

## Original Paper

# Memory and History in Israeli Post-Apocalyptic Theatre Zahava

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### Abstract

*Past catastrophes function as primary models for apocalyptic dystopias and as catalysts of imagined retrospection. Their function as paradigms of memory enables them to shed a sobering light on contemporary dangers as well as to trigger desirable change. The relation between memory, history, and post-apocalyptic theatre should therefore be examined with a view not only to the circumstances that give rise to such theatre, but also to the meanings that emerge from the catastrophic historical episodes which function as paradigms of memory. In the following article I shall discuss two Israeli dystopian plays, Joshua Sobol's *The Jerusalem Syndrome* (1987) and Shimon Buzaglo's *Black Rain* (2007), and their performances in Israeli theatre. I will examine the efficacy of apocalyptic theatre rooted in historical memory, by activating new forms of Theatre (Sobol: Polydrama; Buzaglo: Theatre as a Testimonial Medium) relative to other avenues of historical commemoration, in averting future dangers rooted in a deficient present.*

### Keywords

*realm of memory, history, post-apocalyptic theatre, Israeli theatre, trauma, nuclear anxiety, theatre as testimonial medium*

### 1. Introduction

Studies on messianic and apocalyptic discourse often try to explain the circumstances in which such discourse thrives, the sources of its great suggestive power, and the conditions under which the public is receptive to its messages. Though different explanations—theological, psychological, social, rhetorical, and others—have been offered since the 1970s in response to these questions, most scholars agree that apocalyptic ideas grow primarily against the background of major historical crises (Note 1).

While traditional apocalyptic texts had tended to optimism, with visions of temporary destruction followed by narratives of redemption, modern secular literature—in recent decades in Israel as well—has gravitated towards thoroughly dystopian texts ending in annihilation. Already after the First World War, European theatre witnessed an upsurge in dystopian dramas whose visions of the world's end were linked with the new weapons of mass destruction first employed during the war. Apocalyptic discourse was again on the rise in the wake of the Second World War, with the traumas of Auschwitz and Hiroshima well reflected in the dystopian dramas of the postwar period (Note 2). The reflection in theatre of widespread nuclear anxiety has been established conclusively in Charles A. Carpenter's study on the impact of the nuclear age on American and British drama. Twenty-five dystopian plays, he finds, were written in Britain during the first two decades after the Second World War (1946-1964), only ten between 1965 and 1980. During the 1980s, a decade of renewed nuclear tensions, no less than thirty dystopian plays were written in as few as eight years (1981-1989), whereas from the end of the Cold War to the time Carpenter's book was published in 1991 only a single new dystopian play was authored (and even it, Carpenter notes, went unpublished) (Note 3).

A survey of the dates of dystopian apocalyptic works written in Israel shows that here, too, apocalyptic codes in literature and theatre have been the overt symptoms of crisis—in this case, the ontological and epistemological crisis afflicting Israeli society after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Apocalyptic plays ending in dystopia began to trickle out in the mid-1970s, a few years after the war, but became even more abundant in the 1980s in the wake of the first Lebanon War (Note 4). Oscillating between holocaust and redemption, the apocalyptic genre in Israeli drama was thus an acute response to the implosion of Israeli society's foci of collective identity and the collapse of Zionism's original ideals after the 1973 war.

In addition to prompting apocalyptic anxieties, national and global crises tend to reawaken traumatic catastrophes from the historical past, near or distant. The relation between memory, history, and post-apocalyptic theatre should therefore be examined with a view not only to the circumstances that give rise to such theatre, but also to the meanings that emerge from the catastrophic historical episodes which, in dystopian dramas, function as paradigms of memory. Dystopian works often turn to a nation's repository of historical memory for their material, the incorporation of fateful historical episodes at a time of emergency enabling them to shed a sobering light on contemporary dangers as well as to trigger desirable change. As Walter Benjamin reminds us, the needs of the present, especially in times of crisis, shape the remembered past, which thereby becomes an extension of the present moment. Benjamin thus offers an alternative to the traditional view of redemption—one in which redemption occurs not at the terminus of a linear causal process but via the restoration and rectification of a relevant past moment within the present (Note 5). Because the time of redemption, according to Benjamin, is the present, his is a distinctly *political* conception of redemption; one that aims not to commemorate the past as a given piece of heritage, but to revive it, to retry now what has failed in the past. In Benjamin's view, the ruins of the present can be redeemed via reflection upon the ruins of the past (Note 6). In

addition, if reflecting upon the past can help redeem or restore the present, then imagining the ruins of a dystopian future may lead to a similar result.

In what follows, I shall discuss two Israeli dystopian plays, Joshua Sobol's *The Jerusalem Syndrome* (1987) and Shimon Buzaglo's *Black Rain* (2007), and their performances in Israeli theatre. I will examine the role played within these plays by the memory of past trauma, as well as the efficacy of apocalyptic theatre rooted in historical memory, relative to other avenues of historical commemoration, in averting future dangers rooted in a deficient present. My claim will be that not only the traumatic past functions as a site of memory, but also an imagined horrific future might act as a memory still unrealized, and can be used as a political instrument in the present, aiming to prevent it from being implemented.

