

PERFORMANCES OF COLONIAL ABSURD: *TELL ME SOMETHING* BY RUTH KANNER THEATRE GROUP

DORIT YERUSHALMI
The University of Haifa

ABSTRACT: This article offers a close reading of *Tell Me Something—A Spoken Exhibition* by Ruth Kanner Theatre Group and introduces the term “rhizomatic dramaturgy” to describe a performative practice at once based in colonial reality and working toward its dismantling. Rhizomatic dramaturgy exposes how language both props up colonial structures and has the potential to erase or reimagine them. *Tell Me Something* is a postdramatic work constructed as a series of events with no narrative, thereby precluding any neat organization of knowledge about its venue, Beit Hagefen. Instead, it invites spectators to take part in the deconstruction of the historical-spatial narrative of Beit Hagefen, a municipal institution metonymic of Haifa’s coexistence ethos. The study of curatorial decisions, the relationship between Arabic and Hebrew, and the rhizomatic dramaturgy based on ethnographic materials and speech mechanisms—particularly focusing on repetitions and differences—reveals how this hybrid event, through its bare language, embodies performances of the colonial absurd within Haifa’s Beit Hagefen and its environment and offers spectators parodic moments that provoke “shared laughter.”

KEYWORDS: colonial absurdity, differences, parody, repetitions, speech mechanisms



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Interviewer: (*in a thin voice, apprehensively and excited, interested*) What, what, what exactly is the purpose of this place?

Interviewee: (*in a thick voice, importantly, speaking boldly*) The purpose of this place is first of all (*pause*) . . . It's an Arab-Jewish Center. This means we accept everyone—everyone: an Arab group comes, even Muslim women (*gesturing a hijab—the audience laughs*).

Interviewer: (*insisting, incredulous*) But what does that mean, “everyone accepts everyone”? What, *everyone accepts everyone*?

Interviewee: (*definitively*) Yes. Everyone accepts everyone. What do you want to hear?

Thus opens the *speech space* titled “What Do You Want to Hear?” in *Tell Me Something: A Spoken Exhibition* by Ruth Kanner, curated by Yair Vardi and designed by Kinneret Kisch, which was created specifically for the Beit Hagefen Gallery and presented there on June 14–20, 2021.¹ In addition to the veteran members of the group—Shirley Gal, Ronen Babluki, Adi Meirovitch—all of whom live in Tel Aviv, the work also featured three Palestinian Israelis: Siwar Awwad, a native of Nazareth and resident of Haifa; Bashir Nahara, a native and resident of Haifa; and Ebaa Mundir, who was born in Majdal Shams in the (occupied) Golan Heights, and commutes between Jaffa and Haifa.

In the part just quoted, Adi portrays both a Jewish interviewer and her interviewee, Beit Hagefen's long-serving secretary—an Arab resident of Haifa. The excerpt encapsulates the way the piece uses ethnographic materials as speech exhibits and creates a parody about Jewish-Palestinian coexistence. *Tell Me Something*, I argue, demonstrates instances of *colonial absurdity* performed in a municipal institution metonymic of Haifa's coexistence ethos. With *performances of the colonial absurd*, I refer to the phenomenon of absurdity in the social, cultural, and political realms of colonialism performed in everyday language and reproduced in the performance, and to the absurd dimensions of the colonial regime itself—the futility of power, the embarrassment of the attempt to maintain relations of control, the irrationality underpinning such a regime, and how this irrationality is maintained and reproduced yet also erased through language. *Tell Me Something* reveals various forms of absurdity surrounding the attempt to forge coexistence between patently unequal populations in Haifa.

The work critically examines the du-qi industry (derived from Hebrew “du-qium,” meaning “coexistence,” and referencing the game “duqim,” pickup sticks), revealing the hidden language of superiority that shapes it. This language, often imperceptible to Jews but keenly observed by Palestinian city residents, plays a crucial role in both exposing and dismantling the colonial order.

Colonialism—as a form of domination based on the need to assert authority and superiority—provokes ridicule. What I call the *rhizomatic dramaturgy* of *Tell Me Something* expresses this ridicule by means of ethnographic materials reassembled as fragments that resist narrative linearity. The concept of rhizomatic dramaturgy helps to understand the open, decentralized structure of the work and the ways its segments spread out (like grass). At the same time, the hidden transcript of the subordinates, stemming from a kind of humor of resistance, is revealed.² *Tell Me Something* constructs a multiplicity of parodic views on Israeli Jews and Palestinians, making shared laughter possible.³

My approach here refers to “Theatre of the Absurd,” as defined by Martin Esslin, following Albert Camus’s treatment of the human condition.⁴ Theatre of the Absurd referred to plays written after World War II, which did not conform to any artistic trends or rules, in reaction to the hegemony of realist-psychological drama of European theatre. All elements in absurdist plays, including characters, space, props, and language, allegorically describe nonfictional ideas related to the sense of absurdity. Language is exposed as a system of control or struggle against it, or conversely, stands for lack of communication. Esslin’s nonpolitical framework obscures explicit representations of colonialism that appear in the various plays he discusses and replaces them with generalizations about the “human condition.”

This article explores how *Tell Me Something* performed colonial absurdity in Beit Hagefen as a found space for site-specific work. The curatorial choices informing the piece created spatial interventions at Beit Hagefen and invited spectators to take part in the deconstruction of its historical-spatial narrative. The building became a theatrical and civic laboratory for the way speech acts reveal cultural constructions, including the whitewashing of racism, as well as tactics of resistance. This research is part of a comprehensive study of theatre and cultural institutions in Haifa as a *wounded city*—a term coined by anthropologist

Keren Till for cities that have experienced physical destruction, displacement, and personal and collective traumas after many years of violence and reconstruction of social and spatial relations.⁵ In the case of Israel, the violence perpetrated by the colonial government has been committed by the military and other branches of the national security establishment.

The theoretical framework is related to what Kim Solga dubs *urban performance studies*—a field of theatre and performance studies linked to the spatial turn.⁶ The methodology combines historical research based on archival materials with a thick description of the performances and analysis based on cultural criticism theories and theatre and performance studies—including Hans-Thies Lehmann’s notion of *postdramatic theatre*.⁷ I watched *Tell Me Something* once. The analysis of the work is based on video documentation I received from the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group (henceforth *RKTG*).

RUTH KANNER THEATRE GROUP

The internationally renowned Ruth Kanner, who defines herself as a theatre creator, is one of the most important and prolific artists in contemporary Israeli theatre. She holds a unique position in the contemporary field of performing art in Israel as an independent creator working with her own ensemble, with full artistic freedom over her works and the choice of materials. Since 1998, the *RKTG* has been conducting explorations of theatrical language.⁸ In her works, Kanner transforms the historical, social, and cultural aspects of Israeli place and time into active entities: speech acts, physical gestures, movement, visual images, sounds, and more. The group has developed a unique artistic language of storytelling that places the actors in the role of epic mediators, in the Brechtian sense. Kanner’s two fields of interest—in words-as-actions, focusing not on what is being said but on how people act and interact with words, and in recent years in performing “community speech choruses” primarily in underprivileged neighborhoods—are both on display in *Tell Me Something*.⁹ The group’s preferred sources are nontheatrical materials, such as literary works, cultural studies, and documentary sources.¹⁰

The works of *RKTG* might be considered postdramatic theatre. The concept, coined in 1999 by Hans-Thies Lehmann, denotes a broad

trend of transition from poetics and aesthetics of a performance that depends on dramatic text, narrative, and characters to a visual and physical aesthetics that disassembles the synthesis and hierarchy of the components of the performative event, with particular emphasis on their simultaneity.¹¹ The storytelling dramaturgy characterizing Kanner's work and the preference for nontheatrical materials are among the mechanisms of postdramatic theatre. *Tell Me Something* is an interdisciplinary work that is neither theatre, nor exhibition, nor even a performance in a gallery in the conventional sense.

