

MY FATHER'S JOURNEY

Jewish Intercultural Theatre and Performance Development

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Jewish-related theatre and performance must not only be understood in light of the history of world theatre. It must also be understood theoretically and practically in ways that will move it forward in the 21st century through a creative process that comes out of an authentic Jewish performative and intercultural impulse.

No longer can we look towards socialism, modernism, feminism, post-modernism and other theories in order to create art. Instead we must strike out into the unknown about what we will create; and at the same time – because of the world in which we live – lay a foundation for creativity out of multiple identities and heritage.

The major theme of this year's Conney Arts Conference, *Performing Histories, Inscribing Jewishness*, is a long-welcomed rubric to examine the past and rub it up against the present and the future. Just as Jewish texts are traditionally studied over and against multiple texts, so must we place multiple artistic narratives from multiple cultures – Jewish/non-Jewish, up against each other, over time, in order to move forward. Only in this way can we “lens” Jewish culture in a way that isn't static, but so that it is fluid and multi-dimensional. This authentic Jewish methodology is an operative performative aesthetic. In paraphrasing Adin Steinsaltz, the great modern Talmudic scholar in Israel when asked if Judaism was influenced by other religions and cultures, he replied, most certainly, but there is a Jewish filter that sifts through to see what sticks and what doesn't stick.

I titled my paper, **My Father's Journey** about this theory of dynamic performative identities and its practical application to a Jewish and inter-cultural theatre/performance incubator. In referencing my father, who passed away five years ago, I both honor his memory and the way in which his dream to be a performing artist provides a metaphorical locus for journeying in theatre, art and exploring heritages in a non-threatening “container”. His dream would allow for performing artists to creatively explore their identities, create new works, and develop them in an incubator process. My father's journey are the dreams we live both in what was dreamed for us when we were born and how we dream those dreams that reach both backward into our heritage and move us forward.

This process of incubation is an authentically Jewish one, in that it stimulates creativity, promotes renewability, and is aesthetically Jewish. The narrative for this goes back to the traditions of the *m'forshim* (our Talmudic scholars). This is critical to the aspect of *Performing Histories* so that they be authentically inscribed in our memory and into the future. A midrash set during the second exile from Jerusalem articulates this concept of a performative renewability and inscribing:

Resh Lakish was marking the burial vaults of the Rabbis. But when he came to the grave of R. Hiyya, it was hidden from him, whereat he experienced a sense of humiliation. 'Sovereign of the Universe!' he exclaimed, 'did I not debate on the Torah as he did?' Thereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out in reply: 'You did indeed debate on the Torah as he did, but did not spread the Torah as he did.'

Then the midrash shifts in time and scene:

“R. Hanina said to R. Hiyya: ‘Would you dispute with me? If, Heaven forefend! the Torah were forgotten in Israel, I would restore it by my argumentative powers.’ To which R. Hiyya rejoined: ‘Would you dispute with me, who achieved that the Torah should not be forgotten in Israel? What did I do? I went and sowed flax, made nets from the flax cords, trapped deer, whose flesh I gave to orphans, and prepared scrolls from their skins, upon which I wrote the five books of Moses. Then I went to a town, which contained no teachers and taught the five books to five children, and the six orders of the Talmud to six children. And I bade them: “Until I return, teach each other the Pentateuch and the Mishnah;” and thus I preserved the Torah from being forgotten in Israel.’ ” This is what Rabbi [meant when he] said, ‘How great are the works of Hiyya!’

----*Baba Metziyah 85b*

This midrash shows the Jewish authenticity inherent in an incubator process that is performative and develops a method of expanding a new Jewish consciousness with “teachers” who know their heritage and then reinterpret it to experience it with each other. This midrash inherently shows survival through creativity. Rav Hiyyah directs this process and develops ways of engaging Judaism, creates a script that is a “new” method of an expanding Jewish consciousness with “peer mentors” who know their heritage and then leaves in order for it to be performed.

It is an operative aesthetic that is a creative, interactive process and its intertwining and intertextuality is used in light of Jews being the historical “other.” Remember this occurred during the Roman period when the Torah and its exposition were subversive and teaching it was forbidden on punishment of death. It is also told in the midst of a graveyard with the many graves of rabbis and teachers who had died for the survival of Judaism.

This then is the paradigm for a Jewish aesthetic that is dynamic and can be seen developing over the millennia. Here one can see how the Jewish discourse of textual reasoning is at its root cultural and not religious, as it is usually depicted. In my, as yet, unpublished interview with playwright Tony Kushner, he describes how his work is very Jewish because it is Talmudic. When I asked him what it was that gave Jews this strong passion to create, he said it was in order to survive.

Yet this need for survival must always guard against leaving behind the authentic. Yosef Yerushalmi the great social historian, articulates this problem in *Zachor*.

“For in the world in which we live it is no longer merely a question of the decay of collective memory and the declining consciousness of the past, but of the aggressive rape of whatever memory remains, the deliberate distortion of the historical record.”

Therefore today’s challenges for the Jewish and the world of artists are very demanding. Let me use an example that is both inside and outside the Jewish experience. Recently I saw *The Investigation*, Peter Weiss’ play from the 1960s at the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre. The play is a documentary drama using the transcripts of the Frankfurt Tribunal, bringing Nazis to trial for war crimes committed towards Jews and others in the Auschwitz complex. This recent production was acted, directed and produced by Rwandan actors. They wanted to do a play for the world to see, reflecting the horrors they had lived during the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s by Hutus towards Tutsis and Hutu moderates.

