"ONSTAGE BE PEACOCKS AND OFFSTAGE BE MODEST"?
THE DILEMMA OF ISRAELI ORTHODOX ACTRESSSES
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For over two decades, orthodox Israeli women have been creating theatre despite traditional Jewish reservations against it and despite the fact that theatre involves a certain degree of exhibitionism rather than the tsniut (modesty) demanded of them, particularly in the public sphere.1 A source for Jewish thought about tsniut is Micah 6:8 “Walk humbly with thy G-d” as interpreted by Rabbi Eliezer in Tractate Succah 49b of the Babylonian Talmud, whose explicit application of this as a principle to both public and private spheres is then further elaborated in halacha (religious law), in terms of dress, speech etc. This article highlights the unresolved inherent contradiction between theatre and tsniut, and how orthodox women negotiate and combine modesty with theatre performance. It focuses on two case studies of groups of orthodox actresses who have performed before mixed audiences (men and women), thus pushing the dilemma of modesty to its limit. It shows how their choice not to appear only before their own gender influenced their acting and impacted the concept of modesty in various ways ranging from being stricter than the rabbis to overlooking certain norms of modesty in order to perform and engage in political activism.

Our research shows that many orthodox Jewish actresses and audience members disregard the assumption of aesthetic distance between performers and character; they do not accept the possibility of being like “peacocks on stage and modest offstage” (as one non-religious actress puts it). In this article, we explore the twofold considerations of modesty among orthodox actresses: concern for their own personal modesty, and for that of the audience.

So far there has not been much research on this phenomenon. Reina Rutlinger-Reiner’s earlier research on orthodox women’s theatre in Israel, conducted between 1998 and 2002, being a precedent. This qualitative research included formal, in-depth interviews with performers, directors and educators; spontaneous interviews and “theatre conversations” recorded or jotted down in a field journal; videotapes, texts, and press reviews. Based on this research, which was updated in 2006 and led to her book The Audacity of Holiness,2 we began a joint research project focusing on the inherent contradiction between modesty and performing onstage. Our aim was to examine the difference between secular actresses’ and orthodox actresses’ concepts of theatre in general and of tsniut on stage in particular. One of the conclusions from our research is that orthodox actresses regard theatre primarily as an educational tool, rather than as an art. As such, they feel there should be no discrepancy between their personal life and the life created onstage. Many actresses declare that working within the strict limitations of the rules of modesty offers a challenge and creates opportunities for developing a new genre which they hope will become an alternative to western, secular Israeli theatre.

Theatre in Religiously Orthodox Israeli Society: Background

A surge of artistic activity within orthodox Israeli society has taken place in the fields of art, dance, music, literature and theatre since the 1990s. In theatre, orthodox artists’ initiatives can be divided into men’s and women’s theatre. Women’s theatre encompasses the whole range from storytelling, performed without acting, in schools and community centres (where they perform exclusively for women), to avantgarde theatre performed in front of mixed audiences in the Israeli annual alternative theatre festival in Acco. Most orthodox actresses consult the male religious hegemony (rabbis) before going onstage, especially

1 See Reina Rutlinger-Reiner, The Audacity of Holiness: Orthodox Women’s Theatre in Israel (Yerushalayim: Karmel, 2007) for a survey and analysis of this phenomenon.
2 Ibid.
when issues of modesty arise. Rabbis often make decisions about directing, acting, costumes, and movement without seeing the performance, just by listening to the women’s reports or descriptions of it. For example: Emunah College’s production of Ruth (1998-9) in which women used head movements that involved tossing their hair from side to side. The rabbi of the college forbid this movement. Those actresses who consult rabbis are willing to accept their decisions.3 Most actresses and directors avoid overtly presenting sexuality or sensuality onstage, even when they perform in front of all-women audiences. Lately, there have been cases where women are stricter than the rabbis, and although they receive halachic permission to perform in front of audiences including men—they do not take the opportunity to do so.4 This issue raises the question as to the limits and boundaries of modesty, which will be discussed shortly.

The present study elaborates on one of the most problematic issues at the root of traditional reservations against encouraging orthodox women to perform in theatre, an issue which the Israeli orthodox public and its leaders have been grappling with, namely the inherent contradiction between tsniut and performing onstage.5 It contributes but also differs from Rutlinger-Reiner’s book insofar as it attempts to formulate a theoretical, aesthetic framework for analyzing the idea of tsniut onstage. The current project, conducted in 2008, included interviewing six orthodox and six secular actresses on the topic and comparing orthodox and secular actresses’ conceptions of this term and of theatre in general. We also administered questionnaires on these topics to fifteen orthodox college students studying theatre at Emunah College in Jerusalem. Emunah College is a unique and highly interesting case, as it is the only place in Israel where orthodox women can train to be professional theatre practitioners studying for a B. Ed. in theatre, while observing strict halachic restraints in an all-women academic environment.