In *Tell Me Something*, for the first time, the group incorporates its longstanding preoccupation with the relationship between language and place as part of a gallery-based exhibition. This was also the first time they created a work outside of Tel Aviv. To prepare for the work, the participants addressed questions to local residents of Wadi Nisnas and Hadar, or eavesdropped on their conversations. Mostly, this was a group-based activity, though some of the material was gathered individually by the Arabic-speaking performers. The two questions posed were: "What bothers you?" and "Where is Zionism?" (*eifo Ha-tziyonut?*), the latter implying Zionism Blvd, and thereby humorously referring to the political movement. The group also interviewed some of Beit Hagefen's employees and took part in an art tour in Wadi Nisnas Valley. From the "found" texts of this ethnographic work, speech exhibits were woven; the spoken exhibition, then, had a hyper-local character. Richard Gough connects the work to verbatim documentary theatre pieces, through which can be heard "the depths of meaning and intention underneath mundane sayings and conversation."¹²

Tell Me Something reflects a notable trend in the visual arts and performance known as the *ethnographic turn*. This term describes a field of intersections between art and anthropology, defined as "a willingness to look at common sense, everyday practices—with extended, critical and self-critical attention, with a curiosity about particularity and a willingness to be decentered in acts of translation."¹³ The roots of the ethnographic turn lie in an earlier turn (in the 1970s and 1980s) to a critical theory in which artists focused on uncovering the hidden hierarchical social and economic relations that govern art institutions, as well as the social construction of the art object as unique, autonomous, and timeless. This shift inspired the reconceptualization of the artistic

process: Instead of working in laboratory conditions in the studio, artists have moved out into public spaces, streets, and neighborhoods and have begun collaborating with people in various communities.

WHAT, WHAT, WHAT EXACTLY IS THIS PLACE?

In site-specific performance, the work emerges from a particular setting and engages with its specific history and politics and their resonance in the present. This kind of work cannot travel—it exists only at the site that produced it. Mike Pearson insists that the relationship between place and performance must be defined in this rigorous way: “Site is not just an interesting, and disinterested, backdrop.”¹⁴ *The Arab-Jewish Center—Beit Hagefen* is located in one of Haifa’s historic buildings, situated at the epicenter of a multilayered urban wound. The Center was founded in 1963, at the instigation of Mayor Abba Hushi and his cultural adviser Yaakov Malkin. Uri Lubrani—the adviser on Arab affairs to Prime Minister Ben-Gurion at the time (1956–1963), who oversaw the founding of the Center—suggested that a neutral name be chosen for it. Malkin proposed naming it *Beit Hagefen* (Hebrew, “House of the Vine”), possibly taking the name from the street lying just below the Center.¹⁵ It still bears the same name to this day—harking back to the vineyards planted by German Templars in Haifa, which stood further down the street until 1920. The street got its Arabic name (*al-Karma*) before 1948. In Jewish-Israeli culture, the grapevine is emblematic of peace and tranquility; it is not a Palestinian national symbol, such as the olive tree. The choice thus implies a political strategy that marks the building as a political site and signals who holds authority over the house that serves as an Arab-Jewish Center.

The building stands on the high tier of Wadi Nisnas, a residential Arab neighborhood, predominantly Christian, that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century outside the walls of the Old Town. It is the only Arab neighborhood in Haifa whose homes were not damaged during the 1948 war and has, therefore, preserved an urban fabric that expresses the cultural continuity of Palestinian Haifa. The building that was to become Beit Hagefen witnessed the fleeing and expulsion of the neighborhood’s residents in April 1948 and new residents moving into their homes. In July 1948, the Arab Affairs Committee of the

Haifa Municipality was ordered by the Israeli Military High Command to declare that all remaining Arab residents of the city—numbering about 3,000—must move within five days to Wadi Nisnas. This constituted about 4% of all Palestinian residents of the city just before the expulsion.¹⁶ Thus, the Wadi Nisnas neighborhood became the main ghetto of the Palestinian residents.

The municipality established Beit Hagefen as a cultural institution seeking to promote meetings between Jews and Arabs. The decision regarding its location can be taken as evidence of a colonial gesture. It was not established in Haifa's Jewish neighborhoods, such as Neveh Sha'anani, Ahuza, or Bat Galim, but rather positioned outside the daily lives of the city's Jewish residents. Beit Hagefen is located on the "seam line" between the neighborhoods Wadi Nisnas, German Colony, and Hadar. It borders the historic Hebrew city, embodied in the Hadar Hacarmel neighborhood, but is actually situated on its outskirts. The house offered a counterpoint to the vibrant, non-institutionalized, and "dangerous" Palestinian culture, which thrived around the Communist Party's offices and the offices of the daily Arabic newspaper *Al-Ittihad* in Wadi Nisnas. In these locations, writers, poets, journalists, and the intellectual Arab elite who had remained in Haifa after the Nakba gathered, including Tawfik Toubi, Emile Habibi, Emil Toma, and Mahmoud Darwish. Beit Hagefen, then, was conceived as both a meeting place and, one could argue, a control center. Its proximity to the Wadi Nisnas neighborhood enables the establishment to monitor the residents and events of the Wadi.

In the Center's early years, its activities were held within its walls, including meetings between Jewish and Arab participants, Arabic-language courses, and a space that serves as an art gallery. During this period, it served as a local cultural center with no significant presence outside Haifa. When Amram Mitzna became mayor in 1993, changes were made to its management. The Oslo Accords—the dream of a new Middle East that for a fleeting moment seemed feasible—and the municipal policy spearheaded by Mitzna led to a change in the Center's activities. Thus, in 1994, under Dr. Moti Peri and Rivka Bialik, Beit Hagefen transformed from a local institution into a local tourism destination with the production of the "Holiday of Holidays Festival" in December. "During the holiday period shared by Jews, Christians and

Muslims, the entire city becomes a focal point of celebration. Everyone celebrates with everybody,” as Mayor Yona Yahav later boasted.¹⁷ The festival played a role in strengthening Haifa’s status as a city of coexistence and established Beit Hagefen as a metonym for coexistence. However, the festival is celebrated around Beit Hagefen, that is, in the Arab parts of the city, not in the Jewish areas. It is not, in fact, the entire city that becomes a space of celebration.

