

The First Jewish Prayer-Theater, The Gog and Ma'Gog Laboratory

The Jewish Biblical prohibition of idolatry representation and the Talmudic banning of Greek and Roman Theater as places of heathen ritual, resulted in other, non-representational means of presentation in order to assure a concrete relationship between God and the believer. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem - the "axis mundi", and the place of central public ritual executed by the Priests and Levites - the Jewish ritual was disseminated to the laws, customs, ceremonies and prayers, executed in any place where a synagogue exists or were a group of ten men (the *Minyan*) gather, or even a singular Jew stand to pray. As a matter of fact, many of the life moments of the individual or the community are codified as ritual and in the Mystical movement, the latest being Hassidism, and gesture of life can become a holy one. Thus Judaism is clearly one of the most detailed religious practices.

Parting from this enormous repertory of rituals into theater was my work as a theater director and as a writer for almost forty years. In 1992-1994 (following my intense exchange with Grotowski, during his only visit to Jerusalem) I founded and led the Gog and Magog Laboratory in two years of research and creation of the first Jewish Prayer-Theater, presented at the 1994 Israel Festival.

The international laboratory of artists included directors, actors, playwrights, choreographers, dancers, composers, singers, painters, scenographers, performers, musicians and leading scholars. The Laboratory was experimenting the special features of "Jewish ritual/performance", and more specifically, the ecstatic prayer of the Hassidic mystical movement. The works explored chanting, movement, relationship to space, both physical and mental, the plot of a ceremony, and essentially, the specific modes of acting, and engaging an audience. The acting modes shifted between role playing and storytelling, to performance and mainly to public-individual praying, in the mode of the Jewish "messenger of the community" *sheliach Ztibur*, while the overall image of the company's opera-theater was of individuals simultaneously entering a spiritual "ritual bath". In thus the Gog and Magog work led the artistic foundation to Jewish Prayer-Theater. Its participants farther elaborated this approach in their future creations, as for example, *Maamarot*, presented in this conference.

In my talk I propose to present, for the first time in an International Conference, some of the principles of the Gog and Magog Prayer-Theater modes of creating and presentation, along with selected footage from the rehearsals and the public presentation.

These examples will be shown in collaboration with the team working at present on a documentary movie, *Gog and Magog*.

About the Author

Michal Govrin was born in Tel Aviv. She is a novelist, poet and theater director. She has published nine books of poetry and fiction, translated to numerous languages, and recipients of literary prizes in Hebrew and English.

Michal Govrin received her Ph.D. at the University of Paris for her thesis, *Contemporary Sacred Theater*, dealing with theater and religious ritual.

Among the pioneers of Jewish experimental theatre, Govrin had also directed award winning performances in all the major theatres in Israel. Among her many theatrical achievements are a world premiere dramatization of Samuel Beckett's novel, *Mercier and Camier*, and the translation and direction of *The Emigrants* by Slawomir Mrojek. Among her experimental productions, *Gog and Magog*, based on Martin Buber's Hassidic novel, was created by an interdisciplinary workshop for the 1994 Israel festival, and is considered one of the groundbreaking works of Israeli Prayer-Theatre.