

Review - Double Exposure: Plays of the Jewish and Palestinian Diasporas

Written by Linda Briskman

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LINDA BRISKMAN, JUL 30 2017

Double Exposure: Plays of the Jewish and Palestinian Diasporas
Edited by Stephen Orlov and Samah Sabawi
Toronto: Playwrights Canada Press, 2016

Double Exposure is the first English-language anthology in any genre of drama, prose or poetry by Jewish and Palestinian writers worldwide. The groundbreaking nature of the anthology contributes to the transformative potential of the arts that has been long advocated in both theoretical deliberations and performance practice. Followers of Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal are acutely aware of the power of theatre and other art forms as a liberation project. Such production has a clear social purpose that transcends but complements entertainment. This collection represents a critical turn in the liberation project to one of responsibility of Palestinians and Jews living in conflict-free diasporic zones. Through courage and determination, Jewish and Palestinian writers take us to a space where the realm of possibility is opened.

Bridging the divide

The Israel/Palestine conflict divides by provoking passionate reactions. In this politically charged landscape, dialogue is seen to be out of reach for those living in contested space. Establishing common ground seems unachievable. Yet this is precisely what is needed for peace building and this is what the collection of plays aspires to achieve by overcoming polarisation and polemic.

Growing up as a Jewish child in Australia, with my own connections to Israel/Palestine reinforced by accounts of dislocation, relocation and identity reconstruction. I was raised on holocaust stories, alongside chronicles of oppression of Palestinians. I didn't see the two as mutually exclusive and for me this collection brings together shared histories of oppression. I see an outsider/insider position as one means of overcoming polarities with a blueprint for change based on dialogical and negotiated narratives.

Yet the role of diaspora Jews and Palestinians in the struggle is at times fraught with misunderstanding. The introduction by Karen Hartman reflects on inherent paradoxes, anticipating that those in the diaspora may be accused of being 'cultural tourists'. Editors Sabawi and Orlov tackle this tension by telling us that diaspora endeavours are 'marked by the cultural foot-prints of our ancestors and the emotional, material, and familial ties of so many to the conflict'.

With the Israel/Palestine conflict seemingly intractable as 'both sides' hold their positions, collaborations that derive from lived and heard experiences may be crucial to changing hearts and minds. The dualism between support for Israel or support for Palestine is defused through plays that centre on conversation and the power of imagination drawn from reality. An advantage for theatre as a transformational art form is that dialogue is centre stage without distraction of extraneous visual props.

Although the conflict is political, it is also personal and it is day-to-day experiences from varying perspectives that

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form the heart of each play. Earlier this year Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu visited Australia. When speaking of the Israel project, I am struck by how he refers to Palestinians as obstacles to be overcome and not living breathing human beings with whom he might connect. The dominant 'danger narrative' erases shared humanity and shared suffering.

This ambitious set of plays is sure to be welcomed by those who support Palestinian rights as just. Producing such a compilation is nonetheless a risky business in one of the most divisive issues on the world stage. The works are likely to invoke emotional and political reactions as diverse as empathy, offence, and vehement disagreement. At times, seemingly binary opposites may be seen as merging and creating confusion. If discomfort occurs for readers locked in positions or sitting on the fence, then the authors have surely succeeded.

The project overcomes both stereotypes that abound in everyday depictions and partisan exchanges – what novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns of as the danger of the single story. The characters are not one-dimensional and when one takes a particular position, counter narrative emerges from another.

Beyond politics

I am conscious that readers and viewers will insert their own worldviews into what they read and see. But I suspect that most will agree we are taken into the intertwining worlds of Jews and Palestinians through a deconstruction process. Although the book is supportive of Palestinians, exposure to the competing voices of the characters allows us to see how different positions are constructed and held. Various themes run through the play with land as a physical and social construct that is inevitably imbued with ideology, suspicion, freedom and hostility. Borders are omnipresent, trespassed, shifting and not immutable as popular discourse presents. Politics is always ubiquitous and ideological positions always expressed. Fear, prejudice, loss, power and intrusion also feature.

Bitterenders by Hannah Khalili is based on a true story of a Palestinian family being forced to share their home with settlers. Share is a misnomer for, as with the broader land agenda, there is a power imbalance. The story is told in a quirky yet tragic way, focussing on a grandmother seemingly disconnected from reality. *The Peace Maker* by Natasha Greenblatt raises questions for the naïve and well-intended. Consider Sophie's conversation with Wael in Nablus who tells her, 'It is one thing to read, it is another to see'. Sophie's idealism contrasts with lived experiences of those confined within the West Bank.

