

On Resort 76: Jewish Drama and Putting the Audience Through a Difficult Evening
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During the month of October 2019, the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater, Theatre and Dance Department will produce *Resort 76*, Shimon Wincelberg's drama of the Lodz ghetto. The play will run concurrent with complementary scholarly programs on campus and within the community. During the run, Bella Bryks-Klein (daughter of Rachmil Bryks, author of the source material that Wincelberg adapted for his play script) will visit from Israel to speak and attend the production.

"*Nein! Zay musen vissen,*" this quote is pulled from the afterward in the current print edition of *A Cat in the Ghetto* by Rachmil Bryks. The afterward is written by the author's daughter, Bella Bryks-Klein. This particular quote, which she ascribes to her father, translates to, "No, they must know." I include it here because of what it says in comparison to the oft repeated "never forget." Both are strong statements, but Bryks' admonition is aggressive and forward leaning. It prompts the question, what is next after we have not forgotten? Is it enough that we simply continue to remember?

Rachmil Bryks' writings, recently republished in English by Persea Books are the inspiration for Shimon Wincelberg's play, *Resort 76*. Bryks survived the *Shoah* from ghetto to camp, and then committed his experiences to paper. *Resort 76* is the dramatization of some of Bryks' memories of the Lodz Ghetto.

Before deciding to direct this play, I considered a few other scripts dealing with the Holocaust. I looked to the conventional and populist, but I wanted a property that was unfamiliar. Familiarity, in my estimation, can get in the way of discovering a play and its characters. I also wanted to avoid sentimentalism as the university audiences we perform to are adroit cynics. In investigating some other options, I pulled my copy of Wallace Shawn's *Aunt Dan and Lemon* off the shelf. For his play, Shawn provides a special preface to the script. This preface, titled "Notes in Justification of Putting the Audience through a Difficult Evening," serves as a caveat to an ethically challenging piece of theatre. Shawn writes:

It would be flattering to believe that we are superior in some way to the audiences who cheered for Hitler -- more insightful and perceptive, let's say or less bloodthirsty -- but I think it would be more prudent to make the assumption that perhaps we are not. At least we should allow ourselves to imagine that possibility for just a moment. After all, if we do turn out to be superior -- if we are, in fact, a uniquely benign and harmless group of people, blessed with unusual clarity of vision -- then our moment of over-cautiousness will have cost us nothing. Whereas if it should happen to turn out that we're not superior, our self-examination might save a lot of people -- possibly all people -- from being harmed by us.

This preface came to mind when I reconsidered Shimon Wincelberg's *Resort 76*. The drama is an adaptation, of Bryks' *A Cat in the Ghetto*. The novella, amongst other stories, served as the foundation for Wincelberg's play. Although quite different in plot, *Resort* is similar to *Aunt Dan and Lemon* regarding the difficult evening it means to put its audience through. *Resort 76* is an unconventional and little produced play within the genre of holocaust drama. It offers protagonists that are morally grey, often ignoble, and very human. Wincelberg's motley ensemble is complex with neither good nor evil defining a character. The complexity intrigues on an individual level, draws us to empathize and focus on people, and not the big terrible thing happening to them. To some large degree, the ability to focus on the "big terrible thing" is comforting because it is not individualized. The "big terrible thing" is universal and easily translates across tribal lines. Most importantly, being "big" the "terrible thing" is outside of our personal orbit and, to a degree, allows us to step

back and objectify comfortably at a distance. Stories of the Holocaust can tend to focus on the “big terrible,” which helps their universality but hurts empathy. Wincelberg’s play is not one of those stories.

