

Michael Chekhov's Production of *Twelfth Night* at the Habimah Theatre

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The production of Twelfth Night was Habimah's first production of Shakespeare and the first comedy in its repertoire. It was directed by Michael Chekhov (1891-1955). The reminiscences, letters and diary entries of Chekhov and the Habimah actors trace the course of the preparatory work for the production. Chekhov set himself the task of giving Shakespeare's comedy a contemporary relevance. The artistic results could only be reached by the creative cooperation of the actor-director with the ensemble. Chekhov employed his methods of movement, improvisation, imagination and concentration, among others, that had been tested at the Second Moscow Art Theatre.

The first night took place in September 1930 in the Berliner Theater. Twelfth Night was a success everywhere, even in England, where the Habimah toured in 1931 and 1937. Chekhov's reputation as a director had been established.

From 1926 until 1931, after leaving Russia, the Habimah Theatre toured in many European countries, the United States, and Palestine, with Berlin as its base. Emanuel Levy writes in his book, *The Habimah – Israel's National Theatre 1917-1977*, that these five years were a transitional and extremely important period in the history of the theatre. Significant changes occurred in Habimah's ideological mission, repertoire, organization, and audience (72). According to Levy, a major dispute between the Habimah theatre and the critics concerned the relationship between the ideological mission of the theatre and its artistic standards. It was Habimah's aim to become established in Palestine, while also wishing to maintain the artistic stature the theatre had achieved in Russia (95, 102). In 1927-30 three important Russian directors were invited to meet the urgent need to prepare new productions: Alexei Diky, Michael Chekhov, and Alexei Granovsky, "Europeanizing" Habimah and bringing it closer to the style of Russian and European theatre, and moving away from the world of Jewish themes and style. Michael Chekhov, then living and working as an actor in Berlin, was invited as part of the process (107-108).

Michael (Mikhail) Aleksandrovich Chekhov (born 1891 St.Petersburg, died 1955, Los Angeles) was a nephew of Anton Chekhov and one of the

original members of the Moscow Art Theatre's First Studio where he studied with Konstantin Stanislavsky and Evgeni Vakhtangov. In the 1920's Michael Chekhov was considered to be one of the most original actors of his generation in Russia, embodying the complete synthesis of inner feeling and outer form, which the American director Robert Lewis called "total acting."¹ Chekhov expressed the spirit of Russian culture at the turn of century, which included symbolist poetry and non-naturalistic theatre. His favorite writer was Dostoevsky; one of his spiritual fathers was the symbolist writer Andrei Bely; and his sources of inspiration came from philosophy as well as legends and fairytales. Chekhov was the director of the Second Moscow Art Theatre until 1928 when he emigrated from Soviet Russia. He worked in many theatres in Europe (1928-38) and in the United States (1939-55).

This article will examine and analyze Chekhov's aims and methods in the 1930 production of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* with the Habimah Theatre. How was the Russian theatrical tradition adapted to Shakespeare? What were the artistic innovations Chekhov brought to the production? Was there a confrontation between Stanislavsky's system that had been embraced by the Habimah Theatre and Chekhov's own particular method? And last but not least: what was the personal and artistic significance of the Habimah connection for Chekhov in the first years of his work and life in the West?

The happiest period in Michael Chekhov's professional life during the two years he lived in Germany was his work with the Habimah Theatre. His memoirs record his full support for the artistic program of the theatre to introduce European theatre culture in Mandatory Palestine. Chekhov's memoirs *Zhizn i vstrechi* (*Life and Encounters*, published in Russian in *Novyi Zhurnal* in New York 1944-45) include a chapter on his work with the Habimah Theatre. "The visit of the Habimah Theatre [to Berlin]," Chekhov wrote, "was not only for artistic reasons, it also served another purpose. They had conceived the idea of building their own theatre in Tel-Aviv. They needed money and were hoping to raise it in Berlin. Soirees were organized in rich Jewish households, at which speeches were given and funds were raised on the spot. The production of *Twelfth Night* was meant to demonstrate to the circles sympathetic to Zionism the Habimah Theatre's cultural significance in Palestine." (27)

Chekhov made his appearance in the Habimah Theatre at a time when it was in a state of transition. In the Habimah secretariat, the organizational centre of the Theatre, discussions were being held as to which direction Jewish theatre should take. In November 1929 the home of Margot Klausner in Berlin

provided the setting for one of the most important debates: the ideological mission of the theatre and its artistic standards (Levy 105-6). The philosopher Martin Buber voiced his support for the Habimah Theatre, where the best works of world literature would be staged and the potential for creating universal theatre would be realized. This task was assumed by Chekhov, the second of the Russian directors to be invited to Berlin. Prior to that, Alexei Diky from the Moscow Art Theatre staged two productions in the Habimah Theatre during the first stay of the theatre in Mandatory Palestine in 1928-9.

Another important factor that determined Chekhov's positive feelings about working with the company was that the actors of the Habimah Theatre were old friends of Chekhov and fellow students of Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov. Chekhov admired the Habimah Studio's work with Vakhtangov and the production of *The Dybbuk* (1922), the group's most significant performance in Moscow.²

The reminiscences, letters and diary entries of the Habimah actors trace the course of the preparatory work for the production of *Twelfth Night* in Berlin.³ It was decided at a general meeting of the theatre in Berlin that took place on 11 December 1929 to stage two plays, but only the first of them, *Twelfth Night*, was ever performed. Margot Klausner's diary entries inform us of the course of events.⁴ On 29 January 1930, Klausner went to see Chekhov on behalf of the theatre with the proposal to direct Shakespeare's comedy, but the offer did not evoke his enthusiasm. At the time he had developed an interest for aspects of Jewish history and Biblical myths. It is interesting to note that Chekhov's interest in myths and folklore coincided with H.N. Bialik's proposal for Habimah's repertoire: the treatment of the Bible as raw material to serve as a basis for creating plays in the modern spirit.