## 2. History in the Service of the Present

*The Jerusalem Syndrome* revisits a particularly traumatic chapter in Jewish history, the fall of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., in order to retrace the destructive suicidal urges that precipitated this catastrophic episode—urges which, in Sobol's view, still fester in Israel's contemporary national identity and against whose renewed outbreak he warns. The city of Jerusalem is the common space bridging the play's two historically disparate temporal settings. One series of events takes place in an unspecified future: Jerusalem is ravaged by a brutal war, burning and besieged, beset by famine and by the general collapse of law and order. In the midst of this delirium of torment, a troupe of would-be actors—in reality the inmates of a mental asylum—rehearse for the production of a play written and directed by one of them, a faux history professor. The fragmentary plot recounts the events of the Great Jewish Revolt of the Second Temple era via the period's prominent historical figures, portrayed by the “actors” (Note 7). This play-within-a-play is based on Flavius Josephus' historical account of the revolt, *History of the Jewish Wars*, direct quotes from and references to which permeate the proceedings (Note 8).

At the time, he was writing *The Jerusalem Syndrome*, Sobol was searching for a new form of socio-political theatre capable of depicting ‘mass psychosis’ onstage. Linear narrative theatre, he felt, was not up to the task; only simultaneous theatrical forms, which violated the Aristotelian unities, could effectively realize this goal. Sobol's avowed aim was to create a novel genre—the “polydrama”—with its own theatrical language, one in which several events occurred simultaneously in different spaces, allowing each viewer to traverse the various locations and choose on which events to concentrate. Any separation between the space of the dramatic action and the space of the audience, Sobol claimed, was artificial; the theatrical space must include the audience as an immanent part of the scenery.

This conception was only partly realized in the Haifa Theatre's production of *The Jerusalem Syndrome*. The audience was not required to navigate different spaces; the traditional relationship between stage and auditorium remained largely unchanged. Nevertheless, some of the principles indicated by Sobol were put to practice. In the written play, conventional acts and scenes were replaced by fifty three

theatrical units—“transformations” in Sobol’s terms—associatively linked and based on specific spaces and their typical human behaviors rather than forming a linear narrative continuity. In the Haifa production, some transformations were staged simultaneously, allowing each viewer to choose on which to concentrate (Note 9). Moreover, in keeping with Sobol’s spatial-associative concept, each transformation had the actors emerge from and return to hidden entrances, tunnels, and pits, as if from a collective subconscious. Sobol’s stage directions for the spatial design of Transformation V are instructive in this regard:

“Those buried alive under the wreckage writhe and wriggle, struggling to raise their heads another millimeter, another centimeter above the rubble for a breath of air. Outstretched arms and protruding heads emerge from the pile, like worms from a giant apple.” (Note 10)

### 3. “The Mad Sage”: *The Jerusalem Syndrome* and *Marat/Sade*

A brief comparison between *The Jerusalem Syndrome* and Peter Weiss’s *Marat/Sade* (1963; famously directed by Peter Brook in 1964) will serve to illustrate the difficulties posed by the distinct temporal structures of two different genres: the historically based apocalyptic drama, of which Sobol’s play is an instance, and what Freddie Rokem calls performing history drama, to which Weiss’s play belongs. First to note, however, are several similarities between the two plays. Sobol’s focus on the destruction of the Second Temple is paralleled by Weiss’s use of the French Revolution as a historical paradigm through which to criticize post-WWII Europe (Note 11). Set in 1808, the main story of *Marat/Sade* takes place in the Charenton Asylum, where a group of inmates stage a play written and directed by their fellow internee, the “Marquis de Sade”, with the asylum’s director, his wife and daughter as audience. The play-within-a-play focuses on one of the French Revolution’s bloodiest and most traumatic events, the 1793 bathtub murder of revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat.

The dramatic form of a play-within-a-play, with a troupe of fictional actors performing for a fictional on-stage audience, is hardly a new theatrical ploy. What is less common, and what both plays share, is the identity of the fictional actors—in both cases asylum inmates—and of the onstage audience, which in both plays consists of figures of authority: a military sergeant (and probably an asylum staff member) in *The Jerusalem Syndrome*, the asylum’s director and his family in *Marat/Sade*. Delegating the action to those whom “healthy” society deems insane—those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, locked up, excluded from society, consigned to its margins—is a ploy Sobol and Weiss use ingeniously to interpret the condition in which they find their respective societies (Note 12). Labeling the fictional playwright-directors and actors as insane allows both Sobol and Weiss to present their historical narratives from a socially marginal perspective, one whose very marginality only serves to validate the playwrights’ historical interpretations and prophetic forewarnings. Conditioned by the prevalent literary and theatrical convention according to which jesters, fools, and lunatics are speakers of truth to power, the plays’ real viewers are made to acknowledge the truthfulness of the inmates’ words, a truth others dare not speak. Sobol’s claim in various interviews that the mad professor (the playwright-director of

the play-within-a-play) is his own mouthpiece fashions Sobol himself as a mad sage, out to pronounce the harsh truth in the tradition of biblical prophecy. Meanwhile, as fellow spectators, the on-stage viewers are meant to evoke the real viewers' identification in order to help them internalize the dramatic action and comprehend its real-life relevance. In both plays, however, the real viewers' natural identification with their on-stage counterparts is a trap, set by the playwrights to align the real viewers with precisely those figures of authority (the sergeant, the asylum director) who are responsible for excluding and isolating the prophetic speakers of truth. Ensnared in this dialectical situation, the real viewers now face the same arrows of criticism they had aimed at the representatives of power, as they are now implicitly required to acknowledge their own ethical responsibility for the similar realities rampant outside the theatre walls.

