



# The *YICHUD* Room: Performing Jewish Spaces

by Shira Schwartz, in conversation with  
Julie Tepperman and Aaron Willis

What is Jewish space? *YICHUD* (*Seclusion*),<sup>1</sup> a new Canadian play by Julie Tepperman, co-directed by Aaron Willis and Richard Greenblatt, represents Jewish space in two ways: as a physical space—a synagogue—and as a metaphysical space—a place where a Jewish spiritual reality is enacted through ritual. In fact, part of the concept behind this production was for the first to house the second: to create a theatre space where Jewish ritual is embodied and collectively experienced.

To this end, Toronto's Theatre Passe Muraille (TPM), where *YICHUD* was largely developed, underwent a remarkable makeover from theatre to synagogue, thanks to Beth Kates's extraordinary design. With Jewish art on the walls, *mezuzahs* on every door frame, a *yahrzeit* (memorial) board, and even a notice board for community events such as births and *bar mitzvahs*, the transformation of the theatre space was detailed and thorough. After two runs at TPM in February 2010 and May 2011, the production travelled to Ottawa to be the gala opener for the 2011 Magnetic North Theatre Festival. This required Beth to adapt the design to fit a new theatre, Academic Hall, which also was transformed to look and feel like a synagogue.

At TPM, the Jewish experience began on the street, where spectators noticed a large wooden Star of David and Hebrew writing above the theatre's main doors (a sign with a Hebrew translation of "Theatre Beyond Walls"). Patrons new to TPM often remarked, "How wonderful you got permission to do a play in an old synagogue!" The experience continued upon entering the space, where a live klezmer band played traditional Jewish wedding music, arranged by musical director Aviva Chernick, who also wrote several original compositions for the play. "Wedding guests" were handed programs, not for the play but for "Rachel and Chaim's Wedding," and were invited to sign a guest book where people wrote messages of



The 2010 Theatre Passe Muraille production of *YICHUD (Seclusion)*. From l to r: Jordan Pettie as Ephraim, Julie Tepperman as Rachel, Aaron Willis as Chaim, and Michael Rubinfeld as Menachem, with members of the company.

Photo by Keith Barker ([keithbarkerphotography.wordpress.com](http://keithbarkerphotography.wordpress.com))

“*mazel tov!*”; a few people even left cheques! Upon entering the theatre proper, men were offered *kippot* (head coverings) to wear, and individuals were encouraged to separate by gender: women were invited to participate in a pre-ceremony *Kabbalas Panim* (bridal reception) with the bride and female relatives, and men were invited to celebrate with the groom and male relatives for a similar reception, a *Tish*. Audiences were invited to dance, toast, and receive or offer a blessing to the bride and groom. In other words, a completely immersive orthodox Jewish wedding experience took place throughout the theatre during this half-hour preshow dedicated to the performance of Jewish wedding rituals. Although there are only six speaking characters in the play, in this production there was also a chorus of ten wedding guests (made up of new theatre school graduates) who played family members and whose job it was to sing, dance, and engage with the audience during the preshow, as well as to flesh out wedding rituals during the play (e.g., they danced in the *hora* at the end).

Since many of these rituals are inherently environmental—they are contingent upon specific spatial and spectatorial conditions in order to make them sacred—their presentation in *YICHUD* also became the ground for experimentation by Convergence Theatre, an artist-driven, indie company that conceived and co-produced the show, and that has been particularly interested in environmental theatre and site-specific work. Convergence Theatre has been creating plays since 2006 under the artistic direction of Julie Tepperman (actor-playwright) and Aaron Willis (actor-director). In a recent conversation I conducted with Tepperman and Willis about *YICHUD*, they had this to say about Convergence Theatre:

With every project we challenge ourselves to find innovative ways to push the boundaries of intimacy between performer and audience. We tend to create shows with large ensembles (in *YICHUD*, the acting ensemble and creative team totaled twenty-five!), and



The 2010 Theatre Passe Muraille production of *YICHUD (Seclusion)*. From l to r: Richard Greenblatt as Mordechai and Diane Flacks as Malka.

Photo by Keith Barker ([keithbarkerphotography.wordpress.com](http://keithbarkerphotography.wordpress.com))

we have a history of creating plays in nontraditional venues (our first production, *AutoShow*, took place in actual cars) and site-specific locations (*The Gladstone Variations* was written for Toronto’s historic Gladstone Hotel). With *YICHUD*, we set out to reimagine a traditional theatre space, Theatre Passe Muraille, into something it’s not—a synagogue. We focused on exploring ways, within the context of a traditional Jewish wedding, to immerse the audience in the world of the play and enrich their theatre-going experience.

