JASON SHERMAN

"They'll Shoot Us If We Do This Play."

The Limits of Free Speech in Canadian Theatre

People often ask me what kind of reaction I get to my "Jewish plays." My standard reply, honed over two decades of answering the question, used to be this: I do not write Jewish plays, but if you mean the plays that raise questions about Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, they get all sorts of reactions. As does just about any play that challenges its audience to think and feel.

But now, almost thirty years after I wrote the first of these plays, a more pertinent question might be this: Have the reactions to your plays changed over the years? To which the short answer would be yes – drastically. As for the long answer, read on.

Yet, first let me pause and tell you that I do not think of myself as a Jewish writer, nor of my work for the theatre as Jewish plays. I write. That is what I do. And if some of my work features characters who are Jewish, that is simply because I decided a long time ago to not only draw from my own experiences but to write directly about those experiences. Growing up in a Jewish home – how did that affect me? How was I indoctrinated into a way of thinking, of being? How am I programmed to act and respond, and how can I counter that programming? This particular Jewish home was not especially religious. My brothers and I all had bar mitzvahs, after which we were free to continue attending synagogue or not. Most of us chose option two. We continued to gather for Hanukkah, Passover and Rosh Hashanah, though the numbers dropped over the years through attrition (death, divorce) or indifference. Friday night dinners were perhaps the most obvious ongoing manifestation of our Jewishness. It never occurred to me to connect this particular night with the Sabbath, and other than my mother lighting the candles, there were no obvious signs that it was the Sabbath. It was just understood that everyone was expected to attend, and the ritual of the weekly sit-down was a lovely, lively chance to be together as a family. Beyond all that, we shared a Jewish sense of humour, had a heightened awareness of events in Israel, and suffered the slings and arrows of quiet outrage from the extended family when most of us married non-Jewish women. On the whole, Adonai was thought about only in times of crisis.

But back to my plays. I have written some twenty of them, of which five have significant Jewish content. By significant I mean a character's Jewishness is central to the drama. Here is a sketchbook:

In the early 1990s I was commissioned to write the stage adaptation of a book called None Is Too Many, a work of history that tells the story of Canada's refusal to take in Jewish refugees even as they fled Nazi persecution. The blatantly anti-Jewish policy persisted for many years after the war, too, until the need for skilled labour broke the logjam. I did not know the story and I guarantee you most Canadians did not know it, either. Why? Because of a general lack of interest in our own history, and because it blemishes our record of welcoming those in need to our shores. The title is what a Canadian politician at the time is reputed to have said in response to a question about how many Jewish refugees should be allowed into the country.
As I say I did not know the story and I was so shocked and saddened and outraged by it that I decided to lift my private embargo against writing a Holocaust play. Most of these plays to my mind are largely cynical exercises in eliciting cheap tears from the horrors of genocide. But as the play was also a chance to poke holes in Canada’s self-mythologizing ways, I took it on. In the end, it is a non-controversial play about a safely controversial subject, and most people can agree to its unstated conclusion – i.e., it was a bad thing that Canada did not let the Jews in. Interestingly, no one ever asked me what kind of reaction this Jewish play got.

Ultimately, unsatisfied with the result of None Is Too Many, I wrote a related work, Remnants (2003), which borrowed from both the historical record and the biblical one. Using the story of Joseph and his brothers, it follows the fortunes of a young tailor who rats on his siblings as they try to form a union; found out, he is sent into exile in the New World, where he rises to a position as favourite of the flaky prime minister, and is called to intercede when a boat carrying Jewish refugees docks on Canadian shores. His brothers are among those on board. Again, not an entirely successful play, and again not once was I asked for my reactions to it.

