

## The Tale of Habima



**Nachum Zemach**

As the Russian Revolution raged outside — the centuries-old Czarist regime had fallen and Russia's citizens were brutally slaughtering one another — in a small hall in a back alley in Moscow, a dozen young Jewish men and women were themselves trying to stage a revolution — to found the first Hebrew theatre.

The visionary who conceived the idea, inspired and assembled the troupe, was thirty-year old Hebrew teacher, Nachum Zemach, born in Bialystock, Poland. Since his youth he had dreamed of establishing a Hebrew-speaking theatre, and, in the early days of the 1917 Revolution, he assembled a group of young actors to found the first Hebrew theatre. Among those who joined him were Hannah Rovina, a Hebrew nursery-school teacher, and Menachem Gnessin, who had lived in Palestine for ten years, acting in and directing an amateur theatre company there.

Nachum Zemach requested the great Russian director, Constantin Stanislavski, to take the new company, Habima, under his patronage. Won by Zemach's enthusiasm, Stanislavski proposed that his student Yevgeni Vakhtangov, an Armenian actor and director, teach and direct the new company.



**Yevgeni Vakhtangov**



**Nachum Zemach, Hannah Rovina and Menachem Gnessin**



**Constantin Stanislavski**

Vakhtangov worked with Habima's actors for a year, mounting a production of four one-act plays called *Neshef Bereshit* ("Genesis Ball"). The production was enthusiastically received. Stanislavski gave his approval, and the Hebrew theatre became a *fait accompli*.

The troupe began rehearsing a new play — *The Eternal Jew* by David Pinski. Since Vakhtangov had been taken ill, Stanislavsky gave Habima another director from his theatre—Vasoviad Mechdelev. *The Eternal Jew*, a play about a Messiah who was born in the time of the Second Temple but disappeared, premiered in 1919 with success far exceeding expectations. Habima did more than stage artistic productions; it became a symbol of the Hebrew and Zionist awakening. Maxim Gorki became an ardent admirer of Habima and wrote enthusiastically of the company.

Habima received official recognition from the Russian government. But the *Yevseksiya* — the Jewish section of the Communist Party — dominated by Jewish Communists who opposed Zionism and Hebrew, had this recognition withdrawn. A group of eminent Russian authors and artists appealed to Lenin, father of the Russian Revolution, and stressed the importance of the company, "which set an excellent example of artistic achievement." Their appeal was granted, and Stalin, then Commissar of Nationalities, instructed the support for Habima to be reinstated.



**The Eternal Jew**

Vakhtangov began rehearsals for S. An-sky's *The Dybbuk*, translated into Hebrew by Hayyim Nahman Bialik. Hannah Rovina played the lead role in the drama, whose theme dealt with the world of mysticism and Hassidism. Rehearsals for the play went on for two years, with the first Hebrew performance of *The Dybbuk* being in early 1922. The play was a great success for Habima and, along with the company's other productions at the time, placed Habima among the top-ranking theatres of the twenties. The play was performed over a thousand times, and each time Hannah Rovina bewitched and captivated the audience anew.



**The Dybbuk**



**The Golem**

Habima's next production was *The Golem* by H. Leivick, a play about the famous rabbi, the Maharal of Prague, who created a clay figure to protect the Jews. Aharon Meskin played the lead. This play, as well, was a great success and ran for several decades. Habima mounted two other productions in Moscow. By then all Zionist and Hebrew activity had been proscribed, and Habima remained the last Hebrew voice in Russia.

In 1926 the troupe left Russia for a two-year tour of Europe and the United States, and everywhere its performances won the hearts of spectators and critics, who were impressed by its theatrical accomplishments and noted its Jewish uniqueness. Max Reinhardt, one of Europe's great directors, wrote: "Habima draws on the inner being of the Jewish people, and creates an original, independent and inspiring theatre." American reviews of *The Dybbuk* said the production was a theatrical work resembling a rite in which the actors are the priests, and called the play the acme of perfection.