*YICHUD* uses metaphors of Jewish physical space—for example, the *Yichud Room*, a meeting place in which a bride and groom spend their first moments alone together as husband and wife following the wedding ceremony—to understand a Jewish philosophy of space. The process of staging this play marries a cultural context to a theatrical aesthetic of space. What makes this approach so effective is that it uses environmental staging to introduce non-Jews as well as nonorthodox/nonpracticing Jews to these traditions. The immersive quality of this production takes some of the strangeness of the ritual away since audiences are directly implicated as wedding guests. A play cannot happen without an audience; similarly, a wedding cannot take place without witnesses and celebrants. No audience member was forced to participate; simply by being there, their presence was valued, and they were made to feel welcome from the moment they entered the space.

Despite its emphasis on creating an immersive audience experience within a very specific cultural design, *YICHUD* is a text-based play. Rachel and Chaim (played by Tepperman and Willis) are orthodox Jews living in Toronto. They have



The 2010 Theatre Passe Muraille production of *YICHUD* (*Seclusion*). From l to r: Michael Rubinfeld as Menachem and Jordan Pettle as Ephraim.  
 Photo by Keith Barker ([keithbarkerphotography.wordpress.com](http://keithbarkerphotography.wordpress.com))

requested an arranged marriage, and today is their wedding day. Immediately following the wedding ceremony, they head for the *Yichud* Room. For Rachel and Chaim, who have only had a handful of chaperoned dates, this is the first time they are alone together. In another part of the synagogue, tensions rise between the groom's older brothers, Ephraim and Menachem (played by Jordan Pettle and Michael Rubinfeld), rival Torah scholars who haven't seen each other in four years. Meanwhile, the bride's parents, Mordechai and Malka (played by Richard Greenblatt and Diane Flacks), are secretly planning to divorce, and in a last attempt to woo her back, Mordechai takes some unorthodox measures. *YICHUD* directly confronts the tensions that exist in the orthodox Jewish world between tradition and modernity, powerfully dramatizing issues of love, marriage, respect, sex, honour, and duty.

As a playscript and production, *YICHUD* raises questions about staging Jewish ritual in theatrical space: What are the religious implications of staging sacred Jewish practices? How can the rituals presented in *YICHUD* be viewed as ontologically complicated sites? What does it mean to perform Jewish(ly), to perform orthodox(ly), and in what ways are these practices made meaningful for performers and spectators?

Multiple religious rituals are performed in this play, which produces a charged spiritual reality for some Jewish audience members: silent prayer, the recitation of Hebrew blessings over water, wine, and food, *l'chaims* (toasts) at the *Tish*, the traditional unveiling of the bride before the groom (the *Bedeken*), the marriage ceremony under the *chuppah* (which includes the circling of the bride around the groom, the drinking of the wine, and the breaking of the glass). During one performance, an orthodox spectator shouted "Amen!" from his seat in response to a blessing recited. The audience laughed, of course, but upon speaking to this individual after the show, it was clear that he did not intend this as a joke. From his perspective, he was legally implicated in what speech theorist J. L. Austin would call a "performative

utterance": a speech act that alters social reality rather than merely describing it (12). A blessing was conferred upon an individual and, as an orthodox Jew, he was obligated to respond in order to complete that blessing. For him, the theatre space was sacred, the distinction between a real and fake ceremony erased through the speech act.

---

What are the religious implications of staging sacred Jewish practices? How can the rituals presented in *YICHUD* be viewed as ontologically complicated sites? What does it mean to perform Jewish(ly), to perform orthodox(ly), and in what ways are these practices made meaningful for performers and spectators?

---

Spectatorship in *YICHUD* can be analyzed from both theatrical and religious perspectives. In the play's elaborate preshow, the audience is implicated in two distinct rituals: the *Kabbalas Panim* (for women) and the *Tish* (for men). During the *Kabbalas Panim*, audience members are encouraged to approach the bride for a blessing. Tepperman, playing the bride, explains the blurring of actor-audience boundaries that took place at this moment in the production:

