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Robert Icke and the Gesher Theatre's *Oresteia*, 2018–19.

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Earlier this year, Israelis went to the polls after the fall of the right-wing government led by Binyamin Netanyahu. With no clear victor in the elections, disagreements between secular and religious politicians defeated attempts to form a coalition government, dragging the country into an unwanted second round of elections on 17 September. These were marked by a campaign in which political parties attempted to exploit animosity and divisions within Israeli society, particularly those between religious and secular citizens. Since the elections resulted in stalemate, the country remains without a government, and the prospect of yet more elections threatens. Thus religion and politics remain intertwined, and feature as two of the three fundamental elements within society, the unfortunate third being warfare, as Israel remains locked in a longstanding conflict with its hostile neighbours. These issues all became central components of the production under discussion, Gesher Theatre's *Oresteia*, performed in 2018–9.

Adapting Greek tragedy for societies far removed from that of Classical Athens, in order to make them relevant for the contemporary audience, is more or less a prerequisite for modern productions,¹ in Israel no less than elsewhere. As Nurit Yaari has emphasised,² Greek drama has acted in Israeli theatre as a tool through which issues of cultural identity can be questioned, and through which artists have engaged in 'an intellectual, artistic, and political dialogue with both Jewish culture (the particular) and classical Greek drama (the universal)'.³ In this paper I consider a specific, recent Israeli production of the *Oresteia*, adapted for the Gesher Theatre in 2018, examining how this work, in Foley's words, attempted to 'speak to' the audience, and whether the production succeeded in this attempt. The production used Robert Icke's adaptation as a base text, rather than working directly from Aeschylus. The Hebrew adaptation diverged from that of Icke, however, highlighting the themes of war and religion, and putting a particular spin on politicians, politics, and Orestes himself. All of these changes produced a play that was a product of, and directly relevant to, contemporary Israeli society.

1. Gesher Theatre, *Oresteia* and its Critical Reception

The *Oresteia* was among the repertoire of plays produced by the Gesher Theatre over the 2018 and 2019 seasons. So far it has been performed some twenty times, on most occasions at the Gesher Theatre itself in Haifa, but also for a three-day run at the Jerusalem Theatre. Gesher is the brainchild of Yevgeny Arye, who immigrated to Israel from Moscow and, together with a group of Russian actors, founded the company in 1991. He remains the company's artistic director to this day. An immigrant theatre at its root, Gesher, which means 'bridge' in Hebrew, has thrived over the past decades. Although a product of the Russian theatrical tradition, the company aims to make connections among the multiple cultures and languages that make up modern Israel, including Hebrew, Yiddish, Arabic, Farsi, Spanish, Amharic, Russian, French and English. To help facilitate this breadth, performances frequently utilise supertitles in multiple languages. The company also emphasises productions that have relevance for the Israeli audience, employing innovative techniques to achieve their aims.

Inspired by a recent adaptation of the *Oresteia* and believing that it would fit well into the aims of the company, Roi Chen, a playwright and translator who works with Gesher, approached Arye with the idea, and then set to work on a translation of Icke's play.

Gesher's *Oresteia* was well received by both audience and critics. Almost all of the reviews enthused about the production, praising its relevance to modern society. Reviewers acclaimed the acting, particularly that of Efrat Ben-Zur, who played the role of Clytemnestra and brought a power and pathos to the role that left many of the audience damp-eyed.⁴ The staging and set were also highly praised.⁵ Most of all, though, it was the relevance of the production that impressed reviewers. One declared that 'the modern version proves that the play is full of incomparably human characteristics'.⁶ Another stressed that:

Many dilemmas that appear on stage connect to contemporary conflicts . . . Love, loyalty, relationships between spouses and between parents and children are presented in a thought-provoking way and raise feelings that remain after viewing the play . . . The bottom line is that I definitely recommend watching the show, much of which is relevant to Israel in 2018.⁷

Almost all reviews found it an interesting interpretation with significance for contemporary Israeli society.

2. Icke's *Orestia*

As already noted, the inspiration for Gesher's *Oresteia* was not Aeschylus' original trilogy, but rather Robert Icke's radical reinterpretation from 2015. Icke's *Oresteia* was a surprising commercial success, even transferring from the Almeida theatre, where it had premiered,⁸ to the West End of London, the commercial hub of London theatreland, where sightings of Greek drama are extremely rare'.⁹ In general, theatre reviews were also positive.¹⁰ A modern-style production, it was a version of the *Oresteia* that not only focused on truth and justice, but also portrayed the characters as recognisable humans, caught up in a whirl of family dynamics, in a production that was marked by its relatability for the London audience.¹¹ Such approbation brought it to the attention of Roi Chen, and inspired him to propose that the Israeli company put on its own version of the work.

It was not only the success of the Icke production that attracted Chen, however, but also its radical alteration of Aeschylus' work. Although, in the end, the Gesher production differed from Icke's in a number of ways, it is necessary to outline the changes employed by Icke in order to understand how the later Israeli adaptation diverged from its source.

