Aloni, Nissim (1926-1998) Israeli playwright and short-story writer. Aloni, who was born in Tel Aviv, was the first playwright to break away from the Israeli preoccupation with social realism and dramatic reportage. However, his first play, *Akhzar mikol hamelekh* (The king is the cruelest of all), 1953, still utilized a known Hebrew literary convention: the use of a biblical story as a contemporary allegory. In this case the biblical conflict between Jeroboam and King Rehoboam was the basis for an examination of the Israeli political scene at the time.

In 1956, after having studied French and History at the Hebrew University, Aloni went to Paris and was much influenced by the Theater of the Absurd. Thereafter his plays abandoned any reference to realism or contemporary events. In 1963 he established his own theater, Te-atron ha-onot in Tel Aviv, serving as director and manager and presenting many of his own plays.

Perhaps the most enigmatic of the Israeli playwrights, Aloni is unique in his creation of an original world with its basic components drawn, after his earlier exercise in biblical allegory, from non-Judaic mythology, folktales, masques, literature, commedia dell’arte and history. The titles of his plays indicate one of his abiding interests: *Bigdei hamelekh hahadashim* (The king’s new clothes), 1961, an allegory of corruption, based on Hans Christian Andersen’s story; *Hanesikhah ha-amerika’it*, (The American princess), 1963, which employs the play-within-a-play device; . *Napoleon, hai o met* (Napoleon, alive or dead), 1970, and *Eddie King* (1975), a parable of gangsterism and the American underworld, based on *Oedipus Rex*. These plays are entirely removed from the Israeli context, with their action taking place in various countries, real or imaginary.

Aloni's greatest achievement, which has been adopted and extended by many younger playwrights, is his rendering of the deep structure of secular Jewish writing through the figure of a king either on the point of losing power, or vainly aspiring to regain it. In this figure, Aloni has established a metaphor to examine an element of the Israeli unconscious strongly related to the Oedipal conflict. Kings in his plays are fathers and rulers destroyed or displaced by sons. Moreover the king/ father is either old and weak, or else brutal, providing a reason, real or imagined, for the son's usurpation. Often the sons perpetuate the cycle of incompetence and violence, and have to be replaced. Aloni's deviation from the Israeli dramatic norm of realism rests largely on this scheme of often murderous filial rebellion.

At the start Aloni’s drama met with mixed critical success. His plays, the first in Israel to be composed directly for the stage, were highly theatrical exercises in virtuosity, flamboyance, and brilliant language, employing techonological aids such as tape recorders, and were often misunderstood by critics and public alike. However, in their synthesis of Israeli consciousness and European cultural sources they constitute a milestone in Hebrew literature and criticism has subsequently awarded Aloni a place in the pantheon of great Hebrew/Israeli literary artists. In 1996 he was awarded the prestigious Israel Prize.

Aloni wrote a number of equally brilliant short stories, set in his childhood milieu of the Sephardi working-class quarter of Tel Aviv. Many of these stories are imaginative reconstructions of childhood, utilizing similar mythological and imaginative sources to those of the plays.

glenda abramson

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further reading

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