In recent years, under Assaf Ron’s direction, Beit Hagefen has begun a decolonization process, promoting Palestinian culture in the public sphere and questioning the concept of coexistence in a country marked by discrimination and racism. These efforts include active interventions to influence and change the established order. In 2019, Palestinian activist Rami Younis was appointed artistic director of the “Arab Culture Days” festival, held at Beit Hagefen for forty years. For the first time, the festival celebrated Palestinian culture; it was also relocated to the predominantly Arab public sphere in the Lower City. Younis stated:

Palestinian culture is not a culture of “coexistence” that is supposed to speak of a yearning for peace. It is a real culture, alive and kicking, that the Israeli establishment is trying to erase. And yes, most of it naturally is of a protest character. Beit Hagefen, the producing body, understands this. In these dark times, it is astonishing to me that there are still true partners on the Jewish side who understand that it is their responsibility to stand behind the Palestinian public and provide it with what the establishment prevents it from doing—even at the risk of persecution.¹⁸

Younis’s decision to celebrate Palestinian culture sparked a scandal. As soon as the festival was announced, a strongly worded letter was sent to then Culture & Sports Minister Miri Regev by Shai Glick, a right-winger and CEO of the Betsalmo organization, and two Haifa Likud members. In the letter, they denounced Beit Hagefen’s activities, arguing that it “has become fertile ground for anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish activity.”¹⁹ They further objected to holding a Palestinian cultural festival that “instills the false narrative that Haifa is a ‘Palestinian’ city, with a ‘Palestinian’ culture and identity.”²⁰ In her letter of reply, Regev

agreed, noting that support should be withdrawn from cultural institutions that “champion the Palestinian narrative, which means denying the existence of the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.”²¹ The financial threat to Beit Hagefen’s operations is ongoing.

The attempt to delegitimize the festival shows the ongoing effort by state and municipal bodies to erase Palestinian urban culture, past and present. Appointing Younis as artistic director and supporting the festival was a stance against this power structure, despite the financial risks to Beit Hagefen, a nonprofit entity relying on external funding. Ron, Beit Hagefen’s director, stood firm behind the artistic decisions and responded:

You will not find incitement here, nor any inflammatory discourse, or any statement that is banned in the State of Israel. Fortunately, we are still a democratic country that allows freedom of expression, and I am allowed to ask a person about their identity. I personally fully recognize Palestinian identity.²²

While a festival that celebrates Palestinian culture in the public sphere jeopardizes Beit Hagefen’s budgets, it also enables its continued existence by strengthening its bonds to the social milieu and prevents it from becoming a white elephant.²³

Another example of the decolonization processes lies in the explicit approach of Yael Messer, curator of the Beit Hagefen Gallery (2017–2023):

I see the gallery as a place that tries to act and critique from within, raising questions about the notion of “coexistence” and how it can even be used in a place that is fundamentally founded on discrimination and continual day-to-day racism toward its Palestinian residents.²⁴

As a curator, Messer shifted the focus to studying the building as a site and reexamining the gallery’s historic and cultural roles. This approach is exemplified in *Out of Context*, Nardin Srouji’s first solo exhibition at Beit Hagefen Gallery, featuring six installations and a site-specific performance on screen. Srouji’s ironic and parodic works critique Beit Hagefen as an Arab-Jewish center, challenging its colonial history.

Kanner conceived *Tell Me Something* as one of the site-specific works presented under Messer's management. Kanner's motivation to create at Beit Hagefen was, in her words, a cross "between the personal and the ideological."²⁵ For Kanner, who was born in Haifa, which was

—not far from Beit Hagefen, Haifa is a kind of place of the heart. The place of my dreams. It's a very dim memory of childhood—a place with smells, shapes, colors, and other languages . . . something in the senses gives me a different sound of existence.²⁶

Kanner's interest in exploring the city grew stronger when Siwar Awad joined the group; Siwar lives in Haifa with her native Haifaite partner in a house opposite Beit Hagefen. Consequently, a connection was formed with Messer, who was open to the idea that the raw material for the exhibition would not be paintings or sculptures, but language. Messer notes that she responded to Kanner's idea because of the *RKTG's* site-specificity and also because the idea to engage with Beit Hagefen and its environment through research on language aligned with trends that interested her as a curator.²⁷ The following section of the article outlines the research and curatorial processes behind *Tell Me Something* and the web of events that made up the live "speech exhibit."

EXCUSE ME, WHERE IS ZIONISM? (EIFO HA-TZIYONUT?)

For the performance, the Center—including the management and secretarial offices on the second floor—was completely emptied of all objects and furniture, and, for about two weeks, all routine operations were suspended. Every part of the building served as a space for a hybrid performance: neither an exhibition nor a theatrical work. Yair Vardi and Ruth Kanner did not produce a traditional *mise-en-scène* (i.e., placing the movement of the actors and all the visual components on stage), as is customary in theatre; nor did they hang pictures or place objects, as is customary in visual art. Instead, they designed a *mise-en-events*: The performers were objectified, serving as artistic objects in the exhibition, while the participants were given the freedom to choose their paths. For over an hour, the public moved through the entire building. Participants were invited to sit down, stand around

gazing, or wander about. The events-exhibits led to the spectators' active participation—either by joining the speech, following the performers, or by walking among them—thereby bearing responsibility for the performance. At certain moments, the participants themselves become objects in the exhibition.

The hybrid curatorial concept disrupted not only the theatrical paradigm and the visual arts but also the spatial logic of the building itself. Beit Hagefen's rooms were not used functionally; rather, they transformed into a maze. The walls of the entire building were painted white, the performers wore white clothes, and the blocks they stood on were white. The use of the color white is significant, as it bears many contradictory meanings. White is the Point Zero of art—like Kazimir Malevich's 1918 painting "White on White," which contains scant visual information but allows meanings to be projected onto it. A white cube is the term for a typical modern art exhibition space: a neutral and "clean" space with as little interference as possible. White is associated with cleanliness and sterility, as well as racial supremacy. According to Bhabha, "'Whiteness' is the screen used to project the political ghosts of the past."²⁸ In the work itself, there were no screenings; rather, the performers and the rooms of the building spoke on behalf of the ghosts of the past and the cultural scripts of the present through a series of "speaking events" held throughout the spaces.

These events were based on ethnographic sources, gathered in three ways, as mentioned above: first, from transcripts of conversations with people on the streets of the Hadar (Jewish) and Wadi Nisnas (Arab) neighborhoods, to whom the performers posed the questions *Excuse Me, Where Is Zionism?* and *What Bothers You?* Second, by listening to random conversations of passersby and residents in public places; and third, by talking with Beit Hagefen staff and taking part in a guided art tour in the Wadi.²⁹ The materials were then reconstructed in Arabic and Hebrew, while disassembling and reconnecting the languages. In the following sections, I analyze several dimensions of how text and language feature in *Tell Me Something*, namely the performance in Hebrew and Arabic; rhizomatic dramaturgy based on ethnographic materials; and repetition and deconstruction as means for shared laughter.