Icke's changes were both structural and thematic. He added a preliminary act to the *Oresteia*, in which the Iphigenia story was played out. Rather than including a version of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, as many other productions have done,¹² he instead based the act on the parados of the *Agamemnon*.¹³ This interpretation presented Agamemnon as a loving but tortured parent of Iphigenia, who is depicted here as a young schoolchild. Agamemnon's paternal role clashes with that of his job as leader, as he becomes convinced that his child must die in order to save the lives of many more people. The scene closes with Iphigenia's death by lethal drug, administered by her father, and the subsequent change of wind allowing the fleet to set sail for war. Act Two opens approximately where Aeschylus begins, with the

long-anticipated return of Agamemnon from the war, accompanied by Cassandra, while the third act is based on the *Choephoroi*, the second play in Aeschylus' trilogy. The final act takes the form of the actual trial of Orestes, the evidence of whose crime has been presented throughout the earlier acts, and who is eventually found innocent by Athena, who casts the deciding vote when the jury is tied. Before this judgement, however, there has been an appeal to the audience to act as jury in deciding his guilt or innocence. After the innocent verdict itself, the play closes with Orestes plaintively and repeatedly crying 'What did I do?'

During both of the first two acts, the action is interrupted by scenes featuring Orestes and a woman who works with him to help him remember the events in which his mother and her lover were murdered, an episode that the trauma has repressed. This woman is at first presumed to be a therapist, but in Act Three it is revealed that she is actually a lawyer prosecuting Orestes at his murder trial. Furthermore, it then emerges that Electra never existed. She is merely a fabrication of Orestes' mind, constructed from a guilt-fuelled inability to confront the truth about what he has done.

Icke's play ends on a disquieting note that aims to force viewers to re-examine their ideas of what they have witnessed. The courtroom drama and the earlier acts are revealed as nothing more than 'the unreliable, recovered memories' of a traumatised Orestes,¹⁴ raising questions about the nature of truth, memory and, indeed, the system of justice in the modern world. A similar ambivalence surrounds the question of religion.¹⁵ While Agamemnon is portrayed as a religious man, and other characters in the play are presented as having varying beliefs, none is necessarily 'true'. Thus the question of faith is removed from the realms of philosophy, theology or mysticism and placed firmly in the practical arena of a difficult decision, based on individual mind set and values. In this way, Icke engages with the results of religious belief while avoiding the issue of the rightness or wrongness of such belief, the truth of messages from the gods, or even the identity of such divinities. These attitudes towards both justice and religion would then be altered again in the Israeli production.

Most notably, though, Icke's *Oresteia* is a play about family dynamics, in which Orestes' dilemma can be phrased as a question of what one does when forced to 'choose between your mum and your dad'.¹⁶ This *Oresteia* becomes a family-based, domestic drama, with much of the action taking place around the dining table at supper. Icke's Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are real people, shown in their familial setting, facing and carrying out impossible decisions imposed upon them by their political roles.¹⁷ By emphasising family dynamics, Icke's production highlights the humanity of the characters, making them figures with whom a contemporary audience can identify. It was this modernization as much as anything that inspired Roi Chen to approach Gesher with his idea of producing an adaptation of the work.

3. Chen's Translation of Icke

The content of Icke's production, with its emphasis upon war, politics, family and religion, held appeal for an Israeli company, since modern Israel is a society in which these elements form an unavoidable part of daily discourse. Although Icke's *Oresteia* was the model for Gesher's production, the Israeli version became more than a translation of this work, evolving into a new adaptation that differed in several ways from its source. Chen adopted Icke's method of adaptation as much as the text itself, which he admirably describes as a 'conversation with the material' rather than a simple translation.¹⁸ This approach had a great attraction for the company, which had already produced other plays that took a similar tactic.¹⁹

When Chen had completed his translation of Icke's *Oresteia*, he presented the work to Yevgeny Arye. The two went through the text, trying to imagine it from a performative staging perspective and to isolate what they considered its vital elements. During this reading, a feeling arose that the fourth act was not only unnecessary, repeating what the audience already knew, but was also, in Chen's words 'completely boring' and without dramatic impact. Arye therefore requested the removal of the entire fourth act. Although he had originally been attracted by the dilemma in which the audience are forced to judge Orestes, Chen himself now found this aspect problematic. Since Israel does not employ a jury system, the device would not feel a natural to those watching. More importantly, in Chen's opinion, Orestes had been clearly shown guilty of Clytemnestra's murder, and therefore an audience would have no option but to find Orestes guilty, making the dilemma an empty and meaningless choice.

