

Julia Pascal interviewed about 12:37 at the Finborough Theatre by Shay Kaur Grewal for Radio London 30/11/2022

I'm joined now on the line by writer and director Julia Pascal to talk about a production. It started yesterday, 29 November, up until the 21 December at Finborough Theatre, and it is called 12:37. Now at 12:37pm on the 22 July 1946, the King David Hotel in Jerusalem was bombed, 91 people were killed, and 46 were wounded. That explosion was carried out by far right wing Zionists and they were targeting the headquarters of the British in Palestine. And this is a story, this production is a story of two Irish Jewish brothers from Dublin and the way in which they combat antisemitism on the streets of East London. Julia Pascal, it's a pleasure to have you on the show. Thank you so much for joining me today.

It's a pleasure to be here, delighted.

With this particular production there were so many different themes, aren't there, to explore. It really raises questions around national identity, Jewish violence, where did this particular show come about for you that you wanted to write and direct this?

I met, many years ago, old men who had been involved in Palestine in trying to remove the British. And they'd been involved actively. Some of them were artists who were putting up anti British posters. And some of them were involved in the bombing and sabotaging of British in the mandate. And I became very interested in this story because they were not religious Jews. They were Jews who really were nationalists in the way that other nationalist groups in the end of the 40s were progressing. And I wanted to make the links between Jewish nationalism and Irish nationalism in the early 20th century and Indian nationalism. I wanted to pull the threads together, because it seems to me that no theatre production had ever done that. And so that interested me to explore.

It's a really important discussion around identity and nationalism. Because we see that even today, I appreciate we are referring to a time decades ago for this incident, it's 1946. But, at the moment, if you look at the news headlines, we are constantly, are we not, looking at this idea of nationalism, what it means, whether you look at incidents that took place in America during Donald Trump's presidency, whether you look at now what is taking place with the war with Russia in Ukraine. It feels quite an important conversation to be had at the moment Julia.

Yes, I hadn't realised how timely this play would be when it was suggested to appear at the Finborough and, the more we rehearsed it, and the more I was watching the news and thinking about Ukraine, and Russia, and also post Brexit talks, the whole concept of nationalism, what is national identity? What does it mean to be a people? Should we have a land? All those huge questions, which were 20th century questions, are resonating through into our period. So, although it's a play by history, when I'm watching, it is very much the debate I'm hearing in the street today.

Is it a story of, and I only ask you this Julia because we can document moments in time in history and see them on film or on stage, but sometimes the human nature is such that you are always hopeful to look with positivity towards the future. So, is this a story of hope? Is there hope at the end of this?

I think there is. I was thinking about this coming into the theatre today. There's a hope that comes through which was about internationalism, and each of us is each other's sister and brother and that we have more in common that we have, which differentiates us and there is a dream that we all have, a kind of Eden dream, of a way we can live together. And then there is the nightmare of what nationalism leads to and I was thinking of this constant push pull dynamic that's in the human spirit. And I don't think there's any easy answer. We long we long for identity and to be part of a people but there's a danger that excludes us from other people. And so this is a constant fight within each of us every day and as part of our national and international debate, isn't it?

It certainly is and what I was quite struck by with this particular production, although I've not seen it as yet, is the fact that yes, you are really looking at controversial, complex questions, when you're focusing, as you've mentioned, national identity but of course, Jewish violence. But also there are key aspects which is really around a family drama. It is the intimacy of these brothers, is it not?

In fact, the central characters are two brothers. They are Irish Jewish brothers and they are based on my own father's family who were Irish Jews, and that's a community that very few people know about. And I thought that was interesting to highlight. And I took the liberty of taking their story and deviating it. In fact, my father's family were socialists, but I've imagined what would happen if they went towards the right wing and towards nationalism, what would have happened and so, therefore, the imagination of the writer is to take that further. But then they're also both in love with the same woman. So, there's a central conflict.

Love interest as well. You are really mixing things up, aren't you?

There's a lot of passion. There's sex, there's death, there's weddings, everything. She's a Yiddish theatre actress and part of my interest is representing stories of women that are not known about. A lot of women's lives are invisible. So, she breaks the stereotype of Jewish women on stage and is a very complicated character, who was a communist when she's coming out of Soviet Union and trying to spread Yiddish theatre, but later in the play moves to the right and becomes a nationalist because, in fact, she's been a sex slave in Nazi camps during the Second World War. Her trauma transforms her experiences from left to right. She's a very complicated character. And both the brothers are in love with her. So yes, that's a central struggle.

Central struggle indeed. But what I'm also struck by as you're talking Julia is a key aspect for you to have these voices of underrepresented women. But I would like to talk

to you about yourself, because it is rare that you will speak to a writer and director of a production who is female. That in and of itself is quite something, isn't it? Because me talking to you, genuinely, it's not often that I will speak to women who have not only written a theatre production, but then also directed it. What has that journey been like for you on a personal level.

I started out as an actor, and four years into it, I decided I was on the wrong side, and I wanted to be director.

You want to tell everyone the way you see it and your vision.

Absolutely. I become a theatre director. And then I did a lot of journalism, I was interviewing a lot of survivors of trauma and exile and war. And I began to realise that I could make stage dramas out of these and that I had certain skills which I'd gained from being an actor and being a director. And then I directed my own work, but it forced me into being a producer, searching for money as well. It's a very tough life in terms of you have to do so much background work in getting funds to get shows on. It's great to be a writer and a director, but it also means I have to do a lot of grant forms and looking around for support financially. And that's very tough. So, there are very few of us, but I try and work with younger women also to encourage them into the industry, I think it's very important. I think we should have 50/50 representation in state subsidised theatre. I'm quite an activist in feeling this.

But I mean, as you say, the struggle is such you are still doing it, why do it when there is so much stacked against you? It's an ideal isn't it to have 50/50. That's what most organisations even here at the BBC we hear in the news, you know, 50/50 representation of male and female. Most times organisations fall short, but we know it's really bad don't we? The stats speak for themselves when we talk about theatre in terms of female directors and writers. So, why do it Julia?

I can't stop myself. It's an impulse. I feel like a conduit for stories that need to be told. I enjoy it. I love it and it's a model for other women. They get the chance to think well why not me. So, I like that.

Then what would you say to that person tuned into Radio London who's had enough of it, all the politics behind what gets funded and the constant noes and the rejections? What do you say to them because I guess within your fantastic career, you've been through all of that, you've been there?. You know what it's like.

I think we have to find allies. You have to form families of people who are going to support you, and you support them. And that's what I've learned. The networking between women, finding other women you admire you work with, who will give you a chance. And I think that's very important because we're very isolated. It's lonely, and we have to break free of that and support each other and we don't need to be in competition with each other because it doesn't work that

way. Another woman's success is my success. My success is another woman's success. We support each other. I think that's what has to happen

That's my quote of the day you know Julia, "families of people" I love that because sometimes we often forget that you feel tunnel vision and you're focused on what you're doing, but actually, if you can bring people along with you, the journey is much better, isn't it?

That's right, you can't choose your own family but you can choose the family you want to work with.

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Oh goodness me, don't take me there. I think that's the one thing we all talk about, you can't choose your family but you can choose your friends. Huge congratulations on the production. It's called 12:37 and it is on until 21 December. People can go to finboroughtheatre.co.uk for more details. I'd love to get you back in the studio at some time and speak to you more about your career and the work that you're doing. So, do come into the studio at some point Julia,

Thank you. It was a great pleasure and I've enjoyed it.

Lovely speaking to you..