

Theatre for Survival: Language and Cultural Preservation in the work of the Ladino Players

Mara Lockowandt (Royal Holloway, University of London)

The opening scene of *Presentando de un Megilah para Muestras Dyias* is haunted by the threat of linguistic and cultural annihilation: ‘Vozotros tambien devesh uzar la lengua antes de ke se vos olvide por entero’ (Altabe 2) (‘We need to use the language before we forget it entirely’).¹ A Rabbi speaks these lines to a number of congregants who are part of a Sephardic Diaspora, now residing in New York City. As these lines suggest, the framework for this production is to embrace and maintain Judeo-Spanish, the language of the Sephardic Jews. From this opening scene, the importance of language, as explicitly discussed and debated amongst the community members, emphasizes the tension between assimilation and survival.

This play was a 1996 production, performed by the Ladino Players in New York City. American professor Avivah Ben-Ur argues that unlike the earlier twentieth century American Sephardi Theatre, the Ladino Players seek ‘to celebrate and revive the Judeo-Spanish heritage, culture, and language’ (Ben-Ur, ‘Ladino Theatre’). While previous Sephardi theatre had foregrounded entertainment and escapism, the Ladino Players shift to an ethos of education and recovery of the Sephardi identity. In this article, I use the term *theatre for survival* to signify the relationship between the Ladino Players’ performance practices and their audiences. Focus is given to the performance strategies aimed at challenging traditional Sephardi language and cultural norms. Moments where the language is openly contested appear as demonstrations of cultural memory, in which

¹ All translations are the author’s.

the performers reactivate the Sephardi identity with a contemporary relevance. Drawing upon interviews and a close reading of the performance text of *Presentando de un Megilah para Nuestros Dyias*, this article focuses on two aspects of the production. These are the explicit discussion and modernization of language, and the relationship between the individual and the collective in the process of cultural propagation. I propose that the production serves as a call for increased responsibility, within a wider community that is not exclusively Sephardic, for cultural and linguistic preservation.

The Sephardic Diaspora and the Ladino Players

The Sephardic Diaspora originated with the Jewish expulsion from Spain in 1492, an event that contributed to the mass migration of Jewish exiles to Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America. The majority of the exiles settled in the Ottoman Empire where their language and culture continued to develop. In addition, some Sephardim began migrating to the United States during the seventeenth century. With the further erosion of the Ottoman Empire, more Sephardi immigrants settled within the United States during the twentieth century.² Judeo-Spanish is the language of the Sephardic Jews, developed in the diaspora following the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Although Judeo-Spanish shares a kinship with Medieval Spanish, it has also taken ‘loan’ words from Greek, French, Ottoman-Turkish, and Hebrew, creating a spoken language that is a ‘mélange of calques’ (Kerem par. 4). Ladino, although occasionally used synonymously with the term Judeo-Spanish, is traditionally the written language used to teach liturgical text amongst the Sephardic Jews.

² For a more extensive account of the Sephardim in America see Ben-Ur, Aviva. *Sephardic Jews in America*. New York; London: New York U.P, 2009.

The majority of plays written by the Ladino Players were written in Judeo-Spanish with Latin characters, or in English. The Ladino Players were an amateur Sephardi theatre troupe in New York City from 1994-2004 whose performance practices focused on preservation and revival of the Sephardi culture. David Altabe founded the company and wrote a number of plays including *Prezentando una Megilah para Muestras Diyas*, *Orchard Street Blues*, and *Forsyth Street*, the last of these based on his own experiences of immigrating to America and living in the Lower East Side. In addition to his involvement with theatre, Altabe published original folktales and presided over the American Society for Sephardic Studies. The company was comprised of both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews from a multitude of geographical backgrounds with varying levels of Judeo-Spanish comprehension.

