

# Theatre as a tool for Bridging Socio-Cultural Dichotomies: A Tourist's Assessment of the Akko Theatre Festival in Israel

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## Abstract

From the ancient Greek theatre studies, and cutting through societies of the world, festival performances have remained didactic and dynamic tools or avenues that either promote or project cordial relationship of divergent and or communally bound cultures. Festivals are also repertoires of a given people's history in their original forms, or re-defined forms because of the cultural response to the changing world. Israel is a nation where, like most nations of the world, theatre plays significant role in the lives of the people. With tourism as a vibrant revenue earner for the State of Israel, the Akko Theatre Festival provides not only the tourist a full theatrical satisfaction, but it also contributes its quota to the entertainment and educative needs of its audience. This paper attempts a look at the potentials of Akko Theatre Festival in bridging great socio-cultural divides, not only in Israel but other nations of the world with similar theatre experiences.

**Keywords.** Theatre, Socio-Cultural Dichotomies, Akko Theatre, Festival, Paradigm.

## 1. Introduction

There is hardly any society in the world that does not have festival performances, theatre activities and communally involving programmes. In all these instances, the people are brought together either as actors or members of the audience. Evidence abound that quite a number of such programmes reflect the people's collective history, aspirations and cultures reinvigorated and re-enacted in the performances. Israel, the nation under the research/study of this paper has a vibrantly rich theatre tradition which has experienced tremendous developments over the years. Israel, like other countries of the world has quite a great part of its history reflected in their dynamic theatre traditions. One of such community embracing theatre outings which has garnered remarkable international recognition is the Akko Theatre Festival, founded in 1980. Akko is an Arab-Israeli walled port city continuously inhabited since the Phoenician period. Not too long ago, UNESCO declared Akko as a World Heritage Site. The remains of the Crusaders' fortress dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century provide wonderful historical memories and venues for theatre performances during the Akko Theatre Festival.

The Crusaders were a series of religiously-sanctioned military campaigns waged by much of Latin Christian Europe. The specific crusades to regain control of Jerusalem, the Holy Land were fought over a period of nearly 200 years, between 1095 and 1291. Other campaigns in Spain and Eastern Europe continued into the 15th century. The Crusades were fought mainly against Muslims, although campaigns were also waged against pagan Slavs, Jews, Russian and Greek Orthodox Christians, Mongols, Cathars, Hussites, Waldensians, Old Prussians, and political enemies of the popes. The Crusades originally had the goal of recapturing Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Muslim rule and were launched in response to a call from the Eastern Orthodox Byzantine Empire for help against the expansion of the Muslim Seljuk Turks into Anatolia. Settling at Akko, the Crusaders built for themselves a great fortress from where they launched their military expedition.

It is rather ironically engaging that such a place from where violence was unleashed a few centuries ago is today, a place for spectacular entertainment and moral lessons through theatre festival that does not advocate violence and war, but a means of bringing together all different socio-political, religious and cultural strata of the Akko people, and all its guests/audience. The festival is composed of different genres of theatre forms and practices of Hebrew and Arab productions. These theatre forms include the production of scripted and improvised plays, mime, choreography/dance, music, recitations and the like. Akko's uniqueness is, of course, in its natural resources, in the history looking out from each corner and each stone. But the uniqueness is expressed also in its special human texture. Jews and Arabs, new immigrants and native born, thousands of tourists from within and [rather few from...] without the country - all these, combined with its smells, spices, special dishes and the principle of traditional hospitality, contribute to the city in general and Akko Festival in particular, the amazing multicoloured rainbow of the biggest theatrical celebration in Israel.

## 2. The Akko Theatre Festival: Significance and Challenges.

The Akko Theatre festival, also referred to as the Israeli Alternative Theatre is undoubtedly one of the leading Israeli cultural events that attract audience of Israelis, Arabs and tourists from other nations of the world. It is an annual festival that lasts three and a half days during the Succot [Tabernacles] holiday in both close spaces like the excavated Crusaders' halls and the open air, at archaeological sites or in the port area overlooking the Haifa bay. The Akko Theatre Festival occupies the space beyond the Crusaders' halls into the streets of this ancient city, graduating into an entirely all-involving, captivating and beautiful carnival. Citing an anonymous

writer of “King Richard’s Journey” who compared Akko to mythical Troy, Albert Ben-Shloosh, the General Manager and Senior Producer of the Festival in 2005, records;

If war that lasted ten years turned Troy into a famous city of all times, if Christianity’s victory caused Antioch to become a more praiseworthy city, then Akko will surely win the crown of eternal glory, being a city the entire world fought to conquer. ([http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/aboutUs\\_overview.aspx](http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/aboutUs_overview.aspx)).