After giving Klausner's proposal his consideration, Chekhov suggested an alternative, Karl Gutzkow's *Uriel Acosta*, but this was rejected by Habimah because they were of the opinion that he could only rehearse what he had performed as an actor himself. He was renowned for the part of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* in the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT). At the time he was not thought of as an original director.⁵ However, Klausner's notes from their meeting reflect her sense of the potential she saw in Chekhov:

We talked for several hours about the Habimah, art, theatre and plays [...]. I had the feeling that we had known each other since the beginning of time and we found a common language without any difficulty. I was in a dream-like state when I left his flat. I had never met such a person

before. He creates the impression of being a brilliant personality deeply involved in art. It cannot be said of him that he is merely a gifted artist and director who is capable of staging the most varied repertoire. He simply breathes art. His hands, eyes, everything about him radiate a boundlessness of feeling and melancholy; it can be surmised that he is capable of the depths of villainy and the heights of ecstasy typical of Dostoevsky. (73)

The outcome was that Chekhov agreed to stage Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*. It was Habimah's first production of Shakespeare and the first comedy in its repertoire. It was the first of two plays staged in Berlin during the 1930-1931 season when the Habimah Theatre was living and working with that city as its base.

A six-month working period got underway. Preparations for rehearsals began on 1 March 1930 and the premiere took place in September. The play was translated by the Hebrew poet and translator, Sha'ul Chernikhovsky. The Berlin-based Russian artist Vasili Masyutin created the stage set and the costumes were made on the basis of the sketches of L. Vurk. The music was composed by Ernst Tokh. Levy writes that the casting was undertaken by the actors themselves in collaboration with Chekhov, decided by a general vote of the troupe at three meetings in February, 1930 (161-162). The cast included: Sir Toby - Aharon Meskin, Sir Andrew Aguecheek - Avraham Baratz, Duke Orsino - Shimon Finkel, Maria - Nechama Vinyar, Viola - Tamar Robins, Olivia - Channele Hendler, Malvolio - Boris Chemerinsky, Fabian - Rafael Klyachkin, and the Clown - Menachem Benjamini.

Chekhov set himself the task of giving Shakespeare's comedy a contemporary relevance. He worked to convince the Habimah actors that Shakespeare "was the most modern playwright of our time, and that his characters were living people just like you and me, who could not stand banality and affected bombast" ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 24). Chekhov was faced with the problem of transforming the Habimah actors to suit the spirit and style of Shakespeare: comic stage characters needed to be created out of actors who were heavy in body and soul. "I'm working towards getting style, truthfulness, lightness, humour and theatricality out of them," Chekhov explained to his German colleagues who adopted a skeptical attitude toward the Russian director's method of rehearsing, which demanded lengthy preparation and ensemble work of the actors (26).

The sources for Chekhov's production were obvious. He repeated Konstantin Stanislavsky's and Boris Sushkevich's staging concepts, having himself performed the role of Malvolio in the famous production of *Twelfth Night* (the First Studio, 1917; Chekhov played the part from 1920 onwards). As the Russian theatre historian Marianna Stroeve has put it, in the rehearsals Stanislavsky "made the transition from the cult of feeling to the cult of action" (15-16). The method of searching for inward truthfulness was replaced by a method of searching for action and external expressiveness based on improvisation. To this end Stanislavsky even infringed on Shakespeare's text by making drastic cuts. Scene changes were made using light and movable curtains. The MAT *Twelfth Night* was controversial, but this festive and dynamic production stayed in the repertoire for a long time and had been transferred from the First Studio to the theatre's main stage. The principles forming the basis for the MAT production were to guide Chekhov in his subsequent productions of this Shakespeare comedy outside of Russia. Besides the Habimah production he also directed *Twelfth Night* in Kaunas (the Lithuanian State Theatre, 1933) and in the United States (the Chekhov Theatre Players, 1940).

In Berlin Chekhov and Vasili Masyutin collaborated in creating a colorful theatre festivity. Chekhov wrote: "The sets of the artist Masyutin were light, funny and bright. The actors moved and changed them during the play, creating by suggestion now Olivia's palace, then Sir Toby's merry tavern, now the garden, then the street" ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 24). Klausner concurred in this description. She also perceived the Viennese master's influence on the production: "the artist has created a set that is delightful, with the use of a revolving stage, much colour, charm and humour, so much the case that it reminds me of Reinhardt's style" (110). About the music, Chekhov wrote: "Ernst Tokh composed the songs with his characteristic talent and humour. He gave us as a leitmotiv, a melody in a polka tempo, which was incredibly lively. Everyone sang it as chorus, alone at home, on the streets and backstage. Tokh's orchestration was so funny that the musicians more than once interrupted their rehearsals and laughter could be heard from the orchestra pit" ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 24).

The production was conceived on a broad scale; "But the Russian delight doesn't come cheap," Klausner noted. Chekhov received 8,000 Marks for the production; the set designer and composer 1,000 Marks each, and the actors 300 Marks a month. Klausner's remark that "the profits, apart from the trustees' dues, will not accrue to us," can be understood to mean that the

income generated by the production was to be used for building a theatre in Palestine. "If matters continue in this way, then we will have devoured in one year what we received for three" (Entry dated 1 March 1930). And we learn from the entry dated 12 April 1930 that "Chekhov's work has made progress, but only nine of the twenty-two actors are involved in the production." Evidently, there was a group of discontent actors in the theatre because there were not enough parts in the Shakespeare comedy for everyone. Chekhov's approach to working with the actors also caused friction: quite soon differences surfaced between the branch of Stanislavsky's system that had been embraced by the Habimah Theatre and Chekhov's own particular method, based on his own acting experience.

