

Haaretz Magazine

'What We Did in Gaza Is Revenge for October 7': Israeli Playwright Revisits Eichmann Trial, and the Question of Human Evil



Motti Lerner. "If you believe only monsters are capable of monstrous acts, you won't find any examples." Credit: Ella Barak

'Evil never looks like a monster:' Veteran Israeli playwright Motti Lerner reexamines the Eichmann trial in a new stage production to ask how ordinary people commit monstrous acts

[Talía Banon Tsur](#)

Follow

May 23, 2026

Playwright Motti Lerner was 12 years old when the Eichmann trial began, yet he remembers that period vividly to this day.

"It was a shock. I was completely captivated. I followed the trial meticulously," he says. "Every day at noon I listened to the radio reports from the trial. Every morning I cut out the report on the previous day's proceedings from Haaretz. I don't think I missed a single day throughout the entire trial. I kept those newspaper clippings for decades. But after the trial ended, even years later, I found it very difficult to process what I'd heard. I suppressed it for years and didn't want to revisit it."

- Advertisement -

What makes a 12-year-old child so captivated by the Eichmann trial?

"To this day, I'm not entirely sure. I think that encounter with evil was terrifying for me. I was drawn to it because I wanted to understand it: How do human beings live in the presence of such evil? How do they cope with it? It frightened me deeply."

Now, 65 years later, a glass booth once again stands at Beit Ha'am in Jerusalem, where the original trial took place — this time on stage, in Lerner's new play "The [Eichmann](#) Trial."

Lerner returns to the event that both captivated and haunted him as a child.



A scene from the play. "The Eichmann trial is an opportunity to decipher human evil – Nazi evil, but also evil more broadly." Credit: Itai Ron

"For me, this trial is an opportunity to decipher human evil – Nazi evil, but also evil more broadly. How people lose the ability to distinguish between good and evil," he explains.

Lerner structures the play around excerpts from the trial, many of which remain etched in the public memory, including testimony by Eichmann and Holocaust survivors, among them K. Tzetnik (played by Shlomo Vishinsky), prosecutor Gideon Hausner (Gil Frank), and defense attorney Robert Servatius (Menashe Noy). The play also addresses the pressure West Germany exerted on Israel surrounding the trial, as well as Germany's role in financing the Dimona nuclear reactor.

Through Eichmann and the figures around him, Lerner revisits the moral dilemmas raised at the time: Was it a fair trial or a show trial? And to what extent can obedience to authority serve as a defense?

Eichmann, played by Igal Naor, never leaves the stage. Seated inside the glass booth, dressed in a suit with only a chair beside him, he remains visible throughout the performance. The audience watches his reactions to the accusations leveled against him by the judges, Hausner, and the survivors. He appears almost indifferent to the horrors being described, repeatedly justifying his actions by claiming that he merely obeyed the law and the Führer's orders.

"I am not a monster. I am an ordinary man, like anyone looking at me now," Eichmann says in the play's final monologue,

through which Lerner engages with [Hannah Arendt's concept of "the banality of evil."](#)

"I was born in a small town. I didn't finish high school because I had to go to work. I was fired and became unemployed. A friend from school offered me a job as an administrative clerk in the SS. A few years later, I was appointed head of the department for Jewish affairs. I do not minimize the severity of my actions during the war, but the prosecution could not point to a single Jew I murdered with my own hands. I admit that I swore allegiance to a leader unworthy of trust. Like many others, I worshipped him blindly. If he had ordered me to send my three sons to their deaths, I would have carried it out."

How theaters fail

After more than two hours of conversation, Lerner finally pauses his torrent of words.

"I want to say something about the courage that comes with age, because it matters. I'm becoming more and more aware that I can allow myself to be brave," he says, before stopping to correct himself. "Actually, it's not that I can allow myself to be brave – it's that I have no choice. At my age, I can't afford to hold back. If I don't write what I truly want to write now, I may never have another opportunity. That's something age gives you. I can't compromise anymore. I have to write what feels most necessary right now."

At 76, Lerner is one of Israel's most prominent veteran playwrights. Over the decades, he has written dozens of plays, television series, and films, often revisiting historical events that shook the country and casting them in a new light. Among them are the play "Kasztner," about Rudolf Israel Kastner; "Pollard," about Jonathan Pollard; and the television series "Bus 300," based on the Bus 300 affair and directed by Uri Barbash.

In the two and a half years since [October 7](#), however, Lerner has written several plays that do not turn to distant history in order to understand the present. One of them, "Treason in Wartime," centers on a former Shin Bet chief whose son, an Air Force pilot involved in the bombing of Gaza, commits suicide. The father

then attempts to change Israeli policy and ultimately finds himself accused of treason.



Lerner during rehearsals for "The Eichmann Trial," with theater manager Noam Semel in the background at left. "There is a courage that comes with age." Credit: Itai Ron

"So far," Lerner says, "no repertory theater has agreed to stage a play like that."

Another recent play focuses on a university literature lecturer who is dismissed after revising the syllabus of one of her courses to address war crimes in Gaza through Primo Levi's book "The Drowned and the Saved."

Do you first approach repertory theaters with these plays, or do you turn to fringe theater from the outset?

"I approach the repertory theaters first, and I'll keep fighting until I find a way. Right now, it's clear to me that neither of these plays will be staged by a repertory theater, but I still submit them and argue for them. I'm also trying to think about alternative production models, like raising private funding."