This exemplifies the universality of the Festival that has lasted since 1980. For its period of existence, the Akko Theatre Festival has remained a major activity where theatre practices, amongst other creative processes, are exposed to indigenous and global relevance.

Albert Ben-Shloosh documents that the Festival started with Yossi Frost, Yossi Fitusi and Haim Shiran, who persuaded the late Mrs Lea Porat to locate the Festival in the ancient city of Akko. Ben-Shloosh submits that

Dealing with designation and goals brought about, eventually, looking for and finding new ways, or more correctly, innovative ways in the theatre and into the theatre. Innovative ways expressed by the unobtrusive connection between the creation and location and the very close connection between the theatre loving audience and the artists. ([http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/aboutUs\\_overview.aspx](http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/aboutUs_overview.aspx)).

This way, together everybody looked for an unequivocal saying, or extraordinary wish, which didn’t always find a corner in the institutionalized theatre. This is why Rafi Etgar, Designer of the Festival’s logo, defined it as “an opening for creators”

There are diverse forms of theatre and theatrical expressions in Israel. However, the Akko Theatre Festival is unique because it gives an opportunity for artists and performers to seek new, original and alternative medium of expression. In Akko Theatre Festival, productions are encouraged to test new borders and experiment new horizons of theatre concepts. These include, but not limited to interdisciplinary works and works which present original approach to directing, the use of space, audience cum actor relationship and a host of new frontiers in contemporary theatre praxis. The Akko Theatre Festival graciously accommodates works that consider the special and unique ancient locations/settings of the old city of Akko. One of the most outstanding features of the Akko Theatre Festival is that it supports the production of Arab plays, Jewish plays and Arab-Jewish co-productions. In an environment that both local and the international community could conclude the impossibility of Arab-Israeli cordial co-operation and togetherness giving the antecedents and realities of hostility in this region, these collaborations through theatre, contribute immensely to the fusion of the Arab and Jewish artists and audiences as well as the people of the old city. Because of the dynamics of theatre the artistic fusion of nationalities and cross-cultural divides galvanises professional fusion of Arabs and Jews. This artistic fusion therefore, has the potentials of post-production positive effects on the Israeli-Arab audience and performers. The Akko Theatre Festival is a pragmatic bridge between the great divides of these two communities of Arabs and Jews. The festival has the possibilities of a remarkable or gradual bridging of the great gulf of mutual distrust and suspicion among the rather antagonistic Israeli-Arab neighbours. This way, Akko Theatre Festival would have succeeded in re-enacting what drama did in ancient Greece as Dugga (2008) rightly observes;

From the Greek origin of theatre, Aristotle’s theory of catharsis viewed theatre as a means by which psychosocial goals of transformation of groups or individuals are achieved.

Like most theatre practices all over the world, Akko theatre productions therefore has healthy methods of releasing emotions that are bottled up in the individual actors and subsequently, members of the audience, as one may argue the community at large.

Every society has its set of rules, mores and civilization. From the ancient Biblical days till the present State of Israel, the Jewish civilization and one dares say, in contact with the Arabs, had generated and continues to generate tension, suspicion, apprehension in most Arab-Israeli relationships. Aware of the implications of this aspect of their civilization, both Arabs and Jews use theatre to address socio-political and cultural contradictions and challenges in their environment. By this understanding, a critical audience of the Akko Theatre Festival performances can agree invariably with Aime Cessaire as documented by Williams (1994) that;

A civilization that proves incapable of solving the problem it creates is a decadent civilization.

A civilization that chooses to close its eyes to its most crucial problem is a stricken civilization. A civilization that uses its principles for trickery and deceit is a dying civilization.

In the theatre festival productions, ideas and expressions are generated, articulated and communicated in the various theatrical performances. In the Festival, circumstances, events and conflicts of every day private, political and economic life are appropriated and interrogated by conscious determination, giving such contents in the dramas form, and making them available for social dialogue and initiative.