Chekhov's Rehearsals with the Habimah Actors

In his memoirs, Chekhov describes his collaboration with the Habimah Theatre in very genial terms:

The Habimah group consists of wonderful people. There are so many powerful but contradictory elements combined in them: a fanatical desire to serve but a cold rationality (in everything, even in the approach to artistic work); unbreakable ties of friendship but constant arguments (though not fallings-out); a complete openness to everything new in the theatre but a reservation, a pursuit of some aims which are "theirs," but not necessarily clear to themselves. The general atmosphere among them is intense, strong-willed and active. ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 22)

In his opinion, the *sine qua non* for capturing the essence of this romantic comedy was to act with ease and lightness while delivering one's lines and characterizing one's role in the play. The Habimah actors rose to the challenge. Whereas previously a solemn gravity had been the forte of the Habimah actors, as the German critic Alfred Kerr had expressed it in his review about Sholem Aleichem's *The Treasure* the previous year, an unexpected side of their talent was now revealed (Ivanov 176). Chekhov remarked that:

Twelfth Night is one of Shakespeare's plays, in which lightness in the acting, in the delivery of the text and psychology of the characters is essential to convey the essence of this romantic farce. All the heroes are in love or are beloved, but none of them very seriously; there is no Romeo or Othello, no Juliet or Desdemona among them. The Habimah members

are people who are heavy, physically and spiritually. (Remember *The Dybbuk*). The Hebrew language (unsurpassed in its magical power, tragedy and beauty) is hardly suitable for Olivia's monologues of love. ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 22)

At the first rehearsal Chekhov asked the actors: how would it be possible to stage and act *Twelfth Night* in their theatre? He described the reactions:

The Habimah group began to make a stir, all talking at once (in two languages, Russian and Hebrew) and began to wave their hands, each in his own rhythm, his own tempo. Adeptly catching hold of their neighbors' hands in the air, they quickly resolved the question and all turned to me at once. One cried out in a threatening way: "If lightness is needed, then lightness is needed!" Another tried to persuade me confidentially that I should settle for nothing but lightness; a third, buttonholing me, said reproachfully "what does it mean?" (as if I was trying to persuade them to be heavy). Those who were standing close to me were shouting and those a bit further away making signs with their hands and eyes to say "there will be lightness!" The noise turned into delight, the new task interested everyone straightaway; we all kissed each other there and then and, having made a bit more noise, sat down at the big table. Silence fell. An intense Habimah silence. The roles had already been distributed (on condition that if an actor did not fulfill the expectations, the director would say this openly and the actor would be changed. The Habimah group always did this. They wanted their shows to be good, and did not allow any compromises in this regard. From the first rehearsal they began to strive for lightness. Every day part of the work was dedicated to special exercises. The Habimah group strove stubbornly, fanatically and heavily to achieve lightness. And they achieved it! I had never seen such a capacity for work anywhere, ever, in any theatre. If a miracle could be worked by earthly means alone, then it was done in front of my eyes. ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 23)

The demand to act with lightness, which the director made of the actors, was attained by their perseverance and mastery; daily practice, in combination with the rehearsals and their talents. Chekhov does not analyze the way he worked on the psychological profile of the characters. However, from the later reactions of the critics we shall see that he was able to motivate the actors' movements and combine the grotesque with genuine realism. The artistic

results could only be achieved through the creative cooperation of the actor-director with the ensemble.

Chekhov's memoirs contain a high appraisal of Aharon Meskin and Avraham Baratz. In Chekhov's opinion, Meskin was exacting on himself and sought for artistic truth. He was quite heavy, as if he were cast out of bronze, with a voice so deep that sometimes, listening to him made you want to clear your throat, fly about on the stage, a light and big-bellied Sir Toby, scattering Shakespeare's jests and phrases as if they had been written in his own language. Baratz committed himself to the task of the artistic transformation, as did the rest of the group:

Baratz, a small but corpulent person who walked on his heels, who had worn down even rubber shoe heels, having become Sir Andrew Aguecheek surprised everyone with this discovery: 'Look Baratz is on tiptoes!' Laughter, joy, exclamations?!.... With every day the Shakespeare comedy, transforming the actors, grew, revealing its humour and charm. ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 23-24)

The troupe was eventually transformed in accordance with Chekhov's wishes. The diary entries of Avraham Baratz, Shimon Finkel (who played Duke Orsino) and Margot Klausner offer unique material for characterizing Chekhov as a director and his way of working.

The beginning of the rehearsals was very promising. "Talking to Chekhov is amazingly interesting," Baratz wrote: "He knows many acting secrets, he has a lot to teach us. He is an unusual person, profound and the main thing is that he has a stunning talent" (43). He was also tactful and polite. Himself a great actor, he understood how vulnerable the actor's psyche was. Yet, there were those who still questioned whether he could direct. Finkel noted in his diary that "Chekhov is very gifted. He is a sensitive and vulnerable artist. Altogether I don't know whether he's a director or not. But he's staging the play very well" (*Transformations* 13). Finkel was of the opinion that Chekhov was better at working on the analysis of the roles than the overall structure of the play. We know from other sources that for the rehearsals later in the summer Chekhov drew up the conception of the production and the mise-en-scenes.