In the United States the company faced a crisis; some of its members, led by the founder Nachum Zemach, wished to remain there to found a Hebrew theatre. Most of the company however, came to Palestine and, for the first time, performed before an audience that understood their language.

Habima was received in the Land of Israel with open arms, produced two plays, then set out on tour of Europe once more. In 1931 the troupe returned to Palestine, this time permanently, and set up its home in Tel Aviv.



**Zvi Friedland**

Habima was run collectively, the actors holding frequent meetings to decide how the theatre would be managed, what plays would be produced, and who would play the various roles. Two of the theatre's actors, Barukh Chemerinsky and Zvi Friedland, directed most of the productions. One of the first plays produced in Palestine was *Amkha* by Shalom Aleichem, translated by Y.D. Berkowitz. Other Shalom Aleichem plays were performed subsequently and attracted large audiences. Dramas on Jewish and biblical themes were also performed with great success. In addition, the company performed contemporary plays and classics.



**Barukh Chemerinsky**

One of Europe's great directors, Leopold Jessner, who fled Nazi Germany, produced Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, which aroused a controversy among the audiences as to whether plays "presenting the Jew in a negative light" ought to be shown in the Land of Israel.

In 1937 the company toured Poland, Lithuania, and Central Europe. This was its last contact with the audience from whose midst it had emerged. Habima also performed in England, where it appeared on English television, which was then just beginning. This was the first time a theatrical production had been televised.



**Mirele Efros**

On the eve of the war, Habima produced one of its most successful plays — *Mirele Efros* by Jacob Gordin, with Hannah Rovina playing the lead. In the forties Habima presented two original plays by Aharon Ashman, *Mikhal Bat Sha'ul* ("Michal, Daughter of Saul"), based on the biblical story, and *Ha-Adamah ha-Zot* ("This Land"), dealing with early Jewish settlement in Palestine. These two plays can be called the beginning of original drama in modern Israel. One play which enjoyed great success was Shalom Aleichem's *Tuvia the Dairyman*, in which the Jewish dairyman bemoans his sad fate and hard life. Other plays performed during this period include Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.



**Habima Drama School**

In the forties, the company founded its own drama school under the direction of Zvi Friedland. Here the first generation of Israeli actors received their training. In 1946 the company moved into a building erected especially for it and serving as its home to this day. In 1947, Tyrone Guthrie, an innovative English director, came to Palestine and mounted Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, one of the troupe's greatest productions.



**Habima Theater in the Early Forties**



**In the Wastes of the Negev**

In 1948, Habima set out on tour of the United States, believing that the company would inspire American Jews to help Israel in her struggle for independence. Four months later the troupe returned and began rehearsing a play about the Israeli War of Independence—*Be-Arvot ha-Negev* (“*In the Wastes of the Negev*”) by Yigal Mossinsohn, the story of a kibbutz cut off from the rest of Israel and struggling for its life. The play, whose cast also included younger members of Habima, elicited quite a response.

In the summer of 1949, two foreign directors—Julius Gelner from England and Harold Clurman from the United States — mounted productions of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer’s Night Dream* and Roblès’ *Hostages*. The following year Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* were performed, and Leopold Lindberg of Switzerland staged Brecht’s *Mother Courage*.

The veteran directors were joined by young actors, and together they produced original plays by Israeli authors who were gaining a reputation — Moshe Shamir, Aharon Meged, Yosh, Ephram Kishon, and Nissim Aloni. Peter Fry, a director who emigrated from the United States, directed *The Caine Mutiny* by Herman Wouk, and Hy Kaylos, also from the United States, produced a series of modern plays by American dramatists, in which the younger generation of Habima actors played the lead roles with great success.