I ran across *Resort 76* twenty years ago buried in an archival heap at the Jewish Center of Columbus, Ohio. I was artistic director of the center’s seventy-five year old resident theatre company, Gallery Players. Part of the job was season selection, a responsibility I shared with an influential community board. I brought Wincelberg’s play to the board and they roundly showed me just why they had buried the play in that heap. That board found *Resort 76* “unsettling.” Actually, unsettling is the most euphemistic comment I recall. The essence of their objections was that *Resort 76* is an “ugly” play and paints the murdered Jews of the *Shoah* in an unkind light. In all fairness, traditional preferences seemed to trend more toward the homey comedy of Neil Simon’s *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, the tribal reassurance of *Fiddler on the Roof*, and the noble portrait of victimhood in the *Diary of Anne Frank*. All of these are valuable plays, and good selections for an organization focused on communicating Jewish experience.

A colleague further explained to me that producing *Fiddler on the Roof* and *Anne Frank* is a celebration of tradition and a *mitzvah*. That, indeed, it is crucial to mount these shows every five years or so as new cohorts become theatre-ready. The staging of plays like *Anne* and *Fiddler* (and others such as *Kindertransport* and *The Chosen*) is sacramental and didactic. Like the ancient Greeks, Jews use theatre (especially Holocaust drama) as a teaching tool and cultural affirmation. As a Jew, what I see as reaffirming in a play like *Anne* or *Fiddler* is simple. It is nobility, charity, and wisdom in the face of travail: it is the balance of pragmatism and faith. It is who we would like to be, and how we want others to see us. For a group of peoples so historically threatened, the presentation of Jews as acceptable and useful is a long-standing benefit.

Drama of a people is different from drama for a people. *Fiddler* rides comfortably astride that axis, similarly *Anne Frank* is of the Jewish people, but for everyone. The same can go for most populist/conventional Holocaust and Jewish drama. I would argue that this is exactly what makes “populist” populist, and “conventional” conventional. In the wider view, this applies to most genre-specific drama that grows from a marginalized group. Culturally dedicated theatre traditions have developed from within most minority segments. There is gay drama, Latin drama, black drama, Asian and it goes on quite a bit from there. These are all distinct but share commonality. When a play becomes very successful (e.g. populist/conventional), it has most likely crossed-over and cemented its appeal to those outside the group and in the predominance. A genre play becomes “for a people” when its audience exceeds that genre’s community and a play “for a people” finds success through universal relatability. Broad empathy is the goal and “otherness,” offence or discomfort can preclude this. An undercutting of the “other” is necessary and often the result is cultural neutering. Ultimately, exceeding the genre minority relies on how relatable and palatable a minority story is to the majority. Homogenizing the story is one approach; more problematic still is when this undercutting occurs through derision and disempowerment.

This happened, most notably (and ironically), during the dying days of Minstrelsy. This was a form created for a people. Specifically, for Anglo-Europeans to satirize and mock their black African slave force. Those same Anglo-Europeans created and performed in the Minstrel shows. Around the time of emancipation, as interest in the form waned unexpected minstrel troupes were organizing to take advantage of a vacuum in the market. In the later days, those troupes were black. As white people abandoned Minstrelsy for Vaudeville, black-run troupes stepped into the market. Black entrepreneurs managed and performed these shows and capitalized on white society’s lampoon of them. They co-opted the stock types, clownish physicality, insulting characterizations, blackface, and found commercial success in the recapturing of their own defamation. What had started as drama for a people was reverse-appropriated to become of a people, commercially universalizing the form, and benefitting the marginalized group. Black drama developed a rich history. In general, the black

stories and characters that crossover to white audiences until recently seems to fall into two pools: those that capitalize on their own stereotypes and those that stage their travail.

Gay drama, which arguably started to assert its underground self in the *avant-garde*, and absurdist plays of innovators like Charles Ludlum, eventually found crossover successes. This happened in the same way that most other genre traditions have, by first capitalizing on their stereotypes and then staging their travail. Mart Crowley's racy *Boys in the Band*, was authentic but still camp. As playwright, Neill Bartlett details:

Following *Boys* and the Stonewall Riots (1969), gay characters began to appear in mainstream drama that did not posit tortured (or torturing) homosexuals as its wrenching *raison d'être*. However, such works as James Kirkwood and Nicholas Dante's *A Chorus Line* (1975) and Michael Cristofer's *The Shadow Box* (1977) feature quipping queens who do encourage audiences' associations of homosexuality with constant carnival.