Chekhov was pressed for time: in the first weeks he was unable to work at full capacity in the theatre because Max Reinhardt's rehearsals for *Phaea* (*The Fairy*, by Fritz von Unruh) were running parallel in the Deutsches Theater. Chekhov acted in that theatre until the end of the summer season. In addition, rehearsals were interrupted twice, when the Habimah Theatre was on tour in

Poland. There were other hindering factors: the lack of premises and money and the mistrust on the part of certain Habimah actors of Chekhov's rehearsal method. The work with Chekhov resumed after the touring in Poland was over. In May 1930 Baratz noted in his diary: "We have been buoyed up by the success in Poland. We have a beautiful house and garden at our disposal. At present, there are still funds. All around, the work is positively in full swing" (46-56). That this was indeed the case can be gleaned from the entries made by Klausner dated 20 May: "The production is hellishly demanding but, at the same time, we are experiencing great satisfaction that progress is being made. The set and costumes have been commissioned and Tokh's melodies are also very pleasing" (73-110).

Difficulties started to arise between the actors and the director in June, when rehearsals were transferred to the Berliner Theatre. Chekhov's rehearsal method differed from the traditional one in that he did not lay down exact stage-markings and apparently preferred to start with improvisation in space. Chekhov gave the actors the opportunity of finding their characterizations themselves within set limits. Baratz wrote in June 1930: "The work on *Twelfth Night* is in full swing, but the rehearsals are not the same as the ones we are accustomed to. Chekhov works differently to what we had imagined" (43 - 56). In his work with the Habimah actors, Chekhov employed his method of improvisation, imagination and organic birth of the role that had been tried and tested at the Second Moscow Art Theatre. Klausner noted: "Chekhov is still dissatisfied. He maintains that the actors aren't working on the rehearsals independently enough" (73-110). However, when the trustees of the theatre came many were pleased with the demonstration as a first rough outline.

Baratz reminisced about how the character of Sir Toby developed: it happened only after several run-throughs for lines, when Chekhov requested the actors "to ask questions of the character" (31). This was Chekhov's way of activating the actor's imagination in creating the character. Work began on movements and mise-en-scene. After Chekhov approved of the interpretation of Sir Toby as being a "completely stupid character" (31), Baratz' relationship to the character changed and became free. A period of intuitive searching and improvisation ensued, which was just what the director had had in mind. "I started to behave contrary to all logic at rehearsals: I stopped asking questions and I gave myself up completely to the power of intuition, did whatever I liked and gave free rein to my acting instinct, without controlling or criticizing it in any way, having decided that everything could be finalized and polished up at

a later stage" (31). Under the guidance of the director the actor's subconscious began to make itself heard.

It was Chekhov's aim to uncover the creative forces within the performer, which was a time-consuming process. The director did not restrict the actors' freedom, but rather encouraged them to improvise. At each rehearsal Baratz tried to present something new, and Chekhov was always glad when the actors improvised. Thanks to his shrewd eye he had the knack of selecting what was needed and channeling the work in the right direction. "In so doing, he often added something from the hidden treasure of his very fertile imagination, and so the characters grew from rehearsal to rehearsal" (31). Baratz was of the opinion that his work was progressing successfully enough and that its results were in keeping with the conception of the production. He did not approach the director during the critical moments when the inner content of his character was coming into being; he was convinced that Chekhov could see and sense what was unsuitable, but believed that the character itself would strike the right balance in the course of rehearsals. In other words, Chekhov had faith in the processes at work within the actor and the organic growth of the character.

Chekhov constantly spoke about the joy of artistic creativity, particularly in the staging of a comedy. In Baratz' opinion, the actors enjoyed themselves and were amused during the rehearsals as they strove to achieve ease in their acting but, at the same time, their search to give inner content to their roles was an agonizing one. A chance meeting in the street with a newspaper man and the ensuing feeling that this man's life depended on every newspaper he sold were important experiences for Baratz. It was just this feeling of being possessed, to use Stanislavsky's term that was needed for the character. Chekhov demanded artistic concentration of his actors. "The starting point for a conversation or merely for movements on stage or gestures should be a profound concentration," Baratz wrote, recalling Chekhov's instructions. "There should even be inner concentration when one is in a state of passivity" (33). During rehearsals Baratz became convinced of the effectiveness of this "discovery," which is one of the basics of the acting profession.

Chekhov considered that a key element in the actor's emotional make-up was to have faith in himself and in his contact with the audience. Baratz complained in a conversation with Chekhov that a frequent hindrance for him was his uncertainty as to whether his acting reached the audience. Chekhov assured him that he had "also been tormented for ages by such doubts, but then I got rid of them by relying on my eye. You see, it is very important for

the art of acting to have an accurate eye, and you can rely on yours" (Baratz 34). Chekhov had been observing Baratz' work, and praised him for building up his character "as if he was threading bead after bead on a string" (34).

In his work with the actors, Chekhov apparently adopted the positive pedagogical manner of his teacher Stanislavsky. Chekhov did not criticize those who did not fully succeed in something and, what is more, he sometimes even praised them. This undermined Baratz' confidence and he never asked Chekhov about himself, except in cases where he specifically wanted to know what his acting was like in a particular scene and whether his character reached the audience or whether something about it needed changing, etc. In such cases Chekhov was always frank.