Despite these similarities, however, *The Jerusalem Syndrome* and *Marat/Sade* belong to essentially different genres. Weiss's play is an instance of a dramatic genre in which history is "performed" onstage; its perspective is therefore backward looking, directed at a historical past from which it attempts to derive lessons about the present. Though it combines widely disparate time registers—1808, in which the framing narrative takes place; 1793, in which the play-within-a-play occurs; 1964, the year of Brook's production—all these belong to the (historical or fictional) past relative to the time of the performance, requiring the audience to engage in retrospection. *The Jerusalem Syndrome* belongs by contrast to the essentially forward-looking apocalyptic genre, its understanding of the present inflected by a vision of the (utopian or dystopian) future. Even when the playwright relies on a historical paradigm, as does Sobol in *The Jerusalem Syndrome*, that paradigm's chief function is reflective: though the play's reliance on historical events is inevitably an occasion for retrospection, such retrospection serves an *anticipatory* role, allowing the audience to reflect on the future consequences of their own present condition.

Sobol's focus on the Great Revolt and the destruction of the Second Temple stems, he says, from his recognition that what transpires during a nation's formative years continues to exert its influence surreptitiously throughout its history, that the past endures within the present in the form of suppressed impulses which emerge in critical historical junctures (Note 13). Supporting this view of history are Pierre Nora's reflections on the workings of collective national memory. In Nora's view, prototypical past events perceived to recur perpetually provide the foundations of national memory. National memory is thus not to be found in history books, libraries or archives, but precisely in the symbolic and material traces left by the past. Such "realms of memory" serve a special role in constructing the idea of the nation, but also expose transformations in a people's perceptions of its national past (Note 15). Artistic representations of historical episodes from a nation's past thus always reflect the ethos deeply rooted in the group's national identity. In Sobol's theatre, with its repeated examination of episodes from Jewish history based on extant historical documents (the best-known instance being 1984's *Ghetto*, based on historical records, diaries, and memoirs of life in the Vilna ghetto), I see a "realm of memory" of this sort, one that tracks the traumatic traces left by past events in order to give them

material expression onstage. Sobol's choice to engage with the destruction of the Second Temple, an episode etched in Jewish national consciousness as a constitutive traumatic event with crucial long-term consequences for the nation's subsequent history (two millennia of exile), is thus conscious and deliberate. The memory of destruction, still alive in the national consciousness of independent modern Israel, serves Sobol to offer a corrective to the narrative of historical devastation, to present the historical facts "as they really were". Yet *The Jerusalem Syndrome*'s ultimate aim is not historical knowledge for its own sake. Sobol's analogy between past and future, between the Second Temple and Israel's future prospects, is rather used to illuminate the dangers posed by present-day religious-messianic fundamentalism. The play's ominous vision of a futuristic Israel thus rests on the lessons of the national past.

#### **4. The Angel of History: Between the Historical Past and an Apocalyptic Future**

Two of Sobol's earlier plays—the never-produced *The Woman from Masada*, and *The Jewish Wars*, produced by the Khan Theatre in 1981—share with *The Jerusalem Syndrome* the same historical setting. In an interview with Yotam Reuveni, Sobol explained that for him the Second Temple period was a model case of a devastation-ridden society, one he invoked as a warning to contemporary Israeli society (Note 14). *The Jewish Wars* was meant as a "didactic play", designed to expose Israeli audiences to historical facts concealed or underplayed in Israeli school curricula on the Second Temple period. To this end, the play took the form of an actual, physical excursion taken by the viewers. Their first stop was the archeological excavation at the Tower of David in Jerusalem, where audiences were exposed to the diverse, pluralistic culture that had thrived in Jerusalem on the eve of the Great Revolt. The excursion then continued through a subterranean tunnel, a claustrophobic experience meant to give the viewers a personal taste of the ways in which "self-destructive forces took the form of Jewish ultra-orthodoxy, religious puritanism, and xenophobia, until they completely took over the masses and led them to national destruction". (Note 16)

Though *The Jewish Wars* and *The Jerusalem Syndrome* share Flavius' historical text as their basis, they differ in significant ways. In the six years separating the two plays, Sobol says, his faith in the public's ability to learn from the past, whether near or distant, was eroded, forcing him to stress more explicitly in the later play the analogy between the circumstances that had led the Jews to destruction in the past and the realities of present-day Israel. This he did by mixing and juxtaposing scenes from Jerusalem circa the destruction of the Second Temple and during the imaginative "fall of the Third". (Note 17) In an interview with Dan Urian, Sobol explained that the main impetus for the writing of *The Jerusalem Syndrome* was his anxiety that the fate of the "Third Temple"—modern-day Israel—might one day replicate that of the Second.

Historical consciousness is a necessary condition for understanding and rectifying the present. In Walter Benjamin, we find an appreciation of the importance of historical consciousness as *a site of catastrophe and destruction*. In Benjamin's view, each present moment presents us with an opportunity

to reexamine this landscape of devastation and extract from it the historical episodes pertinent to our existence. In doing so, we “establish a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time”. (Note 18) By relating the present to some definite historical episode, the latter can be “redeemed” within the present; the historical past thus holds a covert key to redemption. At the same time, “to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’”; rather, “it means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”. (Note 19) The historian is thus always obligated to view the past from the perspective of his own contemporary realities, responding to the demands posed by the political circumstances of his present moment. (Note 20)

Benjamin’s theoretical outlook was put into performative practice in the production of *The Jerusalem Syndrome*. By forcing the viewers to reexamine the devastated landscape of the past, both by gazing at the wreckage onstage and by following the historical plot, Sobol hoped to enable them to see the destruction of the Second Temple as a still-relevant bit of the past—a “time of the now”—at this present-day moment of national danger.