Because the festival grants the opportunity for diverse theatrical experiments, it is well organised and co-ordinated. The festival has a set of seven to ten productions that are carefully critiqued and chosen by the Artistic Committee from an approximately well over 100 original and innovative proposals. This same Committee and the Artistic Director of the Festival accompany and monitor the production process of the chosen proposals from their beginning to the final production. Amongst other reasons, this guidance enables the Festival to maintain its high standards and also creates the enabling environment for healthy artistic interface. The chosen proposals are financially supported and they participate in the Festival's competition, where dramatists vie for and are awarded various prizes in virtually all aspects of theatre. Apart from the competition productions, the Akko Theatre Festival hosts guest-and street performances, workshops and international performances. The Festival does not only enjoy the popularity and patronage of the Akko municipality, it enjoys government backings and approval. As a mark of government backing, the Mayor of Akko, Shimon Lankry, taking part in the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Akko Theatre Festival said, "the Akko Festival is a leading, significant event in Israeli culture. The Festival invites us to an encounter with high-quality, original theatre in a lively, vivid atmosphere, set against the background of the enchanted scenery of history. The audience, faithfully attending the Festival and filling its performance halls and the city's streets, attests to a hunger for the out-of-the-ordinary doings of alternative theatre. This is an audience that desires to experience, each time anew, the fresh spontaneity of live theatre, up close and intimate". And on the impact of the Festival to the society the Mayor attested that, "in recent years, we have been engaging full-swing in a process of change and improvement that can be felt in every corner of the city. Festival guests can now enjoy a new boutique hotel, upgraded restaurants, and better-maintained, cleaner streets".

In a similar show of solidarity of government with the Festival on the same 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Israeli Minister of Science, Culture and Sports Raleb Majadele in his message to the Festival said that, "for the 28th consecutive year, the city of Akko presents the Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre, the festival that has transformed Akko from a city known for its archaeology and tourism to one of lively artistic creation, welcoming the future. Akko, a city encompassing a blessed coexistence that embraces an ethnic, religious, and multicultural spectrum, has integrated its beautiful landscapes, ancient halls, and great spaces to create the Akko Festival of Alternative Theatre, that has made its mark on theatre arts in the State of Israel for the past 27 years. The Festival has revealed to us new artists, directors, and actors who have moved from the periphery to centre stage, and from the fringe to the mainstream" And again observing the role of the Festival as a powerful catalyst for change, the Minister noted "with satisfaction how the Festival has contributed over the years to the awareness of theatrical and artistic accomplishment among the city's youth, and particularly in the Theatre Arts major in Akko's ORT High School, the flourishing and international success of the Akko Theatre Centre, and in recent years, the success and accomplishments of the Masrachid Festival of solo plays in Arabic".

David Harar, Director, Old Acre Development Corp., Ltd, during the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Festival also gave a voice of obvious support when he critiqued the Festival as one of the most important cultural events in Israel as a whole and in Akko in particular. He rightly observed that the Festival "represents a wonderful tradition of original artistic creation in this enchanted city that offers the charms of its alleyways, antiquities, marketplaces, scents, colours, the new with the old, as it creates for its visitors a human theatrical spectacle, the largest and most magical in Israeli culture. Over the years, the Akko Festival of Alternative Israeli Theatre has become a unique and significant incubator for alternative theatre, by virtue of its artists, playwrights, directors, producers, actors, and stage crews". On collaboration and support, he concluded that the Old Acre Development Corp., working through the Ministry of Tourism among many other governmental offices, along with the Municipality of Akko, has invested great efforts to continue the development and preservation of this unique city with its rich past and sites attractive to tourists from Israel and abroad". All these attest to the high respect and regard a lot of people have for the theatre performances, growth and development. This success story in, for instance, the growth of Arabic literature from the minority Arab population in the area is better appreciated when one takes a look back to their literary preoccupation in the sixties.

In those early years the role and place of the Arab minority had some obvious but avoidable mixed feelings. This accounted for the Sachar's (2007) view that;

Playing only a marginal role in the nation's affairs, this small elite group was intensely self absolved and bitterly conscious of real or fancied discrimination. In some degree, its members had themselves to blame for their limited influence even on the life of their own community. Although settled mainly in rural areas, they contributed little to village integration; rather, they openly despised the backwardness of their surroundings. For many years, their literary output was unimpressive. Until 1958 not one Arabic full-length novel was printed in Israel.

As vibrant as this observation stands, a lot have happened and are still on-going as regards the place of Arab literary growth and appreciation in this regard.