Chekhov suggested to Baratz a method of embodying the character by using the imagination and the "second ego" or the actor's "control". Chekhov told Baratz that sometimes, when he found it particularly difficult to act some section of his part and he didn't manage to find a solution, he tried another device. He let another actor, one whom he respected, appear in his imagination and perform the excerpt, and this often helped him to achieve the necessary result. Baratz wrote: "Initially I thought that imitation was at work here, but then I realized that I was, after all, only imagining this actor and that he was in essence merely a figment of my imagination and that I was acting as my own director" (34). Afterwards Baratz used this method several times and it was always of benefit in gaining access to the "second ego," which acts as the "director" for what the actor is seeking to embody. Chekhov shared the "secrets" of the profession with Baratz and at the actor's request Chekhov analyzed difficult aspects of his role and gave him advice based on his method. Baratz applied Chekhov's method, which included acting in the imagination, creating various versions of the character, and developing the actor's will.⁶ Chekhov's rehearsals and his conversations with the actors were a real professional training for them. "Chekhov always had a knack of finding the right way of putting it, and I grasped his intention from his subtlest hint, because he didn't like long explanations, either his own or those of the actors," Baratz wrote. "I learned a great deal from him both as an actor and a director, and I shall always be grateful to him for that. We had many conversations with him after rehearsals, even after the production was completed. Each such conversation endowed me with new knowledge about theatre and acting" (34).

It can be assumed from the memoirs and diary entries that Chekhov's delicate method of directing was based partly on having faith in the actor

and letting the process at work within him bring the character and the part to maturity. "Is Chekhov a director?" Baratz wondered. "It's hard to say. If I'd been asked that a few days before the dress rehearsal, I'd have replied that he hadn't convinced us of it. But I don't know now. Perhaps it is the system that is unusual for us, perhaps he deliberately does his directing work in such a way that it goes unnoticed, that the actor does not sense it. However, as the first night approaches the actors discover what has been instilled into them" (43-56).

Chekhov, the director was capable of combining analytic skills with inspirational power. Baratz amplified his portrait of the Russian actor with the following remark:

The most amazing thing for me is that he makes few remarks. Even towards the end, he restricted himself only to technical advice. If you asked him something he would reply, but it was extremely rare that he would say something himself. Only if he finds something very displeasing, will he come onto the stage and show you how you should do it and this is mainly in cases where he thinks the actor is capable of improvement. When he's alone with the actors he hardly ever adopts "our way" of working. (43-56)

Chekhov was more interested in the structure of the production which was more novel for him and harder to achieve. "Oddly enough, in spite of all this he succeeded in 'refining' and 'firing' us." Baratz concluded that an important professional lesson was taught by Chekhov: "What he did teach us was not to talk a great deal and, if you do talk, then with the person concerned and, as far as possible, only about your part or character; you only explain something if you are certain that it will be of help and not simply 'for the sake of talking'" (43-56).

Finkel's diary also contains an interesting description of Chekhov as a director for small-scale, experimental productions: "Chekhov is undoubtedly an excellent artist, but he cannot perfect the details, and he lacks the patience to complete what he has started. He is perhaps more suited to staging experimental works on a small stage. His merit lies in the fact that he guides the actors with ease and great tact, without offending or infuriating them. Moreover, everything has its purpose with him and is decided in advance" (*Transformations* 13). Evidently, even if Chekhov did not lay down exact stage directions, he provided a structure and close analysis of the play.

The First Reactions to the Production

By the time of the dress rehearsal the production was not yet finished, but nevertheless it had to be shown to the audience. Chekhov's way of rehearsing and his method of letting the character "grow organically" were very time-consuming. His lack of directorial experience caused a critical situation in July 1930. The date for the closed dress rehearsal was approaching. The theatre had had no rehearsal space since the middle of June due to the difficult financial situation.⁷ In order to overcome the crisis Chekhov did rhythm and will exercises with the actors to help them discover a new understanding for their acting and the style of the play. According to Baratz:

[o]n the third day, Chekhov began to explain to us how important rhythm was for this play and how necessary it was for the actors to experience joy on stage; and furthermore, that clarity and exactness had to have a different quality in this play compared to our other productions. The actors did exercises to develop their style of speech for individual scenes, with rhythm and will power as their main aim. From then on, it seemed to me that we started to make headway. Did he help us, did we come to our senses or could it have been the case that we woke up to the realization of the responsibility that rested on our shoulders? In any event everything started to improve from rehearsal to rehearsal. Of course, our pride as actors had something to do with it. (35)

To the actors' amazement everything was ready by 15 July. On July 10 Klausner wrote: "Hundreds of invitations have been sent out for the closed dress rehearsal of *Twelfth Night*, there is enormous interest in it. Preparations at the theatre have reached a fever pitch" (110). The dress rehearsal in front of an invited audience took place at the Berliner Theater on 27 July 1930. The Russian *Rul* (*The Rudder*) newspaper reported that the theatre was packed with friends of the Habimah Theatre. Rabindranath Tagore was present at the performance and was given a welcoming speech. The production made an extremely strong impression on the audience, and loud applause repeatedly interrupted the acting on stage (Ofrosimov 28 July). In Klausner's opinion the production combined many excellent components: Shakespeare, Chernikhovsky, Chekhov, Tokh, Masyutin and, finally, "our wonderful Habimah. [...]. Despite all the present difficulties, it has to be admitted that the Habimah actors sometimes manifest profound, superhuman forces, giving them an artistic outlet, and then everything is forgotten" (110). She praised

Meskin in the role of Sir Toby, as the drunkard, merrymaker and jester and Baratz, the “subtle, foolishly sly and fickle” Sir Andrew. They sensed the spirit of the Shakespeare comedy, “at times overacting slightly because of their marked Russian-Yiddish accent” (110).

On the day after the dress rehearsal Klausner noted that “it turned out to be a tremendous success. The press is delirious. Admittedly, some critics maintain that some ill-treatment has been inflicted on Shakespeare by the various contrivances, but all are in agreement about one thing, that the comedy and atmosphere of the production are genuine Shakespeare” (110). Klausner also expressed her delight in a letter to Chekhov since he replied to her expressing his joy at the success of the dress rehearsal and the need to continue rehearsals: “Now I’d like to begin work on this piece and achieve virtuosity. It would take another month and a half!” (Ivanov 186). When rehearsals resumed in August, Chekhov evidently managed to achieve the desired result. “Shakespeare’s comedy grew by the day, transforming the participants in the process and revealing its humour and charm,” Chekhov wrote, possibly with regard to that final rehearsal period (“Zhizn i vstrechi” 24).