In his *Performing History*, Freddie Rokem claims that history is perceivable only when encapsulated in the form of *historiographical* or *artistic discourse*. The past is recapitulated in an organized manner when historical events, chaotic by nature, are placed within an aesthetic framework. (Note 21) In this respect, the artist and the historian enjoy equal standing as makers of representations of history. This, Rokem claims, is especially true in theatre, whose intense energies can bestow special validity on the historical authenticity of the events shown onstage, and whose truthfulness may for this reason surpass even that of the historical text. Playing an important role in presenting history onstage are, according to Rokem, not only the playwright and the director but also the actors, whom Rokem calls “hyper-historians,” and who also serve as witnesses to the events shown onstage. (Note 22) In keeping with Benjamin’s conception of history, Rokem claims that when theatre “performs” history it attempts to overcome our sense of separation from the past, to constitute a community for which past events could regain their meaning. By enacting scenes that connect the present with the past, theatre performs two actions simultaneously: it cites the past in order to enable the viewers to see their own historical past in a new light, while erasing the traces of that same past in order to let the viewers apprehend the full meaning of the present. (Note 23)

Apocalyptic plays, which refer to past events, are marked, I think, by particular temporal complexity, because the history to which they refer engenders a dual analogy in the viewers’ mind: not only between the present and the past, but also between that past and the future that awaits us if the lessons of the past remain unlearned. Confronting live audiences with a dual apocalyptic vision, that of the past and that of the anticipated future, is thus a way to raise their consciousness, not only of the failures and the destructive forces of the foregone, unchangeable historical past, but also—and more importantly—of the urgent need to battle similar destructive forces at present, forces which, if not thwarted, may lead to similar future catastrophes. Connecting properly the different eras of a nation’s

history is crucial not only to the “redemption” of its past and the rectification of its present, but also to the very meaning of its collective identity, for national identity is “a blend of past and future: memories and [past] impressions on the one hand, hopes and wishes on the other, all closely interconnected”; every people must both “look back with eyes wide open” and “know whence it is coming, whither it is going”. (Note 24) When the apocalyptic playwright makes use of an historical paradigm, as Sobol does in *The Jerusalem Syndrome*, its primary role is reflective, with retrospection mainly serving as an *anticipatory framework*, envisaging the future in light of the implications of the present.

### 5. The Menacing Return of Nuclear Apocalypse

Like Sobol’s play, Shimon Buzaglo’s *Black Rain* grounds its dystopian vision in an historical event of apocalyptic dimensions in contemporary collective cultural consciousness. (Note 25) But while *The Jerusalem Syndrome*, like most comparable Israeli plays, turns to the traumatic Jewish past, playwright Buzaglo and director Ophira Hoenig prefer to cast their net further, both nationally and geographically, by focusing on a modern trauma not directly related to Jewish history—the August 1945 American nuclear bombing of Hiroshima which brought the war in the Pacific to its abrupt end. As the concluding horror of the Second World War, however, Hiroshima cannot but evoke in Israeli viewers the Jewish trauma of the Holocaust. Though Israeli society in particular, and the West in general, have tended to devote much more attention to the Jewish Holocaust in Europe than to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the likelihood of nuclear war in the foreseeable future is much greater than that of another genocide of the kind perpetrated by the Nazis. Buzaglo and Hoenig’s choice of Hiroshima as the setting for their play is thus hardly accidental. As James Berger notes, both Auschwitz and Hiroshima are symbolic phenomena with a “revelatory” dimension, ones that, more than any others, have shaped contemporary discourse. (Note 26) In global memory, both these episodes of unfathomable mass killing have come to symbolize humanity’s moral nadir, the lowest point to which human behavior aided by scientific progress could possibly sink, a chilling reminder of humanity’s ability to destroy the world and itself. Since the Second World War, both episodes have become the primary apocalyptic-dystopian models, which shape our visions of the world’s future end.

For Richard Klein, comparisons between a future apocalypse and the Holocaust or even the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are to be rejected. Because they were not *total* in nature, these historical events were not genuinely apocalyptic; many survived them, and archives devoted to the survivors’ testimonies have made it possible to preserve their horrifying experiences and convey them to others. We thus have no prior model to which to refer when trying to envisage the contours of a total nuclear holocaust. Nuclear discourse remains therefore, in Klein’s view, purely theoretical. (Note 27)

In James Berger’s aforementioned work, we find an alternative position. While agreeing that viewing the Holocaust as an apocalyptic event stretches the boundaries of the concept of apocalypse, Berger challenges Klein’s fundamental perspective: contemporary apocalyptic discourse is justified in his view even if total destruction is unprecedented in human history. Historical events like the Holocaust, the



bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and even the Soviet gulags are apocalyptic not in virtue of their being instances of total destruction (which they are not) but due to the complete rupture with the past that they represent. (Note 28) It is this rupture that makes them paradigmatic events, studying the symptomatic consequences of which can provide a better understanding of current sensitivities to apocalyptic events and their representations. It is for this reason, Berger claims, that the perspective of post-WWII generations can accurately be described as post-apocalyptic. (Note 29) Because past catastrophes function as primary models for apocalyptic dystopias and as catalysts of imagined retrospection (that is, of retrospection from the vantage point of the imagined future apocalypse), memory's role as an effective deterrent of future catastrophe is a central theme in *Black Rain*. In our time, historical memory is transmitted via three main channels: institutions (libraries, museums, statistical records, etc.), the media (the press, the electronic media, in particular television, and so on), and the arts. Let us consider each as they are presented in *Black Rain*.