There is also The Retreat (1994), which is a love-found-and-lost story, the main character of which is a Hebrew school teacher who is told to apologize after offering some mild criticism of Israel to her young charges. (This play was written in a calmer time, before such comments would have gone viral and led to the teacher’s immediate dismissal.) The story then follows her as she heads off to a screenwriting retreat, where she is meant to work on her well-meaning but bloated tale about a 16th century Jewish messiah/mystic/madman; instead, she falls in love with her philandering teacher and learns a more direct lesson in putting your faith in authority. The teacher’s rebuke to Israel was mostly in the story’s background, so again no one bothered to ask me what sort of reactions I got to the play.

No, the question was reserved for two plays in which Israel is very much in the foreground. They are also the sort of work that is labelled "political theatre."

Describing a play as "political" in Canada is almost as much of a turn-off as describing it as "Canadian." We have neither the history nor the appetite for political art in this country (the former because of the latter) beyond a few shining examples, unless you expand the category to include any story that touches on societal issues, and does so in the most polite fashion. I prefer my political theatre with the gloves off, that is direct and honest and unafraid to upend long-held beliefs. And that is what I set out to do with my first truly political work, The League of Nathans (1992).

I wrote this play for reasons that had nothing to do with Israel at all – at least not directly. Having studied the great works of modern theatre in school (Chekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg), I knew that in order to write about the Human Condition I should make no reference to the time and place in which I lived, writing instead about people who lived in that "Nevertime Land" called The Stage. That all changed after I saw an exciting evening of theatre based on the work of Noam Chomsky (which was about his media analysis, not his tearing into the Occupation1). A work that challenged and awakened its audience, it motivated me to write about the here and now, and to put something of

1 The Occupation is understood to be (in the context of the article) the military occupation of Palestinian territory by Israel. Reference is often made to "The Occupied Territories."

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myself into my work. "Something of myself" meant a thorough and honest examination of my own beliefs. I conducted this moral vivisection through a group of three Jewish friends, who had grown up together in suburban Toronto and then grown apart, each of them taking their own very separate paths in life. They met at a very young age when they found themselves in the same Hebrew school class, to which they had been sent to prepare for their bar mitzvahs. Learning they shared the same name, they started a club, entry limited to boys named Nathan. The play begins with a phone call many years later, when businessman Nathan Isaacs (Izzy) tells artist Nathan Abramowitz (Nathan) that they have been invited to a reunion with Nathan Glass (Glass), to be held in a synagogue in Toledo, Spain. (I had visited this abandoned synagogue years earlier and knew from the moment I stepped into it that I would set a play there.) Each of the Nathans represents one of the main modern tribes of Judaism: Glass is a staunch Zionist; Izzy is the supportive diaspora Jew upon whose largesse and ideological support Israel depends; Nathan is the left-leaning if ineffectual critic of the Occupation.

As Izzy and Nathan make their way to Spain, we learn through flashbacks that Glass had many years earlier taken part in the murder of an Arab gas station attendant in Toronto, as revenge for the terrorist bombing in Tel Aviv, and then fled to Israel for refuge. Glass has not been heard of since that night, and Abramowitz has been carrying the memory of those events with him all these years. The play's climax is their emotionally-charged meeting, where both men (after conveniently ridding themselves of Izzy, who was always the group's outsider) accuse one another of betrayal over the murder: Glass feels that Nathan abandoned him on that night, while Nathan believes that Glass (who purports to only have watched the murder but not participated) abandoned the principles of humanity. Their meeting ends with Glass making an impassioned speech to Nathan, which starts with a defense of Israel and ends with an invitation to Nathan to see the country for himself.

The play went through a long development period, culminating in its first production in a tiny Toronto theatre. It gained some attention in the theatre community, but raised nary a hackle on the collective back of Canadian Zionists, unless they happened to also be members of the theatre community. (If any Palestinians saw the play they did not tell me.) Significantly, however, it was the first time that the response question was put to me, either by people who had seen the play or by those who had not: "what kind of reaction are you getting?" It took me a long time to understand that the question is a dodge, and means "I am trying to figure out what to make of the political positions taken by your characters; I am uncomfortable that you have allowed one of your characters to speak out against Israel; tell me what the majority of people are saying and I will go along with that."