All the actors were in agreement that Chekhov treated them with great tact. Chekhov was favorably compared with Granovsky, who was staging *Uriel Acosta* at the time. On August 19, Finkel made the following entry in his diary: “During rehearsals of *Twelfth Night* I enjoyed chatting with Chekhov. He is much more likeable, considerate and outgoing than our director of *Acosta*, who ‘presents’ but doesn’t help you.” The performers learned at a relatively late stage that Chekhov’s mother was Jewish, which induced Finkel to think that Chekhov’s temperament had also left its mark on his directing. Chekhov’s contact with the Habimah actors after the rehearsals, when they sang their ancient Jewish songs, brought Chekhov close to the sources of Hebrew culture and its ancient folklore. This was particularly moving and precious for him.

After work the atmosphere would lighten and the Habimah group would sing me their songs, Kol Nidrei, wedding, synagogue and finally from *The Dybbuk*. It thrilled me to listen to these contemporary Jews who conveyed in their songs so deeply, so utterly unconsciously the sufferings, hopes and few joys of their people. I heard them and marveled: someone was calling them in that moment and was singing through them and speaking and crying, as though wanting to wake the singers, but they had fallen asleep long ago, nineteen centuries ago and

the singing would no longer rouse them. And the more joyful the song,
the more the tears came to my eyes and I could not keep them back.
The Habimah actors laughed at my tears, full of ignorance, but lovingly.
("Zhizn i vstrechi" 25)

This is perhaps Chekhov's way of expressing the idea of the dichotomy in Jewish culture between a lost tradition and the modern world, as well as the recognition of his own ambivalence between Russian and Jewish identity.⁸

The Premiere

The production of *Twelfth Night* coincided with a period in which there was an upsurge in the artistic activity in the Habimah Theatre. In September the Theatre toured Poland again and the performances were, without exception, a success. The Russian press wrote of the upcoming premiere of *Twelfth Night* that it would constitute a new departure in the work of the Habimah Theatre (Ofrosimov, 2 Sept.). The first night took place on 15 September 1930 in the Berliner Theater. In his review the Russian critic O. Ofrosimov wrote that the brilliant performance was noisily acclaimed by the audience. The issue of whether the character of the Habimah Theatre was Jewish or European was discussed in the press: "After searching in vain for a director in connection with its endeavours to bring its national character to the fore, the Habimah has a new policy" (Ofrosimov, 2 Sept.). The Theatre invited Chekhov, a "non-Jew," to stage a play and "made a very valuable discovery." Ofrosimov stated: "In this production he showed that he was a director of European standard and a great master." The new production of *Twelfth Night*, which was "swarming with a host of sweet visions and memories" of the First Studio at the Moscow Art Theatre, did not disappoint the old theatre-lover.

As far as the style of the production was concerned, it was evidently not Chekhov's aim to depict "good old England" (which had also not been attempted by Stanislavsky in the First Studio), but to give the actors the opportunity of bringing their own national consciousness into being through improvisation and discovering for themselves the play's rhythm and movement. The production's originality can be judged from the review of a German critic, who drew attention to the "biblical exultation in the Promised Land," where "what is immemorially Jewish" found expression in dance and a celebration of colourful splendour (Ivanov 188). The German newspapers remarked on how the serious style of the Habimah Theatre had been transformed into comic festivity. German audiences were amazed at the

comic talent of the actors. Critics drew attention to the joy and rhythmicity of the performance with its musical accompaniment, ensemble acting and original staging. In the opinion of the Berlin critic, Kurt Pinthus, "Chekhov demonstrated a gracefulness and sureness in his handling of the complex acting."

However, the alterations of the play provided grounds for reproach of its director. Ofrosimov expressed the opinion that *Twelfth Night*, which had been nicknamed "a farewell to laughter," was suffused with very subtle sadness. However, Chekhov did not let this sadness be felt; in this respect it is typical that the Clown's final melancholy ditty was cut and the play ended with dancing for the whole cast and the throwing of coloured streamers into the audience, in the style of a revue, as the critic remarked. The production emphasized the play's comic nature. "Chekhov presented *Twelfth Night* in buffo style, as theatre for the people in that he shifted the main emphasis to the escapades of the comic entourage of the charming Olivia" (Ofrosimov, 18 Sept.). Although he found that the director managed the task of creating a buffo atmosphere brilliantly, what is even more important is that Chekhov succeeded in combining the extravaganza with psychologically based acting on the part of the performers: "There are only ten characters, but the movement and tempo on stage are such that you think a whirlwind has swept past your eyes. Chekhov is inexhaustible in his inventiveness and in the way he gives the characters their psychological profile" (Ofrosimov, 18 Sept.).

Chekhov achieved his aim of presenting modern human beings through the medium of Shakespeare and breathing new life into the performers' acting. The lightness that Chekhov demanded was achieved in performance and contact was established with the audience. Masyutin, the stage designer, received praise for the clever revolving stage he constructed and the gentle, but at the same time, cheerful tones of the set and costumes, which were a joy to behold. Tokh was praised for his expressive, slightly grotesque music. The review in *Rul* concluded: "It is splendid and looks truly Shakespearean, embodying a new style that was hitherto unknown to the Habimah; it is astonishing and you don't know what is more amazing: the skill of the director or the talent of the actors themselves [...]. A charming production, both graceful and merry. Bravo, Habimah; bravo, Chekhov" (Ofrosimov, 18 Sept.).

