

The playwright and the historian: contradicting and complementing each other

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Many playwrights have written historically-based plots for their plays. Aeschylus wrote “The Persians” about the Persian navy’s defeat at the hands of the Greeks at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC. Shakespeare wrote 11 historical plays, from “Julius Caesar” to “Henry VIII”, Arthur Miller wrote “The Crucible” about the Salem Witch Trials, Rolf Hochhuth wrote “The Deputy” about the Vatican’s indifference to the Jewish Holocaust during World War II, and David Hare wrote “Stuff Happens” about the events that led to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. As a writer whose plays deal mostly with historical-political events that happened over the past few decades in Israel, I can attest to the playwright’s purpose as they set out to write about an historical affair¹. This purpose has two main dimensions:

For the individual viewer, the playwright often attempts to present a well-structured historical-dramatic plot, which can lead the viewer to catharsis, the purpose of which is to change values or consciousness. Such change may then lead the viewer to direct political action, or at least to indirect action, in the present. For example, when Arthur Miller wrote “The Crucible”, which deals, as mentioned above, with the historical events of the Salem Witch Trials, his main purpose was to bring catharsis to the viewer, which would empower them to stick to their inner truth and worldview, despite the dangers it entails. If the show manages to create this catharsis, the viewer leaves with a more consolidated personal-political consciousness, which could have an effect on

¹ I went into further detail about the playwright’s means of achieving their purpose in my book “The Playwright’s Purpose” (2014), South Gate, CA: NoPassport Press.

their actions within the different frameworks they take part in, and also on their vote at the ballot box.

Regarding public discourse, the playwright usually aims to use the historical play to create discourse about present events, and not about the historical events depicted in the play. For example, with “The Crucible”, Miller didn’t try to create discourse about the events that took place in Salem, Massachusetts in the 17th century, but about the aggressive political persecution of communists in theater and film, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. Sometimes the playwright deals with historical events that still affect the present in their outcomes or implications. For example, in my play “The Admission”² I dealt with the creation of the Palestinian refugees problem in 1948, thinking that dealing with the historical problem would lead to public discourse, that could in turn point to a solution in the present. And, indeed, most of the discourse around the play dealt with the critical contemporary question: how can we solve the Palestinian refugees problem as part of the negotiations on ending the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

What difficulties does the playwright face when writing about historical events?

First of all, a play about historical events should, obviously, be a good and proper play that can be performed. To be a good and proper play, plot and character development must be subject to dramatic rules. For instance, the play should have an effective exposition, the characters should be justified, the conflicts between them should be clear, the plot should derive from these conflicts, and tie together to a clear and meaningful resolution. Historical events usually don’t play by these rules. Therefore, in order to present historical events on stage, the playwright has to

² First performed at Theater J, Washington, D.C., in 2014.

process them so that they fit into an effective dramatic plot. Moreover, an effective dramatic plot should avoid advancing the plot using reported events that happen off-stage. The historical plot, however, is often affected by many external factors. As the playwright attempts to present an historical chapter that is affected by external events, they would have to build the plot around decisions made by characters on stage, rather than by these external events. That is, the story that would appear on stage would be different from how it transpired in reality. Consider, for example, Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar". In reality, after Caesar's assassination, Mark Anthony escaped Rome, dressed in slave's clothes, and returned to Rome only after he realized that the assassins did not target Caesar's associates. Shakespeare chose to ignore these events. In the play, Anthony doesn't escape Rome, but sends a messenger to the assassins, supposedly in order to find out the reasoning behind the assassination, and in fact, in order to lay a trap for them. Thus, Shakespeare advanced the plot using an independent decision by Anthony, strengthening his character.

