

Introduction

The stage artists Shimen Dzigan (1905–1980) and Yisroel Shumacher (1908–1961) began their careers in the experimental Yiddish theater in Łódź and started to perform as an independent duo in the second half of the 1930s in Warsaw. During their lengthy careers, the two developed a unique stage language that was appreciated by their admiring audiences throughout Europe, Israel, North and South America, and the Soviet Union. They parted ways in 1960. Shumacher appeared in one dramatic play in the Yiddish repertory theater before his death only one year later. By contrast, Dzigan remained active until 1980 – he established a satirical theater in Tel Aviv and continued to follow the path that the duo had embarked upon. He also produced an Israeli television program and staged highly successful performances throughout the Yiddish-speaking diaspora. This book examines in detail, and from various perspectives, the path of this exceptional artistic duo, which reflects a unique, critical narrative in twentieth century Yiddish culture.

Highbrow Yiddish theater began to develop in the second half of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe, part of a broader process of secular cultural production that primarily affected Yiddish literature and the Yiddish press. This has been described by Benjamin Harshav as “the modern Jewish” revolution,¹ while Jeffrey Shandler has defined it as “eastern European Jewry’s abrupt encounter with the opportunities and challenges posed by new social, political, and economic developments . . .”². Yiddish theater developed at first in a largely popular form and, as a result of the significant Jewish emigration from the Russian Empire, expanded rapidly to Western Europe, North, and South America as well as Australia and South Africa. An increasingly sophisticated and modern Yiddish theater emerged during the second decade of the twentieth century and the interwar years, corresponding with new developments on the European stage and connecting new drama and avant-garde theater to various trends in modern Yiddish literature.

Shimen Dzigan and Yisroel Shumacher began their theatrical careers on the modernist experimental Yiddish stage, as part of the “Ararat” theater company (led by the poet Moyshe Broderzon) that was established in Łódź in 1927. This company was organized as a collective rather than as a hierarchical company, and it developed a unique and challenging artistic language in stark contrast to the conservative trend that governed most contemporary commercial Yiddish theater companies in Poland. The two artists moved to Warsaw in 1933, where

1 Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish*, chap. 5.

2 Shandler, *Yiddish*, 126.

they established a new company, again named “Ararat,” and served as both its star performers and directors. A few years later, the troupe became known (and subsequently was officially publicized) as Dzigan and Shumacher’s Theater. Their theater was extremely popular among Polish Jewry in the second half of the 1930s thanks to the duo’s acting talents, daring political satire against antisemitism, and creative, virtuoso use of the various means available to artists of the Yiddish word: parody, wordplay, jokes, contemporary satire, and so forth. From the outset, Dzigan and Shumacher used the Łódź Yiddish dialect, and they continued to do so throughout their careers, rather than adopting the standardized language accepted in Eastern European Yiddish theater. This decision expressed their refusal to surrender to cultural and ideological pressures. They remained different, rooted in their linguistic independence.

In the wake of the German invasion of Poland, Dzigan and Shumacher (along with many other Jews from German-occupied Poland) fled from Warsaw to Białystok, which, following the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement, was under Soviet rule. Similarly to some other refugees, Dzigan and Shumacher chose to become Soviet citizens. In 1940, they became the main actors and stage directors of *Der byalistoker melukhisher yidisher minyatur-teater* (The Białystok National Jewish Miniature Theater). The company performed in many cities throughout the Soviet Union until the German invasion in June 1941. Weeks after the theater group was disbanded, Dzigan and Shumacher tried to join the Anders Army with the aim of leaving the Soviet Union. However, the two artists were arrested for alleged anti-Soviet activity and imprisoned for four years in the Aktyubinsk labor camp in Kazakhstan. They were released in August 1946 and, after a few months, were able to return to Poland, subsequently establishing in Łódź a new satirical theater group that remained active until 1949. The same year, they also starred in the last Yiddish film made in Poland, produced by Shaul Goskind and directed by Natan Gross, *Undzere kinder* (Our Children). The film focused on how Jewish child survivors dealt with the trauma of the Holocaust and the renewal of Jewish life in Poland after the Second World War, as well as the role of art in tackling these challenges.