## 6. Time, Place, and Narrative

A fragmentary work, *Black Rain* comprises twenty-nine scenes not linked by any linear temporal, spatial, or narrative sequence. The characters, which lack proper names, are a microcosm of humanity: He, She, Young Japanese Woman #1, Young Japanese Woman #2, Older Japanese Woman, Young American Man, Librarian, and Government Agent. At all times, the stage hosts representations of five temporally and geographically disparate settings: a library in Washington, DC; a house in an unspecified Western country at some indefinite future time; a speaker's podium; a Hiroshima city square; and a bathhouse in Hiroshima. The play moves freely between its different temporal and spatial settings, hopping between past, present, and future and from one geographical site to the next. It also tears down the barriers between audience and actors, with the latter spending their downtime sitting stageside as viewers. (Note 30)

Despite its fragmentary design of time and place, *Black Rain* consists of two distinct narrative threads, which unravel both alternately, and in parallel. The first, about the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, includes the library scenes, with conversations between the librarian and the young American man; the testimony of the older Japanese woman, a survivor of the bomb; and the scenes with the two young Japanese women (#1 and #2), both of them tour guides at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. The destruction of Hiroshima is thus shown indirectly, via acts of commemoration, as each of the characters tries to preserve the memory of the traumatic event and to learn its lessons. In the second thread, two characters (He and She) follow the directives of a Government Agent in order to prepare for another nuclear war. This second narrative ends with the dropping of the bomb, followed by precisely the consequences described in the testimony of the Japanese survivor. The lessons, we are made to understand, have not been learned. The simultaneous presence of both narratives—the settings and the actors, as characters or as viewers, remain visible throughout the play—suggests that catastrophes of this sort, perhaps even more radical, might return outside the theatre as well. The viewers are thus

challenged to use the traumatic memory of the past—a past replicated in the theatrical present—as a catalyst of action in order to prevent similar events from recurring in the future in real life.

## 7. Memory, Amnesia, and Archive Fever

Two of the settings in *Black Rain*, the library and the museum, are what Pierre Nora calls “realms of memory”. In his view, only modern society, which has lost its capacity for “living memory”, is in need of such sites that provide it with “secondary” or “prosthetic” memory. (Note 31) Our interest in these sites of congealed memory, Nora claims, stems precisely from our acute awareness of a rupture with the past, from our realization that in modernity natural memory has been replaced with a classificatory, reconstructive “history” which acts with the force of a “vanquishing, effacing tide”. (Note 32) In the play, as already noted, one such modern “realm of memory” is the library where the librarian and the young American meet. The latter comes to the library in search of a book on the American postwar occupation of Japan. He finds it in the iconography section, where it is catalogued by virtue of its photographs, not its historical subject matter. The library’s cataloguing system is perfectly ordered, though subject to its own inner logic which is unrelated to the laws of reality. Certain claims made by Jacques Derrida in his *Archive Fever* may shed light on this predicament. According to Derrida, the archive is where we return repeatedly in order to affirm and preserve the memory of the past. (Note 33) This repeated return, however, is “indissociable from the death drive, [and] thus from destruction. [...] The archive always works, *a priori*, against itself”; it “incite[s] amnesia, thus refuting [its own] economic principle”. (Note 34) Derrida’s claims are equally applicable to the principles of library cataloguing and preservation, for in his view, the forgetting of content (particularly traumatic content) impedes the archive’s desire to return to the *arche*, the beginning, the original past event. As a site of accretion where memory is accumulated, the archive does not allow us to place ourselves outside of it, to decide on our own how things really happened or what they truly mean. (Note 35) It is precisely this problematic that infects the librarian’s obsessive memorization of Second World War statistics, in particular casualty numbers by nationality. For him, they constitute “a memorial, abstract sculpting against forgetfulness”. (Note 36) Yet it is precisely these images of “memorial, abstract sculpting” that expose memory’s detachment from the concrete event, subverting the librarian’s claims about the need not to forget. Though he ostensibly devotes his entire time to the task of memory, the mechanical compulsive act of memorizing casualty numbers turns out to provide a merely prosthetic memory, a poor substitute for living memory, which only contributes to the librarian’s repression and forgetfulness of his own role during the war. It is only towards the end of the play, when he is revealed to be a former scientist who had helped to develop the atomic bomb and confesses his erstwhile secret desire to see the bomb used (“because that’s the dynamics of it: when you’ve got a bomb, you want to use it” (Note 37)) that his protective shield cracks and he can no longer remember the casualty numbers he has worked so hard to memorize.

The process of amnesia is even more acute in the media, a problem incisively described by Jean

Baudrillard. In contemporary times, Baudrillard writes, much of our collective memory has taken the form of media images, most of them visual, which detach actual events from their concrete socio-historical context, redeploying them in the media as “floating signifiers.” (Note 38) The image no longer invokes in our consciousness a reality richer, more detailed, more complex than itself; rather, the real thing is gutted of its content, leaving a poor substitute in the form of a schematic image. Instead of creating meaning, the information conveyed by the image devours its own content. (Note 39) The media, primarily television, turn the past into a bank of images for repeated and arbitrary use, negating its concrete history. It is in just this manner that watching the devastation of Hiroshima on television serves the librarian in *Black Rain* as an alibi for his refusal to visit Hiroshima itself:

*American Man:* You weren't there!

*Librarian:* I watched the news.

*American Man:* You saw nothing.

*Librarian:* I saw it. Like fireworks, red and blue and purple and yellow. (Note 40)

The television screen replaces real destruction and suffering with the impressive colorful aesthetics of the image of the nuclear mushroom, effacing the traumatic catastrophe precisely as it puts it on display. Designed to preserve historical memory, the Japanese commemoration industry participates in processes which encourage forgetfulness as well. Hiroshima's perfect reconstruction and restoration has erased all trace of the utter destruction left by the bomb. The rebuilt German cities of the postwar period are similarly, in James Berger's words, “post-apocalyptic simulacra, products of a purposeful historical amnesia”. (Note 41) Despite its overt aims, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum contributes to this same result. *Black Rain*'s two Japanese tour guides are cheerful young women, identically dressed in red-and-white sailor-collared outfits resembling American cheerleader uniforms. Their encounter with the young American is standard tourist fare, the megaphone-equipped guides delivering a steady flow of facts, dates, and statistics, just like their U.S. counterpart, the librarian. Having arrived in Hiroshima to witness the traces of devastation with in his own eyes, the young American is soon sucked into his current status as a tourist, “seeing” the restored Hiroshima through the camera lens. Even after four visits to the Peace Museum, he has not yet really saw Hiroshima:

*Young Japanese Woman #2:* You saw nothing in Hiroshima.