However, the greatest difficulty in writing an historical play is actually character development. When the playwright sets out to write an historical character for a play, they soon discover that the history books only provide the character's outlines: their appearance, their age, their role, and their actions within the historical narrative. These outlines are not enough to build a dramatic character, since the dramatic character's essence is his/her inner world and internal motivations. These are hard to find in the history books, and even in the character's autobiography - if one exists - because in most autobiographies the writer exposes what they wish to expose, and not necessarily the weaknesses, doubts and mistakes that the playwright is interested in. The playwright, therefore, is forced to build a fictional inner world for a real historical figure. In other words, the playwright has to add an entire inner layer to the historical figure simply by

placing them in a dramatic role, an inner layer that stems entirely from the playwright's imagination. This inner world isn't necessarily similar to the historical figure's inner world, though it should be noted that this inner world is meant to justify the character's actions in the play, at least some of which are based on the historical figure's actions.

Writing the historical character's actions is also a complicated task. When the playwright writes an action for an historical character in their play, an action that was committed by the historical figure as well, they usually know what historical reasons led to this action. However, in a play, the playwright also has to justify the action psychologically, and in relation to the character's interactions with the other characters. Usually, the character's psychological structures would be fictional, as are their relationships with the other characters. That is, even when a character in a play takes an action that the historical figure took, their personal and psychological motives would be different.

Up to this point I have shown the difficulty of writing a play based on historical events and characters. We have seen that when writing a play, the playwright is forced to change many of the narrative's details, as well as the characters' traits and actions, in order to ensure that the play is worth performing. However, it should be emphasized that writing a play based on historical events carries with it responsibility, and must be done according to basic ethical rules. I will now attempt to offer a few rules:

1. The playwright must do the best they can to understand the historical facts as they are, including reading different interpretations of the events written by different historians. They must be careful of including an historical event in the play if they didn't investigate it thoroughly.

2. The playwright can, and should, change the characters and their actions when the change is required for the play's structural efficiency. However, the changes must not detract from the historical validity of the events' description. I will demonstrate the importance of this rule using a play in which the playwright did not bother to follow it. In "Henry V", Shakespeare describes the Battle of Agincourt, which took place in 1415 France, and in which some 6,000 retreating English soldiers were attacked by 25,000 French soldiers. Shakespeare praises and glorifies King Henry V for raising his soldiers' morale and leading them to victory, but although he mentions Henry's command to kill the French captives, who surrendered during the battle, he hardly deals with this order that lead to such an atrocity, as several thousands of prisoners were killed. I assume Shakespeare avoided dealing with this event due to structural considerations, but it doubtlessly damaged the play's depth.
3. The playwright can and should make changes to the historical characters' traits and their actions, if the change contributes to exposing the figure's deep, core truth. In other words, fiction is permitted when it teaches us about the historical reality more than the historical reality itself allows. For example, in "The Deputy", which deals with the Catholic Church's relation to the Jewish Holocaust, and in which some characters are historical, playwright Rolf Hochhuth creates a fictional character of an Italian priest called Riccardo Fontana who challenges Pope Pious XII. This fiction is entirely justified because it is meant to expose the Pope's positions on the extermination of the Jews, using the plot device of an internal discussion in the Vatican.
4. The right to write the play must not be misused to settle a score with the historical figures. For example, the playwright must not criticize an historical figure that they

oppose by writing the figure as a belittled or ridiculous character. This choice is not only unethical, but subtracts from the play's depth, because it doesn't challenge the opposing historical characters whom the playwright supports, and weakens the conflicts between the characters. For example, in the play "Becket" by Jean Anouilh, the playwright presents two well-known historical figures: King Henry II of England, and Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Anouilh's sympathy for Becket's character is difficult to miss. Nevertheless, King Henry's character is deep and powerful, despite Anouilh's disagreement with the king's positions. The result, of course, is an exemplary play which affects the viewer profoundly, thanks to the symmetrical conflict between the two main characters.

5. The writer must not manipulate the historical facts to serve their political goals. Consider, for example, the play "Stuff Happens" by British playwright David Hare (2004). As mentioned above, the play deals with the events that led to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and its main characters are George Bush, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell. The *Chicago Tribune*'s theater critic believed that the play was meant to hurt Bush's chances of winning a second term in the 2004 elections. The critic believed that even though the play depicted Bush fairly, Hare took exaggerated artistic license when depicting the events by emphasizing Powell's arguments on one hand, and Bush and Rice's idleness and hubris on the other. These dramaturgical choices probably harmed the play's quality as well.

