

Interview with Daniel Thau-Eleff

By Dalia Levy

There are many young adult Canadian secular Jewish artists who are challenging the status quo and grappling with issues of identity and politics daily and in their art practice. This series of interviews is a venue for making those artists among us visible and hearing about what they're doing, thinking and saying about the plethora of issues we as a generation are facing.

I sat down with theatre artist Daniel Thau-Eleff in his hometown and city of residence, Winnipeg, MB. Thau-Eleff is the founder of the active, independent, professional Moving Target Theatre Company (MTTC) and has written several plays he has produced under the company name. I was relieved to hear him speak repeatedly of similar feelings and ideas I stumble upon regularly myself—something likely to be constant throughout the series.- D.L.



D.L.: How did you come to theatre and life as an artist?

D.T.-E.: When I graduated from high school there was an expectation of going to university. I had no idea what I wanted to do, so [in university] I took five different courses from five different faculties and saw that there was a faculty of theatre at the University of Winnipeg. There was something in one of my Intro to Theatre textbooks about theatre being a quest for truth. I felt like in math and physics I could answer the questions but there wasn't a way to relate, I had no curiosity of my own, and theatre seemed to be about the deepest questions in life and what it means to be human. And [my theatre courses were] a study of how people interact with each other, and exist in the world, what people do and think and how they feel. To quote a friend of mine from another context, "It seemed like it was not a waste of time." There's very little money and very few jobs—but I've learned a lot.

D.L.: How does your Jewish upbringing and identity inform your art practice today?

D.T.-E.: Well, I'm glad you asked. I did an evening of Jewish comedy recently in the spring. I think there are really serious questions facing the Jewish community, particularly us in the more secular Jewish community, about what it means to be Jewish. I guess any definitions I come to on what it means to be Jewish are things like commitment

to each other, to other people, not just Jews, a commitment to the well-being of people. We're in such an intense culture of looking after your own—it's a very narrow focus. So many of the qualities that I see as Jewish I also see in my non-Jewish activist and artist friends. And for me in my activist community there's a huge overlap between activist and artist. And Jews are overrepresented in each of these communities, particularly performing arts. I see activism and Jewishness as connected along lines that I'm not 100% comfortable defining. Some of my work is more overtly activist or political. Everything is political, and even if I'm just questioning norms or assumptions that often go unquestioned or making invisible things visible, then that to me is political and that's activism in that sense, and I see it as very Jewish.

D.L.: What is it like to be a playwright in Winnipeg?

D. T.-E.: In some ways it's great. I feel like I have a really supportive artistic community here. There's so much potential for negative competition and I've felt very little, if any, of that. It's also very isolated. However, I've been very successful with getting grants, which would be much more difficult in other places. I think an equivalent artist to myself in Toronto, for example, would have so many more credentials than I have. Here, people pursue many different interests. I don't think there's the same kind of potential to get my work seen as there is in other cities [in Canada]. Yet I value the [Winnipeg] culture that allows me to have a more well-rounded life. But for people that

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really want to succeed in Winnipeg and get out of Winnipeg they really have to push, which I've done sometimes like with my one-man show. And either my last show or my next show I'm going to take on the road in some form. Winnipeg is a smaller city, and it has its advantages and disadvantages.

D.L.: *Tell us a bit about Moving Target Theatre and how it evolved?*

D.T.-E.: I started it in 2003, and called it Moving Target because I didn't know what I wanted to do. That was before I started writing. The company is very informal, although in the next year I'm going to incorporate it as non-profit and formalize it a bit. The first show we did was by Edward Albee. The rest of the shows we've done are shows that I wrote. Two of them were co-creations with friend and mentor Chris Gerrard. My one-man show I toured in the Fringe to a number of cities and in the Vancouver Chutzpah Festival. My next show I felt needed its own life outside the Fringe, so I got a grant from the Manitoba Arts Council and Canada Council to rent a 5000-square-foot warehouse space and convert it into a theatre and put on a two-week run of the show. My next show after that I developed over the course of five years of staged readings, but for the full production we rented an actual theatre for a change and produced it as an independent production. The Fringe in Winnipeg is our main venue for amateur and professional independent theatre. I wanted to produce professional independent theatre outside the Fringe and managed to get grants for projects I wanted to work on. It's such a combination of skill, hard work and blind luck. I do private fundraising for each production.

