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April 16, 2014

A Fox in the Ruins: Comedy and Calamity in Pursuit of a New Holocaust Theater

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Abstract

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By Jake Krakovsky

For the first generation of Holocaust survivors, what they experienced was unspeakable and unnamable. The second generation of Holocaust survivors responded to the silence of their parents with mass creation—books, plays, short stories, songs, and films, both documentarian and fictional, which attempted to reckon with one of history’s most unfathomable catastrophes. As a third generation Holocaust survivor, I live with the million-ton-millstone of this history on my shoulders, and yet feel that the heretofore created media does not speak to a generation desensitized by the hyper-proliferation of images brought about by the Digital Age. I therefore set out to create my own work of Holocaust representation. As the primary creative element of my thesis, I wrote and performed *Yankl on the Moon*, a tragi-comic one-man-play which juxtaposes the comic Jewish folklore of the “Wise Men of Chelm” with the historical realities of the Holocaust. I chose theater as my lens not only because it is my particular field of study, but because I feel that the live creation and connection inherent to theatrical performance are essential to communicating about the Holocaust in a new, vivid, transformative way. The thesis explores my use of subjectivity, comedy, and non-realistic staging conventions in *Yankl on the Moon*—all choices which deviate from the normative standards of Holocaust literature. My first chapter seeks to establish a theoretical and critical foundation for the incorporation of my play into the canon of Holocaust Theater—not in spite of, but *because* of the notable ways in which I diverge from the extant guidelines and expectations surrounding Holocaust representation. What follows is the text of *Yankl on the Moon*, and a short chapter reviewing the responses to and future of this overwhelmingly successful experiment.

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CHAPTER 1

TOWARD A NEW HOLOCAUST THEATER: A CRITICAL FOUNDATION

Convention and Subversion in Holocaust Representation

The poet's answer to the historian, the poem's defiance of history, begins in the ruins of the material universe, or hovering just above, and remains its most enduring rebuke.

—Sidra D. Ezrahi, "After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?"

Robert Skloot, scholar and critic of the theater of the Holocaust, identifies "five reasons for the work of playwrights who engage the Holocaust experience: 1) to pay homage to the victims; 2) to educate audiences; 3) to provoke emotional responses; 4) to raise moral questions; and 5) to draw conclusions about the possibilities of human behavior."¹ These ideals are noble, and as a theater-maker I find them inspiring. However, as I developed *Yankl on the Moon* creatively, my concurrent critical research brought to my attention the unique and complex web of expectations, conventions, myths, and ideologies that attend any attempt to represent the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.

All creative writing requires that an author interact with received conventions of both form and subject matter. The choice to subvert or support existing paradigms is both a challenge and an opportunity, and the manner in which a writer does so can spell success or failure in the eyes of critics, academics, artists, and audiences. This is particularly true of fiction that seeks to grapple with non-fictional events—let alone one like the Holocaust, frequently considered "unspeakable" or "unrepresentable." And, while all respectable Holocaust literature must cope with "the tension between the compulsion to reenvision and the need for stability . . . the theater's

¹ Robert Skloot, *The Theater of the Holocaust, Volume Two: Six Plays* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 8.

flexible, performative nature magnifies the tension considerably, even unbearably.”² All of this is further complicated when one considers the unique ideological boundaries that have come to govern “respectable study” with regard to Holocaust representation.

Critic and Holocaust scholar Terrence Des Pres observes three primary ethical imperatives that dictate writing about the Holocaust:

1. The Holocaust shall be represented, in its totality as a unique event, as a special case and kingdom of its own, above or below or apart from history.
2. Representations of the Holocaust shall be as accurate and faithful as possible to the facts and conditions of the event, without change or manipulation for any reason—artistic reasons included.
3. The Holocaust shall be approached as a solemn or even sacred event, with a seriousness admitting no response that might obscure its enormity or dishonor its dead.³

These conventions of representation (Des Pres refers to them as “fictions” that “cannot be proved or even accounted for”⁴) are symptomatic of what Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek refers to as “the predominant feature of today's academic Holocaust industry,” that being “the elevation of the Holocaust into metaphysical diabolical Evil, irrational, apolitical, incomprehensible, approachable only through respectful silence.”⁵ These fictions (and the mindsets that create them) seek to limit artistic innovation and serve to immobilize the possibilities for new forms and strategies with which to wrestle with the past. They encourage a monolithic response to the Holocaust, leaving little room for nuance, and restrict the potential of new insight for a new age.

² Skloot, *Volume Two*, 8.

³ Terrence Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?” in *Writing and the Holocaust*, ed. Berel Lang (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1984), 217.

⁴ Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?,” 217.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, “Hitler as Ironist?” in *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?: Four Interventions in the (mis)use of a Notion* (London: Verso, 2001), 66.

I would like to address each of these principles as they relate to my pursuit of healing, transformation, and radical understanding in my play *Yankl on the Moon*. In this section I will address the first two: the perceived historical uniqueness of the Holocaust and the directive to maintain historical accuracy at all costs. The end of this section and the rest of my essay deal primarily with Des Pres' third "fiction" (the exclusive validity of the somber, serious tone), and supports my defiance of it through the creation of my play, and my assertion that tragicomic Holocaust theater is a productive and even necessary response for third-generation survivors engaging the Holocaust in the twenty-first century.

Firstly, the question of the Holocaust's uniqueness: Skloot refers to this when he says that "there are no metaphors for Auschwitz, just as Auschwitz is not a metaphor for anything else."⁶ The Holocaust as an event or series of events is often considered to be so gargantuan in its horror that it does not lie on a spectrum of human atrocities, but rather constitutes a special case, unique, separate from the rest of history. In Žižek's words:

The Holocaust is presented as the ultimate traumatic point where objectifying historical knowledge breaks down, where it has to acknowledge its worthlessness before a single witness; and, simultaneously, the point at which the witnesses themselves have to concede that words fail them, that what they can share is ultimately only their silence as such. So the Holocaust is referred to as a mystery, the heart of darkness of our civilization; its enigma negates all (explanatory) answers in advance, defying knowledge and description, noncommunicable, lying outside historicization—it cannot be explained, visualized, represented, transmitted, since it marks the Void, the black hole, the end, the implosion, of the (narrative) universe.⁷

So the Holocaust is unlike any event preceding (or, it is implied, following) it in history. On the surface, this statement seems logical. We need merely look to the systematic creation of a culture of genocide, "the extent of the perpetrator's intentionality, the degree to which the state

⁶ Robert Skloot, *The Theater of the Holocaust, Volume One: Four Plays* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 15.

