

## Arts &amp; Travel

# Interactive play brings Orthodox wedding to life

By JOSEPH SERGE  
Arts Editor

*Yichud*, Julie Tepperman's new play, is meant to simulate an actual Orthodox wedding, and audience members are treated like "guests," able to interact in a special pre-wedding ceremony.

*Yichud* follows the wedding of Rachel and Chaim. They are brought together through a shidduch, get engaged after a few chaperoned dates and marry shortly thereafter.

"This play takes place on the day of their wedding. The theatre is going to be transformed into a synagogue," Tepperman says. Part of the play takes place in the *yichud* room, where the married couple goes to be alone together right after the ceremony.

The play begins with a pre-wedding ceremony. As the audience arrives in the lobby, "the men will be invited up to the balcony to meet the groom, and the women remain in the sanctuary level," Tepperman says. "The women guests will be able to meet with the bride before the wedding and ask for a special blessing from her."

Mingling about with these "paying guests" will be a group of "volunteer wedding guests" doing pre-arranged things to give the whole thing a real feel. "A lot of stuff is co-ordinated to look spontaneous," Tepperman says.

Although male and female guests will be separated for the first half hour or so of the play, they will all be able to see everything that's going on. "Depending on where you're sitting, you'll get a different perspective."

During the unveiling of the bride, the men will be invited to go and meet the women. They can then watch the final third of the play together. "For the last part, the audience becomes flies on the wall, witnessing the wedding from their seats," Tepperman says.

This isn't the first of her plays to feature audience interaction, or what she describes as "organized chaos." Tepperman and her husband, Aaron Willis, *Yichud*'s director, are the

founders of Convergence Theatre, and their previous plays have also featured such "organized chaos."

In 2006, they produced *AutoShow*, in which seven plays were performed simultaneously in seven cars in a parking lot, as the audience moved from car to car. A couple of years ago, Dora-nominated Tepperman wrote one of the four plays in *The Gladstone Variations*, in which the audience moved from room to room in the Gladstone Hotel in downtown Toronto, following the play's actions.

In *Yichud*, the audience is also treated to an interactive experience and, in addition to mingling with the actors, can also choose to dance to music performed by a live klezmer band.

"It was never intended this way," Tepperman says. An earlier, shorter Fringe Festival version stuck to a more traditional stage setting. But when Theatre Passe Muraille got involved, the whole thing got bigger, and they decided to treat the play like an actual wedding.

"We realized it would serve the play better if the stage was like a synagogue. Everything is very similar to what happens at a real Orthodox

wedding."

Tepperman is aware that Jewish weddings differ according to culture, and went with what suits the characters of the play best.

Tepperman and Willis, who play the couple, Rachel and Chaim, didn't have a *yichud* room at their real wedding. In fact, they hadn't even heard about the ritual "Later, I was working in a synagogue, and I accidentally walked in on a couple in a *yichud* room," Tepperman says. "I think it's a beautiful ritual. It's the first time the bride and groom spend some time together to reflect on what is happening to them."

The play also takes on the larger meaning of the word "*yichud*" (seclusion), which refers to the separation between men and women in daily Orthodox life. During the play, action splits between three "*yichuds*" in three separate rooms that the audience is privy to. The audience also gets to see Chaim's two brothers, who have drifted apart, engage in an

emotional and passionate discussion, as well as an argument between the parents.

"All of these emotional conflicts are heightened by the atmosphere of the wedding itself," Tepperman says.

Richard Greenblatt and Diane Flacks, the co-writers and actors of *Sibs*, play Rachel's parents. Greenblatt also serves as consulting director. Veteran actor Jordan Pettle plays one of Chaim's two brothers, and SummerWorks Theatre Festival's artistic producer, Michael Rubinfeld, plays the other.

The entire cast, in fact, is Jewish.

"That started off accidentally," Tepperman says, but in the end it was a deliberate decision, as everyone was sensitive to the subject matter and didn't need to have the finer points of a Jewish wedding spelled out.

"We all understand what this is all about, although none of us is Orthodox, and we all relate differently to Judaism and Orthodox Judaism."

The set designer, Beth Kates, is also Jewish, as is the musical director, singer Aviva Chernick.

Tepperman says the play is sensitive to the Orthodox community and hired Shira Schwartz, a theatre practitioner and Orthodox woman as a consultant. "We are trying to be as accurate as to what happens at an Orthodox wedding as we possibly can."

*Yichud*, Tepperman says, is a sensitive, powerful and balanced look at relationships. "We really hope this play resonates with people on an emotional level, whether they are Jewish or not."

When the play's run at Theatre Passe Muraille ends, Tepperman hopes to take this production to other cities. "After you work on something for 2-1/2 years, you want it to last longer than three weeks." They are inviting artistic directors and producers from across Canada and New York, and even Mandy Patinkin, who will be in town later this month, to watch it.

*Yichud* runs Feb. 10 to 27, with previews Feb. 6 to 10, at the Theatre Passe Muraille Mainspace, 16 Ryerson Ave., Toronto. Guests are invited to show up 15 minutes early for pre-show wedding celebrations. Tickets at artsboxoffice.ca, 416-504-7529. www.passemuraille.on.ca



Julie Tepperman

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— J.S.