

Wedding Crashers

How one couple's leap of faith turned a 20-minute scene into a nightly celebration (with klezmer band) and a meditation on intimacy



'Yichud,' written by Julie Tepperman and directed by her real-life husband Aaron Willis — and starring them both — has transformed Theatre Passe Muraille into a synagogue for the occasion of an Orthodox couple's wedding.

By Richard Ouzounian

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Sometimes you have to learn how to live apart before you can learn to live together.

That's just one of the many lessons playwright **Julie Tepperman** and her husband, director **Aaron Willis**, have discovered by working on *Yichud*.

The play (whose title means "Seclusion") starts previews on Feb.6 at Theatre Passe Muraille and will continue through Feb.27.

The Orthodox Jewish tradition originally referred to the proscription against unmarried men and women being together, unchaperoned, under any circumstance, but it is now more commonly used to define the moment right after the marriage ceremony when the bride and groom are left alone – supposedly for the first time.

Tepperman laughs as she recalls her first encounter with it.

"When Aaron and I were married, we never had a Yichud room. I learned about it when I was working at a synagogue, I started to open a door and somebody screamed out, *'Don't go in there! That's the Yichud room!'*"

What Tepperman discovered was that "many people consider the time spent there more sacred than the wedding itself. It's a way of consummating the marriage without consummating the marriage." She giggles. "Although there are stories, and now that I've been researching it, people are always anxious to ask me, *'Is it true they do it in the Yichud Room?'*"

But Tepperman and Willis were more impressed with the many layers of meaning this seemingly archaic tradition contained.

"There are so many levels of seclusion, within religion, within family, within ourselves," says Tepperman. "There is a belief in Orthodox Judaism that all the laws are there to keep us safe. The Torah is like a blueprint for life."

Willis adds his perspective. "My experience with Judaism is that one of the most beautiful things about it is that you experience it by doing, rather than intellectualizing."

What's fascinating is the way Willis and Tepperman came to their in-depth knowledge of Judaism, because neither was really born into it.

Tepperman has the seemingly more conventional background, with an Orthodox-raised mother and a Conservative-raised father, but she was raised more Reformed, and admits that most of her profound religious discoveries have come recently.

"The theatre has been my way into Judaism. It continues to challenge my own identity."

But the real wild card is Willis.

"I was not born Jewish; I was raised Catholic. Julie and I met at George Brown theatre school, started seeing each other, then started to talk about religion.

"The more I heard about Judaism through her, the more I wanted to be a part of it. I finally said that I thought we should have a Jewish home."

Willis converted a few years after they were married and they now call themselves "fairly secular Jews who practice," and the synagogue they regularly attend defines itself as "traditional egalitarian."

What's also a joy to see is the way that *Yichud* the play has grown along the same path as the couple's spiritual journey.

Tepperman wrote what she describes as "a 20-minute scene for Aaron and me" set in the Yichud Room, which so captured the imagination of all who saw it, that an expanded version played at the 2009 Next Stage Festival.

After that, both the Harold Green Jewish Theatre and Theatre Passe Muraille decided to co-produce it, but in a shocking development at the end of last November, the former pulled out of the production, claiming that a corporate sponsor had taken offense at the play.

Andy McKim, artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille, believed in the work so much that – together with Tepperman and Willis – he set about raising the \$50,000 needed to bring the work to the stage and they found it from generous donors within a week.

Instead of cutting back because of financial adversity, the new version of *Yichud* is an expansively joyous celebration, with all of Theatre Passe Muraille's space being turned into the location of the festivities, a live klezmer band, and wonderful members of Toronto's Jewish theatre community, including **Richard Greenblatt**, **Diane Flacks**, **Jordan Pettle** and **Michael Rubinfeld**, swelling the ranks of the company.

The question of financial donors making artistic decisions remains a problematic one, but for the time being, everyone connected with *Yichud* prefers to concentrate on the work at hand.

"Judaism is like art," says Willis. "It's a tangible thing. You're always working on it, always shaping it all the time."

His wife is in happy agreement. "I have a deep respect for people who are willing to examine their religion in their work. I find that every question I ask opens up more questions."

Just the facts:

WHAT: Yichud

WHEN: Feb. 6-27

WHERE: Theatre Passe Muraille, 16 Ryerson Ave.

TICKETS: \$20-\$35 at 416-504-7529 or www.passemuraille.on.ca