These ethical rules are not meant to limit playwrights who write about historical events. On the contrary, they are meant to offer them an ethical foundation that would allow them significant

freedom, while ensuring as much as possible that their work would be effective, powerful, and ethical.

What is the historical value of an historical play?

If, as stated above, the process of writing an historical play necessitates liberties in crafting the events and characters, then its historical value is inherently doubtful. Considering this, I will now attempt to show that historical plays nevertheless have great historical value. I will try to explain:

1. The playwright usually doesn't deal with a broad historical chapter, but with events limited in time, space, and the characters involved. These limits allow the playwright a deeper and more focused inquiry than the historian's, who often deals with broad affairs. Moreover, as I mentioned above, the playwright's main occupation is not investigating the facts of the historical event, but the deeper personal layers of the characters involved in it. Most historians don't attempt to study these layers because their research subjects - reports, documents, testaments and other evidence - aren't usually ideal for psychological inquiry. What value does this inquiry into the historical figure's psyche have? I believe its value is great. It exposes the historical event's foundations, explains the figure's decision-making processes, presents their deep, unseen results, and thus allows us to decipher an entire system of causes that led the event's progression. These causes differ from the ones that can be deciphered using tools from other disciplines such as economy, social sciences, political science, etc.

2. As mentioned above, the playwright must know the historical events well. That said, the main tool at their disposal is not their historical knowledge, but their ability to create empathy towards the figures they write about. Empathy, in the theatrical sense, refers to the viewer's ability to walk in the character's shoes, to experience what they experience and feel what they feel. How is this empathy created? It is created by observing the character, by striving to internalize their biography, their past experiences, their relationship with those close to them and far from them, the doubts they feel when taking their decisions, the price they paid and pay for those decisions, and more. A playwright who does their work well can attain a very intimate familiarity with the character they are writing, and with their psychological and emotional mechanisms. This familiarity is the foundation of empathy. It allows the playwright to gain insight into the internal journey that the character goes through throughout the plot, be it a familial or historical plot. Thus, the playwright has access to a very efficient tool, which also allows them to hypothesize about the historical figure's psychological inner workings.

I will clarify with an example: between 1984-1985 I wrote a play called "Kastner"³, about the character of Dr. Rudolph Kastner, one of the leaders of the Hungarian Jewish community. Between 1944-1945 Kastner held negotiations with top Nazi officers - mostly Adolf Eichmann and later Kurt Becher - about halting the transports of Hungary's Jews to Auschwitz. Historians still debate how successful he was, and mostly - whether he was a leader who worked to save his people, or a Nazi collaborator who acted for personal gain. For an entire year I collected every possible piece of information about the man and his actions, until I was able to create within myself the empathy that was needed for writing the play. The more I researched and the more I

³ First performed at the Cameri Theater, Tel Aviv, in 1985.

wrote, the closer I felt that I've come to Kastner's innermost feelings during his negotiations with Eichmann and Becher, and I came to know for certain that Kastner was not a collaborator who negotiated for personal gain, but a person who sought to be a human being where there were few, and did all he could to save Jews under impossible circumstances and conditions. The play that came out of that, generated intense public discourse, that doubtlessly affected our understanding of the historical events.

I have no doubt that no historian would recognize this empathy that I felt towards Kastner as evidence that could influence their position about the historical events that he took part in. I don't expect it to be so. I expect the show's viewers to examine the events that it portrays, and ask themselves what they think of the validity of these events. I also expect that, as they watch Kastner's desperate struggle for his innocence, and his murder in the midst of this struggle, they would go through a cathartic process that would empower them to be a decent human being even in a place where there are none.