People I know would come up to me and I'd have to deal with, "Oh, Julie! Hi! Is this really your mother? What's it like marrying Aaron every show? Congratulations on the reviews!" And, you know, where do I draw the line and "redirect" the conversation? Where does Julie stop and Rachel begin? Then there was the issue of gender to negotiate. As Rachel, I'm *shomer negiah*, meaning I don't physically touch men, other than close relatives. So if a male friend came up to me during the preshow, I wouldn't hug him. I'd just smile and say hello. If a male and female couple came up to me for a special blessing, I would bless them both, but reach out and take only the woman's hands. Similarly, if women decided to join the men at the *Tish*, they wouldn't be asked to leave or anything, but a male actor wouldn't pull a woman into the circle and dance with her because in the world of the play that kind of interaction isn't permitted. Another example is the ushers—dressed like kosher caterers and *Haredi* Jews—who were instructed to offer only the men *kippot* (head coverings), but if a woman chose to wear one—and some did!—great, they didn't stop her! In such an intimate improv, and an environment with such specific orthodox customs and rules, the lines can get blurred. We never wanted to embarrass anyone, and we certainly didn't want to restrict people's movements—why shouldn't a man get to experience a *Kabbalas Panim* and a woman a *tish*—it's theatre! The goal was to make everyone feel welcome and part of the event. . . . We realized it was up to us, the actors, to guide the audience through these rules of engagement.



She further describes how the act of giving people *brachahs* (special blessings) during this preshow affected her personally:

The people who chose to approach did so because they wanted to improvise and engage with us as the characters. The orthodox ritual for a bride to give *brachahs* to her guests was totally foreign to most; they thought it was vice versa, that they should be the ones offering me a blessing! I felt, with the *brachahs*, I always needed to “mean it.” Feel it. I didn’t want to recycle blessings . . . I didn’t want people to feel ripped off . . . I memorized a lot of Hebrew passages from the *siddur* (prayer book), but in the end I never used one bit of Hebrew for the blessings.

I realized that what audiences really wanted, and what was indeed most authentic, was to have me hold their hands, look them in the eyes, and offer them the blessing they wanted, truly from my heart: a blessing for good health, for a loved one who was ill, for an upcoming job interview, or for grandchildren. I was giving the blessing as “Rachel the bride,” but it was equally me, Julie, speaking. . . . There is a belief that “the gates of heaven” are open for the bride on her wedding day and a blessing from a bride goes straight from her mouth to God’s ears. . . . I find that really beautiful. People’s capacity and willingness to play make-believe truly amazed me. Even though we all knew that this was theatre and I wasn’t really a bride, we all agreed to pretend together, and in that sense, “the gates of heaven” really were open.

This practice of staging ritual is complicated by virtue of its being theatricalized. Though Julie is not, in reality, a bride, she is still reciting a blessing that is deeply meaningful from a religious perspective and, although recited in a fictional context, still carries a strong element of authenticity: she “means it.”

She elaborates on the emergence of religious significance through the performance:

There were certain moments of private ritual that I discovered as Rachel—moments between Rachel and *Hashem* (God). For instance, I would kiss my *siddur* each time I opened and closed it. . . . I never enjoyed kissing a prayer book more! It was holy. It was sacred. I would *shokel* (ritual swaying) and whisper prayers I knew by heart to myself, like the *Ashrei*, which is a prayer I’ve always personally connected to . . . the act of reciting those words really resonated with me and allowed me to “drop-in” as an actor to Rachel’s heightened emotional state.

The words *holy* and *sacred* stand out as significant to me. I wonder what Julie means by them. Are the ritualized moments she describes meaningful to Rachel, the character, or to Julie, the artist? She continues:

As the actor playing Rachel, even in these “private moments,” I’m aware that I’m always being watched; I’m on stage. The key for me as an actor was to try to find meaning in every ritualized moment, no matter how small. For Rachel, this is a heightened day, and her connection to *Hashem* is palpable. For instance, in the play, when Rachel’s mother convinces her to take a sip of water (she is supposed to be fasting on her wedding day) and she whispers a blessing before drinking, she does it with feeling. (This always got a laugh . . . of course the act of blessing water is foreign to most people!) It’s like that Passover question, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” On any other day, Rachel might mumble the prayer quickly, insignificantly, and then drink, without thinking twice about it. It’s just an everyday act for a practicing Jew. On *this* day, every prayer a bride utters goes directly to God, and so to Rachel, it takes on a special meaning. In that sense, every move Rachel makes is imbued with a kind of holiness, sacredness, authenticity, a feeling that God is in the room. What a great state of being for an actor to play!

The issue of authenticity was raised a number of times in conversation with Tepperman and Willis, pointing to the challenges of sustaining the fiction of a ritual reality, particularly in a site-specific context where audience members are participants in a sacred space that is being created. Defining what “authentic” means is further complicated by the fact that Willis, the actor who plays the groom, is Tepperman’s husband. Willis reflects on his own marriage ceremony in relationship to the one he performs in the play.