D.L.: *Do you feel these private funders impede your artistic practice?*

D.T.-E.: Not at all. It's not that kind of relationship. I do agree as artists we are very vulnerable [to censorship]. Especially with this conservative government, this thing just happened with *Summerworks* [in Toronto] where that festival chose to put on a play discussing the Toronto 18, a group of young men facing terrorism charges. [Immigration Minister] Jason Kenney condemned the festival for selecting that play and then cut the festival's capital funding.

D.L.: *Your work as a writer/producer with Moving Target Theatre Company regularly includes some pretty dark heavy themes from mental illness, abuse, to murder, loneliness and degenerative disease. Can you elaborate on what draws you to this type of material as a playwright?*

D.T.-E.: I feel like going to these dark places is where we can learn the most and also communi-

cate at the most basic level as activists. [We're saying] don't be scared to think or act on these things. It's okay to talk about it, which I think can be rooted in Jewish tradition as well

D.L.: *You are one of a growing number of Jewish young adults speaking out on Israel/Palestine who goes against the status quo. Is your theatre practice in any way connected to your work as an outspoken critic of Israel?*

D.T.-E.: Well, my first production was called *Three-Ring Circus: Israel, Palestinians and my Jewish Identity*, which I think would be the opposite of a smart way to go about it. I was speaking out with the first play I wrote.

D.L.: *Why did you choose that?*

D.T.-E.: It was on my mind. I think for us as Jews, Israel/ Palestine should be really important because of the way Israel's positioned in our narrative as well as in the international narrative. I grew up going to Jewish school learning, "Jews care about human rights for everyone and have a deep morality; the State of Israel is deeply connected to us and isn't doing anything wrong and couldn't do anything wrong, has the most moral army in the world," that kind of nonsense. So then learning about the realities of what's going on there with the brutal Israeli oppression of the Palestinian people If nothing else as professional or amateur artists, it's important to challenge the status quo [view] in which Israel is this very moral and humanitarian entity that's not oppressing anyone—that's just not true. And if art is a quest for truth, then that's a pretty gigantic lie I grew up with, that a lot of Jewish people I know grew up with and are still hanging onto. What I'll be getting into in my next show is what it is that leads people to support this brutal system of Israeli apartheid or warehousing the occupation. (The term apartheid became outdated shortly after we started using the term; Blacks in South Africa had a role in the economy—cheap labour; Israel has been able to rid itself of its dependence on Palestinians for cheap labour. They're an unwanted population.)

My plays deal with my activism, but in a very roundabout way. None of my plays has been a propaganda piece, I feel—they're not polemics. It has a purpose, but I don't go into a piece knowing what message I want to convey. By the end of the play there's gotta be a message at the core of each play.

D.L.: *What are your future plans and goals?*

D.T.-E.: I'm working on a new one-man show. It will deal with the Israel apartheid issue—Adolf

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chose my interviewees almost exclusively from amongst those, both Israeli and Palestinian, engaged in—as the book’s subtitle states—*Nonviolent Resistance to the Israeli Occupation*, working not just for peace but for what they see as having some chance of being a peace that is both just and enduring.

I have nothing but respect and admiration for the many groups where Israelis and Palestinians work cooperatively for the common good, but which fall outside my narrow definition of “nonviolent resistance”—groups like Friends of the Earth Middle East (which Mr. Brooks mentions) and the Bereaved Families Forum (which he doesn’t), to name only two. Their omission was not meant as criticism, but reflects my need to maintain a relatively narrow focus; and such groups have been well described elsewhere, for example, in the film *Encounter Point* (JustVision.org), and in Daniel Gavron’s 2008 book, *Holy Land Mosaic: Stories of Cooperation and Coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians*.