**The Diary of Anne Frank**

Tyrone Guthrie returned to Israel in 1959 and staged an innovative production of Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, using modern costumes and a contemporary setting. Among the plays mounted then were: *Hannah Szenes* by Aharon Meged, the story of the Haganah fighter who parachuted into Nazi-occupied Europe, *Shesh Kenafayim le-Ehad* (“Each Had Six Wings”) by Hanoch Bartov, dealing with the life of new immigrants, *Children of The Shadow* by Ben-Zion Tomer, about Holocaust survivors in Israel, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the story of a young Jewish girl who hid in an attic during the Second World War but in the end was killed by the Nazis.



**Hannah Szenes**

In 1958, forty years after the theatre's founding, festive productions were mounted, and the company was awarded the Israel Prize and officially recognized as Israel's National Theatre. Eight of the company's actors have since been awarded the Israel prize.

In 1962, a new hall, seating 400, was inaugurated in the home of the National Theatre. Towards the end of the sixties the company ran into economic, managerial, and artistic difficulties. A Government commission proposed that the actor's cooperative, which had owned and managed the theatre, be disbanded and promised Habima substantial budgetary support from the Government. Management of the company was placed in the hands of a board of trustees, headed by the Governor of the Bank of Israel; Gavriel Zifroni was elected General Director; and Shimon Finkel was made Artistic Director.

Habima's home was completely renovated, and a small hall—Habimartef ("Habima Cellar")—was opened for experimental plays. Original productions and Jewish plays were staged, including Elie Wiesel's *Jews of Silence*, which played during the peak of the struggle for Soviet Jewish immigration, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish satirical entitled *On Levity and Hypocrisy*, stories of S.Y Agnon dramatized for the theatre, and modern and classical plays. Zifroni and Finkel completed their terms of office in 1975. Habima had successfully weathered its transitional period to becoming a public theatre. Native-born actors, trained in the company's drama school, now took over center stage.



**On Levity and Hypocrisy**

Shmuel Omer was appointed General Director. Yosef Yizreeli, Shlomo Bar-Shavit, David Levin, and Omri Nizan — all native Israelis, trained in Israel and abroad—have served as artistic directors. The founder's job was done. The actors of the Mandate period were joined by young actors, trained in Israeli drama schools. New Israel directors now work alongside renowned foreign directors such as Yuri Lubimov, a leading Russian émigré.

Habima performs works by Israeli playwrights, the first generation of native authors whose work is devoted solely to the theatre, and has brought back older Israeli dramas of proven quality, paying great attention to plays on Jewish themes. In addition, the company continues to present classical, modern, and experimental plays.

In 1978 The Association of the Friends of the Habima National Theatre was founded under the leadership of Ora Goldenberg, its Chairwoman. The Association helps bring the theatre to development towns, where the audience is given the opportunity of meeting with the actors. The Friends of Habima also grants scholarships to young actors and runs drama programs for the youth. Chapters of the Friends of Habima have been founded in Canada, the United States, South America and England.

### *Shlomo Shva*



**Elza**

In the year 1990, Hanan Snir was nominated as artistic director. Under his direction, Habima produced Moti Lerner's "Elza," "The Night of The Twentieth," by Yehoshua Sobol, "Blood Wedding," by Federico Garcia Lorca, "A View from the Bridge," by Arthur Miller, and "Of Mice and Men," by John Steinbeck.



**A View from the Bridge**

In 1991, the general manager of Habima, Shmuel Omer, absorbed the role of artistic director, a position he held for three years. Soon after he took the post, the Gulf War broke out, and the first play that was prepared this year, "The Tower," by Kelemen Komuves, under the direction of László Marton, was closed down after fifteen performances along with the theatre. In April of this year, the theater reopened; the first production was "Arsenic and Old Lace," by Joseph Kesselring, and "The Glass Menagerie," by Tennessee Williams.

In 1993, Habima produced "Yehu", an original play by Gilad Evron, directed by Hanan Snir. Later that year, Habima produced "A Servant of Two Masters," by Carlo Goldoni, translated by Nissim Aloni and directed by Omri Nitzan. This production was very successful and it was staged regularly for five years, until the end of 1999, when it reached 600 performances. In addition, Hanoach Levin directed his play "The Child Dreams," which was the highlight of the 1993 season in Israeli theater.