I shall first outline the web of events presented in *Tell Me Something*. The work consists of three chapters, each comprising several

events. The public can orient themselves according to a program map of the performance-building, which names the different chapters and events (“speech spaces”); a description of select events follows. The first chapter (untitled) consists of three events that take place sequentially on the upper floor of Beit Hagefen. At the first event—titled *Tell Me Something*—the audience ascends to the upper floor while Ebaa repeats the word *Tfaddalu* (Arabic for “Please” or “Be my guests”) and gestures for them to enter. Her motions, smile, and intonation give the sense that she is inviting one to a festive event or a family home rather than a gallery. However, the excessive use of the word and exaggerated gestures point to a complex system of colonial relations. The subjected people, it seems, are inviting the ruling class, yet also not interested in its presence. When the audience enters, they wander among the performers, who stand far apart from each other, near the walls, in frozen poses, like sculptures at an exhibition. When a spectator passes by a performer, the performer emerges from the frozen position and addresses them with a few words. Sometimes, a conversation develops, consisting of a single sentence performed in a manner that is either distancing or inviting, empathetic or threatening, regimenting or accepting. These include sentences such as: *Look at me, Tell me something, Do they play soccer there?* and *Close the door*. Most of these are spoken in Hebrew, but some are phrases or words in Arabic, such as *Tfaddalu, Keefak?* (“How are you?”), and “*Wala ishi*” (“Never mind”) spoken by Bashir, and Siwar’s instruction, “*Sakkri al-baab*” (“Close the door”). The latter instruction is repeated several times in the performance and is notable not only for conveying the opposite of *Tfaddalu* but also for its expression of ownership of space and setting boundaries.

In the second event, the audience gathers in the central gallery for a choral performance titled *Excuse Me, Where Is Zionism?*, which outlines routes to Zionism Boulevard through speech, gestures, sounds, and vocal noises. Four performers stand on a pedestal, while the audience sits before them. The performance begins with the performers standing immobile, each holding up a white sheet of paper and staring at the audience. The local audience knows that Beit Hagefen is located at 33 *Ha-tziyonut* Boulevard. The question *Eifo Ha-tziyonut?* (“Where is Zionism?”) and its answers highlight the absurdity of renaming the street. During the British Mandate, it was called Al-Jabal [Mountain]

Street. In the early 1950s, it was renamed United Nations Street to honor the UN resolution establishing Israel. In 1975, it was renamed Zionism Boulevard in response to a UN resolution declaring Zionism as a form of racism.

The case of *Ha-tziyonut* Boulevard is not unique; Haifa has many streets with predominantly Palestinian populations that have lost their original names. Cultural geographer Maoz Azaryahu explains that street names are an inexpensive and efficient means of erasure, embedding the new political regime into daily life. While the daily use of names and signs often obscures their political meaning, they inject national values into daily communication. By repeatedly using the word Zionism in the performative event, its concept as both a place and idea loses meaning; the disassembled language suggests that questioning its location (as a street name) also unsettles its political essence (Figure 1).

The second chapter, *How Does One Declare Oneself? A Self-portrait of the Interviewer and the Interviewee*, consists of five speech spaces performed in a cycle, allowing spectators to fully participate in each event. Each speech space is a deconstructed interview in which the roles are



FIGURE 1. “Eifo Ha-Ziunt?”—Shirley Gal, Siwar Awwad, Adi Meirovitch, Ronen Babluki, Photo: Gérard Allon, Courtesy of Ruth Kanner Theatre Group.

swapped, similar to *What Do You Want to Hear?*, from which I quoted at the beginning of this article. As detailed further below, these five speech spaces challenge Beit Hagefen's notion of coexistence, highlighting its openness to criticism through reflective performance work. In *So This Is What You Call Coexistence?* Shirley and Siwar perform in the small gallery, sitting very close on chairs placed on a rectangular pedestal, their hair intermingling. They switch roles between a Jewish interviewer and a Palestinian interviewee. At first, they appear very friendly, but at some point, Shirley morphs into an aggressive interrogator akin to the Shin Bet or police. In the central gallery, Adi, Ronen, and Bashir perform *How Nice*, an interview with the longest-serving custodian at Beit Hagefen, who embodies the place and its stories. The Palestinian man is introduced by function, but remains unnamed (like the Palestinian secretary in *What Do You Want to Hear?*). Bashir, playing the custodian, enters from a hidden hallway and sits on a chair on a pedestal, while Adi and Ronen gaze at him and ask questions. He is objectified as an artwork by both; Adi also pats his chest in a gesture of intimacy and mastery. The colonial absurdity comes through in the interviewers' ignorance as they marvel at everything Bashir says. The disruptive element comes when roles are swapped: Adi plays the custodian, and Bashir becomes the director instructing her until she bristles and storms off. Bashir resumes his role, ending the event hunched over as he disappears into the hallway, symbolizing the subordinates' hidden transcript—a humor of resistance through worn-down deprecation in the face of power. Both events highlight the legacy of coexistence in Haifa, forging a colonial absurdity founded on intertwined intimacy and violence.

In the third chapter (*untitled*), the audience is invited to wander between four events—works with no beginning or end—performed simultaneously. The final event of *Tell Me Something*, performed by the speech chorus *What Bothers You?*, takes place in the main gallery on the upper floor. The audience is instructed to return to the space where the *Excuse Me—Where Is Hatziyonut?* speech chorus was performed. The performers stand on two rectangular pedestals, holding white sheets of paper. They occasionally swap their pages and sometimes appear to be reading from them. Later, it is revealed that a parking report is hidden among the sheets of paper, and they perform its text in various ways. The disruption in the chorus occurs when one of the performers

objects to the question, “What bothers you here?,” tears up the sheet of paper, and storms out. This image of anger signals the end of the event, inviting the audience to leave the gallery. At the end of the event I attended, there was no applause, which reinforced the impression of the work as an exhibition in a gallery rather than a theatrical performance.

Thus, the poetics of speech events altered the spatial relations between spectators and performers, as the events are conducted with the spectators rather than in front of them. This change in spatial relations was also a function of time: In the work, the time of the spectators and that of the performers is shared, processual, and based on an open and evolving structural syntax. The simultaneity of the events subverts the whole, allowing us to perceive the specific details of the events rather than the overall picture: The entire event remains fragmentary and non-linear. Unlike an exhibition, it was impossible to return to any particular exhibit because they had all vanished as they emerged. As Peggy Phelan puts it, “Performance’s only life is in the present.”³⁰ For Phelan, a work of performance art only exists for the precise duration of its staging.

The curation of the work dictated the spectators’ movement throughout the building, balancing the tension between wandering about and gathering, and between spatial logic and disruption. On one hand, it is an inviting and open performance space; on the other, it utilizes performers as artistic objects. The audience actively participate in the event, but this participation is more policed than proactive. The framework allows for choice, but it is a limited one.

IT STARTS WITH THE LANGUAGE

Frantz Fanon argued:

Every colonized people . . . finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.³¹

According to this description, the colonized—that is, the member of the oppressed culture—has several options: to write in their native

language, to use the local dialect, or to remain mute. *RKTG*'s speech exhibition at Beit Hagefen includes both Hebrew and Arabic, but there is no equality between the two—nor is there any systematic translation from Arabic to Hebrew in the sections where the communication is in Arabic. The intensive presence of Hebrew as the language of the performance stems from the fact that the Arabic-speaking performers are bilingual (as are the Arabic-speaking audience members attending the performance)—while most Hebrew speakers do not speak Arabic.

The issue of the Arabic language in the public sphere becomes a focal point in the segment titled, *So This Is What You Call Coexistence?*, performed by Siwar (a Palestinian) and Shirley (a Jew). During the course of the piece, they swap Jewish and Arab identities, highlighting the complexities and tensions surrounding language and identity in the public sphere.