The layering of the Rwandan atrocity with the Holocaust and Weiss' play is very interesting for many reasons. It shows that the Holocaust, as an atrocity, is seen as a paradigm for atrocities of the world. When people try to understand atrocity, explore the multiple narratives, examine the impacts on the human soul, and probe the dilemmas of survivors, victims, and the perpetrators of genocidal acts -- the Holocaust, that is the Shoah, is most often used as the standard.

It also shows the inherent need for members of a culture that is totally "other" from Jewish culture and Judaism to identify themselves with Jews and their lives, their history, their narratives, and their archetypal symbolism to the world.

Why is this important to us today at this meeting? The title of this conference - Performing Histories - makes it obvious. This is the performing of narratives and histories at its most basic level. It is a layering of two phenomena. But it is more than that. What the Rwandans did was both to explore the lives of Jews and others in the horrors of Auschwitz and then to take those lives and allow them to enter into their own lives and performance.

But what is unique here about actors taking on other identities? Isn't this at the core of all good theatre and all good acting? Aren't all good productions the result of artists on an exploration of the "other" and then finding what is within them in order to portray the truth of the character?

Yes, but unlike Ahmadinejad at the conference on racism in Switzerland, there is an acknowledgement, an agreement and respect if you will, for Jews and their "otherness" in the world by the Rwandans, who also see themselves as "other." It is the two narratives or histories rubbing up against each other that is exciting and a creation of a new theatre- a theatre of interpenetrating identities, each revealing the other.

Jewish heritage "rubbing up against" multiple cultures and complex identities -- this can be most clearly seen through young adults today, who are undergoing identity formation, and "seeking" Judaism -- even as the traditional ways of finding Jewish life, culture, and religious expression are diminishing. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett at NYU Performance Studies, on the emerging New Jews in relation to art (presented at UJA-New York City in Fall of 2007):

They espouse an ethics and aesthetics of edge....Rather, this is about the cutting edge, an edge in constant need of sharpening... If the historical edge, the outsider and marginal status of Diaspora Jews has dissipated, the New Jews have turned elsewhere for the energy--the stimulus--that comes from the margin: they have turned to subculture and counterculture, and to experimental contemporary art. Rather, this is about the cutting edge, an edge in constant need of sharpening, a moving--a leading, even a bleeding--edge that resists the center ... This is Jewish by dissent, rather than by descent or even consent... (UJA and Foundation for Jewish Culture Meeting; New York City, Fall 2007)

But an "aesthetics of edge" through culture, identity, and heritage must be consciously explored in a process acknowledging and learning each other's ethnicities, social expressions and religions in an authentic search for identity in order to create new performing arts and culture.

Currently, I am developing a project in Chicago that I think exemplifies this. I call it *ShPieL*, which literally means play. In the middle, and at its core, are a capitol *PI*, which stands for

performance incubator and performance and identity. Using the Rav Hiyya method, I have started my work through a process of focus groups in the Chicago area, become associated with Northwestern University in the Theatre and Jewish Studies departments, have created a working group for this project, and also started working on three entry projects that, to me, are the ways *ShPieL* would work -- by assisting in the development of new performance pieces with Lookingglass Theatre, helping to enhance current productions by multicultural theatres such as the Silk Road Theatre Project's current production of the Israeli play *Pangs of the Messiah*, and showcasing a performance SLAM using identity, culture and heritage.

As an incubator *ShPieL* would also develop actors, directors, and writers in exploration of their craft in light of their heritages and identities. It would bring Jews together with other cultures. It would take the texts and narratives of these cultures and "learn them together" in order to inform the participants' creations, and it would find the techniques that are suited for this kind of process and develop the work through both experiential ways and critical ways. It is also would remain authentic and respectful of the cultures that are being worked with, to avoid a hodge-podge of kitsch that will de-culturate rather than re-culturate.

I also want to posit a new idea that I just started working on, which for lack of a better work I call the practical-mystical, because it utilizes a kabalistic approach to this work. As I'm sure many of you know, the Lurianic Kabala has within it the concept of the breaking of the vessels when the universe was created. In these acts of creation there was a shattering of the vessels holding the divine essence that spread sparks of God's divine light or creativity throughout the world, covered by this metaphysical piece of shard from the vessel. The uncovering and gathering of these sparks is Tikkun Olam, which unfortunately has been simplified to a pop culture phrase for doing good deeds.

But the real work of Tikkun Olam is to work through obstacles both internal and external that block us from the divinity in all of us and to gather those divine sparks of creativity, which are spread throughout the universe. That to me is the particular role of the artist and in this way the artist finds his/her calling. As I mentioned this is an idea I am just starting to work on and I will leave it there, for now.

So, in conclusion, I refer back to another "father" of American Jewry, who understood Judaism not only as a religion but also as an evolving civilization, Mordecai Kaplan. He understood that Judaism is more than a fixed totality. It is dynamic and continues to be so, over the last 4,000 years. He wrote,

"When we speak of the continuity of a religion, we do not mean that its teachings and prescribed modes of conduct have remained unchanged... To comprehend the continuity of a religion, it is necessary to think of the religion not as an abstract entity existing by itself, but as a function of a living people, and as an aspect of the civilization of that people."

Kaplan was a dreamer who saw the need for reconstructing Judaism ritualistically, theologically, culturally, and artistically in light of the many cultures around us. It is this cultural dynamic that informs this theory and practical application for the future of Jewish theatre, performing histories and their inscription - and the continual journey of my father.