**Naomi (2005), Emunah College, Jerusalem**

The play Naomi, directed and produced by Rivka Manovitz-Maayny and Iris Shavit, marked the tenth anniversary of the theatre department at Emunah College. The student actresses performed on the prestigious stage of the Jerusalem Theatre. The original play was a play within a play based on the biography of the famous Israeli lyricist Naomi Shemer, who was associated with right-wing politics. It referred to the upcoming disengagement from Gaza.6 A number of Naomi Shemer’s songs accompanied the text but due to the well-known halacha that a woman’s voice should not be heard in public,7 none were sung live onstage. Instead, a creative solution was applied. The songs were recorded by the actresses themselves and heard as a playback. The openly stated goal of the performance was to denounce the “political mistake” which was scheduled to take place a few months later, namely, the disengagement from the Gaza Strip settlements and the abandonment of the Israeli settlements called Gush Katif.

The case of Naomi is particularly revealing, since Emunah College organized separate performances by two different casts. One cast consisted of those students who were willing to perform in front of a mixed audience of men and women; the other included those willing to appear before all-women audiences only. The set,

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3 Not all actresses consult rabbis. For example, members of The Dosiyot who performed in Acco did not. On their work, see below.
4 This was the case in 2005 when students of the theatre department of Emunah College in Jerusalem initiated political (right-wing) street theatre and the rabbis allowed them to perform using wide costumes and masks. Instead, however, they decided to be the producers and directors of male actors from a yeshiva in Otniel. It was also the case with some students asked to participate in Naomi—we discuss this later.
5 This is an opportunity to thank the Tallpiot College in Holon for supporting the research with a grant given to Reina Rutlinger-Reiner in 2008.
6 Israel’s unilateral disengagement plan was a proposal by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, adopted by the government on June 6, 2004 and enacted in August 2005, to evict all Israelis from the Gaza Strip and from four settlements in the northern Western Bank. Those Israeli citizens that refused to accept government compensation packages and voluntarily vacate their homes prior to the August 15, 2005 deadline, were evicted by Israeli security forces over a period of several days.
7 “Samuel said: A woman’s voice is a sexual incitement, as it says, For sweet is thy voice and thy countenance is comely” (Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 24a, quoting Song of Songs 2:14).
choreography and costumes were identical, yet most of the attention and rehearsal time was allotted to the performers who were willing to act in front of the mixed audience which included—among others—male reporters, politicians and educators. Both casts adhered to halachic rules of modesty, carefully outlined by the college’s rabbi: the actresses were dressed in long bulky costumes which obscured their silhouettes, stage smoke flooded the stage when they were dancing, and the choreography avoided all twisting of the body or excessive use of the hips in order to avoid any hint of sensuality.

The plot of Naomi takes us to a fashionable party in hedonistic Tel Aviv, where we meet, among other “beautiful people” (ironically stated by the song accompanying this scene), a young theatre director. She accepts the not-very-attractive job of directing a community theatre production about Naomi Shemer with the women of Gush Katif. While working with them, she witnesses the perils of their lives, their fears and pain. Ultimately, she joins their struggles and becomes a “reborn” as a religiously observant, right-wing settler.

The opening scene, “Beautiful People,” encapsulates most of the challenges and solutions dealt with in this performance. It is by far the most flamboyant scene: all the actresses are dressed in red, a colour traditionally considered immodest, wearing fashionable large hats and fancy costumes, moving around lazily to the sounds of American music (as opposed to Naomi Shemer’s Israeli songs in the rest of the show), holding glasses of wine, and trying to represent “libertine” conduct. Underlying the scene is criticism of the hedonist, decadent lifestyle attributed to secular, leftist residents of Tel Aviv and praise for the right-wing orthodox settlers’ moral superiority as ideologists combating terrorism by their very existence adjacent to the Gaza border.

The policy-makers of Emunah College (the head of college and head of the theatre department, Rivka Manovitz-Maayny) justified a large-scale production of a right-wing political message—the atmosphere then was that there was an urgent necessity to address the evacuation of Gush Katif—and were astonished when most students declined to appear in front of a mixed audience of men and women. The college rabbi was recruited to convince those students who refused to participate on grounds of modesty to reconsider their decision. Yet as the following interaction indicates, he too was ambivalent about the contradiction between the call to social and political action and the necessity of adhering to strict rules of tsniut. The crucial meeting between him and the students clearly shows this ambivalence and highlights the more observant actresses’ observations of theatre as a potential site of transgression, by men as well as women:

Rabbi: The problems [of performing in front of men] are: 1) That it is forbidden for men to look at the beauty of a woman: the problem is the men’s, but women should not cause it to happen. 2) Another problem is covering hair and refraining from revealing certain parts of the body. 3) Women’s voices should not be heard and the question is whether that refers only to singing, or also to speaking, in public. 4) Men should not see women wearing colourful clothes because it may attract their attention and desires.