Chen was also influenced by the fact that once the audience had found Orestes guilty, as he believed they must, they would have to impose the death penalty, a decision that would not sit well with an audience of Israelis, who are widely against capital punishment.²⁰ Such opposition is in part a reflection of the sanctity attributed to human life in traditional Judaism,²¹ the belief system that underlies the attitudes even of the majority of the more secular-leaning population.²² Beyond the religious context, there is also a specific Zionist abhorrence of capital punishment, a consequence of the hangings in Mandate Palestine that have left scars on the Israeli psyche.²³ In fact, the death penalty has been employed only once in the seventy-year history of the state, in the case of Adolf Eichmann. Even convicted terrorists are not condemned to death.²⁴ Although the death penalty theoretically exists, by Israeli law, it may not be carried out as punishment for the murder of a single person, but only for multiple killings. These circumstances made the Orestes case even less persuasive within the Israeli context.²⁵

In place of the audience judgement, then, Chen and Arye removed the fourth act from the play, leaving the ending more open ended, with Orestes' punishment remaining unstated. This choice allowed more room for individual interpretation and thought, and left the audience with a question rather than an answer.²⁶ It also condemned Orestes to what Chen believed was a far worse punishment than death, namely the torment of living with the knowledge of his deeds. Trapped in the prison of his mind and guilt, Orestes could never escape. In this way, the cycle of blood revenge is closed, but without the participation of the audience in the continual chain of killing, leaving them with clean hands.

Although Chen was at first uncomfortable with such major divergence from Icke's work, in the end he justified it by arguing that 'a performance is inevitably a mixture of the text and the director's interpretation, and that the audience come to view a particular production, in order to experience the specific director's engagement and interpretation of the text'.²⁷

4. The Gesher *Oresteia*

Thus Chen recognised the inevitable nature of adaptation; just as Homer reworked his tradition, and Aeschylus reworked Homer, so Icke reworked Aeschylus, and Chen then reworks Icke, with each reception coloured by its own society and times.²⁸ The engagement of both Chen and Arye with the text was affected by their specifically Israeli environment, as they adapted Icke's work for their

audience. Although Chen did not believe he had consciously created a specifically Israeli production, he agreed that both he and the audience were inevitably influenced, albeit subconsciously, by the cultural and historical context,²⁹ and admitted that he had felt from the outset that it was a play more suited to Israeli society than to British. As he worked on the adaptation, he instinctively translated the text in a manner that revealed this belief, and his translation used specific language, and highlighted particular elements, that reflected his ideas and those of his own culture.

This acculturation becomes clear with regard to Orestes' killing of Clytemnestra, an act Chen viewed uncompromisingly as murder. In fact, he went even further in his condemnation. Using startlingly harsh terminology, Chen labelled Orestes 'a terrorist', a description that is, in Israeli terms, both loaded and evocative. A terrorist, by definition, is one who commits an unjustified act of terror, particularly murder;³⁰ crucially, such acts are carried out against innocent people.³¹ Orestes' killing of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus is clearly not an act of conventional terrorism. Yet for Chen, the fact that Orestes had committed murder in cold blood, and that the audience was fully aware of this, was a fundamental crux on which the play stood, and took on new meaning through his interpretation. The killing of an unarmed person in cold blood, and by stabbing in particular, could not but conjure up images of recent acts of terror in his own society.³²

A broader concern is that of the presentation and interpretation of war itself. Since its founding in 1948, Israel has lived with war and its consequences.³³ Conscripting of both men and women into a 'citizen army' is a constant of national life.³⁴ The descriptive phrase was coined by David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister, who saw the Israel Defence Forces not only as a guardian of the homeland and its citizens, but also as a heat source for the melting pot of Israeli society. Composed of immigrant groups from across the world, including Eastern and Western Europe, North Africa, Iran, Iraq, Yemen and even Ethiopia and India, the army provided, and continues to provide, an arena in which all come together in common experiences and goals.³⁵ When an Israeli soldier is wounded or killed, therefore, Israeli citizens understand that he or she was not a nameless warrior, but someone who could easily have been a loved one of their own. In this way, the Israeli experience is in fact closer to that of ancient Athens than to Icke's *U*, which has a professional army, and few of whose citizens have personal experience of war.

Chen also translated the references to war and the wounded and captured soldiers into the context of modern Israel, along with the vocabulary that accompanies them, which again has a quite different resonance from its effect in the London production. In the first act, when Menelaus and Talthybius attempt to convince Agamemnon to murder Iphigeneia, Icke's words are far from lacking in power:

But if we won. If it was ended, could be ended: no more deaths. No broken families following after coffins. No urns packed smooth with ashes. The thousands of lives that we'd save if it ended even a year early. These lives for these families in this army, in this country, never mind the people in the other camp on the other side of the ocean, the pure number of lives you would save –

Chen's translation is both more personal and filled with terms that provide instant identification and mental imagery for an Israeli audience:

If we win, if we put an end to it? No more fallen. No more bereaved families. No more graves. Think of the thousands of lives we'll save, if it ends even a year earlier.