For The League of Nathans I had people (Jews, not-even-Jews) thanking me because they so identified with Nathan's dilemma, which is: where do my loyalties lie? Am I willing to challenge the beliefs of my community and suffer the consequence? How do I summon the courage to speak out or put myself in harm's way in order to defend my beliefs? I put my own complicated Jewishness into Nathan Abramowitz: his confusions are mine, his determination to learn the truth is mine, his lack of courage to act upon learning it is also mine. But of course there was the other end of the reaction spectrum. This was the pre-tribal 90s, when the worst thing Jews could think to call other Jews who openly questioned Israel was self-hating. The Canadian Jewish News called me

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that in a headline. (A sign that I was onto something, since the only thing worse than
being libeled by this monument to Jewish Conservatism is to be celebrated by it.) And
in between those two poles sat the vast number of responses, which ran the usual post-
theatre gamut from shrugs to insincere “congratulations” to shuffling off for a drink. (I
do not mind the post-show non-responses, by the way; over the years, it is the immedi-
ate response that I’ve come to value less than the considered one.)

In retrospect, the most remarkable thing about The League of Nathans is that it was
produced at all, without so much as the Jewish Defense League (JDL) trying to prevent
ticket-holders from entering the theatre (as this motley group of thugs has done for at
least one other production that I know of), or some Jewish advocacy group calling for
the production to be halted (as happened to My Name Is Rachel Corrie (2006) among
many other plays that dare show Israel in anything but a glowing light). Not once
through the long gestation period of the play did anyone involved in it think that I was
going too far, or imagine that there might be some danger to the theatre or the actors in
taking on the play. Four years later, they could imagine it very well.

The 1993 Rabin-Arafat handshake in the arms of Clinton still brings a tear to the
eyes of those who thought that the dove of peace had finally flown over the land. But
the dove was having none of it, and kept flapping her wings till she was far, far away.
A year later an Israeli settler walked into a mosque in Hebron and massacred twenty-
ine men at prayer (and destroyed the bodies and psyches of many, many more. Israel
held an inquiry into the massacre that put it down to the work of a madman, ignoring
testimony that placed the rampage in the context of a decades-long military occupation.

I decided that I needed to write a follow-up to The League of Nathans, and did so
with a play called Reading Hebron (1996). Here, Nathan Abramowitz (the earlier play’s
central character) becomes obsessed with Israel’s official inquiry into the murders, so
much so that he decides to hold his own inquiry, not only into Israel but into himself,
his relationship to Judaism, the Jewish state and to the people in his life. The play mixes
fictional scenes of Nathan – working temp jobs, divorced, alone – with testimony from
the inquiry, as well as media reports and other found material (a poem written by the
killer when he was a thirteen-year-old Brooklyn Yeshiva boy; a Palestinian child’s ac-
count of being tortured in an Israeli jail; letters to the editor from concerned citizens).
Nathan is conducting his investigation in the privacy of his own room and imagination;
he fantasizes about testifying before the inquiry, but even in the safe confines of his
mind his concerns are dismissed. The play ends, as the inquiry did, with recommenda-
tions to further separate the two sides in the ongoing tragedy.

As with The League of Nathans, I was commonly asked about reactions to the play,
this time with a graver note of concern from the askers. I can report that the range of
responses was as wide as they were four years earlier; but the degree of the responses
had changed. I detected in those who were sympathetic to Nathan’s plight a kind of
resignation or sorrow; I detected in those who were not a sense of outrage. Remember,
things had gotten worse in Israel as the promise of the Oslo Accords began to crumble.
There was a renewed effort on the part of Zionists around the world to not only reaffirm
their commitment to Israel and defend the Jewish state at any cost, but to completely
shut down all opposition to it. The push-back could be keenly felt in Canada. I had a
front-row seat to it one Saturday night during the run of Reading Hebron.
The play had opened to rapturous reviews, but the producing theatre was in a more-precarious-than-usual financial state at the time and had neither the resources nor the will to fire up ticket sales. (I well recall the hapless artistic director, his neck veins pulsating, yelling that "we can't sell this play – it's too controversial!") Luckily, the reviews and word-of-mouth combined to start filling the seats, if only for weekend performances. I do not often revisit a play of mine once it's opened, but I happened to take in a Saturday night show a couple of weeks into the run. I could sense an unease in the crowd on this particular night, even before the play started, as though they knew as one that they were in for an unsettling evening. Then the play started and we were right into the thick of it, with Nathan Abramowitz directly addressing the audience and giving them details about the massacre, testimony from which soon followed.