This carnival association softens the exotic otherness. In the same way that the Minstrel characters Zip Coon and Jim Crow provided a non-threatening clown for white audiences, camp portrayals of gay characters proved ingratiating to straight society. These examples have become effective tropes for their respective genre. This is evident more prominently in mainstream television and film. The commonly accepted tropes are so ingrained in society that, well they are tropes.

Jewish theatrical traditions began as drama of a people. Starting in celebration, ritual and didacticism, the earliest dramas (arguably, evocative biblical poetry like the *Song of Solomon* or liturgical pageants and Purim Spiels) were sacramental. This theatre was not universal and intended specifically for a Jewish audience.

The Classical Greeks did the same thing. Their justification for theatre lay in its utility as both a teaching tool and ritualistic instrument. The tragedies of Sophocles were syllabi for the *polis*. The festivals themselves were sacred ceremonies and attendance was extraordinarily good, due in no small part to the civic gravity the event generated. This is important, since none of these stories were new. Amphitheaters were not filling up because *Oedipus* was a novel entertainment, the Greeks turned out to reaffirm and celebrate their traditions. As cultural and community nourishment, there is unimpeachable value to theatre like this. I can even see the argument in regular revivals of *Fiddler on the Roof*.

Eventually, where Jews did find broader success on the stage was in the guise of an easily digestible, self-lampoon for Gentile audiences. These characters are two-dimensional stereotypes. They are tramp clown or *bête noir*; the ineffectual *nebbish*, the doddering *alter cocker*, the haranguing *yenta*, the sinister *gonif*; all of them played with hyperbolic theatricality undercutting and de-fanging the threatening exoticism of the "Other." As Jews mainstreamed into American culture, the portrayals became more subtle but not much more dimensional. In so much of what we would define as Jewish theatre, the characters are still tropes. They are less broad and more nuanced than the *yiddishkeit* clowns, they may not be carnivalesque but they are comedic and romantic. Romanticism is melodrama at its root and simple morality of melodrama is comforting. This comfort emanates from poetic justice and a sense that the righteous are rewarded. That victory is justified, and so is despair. That all the *tsuris* was worth it. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevya loses Anatevka. In the Diary of Anne Frank, our titular hero loses her freedom and life. In neither case does the protagonist lose faith. The persistence of faith is the message here. Frankly, Anna and Tevya both are less important than this message. They are exemplars, like *Oedipus* or *Medea*, and meant to serve as a lesson. It is worth noting that *Fiddler* and *Anne* are both closer to dramatic romanticism than Greek tragedy, so we should be encouraged to empathize with Anne and root for Tevya. Meanwhile, all the time we spend emphatically rooting we also know that one will not survive and both will lose. In the end, Anne must die and Tevya must flee; the martyring of both is

compulsory so the persistence of faith and hope is preeminent. Tevya and Anne are safe, morally defensible, unchallenging avatars. Most importantly, they are accepting and hopeful in the extremity of their victimization. They are doomed, yet serenely resigned at their end. As such, these plays mesh well with the bittersweet expectations of Jewish celebratory remembrance. Tevye and Anne are attractive culturally because they are each a memorial to tragic heroism and wistful hope, as a result, the reduction of both to the iconography and ineffability of sentiment. The question remains, if hope survives, was the *tsuris* was worth it?

