



regular, momentarily creating a world where everything made sense. The performance was fast and polyphonic, possessing the detail of a full percussion ensemble, with the tiniest finger movements precisely altering the timbre of every single touch. Mortazavi seemed as captivated by this world as the audience with many (myself included) not being able to help but move along with him. This gig was an immense success, demonstrating how more playful approaches to curation can be powerful in facilitating individual expression and that effort needs to be put into creating spaces that fit the artist or ensemble booked, rather than the other way around. I hope that this concert can set a precedent for future iterations of *Ultima* where it continues its ambitious and diverse programme but with careful effort put into *all* curatorial decisions.

Mia Windsor  
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**Uri Agnon, *Antisemitism: a (((musical)))*. Camden People's Theatre, London.**

Written and composed by Uri Agnon, *Antisemitism: a (((musical)))* premiered at the Camden People's Theatre between the 17 and 28 October. I was initially sceptical of the appropriateness of a comedic musical on the topic of antisemitism, not least because of the events in Israel and Gaza on and after 7 October and the weaponisation of antisemitism by Israel and its critics. However, I left the theatre feeling wholly convinced – the work had by no means attempted to offer an authoritative stance on antisemitism in the UK. Instead, it created a space for the audience to sit with the issues, wrestle with the contradictions and laugh at the absurdity of it all.

The musical follows an Israeli Jew's first 24 hours on British soil. Curious to experience antisemitism in the diaspora, the protagonist, portrayed convincingly by Maya Kristal Tenenbaum, takes a journey from Tel Aviv airport all the way to North London and is confronted by antisemitism from passengers on the tube, a Tinder date and two kidnappers who take him hostage after mistaking him for Uri Geller. The hostage scene no doubt landed very differently from how it was initially intended and was preceded by a fourth-wall breakage disclaiming that it was written prior to the events on 7 October. It was surprising to me that this moment did not elicit audible shock from the audience, who were perhaps unsure of what to make of it. The material oscillated between presentations of left-wing and

right-wing antisemitism, critiquing its weaponisation from all sides of the political spectrum. A pre-recorded choir (voiced eerily by Peter Falconer) sung (((antisemitic))) interludes between scenes with text drawn from Twitter typifying antisemitic tropes that, in their absurdity, veer towards the comical. The acousmatic nature of the disembodied choir engendered an uneasy ambivalence, in which the anonymous power of the statements could be mocked while simultaneously acknowledging the real danger they represent. Towards the end of the play, one of the characters states in true Brechtian fashion that for the play to end, it needs to have a moral – this sends the rest of the cast into disarray as they lament the impossibility of a coherent moral the play can have. A moment of real ingenuity, it presents the *raison d'être* of the show by pushing back at reductive attempts to explain British antisemitism without offering its own answer. Agnon does this knowingly and is very much aware of the current trends in socio-cultural theories of music that have adopted Mouffe's concept of politics as agonistic pluralism.<sup>1</sup>

With fourteen unique numbers, two reprises and the pre-recorded choral interludes, the music is punchy and energising, interspersed with moments of lyrical reflection. It comfortably sits within the musical theatre idiom but is also heavily citational in a very 'new music' sense. There are allosonic quotations of Schoenberg, Sondheim and Jerry Bock, to name but a few. These intertextual references to almost exclusively Jewish composers are a nod to the Jewishness of musical theatre, with the genre as we know it today being carved out by New York Jews coming from the Yiddish theatre tradition. In this way, the work becomes a perfect example of what Jeffrey Shandler has called 'post-vernacular Yiddishkeit',<sup>2</sup> in which the modality of expression and its relationship to Jewishness has rhetorical weight adjunctive to the content expressed. The two keyboards making up the band (performed terrifically by David Merriman and Oli George Rew) play into the DIY aesthetic and the trope of the 'wandering Jew' drawing on glaringly artificial sounds melded into more traditional showtune keyboard writing. The singers handled the material deftly; despite occasional issues with balance and annunciation, this hardly detracted from the overall experience.

<sup>1</sup> See Barry Shank, *The Political Force of Musical Beauty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014) and Chantal Mouffe, 'Deliberative Democracy or Agnostic Pluralism?', *Social Research*, 66, no. 3 (1999), pp. 745–58.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Shandler, 'Postvernacular Yiddish: Language as a Performance Art', *TDR*, 48, no. 1 (2004), pp. 19–43.

Agnon's authorial voice is distinctive and can be heard throughout the musical. The show self-identifies as 'not not autobiographic' and blurs the lines between the protagonist and the composer, who himself is an Israeli Jew who has lived through the movement from hegemonic to marginalised status within society. He satisfyingly acknowledges his etic perspective of British Jewry and both the strengths and limits that it can provide. At times the music was very didactic, and the parodic contrafactum of Village People's 'YMCA' with lyrics about the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism felt very on the nose, but knowingly so. While some may have opted for subtlety or moments of poignance, Agnon was uncompromising in his constant use of irony, satire and parody, relentlessly invoking the

tradition of Jewish humour. This was to the show's credit and affirmed a clear and distinctive tone.

At a time when the State of Israel is staking the claim of a very nationalistic model of Jewish peoplehood, it is refreshing to see a portrayal of diaspora Jews as occupying particular and nuanced positionality. Agnon's own research has explored the nature of the political audience and countered the criticism of 'preaching to the choir'.<sup>3</sup> I suspect the political sentiment of the audience was largely in-keeping with that of Agnon's but, to use his own lens, the work was successful at both activating and galvanising us at a time when it could not be more important.

Adam Possener

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<sup>3</sup> Uri Agnon, 'On Political Audiences: An Argument in Favour of Preaching to the Choir', *TEMPO*, 75, no. 296 (2021), pp. 57–70.