The Ladino Players' 1996 production of *Prezentando un Megilah para Maestros Diyas* is a re-telling of the Queen Ester story, or Megilah story, from the Book of Ester in the Tanakh (Hebrew Bible). This story is often told to compliment the festival of Purim, celebrated on the fourteenth day of Adar in the Jewish calendar. It tells the story of a woman who marries the King of Persia and, while keeping her Jewish identity secret, succeeds in thwarting a plot against her people and thus saves the community. In Altabe's version, the traditional setting is interwoven with a twentieth century Jewish community centre through a hybrid storytelling which often juxtaposes the dual settings and characters. The play is divided into three acts that follow an amateur theatre company's telling of the Megilah story in preparation for the festival of Purim. In a metatheatrical staging, the play is set in the Social Hall of a synagogue, which is a similar location to where the staged production took place in 1996. The audience primarily consisted of New

York-based Jews from the local Lower East Side Community. The majority of the audience would therefore have been familiar with the actors as well as the Megilah story. Although the themes of the traditional Megilah story centre on redemption and rebirth, it is the way in which the Ladino Players discuss and present language and traditions in the dramatic storytelling that characterizes this production as *theatre for survival*.

Theatre for Survival

The term *theatre for survival* indicates the strategic use of theatre arts for the survival of cultural identity. This form of theatre, I suggest, seeks to interrupt the domination of the hegemonic system. The stage becomes the platform whereon diasporic minorities and displaced communities may counter prevailing norms with the aim of increasing solidarity for the celebration and preservation of the groups' values and identities. It is worth distinguishing *theatre for survival* from ghetto and community theatre, both of which share characteristics with this form but are distinct. Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo offer concise definitions of ghetto and community theatre; as they argue, ghetto theatre focuses on origins and loss and privileges the memory of a 'homeland' above the new home. However, while *theatre for survival* acknowledges the memory of a 'homeland,' it also emphasizes the collective memory of displacement, rooted more in local tensions than historical utopias or dystopias. This distinction is important because, unlike ghetto theatre, it is not place or memory which motivates production so much as the preservation of culture. The impetus for the performance in *theatre for survival* is a desire to revalue and reinsert the cultural identity into the present historical moment. The production of *theatre for survival* within specific communities and its integral function as

a means of cultural activism can make it a powerful form of community theatre. However, although *theatre for survival* seeks social change and supports cultural democracy, two attributes of community theatre as defined by Gilbert and Lo, theatre for survival differs in its imperative drive to perform or die. It is a form of protest against a dominant culture, potentially subversive, and present only in circumstances where the performing community perceive themselves to be under threat. While seeking to transform the psyche of the spectators, *theatre for survival* utilizes characteristics of forum theatre or epic theatre, forms of political theatre derived from Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht respectively.

The impetus behind *theatre of survival* is not to have the spectators directly join in the decision-making during the theatrical event, but rather to acquire an awareness, understanding, and desire to contribute to the propagation of the language and traditions of displaced groups. For audiences who do not identify as part of a diasporic community, *theatre for survival* functions as a type of epic learning play, whilst for members of the diasporic community the production and reception of the performance offers an opportunity to reinforce the existence of a cultural identity, and interrupts the dominant language, religion, and tales of origin of the hegemonic system. In the following section I will explore the Ladino Players use of *theatre for survival*, which seeks to both abject the minority culture and integrate it into society.

Prezentando un Megilah para Maestros Diyas

Until the Rabbi states ‘We need to use the language before we forget it entirely’ (2), *Prezentando un Megilah para Maestros Diyas* is spoken entirely in Judeo-Spanish; yet,

when the Rabbi insists that the club members present the play in Ladino, the other characters respond with shock and disbelief. This self-reflexive act parallels the metatheatrics evoked in the shared venue of the fictional narrative and the performance event. The utterance simultaneously becomes an act of cultural validation and a call to action. When questioned about this decision the Rabbi responds that enough people are familiar with the Megilah story and have studied Spanish in school, so they will understand the narrative. The dialogue between the Rabbi and the club members suggests that not only will the audience understand, but also that they must. The Rabbi's statement implies that since the Megilah story is part of a shared cultural memory the production need not focus on imagery or narrative, but rather should concentrate on presenting and performing the Sephardi language. Although the play is spoken in Judeo-Spanish, this tension resonates throughout as the characters are constantly highlighting and disputing the modernization of the language within the production.