Practical changes have been made here to the text: in Israel, bodies are not buried in coffins, but wrapped in shrouds and prayer shawls, and cremation is against Jewish law. Even more than these details, there is a starkness and simplicity to the Hebrew wording that pierces the Israeli heart, through the use of the phrases, 'no more fallen', and in particular, 'no more bereaved families'. The term, 'bereaved families' (*mishpachot shekulot*) is one that has deep meaning within this context, addressing a common, and emotionally powerful, cultural response on the part of both those creating the performance and those watching it.³⁶ The families of military casualties and those killed in terrorist attacks in Israel form what is known as the 'family of bereavement'; they play a prominent role in the annual Memorial Day services, and within Israeli culture in general.³⁷ The term, therefore, is one to which the audience would respond, identifying with the anguish in the words.

A similar identification is found in Agamemnon's dilemma, the sort of impossible decision that leaders must make in times of conflict. In this case, another layer of meaning was added by Chen's (perhaps unintentional) modelling of Agamemnon on Israel's long-time prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.³⁸ While Chen denied that the characterization had been deliberate, he did admit that the identification was a natural for the contemporary influence, although he attributed it to the instincts of the actors rather than his translation.³⁹

Whatever the cause, the effect was clear. Netanyahu is known to be a skilled, media-savvy communicator who has managed to hold on to power for ten years, despite a number of attempts to bring him down for alleged corruption and a wave of negative news stories focussed on his personal behaviour and that of his wife, Sara.⁴⁰ Such retention of power, despite the scandals, is a result of a public belief in Netanyahu's strength in opposing Israel's enemies. This is an attitude he espouses forcefully in media interviews, and the similarities between Agamemnon and Netanyahu are particularly blatant in the scene featuring Agamemnon's television interview. Agamemnon opens the scene suave and confident, explaining that he has come to power with the intention of ending an ongoing war that was not of his making and that has gone on too long already. The interviewer, who sounds like a typical, aggressive Israeli chat-show host, questions him forcefully:

You're not bringing our forces home, you're not sending reinforcements to carry out a 'day of judgement', as you promised in the elections. Our ships are standing there with no wind in their sails, and in the meantime our soldiers are sitting ducks. Tell me, what do you expect now? Where do we go from here?

To this, Agamemnon replies:

I'll tell you exactly where we go from here. We go to put an end to it. It's gone on too long, too much blood has been spilled. Too many fallen. But you all have to understand that in order to stop the war, we unfortunately have to continue to fight. There are just two ways to end the war: to win or to lose. And we're going to win.

This speech is reminiscent of Netanyahu's many warnings regarding the dangers posed by Iran. A typical example can be found in a speech from September 2018:

Israel will do whatever it must do to defend itself against Iran's aggression. We will continue to act against you whenever and wherever we must act to defend our state and defend our people.⁴¹

Later in the same interview, Agamemnon is asked, 'So you agree that people aren't satisfied?' He answers:

It's their right to feel that way. I get anonymous notes from people who think that I'm a . . . traitor. I can't make decisions according to what people think of me.

Again, these words are startlingly similar to Netanyahu's in November 2018, when he declared, in connection with his military policy, that, 'True leadership is not doing the easy thing; it is doing the right thing', words that could have been spoken by Agamemnon himself.⁴²

The centrality of this interview in Gesher's version of the *Oresteia*, marked by the leader's smooth confidence, contrasted starkly with the later press conference on Agamemnon's return from the war. In the latter scene, he stood before the microphones, accompanied by Clytemnestra, in a portrayal that evoked Netanyahu's wife, Sara, who is popularly believed to be domineering and to wield undue influence over her husband.⁴³ The contrast between the two episodes marked a turning point in the audience's reactions to Clytemnestra, now perceived as dangerously manipulative and controlling, as well as blatantly highlighting the change from urbane politician to a broken figure suffering from PTSD.

The alteration in Agamemnon has been brought about not only by war, but by the killing of his daughter, which concluded the previous scene. Her death resonated deeply with Chen. He interpreted it in a manner that strikingly reflected his own background, namely as a form of sacrifice.⁴⁴ This is a concept with profound meaning for Israelis, the death of whose young soldiers is described as a sacrifice, and in a country where the oath that IDF soldiers take during the swearing-in ceremony contains the words:

I hereby swear and undertake . . . to dedicate all my strength and even to **sacrifice** my life to protect the homeland and the freedom of Israel'.⁴⁵

The identification with sacrifice goes deeper than this, however, in a predominantly Jewish context; as Chen recognised, the act that started the whole cycle of blood-revenge in the play has parallels with the biblical binding of Isaac. He explains, talking of Agamemnon, 'They say, they explain to him . . . Maybe the government, maybe the gods . . . "If you send your child, there's a chance we'll succeed"'. The fact that Chen's phrasing, 'If you send your child', employs the word used in the Biblical passage,⁴⁶ where Abraham is told not to 'send his hand' against his son, reflects his instinctive identification of the two stories.⁴⁷

This association with a Biblical passage reflects the centrality of religion and faith in Israel. Although early Zionism was in essence a secular movement whose relationship with religion was somewhat strained, even secular Zionists based some of their historical claim to the land of Israel on the Bible, and were convinced of the nation's identity as a Jewish State.⁴⁸

Consequently, religion plays a central role in Israel. According to a 2013 survey, twenty per cent of the Jewish population are religious, and thirty-seven identify as 'masorati', usually translated as 'traditional'.⁴⁹ This means that almost two thirds actively identify with religion. Even those remaining forty-three per cent of Israelis who describe themselves as secular, and avowedly so, typically have a different attitude towards religion from that found in other Western countries. Although they often resent the orthodox religious monopoly over political institutions,⁵⁰ the necessity of interaction with the religious authorities in these bodies gives religion a noticeable role in the consciousness of Israelis, regardless of their personal level of observance.