- Student A: That is the problem we must deal with, that is the big problem left: there are easy solutions for costumes and for covering hair or parts of body but “looking at a woman??” What solution is there for this? When I act, I not only talk, I also move.

- Rabbi: The “evil inclination” [yetzer hara] does not limit itself and nevertheless, there is a difference between people who live in a mixed society [of men and women] and so are less excitable and those who live in separate societies [where men and women do not mix]; then they are more excitable.

- Student A: Our responsibility is towards our audience. We should examine our target audience [who lives in separate societies]. Why should they [men] sin because of me? It is the actresses’ responsibility. This is unclear [from what you are saying].

- Student B: No, it is the men—it is their fault.

- Rabbi: But there is mutual responsibility between Jews…

In this heated discussion, the students express their reservations about becoming “objects of desire” that might cause men in the audience “to sin.” Their concern is equally for the modesty of the male spectators and

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8 Rabbi Haim Fogel (rabbi of Emunah College); Rivka Manovitz-Maayny (head of theatre department), interviews with Reina Rutlinger Reiner, Jerusalem, 2005.
themselves as instigators of sinful behavior. Both the rabbi and the students speak about theatre as a possible site for sin (mainly by men) and so women’s presence onstage is presented as potentially sinful. Although it is the men’s responsibility to steer away from temptation, the college’s rabbi claims that women should share this responsibility and refrain from being in the position of “temptresses.” It seems that the only way the rabbi can convince the reluctant students to join the cast performing in front of a mixed audience is by differentiating between men who live in “segregated” societies gender-wise, and those who live in a “mixed society” and are used to women’s public presence, therefore less liable to indulge in sinful thoughts about them during the performance. This argument was supposed to convince the actresses that they would not be causing any moral harm to the men in the audience since they belong to the second category. Yet some of the students did not accept the rabbi’s explications: they manipulated and even overlooked the male hegemonic rules of modesty, to suit their concept of theatre, which, in this case, was stricter than the rabbi’s. The conflict these issues generated among the thirty students was intense mainly because those who agreed to appear before mixed audiences (according to Manovitz-Maayny, half of the class, about fifteen students) thus proving to be more lenient about modesty, were given more exposure to the media, and more attention was paid to their performances, even though the casts were working in parallel with the same director.

Conflicts arising in connection with the production of *Naomi* are probably what urged the Emunah College to publish, at the end of the same year, *The Responsa on Theatre*, the only volume of orthodox rabbinic guidelines for women performing in theatre.10 The *Responsa* is based on questions directed to rabbis during the past decade. It deals with issues connected to costumes, movement, singing, and the relationship between the audience and the actresses. The *Responsa* represents a list of rules and regulations usually followed by the more observant faction of orthodox Israeli society.11 It demonstrates a lack of understanding of the art of theatre and its illusionary characteristics by ignoring the distinction between real life and acting on stage. For example, it addresses the issue of playing ‘negative’ characters who ‘sin;’ could this incorporation of evil influence the actress’ personality? Another example would be the question whether to photograph actresses onstage. The *Responsa* reinforces the assumption that modesty is an all-encompassing norm and that therefore Coleridge’s act of “poetic faith”, the “willing suspension of disbelief”12 cannot be carried out regarding bodily behaviour. We shall elaborate on the poetics of *tsniut* onstage below.

**Do Not Call: Water, Water (2002), The Dosiyot, Acco Festival**

*Dos* is the slang name in Hebrew for the orthodox. The Dosiyot, meaning orthodox women, is a group that performed in the Acco Alternative Theatre Centre in 2001 and 2002. All its members had received an orthodox education and following military or national service—orthodox women are eligible to do national service rather than enrolling in the army, among others for reasons of *tsniut*—were completing their studies in university theatre departments. Although they all observed the Sabbath and intended to give their children an orthodox education, when interviewed, they all coined their level of religious observance and affiliation with original definitions such as “orthodox-lite,” “observant,” “ortho-conservative,” “differently-orthodox.”