I am not interested in promulgating sentiment. A much fuller portrait is possible of the Jewish experience as human beings in travail. In selecting Wincelberg's play, we are mounting a theatre production that will not protect sensibilities or forego the ugly in deference to comfort and avoiding disturbance. Indeed, I hold that seeking opportunities to discomfit and disturb are very Jewish traits. Consider the custom of *Tikkun Olam*. Roughly translated, it means, "repair the world." Within *Tikkun Olam*, lies the center of the Jewish mandate to pursue social justice. As a Jew, I have the expectation that I will bear responsibility for not only my own moral welfare, but for my community and the world as well. Active, engaged, and often aggressive attention is necessary. "Repairing the world" presumes that something (truly, many things) are broken, and what is broken cannot be repaired through passivity. Memorializing cannot fix a broken thing, and sentiment cannot patch rips in our social fabric. The impetus to act will not spark unless agitated by discomfort and disturbance. We have selected this dramatization of Bryks' memoir in the spirit of Antonin Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty*. We intend to engender deep empathy and encourage catharsis, while at the same time, discomfiting our audiences with moral ambiguity and challenging ethical questions.

"Theater of Cruelty means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all. And, on the level of performance, it is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other's bodies, carving up our personal anatomies, or, like Assyrian emperors, sending parcels of human ears, noses, or neatly detached nostrils through the mail, but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all."

In this Artaudian spirit, I have conceived an immersive approach to *Resort 76*. I would like to envelop our largely college student audience in the world of the play, surround their senses, distract them from their phones, and draw them into empathy with these characters. We have added projection and animation design throughout the production to compliment lights and augment perspective. Our audio concept is a full-show sound bed onto which we will layer multiple levels of atmosphere, effect, and narrative. The scenic *façade* will surround the audience, filling their peripheral vision.

The university has developed a robust series of academic programming to complement our production. From across the campus, the region, and as far away as Tel Aviv. Scholars and experts will join us on campus to speak about the Holocaust. A faculty curated gallery exhibition will accompany the production run. The library is hosting public discussions about *A Cat in the Ghetto*. Additionally, we have integrated Wincelberg and Bryks' writings into a wide segment of our general education classes this fall. We intend to provoke our students to reach a deeper understanding of both the Holocaust itself, and contemporaneous relevant issues of internment and incarceration, and to do so in a broadly interdisciplinary framework with a focus on inclusivity and equity.

Our motivation to produce a play about the *Shoah* stems from the awareness of American ignorance about this history. In her 2018, article for the New York Times, Maggie Astor notes the "Holocaust is fading from memory according to recent surveys". Astor further notes that, "A third of Americans believe that the Holocaust saw the murder of fewer than 2 million Jews; four in ten do not know what Auschwitz was." This is

a particularly distressing finding given the resurgence of nationalism globally. Indeed, there may never be a more apt time to re-educate and re-ignite. This production of Shimon Wincelburg's *Resort 76* by the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater's Theatre/Dance Department provides our university community a unique opportunity to teach the Holocaust in an interdisciplinary and collaborative manner.

This *Shoah* play is uncomfortable and compelling. The people it portrays are, at once, disturbing and laudable. Most importantly, this play is deeply dimensional and does not seek to spare any polite sensibilities. We will aim to both enthrall and incite because, although we should "never forget," it is not enough to simply memorialize and remember. The telling of this story must be aggressive and with purpose, in order to inspire action. Like the wise man said, "*Nein! Zay musen vissen.*" I believe, if we are successful in our aim, this production will achieve this and will be a properly, and justifiably difficult evening.

-Bruce Cohen, MFA

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Endnotes:

1. Bryks, Rachmil, and S. Morris Engel. *A Cat in the Ghetto: Stories*. Persea Books, 2008.
2. Shawn, Wallace. *Aunt Dan and Lemon*. Faber, 2009.
3. Chambers, Colin. *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
4. Artaud, Antonin, and John Calder. *The Theatre and Its Double: Essays*. Calder Publications, 2005.
5. Astor, Maggie. "Holocaust is fading from memory, survey finds," *New York Times*, 12 April 2018