In Chen's play, the term used throughout for the gods is 'Elohim', which is not only a plural form of 'god', but also the standard word used in the Bible for the God of Abraham and his descendants.⁵¹ Where Icke sought to distance himself from religion, since he was writing for an audience in a country where 53 percent of adults describe themselves as having no religious affiliation,⁵² Chen minimized the distance between the religion of Agamemnon and that of the twenty-first century Jew, making the leader's religious faith directly relevant.⁵³ Since Israel is a country where religion plays a role in government, this emphasis has powerful reverberations. The presence of overtly religious political parties and politicians makes many citizens fear the influence of religion and fanaticism in government.⁵⁴ They are suspicious and wary of what they see as religious fanaticism. Thus, when the Mycenaean king admits to being religious saying that he has always honoured the gods and is uncomfortable with taking the lord's name in vain, and even praying on stage on two occasions – he sets warning bells ringing in the minds of the audience. When Agamemnon cries in Hebrew, 'If this gets out, everyone will think that a fanatic has done what fanatics do' (a direct translation of Icke's line here), he expresses a fear of alignment with a very specific religious and political grouping regarded with suspicion by the mainstream Israeli populace.

5. Conclusions

When asked what percentage of Gesher's *Oresteia* was Aeschylus, what percentage Robert Icke and what percentage Yaeli Chen, Chen was unable to answer, concluding only that it was a combination of all three. Gesher's adaptation evolved in response to a possibly subconscious awareness of a need to alter elements to suit them for the local audience, and to exploit issues that seemed to chime with the Israeli experience. The new work that resulted was both suited to, and a product of, the contemporary environment, with the themes of guilt and innocence, capital punishment, war, and religion all taking on an Israeli tenor. In this way, Gesher has reworked Icke's adaptation of the ancient *Oresteia* for its own audience in twenty-first century Israel.

NOTES

¹Helene P. Foley, *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage* (Barkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012) xii-xiii: 'Embodying a Greek tragedy on stage must involve taking a potentially controversial and deliberate position that communicates something to a contemporary audience . . . Theater artists who perform and or revise Greek tragedy pour immense physical and intellectual energy into an ephemeral attempt to make a challenging work speak to its audience at a specific moment in time (or even afterward, in the memory of the viewers who give a play its meaning)'. For a similar attitude concerning Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy, see Christopher Murray, 'Three Irish Antigones', in Marianne McDonald and Michael Walton, *Amid our Troubles* (London: Methuen, 2002) 117. That Athenian tragedy was inherently political in its original setting has long been central in scholarship. There is a long and wide-ranging bibliography on the subject, but Anthony Podlecki's, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Drama* (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1966) and John Winkler's *Nothing to do with Dionysos?: Athenian drama in its social context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) provide useful starting points.

²Yaari stresses that one of the main ways in which classical drama has been staged in the country is by seeking to make the performances accessible to the wider public by adapting their plots to make them relevant to modern Israeli social and political reality. Thus . . . plays such as *The Persians*, *Agamemnon*, *Antigone*, *Women of Troy*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and *Lysistrata* were chosen for their dominant theme of war as a backdrop to the plot, underscoring their political relevance to the daily reality of Israeli audiences' (Nurit Yaari, *Between Jerusalem and Athens: Israeli Theatre and the Classical Tradition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018 3). For another example of such adaptations, see Molly Levine, "Iphigenias in Jerusalem: Sacrifice and Survival in Jewish and Greek Culture" *Eidolon* March 22, 2018.

³Ibid. 7. Yaari numbers no fewer than eighty-six productions of twenty-two different plays that were staged in Israel between 1945 and 2015, and in her analysis highlights how Israeli theatre practitioners have repeatedly come back to classical drama as they exploited the ancient texts and mined them for contemporary meanings throughout the years of Israel's development

⁴See reviews cited in n.6–8 below.

⁵Designed by Semion Pastuch, the bare stage featured a huge mirror that rose and fell, reflecting the figures of the actors, becoming opaque or transparent according to need, as well as simple white chairs, which fulfil various uses, from dining chairs to vantage points for observation by the psychologist, at one point even becoming tombstones. These elements were combined with powerful video and photography under the direction of Eddie Hubtner, creating a fusion between old and new, or in the words of Mosenthal, futuristic and archaic, the perfection and avant-garde that are so characteristic of Arye and Gesher', (David Mosenthal <https://www.walla.co.il/item/319524>, accessed 2 August 2019).