3. Despite the development of historical research in the past century, and the deepening freedom in the usage of historical sources, including oral history, the playwright's level of freedom is still much greater than the historian's. The risk involved with this level of freedom is, of course, that the playwright could more easily make mistakes. On the other hand, it is exactly this ability to choose their sources more freely, and especially their use of empathy, that allows the playwright to expose incredibly important processes for which there is no "evidence" in documents or testaments. I will clarify with another example: in 2012 I wrote the play "The Hastening of The End"⁴, about a massacre

⁴ The play was first performed at the Khan Theater, Jerusalem, in 2013. I declined to translate it to English, out of concern that, in the current political climate, it may be misused.

committed by an Israeli doctor in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron on February 25, 1994. That morning, Dr. Baruch Goldstein woke up in his home in the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arbah, dressed in IDF (Israeli military) uniform, and said his morning prayers. He then took his rifle, drove to the Cave of the Patriarchs, went in, and fired indiscriminately at about 500 Muslim worshippers. He managed to kill 29 and injure around 125 before he was beaten to death. Two days later, the Israeli government set up a committee of inquiry headed by the President of the Supreme Court (Israel's equivalent of the Chief Justice). The committee gathered data, interrogated 106 witnesses, examined 1,140 exhibits, and analyzed the massacre affair for about four months. It came to the conclusion that Goldstein acted alone and did not receive any assistance, probably due to personal distress and post traumatic stress, and on the background of deteriorating security in Hebron in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords. I read the 338 page report⁵, and I was shocked to discover that the committee dedicated most of it to prayer and security arrangements in the Cave of the Patriarchs, to the Intelligence Corps' preparedness, and to other police and military functions. All of the report's conclusions deal with these issues. The committee didn't even bother to investigate the question, which in my opinion is the essential one, of whether Goldstein's actions had a theological basis. In other words, was Goldstein inspired, among other things, by Halachic decrees and discussions that took place in Kiryat Arbah and Hebron before the massacre? It didn't take much research to discover that Goldstein, who was a religious man, pondered many questions of Halacha (Jewish religious law) that had to do with his role as a doctor, such as: how to act when a patient needs treatment on Shabbat, or when a patient needs to

⁵ Report of the Committee of Inquiry regarding the Hebron Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre, Jerusalem, 1994

drink water on Yom Kippur, or whether or not organ donations were Halachically sound. Goldstein sought the advice of rabbis to answer these questions, and acted according to their instructions. And so, as I followed Goldstein's life history to that terrible moment, it became clearer and clearer to me that Goldstein could not have committed the massacre without getting a sign or a hint from rabbis that this action is an important religious commandment. Therefore, I researched the theological discussions that were held in Goldstein's proximity before the massacre, and to my horror I discovered that several ideas that came up in these discussions could have provided a motive for Goldstein to commit the massacre. The most radical idea came from the writing of Rabbi Yitzchak Ginzburg, then head of the "Kever Yosef" Yeshiva in Nablus, and today head of the "Od Yosef Chai" Yeshiva in the settlement Yitzhar. Rabbi Ginzburg supported Goldstein's massacre unequivocally. He even wrote a book in his praise, "Baruch HaGever" (literally, "The Man is Blessed", a play on words on Goldstein's first name), published a year after the massacre, in which Goldstein is described as a saint. According to Rabbi Ginzburg, God himself may have appeared before Goldstein and commanded him to defy the Torah and murder Muslim worshippers in order to delay the apocalypse. That is, to commit the massacre in the Cave of the Patriarchs, knowing full well that this massacre may lead to catastrophe that would encompass the entire Middle East. This catastrophe may be so violent that it would not only undo the Oslo Accords, which were a national disaster according to Goldstein, but would force God to send the Messiah to save his people in the Land of Israel. As I see it, only a radical theological idea like this could have compelled Goldstein to commit such a horrible massacre. The few historians who wrote about the massacre noticed the praises Rabbi Ginsburg wrote about Goldstein after

the massacre. To my best knowledge, none of them explores Ginsburg's influence on Goldstein before it.