In 1949, Dzigan and Shumacher left Poland for a tour of performances in Western Europe. In 1950, they staged their first performance in Israel as “guest actors,” a status that allowed them to circumvent the government-sponsored ban prohibiting local actors from performing in Yiddish (in force from 1949 to 1950). Following their success, and in order to limit the power of the Yiddish theater in the State of Israel, the Films and Plays Censorship Committee permitted guest actors to appear in Israel for periods of only six weeks. However, due to their status and fame, Dzigan and Shumacher were allowed to continue performing beyond this limited period, on the condition that they included Hebrew sections amounting to one third of every performance. The duo met this demand mainly

by incorporating Hebrew songs performed by Israeli singers between their own skits. Dzigan and Shumacher were received in Israel with great enthusiasm, particularly by the community of Yiddish speakers and theater critics. They were also praised by critics in the Hebrew press, although many expressed reservations regarding their decision to continue performing in Yiddish. They continued their artistic path in an environment that, in the 1950s, rejected Yiddish as a legitimate language and culture. Using their exceptional talents, Dzigan and Shumacher were able to translate the Israeli reality into a satirical theatrical language that became a central tool in the critical representation of Israeli society at a time when light entertainment flourished on the Hebrew stage and Hebrew political satire was almost non-existent in the theater scene. Indeed, skits by the two actors (today available as audio recordings), characterized by a rich variety of subject matter, linguistic finesse, talented performances, and sharp satire, are considered part of the classic treasury of modern Yiddish culture. In 1958, Dzigan and Shumacher settled in Israel, but they continued to perform in the diaspora, mainly in South America and the United States.

Despite Dzigan and Shumacher's central place in the history of Yiddish theater and satirical theater in Israel, no comprehensive study has examined their careers, artistic endeavors, or contribution to these fields. The existing monographs, articles, and studies concerning Yiddish theater and its history in the diaspora focus on specific Yiddish theater troupes, as well as Yiddish theater in various cities and countries. Some of these studies discuss the development of the Jewish performative tradition, while others concentrate on the art of satirical and comic theater among Jews in general and Yiddish speakers in particular.³ My discussion traces the internal cultural sources that Dzigan and Shumacher drew upon, the duo's place in the chain of Jewish performative tradition, the Jewish and linguistic characteristics of their art, and the cultural and social roles of their theater. In so doing, it relates to existing studies of Yiddish theater, as well as those devoted to Jewish humor, Jewish parody, and humor in Yiddish literature. However, considering the modernist language of the Ararat theater, the duo's work must be examined not only in the context of Jewish theater but also in relation to *Kleynkunst* (miniature theater), the European, Russian, and Polish tradition of cabaret,

³ See, for example, Shipper, *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst*; Erik, *Di komedyes*; Oyslender, *Yidisher teater*; Mestel, *Undzer teater*; Turkow-Grudberg, "Yidish teater in Varshe"; Belkin, *Hapurim-shpil*; Nahshon, "Habima's Production of 'The Dybbuk'"; Steinlauf, "Y. L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater"; Stern, "From Jester to Gesture"; Berkowitz, "Writing the History of Yiddish Theatre"; Veidlinger, *Moscow State Yiddish Theater*.

and humor in Western culture (for example, the genre of comic duos). All these provide important contexts for understanding Dzigán and Shumacher's artistic path, and I will discuss them at length in this book.