*Do Not Call: Water, Water* is an avant-garde play, a pastiche of personal monologues, texts from the Talmud

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10 Avraham David Spector, *The Responsa on Theatre* (Jerusalem: Emuna College, 2005). *Responsa* (responses) represent a genre in halachic discourse. They are written decisions and rulings by legal scholars on various subjects.

11 In the opening pages of *The Responsa*, letters of blessing and *haskamot* (letters of consent) are given by: Rabbi Yaakov Ariel (Chief Rabbi of Ramat Gan); Rabbi of Emunah College, Rabbi Haim Fogel; Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen; Chief Rabbi Elyahu Bakshi-Doron; and Rabbi Dov Lior, Chief Rabbi of Kiryat Arba and Hebron and a prominent leader of the RZ community.

12 “Willing suspension of disbelief” is an aesthetic concept describing our relationship to art. Coined by the poet and philosopher of aesthetics Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817, it refers to the viewer’s willingness to accept the premises of a fictional work as truth, even if they are fantastic or impossible. It refers also to the audience’s willingness to overlook the limitations of a medium in order to facilitate acceptance of these premises. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Essay on Poetic Theory,” from *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter XIV (1817), [http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237838](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/237838) (accessed 17.06.2013).
The personal monologues relate critically to several characteristics of observant women’s lives, such as the mikveh—a ritual bath that must be visited after the end of menstruation in order to resume sexual relations with their husbands after this period of abstinence—pressures to marry at a young age, and the need to learn a “useful” profession (such as teaching) together with the more hidden desires to be a “bad girl,” to violate Shabbat, and look untidy by smudging white dresses with chocolate and mud. It included slaughtering of such sacred cows as reverence for domesticity and the holiness of Jerusalem.

The main theme was presented by the husband of one of the actresses, who acted in the show as a melamed (instructor). Quietly, as if he were teaching, he presented the story of the four rabbis who entered a pardes, the mystical garden of knowledge from which only Rabbi Akiva emerged unharmed. The melamed did not perform with the women but always remained apart from their wild, frenzied acting. The story he presented progressed in linear fashion despite many interruptions and digressions; he was the axis around which all the narrative digressions took place.

Several scenes happened at once on different levels of a courtyard, and throughout the play the actresses screamed and moved wildly about. The provocative text and staging transgressed the rules of modesty, both visually and textually. It was by far the most daring production performed by an orthodox women’s theatre group during the past decade. The actresses in Do Not Call: Water, Water, manifested two conflicting forces in the praxis of modern orthodoxy: the desire to be part of the general Israeli society, which entailed defying traditional norms of modesty and performing an avant-garde type of play in front of a mixed audience, and the desire to stay in the fold and communicate especially with orthodox society. This conflict was implied in the interviews that took place during 2002, when all the actresses voiced disappointment that there were no articles in the orthodox press about their performance. It is clear that onstage, the group attempted to display explicitly “naughty” behaviour: frenzied movements, “violation” of the sanctity of canonical texts by reciting them childishly, cynically, or by screaming them; performing transgressive behaviour by lighting a cigarette from the flame of Shabbat candles; wearing tefillin (phylacteries), a practice that is reserved in orthodoxy for men; smudging each others’ white dresses with dirt; and talking about intimate topics such as physical desire and immersion in the mikveh. Yet even while transgressing the rules of modesty, they were never overtly erotic. On the other hand, their texts were extremely provocative:

I will steal these cords [taking the tefillin]. This is what takes them upwards and gives them their strength, their wholeness. And we? We are just plain little girls with a space as big as our bodies that we wish to fill, this machine, we want to plug it in, and then we are ready for this wedding, for this filling, for this wholeness. And at the end it is a little man, and it is insufficient. And it is a terrible tragedy.

The newlywed actress who wrote this scene about immersion in the mikveh after menstruation felt embarrassed about the scene when her in-laws came to the performance and so in order not to offend her new family, she censored the text. The other group members agreed to the change although it demanded last-minute

13 Candles are lit on Friday night symbolizing the beginning of Shabbat and from then onwards smoking, for example, is forbidden. See Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shabbat 12.1, “A person who kindles even the smallest fire is liable”; and Exodus 35:3, “You shall kindle no fire throughout your habitations upon the Sabbath day.”

14 Although one can make links to other artistic works making transgressive use of tefillin, the company did not mention other works as influencing them. There is, however, a trend of Israeli and Jewish artists dealing with religious artifacts in different and sacrilegious ways. The artists profane the sacred in order to investigate the relevance of these articles to contemporary Israeli and Jewish life. Major examples include Yona Wallach, “Tefillin,” Iton no. 77 (1982); Leonard Nimoy, Shekhina (New York: Umbrage, 2002); Digi Dekel’s photograph isha be tallit (woman in tallit), 1996; Moti Mizrahi’s photograph Tefillin, 1973; Haim Maor’s photograph, Untitled, 1975. See also the work of artist Nehama Golan. These and others are discussed in Yael Guilt, “ve’yirastih li: Jewish Ritual Artifacts as Metaphor for Eros and Body Representation” (Hebrew) http://www.oranim.ac.il/sites/heb/academy/main-publicity/bibliography-publicity/social-sciences-faculty-brief/ritual-artifacts/pages/default.aspx (accessed 21.03.2013).