Shirley: We Arabs know you better than you know us.

Siwar: It starts with the language.

Shirley: Ultimately, the other side is very afraid of me. From the moment they hear me speaking Arabic, they're terrified of me. Am I right, or not?

Siwar: It deters them. Even in Haifa today.

Shirley: Am I right or not?

(Siwar meekly confirms that this is indeed the case)

The intimidating effect of Arabic is conveyed in several scenes. For example, in *Tell Me Something*, Siwar barks, "Close the door!" in Hebrew, then repeats it in Arabic ("*Sakkri al-baab!*") like a threatening command; the video footage captures a Hebrew-speaking spectator responding dismissively, "Sheesh, OK. . ." In the event titled *R48om: Street Talk*, Siwar is the only one who speaks Arabic. Knowledge of Arabic separated the participants: Arabic speakers listened and laughed at a conversation about chewing gum that "after two chews has no taste . . . resin-flavored gum—my grandmother used to fool us with it"; monolingual Hebrew speakers, however, passed by, utterly oblivious to what was being said.

When communication switches to Arabic, it becomes a musical experience—speech acts and intonations that make up a score, since

most of the audience do not understand Arabic. There are isolated cases in which two Arabic speakers converse in Arabic. For instance, in *What Bothers You Here?*, the conversation between Siwar (Shopkeeper) and Bashir (Interviewer) creates a linguistic enclave, rife with irony. This small scene highlights the political-existential absurdity surrounding coexistence in Wadi Nisnas. It is worth recalling that the text performed here was based on interviews with and overheard conversations of local Palestinian residents.

Bashir [*in Arabic*]: Hello, sir [*No response*] Hello? How're things?

Siwar [*in Hebrew*]: Yes, can I help you?

Bashir [*in Arabic*]: Sir, do you speak Arabic?

[*Henceforth the dialogue continues in Arabic*]

Siwar: Yes, what do I look Jewish to you?

Bashir: How should I know?. . . Good. And they take good care of the place, or . . .

Siwar: What, here? Yes, very good.

Bashir: The municipality, and so on. . .

Siwar: Yes, good.

Bashir: . . . Is there anything here that needs attention?

Siwar: Yes, no, it's an okay place—like, there are no Arab-and-Jews here; there's no such thing here; Arabs and Jews, we all live together.

Bashir: (*Mimicking her mockingly, in Arabic*) "We live together" [*pause*]

Shirley: (*Joins the scene, interweaving a Hebrew text about complaints*) What bothers me? No work, no life, the population is old—that's it!. . . [*pause*]

Siwar: But we must live, we must live.

Shirley [*in Hebrew*]: And Arabs. (*Silence*)

The paucity of Arabic is noticeable in the event titled *Invitation to Talk*, in which pairs of people are invited to chat on seat-like installations. The chair-like objects vary in height, direction, or distance from each other, creating disrupted speech states, such as two people speaking to each other while sitting back to back. The time allotted for conversation is very short. Bashir directs the event by gesturing participants to the chairs while saying *Tfaddalu* (*Please, Be my guest*).



FIGURE 2. *Invitation to Talk*, Bashir Nahara and participants, Photo: Gérard Allon, Courtesy of Ruth Kanner Theatre Group.

As before, the greeting *Tfaddalu*—the single Arabic word heard in the space—symbolically reflects stereotypical hospitality, with its exaggerated use indicating a complex system of colonial relations: the subjugated inviting the subjugator, even if they do not desire their presence.

Once more, all pairs in the recorded piece speak Hebrew. One captured conversation between a comparatively older Jewish spectator and a young Palestinian one neatly illustrates the absurdity: The Jewish senior takes over the conversation, rendering the Palestinian a mere listener to the hardships of a Haifa believer in coexistence (Figure 2).

Jewish man: All this talk [i.e., the performance] in light of what happened here a month ago, all the riots. I am here . . . Wadi Nisnas is . . . it's my natural habitat, as they say—I'm here all the time, I have a lot of friends here, and it's complicated, because Haifa has always been portrayed—and still is, today, in my eyes—a place of real, genuine coexistence.

Palestinian spectator (nodding): Yes.

Jewish spectator: That's how it all started: *they* started burning things, it didn't start with Haifaite—they started burning things.

Lack of communication, disrupted communication, and violent language are hallmarks of the Theatre of the Absurd. The speech situations described above, and many others, highlight the colonial absurdity that manifests itself in language. Even when the words are understood, their connotations are different, and the use of sound and intonation allows us to dwell on the various modes of interpretation. Hebrew speakers interested in communicating with Arabic speakers do not know their language—Arabic speakers are forced to converse with them in Hebrew. On the one hand, bilingualism is an advantage for Arabic speakers; on the other hand, it perpetuates the oppression of Arabic as an intellectual and artistic language of communication.

SO, THIS IS WHAT YOU CALL COEXISTENCE?

In the first chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the rhizomatic “has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows.”³² The rhizome is a plurality, with no clear origin or center. It is all splits, mazes, and unexpected encounters. I suggest that RKTG’s practice in creating *Tell Me Something* can be thought of as rhizomatic dramaturgy. The curatorial-dramaturgical process based on the ethnographic materials offers an examination of speech mechanisms, including intonation, body language, rhythm, volume, and so on. It rejects the notion of compiling knowledge about coexistence and Beit Hagefen into a single inclusive theoretical framework. Instead, it offers fragments of the various social spaces and layers of the site, leading to the emergence of absurd situations. In Gil Hocherberg’s terms—which correspond with Deleuze’s concept of *becoming*—the result is a poetic political exhibition that eludes history. It intervenes in the space, using methods of inquiry that galvanize historical knowledge in the effort of asking questions about the emerging future.³³

The curatorial action, specifically considering how to create an exhibition without objects, influenced the dramaturgy. The performance is not based on dialectical development, as is customary in traditional theatre; nor does it present events in a way that forms a beginning, middle, and end. Performers do not portray dramatic characters; nor is there any realistic representation. As with trends of postdramatic theatre that strive for alternative ways of representing identities and

subjects, the dramaturgy of *Tell Me Something* is fragmented—a montage of pieces with neither hierarchy nor center.³⁴ The texts range from everyday sentences (such as *Can I have pomegranate juice in a size 12 glass?*), through questions, to personal recollections (*And she stayed here in Haifa . . . And lived at the Carmel station . . . My father worked as a driver for Dr. Blumenthal. Everyone knew him*).