⁶Dana Shuchmacher in Maariv on 12 November 2018 <https://www.maariv.co.il/culture/Article-668194> (accessed 13 June 2019). Translations from Hebrew are my own.

⁷Aviva Rosen, the internet theatre magazine blog ('Marta knows'), *Martayodaat.com* 6 August 2018, <https://marthayodaat.com/2018/08/06/07-90-07-92-07-9E-07-9E-07-A0-07-95-07-9F-07-9C-07-90-07-9E-07-94-07-A9-07-97-07-A9-07-91-07-AA> (accessed 13 June 2019). Such thoughts are echoed by other reviews. See, in addition to those cited above, e.g. <http://www.habama.co.il/Pages/Description.aspx?>

Subj 1&Area 1&ArticleID 30781; https: www.makorrishon.co.il culture motsash 91637 ; ; https: determinreader.wordpress.com 2018 08 05 D7 90 D7 95 D7 A8 D7 A1 D7 98 D7 99 D7 90 D7 94- D7 94 D7 A6 D7 92 D7 94 ; https: www.motke.co.il index.php?idr 402&pid 192236(all accessed 13 une 2019). The one entirely negative review was written by Nanno Shabtai, who is the daughter of Aharon Shabtai, the Israeli classicist, poet and translator who produced a popular Hebrew translation of the Oresteia. His daughter objected to the whole principle and ideology behind the Gesher project, rejecting it in favour of a straight production of Aeschylus in good Hebrew translation.

⁸The Almeida theatre is situated not in the dramatic heart of London, but the borough of Islington, once a working class section of North London . . . but now thoroughly gentrified’.

Richard Hornby, *The Almeida Theatre*, *The Hudson Review* 53. 3 (Autumn 2000) 488 (488–494).

⁹https: www.1843magazine.com culture the-daily robert-icke-an-expert-player-of-the-game (accessed 7 November 2018).

¹⁰For discussions of the production see Justine McConnell, ‘Radical Re-Envisionings: The Almeida Theatre’s Oresteia and Medea’, *Arion* 23. 3 (Winter 2016) 160 (151–166); Avra Sidiropoulou, ‘Directing as Political Act: The Dangers’ and Fears’ of Mounting Aeschylus’s Oresteia in Contemporary Periods of Tyranny’, *Comparative Drama* 52.1 & 2 (Spring & Summer 2018) 159–180; Margherita Laera, ‘On killing children: Greek tragedies on British stages in 2015.’ *Critical Stages* (2015). http: www.critical-stages.org 12 on-killing-children-greek-tragedies-on-british-stages-in-2015 . . . reviews by theatre critics were generally very favourable. See, for example, Michael Billington’s review in *The Guardian*, https: www.theguardian.com stage 2015 jun 07 oresteia-review-icke-brings-us-aeschylus-for-the-modern-age; Gareth Jones, https: www.reuters.com article us-theatre-britain-greeks-modern-take-on-greek-tragedy-enthrals-london-theatre-goers-idU M1 BN0OQ0 U20150610; Natasha Tripney, https: www.thestage.co.uk reviews 2015 oresteia ?login to https 3A 2F 2Fwww.thestage.co.uk 2Faccounts 2Fusers 2Fsign up.popup; Susannah Clapp in *The Observer*, http: www.theguardian.com stage 2015

¹¹For Icke’s own explanation of the changes, and the reasoning behind them, see Robert Icke, *Practitioners’ Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 6 (2015).

¹²See Lisa Maurice, ‘The House of Atreus as a Reflection of Contemporary Evil: Performance Reception and The Oresteia’, in Eran Almagor and Lisa Maurice, *Beauty, Bravery, Blood and Glory: Ancient Virtues and Vices in Modern Popular Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) 37–59.

¹³See McConnell (2016) 160.

¹⁴Late Bassett, ‘Oresteia at Trafalgar Studios, SW1A’, *The Times* (September 9 2015) https: www.thetimes.co.uk article oresteia-at-traffic-studios-sw1a-zfvdn5xgfjn (accessed 18 November 2018).

¹⁵Icke discussed this aspect in interview, viewable at https: almeida.co.uk oresteia-talkback (accessed 14 November 2018).

¹⁶Icke (2015).

¹⁷These decisions extended even to the capture of Cassandra. Seeing parallels between the young girl rescued from the altar at the end of the war and the daughter sacrificed to enable to war to start, Icke presents Cassandra as saved by Agamemnon in atonement for his killing of his daughter. This portrayal is in sharp contrast to traditional portrayals of Agamemnon bringing back a sex slave and thus incurring Clytemnestra's rightful wrath. See e.g. Simon Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 41–48.

¹⁸Chen's perspective and ideas were communicated in a phone interview I conducted with him on 21 November 2018.