15 From the play performed and written by The Dosiyot: Do Not Call: Water, Water, 2001/2002.
improvisations. The ad hoc self-censorship, however, was only in terms of speech, not dress or movement. The importance of modesty internalized by actresses raised as orthodox influenced their decision to censor their own “outrageous” text. This event demonstrates that even the most daring artists protesting against rigid, orthodox education could not maintain their artistic “freedom” when confronted with the encounter between orthodox values (tsniut) represented by the family and provocative art. In this particular case when they knew specifically who was seated in the audience, The Dosiyot self-censored their vulgar language.

Shira Edri- Elizur, “Kodesh Vechol.” Exhibition of Emunah College Graduates of Visual Arts Department, 2012. This photograph shows the exact same scene as in the play “Do Not call Water, Water” although it was taken more than ten years later without any connection between the artists.

The Body as a Sign in the Performing Arts and the Poetics of Tsnuit Onstage

In theatre, most performers embody fictional characters. The aesthetic distance between their “real selves” and their “characters” allows them to portray a wide range of roles, including those totally incongruous with their personal lives.

Acting is defined by Claudia Tatinge Nascimento as an art of “constructing a hybrid identity which draws on the embodiment of technique, personal memory and imagination, playfulness of self and other, actor and character, fiction and reality, semiotic and phenomenal bodies.”


not invested with the necessary transformative power, as Erika Fischer-Lichte defines it:

For hermeneutics and for semiotic aesthetics, a clear distinction between subject and object is fundamental. The artist, subject 1, creates a distinct, fixed and transferable artifact that exists independently of its creator. This condition allows the beholder, subject 2, to make it the object of their perception and interpretation.19

In contrast to secular performers, orthodox Jewish actresses disregard the assumption of aesthetic distance between the performer and the character, between the artifact and its creator. They do not accept the possibility of acting like “peacocks on stage and modest[ly] offstage.” The manifestation of modesty draws a necessary relationship between the norm of modesty and the bodily form it takes onstage, just as in life.20

It is helpful to look at the *Responsa* in light of Nascimento’s account of actresses creating a “hybrid form” in an encounter between foreign and familiar elements, where the unfamiliar is actively interpreted by the actress who brings her own background and training to bear. There is a link as well as a difference between the “semiotic body” she presents, her body as carrier of signs to be read by the audience, and the home ground as it were of her “phenomenal body”, the body of the actress who has her own life and identity. The *Responsa* shows that tsniut opposes Nascimento’s description of the playfulness between the semiotic and the phenomenal body:21 the all encompassing norm of tsniut constructs the two bodies as the same.22

The discourse on empowering and disempowering agencies in body signs, with an emphasis on women’s bodies, has come to the fore of theoretical analysis in the past two decades. Theories of the body as a locus of discourse, of regulation and control (Michel Foucault) as well as the works of various feminist scholars (Laura Mulvey, Susan Bordo, Judith Butler), and studies of the relationship between spectators and on how women perceive themselves and their performances in the public sphere, are instrumental for our discussion of modesty among orthodox actresses.23 Such work has exposed the complex construction of the feminine body, in identifying the male gaze as an attitude and a way of looking that is not simply natural, and as something that women adopt, in evaluating their body shape, and feeling fat or ugly for example. Gender has been described as “performed,” a construction, other than biological sexual difference. Power is understood to be at work in the visual field.

As we have seen, the rabbis emphasized the “sinful” dimension of displaying female bodies onstage. This type of objectification of women has been defined by Peggy Phelan in the terms of an extreme feminist critique:

Since the female body and the female character cannot be “staged” or “seen” within representational mediums without challenging the hegemony of male desire, might it be effective politically and aesthetically to deny representing the female body (imagistically, physically) in order to bring about a new form of representation itself?24

Phelan asks whether women can possibly be represented onstage without challenging male desire. This question is relevant even in the case of all-women audiences, since the actresses’ movement onstage challenges the concept of modesty, which applies to all areas of life.

In contrast to the orthodox actresses, the secular actresses whom we interviewed accepted the erotic

(Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 81.

