

COVER STORY: YICHUD (SECLUSION)

Magnetic North Festival: Hot Summer Guide

This year's Magnetic North Festival program offers a mesmerizing blend of genres

Fantastic Mosaic

by Cormac Rea June 2nd, 2011



Julie Tepperman & Aaron Willis star in YICHUD (Seclusion)

Surfing the waves at social networking and e-dating sites may be de rigueur for the single and lonely in this post-millennial age, but computer programs can only refine personality matches so far. Perhaps the age-old idea of a matchmaker has the potential of being a more personalized and, ironically, evolved version of the dating service? If so, religious ceremonies utilizing matchmakers and arranged marriages - practices that have been mimicked and resurrected in the cold, blue light of contemporary computer dating websites - could benefit from an objective re-examination of their worth.

Yichud (Seclusion), a play by Toronto playwright **Julie Tepperman** and directors **Aaron Willis** and **Richard Greenblatt**, provides just such a re-examination, depicting the arranged marriage between characters Rachel and Chaim, a pair of Orthodox Jews living in Toronto, and their first private moment together as a couple in the traditional yichud room. *Yichud (Seclusion)* displays all the elements and ceremonies of an Orthodox wedding, including the concerns and storylines of family, bride, groom and guests. It is an atmosphere with which the creators have some experience.

"[Julie and I] both come from a Jewish background as well," offers co-director Aaron Willis, reached over the phone in Toronto. "I'm actually a Jew by choice, converted in 2008 after Julie and I married in 2004, but Julie actually comes from a family with Orthodox background."

"Though I wasn't raised Orthodox," explains Julie Tepperman, "my mother was raised in a modern Orthodox home, but kind of moved away from religion after she got married. I was very close with my grandparents, and a lot of my connection with Judaism comes from them and their stories, but I also have a lot of Orthodox, "black hat" cousins, and have been so curious about their lives. For example, one of my cousins requested an arranged marriage when she was 19, and now she lives in New York with several children and has a much different life than me. An arranged marriage may seem very foreign, but it has a lot in common with something like J-Date or E-Harmony - they're kind of the same but in this case you have a personalized matchmaker."

The idea of a matchmaker offering human insight into the darker crannies of personality, suitability, and potential for love would certainly appear a step ahead of subject field-based connections forged through the keyboards of the desperate. Still, inevitably there is the bogey of religion, its absolutist nature, and the implicit questions of liberty and freedom for all parties.

"I wondered what it would be like to put an emphasis on the brevity of courtship in arranged marriages in Orthodox Judaism," says Tepperman. "So, once you meet and realize you like each other and share many of the same values and goals, including faith in God, and after your families meet and decide they like each other - plus there has to be chemistry between the couple in question - once all of that is established, you can take the plunge knowing that you have your whole marriage to grow together and get to know each other.

"On the other hand, you are chaperoned during all of your dates, and can't even touch. In conceiving of this play, I was curious to explore the first moments when the couple is actually alone together on the yichud room; this is where they meet directly after the ceremony (and before the reception). It was so foreign to me...Yichud (Seclusion) quickly snowballed into all kinds of other questions and curiosities."

Yichud (Seclusion) June 3-6, 2011

*By Théâtre Passe Muraille in partnership with Convergence Theatre
at Magnetic North Theatre Festival (Academic Hall, University Of Ottawa)*

Written by Julie Tepperman

Directed by Aaron Willis, Richard Greenblatt

<http://www.ottawapress.ca/stage/stage.aspx?iIDArticle=21755>