In Ruth Kanner’s works, according to Daphna Ben Shaul, there is an “ideology of form”—namely, the act of storytelling is a form that structures content.³⁵ The performers do not play the portrayed characters; rather, they play the role of storytellers. The *mise-en-scène* becomes a speech event produced by sounds, intonations, silences, musicality of words and sentences, speech actions, and speech disruptions that convey the meaning. The principle of disruption is manifested in what is referred to, in theatre and performance discourse, as *misperformance*. In *Tell Me Something*, misperformance disrupts the cultural script of Beit Hagefen and highlights the colonial absurdity. As we saw earlier, at the event *What Do You Want to Hear?*, Adi embodies the secretary, a Christian Arab, and the interviewer as two faces of the same role (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3. *What Do You Want to Hear?*, Adi Meirovitch, Photo: Gérard Allon, Courtesy of Ruth Kanner Theatre Group

The Jewish interviewer delights in every story the secretary recounts about Beit Hagefen. When the secretary talks about the Arab and Jewish writers who have lived in the valley, the interviewer is beside herself: “Just a second, just a second, wait, wait, I want Ya’ir to hear this too—Yair, Yair! [*calling out*]. Because it’s very interesting - because we don’t know anything.” She reflects an Orientalist superiority—a desire to know coupled with an unwillingness, or inability, to listen. Toward the end of the interview, she asks: “Tell me, do you remember anything that was the opposite, by any chance? . . . Does everything always go smoothly? Is everything always in peaceful coexistence?” The secretary provided her with what she wants to hear, but now answers in a different tone, weaving in the story of her own family’s *Nakba*. That story, however, which purportedly does not tie in with the questions posed by the interviewer, goes uncommented upon by her, as if it remains unheard.

The title of the speech space *SoareyouaskingSomethingOr* is deliberately garbled. It is performed by Ronen, rapidly declaiming a transcript of what the director of Beit Hagefen said in a conversation with the group. On the one hand, the rapidity of his speech makes it impossible to understand what he is saying; on the other hand, it expresses his high energy and emotional attitude toward the institution and its importance to him. Ronen’s words are unintelligible, but it is obvious he thinks that he knows what is best for Beit Hagefen. The garbling is, therefore, the form that expresses the absurd situation that the Arab-Jewish Center has always been managed exclusively by Jews. The event demonstrates how the very belief in the Center, founded on goodwill yet also on silencing and oppression, generates a colonial absurdity.

In *So This Is What You Call Coexistence?*, Siwar and Shirley play an Arab interviewee and a Jewish interviewer. As mentioned, sometimes they complement or continue each other, and switch roles. The tension between intimacy and violence, as in the story of a Jewish neighbor of a Palestinian family, highlights the colonial absurdity (Figure 4):

Siwar: Even I remember that her son had to go through some kind of—

Shirley: —security clearance

Siwar: And they call his mother

Shirley: He had to declare

Siwar: —that he knows us, and it’s part of life, they’re part of our life.



FIGURE 4. *So This Is What You Call Coexistence?*, Shirley Gal (on the left) and Siwar Awwad (on the right), Photo: Gérard Allon, Courtesy of Ruth Kanner Theatre Group

Shirley: Declare what? That they know you guys?

Siwar: Yes, there was a kind of classification there, and there was this question—

Shirley: Ah, yes, if you know any Arab people

Siwar: Or something like that. . .

Shirley: And he had to declare—

Siwar (muttering in a low voice): Yes.

Another example of colonial absurdity comes about in *How Nice*, Adi and Ronen's interview with the Palestinian custodian (played by Bashir). The latter ridicules the interviewers who wish to learn about the place, showing the power of the indigenous individual who manages to fool his superiors. The parody here centers on the predetermined script of Beit Hagefen's historical narrative as a source of pride for Haifa:

Adi (admiringly): We've heard that you are one of the longest-serving staff members. . .

Bashir (climbing the rectangular pedestal, becoming an object): I've been here since 1981.

Adi and Ronen (*admiringly, echoing his answer*): 1981! 1981! Wow. . . (They grab two museum chairs, place them in front of the rectangular pedestal, and sit down). Do you have any interesting story you remember from this place? Something special or interesting.

Bashir: For me all the stories are interesting. . . in the beginning, when I started working here, it was an Arab-Jewish Center that held meetings of youths.

Adi and Ronen: How nice!

Bashir: There was also a Jewish-Arab band.

Adi and Ronen: How nice!

Bashir: There was a women's group here called **Gesher** [Hebrew, "Bridge"]—Jewish and Arab women who would come and meet here.

Adi: How nice!

Bashir: There was also a basketball association here.

Ronen (*confidently*): Jews and Arabs!

Bashir: No. Of the deaf-mute.

Ronen (*embarrassed*): How nice.

The custodian masterfully leads his Jewish interviewers to parrot the coexistence script, only to expose them as ignorant of the actual details, resulting in one of the performance's comedic climaxes.

In addition to the custodian and the secretary, we get to know Beit Hagefen through the work of a Palestinian tour guide. *We'll Find If We Have Some . . . Shade* re-situates a walking tour in Wadi Nisnas through the spaces of the building, casting a parodic light on the practices of such tours. Shirley as the guide uses devices to prompt responses from participants, who willingly play along. She hands out strips of paper with prewritten answers to questions about the *Gate of Religions*, featuring symbols of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Responses include "Coexistence," "Harmony," "I say: To each his own," "Of course, Jews are the center of the world," and "divide and rule." Later, she holds up a clipboard prompting admiration ("Ahhh") when discussing the Tuma family home. Participants comply with these cues. The tour concludes on the roof of Beit Hagefen, overlooking *Ha-tziyonut Boulevard*. The script humorously refers to the previous name, Shderot Ha'um (United Nations). It is worth noting that before 1948 and even

today, it is still common to hear it referred to in Arabic—outside the Zionist sphere—as Shari‘ aj-Jabal (Mountain Road).

As mentioned earlier, each participant crafts their own path through these interviews, constructing their own experience. The rhizomatic dramaturgy breaks down the linear dramatic structure, thus precluding the possibility of constructing a cause-and-effect narrative. The event thus actually prevents spectators from organizing their knowledge about Beit Hagefen or coexistence. Instead, bits of stories are offered—of Palestinian employees and Jewish investigators—that mix past and present, personal and institutional, the habitus of the institution’s employees and its dismantling.

WHAT, WHAT, WHAT, BOTHERS YOU?

In postdramatic theatre, communication is between the stage and spectators, unlike in dramatic theatre, where communication is between the characters on stage. Often, in postdramatic theatre, language emerges as part of a theatricality in which, instead of a linguistic representation of facts and meanings, we find sounds, tones, sentences, and vocal utterances that are not governed by meaning but are revealed as material that is open to the physical presence of the text and to various possible understandings.³⁶ The physical presence of the text itself is the theatrical reality. Thus, independent auditory semiotics is constructed often without hierarchy, causality, or uniform meaning.³⁷ The voice as a physicality might be presented in the form of breathing, whistling, sighing, or yelling. The voice takes on a life of its own as a tonal structure in space and time. Thus, for example, in *What Botheres You?*, the question breaks down and turns into a rhythm:

What-what-what bothers, what bothers, what bothers, what bothers
What-what-what bothers, what bothers, what bothers, what bothers

Later on, that question becomes almost a song, in a staccato beat, and even a murmuring of sounds; the vocal gesture will shift away from the question-and-answer format as it was at the start of the event.