Yiddish theater in Israel has received little attention, both in studies of Yiddish culture in Israel and scholarship on Israeli theater.⁴ Academic research has so far focused mainly on the Hebrew theater in Israel, largely ignoring artistic expressions in other languages. This trend began to change in the last two decades, thanks to increasing scholarship on minority cultures in Israel.⁵

The duo specialized in Yiddish satirical performances concerning topics from everyday life. In order to analyze their activities both on and off stage it is vital to understand the milieu in which they performed. Therefore, in addition to the various available sources – such as commercial recordings (audio and video), Dzigán's autobiography, and memoirs penned by theatrical figures – I examined archival material pertinent to the surroundings in which the duo's productions were created and performed – Poland until the outbreak of the Second World War, the USSR, Israel, and the diaspora following the Holocaust. The many archival materials I perused include scripts of plays, recordings of performances for the artists' personal use, directors' notebooks, correspondence with the authorities, reviews in a number of languages, printed playbills for the performances, interviews with the artists, and press cuttings written by the artists themselves.

My analysis of the duo's performances is informed by theories of performance and theater studies. Performance is an aesthetic act of communication that employs cultural symbols and offers the audience an opportunity to partake in a shared experience. Furthermore, it enables the mutual and continued processing of experiences and meanings that constitute culture. A performance must therefore be interpreted within the context of its creation, presentation, and reception.⁶ The study of the theatrical event as a context-dependent artistic phenomenon

4 See Pilowsky, *Tsvishn yo un neyn*; Rotman, "Language Politics"; Rojanski, *Yiddish in Israel*.

5 Alongside modern studies of Hebrew theater in Israel – such as those by Alexander, *Leitsan heh'atser*; Orian, *Habe'aya ha'adatit*; Tartakovsky, *Habima*; Gilula, *Hate'a'ron hakameri* – there exist many studies concerning Yiddish theater and theater in Israel in languages other than Hebrew, which are now trickling into the academic discourse on Israeli theater. See, for example, Yerushalmi, "Betsila shel Hanna Rovina"; Yerushalmi, "Historyot shel 'Hadibuk"; Zer-Zion, "Ha'Vilner trupe"; Kaufman-Simhon, "Lemale' halal"; Lewy, *Hayekim*. This change is also evident in the certain degree of recognition accorded to these groups by the government, expressed in grants for cultural activities, changes in educational programs, and the discussion of minority culture in the media. One example is the law passed in 1996 establishing national authorities for Yiddish culture and Ladino culture, and its realization in the founding of these institutions a few years later.

6 See Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History"; Zarrilli, "For Whom Is the King a King?"; Bauman, "Performance."

tends to negate the hierarchy between the aesthetics of the performance and the nature of its reception.⁷ In addition to the means of expression, acting style, intonation, and so forth, this study also stresses audience responses, the reactions of reviewers, and the artists' image in the public sphere, outside their activities on stage. According to this approach, the artistic endeavor, the public performance, and the personal story are interwoven.

The Structure of the Book

This book is structured chronologically. Each chapter outlines, characterizes, and analyzes the artistic endeavors of Dzigal and Shumacher, or Dzigal alone, during a certain period. An examination of performances or texts is integrated into a discussion of various facets of their artistic activity – the artists' professional and social biographies; the historical, cultural, economic, and political circumstances in which the art was created and performed; ways of realizing the text; and its reception by critics, alongside other aspects. Thus, the discussion touches upon a range of internal and external aspects – relating to both content and form – of Dzigal and Shumacher's artistic path. I also examine references to them in the press and their behavior vis-à-vis the authorities and various institutions, including their activities in prisons and labor camps in the Soviet Union, in cafes, in the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) cafeteria, or in conversations with reporters. These interactions sometimes complemented (and on other occasions contradicted) their performances on stage.

According to Dzigal, theater and humor can exert great political influence. In his autobiography – entitled *Der koyekh fun yidishn humor* (The Power of Jewish Humor, 1974) – he even claimed that his theater contributed to the historic change in the Israeli political leadership that occurred in the 1970s, a change that reached a peak in 1977, when Menachem Begin came to power, ending three decades of Labor Party dominance. This accords with the findings of contemporary scholars, who regard the theater as an arena of conflict and actors as part of the array of political forces active in society.⁸

The detailed examination of the skits and monologues that Dzigal and Shumacher performed – from the days of Ararat to Dzigal's last show in Israel – emphasizes the performative dimension of their art. This is directly connected

⁷ See Schechner, *Performance Theory*.

