History as a Mirror for Our Future Selves: A Study of Theater Makers Enacting their Relationship with the Jewish Past

Miriam Heller Stern and Tobin Belzer

What did the Exodus, the story of leaving Egypt, mean to a community of Hellenized Jews in Alexandria with a thriving, culturally assimilated existence?

How might have Jews in Alexandria viewed the Maccabean zealots staging a revolt in Judea?

Revolution is much more sordid and messy than the romantic view we learned as kids. What are we trying to say about that?

These are some of the historical questions animating the discussions among the director and cast of the Los Angeles-based Jewish theater company, theatre dybbuk, as they have ventured to create their newest play, Exagoge. The original Exagoge is an ancient Jewish play, a telling of the biblical exodus narrative in the style of a Greek Tragedy, authored by Ezekiel the Poet in Alexandria during the second century B.C.E. Only 1/4th of the original play still exists, but theatre dybbuk is filling in the blanks between the remaining 263 lines to tell an enduring story of disenfranchisement, migration and cultural identity.

Theatre dybbuk’s mission is to “illuminate the universal human experience by creating provocative theatrical presentations and innovative educational opportunities based on Jewish folklore, rituals and history.” Founding artistic director and playwright Aaron Henne leads the cast through a 6 to 18-month process of script development, which begins with research, consultation with scholars and group study and evolves into an iterative process of reflection, writing, group reading and revision, to develop the production. Henne became interested in Hellenistic Judaism because of his understanding of cultural parallels to the cultural assimilation of Jews like himself in contemporary Los Angeles. In search of a point of departure for a historical project, he discovered the ancient remnant of Exagoge and began to wonder how the view of the Jewish past from the vantage point of 2nd century Jewish Alexandria might provide a unique way of seeing the Jewish past from the vantage point of today. “Relating the ancient story to contemporary issues, the play weaves in modern day narratives of refugee and immigrant experiences to highlight the inclusive nature of the Exodus narrative, and the ongoing crises of people fleeing oppression around the world” (http://www.theatredybbuk.org/). In the spaces between the original Exagoge lines, Henne has inserted excerpts of political speeches from the modern era as the voices of Jethro, Moses and Sepphora, including Patrick Henry, Frederick Douglas, Shirley Chisholm, Russell Means and Barack Obama. The juxtaposition and negotiation of these historical actors, as interpreted by the playwright and cast, provides a rich context for studying how a group of American Jewish adult theater makers study and make sense of, and then create performance art out of, the Jewish past.
Our research examines theatre dybbuk’s process of exploring and interpreting the Jewish past; how historical understanding emerges and is utilized for artistic social commentary; and finally, how the director/playwright, cast, dramaturg and music director each reflect upon their own historical thinking and narratives as individuals. With the classic literature on Jewish historical memory (Yerushalmi, 1996), Jewish historical consciousness (Funkenstein, 1989), historical thinking (Wineburg, 2001) and heritage (Lowenthal, 1998) as background, we entered into the study observing this unconventional study group with an eye toward developing a grounded theory out of their practices, experiences and reflections on the process. Our working hypothesis, which will continue to unfold and be revised through the culmination of the play and the post-production interviews, is that the participants use “histories” as a three-way mirror to help them view and grapple with the moral dilemmas of the present and propose a vision for the future. Ultimately, as theater makers, they are engaging in a kind of “critical pedagogy for social justice” (Freebody & Finneran, 2015; O’Connor, 2015). Learning history is not the goal; but historical learning and interpretation are instrumentalized for a project of creating theater, seeking personal meaning and pursuing justice. History provides a series of metaphors that allow the theater makers and the audience to view the world through alternate lenses (Saxton & Miller, 2015). This research is not intended to prescribe how we should teach history, but rather to understand why and how people take an interest in history, make meaning of it in their present lives and pursue social action armed with what they see as a historical rationale. What implications our findings will have for the teaching and learning of history are still emerging.

To date, the research team has observed the six-month process of script development and Dr. Stern has conducted interviews with Aaron Henne throughout the process thus far. Minor revisions to the script are expected once rehearsals begin May 1 and the show will be performed in three Los Angeles venues in June through August. After the show is staged this summer, Dr. Belzer will conduct interviews with the cast and key members of the team in order to uncover their Jewish historical understanding as it evolved through the development and production of project and how they make meaning of that understanding. She will use a post-then-pre design to reduce response-shift bias and allow for themes and a grounded theory to emerge (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000). Although creative control is ultimately in the hands of the playwright and director, the cast is deeply involved, invested and influential in many of the decisions regarding the narrative, message and tone of the play; their identities and agendas are reflected in the work.

Our conference presentation will focus on the data collected thus far: an analysis of the script itself and its historical themes, cast members’ responses to drafts, and the dramaturgical choices that dialogue with history. We will share an excerpt of the script which demonstrates the play’s weaving together of histories – Biblical narrative, a Hellenistic representation of Biblical narrative, Hellenistic Judaism, and modern American history, each one serving as a mirror for the playwright and ultimately the audience to reflect on their own relationships with the past and the enduring concerns that shape society today. We will also discuss how the script negotiates what Henne sees as a core ethical dilemma stemming from a contemporary liberal Jewish relationship with the past: in playwright/director Henne’s words, “How are we supposed to act upon the historical refrain ‘do not forget’ which the chorus echoes in the play? ‘Do not forget’ can lead to a defensive, protectionist posture. I was hurt, I was traumatized, and therefore I
need to protect myself and keep others out. But ‘do not forget’ can also lead to empathy and inclusion: because I was traumatized and hurt and disenfranchised, I do not want the same to happen to another” (interview with the author, April 19, 2016). This dilemma has been alive in the cast’s study of the historical origins of the play and in their deliberations about staging a new version of this Greek tragedy in the present.

Bibliography