⁷ Žižek, "Hitler as Ironist?," 66-67.

apparatus legalized the devastation . . . the number of people killed,”⁸ global inaction, the development of killing technology, the inaction of bystanders,⁹ and the extent to which Nazi Germany seemingly prioritized the torture and extermination of Jews even over its own success in the war, to see an accumulation of atrocities that appear to have no equal.

This logic, however, is potentially dangerous and myopic, as the twin maxims “Never Forget” and “Never Again” would seem to imply. If, as Santayana warned, failing to properly remember history makes one doomed to repeat it, then making the Holocaust unique by segregation from the rest of human history denies the reality of other genocides and, yes, the potential for other Holocausts. On one level, there is something vaguely racist (or at least Eurocentric) in emphasizing the Holocaust’s status as an historical aberration; it implies that an atrocity of such cruelty and brutality is exceptionally inconceivable in Europe, let alone in Germany, the heart of “civilized culture.” It is as if to say: when entire ethnic or religious groups are extinguished on other continents it is to be expected; but that could not happen here, in the West, where people are civilized. This is dangerous thinking.

I take issue with the designation of the Holocaust as historically unique not out of any desire to diminish its magnitude—in fact, quite the opposite. Many elements of the Holocaust were undoubtedly unique in scale, but if we are to wrestle honestly with the stain of the Holocaust on our collective memory, we mustn’t relegate it to a special category of its own; we must confront it as an historical event orchestrated by “ordinary people,” carried out by “ordinary people,” claiming as its victims “ordinary people.”

⁸ Vivian Patraka, *Spectacular Suffering: Theater, Fascism, and the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 1.

⁹ There were, of course, notable exceptions, but Holocaust scholar Ian Kershaw’s famous declaration that “the road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference” makes clear the truly colossal indifference (and therefore, complicity of the masses) demanded by the scale of the Holocaust.

Hitler is considered by many to be history's greatest monster; however, "Hitler, on the private, intimate level, was a person just like any other."¹⁰ He was a vegetarian, ardent non-smoker, and suffered from Parkinson's. Researchers have yet to find an element of Hitler's psychology or personality that could possibly explain the actions that have made his very name synonymous with grotesque hatred, mass death, and inhuman evil. According to Žižek, acknowledging Hitler's everyday humanity "makes his monstrous crimes even more horrifying and uncanny . . . and, along the same lines, when researchers desperately seek a secret meaning of the Holocaust, anything (including heretically asserting that God himself is diabolical) is better than acknowledging that an ethical catastrophe of such proportions could have occurred without a purpose, just as a blind effect."¹¹ Just as thinking of Adolf Hitler as a monster rather than a man in some way alleviates his responsibility for his monstrous actions; treating the reality of the events of the Holocaust as "above or below or apart from history"¹² rends them from their context and encourages silence where there should be endless discourse.¹³

The notion of the Holocaust as unique, and therefore "unspeakable," is therefore misleading; the abundance of Holocaust media (historical, legal, testimonial, confessional, literary, poetic, musical, etc.) tends to suggest the exact opposite. As Skloot observes, "implicit

¹⁰ Žižek, "Hitler as Ironist?," 65.

¹¹ Žižek, "Hitler as Ironist?," 65.

¹² Des Pres, "Holocaust Laughter?," 217.

¹³ The view of the Holocaust as absolutely unique is also contradicted by the role of Holocaust organizations. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum operates the Center for the Prevention of Genocide, which takes as its statement of purpose a quotation from Nobel Laureate, political activist, and author Elie Weisel: "A memorial unresponsive to the future would also violate the memory of the past." The Museum's steadfast devotion to genocide prevention makes clear the relationship between the Holocaust and other global atrocities.

in the proliferation of Holocaust literature [is] the final laying to rest of the dubious critical perspective that art cannot explore or attempt to explain the tragic events of 1933-1945.”¹⁴

“Unspeakable” here refers instead to a moral anxiety—the fear that the subjectivity inherent in any representation (“any representation of the Holocaust in literature or art can never adequately convey the reality of a lived experience”¹⁵) puts all representation in danger of trivializing the brutality of its perpetrators and the suffering of its victims. These are valid, valuable, ethical concerns. However, to turn the fear of trivialization into a proscription against nuanced interpretation and representation is to make flaccid the ability of future generations to examine and learn from the historical, political, and personal realities of the Holocaust. This is even truer in the context of art, the value of which lies in that particular freedom born of subjectivity.

Des Pres identifies the need to affirm and defend absolute historical accuracy (his second fiction of Holocaust representation) as the most persuasive imperative informing Holocaust studies. This act of bearing witness is the way in which we endeavor to protect the truth of the event in the face of rampant denial and revisionism and “guard the future by bondage to the past.”¹⁶ But in this attempt to preserve truth through the adherence to strict categories of representation there is an intrinsic danger of stagnation, of, in the words of Vivian Patraka, making the corpus of Holocaust literature “an immobile, tomblike place . . . creat[ing] an inert body of knowledge intended only to conserve and preserve.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Skloot, *Volume Two*, 4.

¹⁵ Anna Richardson, "The Ethical Limitations of Holocaust Literary Representation," *ESharp*, no. 5 (Summer 2005), 2.

¹⁶ Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?,” 220.

¹⁷ Patraka, *Spectacular Suffering*, 3.