It was an old theatre with dilapidated, squeaky chairs. That night, there was a lot of squeaking. And sighing. Very heavy sighing. Nobody sighs more heavily than Jews at a play they are not liking. But of course this is Canada so nobody ever gets more demonstrative than that. Except somebody did. This particular somebody stood up – squeak – very loudly jangled a set of keys and yelled something at the actors. I do not remember what it was, or even if I heard the words clearly. (I was sitting in the balcony, which overhangs a good portion of the orchestra seats, so had no idea who the Jangler was.) Then came the stomping of feet up the aisle and the banging open of the theatre door and the further yelling, this time at the poor box office staffer. The actors coolly and professionally played on. Backstage that night the two women in the cast were in tears. They had never experienced anything like it. The Jangler, I should say, stood up at an interesting time in the play. It came with the introduction of young Baruch Goldstein into the play, just as he donned a tallis and began to read his poem of peace. Apparently, this was too much for at least one member of the audience, who could not stand the thought of listening to a child's call for peace. The actor who played Goldstein coolly waited for the Jangler, who had now morphed into the Stomper, to make his (her? I never did see the offended one) way out of the auditorium, and then carried on.

Something had indeed changed, and not just on this night. I had felt it coming on incrementally in the preceding years, ever since that dove made off with her olive branch. Canadian Jews – taking their cue from Israel and its protectors – were getting more vocal in their opposition to any form of criticism about the Jewish State. Now, rather than simply brand its critics with the tired cliché of self-hating Jew, a brilliant new strategy was introduced, equating criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. Like the best ad campaigns, it was simple, pure, easy to grasp and just as easy to remember.

What happened during that Saturday night performance of Reading Hebron was part of this new rigidity among Zionists, who would literally no longer sit there and take it. ("It" being another point of view.) This rigidity has a name: Hasbarah (propaganda), and it's been highly effective. Other ominous signs of it had already popped up here and there:

1. At a fundraising dinner for the Tarragon Theater, a University of Toronto professor, after hearing my synopsis of The League of Nathans, accused me of wishing that "Hitler had finished the job." As soon as she heard that at the heart of the play was a confrontation between a Zionist and a Liberal Jew, she flipped. I was not about to accept her slander and made her retract her disgusting words. She did so, reluctantly, possibly...
because we still had the entree and dessert to get through. You can take it on faith that were she to make the same stupid remark today, an apology would not be forthcoming;

2. At a Q & A session after a performance of Reading Hebron in Montreal, I was assailed by speaker after speaker with the question "where is the balance?" "Balance," in the case of discussions about Israel, always means this: "why did you include a sympathetic Palestinian voice?" This was part of the new brook-no-dissent strategy: Zionists realized that the Palestinians were starting to get out their story, and that the only way to stop this from happening was to shout it down and denounce anyone who would dare share it.

3. On a break from a Jewish theatre conference, to which I had been invited to give a keynote address, a young American artistic director took me aside at the coffee table to assure me that he loved my plays, "but" – and here he looked about nervously and dropped his voice to a whisper – "but politically I can't do them."