I can’t begin to rebut all of David Brooks’ arguments in this space, but those interested in reading more about BDS in general, and the academic and cultural boycott in particular, can go to BDSmovement.net and pacbi.org; and for an exhaustive treatment of BDS—including, but not limited to, its academic and cultural components—I recommend reading *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions: The Global Struggle for Palestinian Rights*, by Omar Barghouti, one of its most prominent Palestinian advocates.

Maxine Kaufman-Lacusta
Burnaby, BC

INTERVIEW...

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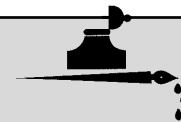
Eichmann will figure prominently in it. I’m pretty sure Jim Jones will too. It will look at why do good people do and support atrocious things. Hopefully it’ll tackle religion and politics. I’m working on a one-woman show about love and sex, starring Doreen Brown-

stone, Winnipeg’s oldest Jewish working artist. She was in the first production at Manitoba Theatre Centre directed by John Hirsch.

D.L.: *I definitely hope you come to Vancouver with your next one-man show.*

D.T.-E.: *It’s gonna need a tour, this one.♦*

Jottings by Sylvia Friedman



* You know, we’ve been back from the UJPO National Board Meeting in Winnipeg for over a month now, but the wonderfully warm feelings generated by our hosts linger on. Everything ran like clockwork—but without any pressure—and we still had lots of time for socializing and just sitting around and schmoozing. I even managed to sit in on one of their choir rehearsals and, oh my, they’re making some beautiful music.

The day after the Conference, they held a lovely—and very successful—*Outlook* Luncheon at the Fort Garry Hotel, where Lionel Steiman delivered the address. All in all, it was really great being in my old home town once again. Thank you Winnipeg—it was wonderful!

* A hearty *mazel tov* to Martha and Marty Roth of Vancouver on the birth of their granddaughter RAMONA FRANCES ROTH. Ramona was born on August 14th, and weighed in at 7 lbs. 14 oz. Proud parents are Jane and David of Minneapolis.

* Get-well wishes go out to JUDY GOLDIE of Toronto. We understand that you are recovering very nicely, and we hope you continue to do so until you are all well again.

* This past month has been particularly sad for us at *Outlook* with the loss of so many of our dear friends.

Our belated condolences to Clara Birnbaum of Japan, on the recent loss of her mother, RUTH BIRNBAUM of Montreal. Our sympathy also to Miriam, Phillip, David, Helen and children, and to very dear special friend Saul Lemkin.

Condolences to the Coodin Family on the passing of their brother MOISH COODIN of Montreal. We send our sympathies to Tzipie in Montreal, Arnie & Zoya in Vancouver, and Perry & Ruth in Ottawa.

Our old friend, CY (CYRIL) HARROD, quietly passed away in Vancouver, on November 13th. Cy was a very gentle man with a delightful sense of humour. He leaves to mourn his wife Rose, and stepchildren Katherine (Tom), Paul (Heather) and grandchild Sally.

The shocking news that BOB ROSEN of Vancouver has died has hit his family and many friends very hard—he was only 64 and a going concern. He was a community school coordinator and teacher and musician. Among his many activities, he was on the steering committee of Independent Jewish Voices-Canada. Our hearts go out to his wife Eva Sharell, son Michael Gabriel Rosen (Tracey), brother Stanley (Rita), nephew Daniel (Jess and Evan), Janine and Brianna.

Our dear friend LEN DOLGOY of Almonte, ON and more recently of Toronto, passed away. Len was a lifetime member of the UJPO and an avid supporter of *Outlook*. While he was an excellent geography teacher, his first love was pottery and he was featured in many exhibitions. He is survived by his wife Reva and sons Sholem and Avi.

BEN SWANKEY died at the ripe old age of 98. He lived a most colourful and extraordinary life. He made a lifelong commitment to socialism as a young man, and never forgot his humble beginnings. Ben contributed a number of articles to *Outlook*, and in his later years he wrote his memoirs, *What’s New: Memoirs of a socialist idealist*. He became a labour writer and policy analyst, and remained active well into his 80s. He leaves behind his daughter June (Ken) and son Tom (Barb) and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Until next time,
Sylvia