An air of success was palpable in the theatre. However, after the premiere Finkel wrote in his diary that, "In the newspapers it's a great victory, but the audiences are small. It was to be anticipated that positive reviews would not be enough to obtain full houses in Berlin for a Shakespeare play in Hebrew, and

that a sensation would be needed. Much work has gone into this production. Chekhov rose to the occasion in his work with the actors and his talent as a director emerged very clearly" (59). Finkel predicted that the production would be a great success in Palestine, which was to be the case.

In his history of the Habimah Theatre Emanuel Levy observed that *Twelfth Night* was proof of the troupe's artistic development. With this production, the Theatre proved that a work of great world drama could be successfully staged in Hebrew (107). There were a total of eighty-seven performances of the Shakespeare comedy and it was performed several times in Berlin. It was a success everywhere, even in England, where the Habimah toured in 1931. "In London," Chekhov wrote, "Sean O'Casey gave it a perceptive and positive review" ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 27). The Irish playwright was overwhelmed by the actors' joy, rhythm, colour and general charm. He acclaimed the production as being genuine Shakespearean comedy that revealed the great heart of the poet (Chekhov, *Literaturnoe nasledie* 2 503).

In the autumn, the Habimah Theatre returned to Palestine, where the setting up of a theatre, library and theatre museum was envisaged. The Theatre undertook a big tour of Europe in 1937-8 (performing in Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia, France, Belgium, and England). Having seen *Twelfth Night* in England Gordon Craig enthused about the actor's ensemble work in his review for *The Times* (qtd. in Levy 145). And John Gielgud wrote that although in spirit and conception the production differed completely from Shakespeare, the author himself would doubtless have been staggered by the unusual inventiveness of the acting and staging (32). It was at this time that the students of the Chekhov Studio in England saw the Habimah Theatre in London and were impressed by the acting.⁹ "The production was a success," Chekhov reminisced in 1945. "After spending some time in Europe, the Habimah Theatre left for Palestine, where they apparently still to this day occasionally amuse Tel Aviv and the surrounding towns with their light-hearted performances of Shakespeare's weighty jokes" ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 27).

His *Twelfth Night* production was proof of Chekhov's talent as a director. The fact that this production to a great extent repeated the conception, staging and production of the First Studio in no way detracts from the merits of Chekhov as a director. Chekhov had achieved his goal of presenting through Shakespeare the tragicomedy of humanity and breathing new life into the performers' acting. This production combined the elements necessary for success: the Habimah actors and the actor-director, who shared the common

language of art, and the audiences in the various countries who understood the joyful language of the theatre. Chekhov's reputation as a director had been established, though it would be further tested in subsequent productions in Europe and the United States.

In the years that followed, Chekhov maintained his contact with the Habimah Theatre and he received repeated offers to continue his directing work with it. His letters to his Swiss friends Georg Boner and his daughter Georgette indicate that he met Ben-Chaim in Kaunas (Kowno) between 1932 and 1933 and discussed his visit to Palestine with him. Chekhov wrote to Georg Boner before Christmas 1932 that the "Jews," i.e. the members of the Habimah Theatre, had invited him to Palestine, a country that he very much wanted to visit and where he dreamt of acting a Jewish policeman¹⁰ (Letters, 22 Dec.1932). Ben-Chaim left Kaunas with the intention of discussing the question of inviting Chekhov to Palestine with the whole troupe.

Chekhov considered the option of resuming work with the Habimah Theatre in the spring of 1934, when he was ousted from the Latvian and Lithuanian theatres. In an undated letter to Georgette Boner, in the summer of 1934, after suffering a heart-attack in Riga, he wrote of having a new invitation from the Habimah: "I need to leave now! I have received a telegram from the Habimah. I replied that it was possible. Then, the most difficult issue: my health. But: there is the heat in Palestine and relocation is difficult for me. My letter to the Habimah was full of questions" (Byckling 85). In the winter of 1934-35, when Chekhov was preparing a big tour in the United States with a troupe of Russian actors, he wrote from Italy to Georgette, who was traveling in Palestine at the time: "Thank you for the letter from Palestine! My dear Jews (the Habimah Theatre) have invited me again. Oh, beautiful, hot Palestine and directing work are much dearer to me than cold America in the midst of the Ocean and the necessity of working as an actor!" (Letters, 8 December 1934)

"Michael Chekhov dreams of working with the Habimah," this was the title the correspondent of the Russian *Segodnya* (*Today*) newspaper gave to an interview with the artist in February 1935 where he stated that the Habimah Theatre, being in his opinion of one the best theatres in the world, combined certain elements of the ideal theatre. "I find in the Habimah Theatre part of what I am looking for: great closeness and harmony in ensemble work, movement and a heightening of facial expression and gesture" (Ch.G.D.) The final invitation from the Habimah Theatre came in the summer of 1935, when Chekhov was living in America. Trying to decide his future and deliberating over the invitations from various theatres, Chekhov "thought of Palestine." In

a letter to Georgette Boner, he reconsidered this option, even giving preference to the Habimah Theatre above all the others: "A journalist from the *Forward* newspaper came from Palestine and told me that the production of *Twelfth Night* was the biggest success in Palestine!! And that the English representative in Palestine, Hurst, reserved a permanent seat for all performances of *Twelfth Night*! A letter arrived from the Habimah yesterday saying that they will be without a director from February onwards. What am I to do?" (Letters, 4 July 1935).