Let us be clear, though: American and Canadian Jews have always been a small 'c' conservative bunch, Canadians perhaps more so than their southern neighbours, even when they were mostly voting for the capital 'C' Liberals. But they (d)evolved, emerging from the liberal cocoon where they supported humanitarian causes of every stripe to emerge fully formed as a capital 'C' Conservative bloc, still supporting every underdog group but the Palestinians, trading their conscience for support of Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Friends of Israel Gang. In Harper – whom Haaretz columnist Gideon Levy called "the most automatic backer of Israel in the world" – they had a guy who literally serenaded Benjamin Netanyahu. (Fire up the internet and search for "Harper sings Hey Jude," and try to keep a straight face when the camera pans to Bibi trying to do the same.) The fact that Harper is an Evangelical Christian whose support for Israel is in line with Biblical prophecy doesn't seem to bother his Canadian Jewish fanboys, no matter that the Last Battle will consign them and all they love to the eternal flames of hell.

It is perhaps not coincidental that Bibi would reward his prized songbird by naming a bird sanctuary for him in Israel. Then again, it is not as if Canuck prime ministers before or after Harper have exactly been the enemy of the Jewish State, or would ever have so much as hummed "Give Peace a Chance" before the Knesset (wrong Beatle, I guess). Harper, though, took Canadian support for Israel to new heights – or depths – by trying to introduce legislation that would have made support of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement a hate crime. This anti-democratic move was in lockstep with Israeli efforts over the last several years to punish and silence its own citizens for daring to speak of the Nakba (the Palestinian word for the events of 1948 and beyond), a cynical, heavy-handed response to a legitimate attempt at speaking truth to the history books. (No doubt those who question the lack of balance in my plays are outraged over Israel's stifling of the other side of the debate, and are constantly sending emails to the editor of Israel Hayom and other mouthpieces of the state demanding balance in their coverage.)

Such was the atmosphere when I was invited to take part in a theatre festival in Israel some years ago. It was both my first trip to Israel and my first time back in a theatre in a long time. I had in the preceding years stopped writing plays, having decided that I could no longer justify the time and effort I was putting into an art form that was marginal at best. I defected to television, where I gave up my voice in order to make some money. But the trip to Israel reinvigorated my thoughts and feelings about the
place, as I saw firsthand that which I had only ever heard about, thought about, read about, written about. I was soon plotting the further adventures of my gang of Nathans. I did not know much about it, other than that it would finally take Nathan Abramowitz to Israel, where he would have to confront his own push-me-pull-me relationship with the country and its people. And, of course, come face-to-face again with his former friend Nathan Glass, who so long ago had dared Nathan to make the trip.

The play was commissioned by Canada's biggest theatre, the Stratford Festival, which didn't really know what it was getting into, since I was given carte blanche to write anything I wanted. Naturally, I gave them a sprawling, political play set in Israel. In Ariel's Wall, as it was then called, Nathan goes to Israel, gets lost in the West Bank and somehow enters the mind of the comatose Ariel Sharon, thereby seeing the entire history of the country through the brain of a man who'd been witness to every significant event in the country's brief, eventful history. Izzy was also along for the ride, having come to Israel to celebrate the wedding of his son. Stratford passed. Not their cuppa.

I then sent the play to a company in Toronto, which quickly took its measure by holding a private reading, attended by the artistic director. I had made some changes to the play, but it was still long and unwieldy as I continued to test out a number of ideas, characters and storylines – but the main thrust of the piece was there. At the end of the reading, the cast offered the customary applause. The artistic director dutifully joined in, but even in the midst of his faux enthusiasm leaned into me and stage-whispered, "They'll shoot us if we do this play." He snort-laughed at his own remark, but the joke was one me.

Undaunted, and beginning to see what this new work could be, I sent it to another Toronto theatre company, a much smaller one than the second, itself much smaller than the first. This third company mostly produces plays from the contemporary repertoire plays that had established their bona fides on Broadway or in the West End – while occasionally mixing it up with a provocation or two. (They had produced the play I referred to above, the one the JDL had tried to block access to.) The third artistic director — or AD3 as I will call him — was very excited by the draft, and committed at our first meeting to producing the play after a two-year development period. Jackpot! The Nathans Plays would now be a trilogy! Can you see where this is going?

