

From Jewish Rituality to Theatricality: the Question of Transformation

People are accustomed to calling transportation performances "theater" and transformation performances "ritual". But this neat separation doesn't hold up. Mostly the two kinds of performances coexist in the same event.

(Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology*, 130)

The case of Jewish Orthodox actors involves a special state of performativity: they consider both daily religious rituals and theatrical performances onstage as transformations.

Such is the case of *Ma'amarot*, a production based on the Jewish Morning Service that was performed in Jerusalem between 2000 and 2004 by a group of seven Orthodox male actors. As performers and as people at prayer, the actors of *Ma'amarot* worked to achieve moments of pure presence of authentic self, before the audience, as before God. As a result, some moments of the production were puzzling to the degree that the audience asked itself whether the actors "act praying" or whether they were "praying"? Those were fascinating, even disturbing, instances. The production's ability to achieve what Antonin Artaud had sought, ecstatic expression simultaneous with the actors' individual explorations of the experience of prayer in a non-religious setting, generated a unique phenomenon: the audience was permitted to witness the intimacy between worshipers and their God.

A diametrically opposed case is the *Responsa on Theatre*, the only volume of Orthodox rabbinic guidelines for women performing in theatre. The *Responsa* is based on questions directed to rabbis during the past decade. It deals with questions connected to costumes, movement, singing, and the relationship between the audience and the actresses. *The Responsa* represents a list of rules and regulations, usually followed by the more observant section of Israeli Orthodox society and reinforces the assumption that acting onstage might be a modus of transformation. The rules offered by the *Responsa* are aimed at preventing any such possibility.

About the Author

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