"The Eichmann Trial" has now been staged as an independent production. Last year, the play was produced at the Romanian National Opera as an opera composed by Gil Shohat. Now, at the initiative of former Habima CEO Noam Semel, the play has returned in a production directed by Ilan Ronen and produced by Ayelet Rips' Habira Theater.

At first glance, one might assume that a private producer dependent on ticket sales rather than public funding would avoid mounting a two-hour historical drama.

"I think theaters are afraid of the audience," Lerner says. "They worry people won't come to see plays like this. That's a fear I rebel against. I tell theater managers every time we meet: 'You're completely mistaken. The moment audiences see that you're staging something that truly touches their heart, they will come.'"



A scene from *The First Lady*. "I wanted to understand how someone as intelligent and accomplished as Golda could become trapped in such blindness." Credit: Redi Rubinstein

Since the beginning of the war, have you felt the impact of the boycott movement against Israel on productions of your plays abroad?

"Absolutely. The boycott has made things very difficult. At the moment, the only one of my plays scheduled to be staged abroad is 'On the Edge,' which will be produced in Bucharest." The play, originally written in the context of the [2014 Gaza war](#), was revised after October 7.

"My friends in the United States – theater directors I've worked with for years – tell me openly: 'We can't stage a play by an Israeli playwright right now. This isn't the moment.' After the [war with Iran](#), things became even worse, because suddenly we're seen as the reason America was drawn into the conflict. Even my American agent tells me, 'No theater will stage your work right now.' You keep fighting, but it's very difficult."

The Illusion of Influence

Lerner lives in Tel Aviv. He is divorced, the father of three children, and grandfather to five grandchildren. The Yom Kippur War left a profound mark on him, one that shaped not only his transition into theater but much of his later work.

In April 1974, he has been discharged after serving as an officer in the Artillery Corps and went on to pursue a master's degree in mathematics at the Hebrew University. "I returned from the war to my studies in a state of great, profound emotional turmoil.

"I found it terribly hard to study. During that first year I was still quite traumatized by the war. I would go to demonstrations almost every day, both as a release and out of a deep sense of identification with the people who were giving voice to what I felt. I wasn't a theater person at all then, but I had a girlfriend who was studying theater. I was amazed by the things she would tell me at home about her studies, by how fascinating her classes were. So I started going to a few classes, and eventually I abandoned the mathematics degree altogether."

Ahead of the war's 50th anniversary, Lerner wrote the play "The First Lady," which centers on Prime Minister Golda Meir during the protests against her government and the deliberations of the Agranat Commission, established to investigate Israel's failures leading up to the war.

The play, a joint production by Habima and the Be'er Sheva Theater, recently concluded its run after 110 performances. Lerner wrote it before October 7; it had been scheduled to open soon after the Hamas attack, but eventually premiered in December 2023. In the new political reality, it took on an entirely different meaning. Audience members frequently applauded the protesters on stage, including Captain Motti Ashkenazi, who demands that Golda Meir (played by Leora Rivlin) and the military leadership take responsibility for the disaster.

"I felt this play needed to go on immediately – not even two months later," Lerner says. "We staged it as soon as audiences could physically return to theaters. Part of the play's power came from the moment itself, but also from its attempt to tell Israeli

audiences a story they don't necessarily know: that Egypt made repeated diplomatic overtures before the war, and the Israeli government rejected them.



Motti Lerner. "You keep fighting and fighting, but it's very difficult." Credit: Ella Barak

"It's not that I can allow myself to be brave – it's that I have no choice. At my age, I can't afford to hold back. If I don't write what I truly want to write now, I may never have another opportunity. I can't compromise anymore."

"Drama is a powerful way of deciphering reality. I wanted to understand how someone as intelligent and accomplished as Golda could become trapped in such blindness, how she failed to recognize the obvious warning signs of war. I thought that if I could understand her blindness, perhaps I could also understand our blindness today."

To what extent do you think theater still influences audiences today? Plays no longer seem to generate the broad public debate they once did.

"I'm fully aware that my plays may have little real influence," Lerner says. "But without the illusion that they might matter, I wouldn't be able to write. There's an internal contradiction in that, of course. Sometimes I think: 'This play has to affect people. No one could see it and remain indifferent.' Other times I think: 'People will watch it, go out for coffee afterward, go home, and go to sleep.'"

"But the goal is always to persuade the viewer to participate in the political process I'm trying to advance. Take the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Our future here depends on resolving it. Ideally, someone leaving a play like 'The First Lady' would think to themselves: 'I need to be part of solving this conflict so this wound can finally heal.'"

"I'm not telling people whether the solution should be two states or one state. But I do speak about the occupation, and it's important to me that even viewers who support it understand that occupation is fundamentally immoral. They need to ask themselves what kind of person they become when they support something fundamentally immoral."

Over the years, you've written about several prime ministers and historical figures. Do you think [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) will eventually become a character in one of your plays?

"It's possible. But I think I still need some distance from him. When my feelings toward someone are too absolute, too judgmental, I can't write them properly."

"To me, Netanyahu's defining trait is his sense of historical grandeur. He governs as though he believes he has a monumental historical mission. That Churchillian sense of

himself ultimately causes him to stumble again and again. It's there even in the smallest details, including the corruption scandals."

Did you feel able to write about Golda Meir without judgment, despite having served in the Yom Kippur War yourself and experienced that failure firsthand?

"Yes, because 50 years had passed. That gave me enough distance to see her differently. With Bibi, I doubt I'll have 50 years to wait, but who knows. I'm still waiting for the moment when it becomes possible."