Like all of my plays, this one went through extensive rewrites. After two workshops, it was unrecognizable from that first Stratford draft. All that remained were the three Nathans and a trip to Israel. Even the title had changed. It was now called United Nathans, a moniker that offered the promise of a reconciliation among the three friends. The plot is still motivated by the wedding of Izzy's son, but focuses almost entirely on the Nathans as they tramp through Israel on a recreation trail, catching up on their lives and ultimately confronting each other over the murder and Glass's role in it. (Izzy makes a surprising revelation about the event.) The play revisits the themes of the earlier plays – loyalties, ethics, history – while bringing Nathan face to face with his moral and physical cowardice.

At the end of each workshop, a reading was held, with the usual grin-and-bear-it Q&A afterward. After the first reading – when the play was halfway between what it was and what it would become – every question from the audience was about the politics of the play, with much questioning if not outright condemnation of what it had to say about Israel. Naturally, few noticed the words of the pro-Israel characters, and
once again I was challenged about the play's balance, because once again I had made the cardinal sin of including the Palestinian narrative alongside the Israeli one. None of this was terribly surprising. What was surprising, and most gratifying, was that after the second reading, when the play had gone through its most extensive set of revisions, the play was met with great enthusiasm by the audience, many of them having been present at the first reading.

But now, instead of debating whether the play was pro-this, anti-that, balanced or off-kilter, people were expressing genuine engagement with the story, the characters, the ideas, the emotional pull of the piece. To me (and to the actors) this was a sign that the play was now a play. The political views informed the story, but the struggles of the characters were foremost on the minds of those who word it. AD3, however, left without saying a word to me.

Two weeks later, after I wrote to him seeking comment, I was informed that the promised production was off. His reaction was completely at odds with the response from the audience. Perhaps he had given up on the play following the Q & A session after the first reading. Or perhaps it was something more. Perhaps AD3 had decided that it was not worth it, in the current atmosphere, to press on with a play about Israel (even one that no longer brought out knee-jerk reactions from its audience). No, safer to retreat to the world of complacency. The company's next production was *The Chosen*, which is about as likely to stir debate as a box of toothpicks. To add salt to the wound, AD3 cast my Nathan Abramowitz in a leading role.

Of course AD3 never flat out told me that he was reneging on his word because he feared backlash, or because the thought of having to battle the JDL kept him up at night, or that Hasbarah had done its work so effectively that it was no longer worth the effort to express any dissent over the continued Occupation and its physical and psychological effects on both the Palestinians and their Israeli overlords. But you'll forgive me for thinking that we had entered a new phase in the ongoing battle to stage political art, specifically about Israel. There are three such phases, and each one corresponds to one of my Nathans plays:

Phase 1 (*The League of Nathans*): low-level opposition.

Phase 2 (*Reading Hebron*): loud, organized opposition.

Phase 3 (*United Nathans*): self-censorship.

In Phase 3, I no longer need to answer by rote the question: "What kind of reactions did you get to your play?"

In Phase 3, I am left to wonder, what kind of reactions might I have got to my play? But perhaps I need not wonder. Perhaps it is as clear as an artistic director whispering that he would be shot if he did my play. As clear as a young American director's hushed fears about taking on my work. As clear as another American director declaring during a roundtable discussion that yes, Jewish lives were worth more than Arab ones. As clear as a professor telling me that I obviously wished every last Jew in Europe had been gassed. As clear as the panicked employee of a Montreal company who while on the phone with me worried that a group of placard-waving protesters was on its way to the

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2 The play is based on Chaim Potok's 1967 novel.
theatre, only to breathe a sigh of relief as she realized it was a Labor Day parade, and was marching on by.

Yes, it is all very clear.
In Canada, we do not shoot people for their plays.
We just stop the plays from being heard in the first place.
In the name of balance.

Works Cited