*Young American Man:* I saw everything, everything. ... And I saw the burnt people too. They reconstructed everything so authentically. Just like Pompeii. The flowers at the Hiroshima museum are black, just like in Pompeii. I saw everything. I visited the museum... four times at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum... The illusion is so perfect it drives the tourists to tears...” (Note 42)

The dazzling museum reconstruction, the perfect urban restoration, the library, the archive—all turn out to be mere substitutes, failed attempts at an authentic representation of the original events. Their precise reconstruction and the overly perfect illusion it provides, as well as their flawlessly rational organization, serve to conceal the trauma instead of making it tangible. The tourists' tearful reaction is likewise a sterile cathartic effect, substituting tears over the past for genuine future-oriented action. The

museum's "authentic" exhibits, like the librarian's memorization efforts, like television watching, encourage passive spectatorship, with the resultant emotional reaction confined entirely to the spectator's inner world. *Black Rain* points, then, to the failure of both cultural institutions and the media to preserve the historical memory of past catastrophes and transform it into an active, relevant force in public life. Can theatre succeed where these other channels of historical memory have failed?

## 8. Theatre as a Testimonial Medium

Holocaust scholars often point to the potential inherent in the transmission of historical memory via *oral testimony*, stressing the latter's ability to confront us face to face, in an unmediated manner, with the hellish experience of those who have returned from the grave. Lawrence Langer, for example, has criticized the written testimonies of witnesses for their use of such mediating devices as genre and literary style, which in his view tend to distort authentic historical truth. Oral testimony, he claims, is privileged in virtue of its directness and non-literary spontaneity. In his view, it is precisely the lacunae and occasional incoherence of oral testimonies that represent the "quintessence of the experiences" reported by the witnesses. (Note 43)

*Black Rain* presents us with two types of witnesses, the first in the form of a character, the second in the form of the audience itself. The former is the older Japanese woman (portrayed by the excellent Salva Nakara (Note 44)), a Hiroshima survivor reliving the traumatic experience onstage and sharing it with the viewers. The highpoint of the play is marked, no doubt, by her chilling testimony, in which she describes the moment Hiroshima was bombed. Her testimony appears twice in the course of the play, first in written form, when the librarian asks the young American to read it aloud, and only then directly from the survivor's mouth:

*Older Japanese Woman:* It started to rain. I left the kids under the umbrella. The drops became larger and larger. Someone yelled: "The Americans are drenching us with gasoline!" – but you could feel it was water drops... (Note 45)

At one point, however, during the survivor's oral testimony, the magnitude of the trauma, expressed by the gradually intensifying music, overpowers her. Her voice is drowned out by the music until it vanishes completely, with only her lip movements and bodily gestures left to convey her emotional turmoil to the audience. The viewers can still recall, however, the horrifying words of her written testimony, read earlier by the young American:

...the wind was blowing harder and giant trees collapsed. Up above, shreds of tin roofs were flying in the air... papers... doors... my feet became drenched with blood as the whirlpool was moving towards the river. There were men and women... one woman right next to me was constantly mumbling about how cold she was, then stopped shivering and died. One man leaned forward to grab this woman's hands and support her, but her skin just peeled off in huge chunks, like gloves... some of the men and women were completely naked... their burns were black, then red and swollen, and by the evening... they reeked. And in the morning, the tide... (Note 46)

Only towards the end of her testimony does the music quiet down and her words can be heard once more:

...in the morning the tide washed everything and they drowned. I saw some bodies floating in the river. It was raining again. [...] That's all. (Note 47)

Victims tend to experience past traumas as if they are recurring at present. This is why the survivor's voice is drowned out by the music when she reaches the core of the trauma, that ineffable, non-transmittable "excess" (in Dominick LaCapra's terms) which eludes all representation and leaves only a lacuna. (Note 48) According to Langer, oral testimony offers the witness an opportunity not only to remember the past but also to relive it, transforming the testimony into the very event it describes and allowing its hearers to converge upon that same event (Langer is specifically concerned here with the viewers of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*). A similar view of the audience's status as witnesses is expressed by Berger, according to whom one source of the witness's authority is the fact he or she was *there*, at the event itself, experiencing it in the flesh; through his or her testimony, the witness shares this authority with us, causing us to "be there" as well. (Note 49) Furthermore, by enabling us, the audience, to directly confront the otherness calling us from within "the crying wound", (Note 50) the survivor's living voice demands that we not only listen but also respond. The viewers watching the Japanese survivor as she gives her testimony are thus compelled to replicate in their minds the missing ineffable content, and thus to experience actively (if wordlessly) the untold trauma.

For E. Ann Kaplan, the question to ask is not only when it is that viewers become witnesses, but also what it is that makes a testimony "ethical". (Note 51) In her view, everyday images of trauma (what she calls "vicarious trauma") elicit in us no more than empty empathy. (Note 52) The difference between empty empathy and "ethical" testimonies depends on *distance*: excessive proximity engenders only empty empathy, leading to vicarious trauma. Ethical testimony, by contrast, is necessarily related to *artistic* activity designed to produce ethical awareness. "To bear witness", for Kaplan, is thus not necessarily to impart information about some heretofore unfamiliar event, but to fundamentally change the viewer's worldview in a context to which justice is central. (Note 53) This view is consistent with my own understanding of the audience's role in apocalyptic theatre, namely as ethical witnesses.