¹⁹Another notable example is Chen's 2015 adaptation of *Don Quixote*, entitled *I, Don Quixote*, which sets the tale in a grim prison cell occupied by two inmates who have shared it for the past five years. Of these two, one is an intelligent but violent and psychotic individual, while the other is a milder character who dreams of opening a sweet shop. The former is obsessed with Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and repeatedly reads the book aloud to his illiterate cellmate. In sleep, the pair become Don Quixote and Sancho Panza and, in their dreams, act out scenes from the book, with the play alternating between the 'real' world of the prison and the fantastic dreams. This 'story-within-a-story' structure enabled central themes of the play – the nature of freedom and of friendship – to be highlighted in a consciously metatheatrical production. The casting technique enhanced the metatheatricality, for actors playing the two prisoners swapped roles between performances to play each role on alternate nights, each lending a specific reading of the character to his portrayal.

²⁰Thus e.g. Edna Ullmann-Margalit, 'Israel and Capital Punishment', <https://www.bjpa.org/content/upload/bjpa/oct02margalit.pdf> (accessed 20 August 2019): the demand for capital punishment has never gained significant momentum and has not been adopted by any major political party as part of its platform – even in times of indiscriminate murder by terrorists of large numbers of Israeli civilians'.

²¹On this see e.g. No'am Oshar, 'Quality of Life in Jewish Bioethics' (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006) 24–26; Raphael Cohen-Almagor and Merav Shmueli, 'Can life be evaluated? The Jewish Halachic approach vs. the quality of life approach in medical ethics: A critical view', *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 21.2 (2000) 117–137.

²²For this phenomenon, see Peri Edem, 'Dimensions of Jewish Religiosity in Israel', in Avi Sobel and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (eds.), *Tradition, Innovation, Conflict Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Israel* (New York: New York State University Press, 1991) 251–77. For a more recent examination of the identification with Judaism by 'traditionist' Jews, who, together with religious Jews, form a majority of Israeli society, see Yaacov Yadgar, *Secularism and Religion in Jewish-Israeli Politics, Traditionists and Modernity* (Israeli History, Politics and Society) (London: Routledge, 2010).

²³See Sahi Lavi, 'Imagining the Death Penalty in Israel', in Austin Sarat and Christian Boulanger, *The Cultural Lives of Capital Punishment: Comparative Perspectives* (The Cultural Lives of Law) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005) 219–230.

²⁴See Amnon Straschnov, 'The Judicial System in Israel', *Tulsa Law Journal* 34 (1998) 528 (527–38).

²⁵*Ibid.* 530.

²⁶The decision not to involve the audience in the judgement was also influenced by another recent Gesher production, *In The Tunnel* (2017), in which the audience had indeed participated in a vote. In this political and satirical piece, also written by Chen, two Israeli soldiers, an older reservist and a new conscript, are buried in a Hamas-dug tunnel penetrating Israeli territory, together with two Palestinians. What happens over the course of the play was conditioned by the choice of the audience, who, before they entered the auditorium, were each given one ballot and asked, in a metaphor made concrete, to vote as to whether there was or was not a light at the end of the tunnel.

²⁷In interview, see n. 18 above.

²⁸I am indebted to Mike Lippman for this succinctly expressed point.

²⁹This is far from unique, for the element of ideology has been present in Israeli theatre, even when unintentional, from its earliest days. See Dan Urian, 'Nationalism in the Israeli Theatre', in Efraim Karsh, *Israel, The first hundred years, volume 3: Israeli society and politics since 1948. Problems of collective identity* (London and NY: Routledge, 2014) 43–55.

³⁰See Aja Halwani, 'Philosophy Terrorism: Definition, Justification, and Applications', review of Igor Primoratz, *Terrorism: The Philosophical Issues*, in *Social Theory and Practice*, 32. 2 (April 2006) 289 (289–310).

³¹Mimi Ajzenstadt, and Ariel Barak, 'Terrorism and risk management- The Israeli case', *Punishment & Society* 10.4 (2008) 358 (355–74)

³²For details of terrorist stabbings, see Ofer Merin, Eitan Sonkin, Avraham Yitzhak, Hagai Frenkel, Adi Leiba, Alon D. Schwarz, and Eli Shaffer, 'Terrorist stabbings – distinctive characteristics and how to prepare for them', *The Journal of Emergency Medicine* 53.4 (2017) 451–457.

³³For an overview of the conflicts and Israeli history, see Ritchie Owendale, *The Origins of the Arab Israeli Wars* (Abingdon and NY: Routledge, 2013) (4th ed.).

³⁴See Dan Soen, 'All Able-Bodies, to Arms – Attitudes of Israeli High School Students toward Conscript and Combat Service', *American Journal of Social Issues & Humanities* 2.3 (May 2012) 152 (152–161): For many years Israel was known as a Nation in Uniform and the IDF was considered the People's Army'.

³⁵See Dov Tamari, 'The People's Army' Put to the Test', in Meir Elran and Gabi Sheffer (eds.), *Military Service in Israel: Challenges and Ramifications* (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2016) 35–48.