⁸ Regarding the breakdown of the mechanisms of power and how this is revealed by the study of theater see, for example, Schechner, *Performance Theory*; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Taylor, "What's Wrong with These Terms?"; Auslander, "Stand-up Comedy."

with the cultural role that their theater played, its reception by critics and audience, and the means the artists employed in light of their artistic milieu and the socio-political context.⁹

The clearest example of such analysis is the section concerning the skit “Der nayer dibek” (The New Dybbuk), performed in 1957. This skit was a parody of the canonical performance of Sh. An-sky’s play *The Dybbuk*, set in Eastern Europe, as staged by the Hebrew Habima theater. However, at the same time, it offered a satirical commentary on Israeli politics during the 1950s – the frustrations felt by immigrants, the unquestioned authority of David Ben-Gurion, and more. Dzigán’s performance in a parody of the character Leaele (Leyele), as played by Hanna Rovina, and Shumacher’s performance in the role of the Hasidic Tzaddik, a satirical version of Ben-Gurion, here serve as the basis for a discussion of nationalism and theater, the status of immigrants, cultural and linguistic battles, and even gender relations.

About the Sources

There is little scholarly literature relating directly to Dzigán and Shumacher. In her popular book, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, Nahma Sandrow mentions their artistic endeavors, noting their central place in the history of Yiddish theater.¹⁰ Gilles Rozier, who contributed significantly to the study of Moyshe Broderzon’s literary works, discusses the Ararat theater, which was founded by Broderzon, from historical and literary perspectives.¹¹ Although his study is an important source for examining the initial years of the duo’s artistic careers, he focuses on texts rather than theatrical performances and does not discuss Dzigán and Shumacher’s art specifically.

The only scholarly works devoted to Dzigán and Shumacher in their own right are an article by the historian John Efron,¹² Uri Vedenyapin’s BA Thesis written at Harvard University,¹³ and a chapter in Rachel Rojanski’s recently published book.¹⁴ Vedenyapin focuses on Dzigán, endeavoring to locate his art within the

⁹ This is influenced principally by the cultural studies approach advanced by Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach, who refuse to accept the separation between life and art, attempting to connect both to dynamic cultural processes. See Roach, *Cities*; Reinelt and Roach, *Critical Theory*.

¹⁰ Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*.

¹¹ Rozier, *Moyshe Broderzon*.

¹² Efron, “From Łódź to Tel Aviv.”

¹³ Vedenyapin, *Doctors Prescribe Laughter*.

¹⁴ Rojanski, *Yiddish in Israel*.

tradition of Jewish theater during various periods of his activity.¹⁵ Efron seeks to characterize Dzigan's political satire and the role of the Yiddish language in his art, based on Dzigan's memoirs, commercial recordings of skits, and historical and social studies. He views Dzigan and Shumacher as continuing the tradition of the *badkhn* (jester) and as the heirs of Sholem Aleichem.¹⁶ Likewise, he discusses Dzigan's status in Israel, which is also the main topic of a chapter in Rojanski's book. In addition, I have published a number of studies concerning the duo: one in the collection *'Al na' tegarshuni* (Do Not Chase Me Away), concerning performance and text in Dzigan and Shumacher's theater, another regarding their political satire of Israeli leaders, published in a collection on Jewish humor,¹⁷ an article on performing homeland in the post-Holocaust era,¹⁸ and my PhD dissertation, upon which this book is based.¹⁹

Various Yiddish actors described Dzigan and Shumacher at length in their memoirs. These texts contributed to creating the modern mythology of Yiddish theater, which Joel Berkowitz refers to when discussing the scholarly works regarded as "classics" in the historiography of the field.²⁰ Despite the problems that such works entail, we can glean from them much information about the environment in which the two artists were active, in various periods and different places. The depictions in such literature reveal how key figures interpreted the period and can thus help us to understand the cultural, social, and political meaning of Dzigan and Shumacher's stage art.