Whenever, occasionally, an attitude toward the Jews was expressed at all, it usually took the form of obsequious appeals for mutual goodwill and practical cooperation. However, many of these young men preferred to express

their criticism of the state and its government in increasingly nationalist or communist terms. Again during this pre-Akko Theatre Festival days, the majority of the Arab minority preferred to contrast their situation with that of the Jewish majority; and the gulf between the two peoples was hardly encouraging. Undergoing some level of status imbalance, uncertain too, whether they were Israeli Arabs or Arabs in Israel, they veered increasingly toward political protest. Within the same period under review, i.e. post-independence but pre-Akko Theatre Festival, Sachar (2007) again observes that;

Nearly all Arab writers of whatever genre or merit evinced hostility toward the state and an ever willingness to incite against it; presenting the Jews as strangers, infidels and fanatical haters of all Arabs.

So high was the suspicion against the state that the Israeli government was described as tough cabal of opportunists, whose persecution of the Arab minority was shrewdly calculated to provoke the Arab states into retaliating against their own Jews, thereby touching off further Jewish migration to Israel. Because of the hostility with which the Arab minorities related to the Jews, it was significant that the full plenitude of Israel's accomplishments on behalf of its Arab citizens- good roads, irrigation, electricity, social welfare, broadened education, economic prosperity- was scorned as nothing better than the last meal offered a condemned man. [Emmy, this is nice pro-Israeli propaganda. Alas the actual situation is different.] With this kind of unfriendly feelings and relationship between the Arabs and Jews in almost every part of Israel/Israeli boundaries, the deep-rooted emotional malaise continued and no formula appeared likely to resolve it in Akko, as one can say for other parts of the state. But with the coming of the Akko Theatre Festival, the situation in Akko has drastically changed for the better, and this change is gradually snowballing into the greater society of Israel. Even if this is not held as ultimate, it is at best the wishful thinking of both practitioners, the immediate and remote audience of the Akko Festival; further proving by the day, how dynamic theatre can be as an avowed vehicle for social transformation. This defined role and success story attracts government and corporate bodies' support for the Festival.

For a number of years now, the Festival is managed and produced by the Akko Municipality and supported by the Cultural Administration of the Ministry of Education and Culture, as well as other public and private organisations with the intention of moving the festival into a better future. It should be noted that this financial and administrative support, (the volume of funding and administrative support notwithstanding), the Festival performances are never censored or influenced by the government. According to Shimon Levy in an interview with me on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008 at Tel Aviv-Israel, the Akko Theatre Festival is the most theatrical event in Israel every year featuring new socially radical productions that react to political and social happenings of the year. It is a sensitive measuring rod of Israeli happenings during which theatre activists are freely radical in using theatre to break social, religious, gender and cultural taboos to no restraint. This makes the Akko Theatre Festival, an ordinarily critical activity that a number of governments in the world can be apprehensive about such performances in their societies. But this is not the case with the Israeli government. However, though there is no government censorship or reprisals, Shimon Levy, himself a former director of the Festival admits that groups and organisers do a lot of highly developed self criticism and appraisals. This non-censorship by the government gives unlimited room for the theatre to greatly play its role as the mirror and regulator of the society. Because of this absence of governmental censorship and manipulations, the theatrical experiences in Akko Theatre Festival enjoy boundless artistic and creative licence to critique, lampoon and even interrogate governments and their policies. This makes impact because of the medium of drama and entertainment used to marshal people's approval or discontent with government policies. With the annual presence of government representatives in this festival, it is expected that every critique of government policies should receive attention from the government. On the vibrancy and relevance of the Akko Theatre Festival, Levy (1992) records that,

The Akko Theatre Festival for Israeli alternative theatre is perhaps the precise thermometer for measuring heat and pressure in Israeli society - often more accurate than the politicians.

One of such convincing outings of the Festival was in 1984, when according to Levy (1989);

With no premeditation or political scanning and planning whatsoever, the profile of the Festival in Akko reflected the strong internal criticism addressed against the Israeli government for its role in the Lebanon war. The actual war raged only 25 kilometers further north from the stages set out in the ancient Christian Crusader Halls in Akko. 11 out of 12 of the major shows presented in various forms a stage image of the "living dead". The "living-dead" is not a new motif in Hebrew literature. It is an image of a moral vampire demanding the payment of emotional debts by those who had remained alive. Hebrew poetry spoke of the "living-dead" in connection with all of Israel's wars since 1948.