³⁶See Eliezer Witztum, Ruth Malkinson and Simon Shimshon Rubin, 'Loss, Traumatic Bereavement, and Mourning Culture: The Israel Example', in Yochai Ataria, David Gurevitz, Haviva Pedaya and Yuval Neria (eds.), *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture* (Springer, Cham, 2016) 369 (365–75).

³⁷See Leeat Granek, 'Mourning Sickness: The Politicizations of Grief', *Review of General Psychology* 18. 2 (2014) 61–68 on the importance of Memorial Day, and its deep significance within Israeli culture.

³⁸Netanyahu has been prime minister of Israel for a decade, since 2009. For a recent biography, see Anshel Pfeffer, *Bibi: The Turbulent Life and Times of Benjamin Netanyahu* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

³⁹He stated, 'Of course, whether consciously or unconsciously, when an actor plays a politician being interviewed, he plays politicians that he knows, and when they label him a traitor, we think about Israeli politicians who are labelled as traitors'.

⁴⁰See Aluf Benn, 'The End of the Old Israel: How Netanyahu has transformed the Nation', *Foreign Affairs* 95 (2016) 16–27; Yaron Katz, 'Israel's Social Media Elections', *Open Journal of Political Science* 8.4 (2018) 525–36.

⁴¹Speech to the UN General Assembly, 27 September 2018.

⁴²<https://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-5401789,00.html> (accessed 26 November 2018).

⁴³See e.g. <https://www.haaretz.com/premium-sara-netanyahu-enigma-no-1-1.5230264> (accessed 23 June 2019).

⁴⁴See Udi Leibel, 'Militarism versus Security: The Double Bind of Israel's Culture of Bereavement and Hierarchy of Sensitivity to Loss', *Mediterranean Politics*, 16:3 (2011) 365–384.

⁴⁵IDF soldiers' oath, available at <http://www.marpad.co.il/index2.php?id=45&lang=HEB> (accessed 23 June 2019).

⁴⁶Genesis 22.12

⁴⁷The identification with the binding of Isaac is particularly striking because the sacrifice does not, in the end, take place in the Biblical passage, as in the version related in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, with its last-minute substitution by Artemis. Iphigeneia has also (and more commonly) been compared to ephthah's daughter. See e.g. Moshe Weiss, 'Ephthah's Daughter', *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37.1 (2009) 57; Anna Linton, 'Virgin Sacrifices: Iphigenia and Ephthah's Daughter', in Helen Fronius and Anna Linton, *Women and Death: Representations of Female Victims and Perpetrators in German Culture 1500–1900* (Oxford: Camden House, 2008) 43–59.

⁴⁸There is a vast bibliography on Zionism and religious belief, but for a recent overview, see Adam Garfinkle, *Politics and Society in Modern Israel* (New York: Routledge, 2015) (2nd ed.) 137–145. For the role of the Bible in secular Zionist ideology, see Anita Shapira, 'The Bible and Israeli Identity', *AJS review* 28.1 (2004) 11–41; Yael Zerubavel, 'A secular return to the Bible? Reflections on Israeli society, national memory, and the politics of the past', *AJS Perspectives: The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies* (Spring 2011) 30–31.

⁴⁹<https://www.iataskforce.org/sites/default/files/resource/resource-1454.pdf> p.26 (accessed 23 June 2019).

⁵⁰These institutions include marriage, burial, and the control of some aspects of public life, including transportation on the Sabbath and supervision of kashrut licensing in restaurants. The non-participation of the Ultra-Orthodox citizenry in military service has also caused deep

tensions. See Matt Evans, 'Exacerbating social cleavages: The media's role in Israel's religious-secular conflict', *The Middle East Journal* 65.2 (2011) 241 (234–250).

⁵¹For a full-length study of the word, and its possible meanings, see Joel Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001).

⁵²<http://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2017/september/british-social-attitudes-record-number-of-brits-with-no-religion>

⁵³It should be noted that Israel is not unique in this way. As one recent study pointed out, there exists a modern phenomenon of "religious nationalism" that aspires to "religionization" of the political culture and an exclusive focusing of national identity on religion. In the Middle East, Israel defines itself as a Jewish (and democratic) state; likewise, most Arab states define themselves as Muslim states, and some (if not all) of them ascribe much significance to Islamic law – Shari'a – as a source of legislation'. (Marshall J. Breger, Yitzhak Eiter and Leonard Hammer, *Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine: Religion and Politics* London and NY: Routledge, 2012) 1).

⁵⁴See Ira Sharkansky, *Governing Israel, Chosen People, Promised Land and Prophetic Tradition* (London and NY: Routledge, 2005), 1, 7: 'religion is part and parcel of ethnic and national conflicts' and 'religious leaders and adjudicators interpret religious law in light of political needs'. See also Gregory S. Mahler, *Politics and Government in Israel: The Maturation of a Modern State* (Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) (3rd ed.) 96.