In his article "Kleynkunst un marionetn-teaters tsvishn beyde velt-milkhomes" (The Miniature Theater and Puppet Theaters between the Two World Wars), Moyshe Nudelman, one of the central authors of skits and monologues for Ararat and Dzigan and Shumacher's theater, surveys the development of Jewish miniature theater in Poland. In addition to painting a fascinating picture of Ararat in Łódź, Nudelman depicts in detail the duo's Warsaw period, examining how the Jewish audience in the city experienced the artists' theater, their influence

15 Vedenyapin depicts Dzigan as a stand-up comedian, although neither Dzigan nor his critics (apart from the reviews of his performances in the United States in the 1970s) identified either him or Shumacher with this genre.

16 Efron, "From Łódź to Tel Aviv."

17 Rotman, "Political Satire."

18 Rotman, "Performing Homeland."

19 The article includes earlier versions of sections found in the fifth chapter of this book. See Rotman, "Hadibuḳ 'einenu Moshe Sneh"; Rotman, "Performens kebiḳoret tarbut." See also: Rotman, *Habama*.

20 Berkowitz, "Writing the History of Yiddish Theatre." Concerning the study of the theater using memoirs, biographies, and similar materials see Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History."

on the local culture, and their public status in Jewish communal life.²¹ A further central source for my research is Moyshe Pulaver's book, *Ararat un lodzher tipn* (Ararat and Łódź types).²² Pulaver, one of the actors and directors in the Ararat troupe, included in his work documents, pictures, personal memories, and press clippings about Ararat. These constitute important sources for its study, although the book presents a very personal interpretation of the troupe by one of Ararat's central figures and its information is not always accurate.

Shimen Dzigán's autobiography, *Der koyekh fun yidishn humor*, describes the society in which he was raised, his personal development, his theatrical path, and the connection between art and the surrounding political reality. It contains a rich variety of anecdotes as well as portraits of his youthful experiences and artistic career from the actor's own historical perspective. This fascinating book was penned with the help of several writers and editors. Yet despite its comprehensive editing, we clearly hear the actor's voice. The book was written in Yiddish and intended for Yiddish speakers in Israel and the diaspora. The readership that Dzigán imagined was without doubt his own generation, those who attended his theatrical performances – his viewers, and his critics.²³ His autobiography, similarly to any other autobiographical work, is not unproblematic with regard to historical facts, circumstances, and events, but there can be no doubt regarding its contribution to studying the art of Dzigán and Shumacher, as well as Dzigán's life and artistic activities. The book reveals how Dzigán sought to immortalize himself and how he chose to tell his personal story, as well as that of Yiddish theater.²⁴

In addition to the materials mentioned above, I relied on many primary sources from various archives. These include scripts and playbills of performances by Dzigán and Shumacher, performed both together and individually; audio recordings of the duo's monologues and dialogues recorded in Poland before World War II; audio recordings made in Israel and other countries and distributed first on vinyl, then commercial tapes, and later on CDs (both Dzigán and Shumacher as a duo and Dzigán's theater); home recordings made by the actors for their personal use in shows and rehearsals; films in which they appeared; extracts from news reports broadcast in Israeli cinemas; and two recordings

²¹ Nudelman, "Kleynkunst."

²² Pulaver, *Ararat*.

²³ As far as I know, he did not express any desire to translate the book into Hebrew or other languages.

