



*“Dreamers Often Lie”: On “Compromise”, the
subversive documentation of an Israeli-
Palestinian political adaptation of
Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet*

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INTRODUCTION

For almost five hundred years, Shakespeare’s plays have served to illuminate the greatness of the human spirit and its victory, even under tragic circumstances, over the forces of evil. The amazing power of these plays seems to be infinite, as these texts are endlessly reinterpreted and appropriated by different nations, in various artistic media, and often in the service of those whose voices cannot be heard. This is the thesis that guided Zdeneck Stríbrny (2000) for instance, in his book *Shakespeare and Eastern Europe*, in which he deals, among other themes, with the contribution of Shakespearian plays to fighting the authoritarian regime in the USSR during the days of the Iron Curtain. According to Stríbrny, the universal dimensions of Shakespeare’s plays have enabled the world to appropriate many of the texts to particular purposes. Shakespearian texts are, therefore, no longer only culturally valuable theatrical plays *per se*, but also and rather a means to provide new and sometimes subversive interpretations of existing political situations.

In the Israeli cinematic context one of the most famous interpretative exploitations of a Shakespearian text can be found in Rafi Bukai’s feature film *Avanti Popolo* (1986), which tells the story of two Egyptian soldiers trying to make their way back home in the Sinai desert that had just been conquered by Israel, on the day following the end of the Six Day War.

The road movie narrative of *Avanti Popolo* enables the two Egyptians a number of encounters with Israelis, at the peak of which they meet with three reserve soldiers



and ask them for water. When the Israelis refuse to let them drink, one of them, an actor by profession who, just before the war had been declared, had been given the role of Shylock in Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice", dares to recite this character's most famous protest lines in his defense:

I am a Jew! Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same Winter and Summer as a Christian is?
If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

This unique case of Shakespearean referentiality in Israeli cinema has become legendary because of the interchangeability of identities that it evoked. In a moment of despair, afraid of losing control over his life, the Egyptian actor-soldier decides to play the role of the Jew and actually succeeds, for a while, in saving his friend's life and his own. (Munk & Gertz, forthcoming) This, however, as mentioned above, remains a very unique case in Israeli cinema as a whole.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

As opposed to Israeli cinema, Israeli theatre has staged many of Shakespeare's plays. However it has mostly respected their classical literary qualities, thus avoiding any eventual political subtext. Against this background, it seems that the 1994 production of *Romeo and Juliet* as a Palestinian-Israeli joint venture can be considered as an extraordinary event that, viewed from today's perspective more than a decade later, seems to have obtained its full significance, as not much has changed in the Middle East peace process. Dreamers continue to speak loudly and animosity from both sides still reigns.

Historically speaking, one can say that the year 1994 was one of the most tumultuous periods in the State of Israel. After the Madrid Conference in 1991 and the signing of the Oslo Peace Accords in 1993, a certain understanding was reached by both sides regarding the future establishment of a Palestinian State, after which Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Israeli Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin and Minister of Foreign Affairs Shimon Peres were awarded the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts. Although the world was enthusiastic about the prospect of peace in the Middle East, both Israelis and Palestinians remained suspicious, and manifested in various manners their resentment towards these governmental maneuvers. In practice this was soon translated into Palestinian bombing attacks inside the Israeli borders and immediate Israeli acts of retaliation. As opposed to previous wars in the Middle East, the target this time was civilians on both sides. The growing number of casualties created an unprecedented state of distrust and fear, not only among the two peoples



but also inside both countries. In Israel this situation reached its peak more than a year later with the assassination of Prime Minister Itzhak Rabin by the radical right-wing Israeli Igal Amir, at the conclusion of a peace rally in Tel-Aviv.

A SHAKESPEAREAN JOINT VENTURE

According to Watts (in his introduction to the new edition of the play [2000]), *Romeo and Juliet* as “representative of intense romantic love” (2000:11) “expresses rebellion in the name of love, by young people against the divisive and destructive prejudice.”(14) At first sight, this seems to be the perfect metaphor for the love-hate relationship between the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. This may explain the exceptional endeavor by two theatre directors, the Israeli Eran Baniel and the Palestinian Fuad Awad, to initiate their common production of the play at the Jerusalem Khan Theatre. Their concept was based on the creation of a perfect symmetry: not only two directors (Israeli and Palestinian) but also two theatrical ensembles (the West Jerusalem Khan ensemble and the East Jerusalem El-Kasba ensemble), two technical staffs and even two languages (Hebrew and Arabic). All adhered to the tiniest details in order to prove to the world that, as opposed to the tragic ending of *Romeo and Juliet*, co-existence between Israelis and Palestinian was indeed possible.

