

Forget? Remember? A Playwright's Dilemma

Michael Fischer, the central character in Steven Levenson's play *If I Forget*, is an ageing academic with a problem. Several problems, actually. The play is set in Washington, D.C. in 2000-2001 and captures the wholesale decay of American Judaism.

Michael has been fired by the university where he taught because his "revisionist" book on the Holocaust provoked a sharp public reaction. He is suing the university for damages but has run out of money to maintain the suit. His daughter is receiving psychiatric help for suicidal tendencies and an eating disorder; she refuses to talk to her father. Sharon, Michael's sister, has begun an affair with a married Guatemalan immigrant who works in a store that her father owns. (The father has retired and is leasing the place.) By the end of the play she'll announce that she's pregnant. Sharon set herself up with the Guatemalan after discovering her former lover engaged in unusual sexual activity with the female cantor of the synagogue she attends. Holly, Michael's other sister, is married to Howard, a successful lawyer whom Michael approaches for a loan. Howard discloses that he has been defrauded by a prostitute that he met over the internet and would like, perhaps needs, to borrow money from almost anyone; the family is verging on destitution. Holly will discover this at the end of the play. Her son Joey is intensely disrespectful and foul-mouthed, absorbed in the electronic toys of his generation. Michael, Holly, and Sharon bear the usual set of family resentments, and by the end of the play, are hurling obscenities at one another.

But Michael's troubles go further. The book on the Holocaust that cost him his university position has also estranged him from his father, Lou, or added to an existing estrangement. By

the second act, Lou is disabled by a stroke, and his care represents yet another costly burden the family is going to have to share.

Michael is troubled by other things besides. Israelis he believes are exploiting the Holocaust to generate public support in the U.S., or to emotionally blackmail Jews into extending support. “Go into any synagogue now,” he declares, “the Holocaust is now the centerpiece of Jewish life. The lynchpin that binds us all together is suddenly, it’s not culture anymore or food or religion—it’s certainly not religion, with the number of Jews that actually practice their religion--it’s the six million. And we’ve been manipulated, all of us, our entire lives, to feel constantly victimized, to feel constantly afraid. We’ve learned all the wrong lessons from the Holocaust. . . .The book argues that the only way we can escape what essentially has become at this point, what has frankly become at this point a religion and a culture of frankly death and death worship, a culture that finds its meaning and reason for being in the charnel houses of Europe, the only way that we can get past that is to forget it. Actively. We stop making movies and writing books about it. . .” (Heavy irony here—he has of course done just that.)

“If you don’t understand the Holocaust, how do you understand the idea of Israel?” Sharon asks, altogether pertinently.

“The Holocaust has been used,” Michael answers, “the idea of the Holocaust, to distort American Jewish life, and discourse, and culture, since the 1960s.”

American Jews disappoint in another way. He recites an odd rollcall of unrelated Jewish intellectual all-stars—Einstein, Hannah Arendt, Emma Goldman, Walter Benjamin—and wonders what happened to the following generations. Publicity-conscious characters like Alan Dershowitz and conservatives like William Kristol are all that remain of “the great Jewish radical

intellectual tradition,” which would include the college students who marched for civil rights in the 1960s.

By the end of the play, the children decide to sell the store against the father’s will to the Guatemalan immigrants. The neighborhood is undergoing gentrification, and funds from the transaction will solve a lot of family problems (including paying for care of the father.) I suppose the decision to cash in on the rising value of the property is intended to expose the hollowness of Michael’s radicalism, which takes a different direction when it collides with his foundering bank account.

The story has a ready-to-assemble, everything-but-the-kitchen-sink feel to it, and the tale is unduly extended. Everything needs to get into the story to capture the ills that beset Judaism today—the degradation of the characters, the poor conduct of the university where Michael is teaching, the family’s troubles and the dependence on drugs that appease anxious minds. (In the second act, when Michael and his wife have come to Washington from Brooklyn, Holly offers him a selection from the drugs she carries around—Atavan, Xanax, Valium, Klonopin; Michael accepts the Xanax.) The business of “forgetting the Holocaust” is of course blasphemy, and Michael concedes by the end of the play that the approach is meant to provoke and attract the public’s interest. That it does, but not in the way he expects.

This detail of Michael’s book may owe something to *The Counterlife*, a Philip Roth novel from 1987. On a flight from Tel Aviv to London, Nathan Zuckerman, a Roth creation who appears in several novels, encounters the demented Jimmy Lustig, who thrusts on him “a manifesto” calling for Jews to “FORGET REMEMBERING!” Jimmy wants to see the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem closed and the word Nazi expunged from the country’s collective memory. The manifesto continues: “ZIONISM WITHOUT AUSCHWITZ! JUDAISM WITHOUT

VICTIMS! THE PAST IS PAST! WE LIVE!” Only this way can the Jews achieve a truly normal life, free of the psychic distortions of having been victims of mass murder. The idea is further developed in Roth’s *Operation Shylock*, published some years later, when one of his characters goes to Israel to publicize “diasporism.” This theory calls for resettling Israel’s European Jews in the countries whence they came, a fantasy as preposterous as the one that’s offered in *The Counterlife*.

The legal dispute between Michael and the university board of trustees may remind viewers of the struggle between Steven Salaita and the University of Illinois. This erupted in 2014, when the university dismissed him because his anti-Israel “tweets” drew publicity and antagonized the public. It was settled in courts and cost the university about \$600,000 on grounds of unjust termination. Michael is hoping for a similar result.

Some elements of the dialogue are conspicuously ineffective. Michael has sent his father a copy his manuscript, which he knows will offend him. But retired shop keepers are unlikely to show an interest in such documents, and the father offers what I assume the playwright considers telling words. Lou served with an Army unit that liberated Dachau in 1945 and tells his son that “for you history is an abstraction. But for us, the ones who survived this century, this long, long century, there are no abstractions anymore. . .” Retired shop keepers don’t talk this way. Likewise, at the end of the play, Holly’s son Joey presses Michael for the details of his daughter’s breakdown. Reluctant to say anything, Michael replies that the story “is complicated.” Joey replies, “I don’t mind. I like complicated stuff.” There is more talk along this line, but there is nothing in the play to suggest that a teenager who lets his jeans sag unpleasantly and avidly relishes his electronic toys and speaks in monosyllables enjoys anything that’s complicated.

I also find the ending of the play a mistake. After Joey and Michael conclude their colloquy there is a pause, after which each actor on the stage stands to recite a passage that sounds partly biblical, echoing *Ecclesiastes*, and partly apocalyptic. The idea seems essentially conservative, emphasizing the immense passages of time that stretch from antiquity to the present, reminiscent of Shelly's *Ozymandias*. I assume that they are speaking for the playwright and not for themselves, and after two hours straight of Ibsen's realism the transition is jarring and ineffective.

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