

## FROM PLAYWRIGHT JULIE TEPPERMAN

I was once asked how I could write a play about Orthodox Jews, not being an Orthodox Jew myself. My answer was something like, “if we all only made art based on things we know about from direct experience, there’d probably be a lot of pretty boring art out there, don’t you think?”

Though not raised in an Orthodox Jewish home, my family runs the gamut, ranging from completely secular, Reform, Conservative, Traditional Egalitarian, Modern Orthodox, to Torah-Observant Jews. It’s complicated! I trace my earliest sense of Jewish identity back to a rich and loving relationship with my four grandparents. Today, my strongest connections to Judaism are primarily through culture and community, and through belonging to a diverse and inclusive Synagogue. Ironically (or not), the theatre has been my “way in” to Judaism, at once challenging and strengthening my sense of what it means to be a Jewish woman and a theatre artist living today.

The seeds of this play were planted one afternoon when I accidentally walked in on a bride and groom in their Yichud Room! At the time, I didn’t know what Yichud meant. As I learned about this intimate wedding ritual, and eventually about the Laws of Yichud and the complexities of gender separation practiced in Orthodox Judaism, my curiosity was sparked. I also grew more and more fascinated by the concept of arranged marriages in Orthodox Judaism – how could something so seemingly archaic still be practiced today? Through my research, I’ve grown to respect and even admire the custom when it is approached from a place of mutual discovery, respect, shared beliefs and values – and like Rachel tells her father, there has to be chemistry. Although I understand the reasons behind it, I admit I still find the brevity of courtship and the couple’s inability to be alone together or touch, jarring.

The more I asked around, the more I discovered that nobody seemed to know exactly what actually goes on in the Yichud Room. The closest I got to an answer was, “it’s different for every couple.” Seriously? This from a religion that never tires of details and specificity?! As I started to tell people what I was writing about, you can bet the first question out of their mouths was “is it true that they do it in the Yichud Room?” So many unknowns, so many pre-conceived notions and assumptions – what is a young Orthodox Jewish couple to do?! Dramatically speaking, I wondered what a heightened experience the Yichud Room would be if it was indeed the first time the bride and groom had ever been alone together; the first time they had ever even held hands. And I wondered what expectations, hopes, and fears they would each bring into the Yichud Room.

Seclusion is the running metaphor throughout the play. Like Rachel and Chaim, each couple in the play experiences their own moment of Yichud. Through extensive research and rigorous character exploration, I have come to deeply respect and admire these six characters, flaws and all. I do not claim to be an authority on the Yichud Room, or on any matters pertaining to Orthodox Judaism; these characters can no more represent Orthodox Jews than any handful of people can ever represent any religion. At its core, I believe this is a play about the endings and beginnings of relationships. For me, it is essentially a play that begins and ends with love.