THE DOCUMENTARY

Though never performed in this way before in the Middle East, the analogy between the young lovers’ tragedy and the threat of a similar ending awaiting neighboring countries at war does not seem very original. “Compromise” (1996), however, the documentary directed by Anat Even about the hardships of carrying out such a project, especially while being confronted with the political reality outside the theatre walls, certainly was. Even’s documentary not only rejects the “making of” form of documentation but also refuses to accept the premises of the theatrical collaboration, as is reflected in her opening close-up shot, in which the Palestinian actor Muhammad Bakri speaks one of the most well-known quotations of the play: “Dreamers Often Lie”. Needless to say that, according to the film, ‘dreamers’ refers to the utopist directors of the Israeli-Palestinian production of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Israeli filmmaker Anat Even earned her international reputation from political documentaries such as “Detained” (2001), “Premises” (2005) and recently, her more personal “After the End” (2009). In “Compromise” her political voice subtly emerges from the juxtaposition between the shelter-like stage in Jerusalem and the world outside it. The best example of this is that of the documentary visuals of the off-stage space, i.e. the city of Jerusalem (which is a metonymic reflection of the tensions



between the two peoples) that seems to ignore the existence of this ambitious theatrical project. The documentary appears to confront the dreamers' vision of the Shakespearean adaptation by showing on screen the city's insistence on the traditional dichotomies: 'we' and 'they' or 'the people' and 'its enemies'. Thus, it proposes to consider the fate of those who were designated by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben as *Homo Sacer*, (literally "the Sacred Man"), those individuals whose national identity is blurred due to the meanderings of history and who, therefore, are the first to be accused and condemned when a state of emergency is declared. In the Israeli-Palestinian context of the 1990s and its permanent state of emergency, the *Homo Sacer* is no other than the Palestinians living either in the sovereign State of Israel or in the occupied territories.

Not only does the analogy between the two lovers thus become irrelevant, but the documentary also shows that the very use of this analogy seems to be the best way of avoiding crucial questions such as "Are the inhabitants of the area doomed to the tragic ending of *Romeo and Juliet*?"; or "Will we have the chance to formulate another narrative, a narrative in which people will no longer have to die due to a prolonged conflict whose historical roots, as in the case of the Shakespearean families, have already been forgotten?"

Performing the Shakespearean play at the Jerusalem Khan Theatre was an attempt to respond to the exclusion implied by the state of emergency – either by physical means such as road blocks and arrests, or more subtly, by defining the Palestinian Other as a danger to the environment. This attempt by the two directors to reproduce on stage an illusion of co-existence was, however, doomed to fail; for political conflicts, even when resolved on stage, tended to penetrate the walls of the rehearsal room. Director Even exposed the production backstage as a set of interacting powers, reflecting the inequality between the parties. She did so by subverting the traditional documentary form, usually defined as "being able to convey to us the impression of authenticity". (Nichols, 2001:20)

UNDERMINING THE TRADITIONAL DOCUMENTARY FORM

One of the familiar modes of documentary cinema is what is known as "the making of" genre, relating to film or theatrical productions. It typically begins with the rehearsals and ends with the premiere. Though documenting the hardships encountered by the production team in the Khan production, "Compromise" deviates from this formula and instead focuses on liminal situations, in which the outside world and the play seem to merge. The intense differences between Israeli and Palestinian identities, that were to become blurred in this production, become increasingly clearer in front of Even's camera. "Why do the Arabs have to play the role of the Capulets?" one of the Palestinian actors asks furiously. His unanswered question resonates in the theatre space and seems to be answered only at the documentary's ending, set in the house of the Palestinian actress Hitam Adlabi in northern Israel. Like that of many



Palestinians living in the State of Israel, Adlabi's village reflects the multi-layered nature of this land, physically and metaphorically torn between the two nations. Speaking to Even's camera, she tells about her brother, a former convict accused of two attempts to bomb Israeli buses, and declares that, like in the Shakespearian world, he had done so "for the sake of revenge". The hand-held camera style contributes to this blurring of the limits, as if asking: "When do the actors speak for themselves and when do they speak their Shakespearian part?" Moreover, the precise distance of the camera, so different from the spectacle provided by the theatrical medium, reveals the actors' tiniest gestures and expressions. Through the use of close-up shots, the cinematic technique deconstructs the play's mimesis and enables the critical infrastructure to undermine its documentation.