The prioritizing of “historical accuracy” over other forms of representation is problematic as well. Historian Peter Haidu observes that all media of representation are subjective, and the dangers of misrepresentation and appropriation are found in “the ineluctable structures and risks inherent in the representational process, *including history as well as fiction*.”¹⁸ History and fiction are both subjective forms, different methods of truth-seeking. To put it another way, “even historians write from subjective and emotional perspectives.”¹⁹ Skloot notes that “criticism of the Theater of the Holocaust often makes two opposite arguments: that a realistic approach is a falsification of the subject and that an abstract approach is a betrayal of it.”²⁰ A Holocaust theater unburdened by demands of realism and “historically accurate” portrayal can explore possibilities of representation for a topic for which previous forms of realism have proved insufficient.

To reiterate, then: I believe the Holocaust should not be understood as utterly historically unique and unexplainable, and its representation should not stop at the unquestioning loyalty to historical fact. This slavish devotion to fact disallows not only the open subjectivity that is crucial for artistic investigation, but also serves to inhibit impulses of modernist or experimental expression, limiting art of the Holocaust to dry historical realism. This increases the danger of stagnation, which I believe would be a greater disservice than any dangers inherent in experimental creation. These lead to my final point of this section, which I will continue to discuss throughout the rest of the chapter: that the total piety that heretofore has dominated the

¹⁸ Peter Haidu, “The Dialectics of Unspeakability: Language, Silence, and the Narratives of Desubjectification,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution,”* edited by Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 281.

¹⁹ Skloot, *Volume Two*, 5.

²⁰ Skloot, *Volume One*, 15.

discourse of Holocaust representation calls for a response that is bold, subjective, fantastical, and irreverent.

German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno's oft-quoted, rarely footnoted 1949 dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"²¹ is a seemingly obligatory reference in discussions of Holocaust representation. The statement refers literally to the Auschwitz death camp, and synecdochically to the whole of the Holocaust, as well as other global atrocities of the past century. Everything that has occurred since has occurred in the same world that produced Auschwitz, and to create or find any meaning (let alone poetry) in the brutal, unthinkable shadow of Auschwitz seems to us "barbaric." But American poet Lyn Hejinian interprets Adorno's statement in a different sense: "not as a condemnation of the attempt 'after Auschwitz' to write poetry but, on the contrary, as a challenge and behest to do so."²²

The word "barbarism," as it comes to us from the Greek *barbaros*, means "foreign"—that is, "not speaking the same language" (*barbaros* being an onomatopoeic imitation of babbling)—and such is precisely the task of poetry: not to speak the same language as Auschwitz. Poetry after Auschwitz must indeed be barbarian; it must be foreign to the cultures that produce atrocities. As a result, the poet must assume a barbarian position, taking a creative, analytic, and often oppositional stance, occupying (and being occupied by) foreignness—by the barbarism of strangeness.²³

Hejinian's "barbarism of strangeness" is exactly what is needed in a contemporary theater of the Holocaust. Confronting the Holocaust through a non-realistic treatment, including comedic elements, can serve "not [as] a diminution or denigration of the Holocaust, its victims, or perpetrators but rather a new attempt to come to grips with a historical catastrophe of astounding

²¹ Theodor W Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms*, Reprint ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 34.

²² Lyn Hejinian, "Barbarism," in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 365.

²³ Hejinian, "Barbarism," 366.

complexity.”²⁴ The Theater of the Holocaust must embrace subjectivity, artistic freedom, alternative representations, and, yes, even comedy, if it is to remain vivid, compelling, and relevant in the contemporary world.

Why Comedy? A Survey of Comic Strategies

By allowing us to laugh at that which is normally unlaughable, comedy provides an otherwise unavailable clarification of vision that calms the clammy trembling which ensues whenever we pierce the veil of conventions that guard us from the basic absurdity of the human condition.

—Ralph Ellison, *An Extravagance of Laughter*

Yankl on the Moon is my attempt to create a new, alternative theater of the Holocaust, which reflects the artistic needs of a twenty-first century audience, for whom traditional modes of representational are no longer sufficient. I frame *Yankl* as a piece of art that diverges from extant traditions, and thus I am primarily concerned with Terrence Des Pres’ third “fiction” of Holocaust representation, that being the requisite tone of sober, somber realism that is expected of “respectable” Holocaust literature. This question leads me then to consider modes of comedy that have been fruitful in my consideration of Holocaust theater.

Professor John Morreal, founder of the International Society for Humor Studies, identifies three prevailing theories of humor: superiority theory, relief theory, and incongruity theory. Superiority theory, what Morreal calls “the oldest, and probably still most widespread theory of laughter,”²⁵ is the theory that “laughter is an expression of a person’s feelings of superiority over other people.”²⁶ Relief theory is best exemplified by Freud’s version of the idea, contained in his 1905 book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, wherein he explains that laughter provides pleasure through the release and discharge of energy that would otherwise

²⁴ Skloot, *Volume Two*, 7.

²⁵ John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983), 4.

²⁶ Morreall, 4.

be used to repress psychic activity. Incongruity theory, simply enough, describes humor produced when we perceive an incongruity between what is known or expected, and the reality of what actually occurs.

Superiority theory and relief theory are primarily relevant to the study of Holocaust comedy through their roles in the significant promulgation of dark jokes and humor amongst Jews living and suffering in ghettos and concentration camps during the Holocaust itself.²⁷ However, incongruity theory is most salient in my exploration of fiction created in and for a post-Holocaust world. Incongruity theory focuses on absurdity, extremity, and is fertile ground for grappling with the monstrous contradictions of the Holocaust. In this section I will survey some theories about comedy that connect to these possibilities.