Lehmann argues that there is no element more characteristic of postdramatic theatre than the element of repetition.³⁸ The repetition of

words, physical or vocal gestures, and sentences in different variations is one of the most common elements of the work of RKTG. In *Tell Me Something*, repetition acts as a performative practice connected to the local social discourse, enabling a critique from within that simultaneously parodies the local discourse's methods. As Linda Hacheon puts it, "Parody is a repetition with a critical distance that allows marking at the heart of the similar."³⁹

Murphy and Loingsigh have expanded conventional interpretations of postcolonial humor as a subversive and resistant device to a discussion of humor as a means of seeing the colonial project, whose outcome produces what they call "shared laughter."⁴⁰ They argue that shared laughter is a way of bringing together polarized groups and exposing colonial patterns while beginning to imagine the times that would come after. This distinction ties in with the effect of the spoof in the show, which, as previously noted, involves a parody of Israeli Jews and a self-parody of the Palestinians. In *Tell Me Something*, there is no clear distinction between repetition as a means of building presence and energy of speech and repetition as a tool for producing parody. Here are some examples of both in the two speech choruses that open and close the performance.

The entire piece, *Excuse Me, Where Is Zionism?*, is based on repetition and difference, anchored in the question and the varying responses, as each performer expresses their own variation on the spatial signifier known as "Zionism." Against the backdrop of the street's renaming, one cannot help but laugh at the irony and parody implied in every question and answer. Ronen asks Siwar with great interest, *What number on Zionism—because Zionism is long?*, while making a macho physical gesture to denote the adjective "long." Siwar replies hesitantly, *I don't know. They told me to get to 48. . .*, expressing a counternarrative to Zionism, as it subtly references the year that marks the Nakba for Palestinians. When Siwar gives directions, she does so in Arabic, and Shirley translates into Hebrew. Shirley: *Right at the traffic lights, go left and then right and then really left: there's right-right, and there's right-left.* The performers rhythmically repeat the instruction "left, right" and begin marching on the spot—a parody of the link between Zionism and militarism. Ronen's explanation alludes to historical periods: *Depends which Zionism. The start of Zionism? From one up to the Carmel? Before*

Carmel? Before Carmel and a little bit? All immigration to Israel is Zionism. The questions, delivered in a seemingly earnest manner, evoke laughter, highlighting the absurdity and multiplicity of meanings that Zionism takes on in this context.

Toward the end of the event, a parody is performed on Hebrew speakers who claim to speak Arabic but do not, in fact, know the language. Ronen receives a phone call from an Arabic speaker and engages in a conversation with her using a vocabulary of Arabic words that Jews commonly know, combined with a few slang terms, such as *marhaba*, *marhabtayn*, *keif halak*, *yom asal yom basal*, *baklava*, *bukra fil mishmish*, and military language like *jeeb el-hawiya* (bring the ID). He repeats these words in various iterations, transforming Arabic into gibberish—a language that gives the impression of being coherent but without conveying any actual content. This conversation demonstrates how the colonizer distorts and flattens the language of the colonized, revealing the absurdity embedded in the colonial encounter and evoking awkward laughter.

The repetitive performance of the question in *What Bothers You?* is aimed at two sites: Beit Hagefen itself, where the performance is held, and Wadi Nisnas, the valley that it is part of. Thus, Beit Hagefen becomes a kind of synecdoche of the city as a whole. At first, the performers stand on two benches behind each other. Initially, Adi, who stands on the lower front bench, directs the question at the audience. The answers she receives feature repetition of parts of the question and its deconstruction in a way that reflects a lack of communication and parodies the situation at hand. The expression “Close the door!” voiced by a shop owner she approaches illustrates his alienation and reluctance to cooperate with the Jewish interviewers:

Adi (empathically): Excuse me?

Bashir (alienated): Yes!

Adi (empathically): What bothers you here? [*When Bashir doesn't answer*] What bothers you here?

Bashir (alienated): Bothers me? Here? Here?

Adi: Yes!

Bashir (sardonically): What bothers me here? Nothing. Everything's amazing. Amazing. Amazing. It's all amaaaaazing.

Adi: Thank you.

Bashir (*commanding*): Close the door, please!

Another attempt:

Adi (*trying to be friendly*): Excuse me, I wanted to ask, if possible, what bothers you here?

Shirley (*alienated*): Nothing. Anything else?

Adi (*politely*): No!

After several rounds of such question-and-answer sessions, the order is disrupted: The performers echo Adi's words, substituting and multiplying them as well as the respondents' replies, thereby giving the language a material presence. The words become mere sounds. When someone says, for example, that the sirens are disturbing him, everyone repeats the words *beeps* and *honks* over and over again: *Beeeeeeeeep* and *Ho-o-o-nks*. Gradually, complaints begin to be heard, the alienation is replaced by anger, and the issue of the municipal establishment's attitude toward the Valley is raised. The following excerpt is an example of the complaints of exclusion, the sounds that mask what must not be said, and the manifestations of racism. Complaints are made about Mayor Einat Kalish (2018–2024), and compliments are paid to Mayor Yona Yahav (2003–2018, 2024–):

Shirley (*provocatively*): You want the truth? You want the truth?

Siwar (*directly*): All the Arab areas, and also the Wadi here—she pays no attention at all.

Shirley (*ironically*): What bothers us? Here?

Siwar: Really (*directly*), Yona Yahav, Yona Yahav, he would have paid attention. This one pays no attention at all.

Everyone: Ssssssssssssss. . .

Siwar: She seems to me to have something against. . . Arabs (*at the word "Arabs," everyone makes a long fffffff sound*)—I swear to God.

Ronen: Which areas does she care for?

Adi: Carmel, Hadar.

Siwar: Where, where you pay a lot of municipal taxes, every day they clean.

Racism against Arabs is both openly and covertly on display: “I’ve been here seventy-two years. Yes, seventy-two years. (In an ironic whisper): . . . *The cousins? They love me. Everyone calls me ‘Grandpa.’*” The term ‘cousins’ is an Israeli slang for Arabs and is used in racist contexts. Someone else takes a direct approach: *What bothers me? Ahh, that there’s no work. . . . That there’s no life. That the population is old (pauses) . . . and Arabs.* Manifestations of racism are replaced by complaints. One complaint that everyone agrees about is that *There’s no parking in the Wadi.*

Bashir: There’s no parking in the Wadi—that’s the biggest problem here.

[*Demonstration shouts develop*]

Bashir: There is parking over there.

Chorus: *Here* there is no parking.

Chorus: There’s parking over there.

Bashir: The problem of the Wadi is that there’s no parking, no parking.

The complaints voiced against the municipality become a protest by a civil collective over their rights as city residents. The demonstration is interrupted by the text of a parking ticket, which is brought in as evidence that there’s no parking in the Wadi. The absurdity and incompetence of the municipal bureaucracy intertwine with the oppression of the colonial state apparatus. This is highlighted when the chorus asks Bashir for his details: *ID card? Place of birth?* He returns to the Nakba and tells the story of a native family from Tira, but no one listens as the chorus repeats the dry factual details of the parking violation and the options for appeal. Toward the end, the chorus sings the text of the payment options listed on the parking ticket, rhythmically and in a sweet tone. Finally, Ronen shouts: *What are all these questions? Where is ‘here’? Where is ‘here’? What bothers me? Nothing bothers me. Nothing. Nothing at all. What are you trying to say!?* He then angrily tears up the white bits of paper in his hands. The question ultimately leads to frustration. The repetition of the question *What bothers you?* and the answers that branched out like a rhizome not only counter a singular narrative but also create a sense of instability and reveal the parodic aspects of the coexistence ethos rooted in the colonial system.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN DISASSEMBLY AND RECONSTRUCTION

This article offered a close reading in *Tell Me Something*, examining how it was presented as an interdisciplinary event that is neither an exhibition (historical or scientific) nor a performance in a gallery. The study of curatorial decisions, the relationship between Arabic and Hebrew, and the rhizomatic dramaturgy of ethnographic materials and speech mechanisms—with a particular focus on repetitions and disruptions—reveals how this hybrid event, through its bare language, is a form of theatre of the colonial absurd that occurs both within the walls of Beit Hagefen and in its environment. The work, constructed as a series of events with no narrative, precludes any neat organization of knowledge about Beit Hagefen or about coexistence within a single inclusive theoretical framework. Instead, it offers spectators active participation in learning about a municipal institution that is metonymic with coexistence, while simultaneously problematizing the very concept of coexistence and the possibility of realizing it.