FACE TO FACE WITH POLITICAL REALITY

During the shooting of the documentary a series of major controversial events occurred, including serial terrorist attacks on Israeli buses and the signing of the peace agreements between the political leaders, Itzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat. These events threatened the play's basic assumptions regarding the possibility of modifying attitudes and changing one's perceptions amid an ever-changing and chaotic reality. These dilemmas are echoed throughout the film text, from Mercutio's above-mentioned declaration "Dreamers often lie" to the entire documentation emphasizing the empty phraseology of the Israeli left when confronted with itself inside the rehearsal room. Director Baniel speaks about the project as the need to "find some gentile, maybe a poet, who would be both at a distance and yet close enough to the situation in order to create a meeting place for us, that will take care of our mutual needs for a normal life, and not in terms of borders, kilometers, prisoners, tanks and stones."

According to "Compromise", the gentile and the poet are exposed as false prophets; through the tiniest gestures and mimicry as well as the language chosen by the actors to describe their common work, the illusion is revealed. One of the scenes that most obviously shatters this illusion is that which took place at the exact moment that the Oslo Agreements were being signed. Director Baniel and his actors open a bottle of champagne but the camera focuses on those actors who are sitting a little further away, somewhat puzzled and perplexed, as if their entire world has suddenly fallen apart. Thus, the camera succeeds in capturing the ambivalence of this moment of celebration, as if it encapsulates the tension between the production's declared statement and the true feelings of the individuals in it.

The confrontation between the space outside the theatre and that on stage does not leave any room for doubts regarding the sincerity of the dreamers who act inside the theatre, amid this state of emergency. It seems, however, that this sincerity was not enough and the play, though participating in various festivals abroad, failed in Israel. The Palestinian actress Hitam Adlabi gives a frank account of her



disappointment: "While we were performing the play in Lille, in France, we were told that it would also be shown in Paris, Germany and Norway. And I asked when would it be performed in Israel, but never received an answer."

Here lies the essential problem that the theatre production had avoided confronting. As an Israeli-Palestinian theatre co-production, *Romeo and Juliet* conquered the world stages. The text itself, as well as the scenery and the costumes, were recognizable by the Western audience. Only the languages – Arabic and Hebrew – added an exotic appeal to what was already known. For the Western viewer the play represented the ability of the involved parties to surmount, even for a moment, all of their pain and to allow art to speak for them. This "exoticization" of the self seemed to fulfill the typical wishes of the Western world, in the search for a solution for the volcanic Middle East. Indeed, this standpoint was well expressed in the European television coverage of the play in Europe, of which part of one report was inserted by Even into her documentary. In this television piece, after the Palestinian Romeo and the Israeli Juliet introduce themselves to the camera, the television filmmaker chooses to edit these shots by a series of dissolves that confirm the perfect adherence of the staged scenes and those seen on the news: the historical hand-shaking of Rabin and Arafat as they signed the Oslo Agreements is perfectly superimposed on the hand-holding of the dead lovers on stage; and the crowd outbursts in Verona are shown over similar ones of Palestinians in the occupied territories. This dissolve and superimposition editing reveals the lie behind the entire bilateral *Romeo and Juliet* project, as if the documentary was saying: "That is what the world wanted to see; this is what the Israeli-Palestinian production has provided."