19 Ibid., 17.
dimension of their performance and believed that their body could and should serve as a means for transferring artistic, social and other messages. Evidently, they distinguish between bodily conduct onstage and everyday life:

People dealing with theatre are not modest. They need the applause and the attention. There is modesty “before” and “after.” Modesty is something interior and is connected to personality. There are people who will always say “me, me, me,” and they are not even actors. Modesty is for me a feature of character, a kind of behaviour. In Beit Zvi, we were told “to be peacocks onstage and offstage to be modest.” I find this is justified. There are many actors who are talented but are very modest. It is personal. There is no contradiction in my opinion.26

This view supports what Fischer-Lichte describes as the transformative power of performance: the performer becomes a “fixed and transferable artifact” that exists independently of its creator.27

The secular actresses we interviewed all stated that if their bodies were exposed “respectfully,” agreeing to nudity was part of their professional obligations:

If the director has a concept—if it is part of the message…. I won’t be naked onstage without a reason. There are actors who decide ahead of time that there are limits they will not cross. I have not been in situations where nudity was forced on me or where it was not done in a respectful way. Modesty is personal and not definite—it changes.28

Secular actresses and actors, trained in acting studios, learned to overcome natural or personal inhibitions in order to be able to perform a wide range of situations (including undressing) onstage. They consider their body a part of the artistic medium: “I have appeared onstage naked—it is also personal. Now after giving birth, I would not do it. This is personal and everyone decides for himself. It depends on the actors and directors you work with.”29

Clearly, secular actresses do not perceive themselves as responsible for the spectators’ modesty and only concern themselves with the question of personal modesty. Limitations placed on orthodox actresses include the additional dimension that women are meant to be engaged in “the full-time job of managing male sexuality.”30 Rabbits expand on this issue by saying that women must act modestly in order to prevent men from transgressing. This obligation stems from the command for every Jew to refrain from causing others to sin.31 Male rabbis decide how women must dress and move so that men’s passions will not be aroused, and so a woman becomes the “prop for their soul-fantasies and she is rendered as the necessary corporeal support for man’s subjectivity,” the pole formulated according to masculine needs.32 Women are caught between competing demands emanating from various sources, in our case, from their adherence to a halachic way of life and their artistic aspirations. At times, however, the actresses can also be more extreme than men about modesty rules. According to Eilberg-Schwartz, vast cultural and symbolic resources are invested in those objects around which conflicting representations revolve, and they become “evocative, puzzling and dangerous”:

25 A well-known acting studio in Israel, where the interviewee studied acting.
26 Dvorit, a secular Israeli actress, interview with Sarit Cofman-Simhon, 2008.
27 Fischer-Lichte, Transformative Power, 17.
29 Dvorit interview, 2008.
31 Cf. Rashi’s commentary on Leviticus 25:37, "One shall stumble through the iniquity of another, for all the people of Israel are responsible for each other."
The multiplication of rules that often occurs has the effect both of mastering a threatening object and of glossing the generative conflict and so...the original contradiction is lost from view. Caught between conflicting cultural processes, these objects are volatile; their power or energy can be transferred by association to other more stable cultural meanings.33

If we accept this notion, it is clear why on the one hand, acting has been accepted in orthodox society, but on the other hand, actresses are meant to deal with the guilt as perpetuators of sin for men whose desires are perceived as “primal and overpowering.”34 It is because of this reasoning that women/actresses almost naturally accept the limitations of the Responsa. The established cultural messages associated with a potential source of conflict are taken on by actresses, and in Eilberg-Schwartz’s opinion this helps “control an otherwise unruly object,”35 women striving for creativity in the public sphere.

Among readers familiar with the art of theatre, the Responsa raises serious doubts whether orthodox women can create theatre at all and if so, what kind of aesthetic and artistic experience this theatre can offer. It echoes ancient traditions in Judaism, which was preoccupied with the human body and its processes and “the rules that both regulated the body and turned the body into a symbol of other significant religious concerns.”36 The Responsa’s recommendations deal with the physical aspects of the theatre such as mise-en-scène, actresses’ movement, use of voice, costumes, as well as documentation, e.g. programme notes and publicity. These decisions on what is allowed or forbidden are determined by fragmenting the actresses into female body-parts which must be hidden or blurred. Decisions on contents and genre, e.g. how to create political theatre without being slanderous, or decisions about which characters to portray are also determined in the Responsa. The feminist theoreticians Young and Bartky address the dangers of self-fragmentation and Bartky describes body-fragmentation as psychological oppression: “The ‘splitting’ or fragmentation of the subject can be seen as undermining the integrity and agency of the self.”37 The fact that women must assume responsibility for men’s moral integrity also diminishes the actresses’ importance as artists and regards them instead as “objects of desire” governed by the male gaze.

