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TALKING POINT

A letter from the Land of Israel

(Ezekiel Mphahlele, director of Chemchemi, is writing from Tel-Aviv where he is studying aspects of theatre as a guest of the Israeli Government and the International Theatre Institute, Israeli Centre)

It is hot here. Hot and humid, as a Mediterranean summer should be. Except that there is a hot dry wind that comes intermittently from the desert - the hamsine. Like the Rarmattan that blows from the Sahara down the whole of West Africa. A stone's throw away is the Mediterranean Sea. But I am a dry-land animal, and the sea holds no attraction for me. I think of it as a cruel beast, licking the bodies of bathers only as long as they keep a respectable distance from its jaws.

Tel-Aviv, where I am based, is bustling with tourist life. Native life is always robust here, unlike the sedate capital, Jerusalem, where life goes dead after 9 p.m. People from poor countries like us Africans are often disgusted or amused by tourists. We like their money but not their manners. An American Jew, one of those who come on a regular pilgrimage to their mother country, shouted to me the other day, "Hi! Glad to see you folks!" and shook my paw much longer than was necessary. "You folks" I instinctively interpreted as "you blacks" or "you Africans". It made me feel pre-historic, as if I had emerged from a colony of dinosaurs that had survived extinction by some streak of nature.

Strange city, Tel-Aviv. Next to it, within easy walking distance, is Jaffa, an ancient biblical city clinging to the seashore much more than Tel-Aviv, because it's older and is not spreading away from the water like Tel-Aviv. Jaffa was very long an Arab town, but the Arabs fled during the Palestine War of Independence of 1947-49, when the Jews were fighting to free themselves from British rule. There are still ruins that display interesting Arab architecture and narrow lanes. The buildings that were left were occupied by Jewish immigrants. Tel-Aviv used to be something like a suburb of Jaffa, and it has now grown bigger than its mother. It sprawls away rather messily like treacle, but there is something enchanting about this messiness. I take to a city or am repelled by it because of its human rather than physical qualities, because of its people. Paris, for instance, is one of the best-planned cities I have ever seen, but I find Parisians too repulsive to live with.

I am glad I accepted the kind offer of the Israeli Government to bring and maintain me here so that I may observe and study wherever possible aspects of theatre, especially directing. I am also a guest of the Israeli centre of the International Theatre Institute who plan my programme. This Institute is hardly known in several parts of the world. It has its headquarters in Paris, as one of the agencies of UNESCO. The office of a member-country is called a "centre". Its aim is, briefly, to promote international understanding

through co-operation and exchange of ideas in the field of theatre.

Tel-Aviv has four main theatres and about four smaller ones. One very interesting theatre among the four is Inbal, a folk-dance group. The name means "tongue of the bell". I saw them perform a series of dance, each of which tells a story, under the general title, Psalms of David. Inbal consists of Yemenite Jews. The choreographer - a woman - has pieced together Yemenite, Arab and traditional Israeli dances in a most fascinating if stylized form. Incidentally, the Hebrew spoken by the Jews from the Yemen (near Saudi Arabia) is still regarded here as the nearest to the Hebrew of the ancient people of Juda. Possibly because it remained rooted in Middle-Eastern soil. Inbal, like Guinea's Ballets Africaine, whom we saw in Nairobi recently, have much to teach Africa in the use of the dance as a medium of story-telling, in other words, of theatre. This reinforces our original idea at Chemchemi - to use music and dance as much as possible in our plays.

A most popular play here is a musical which has run for over 200 performances and still draws packed houses - The King and the Cobbler - written by an Israeli. The story is a simple one. King Solomon, at the time when Pharaoh has presented him with an Egyptian wife, decides that he wants to change occupation with a cobbler for a time, so that he can get to know what it feels like to do a relatively menial job. This idea is born of the fact that the cobbler happens to resemble the king very closely - so much so that in other communities he would have been killed for it. One actor has four roles in which he acquits himself remarkably: the king, the cobbler as himself, the cobbler as a king, the king as the cobbler. Three other plays closest to Jewish life that I have seen are Sunset written by an East-European Jew about the murky underground life of Odessa; Amcha (meaning "you simple folk") is also about East-European Yiddish-speaking Jews; and Five-Five, a musical comedy.

This brings me to the big trouble Israel is experiencing in the business of entertainment. The people here are crying for Israeli plays, and not more than 20% of the plays that have been performed over the last 15 years have been originally Israeli and Hebrew material. The response to the appeal is not encouraging. The rest of the plays being put on here have been imported from the Western world and translated into Hebrew. Hebrew was revived as a spoken language - as distinct from a language of the Bible and religious worship - only sixty years ago. Its culture is only beginning to find shape and direction. Let it be remembered that about 2000 years ago the Jews were exiled from their homeland - Palestine. The Babylonians and later the Romans scattered them about or used them as slaves. The two great Jewish temples were destroyed, the second during Herod's rule as a Roman vassal. Palestine was almost totally drained of its Jewish population. Those who escaped slavery went to Europe and other parts of the world, including the Yemen. Each Jewish community - in Russia, Poland, Hungary, Rumania, the Yemen, and later in Britain and the United States, - assimilated a good deal of the culture of the country of their adoption. They spoke the language of the country, and in Eastern Europe they evolved Yiddish, which has German as its base and bits of Hebrew and other languages thrown in, but is very rich notwithstanding. The one thing that has kept the Jews together has been the Jewish religion and common suffering as people who have been discriminated against as Jews for centuries.