Contrary to the European television cover, however, the documentary ends with another vision, revealing that a utopian vision and the co-direction of a classical play are not enough to break the siege and oppression present in the real world, the world that exists outside the walls of the Jerusalem Theatre. When the Palestinian actor Haled Almasso, a resident of Beit Jalla village, arrived in a taxi at the Israeli roadblock on his way to the Khan Theatre, he was refused permission to pass. The frame opening the sequence is designed very carefully in order to produce the intolerable alienation felt, even before the cab enters the frame. In the depth of the shot, exactly in the middle, we see an Israeli soldier, recognizable by his uniform, who seems to control the space. His strategic position in the frame expresses all the arbitrariness of the situation. On the right side of the frame a Palestinian woman dressed in black walks away from the roadblock. On the left, a number of large concrete blocks, of the kind that serve the Israeli army to block roads, counterbalance this powerful image. These same roadblocks would become a very popular iconographic symbol a couple of years later, when during the second *Intifadah* (*Intifadat El-Aksa*) Israeli documentaries would become increasingly involved in revealing the Israel Defense Forces' strategies in regard to Palestinian citizens. Now, a few years earlier, *Compromise's* impressive shot already pointed at the arbitrariness of the role division between oppressed and oppressors. The shot does not end here, however, but develops into a sequence entirely devoted to resistance: when the soldiers decide not to let the taxi (and the



actor in it) cross the border, the taxi driver uses a side way leading to exactly the same place, the center of Jerusalem, far from the open eyes of the Israeli army, thus revealing the latter's inability to control and hermetically block the entire space.

Jerusalem is not Verona and this "cat and mouse" game between the parties does not correspond in any manner with the noble ideals evoked in the Shakespearian tragedy. Rather, the film evokes the tragedy of another character, one that does not feature in the original play: the man deprived of his basic rights, the *Homo Sacer*. Against this background, the Palestinian director's talk about his fear of losing his Palestinian culture seems almost ironical, as he himself had agreed to take part in this joint venture of staging *Romeo and Juliet* together with the Israeli director Eran Baniel. Therefore his declarations to the camera seem to be covering for another and more basic fear, not that in respect of culture but rather that concerned with basic human rights for a decent life. In turn, this fear raises another question, namely: was this production of *Romeo and Juliet* truly his dream, as it was for the Israeli director, or was it someone else's dream into which he had been drawn? The Palestinian director speaks incisively about his attempts to resist the Israeli government's effort to create here a new kind of (Palestinian) man. His speech is complemented by Muhammad Bakri, who reminds the filmmaker of the forty years of wandering in the desert required for the people of Israel to reach its land. "Just like Moses in the desert, we have to complete a generation, to give it time, to kill it. And then raise a generation who believes....A new Jew has been created here but the new Jew has been contaminated by all the diseases of the old Jew." And the Russian Jewish actor, Boris Akhnov, against the background of the choir singing in Hebrew and Arabic, relates to Bakri's declaration at his own existential level – which is that of the sense of place: "Everyone is looking for a place, and it's not easy [...] I thought I ran away from politics [in the USSR] and in fact, here I reached the depth of politics."

DREAMERS OFTEN LIE

The compromise in the documentary's title is therefore an ironic compromise, a compromise that theatre artists make with reality. It is a compromise made in order to survive in the impossible situation created by the sovereign State. The film, however, does not comply with this compromise and even undermines it by presenting the radical positions of most of the actors. More than a decade later, we can understand that the compromise that the directors attempted to stage by using *Romeo and Juliet* was no more than a *trompe-l'œil* in order to continue their artistic work during a state of emergency imposed on the country. From the perspective of time, and given the dramatic events that have since occurred in the area, we can understand that this "state of emergency" is a code invented by a democratic State in order to control the unbearable situation created by the Israeli occupation and to postpone the inevitable uprising of the Palestinian citizens in the occupied territories. It is therefore not surprising that Even's documentary reveals all that the play's directors intended to



camouflage: that is, the secret behind the compromise and the discontent of those who agreed to participate. One cannot ignore what Israeli director Baniel admits by the end of the film: "The main purpose was to open a small window, to show the play in front of a large audience and thus engage a discussion, opening the hearts and the heads of both sides. *But it did not happen.*"

In light of Baniel's words, the final sentences of the documentary film seem highly symbolic. Addressing the Palestinian actress Hitam, the filmmaker asks: "Theatre usually does not achieve revolutions, does it?" And the actress's answer reminds us that she was and remains the *homo sacer*: "Then who does?" she says. This rhetorical question expresses a tragic acknowledgement, common to the actress and the entire Palestinian cast, of the inability of any art form to change the situation of the oppressed in the eyes of the oppressors. And *Romeo and Juliet* is no exception.

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