Umberto Eco's postmodern whodunit *The Name of the Rose*, set in a fourteenth century Benedictine monastery, imagines a treatise on comedy, the lost sequel to Aristotle's *Poetics*.²⁸ In Eco's novel, this book is surrounded by a monastic conspiracy, with those in power doing all they can to suppress the text (for example, by poisoning the only copy) for fear that an Aristotelian approbation of laughter, "considering comedy a wondrous medicine, with its satire and mime . . . would induce false scholars to try to redeem the lofty with a diabolic reversal: through the acceptance of the base."²⁹ The thought that humorous writing might be "elevated to

²⁷ See: John Morreall, *Humor in the Holocaust: Its Critical, Cohesive, and Coping Functions* (Address, 1997 Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches, Hearing The Voices: Teaching the Holocaust to Future Generations, Tampa, FL, March 1997), <http://www.holocaust-trc.org/humor-in-the-holocaust/>, and: Chaya Ostrower, *Humor as a Defense Mechanism in the Holocaust* (Master's thesis, Senate of Tel-Aviv University, 2000), <http://web.macam98.ac.il/~ochayo/absractn.html>.

²⁸ Aristotle's *Poetics*, generally considered to be *the* seminal text of Western literary and dramatic criticism, focuses almost exclusively on tragedy. It is known that a second book may have been written, potentially vis-à-vis comedy; however the text, if it exists, has never been unearthed.

²⁹ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1995), 475.

art” or become “the object of philosophy, and of perfidious theology,”³⁰ fills the chief monks with utter horror. Eco’s pious conspirators know well that laughter is a powerful tool, the use of which can temporarily free the *villein* (peasant) from fear of the Devil; this book, if disseminated, might allow for that reversal to be fully realized, the results of which would be plain to see: “The people of God would be transformed into an assembly of monsters belched forth from the abysses of the terra incognita.”³¹ This is the reaction that Eco imagines, were those in power to be forced to contend with an authoritative text extolling comedy as a theologically and philosophically legitimate mode of representation: the social order would crumble, the status quo would explode and, in short, as Andrew Stott put it, “the conceptual order of things would be radically altered.”³²

It is no small wonder, then, given the lack of such a defining text, that for much of literary history comedy has been considered less worthy of criticism and consideration. Stott, in his critical survey *Comedy*, observes: “comedy has been denigrated in the academy, especially in comparison with tragedy, due in part to the absence of an important treatment of it in the Classical tradition.”³³ Stott places blame for the depreciation of comedy in the academy on a combination of forces, primarily “concepts relating to the nature of literature, the proper objects of intellectual inquiry, and rejection of supposedly ‘popular’ forms in favour of elite ones.”³⁴

The ephemeral, momentary nature of laughter has also contributed to comedy’s second-banana status; scholar J. L. Styan reflects a common opinion when he notes, “when a joke is

³⁰ Eco, *Name of the Rose*, 474.

³¹ Eco, *Name of the Rose*, 475.

³² Andrew Stott, *Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17.

³³ Stott, *Comedy*, 18.

³⁴ Stott, *Comedy*, 18.

dissected, it abruptly ceases to be funny, which is disconcerting to say the least.”³⁵ Some have pointed to the highly subjective and contextual nature of comedy as a basis of opposition against the critical study of comedy, considering it “an aspect of communication that is emphatically closed to study and interrogation.”³⁶

I want to suggest an additional reason for anti-comedy bias. Perhaps the historical opprobrium on comedy can be attributed in part to fear—the same fear experienced by the monks in *The Name of the Rose*, the fear of the great power inherent in comedy, potentially greater than that of tragedy or any other form. An audience may sit at attention and quietly weep at a tragedy—but laughter is explicit and immediate in its approval and license. The power of laughter can be used to criticize those in power, to confront an audience’s own shortcomings, and to liberate them of foolish notions. All the same, the power of laughter can be used to maintain the status quo, to further subjugate the oppressed, and to induce shame and silence. Like any tool, it can achieve great or terrible things, depending on how it is used. It is a responsibility of any critically minded humanist to study, understand, and, I would add, to create comedy.

Despite the longstanding bias against comedy in academia, “in the twentieth century we meet critics who are prepared to ‘redeem’ it as a culturally rich and critically significant form within a rigorous intellectual context.”³⁷ I will now survey the theoretical groundwork of comedy and humor upon which I construct my thesis of Holocaust comedy, and which serves as a theoretical basis for my creative choices in *Yankl on the Moon*.

³⁵ J. L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*, 2nd ed. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 39.

³⁶ Stott, *Comedy*, 18.

³⁷ Stott, *Comedy*, 18.

The utter, colossal inhumanity of the Holocaust moves those who contemplate it (let alone those who experienced it directly) toward fundamental questions of the nature of human existence, and meaning (or lack thereof) in a universe in which such things can happen. This calls to mind artistic strategies of expressionism and absurdism, and American philosopher Simon Critchley further extends the Morreall's incongruity theory toward a view of comedy as an expression of absurd existential angst.

Critchley's view centers on animalization. It has been said many times that the human is the only animal that laughs—Nietzsche asserted that man “alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter.”³⁸ More than any other mode, comedy captures the disjunction between existing and reflecting that distinguishes the humans from other creatures. The animal, in this view, “simply lives and experiences,”³⁹ unlike the human being, who exists in a state of self-reflection. We experience our experience as experience, we cannot escape it, and, therefore, we suffer. In the case of the animals, ignorance is indeed bliss.

It is this conception of comedy as an expression of existential angst that is central to Critchley's theory of comedy. He writes: “There is a metaphysical unease at the heart of humour that turns on the sheer difficulty of making our being coincide with our having of that being.”⁴⁰

Grotesque humor is an example of comedy that relies heavily on the incongruity between having and being, in this case particularly the paradoxical phenomenon of both *having* and *being* one's body. Scatological or flatulent humor, often considered childish and crude, is funny to us because they explore “the distinction between the metaphysical and the physical . . . in the gap

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, Edited by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage Books ed. (New York: Random House, LLC, 1967), 56.

³⁹ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2013), 28.

⁴⁰ Critchley, *On Humour*, 52.

between *our souls* and *arseholes*.⁴¹ This keys into the deeply unsettling (and, therefore, deeply funny) disjuncture between *being* a physical body and, simultaneously, *having* that body, and having the reflective distance garnered by our agency over it. Fart jokes are funny because they invoke bad smells and rude noises, but, just as much, they are funny because they address deep-seated existential anxieties.

Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin developed a theory of comedy for which the grotesque is central. Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, a treatise on the work of French Renaissance humanist François Rabelais, is "about the subversive openness of the Rabelaisian novel, but it is also a subversively open book itself."⁴² *Rabelais and His World* is an analysis of Rabelais's writings, primarily the novels collectively known as *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, with respect to one primary aesthetic, literary, and socio-cultural concept: folk humor and carnival culture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the treatment of which constitutes a literary form that Bakhtin dubs "grotesque realism."

Bakhtin's theories of carnival, grotesque realism, and folk humor are primarily characterized by their fundamentally ambivalent nature: simultaneously dying and being reborn, degrading and uplifting. It is this carnival understanding of the dual nature of laughter that makes Bakhtin such a useful thinker for the exploration of comedy as a tool in creatively engaging Holocaust narratives.

Bakhtin's writing is overtly political, and while he was working under the shadow of the Soviet political machinery, his conceptualization of folk humor as a "reaction against cold

⁴¹ Critchley, *On Humour*, 46.

⁴² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Translated by Helene Iswolsky. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), xvi.

rationalism, against official, formalistic and logical authoritarianism,”⁴³ can be aptly applied to the political goals of alternative post-Holocaust literature. “By laughing at power,” suggests Critchley, “we expose its contingency.”⁴⁴

“Comic rites and cults . . . clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody—all these forms have one style in common: they belong to the one culture of folk carnival humor.”⁴⁵ Carnival, Bakhtin claims, was a time set apart from normal life, marked by specific “forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition,” which were “sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonies.”⁴⁶ In addition to these carnivals proper, “nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized.”⁴⁷ The standard worship or feast was frequently accompanied by a mocking, satirical version of itself—a parallel, comic, double life.

These forms of medieval carnival culture jointly result in what Bakhtin refers to as a “two-world condition,” wherein, for a designated period, people lived in a second, non-official world, in which laughter reigned supreme, and there was absolute liberty from “religions and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety.”^{48,49}

⁴³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 37.

⁴⁴ Critchley, *On Humour*, 11.

⁴⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 4.

⁴⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 5.

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 5.

⁴⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7.

⁴⁹ This phenomenon, wherein the “normal” world with its rules and regulations, is contrasted with a boundless one, playful and sensuous, is reminiscent of a classically Shakespearean trope in comic literature: the “other world” syndrome, as exhibited by *As You Like It*’s Forest of Arden, and *Twelfth Night*’s carefree gardens and country palaces.

The carnival pageants and comic shows referred to as “ritual spectacles” find their “constant, accredited representatives”⁵⁰ in clowns and fools, the only beings able to live in the world of carnival even outside of the carnival season. Existing in an ambiguous space between life and art, both ideal and real, clowns and fools are the ambassadors of the festive spirit that marked carnival time. Carnival time was separate from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.”⁵¹ It is within this special, classless environment that carnival laughter was possible. Carnival laughter, as Bakhtin describes it, is not ordinary laughter directed toward a single humorous occurrence—it is an ambivalent laughter, simultaneously mocking and uplifting, “it asserts and denies, it buries and revives.”⁵²

Comic verbal compositions were a ubiquitous element of carnival culture, produced frequently by monks, clerics, theologians, and scholars—those of the normally “serious” world. These clerical parodies satirized liturgical texts, scholarly wisdom, scientific learning, and even the scriptures. Equally representative of the Carnavalesque spirit is the medieval comic theater. Comic mystery plays, spoofs of miracle and morality plays, encapsulated the universal, interpersonal, intrapersonal laughter of the carnival.

In Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, “images of the human body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life play a predominant role.”⁵³ Bakhtin identifies this particular interpretation of the human body, as it is found in Rabelais and other medieval and Renaissance art, as the fundamental unit of grotesque realism.

⁵⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 8.

⁵¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

⁵² Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 12.

⁵³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 18.

The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, and transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world . . . parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation. This is the ever unfinished ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other.⁵⁴

Bakhtin writes: “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.”⁵⁵ Degradation is the bodily corollary of the cultural and hierarchical debasement found in the carnival. Just as the abovementioned medieval clowns and fools were daily representatives of the carnival spirit, they also participate in grotesque degradation, in the transfer of “high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere.”⁵⁶ In grotesque realism, degradation carries a literal, spatial meaning. Upwards is heaven, society, spirituality—the face and head. Downwards (the realm of the grotesque) equates to earth, grave, womb, belly, buttocks, genitals, defecation, copulation, pregnancy, and birth. Grotesque degradation carries with it the same requisite ambivalence that is present in carnival obscenity and parody—it is a simultaneous swallowing up and giving birth.

Bulgarian-French philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva, heavily influenced by the writing of Bakhtin, developed a theory of abjection that further explored the connections between Bakhtinian degradation, grotesque realism, and destructive/regenerative ambivalence.

⁵⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 26.

⁵⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 19.

⁵⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 20.

No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—*cadere*, cadaver. If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. [...] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.⁵⁷

In this way Kristeva understands that grotesque depictions of death and bodies evoke such an intense response in the viewer because of a similar discord to what Critchley identified: the tension of both being and having oneself and one's body. Grotesque realism is jarring, disturbing, and fascinating because of the ways in which it forces us to reckon with those ambivalent elements of existence that side step established order and boundaries.

French philosopher Henri Bergson offers yet another approach to comedy that is found at the boundaries and transition points of humanity: in this case, the comedy found on the border of human and object.

A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it—the human caprice whose mould it has assumed . . . for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces [laughter], it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 3-4.

⁵⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Translated by Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 11.