Indeed, the playwright's insights are inherently different from a court ruling. The playwright doesn't examine evidence according to a legal procedure. The testimonies that I collected during my research were not recorded, they are not valid at court, and therefore the conclusions I came to at the end of the writing process are not to be thought of as a verdict. Nevertheless, I think that the writing process – which was based on an attempt to approach Goldstein's personality as closely as possible, to track the different influences he was exposed to, the ideas that drove him and the ideology and theology for which he acted – brought up significant hypotheses about the religious motives for his terrible action, and perhaps even created a public discourse about the influence of extremist rabbis on the political sphere in Israel. I also hope that the insights offered in the play would contribute to the historical interpretation of this traumatic event, and would allow Israeli society to go through the necessary restorative process.

What is the socio-political importance of the historical play?

I assume that any playwright who writes about historical events is convinced of the validity of their dramatic interpretation. I also assume that any historian who investigates the same events is convinced of the validity of the historical analysis offered in their study. In many cases there is disagreement between the playwright and the historian. I believe that this disagreement may serve as an important component in the development of discourse about the events, both among theater creators and historians who examine their own methods, and among the general public. Despite the occasional criticism by historians of playwrights' meddling in their field, the challenge that the playwright presents to the historian is important. The playwright's incisive

insights may force the historian to re-examine their findings. However, the opposite is also true. The playwright must examine their own dramatic interpretation according to the historical research. The historian's method includes well-developed tools of self-critique, and the playwright must not ignore the historian's findings. Bridging the divide between the playwright's and the historian's interpretations is not always necessary. A multitude of viewpoints may lead to deeper discourse. These days especially, this deepening is becoming more and more important. The public discourse that we see today is blunt and shallow, and is increasingly based on manipulative "fake news". Despite the fact that both playwrights and historians have less influence on public discourse than they used to, they must continue to take part in it and to engage in complicated and thorough discussion, so that the tools that allow us to hold such discussion will not be lost.

Deepening the historical discussion is a challenge for all those who seek progress, and it is especially important considering the fact that many forces in the global socio-political discourse seek to create a false narrative of our recent history for political gain. A clear example is the effort of Israeli governments throughout the country's existence to create a false narrative of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, by erasing the expulsion of 700,000 Palestinians from their homes in 1948. One of the main tools for this erasure is the omission of these events from the history textbooks for highschool students, and the silencing of any public discourse on the matter through legislation⁶.

⁶ The law passed in the Knesset in March 2011 as part of the Budget Foundations Law (Amendment 40, 2011). According to this law, the Minister of Finance may reduce government funding to a supported organization, and fine it for up to three times the government's original financial support, if the organization is deemed to engage in the following: negation of Israel's existence as a Jewish and Democratic state; incitement to racism, violence or terrorism; support of armed struggle or terrorism of an enemy country or terrorist organization against the State of Israel; Marking of Israel's Independence Day as a day of mourning; acts of vandalism or physical degradation of the national flag or other state symbols. The article that forbids marking the state's Independence Day as a day of mourning is meant to prohibit events, discussions or ceremonies about the expulsion of Palestinians in 1948.

My above-mentioned play “The Admission” was written to counter the efforts to deny the Nakba⁷. It presents the Israeli viewer with the admission process that one of the 1948 Independence War commanders, who was responsible for the expulsion of a Palestinian village, goes through. This play could not have been written without relying on the research of the “New Historians”, a group of Israeli historians who started to uncover the details of the Palestinian expulsions in the 1990s. Unfortunately, this was one of the few plays in Israeli theater that heeded this challenge. Most Israeli playwrights choose to ignore it, as they choose to ignore the tragic fact that Israel still occupies the West Bank, lays siege on the Gaza Strip, infringes on Palestinians’ basic human rights, and prevents them from fulfilling their national rights. By ignoring the occupation and siege, Israeli theater becomes complicit in the Israeli governments’ attempt to normalize the occupation over the past 50 years. Thus, Israeli theater avoids fulfilling its duty to Israeli society, which is to create deep, challenging socio-political discourse within it.

⁷ Nakba means the Catastrophe in Arabic.

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