The survivors are witnesses in virtue of their being the ultimate victims of the events in which they had been involved, therefore their perspectives are personal and subjective. Theatre audiences, by contrast, keep a certain distance between themselves and the events; they can thus simultaneously be witnesses confronting the suffering other "face to face", but also external spectators capable of critical reflection. It is this latter feature which generates the ethical action -action taking place outside the theatre, after the show ends. Moreover, the very act of representation takes us from a past-oriented ethics, which largely consists of empathic listening to the witness, to a future-oriented one which urges us to act ethically in the realm of politics and transform the real world. The unique circumstances provided by theatre make possible a moral awakening that reaches beyond our usual geographical, ideological, or cultural environments. It is in theatre that we encounter the unfamiliar witness, the one we rarely

encounter in reality and whose voice we rarely hear. It is this encounter that makes us more sensitive to life's fragility and promotes in us a sense of universal fraternity. (Note 54)

### 9. Hybridizing the Historical/Documentary with the Fictional/Theatrical

Unlike Joshua Sobol, who based *The Jerusalem Syndrome* exclusively on historical material, Shimon Buzaglo chose to combine documentary material (letters by Manhattan Project scientists, testimonies, statistical material, US Home Front Command guidelines) with such fictional-poetic sources as the screenplays of Alan Resnais' *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and James Murakami's *When the Wind Blows* (1986), Edita Morris' novel *The Flowers of Hiroshima*, and Canadian playwright Robert Lepage's *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*. As Cathy Caruth reminds us in her discussion of the filming of *Hiroshima mon amour*, director Alan Resnais was first asked to film a documentary on Hiroshima but after several weeks of filming declined, claiming that the prospective film would be no different from his previous film on the Nazi concentration camps. It is fiction, Resnais' decision suggests, and not documentary material alone, that is capable of representing the historical event in its concrete detail. (Note 55) This combination of various poetic media (cinema, literature) and genres (scripts, novels, plays) with the documentary material is responsible for *Black Rain*'s uniqueness as well as being reflective of its subject matter. This hybrid model is crucial to the play's success in disrupting mimetic illusion and opening some distance between the action taking place onstage and the extra-theatrical realities, and thus in privileging and drawing the audience's attention to the latter, in order to keep the past from replicating itself in the future. Indeed, this is how director Ophira Hoenig describes the play's aims in the programme:

The story of Hiroshima was only a pretext for addressing moral and human issues related to the development of weapons of mass destruction. [...] We all stopped and listened to the horrifying, shocking past in order to understand the threatening present. I stopped, trying to understand whether anything could be done to prevent it [...] I stopped, and a muffled cry emerged from my lungs, echoing against a suicidal humanity. Then I understood that this is precisely what this work is about. (Note 56)

Why, however, did an Israeli play look so far afield, to the historical catastrophe of a foreign nation and culture? Wouldn't the contemporaneous Holocaust have been a more "natural" subject matter, one more readily accessible to Israeli audiences? More than any other historical event, the Holocaust requires that we attune ourselves to a new ethical orientation, and for many artists and thinkers after the Holocaust the question "How did this happen?" has been inextricably tied to the question "What can we do to prevent it from happening again?" But while the poetics of Holocaust testimonials tends to engender, first and foremost, a past-oriented "ethics of listening", the play's use of Hiroshima serves to stress the fact that the development of nuclear weapons has never ceased—on the contrary, nuclear weapons are now in the possession of more nations than ever before—and that its relevance to Israel is now greater than ever, especially in light of the recent developments in Iran. The use of the metaphor of nuclear holocaust in *Black Rain* relies on the memory of the past but derives much of its power from the threats

of the present and from the effort to look to the future. From this point on, only the viewers can assume responsibility and take real action.

## 10. Conclusion

The main conclusions of the survey of those two plays is that the Post-Apocalyptic theatre does not seek to present the historical events as an end in itself. Rather, it uses historical past as a bank of events and images rooted deeply in the national or international traumatic memory, as warnings of their possible recurring. The main concern of the authors is to bring a change in the political behavior in the present, in order to prevent this horrifying prophecy from happening. We may say that their study-case is the past; their perspective is the Future; but the necessary actions to be activated are rooted in the political present.

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## Notes

Note 1. See e.g., Collins, J. J. (1984). *The apocalyptic imagination*. New York: Crossroad; Kaufman, Y. E-S. (1952-1953). Midreshe ge'ulah. Tel Aviv: Mossad Bialik.; Cook, S. L. (2003). *The apocalyptic literature*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Note 2. Some dystopias from this period, for example Friedrich Dürrenmatt's *The Physicists* (1962), focused on scientists and the destructive potential of scientific innovations. Others—for example Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* (1964), set against the waning days of the French Revolution—looked at future catastrophes through the lens of historical paradigms. Still others, for instance Becket's *Endgame* (1956), offered apocalyptic abstractions of time and place. Arthur Kopit's later *End of the World* (1984) is particularly pessimistic, offering humanity no refuge from the bomb.

Note 3. Carpenter, C. A. *Dramatists and the Bomb* (1991). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 3.

Note 4. Apocalyptic plays from this period include Yosef Mundi's *The Governor of Jericho* (1975) and *Messiah* (1982), Shmuel Hasfari's *Tashmad* (1982), Motti Lerner's *Pangs of the Messiah* (1987), Joshua Sobol's *The Jerusalem Syndrome* (1988), and Ilan Ronen's *War of Brothers* (1988).