The human, in Bergson's theory, is a myopic creature—we cannot relate to anything outside our own experience, and, therefore, if we are relating to something it must in some way resemble our own humanity. An object or non-human animal presenting itself in a human fashion, then, causes laughter. Conversely, and more to Bergson's point, when we find humans to be funny it is primarily because they are exhibiting qualities of an object. As Bergson states in one of his laws of laughter: "We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing."⁵⁹ This concept governs many of Bergson's ideas about the physical qualities of what we find funny. Comedy, "begotten of real life and akin to art,"⁶⁰ finds its root in a person displaying "mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being."⁶¹ This rigidity, something mechanical found in something living, often indicates "the presence of the individual in quite definite, though imaginary surroundings."⁶² A perfect example can be found in a classic Looney Tunes trope, most often found in cartoons featuring Wile E. Coyote and The Road Runner. The Coyote, in hot pursuit of The Road Runner, sprints off the edge of a cliff—and continues to run, in mid-air! This is, of course, absurd, and when (after sensing his imminent plight and glancing downward to confirm it) gravity resumes and The Coyote finally plummets downwards, we laugh. The Coyote, with his obsessive, repetitive, and endlessly failed schemes, is an example of the mechanical tendencies Bergson ascribes to comic characters. It is his own fanaticism, and no outside force, that causes his downfall—a fanaticism that Bergson would call "a kind of

⁵⁹ Bergson, *Laughter*, 33.

⁶⁰ Bergson, *Laughter*, 11.

⁶¹ Bergson, *Laughter*, 14.

⁶² Bergson, *Laughter*, 15.

automatism that makes us laugh--an automatism, as we have already remarked, closely akin to mere absentmindedness.”⁶³

Bergson sees a similar comic automatism applied to human moral behavior, wherein “certain vices have the same relation to character that the rigidity of a fixed idea has to intellect.”⁶⁴ The rigidity that causes Wile E’s failure to recognize that he is hanging in midair, his lack of *situational awareness*, can also be found in those comic characters whose lack of *self-awareness* brings about laughter. This quality is the true thrust of Bergson’s essay, that the comic is at its core a moral force, and that “laughter, then, does not belong to the province of esthetics alone, since unconsciously (and even immorally in many particular instances) it pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement.”⁶⁵

It is from this distanced position that society can laugh at someone’s inelasticity—their consistent insistence on vice (often seen as ridiculousness or eccentricity)—in the face of the moral mainstream. Rigidity of the soul is seen as comic, and by laughing at one who fails to uphold moral conventionality society can make them aware of their faults, and bring them back to the fold.

All of the comic philosophies explored in this sub-chapter informed and are present in *Yankl on the Moon*. The comic energy of the people of Chelm is reminiscent of Bergson in its inelasticity and unchanging foolishness and foibles. This quality, which lends itself toward an eternal life of sorts (as in un-killable cartoon characters), makes the sudden destruction of Chelm and its citizens all the more salient and shocking. Both Bakhtin and Kristeva’s conceptions of the grotesque can be found in *Yankl*: the farting, laughing, blintz-gorging of the pre-Holocaust

⁶³ Bergson, *Laughter*, 16.

⁶⁴ Bergson, *Laughter*, 16.

⁶⁵ Bergson, *Laughter*, 18.

Chelmers is Bakhtinian in its universal, carnivalesque, clownish openness. Yankl's relationship with the bodies of his Chelmers and the graves he digs for them ("dotting the valley like giant warts") relates to Kristeva's definition of the abjection. The Chelmer's desperate attempts to survive (for example, Zufya the Shamash knocking upon the shit-stained pile of shutters) as well as Yankl's struggle to deal with the "nothing" and emptiness, exist in an existential weariness much like what Simon Critchley explores.

I should note, then, that each of these cases is an example of not just comedy, but comedy in relation to pathos and tragedy. The power of *Yankl on the Moon* lies in its unique juxtaposition of broad comic style and unquestionably tragic material. I will now, therefore, move on to examine the specific nature of comedy that engages with the darker elements of the human experience.

Dark Comedy, Modern Tragicomedy, and Jewish Gallows Humor

Nothing is funnier than unhappiness...yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world.

—Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*

Dark comedy is dramatic comedy that takes as its subjects those topics that are traditionally considered morbid, solemn, and terrifying. According to J. L. Styan, "Dark comedy is drama which impels the spectator forward by stimulus to mind or heart, then distracts him, muddles him, so that time and time again he must review his own activity in watching the play."⁶⁶ In skillfully crafted dark comedy, the juxtaposition of humor and pathos heightens and clarifies the effect of both so that "the uglier the nightmare, the wilder the farce and the more

⁶⁶ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 262.

digestible the mixture.”⁶⁷ Laughter amidst death (“a constant theme of comedy”⁶⁸) can be found in drama from *Romeo and Juliet* (Mercutio’s punny deathbed pronouncement that “to-morrow . . . you shall find me a grave man”) to Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* (the film’s grimly funny finale features a crucified chorus melodically imploring the viewer to “always look on the bright side of life”).

Samuel Beckett, in his novel *Watt*, identifies “the mirthless laugh” as the highest form of laughter: “the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy.”⁶⁹ Such a seeming contradiction finds its evidence in the long history of comedy, which does not merely follow tragedy as a form, but juts forth impetuously and insistently from within it—what American theater critic Walter Kerr called “the groan made gay.”⁷⁰ This chapter section introduces origins and theories of dark comedy, acknowledges the Jewish predilection for gallows humor, and investigates the new varieties of tragicomic drama manifested in the theater of the postwar West.

Ancient Greek Roots—The Satyr Drama

In the Ancient Athenian theater festivals, Kerr tells us, tragic trilogies were “almost invariably followed in performance by a fourth piece, presumably written by the same author, in which the same material which he had been treating so tragically was suddenly seized by the bootstraps and turned upside down . . . this aftermath, or mocking of what had been so solemnly pursued, was called a Satyr play.”⁷¹ Today there remains only one complete extant example of

⁶⁷ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 233.

⁶⁸ Walter Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 170.

⁶⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (Grove Press, 2009), 39.

⁷⁰ Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy*, 16.

⁷¹ Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy*, 23.