**Yehu**

In 1994, David Alexander was nominated as general manager and Gary Bilu as artistic director. Habima produced "Amadeus," written by Peter Shaffer and directed by Michael Gurovich. "Amadeus" was a co-production with the Haifa Theatre. Habima also produced "The Father," by August Strindberg, under the direction of Hanan Snir, "Three Sisters," by Anton Chekov, directed by Shahar Segal, "The Visit of the Old Lady" by Friedrich Durrenmat, under the direction of Omri Nitzan. As a co-production with The Cameri Theatre, with Lea Koenig in the leading role.



**Three Sisters**

Since 1995, and up until 2004, Yaakov Agmon was the general manager and artistic director of the theatre. During his tenure, Habima concerned itself with national events taking place outside of the walls of the theatre like the murder of Yitzchak Rabin. Habima was also involved in social affairs like the

war against violence in Israeli society. The theater produced works that reflected the new concepts of Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Yom Hazikaron, Remembrance Day for Israel's fallen soldiers. These political and social concepts were preserved throughout all the years of Mr. Agmon's direction. The theatre produced "A Mountain Won't Move," by Gilad Evron, directed by Hanan Snir; "Civil War- A Theatrical Event," written, edited, and directed by Ilan Ronen on the basis of "The Jewish War," by Yosef Ben-Matityahu and satires like "The Song of the Baboon," and the "The Baboons Are Back."



**Kaddish**

The theatre went on tour to Oslo, Norway with Henrik Ibsen's "Ghosts," directed by Hanan Snir and to New York with Allen Ginsburg's "Kaddish," also directed by Snir. Both productions received rave reviews. Throughout this period, new dramatists such as Aharon Ezra, Shlomo Moskovitz, Ravid Debara, and Yael Ronen were discovered by Habima.

Additionally, "The Habima Young Company," was established and directed by Ilan Ronen.

In 2004, Odelia Friedman and Benny Sarfati were nominated for general managers, a post they share. Ilan Ronen was appointed as artistic director. Immediately after the nominations, Habima underwent its great renovations of the theatre, and the company vacated its home for five years and performed in different venues throughout Tel Aviv. During these five years, Habima produced "Anna Karenina", adapted by Helen Edmundson from the novel by Lev Tolstoy, directed by Ilan Ronen; "Little Eyolf" by Henrik Ibsen adapted and directed by Hanan Snir; and "The Seagull," by Anton Chekhov and directed by Rami Hoyberger. Throughout these five years, the theater produced several original plays; "Hevron," by Tamir Greenberg, a coproduction with the Cameri Theater, directed by Oded Cotler; "Nutcase" written and directed by Yael Ronen, which became a cult-hit and attracted many young audience members; "The Sixteenth Lamb," written by Yehonatan Gefen, adapted and directed by Miki Gurevich; "The King and the Cobbler," by Sammy Gronemann with translations and lyrics by Natan Altermann and directed by Ilan Ronen.



**Little Eyolf**



**The King and the Cobbler**

In 2006, Habima was inducted as a member of “The Union of the Theatres of Europe,” an honor it shares with nineteen other eminent European theaters. The membership in U.T.E. is a gesture of appreciation and respect to the National Theater of Israel, the only member with this distinction who is not European.

Habima is very active in touring productions around the world in places such as Japan, Taiwan, Poland, Romania, Germany, Cyprus, and Moscow. These tours have turned the theater into a leading voice in international co-productions. Additionally, Habima works on many co-production’s alongside other Israeli theaters like The Cameri Theater, Haifa Theatre, Be’er Sheva Theater, and the Arab Hebrew Theatre.

In November 2011, Ilan Ronen, the artistic director of Habima, was nominated as president of U.T.E.

On November 15th, 2011 the theatre returned to its renovated home.

*Hani Seligsohn*