Chekhov did not go to Palestine. In 1935 Chekhov's destiny changed: he went to England at the invitation of Dorothy Whitney Elmhurst, an American millionaire, and her husband Leonard Elmhurst. Chekhov's dreams were realized through the establishment of the Chekhov Theatre Studio at Dartington Hall. For two years (1936-38) Chekhov conducted laboratory work, exploring the ways to creativity with an international group of students. The group became The Chekhov Theatre in the United States (1939-42). However, Chekhov's modern vision of Shakespearean comedy was remembered for a long time in the new homeland of the Habimah Theatre. Miriam Bernstein-Cohen wrote in an obituary for Chekhov in October 1955 that "Israeli audiences remember Chekhov for his brilliant production of *Twelfth Night* at the Habimah; it was colourful, delightful and bubbling with merriment and wit" (37).

The motif of Jewishness gradually grew in relevance for Chekhov. There were many strands woven into this motif of Jewish consciousness: an interest in folklore and Biblical symbolism, and the difficult personal experiences which exerted an influence on Chekhov's decisions. Later we witness his horror of fascism and his demand to transfer the Studio from England to the United States in 1938. Significantly, Chekhov also returned to Jewish themes in his meditations on the image of the Eternal Jew that were published in his memoirs after the war.

Notes

- 1 Robert Lewis described the performance of Michael Chekhov with the Moscow Art Players in New York in 1935 as "total acting": "By that I mean each part Chekhov assumed was minutely executed from the point of view of physical characterization – the walk, the gestures, the voice, the make-up – all were meticulously designed to illuminate the character he was playing. Even more remarkable was, that, at the same time, his emotions were full, all equally chosen, and experienced according to the minds and hearts of the personages he acted. Here was the supreme example of the

- complete 'inside' coupled with the complete 'outside,' each deriving from the other" (81).
- 2 Stanislavsky gave a series of lessons at the Habimah studio in Moscow in October 1920 - April 1921. The sessions were attended by the Habimah, the Chekhov, the Vakhtangov, and the Armenian studios. (Vinogradskaya 212-37). Chekhov praised the premiere of *Princess Turandot* (*Literaturnoe nasledie* 1, 449).
 - 3 I want to express my gratitude to Jan Vikard for finding source materials in Hebrew and for translating all of them from Hebrew into Russian for the chapter of Chekhov's work in the Habimah in my book (Byckling 2000).
 - 4 Margot Klausner, the daughter of a wealthy German Jew with a passion for both Zionism and the Hebrew theatre, was one of the heads of the Habimah secretariat. At the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, she, together with her husband, Yehoshua Brandstatter, undertook fundraising for the Habimah Theatre and the organization of its productions, as well as hiring (Klausner 73-74).
 - 5 This was the general opinion about Chekhov's direction in Russia. Rudnitsky writes of Chekhov's work in the Second MAT: "Chekhov's great acting talent was already universally recognized. His authority as a director and the head of a theatre was, however, a different matter. Chekhov did not possess great directorial talent, something he himself acknowledged, and therefore he often relied on collective direction, that is he created a group of three or [??] directors to work on each play." (113, 193)
 - 6 Baratz recounts "rehearsing in imagination," and other interesting ways to approach the part and create contact with audience in Chekhov's method "seeing with my mind's eye some excerpt on stage, working on it in the usual way, then setting it aside and thinking up a more interesting version and then rejecting that version too and starting the whole process for a third time: this would then be the proper version, the one I needed" (Baratz 34).
 - 7 Baratz described the situation as follows:

Since leaving the Berliner Theater (17 June), we have had no real rehearsals, only technical ones with the stage set. They were scheduled as acting rehearsals, but turned into technical rehearsals within half an hour because the set was so fragile. We were on the verge of despair as to when we were finally going to work on our acting. After all, no one was prepared and we were pressed for time. Chekhov kept insisting that the first night should be on the 10th, but the first run-through with the set was only on the 1st. Some of our fellow actors were present and they saw it all and caused panic. There was no production, no acting, no actors and no clarity - just a kind of amateurish hotchpotch. People shrieked with headache. We had known all this already, had talked about it in the dressing rooms and had constantly been asking Chekhov when were we finally going to start work on our parts. "Everything in good time," he had said to us. (34)

Judging by Baratz' account, Chekhov provided the actors with an outline that they were meant to flesh out themselves using their creativity and talent. Chekhov gives a very different picture of their work: "The rehearsals went happily and as always with in Habimah intensely" ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 25).

- 8 Chekhov did not reach complete understanding with the Habimah actors about ancient Hebrew history and the modern Jewish situation. Chekhov writes in his memoirs:

The Habimah group told me much that was interesting about Palestine, about the theatre and the public in Tel Aviv and other cities of the Promised Land, about the struggles and stubbornness with which their land had been created, about the inevitable conflicts, the harm brought about by party disagreements, about sincere (i.e. friendly) relationships with the Arabs and about other subjects which concerned them. Sometimes their tales about the country which I knew only through Bible and New Testament stories seemed strange to me. It was as uncomfortable for me to hear about the struggle of political parties in Bethlehem or Nazareth as to see posters, notices and advertisements on the walls of Venetian homes. More than once I tried to direct the conversation onto different themes, but always unsuccessfully. At precisely this time I was interested in the esoteric side of Bible stories and once risked speaking about the Eloim and Yogev, but such kind, uncomprehending eyes were turned to me from all sides that I quickly sought to hide the unwanted guests whom I had almost brought into the society of my dear friends. ("Zhizn i vstrechi" 24-25)

- 9 One of the students, Hurd Hatfield, who later became famous in Hollywood, was so impressed by the performances of the Habimah, that he wrote and staged a one-act play about an old Jew and the sufferings of his people. The play was produced in the Michael Chekhov Studio in Dartington, England, in December 1938. (Hatfield, 1996)
- 10 This joke can be appreciated if one knows how frightened Chekhov was of policemen or anyone in uniform.

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