The very choice of Beit Hagefen as a performance venue makes this an intervention work. The interventions are expressed in a combination of the disassembling of space, the pedagogies and habitus of the institution, the relationship between the powerful and the voiceless, glimpses of the past and daily life in the present, and their reconstruction through repetition and disruption of speech mechanisms in social situations. Repetition, as we have learned from Deleuze, is a form of amplification and bolstering—one that harbors a constant flux of movement and formation of something new. The sheer preponderance of repetition that characterizes speech patterns and content alike casts all performers in the colonial “Theatre of the Absurd” (which is to say, everyday life in a colonial regime) in a parodic light. The absurdity lies in clinging to the notion of coexistence in a setting that is steeped in racism and beset by civil inequality.

The excess of dismantling and repetitions produces a comic and parodic effect, which gives the work an elusive character while constituting a complex and aesthetically layered political statement. Moreover, the spectators’ participation in the event creates an experience of playfulness and a reflexive view of the Arab-Jewish Center, which

deepens the spectators' involvement and interpretations. This, then, is an example of a work that, despite (and perhaps because of) its disruptions, dismantling, and incoherence, heightens the audience's ability to listen and be an active partner in the disassembly of colonial power structures in a bid to imagine a common future.⁴¹

DORIT YERUSHALMI is a senior lecturer in the Department of Theatre and Performance Studies at the University of Haifa. Her research focuses on urban performance studies, with a particular emphasis on Haifa as a "wounded city." She explores typologies of returns through theater, illustrating how performances create symbolic and physical returns to urban spaces. Her work includes a comprehensive study of Khashabi Theatre, an independent Palestinian theater in Haifa.

NOTES

1. The different performative events of the "spoken exhibition" were called "speech spaces" in the program. The verb *tell* in the Hebrew title *Tell Me Something* is in the feminine singular. All transcripts are by the author, based on the video documentation provided by Ruth Kanner.
2. James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 1–16.
3. David Murphy and Aedín Ní Loingsigh, "Something to Laugh About? Representations of Europe in Francophone African Cinema and Literature, 1954–74," *Le Rire européen: échanges et confrontations*, ed. by Anne Chamayou and Alistair B. Duncan (Perpignan: Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2010), 349–64.
4. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: Anchor Books, 1961). Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, trans. Zvi Adar (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1990).
5. Karen Till, "Wounded Cities: Memory-Work and a Place-Based Ethics of Care," *Political Geography* 31 (2012): 3–14. Dorit Yerushalmi, "How the Khashabi Theatre Produces a 'Dual Presence' of Palestinian Urbanism? Ghosts and Memory in Its First Season, Haifa, 2015–2016," *Theatre Research International* 48, no. 2 (2023): 123–41.
6. Kim Solga, *Theory for Theatre Studies: Space* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2020), 12.
7. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
8. See Adi Chawin and Richard Gough, "Introduction: Stepping Sideways," in *In Praise of Sideways: Storytelling Journeys of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group*, eds. Adi Chawin and Richard Gough (Wales: Performance Research Books, 2023), 13–25.
9. See also Adi Chawin, "Nots on the Rehearsal Process," in *In Praise of Sideways: Storytelling Journeys of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group*, eds. Adi Chawin and Richard Gough (Wales: Performance Research Books, 2023), 101–22.

10. Daphna Ben-Shaul, "This Is a Story about a Non-Place," in *In Praise of Sideways: Storytelling Journeys of the Ruth Kanner Theatre Group*, eds. Adi Chawin and Richard Gough (Wales: Performance Research Books, 2023), 249–56.
11. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 87–107.
12. Richard Gough, "Tell Me Something: An Introduction to section two," in *Storytelling Journeys of RKTG*, 95.
13. James Clifford, "An Ethnographer in the Field, James Clifford Interview," in *Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn*, ed. A. Coles (London: Black Dog Publications, 2000), 53.
14. Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks, *Theatre/Archaeology* (Routledge: London, 2001), 23.
15. Haifa City Archive, file 01146/4.
16. Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Rachel Kalus and Ziva Koldoney, "A Politics of Urban Space in an Ethno-Nationally Contested City: Negotiating (Co) Existence in Wadi Nisnas," *Journal of Urban Design* 15 (2010): 403–22.
17. Yona Yahav, *The Holiday of Holidays 2005, Hanukka, Christmas, Ramadan* (Haifa: Beit Hagefen, 2005), 5.
18. Rami Younis, "Let's Make History: A Palestinian Cultural Festival Will Open in Haifa," *Siha Mekomit*, June 11, 2019.
19. Boaz Cohen, "Regev: Expressing [My] Displeasure over the Existence of the 'Days of Arab Culture' Festival," *Kolbo Haifa & Krayot*, June 5, 2019.
20. Cohen, "Regev," 21.
21. Cohen, "Regev," 21.
22. Cohen, "Regev," 21.
23. The decolonization process is in its early stages, but right questions are being asked, and self-critique is emerging. However, much work remains; for example, Beit Hagefen's library closes on Jewish holidays, limiting access for Arab students.
24. Yael Messer, "Site-Specific," *Erev Rav*, May 29, 2021.
25. From my interview with Kanner on May 25, 2024.
26. From my interview with Kanner on May 25, 2024, 26.
27. From my interview with Messer on May 26, 2024.
28. Homi K. Bhabha, "The White Stuff (Political Aspect of Whiteness)," *Artforum* 36, no. 9 (May 1998): 21–24.
29. The information is from my conversation with Siwar, May 3, 2024.
30. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Routledge: New York and London, 1993), 146.
31. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Tel Aviv: Maariv Library, 2004), 1.
32. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 21.
33. Gil Z. Hochberg, *Becoming Palestine: Toward an Archival Imagination of the Future* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021).

34. Maaike Bleker, *Doing Dramaturgy: Thinking through Practice* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 42–44.
35. Daphna Ben Shaul, “Ideology of Form in Storytelling Theatre: The Politics of Inter-medial Adaptation in Discovering Elijah, A Play about War, Gramma,” *Journal of Theory and Criticism* 17 (2009): 165–82.
36. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 50.
37. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 145.
38. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 156.
39. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 49.
40. Murphy and Loingsigh, “Something to Laugh About?” 349–64.
41. This article was conceived, and deals with an art work performed, before October 7, 2023. It speaks of an appeal to decolonization that today seems even less imaginable.