Sabra Falling by Ismail Khalidi is set in the Sabra refugee camp in Lebanon in 1982, toward the end of the Israeli bombardment of Beirut. An Israeli pilot falls into a Palestinian house in the camp. Despite initial animosity, humanity wins through as he is tended to as a prisoner of war. The fallen pilot bears an uncanny resemblance to Eyad, captive in an Israeli prison, and the situation becomes more complicated when Eyad's father, whose mind is muddled, cares for him as his own.

Contests over history emerge in Arthur Milner's 'whodunit' play, *Facts*. On the surface this is a story of an attempt to find the killer of an American archaeologist in the West Bank. The protagonists, an Israeli and a Palestinian official, have a shared mission but it does not take long for cracks to emerge and the dialogue portrays 'history wars' by delving into different readings of biblical interpretation, revealing ideological divides.

Contributions of the editors

From opposite sides of the globe, Canada and Australia, works of the two editors are included. *Sperm Count* by Stephen Orlov, the only play of the collection set in North America, raises bioethical and moral questions that entangle with politics, history and prejudice. The humour in *Sperm Count* presents some light relief while confronting difficult questions about our humanness. The broader issues in Orlov's play are ones that emerge in the mainstream of bioethics – donor sperm, (in)fertility, and abortion. But discrimination, politics and history intervene.

The story is told through David and Lena and their infertility, with the intervention of the character 'Sperm'. Complex stories are evoked through their Palestinian doctor and David's holocaust survivor father. The political history of the

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doctor comes into question, although he assures that his work is about principle and not politics. David's father tells a long-held secret about how in Treblinka he had helped his wife carry out an abortion because pregnant women were sent to the camp's gas chambers.

Samah Sabawi's *Tales of a City by the Sea* is the play most familiar to me. I was witness to its success in Melbourne where I attended a performance and was also a perplexed onlooker to the controversy that erupted when it was selected as part of the Victorian curriculum for secondary school students. Using romance, Sabawi deftly confronts the humanitarian tourism question through a Palestinian prism.

Jomana, a journalist and resident in a Palestinian camp in Gaza, falls for Rami, an American of Palestinian origin. Through this love story, the distinction between insiders and outsiders is poignantly felt. The play starts with Jomana's acknowledgement of the sea as a consistent presence amid chaos, followed by harsher poetics after the sound of a drone interrupts her writing: 'The whooshing waves whisper tales of occupiers that have come and gone' and concluding that 'only the sea remains'.

Although having fallen for Rami, Jomana is accusatory of him and others with international passports who arrive on feel-good adventures. 'They take photos, make promises, and then they run back to their comfortable lives where once in a while, they talk about the plight of their people over polite dinner conversations with other sophisticated privileged people'. This again raises the uncomfortable question of responsibility of diaspora onlookers and the boundaries of ethics of engagement.

A family account of divide

Twenty-one Positions is a Palestinian-Jewish collaboration by Abdelfattah AbuSrou, Lisa Schlesinger and Naomi Wallace. It highlights the phenomenon of ideological divide that can exist within a family. Two brothers of Palestinian origin raised in America could not be more different. Fawaz searches out the typical American dream while Rashid seeks homeland Palestine. The story revolves around Fawaz's visit to Bethlehem to attend the marriage of Rashid to Hala. The strong arm of the law is revealed, exposing the difficulty of people of Palestinian origin to enter, and their humiliation by authorities.

With the wedding cancelled, a young Palestinian girl tries to help Fawaz negotiate a map in order to find his brother. Map becomes a metaphor in a land where movement for Palestinians is far from straightforward. Fawaz is worried when he hears rumours that his brother was involved in an 'operation'. Fawaz becomes implicated and lands in an Israeli gaol. Problems of identity weave into the dialogue, both Palestinian and American.

Audience transformation

The carefully selected plays are nuanced. In many ways, the collection could be a microcosm for peace with the editors explaining that the concept evolved from trust and honest exchange. The plays are accessible. The questions they pose are not overtly hard-hitting but weave poignant and educative stories. Notes following each play contextualise the topics and give the reader a yardstick for their own interpretations.

Are plays better read than seen? This is a vexed question. Up until now I have preferred the visual alone, viewing a performance while perhaps only partially grasping complexities. Although not wishing to diminish the power of performance, the written word is for serious readers of politics and perspective, which is why school curricula plays a part.

Writing for theatre is demanding and rewarding. Reading theatre is also demanding, confronting, but ultimately rewarding. Overall, the plays expose us to the multifaceted layers of the lengthy conflict and the different ways in which lived experiences are enacted. The characters are alive, likeable and convincing.

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