Levy advances his observation by saying that as a kind of response to the collective subconscious this image was also echoed by the playwrights who wrote for the Akko Theatre Festival, together with the directors who produced the plays. Levy concludes that from within the enclosure of the Crusader walls, the theatre reacted to the reality of events with openness and critical appraisal. It is when theatre performs its role like this that, according to Boal (1996), it becomes highly telescopic because;

It brings close what is far away and makes bigger what is small. These characteristics of the aesthetic space make it extremely powerful in analysing situations. In life, we tend to make and fix images for ourselves which then influence us and we cannot modify. But the aesthetic space of theatre allows us to say, okay, that's the way things are but not the way things should be; and now we are going to create an image of how we want the world to be.

In Akko Theatre Festival, drama is evidently used to expose the images of the people and explore how those images should be what they ought to be for the peaceful interactions and development of the people. The festival productions make definite impacts on both the actors, the audience and the society because the bulk of the contents of the productions tally with Jenks' (1993) similar observation that;

Patterns, explicit and implicit of and for behaviour, acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in the essential core of culture, of historically derived and selected ideas with their attached values.

Considering the potentials in Akko Theatre Festival, and the constructive involvement of the government and other corporate bodies, the Festival is gradually growing and making serious impacts beyond its immediate host, Akko. With this kind of influence Gyekye (1997) asserts that;

It is possible for artistic forms and other cultural products originating from particular cultural environments, (*in this case, Akko*) of the nation (*i.e. Israel*) to stimulate a lasting national aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment. (emphasis mine)

By this understanding therefore, the cultural products of Akko community paradoxically, become less particularistic or local by becoming national as most other citizens across the State of Israel come to appreciate and identify with them. Because of the attention and interest those local Akko particularised aesthetic may hold for the nation of Israel at large, they will in time, shed more of their local Akko regional particular identities and take on a national and universal identity because of the topicality of issue raised that have global relevance and acceptability. By universal acceptability here we mean that concept of universality that deals with the sense within a production in which according to Dasyilva (2004);

Characters, whether individualised and recognizable as persons, or presented as types or symbols, reach beyond their immediate audience and circumstances to wider implications. What is happening to these characters happens or can happen to anybody outside the world of the theatre and in the multiplicities of societies far and near.

Whichever way universality is conceived and achieved, it is the measure of such universal thrust i.e. seeing beyond the immediate known events of the drama, that it achieves a lasting philosophical significance.

### **3. Conclusion**

From the ancient period till date, theatre all over the world has remained a vibrant didactic tool for change. At the risk of government reprisals and clampdown, theatre practitioners in most parts of the world undergo a lot of harassments in the discharge of their professional calling. The cordial government-theatre practitioners' relationship in the staging of the Israeli Akko Theatre Festival is of global significance. It is gratifying to note that in spite of the obvious and imagined hostility and tension as an almost daily life pattern of the Arab-Israeli contacts, and the dynamic nature of the theatre, the Akko Theatre Festival is never censored by the Israeli government at both the municipal and national levels. This understanding should be a lesson to other governments world over in their relationship with theatre and theatre practitioners. Let it also be noted that theatre is undergoing tremendous growth in Israel because of the conducive environment created by the Israeli government and appreciated by the theatre activists. It is in line with such appraisal that summing up the growth of theatre activities in Israel Levy (1989) assesses that Israelis, as faithful theatregoers

Relate to their theatre in terms of value, ideology and political content. Taking into consideration that a large Arab minority population does not attend the Hebrew theatre, that the Jewish orthodox religious groups would never set foot inside the theatre's doors, and there is also a vast and growing number of football and television fans- who take no interest in theatre whatsoever, then a glance at the weekly theatre column in any Israeli newspaper, even in comparison with most of the world's major cities, is truly amazing.

Apart from the obvious lessons in the Akko Theatre Festival performances, in a society that is always threatened by violence and communal suspicion, theatre activities, no doubt, contribute immensely to easing tension as it

offers unrestrained entertainment to the audience, and the society at large. Akko Theatre Festival is a shining example to theatre lovers all over the world; hence, it should continue to enjoy support from government and corporate bodies as this support galvanises the development of Israeli theatre practice and more so, to enable the vibrancy of the Festival to keep growing fast beyond the borders of Israel to other nations of the world where theatre is practised and appreciated.

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