

SHALOM LIFE



Inside the Yichud Room With Julie Tepperman

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Julie Tepperman first found out what a yichud room was when she accidentally walked into one at an Orthodox wedding. Having never gone through this ritual at her own wedding, Tepperman was intrigued – especially because no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get anyone to divulge what actually goes on inside.

Translated from the Hebrew word meaning “seclusion,” yichud refers to the impermissibility of an unrelated man and woman becoming secluded together in a private area. The yichud room, which as Tepperman discovered is actually an extension of the wedding ceremony, is the first time the bride and groom can be alone together as man and wife. According to Jewish Orthodox tradition, they often take the time to eat (couples are supposed to fast the day of the wedding), exchange gifts, and enjoy these first few moments together in private.

It's a ritual that often stays behind closed doors, but the Dora-nominated Tepperman decided to write a play about it. For anyone who caught Yichud at the Next Stage Theatre Festival last January, or in any of its previous incarnations, they will be surprised to see a whole different play at Theatre Passe Muraille this month. Penned by Tepperman and co-directed by her real-life husband **Aaron Willis** (who also plays Chaim the groom) and **Richard Greenblatt** (who also plays Mordechai, father of the bride), Yichud offers a glimpse into the Toronto Orthodox Jewish community through Rachel and Chaim, a young couple on their wedding day. This being an arranged marriage, the two have only gone on a handful of chaperoned dates, which causes more than a little anxiety for both – especially as Rachel must figure out how to tell her new husband that she plans to do her Master's before starting a family.

Added to the mix are Rachel's unhappily married parents and Chaim's two brothers, whose own tensions gradually bubble to the surface. In a unique touch, the theatre will be decorated like a synagogue and the audience will become actual guests of the wedding.

Shalom Life recently spoke with the lovely and very gracious Julie Tepperman over the phone about love, Jewish traditions, and getting re-married to her husband every night.

Tell me how the idea for Yichud first came about.

The idea came about when I learned about the yichud ritual during the Jewish wedding ceremony. I accidentally walked in on another couple's yichud room [laughs] and I wondered what they were doing in there. As I started reading about it I thought it was a really lovely ritual, that the bride and groom, could have an opportunity to be alone together. And then I started to investigate the larger meaning of the word in terms of daily Orthodox practice, and some of those themes have woven their way into this larger play, but really it just started off as a 20-minute scene between the bride and groom, and me wondering how high the stakes would be if it was the first time they were ever alone together.

What's it like playing against your real-life husband as your groom?

It's crazy! In a way there are a lot of firsts for us, because we never had a yichud room and we didn't even have a traditional Jewish wedding. Without sounding cheesy, it's quite romantic actually, to play those firsts with each other. When it comes down to it, we just forget about the writing and directing and get to be Rachel and Chaim in the yichud room - - it's very provocative.

Yichud is about a very specific community and a very specific ritual, so what do you think makes the play universally accessible, especially to non-Jewish people who may not be familiar with these traditions?

I think every religion has traditions, many of which have an element of wanting to please your family, and I think life cycle events bring that out of people no matter what religion you come from. Also, I think everyone can relate to the first time you've ever been with a special person. Whether people had an arranged marriage or dated for a very long time, everyone has experienced a first in their relationship and has had their hearts flutter, and they've also been disappointed. So I think anyone who has ever been in a relationship on some level will be able to relate to the play and have certain elements resonate with them.

Did you put any of yourself or your own views on arranged marriage into these characters?

It's funny, but I always wrote Chaim for Aaron, so I think there's a lot of Aaron's kind of nervousness or nerdiness there [laughs] – not nearly as nervous or nerdy as Chaim, but there's a bit of him in that, in his gentleness and kindness. I really had no views on arranged marriages, just a lot of curiosity. I've had relatives who at a very young age requested arranged marriages, and were married quite quickly after they found their match. To me that is so foreign, and different from the way I've chosen to live my life, but I deeply respect it and am deeply curious about it. I really think curiosity is what sparked so much of the writing.

Did the writing process make you think differently about love and marriage and Jewish traditions?

That's a great question. For me, I feel that my way into Judaism is through theatre. It's very strange – I think like all the characters in this play, I'm constantly in a dialogue about my own Jewish practices. I'm not sure if meeting these characters and meeting the people who helped with the research will actually make me change my life – you never know! – but I certainly feel very connected to Judaism, culturally, in the last few years. Traditionally it's still a struggle, but I think I have a greater understanding. I hope I do!

What was it like working with an all-Jewish ensemble?

Oh, it was amazing! None of us are Orthodox, and all of us have very different Jewish practices, but it didn't take us long to get into the thick of the issues and start asking questions. It really felt like cheder, or Talmud class [laughs]. Beth Kates [the set designer] designed the whole theatre like a synagogue, and it's been a very emotional experience for her – because she had childhood memories and adult experiences of going to synagogue with family, she was able to put all of that into her design.

There was a funding problem late last year when the Harold Green Jewish Theatre company withdrew their support, but you raised the money and got back on track really quickly.

Really quickly. It was incredible. We got together with Theatre Passe Muraille and did a bunch of emergency phone calls. A lot of the support early on came from members of the Jewish community, from various denominations of Judaism. It's unfortunate what happened, but I think very exciting in that we would have had no idea that there was so much support for the show. We've just been blown away, and we went in for the first day of rehearsal feeling very high-spirited and encouraged. Not that we didn't feel this before, we did, but we felt like this is a story worth telling.

Since you started this project, have you gained any more insight into what happens in the yichud room, or do you think that will always be a mystery?

I don't think I'll ever really know! Aaron converted to Judaism after we got married, so even though we had a Jewish wedding, by law we're not religiously married. I think if Aaron and I were to ever have a wedding again – and I don't know if we will, because in working on the show, we kind of feel like we get to get married every night [laughs] – but if we ever did, we would certainly have a lot of options for how we wanted our yichud room to go.