²⁴ Historians of the theater, among them Postlewait, Barton, and others, have discussed the reliability of autobiographies in establishing historical factors. Berkowitz addresses the topic in his critique of the historiography of Yiddish theater.

of adaptations of theater plays by Dzigan produced especially for Israeli television. The two shows were recorded on tape and distributed on DVD. These materials constitute a major resource in examining the performative aspects of Dzigan and Shumacher's art. I also found useful other materials documenting their activities and creative path, such as director's notebooks, diaries, and correspondence with the authorities. In addition, I availed myself of reviews and articles about Dzigan and Shumacher in the Israeli press in Yiddish, Hebrew, and other languages, in the official languages of Poland, the USSR, the United States, Argentina, and other countries; and interviews with actors and texts that they themselves published in the press.²⁵ I consulted reviews and photographs from the Ararat collection donated by the actor Moyshe Kosman (Kazanover) to the Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts at Tel Aviv University, and interviews with stage artists who collaborated with Dzigan and Shumacher (Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer, Anabela [Ya'akov Kelner], Lea Szlanger), and with Lydia Shumacher-Ophir, Yisroel Shumacher's daughter.

The archival sources are largely located in the Shimen Dzigan collection and the Yisroel Shumacher collection at the Yehuda Gabbai Theatre Archive in the Beit Ariela Library in Tel Aviv (BAA), the Israeli Center for the Documentation of the Performing Arts at Tel Aviv University (ICDPA), the Israel Goor Theatre Archives and Museum at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (IGTA), the collection of the Yidisher Artistn Farayn (1919–1939), and the collection of the Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum, both at YIVO in New York.

A Note on Transliteration, Names, and Translation

This book relies extensively on sources in Hebrew and Yiddish. The titles of both first and secondary sources in those languages have been transliterated. Names of newspapers follow the English spelling of the newspaper, where this exists (for example *Yedioth Ahronoth*).

YIVO guidelines were used for transliteration of Yiddish. The Hebrew transliteration follows the ALA (American Library Association) system. According to the

²⁵ Many of the reviews and articles are preserved in the Yehuda Gabbai Theatre Archive at the Beit Ariela Library in Tel Aviv. They were collected by the artists, sometimes without noting the place of publication or date. When I approached the materials in the archive, the articles were not organized in any order and therefore I refer the reader to the archive itself. Online access to many primary and secondary sources is provided nowadays by various websites, including those of The Israel Goor Theatre Archives and Museum, the Index to Yiddish Periodicals, and the Historical Jewish Press.

guidelines of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, prepositions and the article are not separated from the noun (*ha, ba, la*, etc.). In Hebrew transliteration, the letters Aleph and Ayin are marked with the signs ' and ' respectively. Transliterations use only lower case (apart from the first word in a sentence, private names, and names of countries), in accordance with the fact that both Hebrew and Yiddish have no capital letters.

A particular challenge in writing this book was the spelling of personal names. Indeed, the book includes individuals from a range of countries and cultures. Moreover, Hebrew and Yiddish names can be transliterated in a variety of different ways. Thus, where possible, the spelling of individuals' names follows the spellings in roman characters found in the authors' own books, articles, or (more recently) websites and social media, or accords with commonly accepted spellings (for example, Sholem Aleichem, Uri Zvi Greenberg). The names of Yiddish actors are written according to the YIVO encyclopedia, files in the YIVO archives, or Zalmen Zylbercweig's *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*. Names that do not appear in any of these sources have been transliterated following the YIVO guidelines. Likewise, the names of Hebrew and Yiddish actors, politicians, and other figures have been spelled according to commonly accepted spellings or, in the few cases in which this was not possible, transliterated.

However, a division of the names into Hebrew or Yiddish is not possible. Indeed, some actors performed in both languages and writers wrote in both these tongues. So too, Dzigal and Shumacher were discussed extensively in both the Hebrew and Yiddish press. Thus, spellings are consistent with the context. For example, Dzigal's first name is spelled Shimon (rather than Shimen) in the transliterated titles of Hebrew articles about him.

All translations from Yiddish and Hebrew within the text are mine, unless indicated otherwise. Quotations from Dzigal and Shumacher's skits appear in the original Yiddish, followed by an English translation. Lengthy and significant quotations from reviews and other documents have also been included in the original Yiddish, although in most cases these are found in the footnotes, so as not to disrupt the flow of the text.