The Freedom to Renounce “Freedom”

The Responsa of Theatre, with its codified limitations, gains control over the visual as well as the textual components of the theatrical event. It might come as a surprise that most orthodox actresses not only accept but even endorse the rulings of The Responsa:

As a performer I will never be able to fulfill my full potential because I follow the rules of modesty and religion. Because I will not give up modesty I cannot perform freely onstage. I believe that in a performance there is exposure, and that this is not halachically correct. If I didn’t have that limitation I would let [myself] go far and get to great places.38

This actress has given up on what she considers her strong theatrical abilities in order to abide by halachic rules and regulations connected to modesty. She knows she is paying a high price by being unable to fulfill her true theatrical potential, nevertheless she does not sound embittered by this decision.

34 Hartman, Feminism Encounters, 55.
36 Hartman, Feminism Encounters, 55.
37 Quoted in Gail Weiss, Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 50.
Yet Shoshana, a director who has worked for many years with orthodox actresses, claims that their main problem is not one of modesty but rather of their fear “of being ‘ugly’ and exposing their ‘broken hearts’” in public:

Their [orthodox] rules of modesty are walls that “protect” them from being vulnerable....Some people need halacha, but you have to know that it [halacha] is not the real issue. Modesty is not the issue—it is not the real thing. The real thing is to know who you are, what your story is in this world and what your creative self is.39

In her opinion, orthodox actresses use the demands of acting modestly as an excuse to avoid immersing themselves completely in “real” theatre work which would reveal their vulnerability and the social pressures they experience.40 In a similar vein, we could consider their choice of being stricter than the rabbis as yet another way of avoiding vulnerable areas. In fact, the actresses have demonstrated an additional, alternative, and surprising dimension of freedom, in choosing to be more restrictive than the rabbis themselves, as we witnessed in the case of the double cast of Naomi. In this, our analysis goes hand in hand with that of Saba Mahmood, who in her work on Muslim women in Egypt writes that “Negative freedom refers to the absence of external obstacles to self-guided choice and action…. Positive freedom, on the other hand, is understood as the capacity to realize an autonomous will.”41 The fact that actresses opted not to accept the rabbis’ recommendation (or even pressure), functioned as the degree of their free choice not to reveal themselves more than they were willing to, according to their personal interpretation of tsniut. It can be seen as embracing a new kind of agency: the actresses refused to simply accept a negative freedom offered by the rabbis, preferring their own judgment about the right course of action. Such a view departs from the more overtly anti-patriarchal work of the feminist theorists mentioned above. Mahmood’s is a feminism that is more accepting of the terms of traditional society, while creating autonomy within it.

Social Implications of Modesty Onstage

Perhaps one of the reasons that orthodox actresses implement the rules of modesty in theatre lies in the fact that they regard theatre primarily as an educational tool, rather than as an art.42 As such, they feel there should be no discrepancy between their personal life and the life created onstage. They uphold the Aristotelian educational tradition in which “morality [is] both realized through, and manifest in, outward behavioural forms.”43 Theatre and modesty in personal life are not contradictory for them; on the contrary, they are complementary, part of a continuum of behaviours in different contexts.

For orthodox actresses, the human body is the “site at which conflicting cultural impulses meet and clash,”44 and so they prefer to use their bodies to create theatre as a means to transmit educational, social, religious or cultural messages instead of creating merely “make-believe.” Embracing Jewish orthodox concepts of responsibility towards male members of their society, impersonating a fictitious character is of lesser importance than presenting questions pertaining to morals and religious conviction.

However, many actresses declare that working within these strict limitations creates a challenge for them

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40 Shoshana was the director of an evening of monologues in 1998 where orthodox women expressed the doubts, conflicts and struggles of their society. It was banned by Emunah College. See Rutlinger-Reiner, Audacity of Holiness, for a close analysis.
41 Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 10f. This feminist-religious context caters to the view of the philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who distinguished between negative political liberty and positive political liberty. Berlin examined these concepts as the difference between freedom from constraint and freedom that comes from self-mastery or self-realization.
42 In a questionnaire distributed to fifteen students at the Emunah Theatre Department in 2008, only 20 percent defined theatre as having an artistic aim. The rest indicated that its aim was educational or social.
43 Based on Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 25.
and opens opportunities to develop a new genre which they hope will become an alternative to western, secular Israeli theatre:

In this genre [orthodox theatre] one does not say everything onstage, one does not expose everything onstage. In this genre one dances without showing the hips and things even more…⁴⁵

