

‘Tell her to be careful:’ Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* at The Royal Court Theatre

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In the brightly lit theatre, two lines of performers proceed in single file up the far aisles towards the stage, amongst the hubbub of a chattering audience. The stage itself is almost bare, with only a table and chairs placed in the centre. Some actors move towards the table; the others line up against the walls. With a flash, the house goes dark and light illuminates the table.

Tell her it’s a game
Tell her it’s serious

So begins *Seven Jewish Children* at the Royal Court Theatre. Just as the opening of the play plunges the audience immediately into the middle of a debate, so the entire experience of the production feels as though one is catching a fraction of something much bigger and that one has missed much of what went before. This sense of the transitory permeates the production: in the dialogue that is, in fact, a series of mid-arguments, and in the staging which is minimal and deliberately low-key. Churchill’s opening stage directions state that ‘*[t]he lines can be shared out in any way you like among those characters. The characters are different in each small scene as the time [is] different. They may be played by any number of actors.*’ The rapid shifts in time and place are signified solely through an interchange of actors and a flash of light.

Yet what is deliberately utilitarian and modest in Dominic Cooke’s production is hugely ambitious in authorial intention as Churchill’s play outlines a history of modern Israel from the Holocaust up until the most recent events in Gaza. This is done through seven short scenes, each depicting a Jewish Israeli family debating how to explain events in modern Jewish history, such as the Holocaust, the foundation of Israel, and the 6 day war to a little girl we never see. The production asks difficult

questions: how do you explain war, violence, fear and hatred to a child? The non-specific characters, interchangeable faces and minimal props lend the production a strongly allegorical feeling. What might be *a* Jewish Israeli family becomes the representative for *all* Jewish Israeli families, just as the absent child represents all children.

It is this vexed question of representation that moves the play into muddier waters. How, in a play, do you do justice to the complexity of the situation of Israel and Gaza? And, most strikingly of all, how do you do so in less than 10 minutes?

As is evident from its length, *Seven Jewish Children* is not an ordinary play in its conception or production. Rather it is a piece of reactive theatre that was written in direct response to the situation in Gaza with the intention of promoting and raising money for the charity Medical Aid for Palestinians (for which there were collection points and leaflets throughout the theatre). That the piece is reactive is made explicit by Churchill herself when she points out: ‘I wrote it last week; by this week I was arranging it with the Royal Court; it's now being cast; rehearsals are next week; and we perform it on 6 February’ (Brown, 2008). Churchill went on to say: ‘It came out of feeling strongly about what’s happening in Gaza – it’s a way of helping the people there. Everyone knows about Gaza, everyone is upset about it, and this play is something they could come to. It’s a political event, not just a theatre event.’

Churchill’s comments draw attention to one of two major misgivings I had about this production. Firstly, there is the danger of the deliberately reactive: the naïveté that can characterize this kind of ‘political theatre.’ Her sweeping comment ‘everyone is upset about it’ suggests a uniformity of political belief between performance makers and audience that can arguably lead to what one *Times* critic, at his most vitriolic, called ‘the enclosed, fetid, smug, self-congratulating and entirely

irrelevant little world of contemporary political theatre' (Hart, 2009). In this case, the framing of the production leaves no doubt as to what we are all meant to feel upon witnessing the play. This in itself is not surprising in a piece of theatre specifically designed to raise funds for people in need.

However, in keeping with the play's brevity and the desire to write to a specific *end*, Churchill's choice of the allegorical lends itself to potentially reductive characterisations and simplifications of intentions. Indeed, in its tracing of important episodes in Israeli history, *Seven Jewish Children* is somewhat akin to the travelling medieval morality plays where biblical stories were retold with didactic intention. Good and evil are painted in explicit terms to maximise the impact of the moral message within the time constraint, leading to the possibility of stereotyping. This is evident at the end of *Seven Jewish Children* where the deft, intelligent and complex dialogue that marks Churchill's work gives way in the last scene to a long single outburst from a character. In this speech Churchill's Jews transform from victims to cartoon monster perpetrators:

tell her I don't care if the world hates us, tell her we're better haters, tell her we're chosen people, tell her I look at one of their children covered in blood and what do I feel? tell her all I feel is happy it's not her.

The second troubling aspect of the production relates to *agency*. Performance scholar Baz Kershaw noted, when writing about the politics of performance, that 'we must move beyond formalist analysis – which treats theatre as if it were independent of its social and political environment – and consider performance as a cultural construct and a means of cultural production' (Kershaw 5). In this statement, Kershaw is drawing attention not only to a rejection of the concept of theatre as somehow apolitical, but also to the importance of a degree of reflexivity in performance making. In other words, it is not only about what performance makers want to say, but also

from where they are saying it: their own cultural positioning. It is this lack of reflexivity, the pretence that theatre and theatre practitioners are somehow ‘outside’ and able to make impartial political commentary that risks being mistaken and even, at times, offensive or patronising.

Churchill’s decision to speak *for* Jews exclusively and to give no voice to the Palestinians arguably perpetuates the dichotomous relationship of perpetrator and victim. As seen in the above, this leads to language that is at times stereotyped and also to a degree ‘others’ the Palestinians who are unseen and unheard victims, an uncomfortable positioning that carries the traces of colonialism.

Let me be clear: it is not the job of the performance scholar to make a pronouncement on the definitive ‘meaning’ of a live performance. As many prominent writers have argued at length, trying to pin down the ‘intention’ of a performance ignores the complexity of signifiers and the equally important role of reception involved in meaning-making. Marvin Carlson expressed it in his definitive work, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*: ‘[p]erformance by its nature resists conclusions, just as it resists the sort of definitions, boundaries, and limits so useful to traditional academic writing and academic structures’ (Carlson 207).

Indeed, while it may be easy to highlight difficulties with this piece in close textual examination, paying attention to non-text-based signs yields a richer interpretation. At its most affective, *Seven Jewish Children* is about the constant desire for – and absence of – home and safety. This insecurity is aided by the distinct military theme that runs through *Seven Jewish Children*: the actors trudge in lines onto the stage and line up against the walls like soldiers. Whilst the scenes are ostensibly about a family, they gather in a bare, militant place. There is no separation of family and war: rather, there is a conflation of the two as what might be a kitchen

table becomes a war command. Their home is not a ‘home,’ it is a bomb shelter: a collective refuge from the threat outside.

As security is always absent in this play, so is war ever present. The actors’ World War II style clothing is a physical manifestation of the Holocaust, rooted into the body of the survivors and the future generations, inescapable, ever-present. As the scenes escalate towards the contemporary, the clothes tie the characters to the past and a modern Jewish identity forged in the darkest circumstances imaginable.

Seven Jewish Children suggests that a safe home – for Israeli Jews and for Palestinians – is just like the beloved child, always out of sight.

References

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