Satyr drama: Euripides' *The Cyclops*, in which a thoroughly serious sequence from *The Odyssey* is comically distorted. *Cyclops* is replete with grotesque violence and crude sexual humor, and presents the tragic hero of Homer's epic cavorting and fooling with drunken goat-men.⁷²

On one level the Satyr drama served as comic relief; viewing three Greek tragedies in a row makes for a lengthy, pathos-driven day at the theater, and one might well be expected to desire some lighter fare. But more to my purposes is the restorative power that lies at the juncture of the comic and tragic, or the sublime and grotesque. Greek tragedy was concerned with serious questions about fate and the roles of the divine in mortal life; its characters are soldiers, seers, heroes, and gods. Satyr drama burlesques that same mythic landscape with the insertion of the satyrs, and rededicates the stage to their master, Bacchus. The introduction of ironic distance and grotesque degradation subverts the tragic drama into a new form, distinct from tragedy and comedy.

While the Satyr drama is not synonymous with contemporary forms of tragicomedy, it is interesting to note that (according to the majority of scholars) it preceded the development of comedy itself. As a transitional mode satyr drama opened the door from tragedy to comedy, and this intermediary nature is reflected in the modern interlacing of tragedy and comedy that has birthed new forms, chthonic, fecund, and life affirming.

Gallows Humor

A condemned criminal, goes the old joke, was being lead to the gallows on a Monday, and remarked: "Well, the week's beginning nicely." There are obvious sources of humor here: the ironic incongruity of the man's remarks, his perceived eccentricity or lack of self-awareness, and a superiority felt by the joke's audience. These qualities, however, may be found in many

⁷² *Cyclops* is a play about death as well—amidst the cavorting and scheming, Ulysses loses the majority of his men.

kinds of humor. In gallows humor, (not a dramatic form itself but a subgenre of humor in general), there is potential for Bakhtinian duality. The joke simultaneously refuses and embraces death—it is a denial wrapped in an affirmation.

In his *Jokes and the Unconscious* Freud identifies three individuals necessary for a joke to be made: the joke teller, the object of humorous aggression, and the joke's audience, a passive third party. Gallows humor collapses Freud's triad into one figure; the mocking and mocked are unified—this is Bakhtin's Carnival laughter; it "asserts and denies, it buries and revives."⁷³ To laugh at death is to laugh at what we fear most; by naming it, we degrade it, and by our laughter we gain agency over that which makes us tremble, and are freed, at least for the moment. While both perspectives are useful, Freud's conception of humor is limited to his particular (and peculiar) vision, wherein humor that has a purpose (what he calls "tendentious" jokes) is restricted to an aggressive, sexual interpretation. Bakhtin goes to a different place; his understanding of humor's ability to simultaneously degrade and elevate is constructive for an understanding of the redemptive powers of dark comedy in Holocaust fiction.

Gallows humor can be found anywhere human beings struggle with hopeless situations. Joking in the midst of adversity can be a way of taking charge of one's own suffering, and can function as a survival mechanism. In *Waiting for Godot's* penultimate moment, Estragon's trousers comically drop just as he and Vladimir are to attempt to hang themselves, and the pathos of suicide is undercut by a moment of absurd physical comedy.⁷⁴ On one hand, our pain is somewhat alleviated, but the laugh is coarse, through the teeth. This is not the belly laugh of joy and drunkenness, but Beckett's "mirthless laugh;" it deepens the painful sensation as it soothes.

⁷³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 12.

⁷⁴ The moment also recalls one of the most enduring comic routines (or *lazzi*) of the Commedia dell'Arte: the *lazzo* of suicide.

Gallows humor is a core element of Jewish humor. Alice Solomon suggests “black humor has roots in the shtetl tradition of the schlemiel and the schlimazel.”⁷⁵ The ubiquity of violence, persecution, and anti-Semitism in all its forms throughout the whole of Jewish history casts a tragic shadow over Jewish identity, and Jewish culture has responded for centuries with humor marked by self-deprecation, deflation of powerful enemies, and a sense of ironic affirmation in the face of danger.

Three examples:

First joke. Two Jews are sitting in a deli. One peruses the Jewish daily newspaper *The Forward*, the other read Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer*. The man reading *The Forward* notices his the other’s reading material and remarks, “What, you’re reading *Der Stürmer*, that piece of anti-Semitic trash?! What are you, a self-hating Jew?” “On the contrary,” his friend replies. “When I read *The Forward*, what do I read? They are murdering us, they are deporting us, the Jews aren’t wanted anywhere—so depressing. But when I read *Der Stürmer*...we own the banks! We run the media! I’m on top of the world!”

Second joke. Two Jews are walking down the street when they see two tough looking gentiles coming their way. Says one to the other, “We’d better get outta here, and quick! There are two of them, and only one of us!”

Third joke. Three Jews are captured and sentenced to death by firing squad. They are blindfolded, and each, in turn, is offered a final cigarette. The first two simply accept, but the third refuses, spitting in the face of his captor. The Jew next to him lifts his blindfold and whispers “Shah! Mordechai! Don’t make trouble.”

⁷⁵ Alice M. Solomon, *The Paradox of Holocaust Humor: Comedy That Illuminates Tragedy*, Diss. (City University of New York, 2011), 39.

Jewish Humor and *Seinfeld*

The NBC television sitcom *Seinfeld*, a critically beloved show that remains a powerful pop-cultural force today, was dominated by Jewish comic sensibilities that epitomized the Yiddishkeit of 20th century secular American Jewish humor. In the episode “The Yada Yada,” Jerry is concerned by his dentist Dr. Tim Whatley’s behavior following his recent conversion to Judaism. Jerry begins to suspect that Whatley became a Jew “just for the jokes,” and his attempts to confront the dentist result in the following exchange: “(Whatley): Jerry, it's our sense of humor that sustained us as a people for three thousand years. (Jerry): Five thousand. (Whatley): Five thousand, even better.”⁷⁶ The dénouement of this subplot results in Jerry (having vengefully disseminated some jokes of his own mocking dentists) being vilified as a “rabid anti-dentite.”