What follows are two examples of how the language is openly and critically discussed within the production by the characters. Immediately following the opening conversation on language and intentionality are moments where the relevance of language and the attitudes of characters are questioned, revised and reversed. One such moment occurs when the audience encounters Ester as she first passes before the King during a festive promenade where he intends to pick a wife. The king is immediately overcome by her beauty and wishes to marry her. Haman, the King's chief advisor, encourages him to wait to see the other women, one of whom is his own daughter. The king refuses, declaring, 'No me sekas mas el kulo' (11) ('Get off my ass'). The club members respond that this word ('kulo', translated as 'arse') isn't in the Megilah or the

script, suggesting the actor has improvised this moment within the performance. The president of the club declares that if the Rabbi doesn't say anything then they can use 'kulo' in the performance. This instance is particularly noteworthy, as the actors/characters engage in a 'double-writing' of the Megilah story, a revision of the playwright's modernized text. The actors are rewriting the traditional story, illustrating how one can, and perhaps should, update language and traditions. The Megilah story, as well as the script itself, is presented as living text, flexible and adaptable.

The flexibility of the text is also present in the roles and relationships of the characters. In scene four, the King utters to his wife Vashti, 'I yo me siento tan asolado sin ti...' (8) ('I would feel so destroyed without you'), which is a textual addition as well as an alternative sentiment for this character within the traditional story. The King is often portrayed as heartless and inclined to debauchery and thus these openly expressed sentiments offer a re-characterization. A club member responds to this textual addition with 'Aunken no aprese en la Megilah, me esté gustando' ('Although that doesn't appear in the Megilah, I like it') (8), signifying that the addition accurately reflects how the actors/characters feel the character could (or perhaps should) be retold. While the alteration of the King's lines and intentions may be to add a layer of romantic appeal, the two reasons the characters give within the playtext for adapting the traditional story are to add humour and to modernize the text's chauvinistic characteristics. This additional instance of interruption further establishes the actors'/characters' ability to edit and redefine the language in the traditional story whilst also altering gender and power relations. These moments of adaptation affirm the mutability and contemporary resonance of the traditional story.

The modernization versus conservation debate with regard to Ladino is further illustrated by the structure of the performance. The action transpires between two concentric narratives, the traditional Megilah story and the modern-day re-staging of the story in New York City. While the traditional narrative is evoked as part of a collective cultural memory, the present-day narrative signifies the ongoing presence and value of the language in daily life. The actors/characters use Ladino to communicate the play and mytho-religious narrative, as well as to gossip and discuss issues related to everyday life.

While an examination of language within the production is crucial for understanding the overarching drive for cultural preservation, equally significant is *who* is speaking, as both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews are members of the Ladino Players. However, as an acquired language, and not the autochthonous language of the Ashkenazi, Judeo-Spanish serves, to borrow a description from Mikhail Bakhtin, ‘two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author’ (Bakhtin 324). In other words, the significance of the utterance lies not only in the words themselves but also in the extra-textual meaning added by the cultural identities of the speaking bodies. Although Altabe makes no mention of Ashkenazi or Sephardi identities explicitly, the composition of the company affects the potential meaning-making.

As Judeo-Spanish serves as a unifying force for the performers, it, perhaps more importantly, serves as a means of connecting to the audience. This is illustrated most clearly when the actors invite the audience onto stage to join in the traditional dancing at the Persian court; ‘Por ke no les demandamos a todas las mujeres ke van a estar mirando la ovra ke suvan al tabló a prezentarsen al rey. Ansina azenmos lo ke yaman “audience

participation” (10) (‘Why don’t we demand that all the women that are going to see the play come on stage to present themselves to the King. Then we will have what they call ‘audience participation’). A traditional song is sung and the audience is encouraged to join the performance to contribute to the story.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor writes about the relationship between performers and audiences in transmitting knowledge. She states that spoken language is part of a culture’s ‘repertoire,’ a way of knowing and connecting to embodied cultural knowledge (20). For her, the repertoire ‘enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, non-reproducible knowledge’ (20). Through speaking and singing, the Ladino Players are reinserting the Sephardi repertoire of the mytho-religious text into the local-temporal, giving the language and tradition an embodied presence. The Ladino Players’ *theatre for survival* is a performance that ensures the ongoing use and understanding not only of the Ladino language, but also of the culture and identity embedded in the act of speaking.