Towards the beginning of the 20th century, their ill-treatment drove some of them back to Palestine, which has become the state of Israel. "The Holocaust" of the Hitlerite period accelerated immigration into Israel. What we have here now is a mixture of cultural backgrounds and, apart from Yemenite and North African Jews, who have been under strong Arab influence, the Jews have been Westernized and so tend to patronize in large numbers Western plays - from Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, which has compelling force even when one sees it done in Hebrew, down to Arthur Miller's After the Fall, which must have very little to say to most people here (certainly nothing to me).

Amateur theatre is very lively here. I attended an annual drama festival for amateur groups where simple folk mixed freely with intellectuals. Stage

sets were very simple. In this way, theatre is brought to people outside the big centres.

We in Africa have an advantage over Israel in the sense that we have not been uprooted the way they were and have to grow roots again. Even as tribes, we do not find ourselves, as Israelis from different countries suddenly find themselves, face to face with each other without a common way of behaviour. But Israelis have advantage over us, with the exception of South Africa where language and tribal barriers have been largely broken down: it is that they have a common language which the third generation is growing up in and learns to write, read and speak. And we should have no illusions about language problem. A national language has most often had to be dictated from above. The most recent examples are Ceylon, India and Tanzania. It has to be adopted consciously, and an academy has to be set up to invent a vocabulary where it is required. The Israelis did this and today they can be proud that not only their religion but also their language bind them together.

Another vitally important activity we think we have all eternity ahead of us in which to embark upon is the formation of national dance groups. The right sentiments were expressed by the Minister of Education (then Pan-African Affairs Minister), when, on the occasion of the visit of Guinea's Ballets Africains, he said that the Government of Kenya was intending to form a similar troupe. Since then, we have heard nothing of it. One wonders if anyone ever thought of using Chemchemi as an existing centre with organizational machinery that already engages in theatre, music and other activities? We are still waiting.

Israel has a population of $2\frac{1}{4}$ millions. It is not a rich country and it is surrounded by hostile Arab countries that want to strangle it out of existence. But its wealth lies in its resources of determination, hard work and singleness of purpose. Where the elite and ordinary folk rub shoulders, as in places of entertainment and national ceremonies, the educated class is not always asserting its importance and imaginary superiority over the ordinary folk. The same cannot be said of our so-called emerging African. He wants his presence felt, and imagines that entertainment that "the man below" enjoys should not interest him as "superior man". Israelis are most informal in their public attitudes. They are searching for some common identity in addition to their religion because not all of them are religious people, anyhow, even although they observe the same religious feasts.

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Art in a Kibbutz

I spent the weekend of the Jewish Passover in a kibbutzi at the invitation of its members. A kibbutz is a remarkable example of communism in earnest and sincere practice, minus beaurocracy. There are 250 kibbutzim (plural form) in Israel. Each is organized as one huge family, consisting of about 150 individual families. The members work at different things they are assigned to, mostly in agriculture. The house accommodates man and wife and children under 12 or so. The other children live in dormitories, and all the members of the village eat together in a large hall. Those who have special talents are helped towards realizing them even if the kibbutz has to send them to institutions outside. They may come back to serve the kibbutz or they may not, according to their choice. The members do not earn wages beyond a little pocket money for incidentals. Clothes for each family, furniture and so on, are supplied from a central store. There is a clinic, a doctor and a nurse, who are members of the kibbutz. The farm produce is marketed, and there are committees in charge of various departments of kibbutz life. The community pays income tax as one person. It is not uncommon to find men working in the fields and at night teaching, or engaging in theatre or a discussion activity.

There are several kibbutz members who are not religious at all, and there are religious kibbutzim where the orthodox Jewish religion is lived.

The Passover feast begins on a Friday afternoon as the Sabbath (Saturday) also does, and ends on the following Friday. It is observed to celebrate the occasion when an angel is said to have protected Jewish children from slaughter by Pharaoh during the period of exile in Egypt. It also celebrates the journey of about 40 years through the desert under the leadership of Moses. During the Passover dinner on the Friday, the story of the Exodus is recited in speech and song. Matzah, the tasteless unleavened bread is eaten throughout the following week. This, together with very bitter herbs, are served as a remembrance of the bitter desert days.

Originally, the Passover has been celebrated in homes where all members of the family and relatives met and recited the story of the Exodus. But now, owing to the existence of villages like the kibbutz, and the break-up of family life in the present century, communal services are held. This was the first time for me to attend a Passover Feast: an unforgettable experience.

A kibbutz artist had lined the frieze in the dining hall with beautiful paintings which he made and then cut the figures out of his paper to form a series which tell the story of the Exodus. I am making arrangements to exhibit these beautiful paintings at Chemchemi soon, together with the text from the Haggadah - the story of the liberation from the Egyptians and the journey to the Promised land. The land will show in what skilful and creative way cut-out painted paper can be used to relate a story.