It [orthodox theatre] must be much more subtle, with a lot of sensitivity to elements a secular person is not conscious of at all, and each topic should be treated in a complex way. I want “our” theatre to improve people, not to make them look at themselves with a feeling of disgust.⁴⁶

Many plays communicate a religious message or represent women’s devotion to G-d and Judaism, and so some actresses and directors consider theatre as a sort of “holy worship” (avodat kodesh). For some, the fact that plays are written, directed and acted by women who share orthodox values and lifestyles automatically shifts the plays into the category of “holy worship,” even if they deal with apparently secular topics such as social and political issues. On the other hand, if actresses believe their plays may change the social or political climate in Israel, some are willing to become more flexible and give up strict adherence to rules of modesty:

I was sure I was going to change the audience's opinions [about the disengagement from Gaza]. I said to myself: “If I see that, according to halacha, I can find a heter [rabbinic permission] to do something complicated and unacceptable from my point of view, I am ready to perform in front of a mixed audience with the chance that I can greatly influence the public.”⁴⁷

One actress stated that she felt that performing in a political play in front of her male family members and perhaps in front of men who held opposite political views was of utmost importance, and justified her appearing in front of mixed audiences of men and women:

It is important that my voice should be heard in public ...and that it should come from a place of modesty. Most orthodox people go to movies and to theatre even though they are not always modest. Our plays are modest and are done with yirat shamayim [fear of G-d] and so we can say something that comes from our soul...I must do it on the same stages and in front of mixed audiences. When the world is repaired and I won't have anything to scream at or react against or repair, I may be obligated to create [art] in a separate society. But now it is more important that people hear about Gush Katif and abused women and all kinds of problems in orthodox society, and I will have a wider influence on people.⁴⁸

This actress declares that her theatre work is modest and instilled with the fear of G-d but she admits that the ideal would be not to perform in front of men. She rationalizes this “breach” of modesty and relates it to the urgent need to be politically and socially active, especially during what she felt was a crucial period (prior to the disengagement from Gaza). She tries to minimize “the harm” by performing “from her soul” and by expressing hope that in the future when the world is “mended” (tikkun olam) she will not have to deal with such problems, and she will be able to marginalize her artistic efforts by performing only in front of all-women audiences. Meanwhile she feels she must present her ideology to as many people possible and thus, modesty can be sacrificed, overlooked and replaced by a sentiment favoring political activism.

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⁴⁵ Rivka Manowitz (founder and head of the Theatre Department at Emunah College, Jerusalem), interview with Reina Rutlinger-Reiner, 2008.
⁴⁶ Rabbi Shlomo Aviv (pseudonym), interview with author, 2002.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 42ff.
Conclusion

Apparently, non-orthodox performers are able to switch (at least theoretically) from “being peacocks onstage” to being modest (or not) in their personal life. Yet orthodox actresses disregard the assumption of aesthetic distance between the performer and the character, a distance which demands a unique way of exhibiting the performers’ bodies as signs and symbols. Orthodox performers do not accept the premise of playfulness of self and character. Still, considerations of modesty proved to be flexible or subject to free interpretation in diverse situations.

We have seen a twofold consideration of modesty among orthodox Jewish actresses: concern for their own personal modesty and for that of the audience. Even when they are willing to renounce restrictions intended to guard their own modesty, they remain preoccupied with the audience’s. Many orthodox women actresses, by their very choice of performing in theatre, know that they are engaging in a behavior which some consider as potentially transgressive. By complying with rabbinical decisions, even in artistic matters, they assume the role of protectors of the audience’s modesty as well as their own. Despite their audacious decision to engage in this type of non-normative cultural activity, the women automatically restrict themselves as artists. Our research suggests that even the most daring orthodox actresses have adopted and reinforced the traditional, conservative male perception of gender and the male gaze. Their resistance and transgressions are in relation to the traditional norms that they have internalized.

Alternatively, the option of being less liberal than the rabbis indicates, surprisingly enough, a dimension of freedom of choice. Their productions, consistent with the hegemonic male modesty rules, are stifled movement-wise and in the range of topics the actresses are willing to deal with. For example, they refrain from dealing with intimate relationships between the sexes.49 On the one hand, it is evident that in this artistic medium—theatre—orthodox actresses “mediate their own relationship with their bodies by seeing their bodies as they are seen by others and by worrying about what they and these [largely invisible] others are seeing as they are acting.”50 On the other hand, they have partially renounced tsniut, or rather manipulated and redefined it, in order to perform ideological activism while protecting not only themselves but their audiences from going “after your own heart and your own eyes, in pursuit of which you used to go astray: that ye may remember and do all my commandments and be holy unto your G-d” (Num 15:39).


Bibliography