By modelling the wider potential for language use and value through the individual subjectivities of the company members, the Ladino Players seem to, in part, be encouraging audiences to follow suit and participate in the propagation of the language and traditions. Emphasizing the role of language in the journeying and settlement of the Sephardim, historian Mair Jose Benardete states, language was ‘the most precious possession [...the Jews of Spain] took with them in their exile’ (9-10). Even for the Sephardim in America, with their diverse range of ‘microidentities’ (Judeo-Spanish-, -Arabic, -Greek), ‘language was an overarching unifying force’ (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews*

20). Even within the heterogeneity of the Sephardim, language was used to unify the community against a dominant culture.

Further linking language to cultural traditions, John Joseph identifies the formation of this connection as being ‘a universally observable capacity to interpret signs’ (34). The value of language lies in its ability to establish a foundation for ‘perception, cognition, reading and interpretation, all of which interact with each other’ (34) so a shared sign-system is developed and communicated within the community. This shared system is both translational and transnational, spanning both global and local histories. In his monograph on language, *Speaking in Tongues*, Marvin Carlson investigates the role of language in theatre and its relation to location. Carlson has noted that with dramatists creating work for specific audiences, ‘locality and specificity’ are central to the production and reception of language (3). However, diasporic groups construct ‘locality’ in alternative ways to the geographically consistent postcolonial communities suggested by Carlson; due to their ongoing process of displacement, journeying, and settlement, specific localities are sites of travel. In discussing the relationship between a sense of belonging or ‘home’ in diasporic global and local journeying, Avtar Brah states, ‘[d]iasporic identities are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing “imagined” and “encountered” communities’ (196). The semiotics of this transnational quality is best expressed through the language, which reflects the history of multi-localities. Although Judeo-Spanish is characterized by being the language of the Sephardim, the amalgamation of Turkish, French, Spanish, and Greek influences in the vocabulary and grammar signifies the geographical and temporal maps from centuries of (re)settlement

and alienation. Language, in instances of diaspora performances, such as those by the Ladino Players, is simultaneously local and global, occurring in specific geographical locations while also linked to past experiences of embodied culture and language that have evolved globally. Language is rooted in the local but identifies with the global. The act of enunciation gives the spoken language a localized presence amongst specific performers and audiences. The global identity is the abstract, the pluralist, the archived, and the historical. The local is embodied, fractured, disfigured, and heterogeneous. *Prezentando una Megilah* straddles global and local geographies and temporalities by blending traditions and modernizations as well as through the joint storytelling of audiences and performers.

While the company members and community seem to be invited to revive and modernize the language, there is also a danger involved. What is at stake in this widening of participation? The acquisition of language by members of the wider community is a form of assimilation. Survival, as represented within the production, is cloaking the underlying problem of cultural dissipation by assimilation. While the use of Judeo-Spanish serves as a model for the use and relevance of the language to wider audiences, it is limited in establishing a unified cultural identity. As John Joseph writes,

a given language is capable of sustaining more than one culture...Even if, historically, it has developed within a particular culture, it does not *in itself* spread that culture to other people who learn the language. Language must be embedded within the cultural habitus in order to function as the vehicle in which the culture will be acquired. Transferred to a different habitus, the language will mould itself to that habitus, rather than the other way around. (169)

Without being embedded within the community the cultural traditions linked to Judeo-Spanish can never be fully realized for audiences. However, as Joseph suggests, Judeo-Spanish may be capable of sustaining more than one culture as audiences don't *acquire*

but *connect* to various partial traditions within the multitude of signs present in the performance. The heteroglossic presentation of the text, that is, the doubled sign system of the playwright and the performers, is expanded to include the audience as a third interpretive body. In Carlson's discussion of the benefits of heteroglossia in theatrical texts, he argues that 'one of the most important results of an author relinquishing monologic control over a text is that the text, like life itself, becomes much more clearly open-ended' (Carlson, 'Theatre and Dialogism' 317). This open-endedness accounts for the possibilities within the text itself as well as the audience's interpretation. The ongoing reverberations of the narrative accounts create a continuous renewing of the mytho-religious text between the audience and the performers as it becomes (re)articulated into the heteroglossic cultural texts of new societies.