When Julie and I stood under the *chuppah* in performance, and I looked at the eternal flame that Beth [set designer] made, it struck me that, at our real wedding, I didn’t think about God; but in this wedding, when thinking like Chaim, I did. And when I was *davening* (praying) as Chaim in the *Bedeken* and in the *chuppah*, it really resonated with me, Aaron. The intention behind these rituals, how the wedding day is as holy a day as *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement) . . . by allowing these images to affect me, I think it helped ground me in Chaim and keep my performance alive and spontaneous.

The way Aaron speaks about this scene is interesting; he uses the word “in” instead of “at” when referring to certain wedding practices: “in the *Bedeken*”; “in the *chuppah*.” This phrasing suggests an ontology of Jewish wedding rituals distinct from the theatre in which they are situated. The *space* these rituals occur in is not exclusively a physical space, but also a mental and spiritual space that exists simultaneously with the physical one. “In” points more broadly to how ritual is viewed in a Jewish context: it is a space, an altered reality, one enters *into*.

Aaron elaborates on the way that this sacred space was opened up in *YICHUD* by describing the relationship between theatre and ritual from an actor’s perspective.

In my personal spiritual practice, *davening* isn't *davening* unless I mean it. For me, it's hard to *daven* on autopilot, without understanding why I'm saying what I'm saying, without connecting to the intention behind the words. And similarly, acting will only be believable to an audience if the actor understands the intention behind what he/she is saying. For me, this is the neat crossover between ritual and theatre. Every ritual that people see as deeply meaningful has an incredibly strong intention behind it, which is why I think ritual can be so potent and effective. Theatre works the same way. The more specific the intention is behind the writing, the acting, the direction, and the design, the stronger the effect on the audience.

Here, Aaron draws a crucial comparison between religious ritual and theatre. In both cases, the efficacy of the performance is relative to the clarity and specificity of the performer's intention—or, to return to Tepperman's phrasing, the extent to which he/she “means it.” Willis explains:

I think there's an important distinction between “meaning it” and “feeling it.” I'm comparing the *intention* of ritual practice with the *intention* of theatrical storytelling, and how, when those intentions are clear and specific, it becomes possible for the ritual participant/actor/audience member to actually *feel* something. There's no guarantee a person will feel anything at all, but the crux of the comparison between ritual and theatre, to me, is that both strive to *create* a space, which encompasses both a physical environment as well as a mental/spiritual mindset, in which there is the possibility for deep and rich feelings, emotions, connections with one another or with the divine/sublime/unnamable mysteries of the universe.

Willis goes on to describe how entering a sacred space affected the actors and the audience:

There's something potentially troubling for people about representing ritual onstage . . . whether it's invigorating or uncomfortable, people act differently when the environment they're in is perceived to be holy. The synagogue we created for *YICHUD* allowed the audience (and the actors) to enter into a relationship of sorts with a spiritually charged reality. Whether they were Jewish or not, ritually observant or not, they had an experience of a “Jewish space” both literally via the physical environment we created and imaginatively via the spiritual environment the actors embodied.



The 2010 Theatre Passe Muraille production of *YICHUD (Seclusion)*. From l to r: Aaron Willis as Chaim and Julie Tepperman as Rachel, with members of the company. Photo by Keith Barker ([keithbarkerphotography.wordpress.com](http://keithbarkerphotography.wordpress.com))

As an orthodox woman myself, what excited me about working with the creators of *YICHUD* in a consulting role was their determination to explore Jewish ritual honestly and rigorously. Details concerning the religious implications of modes of speech, dress, physical contact, Torah study, and more were embraced—not glossed over. During several talkbacks after the show, audience members indeed expressed that it was this very element of the play that made it so accessible. Non-Jewish spectators shared that these moments of specificity were meaningful as they became points of entry for their own religious/cultural contexts and experiences. In effect, ritual specificity and site-specificity worked together in *YICHUD* to realize the promise of performance as a live medium: creating an experience for audiences that was at once spiritually potent and dramatically truthful.

## Note

1. *YICHUD (Seclusion)* is published by Playwrights Canada Press. See [www.playwrightscanada.com/index.php/yichud-seclusion.html](http://www.playwrightscanada.com/index.php/yichud-seclusion.html).

## Work Cited

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1962. Print.

Shira Schwartz is completing her PhD in Theatre Studies at York University. Her area of research is performing Jewishness and sexuality. She also works on ethnography, dramaturgy, and new play development.