Note 5. Benjamin, W. (1968). *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. In Hannah Arendt, ed. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken, 253-264.

Note 6. Benjamin, 254

Note 7. The Great Revolt, also known as the First Jewish-Roman War, took place in 60-73 A.D. (roughly six decades before the Bar Kokhba revolt, or the Third Jewish-Roman War), with hostilities reaching their zenith around 70 A.D., the year Jerusalem was taken and the Temple destroyed by Titus. Masada - last stronghold of the Sicarii led by Eleazar ben Ya'ir-held out for another three years, until facing imminent defeat the besieged rebels committed collective suicide.

Note 8. While some historians have challenged the book's historical veracity, we must remember that ancient historiography diverged significantly from our current understanding of historiographical practice. Flavius' book contains mythical views and beliefs, which in his time were not deemed non- or anti-historical. See Simhoni Y. N. in his introduction to his translation of Flavius: Flavius J. (1968). *History of the Jewish wars against the Romans*, Simhoni Y. N. (trans.). Tel Aviv: Masada Press, 16. Of particular importance for our purposes is the fact that Flavius' perception was at root historical.

Note 9. Thus, according to Sobol's stage directions, Transformations VI through VIII are to be staged



simultaneously.

Note 10. Sobol, J. (1987). *The Jerusalem syndrome*. Tel Aviv: Or-Am, 15.

Note 11. Rokem, F. (2000). *Performing History*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 99-111.

Note 12. See Foucault's instructive interpretation of this type of incarceration: Foucault, M. (1991). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. London: Penguin Books.

Note 13. Sobol in discussion with students at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2009.

Note 14. Nora, P. (1993). Between memory and history: A problem of place. *Zemanim* 45, 5-19.

Note 15. Reuveni, Y. (June 12, 1986). Yediot Aharonot. Cited in Urian, D. (1989). On the Jerusalem syndrome: An interview with Joshua Sobol. *Hetz* 1, 92-94.

Note 16. Urian, D. (2008). *Theater in Society*. Tel Aviv: Open University Press, 112.

Note 17. Urian, On the Jerusalem syndrome. 92-94.

Note 18. Benjami, 263.

Note 19. Benjamin, 255.

Note 20. For a discussion of the political significance of Benjamin's thought, see Moses, S. (1991). Walter Benjamin's theological-political model of history. *Zemanim* 38, 4-18.

Note 21. Rokem, xi, 101-102.

Note 22. Rokem, 19.

Note 23. Rokem, xii-xiii.

Note 24. Ahad Ha'am [Ginsberg A. Z.]. (1954). Past and Future. In *Complete Writings*. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Hotza'a Ivrit and Dvir, 81-83.

Note 25. Produced by the Herzliya Ensemble with the Haifa Theatre for the 2007 Israel Festival. *Black Rain* should really be co-credited to playwright Shimon Buzaglo and director Ophira Hoenig.

Note 26. Berger, J. (1999). *After the end: Representations of post-apocalypse*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press. It is no accident that Berger speaks in terms of "revelation" when describing both the Holocaust and the Japanese catastrophe as models of a future apocalypse, as the latter term's etymology is rooted in the Greek apokalypsis, meaning "unveiling" or "uncovering".

Note 27. Klein, R. (1990). The future of nuclear criticism. *Yale French Studies* 77, 76-100.

Note 28. Berger, xii.

Note 29. Berger, xiii.

Note 30. For a discussion of this device, see below.

Note 31. Nora, 8-10.

Note 32. Nora, 8-10.

Note 33. Derrida, J. (1995) *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Note 34. Derrida, 12.

Note 35. Derrida, 12.

Note 36. Buzaglo, S. (2008). *Black Rain*. Tel Aviv: Or-Am, 23.

Note 37. Buzaglo, 58-59.

Note 38. Baudrillard, J. (1983). *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e), 5.

Note 39. Baudrillard, J. (1983). The implosion of meaning in the media. In *The shadow of the Silent majorities: Or, the end of the social and other essays*. New York: Semiotext(e), pp. 97-110.

Note 40. Buzaglo, 33.

Note 41. Berger, 20.

Note 42. Buzaglo, 35-6. All emphases are mine.

Note 43. Langer, L. (1993). *Holocaust testimonies: The ruins of memory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, xi.

Note 44. That the Japanese victim was portrayed in the original Israeli production by an Arab actress, was surely no coincidence. For audience members, says Marvin Carlson, the cultural meaning of the individual actor's performance is not limited to the current performance but is loaded with echoes of past performances as well, a phenomenon Carlson calls "ghosting". See Carlson, M. (2001). *The haunted stage: The theater as memory machine*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. Similarly, we may add, a current performance can derive its meaning from the actor's biographical and social circumstances.

Note 45. Buzaglo 51-52.

Note 46. Buzaglo, 44-45.

Note 47. Buzaglo, 51-52.

Note 48. LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Note 49. Berger, 48.

Note 50. Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: trauma, narrative, and history*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 8.

Note 51. Kaplan, A. (2008). Global trauma and public feelings: Viewing images of catastrophe. *Consumption, Markets & Culture* 11 (1), 3-24, p. 18.

Note 52. Kaplan, 16.

Note 53. Kaplan, 20-21.

Note 54. Phelan, P. (2004). Marina Abramovic: Witnessing shadows. *Theater Journal* 56 (4), 569-77.

Note 55. Caruth, 27.

Note 56. Hoenig, O. (2007) *Black Rain*, Original Program.