In discussing the attitudes of exiles, Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz declared, 'language is the only homeland,' signifying language's ability to create mobile places of belonging and support (qtd. in Umpierre 135). The use of the Ladino language within the performance of the Ladino Players unites the Ashkenazi and Sephardi performers through the act of storytelling, as well as connecting audiences who, through meta-theatrics and participation, are encouraged to join in the revival of Sephardi traditions. Cultural survival is made into a present imperative as the actors/characters are constantly re-evaluating the traditional narrative to reflect and address the past and present. This agency in altering the traditional text may be essential for the survival of the Judeo-Spanish language and the cultural traditions. This textual updating is the ongoing result of modernization and Westernization upon the diaspora groups and thus finds relevance in postcolonial discussions on syncretism and mimicry. The use of Judeo-Spanish signifies

not simply the revitalization and shared understanding of Sephardi culture, but of a broader diaspora-nation. Situated on the ‘borderline of history and language’ the Ladino Players struggle for cultural survival through exilic heteroglossia (Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation’ 320).

In conclusion, the strategic use of language is a key characteristic within the Ladino Players’ theatre in encouraging wider audience participation in the understanding and use of the language. As argued by Diana Taylor, cultural memory is archived and potentially remapped through embodied practices. Emphasizing the transitional processes of memories, she states, ‘what changes over time is the value, relevance, or meaning of the archive, how the items it contains get interpreted, even embodied’ (19). Taylor’s observations suggest that collaboration between makers and receivers of cultural acts is essential. The ongoing contribution and involvement of remembering and restating cultural memory is a crucial element of theatre for survival. Taylor goes on to state that the ‘reproduction of knowledge’ occurs because of people “‘being there,” being part of the transmission,’ which, for the Ladino Players, includes active participation in the theatrical event (11). For the Ladino Players, *theatre for survival* is a proposed shift from ancient to modern and from a private to public investment in the understanding and reviving of the Sephardi language and culture.

References:

- Altabe, David. *Presentando de un Megilah para Nuestros Dyias*. Unpublished. 1996.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Austin: U of Texas P, 2004.
- Ben-Ur, Aviva. *Sephardic Jews in America*. New York and London: New York UP, 2009.
- . 'Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) Theater in the United States.' *Jewish Women a Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. 10 April 2009
<<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/ladino-judeo-spanish-theater-in-united-states>>
- Benardete, Mair Jose. *Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews*. New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1982.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- . 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation, in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990. 291-322.
- Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Carlson, Marvin. 'Theatre and Dialogism.' *Critical Theory and Performance*. ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992. 313-323.
- . *Speaking in Tongues: Language at Play in the Theatre*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2006.
- Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, Politics*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Joseph, John E. *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, and Religious*. New York: Palgrave, 2004.

Platform, Vol. 4, No. 2, Mapping Performance, Autumn 2009

Lo, Jacqueline and Helen Gilbert. 'Towards a Topography of Cross-cultural Praxis.' *The Drama Review* 46.3 (2002): 31-53.

Kerem, Yitzchak. 'The Greek-Jewish Theater in Judeo-Spanish 1880-1940.' *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 14.1 (1996). 11 May 2009.

<<http://www.sephardicstudies.org/greek-t.html>>

Taylor, Diana. *The Archive and the Repertoire*. London, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Umpierre, Luz Maria. 'Unscrambling Allende's "Dos Palabras": The Self, the Immigrant/Writer, and Social Justice.' *MELUS* 27.4 (2002).