The episode is in many ways a study in Jewish humor. It both invokes and mocks what is seen as the lengthy tradition of Jewish culture using humor as a survival tool. The “anti-dentite” comments can be seen to satirize perceived excesses in Jewish paranoia about anti-Semitism—a recurrent theme in characteristically self-aware Jewish humor. Wrapped within its assimilated, secular, pop-cultural context, *Seinfeld* is still marked by dark comic sensibilities that course through so much of Jewish humor.

It is true that a predilection for dark comedy is strongly associated with Jewish culture, a distinction that is shared by the Irish (who are often compared with the Jews⁷⁷), as alluded to by the above quotations from Samuel Beckett.⁷⁸ However, Jewish and Irish senses of humor are by no means exclusive examples of marginalized populations making use of humor in the struggle

⁷⁶Peter Mehlman, and Jill Franklyn, "The Yada Yada." In *Seinfeld*. NBC. April 24, 1997.

⁷⁷ Irish author Brendan Behan is alleged to have said: “Others have a nationality. The Irish and the Jews have a psychosis.”

⁷⁸ An even clearer connection can be found in the writing of James Joyce; Bloom, the hero of Joyce’s epic *Ulysses*, is a Jew, and has a tragicomic sensibility that is thoroughly Jewish despite the character’s distinctly Irish identity.

against subjugation. Ralph Ellison, writing about the use of humor in combating racial oppression and antagonism, describes “dealing with the inescapable conjunction of laughter and pain.”⁷⁹ The parallels between the African-American and Jewish experiences of oppression and humor in America have been widely noted, as evidenced by the currently running two-actor play *The Black-Jew Dialogues*, a highly comic stage show about “two American minorities that have slavery, the KKK, and chicken livers in common.”⁸⁰

Modern Tragicomedy

Theater in the post-war west experienced a resurgence of the dark comic impulse in the proliferation of tragicomedy as a genre. While precursors exist throughout the Modernist movement, there came at this an explosion of tragicomic theater, much of which was linked to a phenomenon that has come to be known as the Theater of the Absurd. Critic Martin Esslin devised the term in his 1960 book of the same name to describe what he saw as a significant trend in European theater—not a unified movement or school of thought, but a grouping of plays and playwrights emerging around the same time, expressing similar ideas in nontraditional ways.⁸¹

The authors of Theater of the Absurd are broadly connected by the themes of their plays, chief amongst them the “sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition.”⁸² Theater of the Absurd attacks these philosophical concepts not merely through subject matter, but in an equally absurd subversion of traditional dramatic form, “by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.” [Esslin, 24]. The Theater of the Absurd

⁷⁹ Ralph Ellison, “An Extravagance of Laughter,” in *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 172.

⁸⁰ “The Black-Jew Dialogues.” Dialogues on Diversity. www.theblackjewdialogues.com.

⁸¹ The name is taken from the concept of absurd existentialism as denominated by Albert Camus in his 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

⁸² Martin Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd* (Random House, LLC, 2009), 23.

is often highly imagistic, and often features minimalism, grotesquery, “a radical devaluation of language,”⁸³ and the rejection of realistic and naturalistic dramatic conventions. And almost every play in the Theater of the Absurd’s canon is tragicomic in tone.⁸⁴

The unique iteration of the tragicomic in modern drama, beginning with the Theater of the Absurd, is not solely marked by the juxtaposition of pathos and humor. Modern tragicomedy is also characterized by a comprehensive ambiguity of structure, mood, and tone, suffused with an irony that demands both intellection reflection and emotional investment from its audience, but denies them the total satisfaction of either. Allowed neither the detachment of comedy nor the sympathy of tragedy, the audience dangles in sensitive uncertainty, offered a “new and exciting ambivalence of attitude.”⁸⁵ Within this vulnerable position of thoughtful empathy is found a split of consciousness that “enables the subject to see the world with bifurcated vision” and “opposes an univocal interpretation of the world.”⁸⁶

Author and theater critic Albert Bermel analogizes the effect of this dramatic mixture to 3D glasses: to comprehend the dimensions of the tragicomic drama before them fully, “a spectator of comic agony needs to look through the “red” filter of amusement and at the same time through the “blue” filter of suffering . . . Viewing through only the “blue” or “red” filter results in blurred vision.”⁸⁷

The kind of play we are growing more accustomed to prohibits easy solutions of the problems of ‘involving’ the audience. In order to recreate the effects of ambivalent life, in order to make us more aware of our minds working through our feelings, the good modern dramatist will insist, by refreshingly questioning illusion and convention in the

⁸³ Esslin, *Theater of the Absurd*, 26.

⁸⁴ Esslin’s canon includes, among others, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Edward Albee, and Harold Pinter.

⁸⁵ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 268.

⁸⁶ Stott, *Comedy*, 12.

⁸⁷ Albert Bermel, *Comic Agony: Mixed Impressions in the Modern Theater* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 4.

theater, that we remain aloof though implicated. There can be no comforting sense of ‘belonging to a side’ in the experience of his theater. There can be no relaxation in a play that acquits us by laughter at one moment and then convicts us the next. To place us in this unhappy limbo, the playwright will be busy measuring, expanding and contracting that vital gap between the world of his actors and the world of his audience, between art and life. The characters stand there on stage--how are we to regard them? As next of kin or as distant poor relations? What if we are unsure? That is the uncomfortable state of mind the writer of dark comedy aims to create.⁸⁸

The profusion of modern tragicomedy has altered the expectations of the audience; “the spectator arrives in the theater today with less prejudice of the kind that restricts the drama’s breadth of characterization and situation. In a modern play he will not be so disconcerted if the comedy becomes cloudy with feeling or the tragedy suddenly illuminated by witty breaks of sunshine.”⁸⁹ One of the greatest tools at the disposal of this new playwright is tragicomic irony.

Tragicomic theater is marked by an ironic distance that allows for its unique ambivalence of tone. Belgian literary critic Paul De Man⁹⁰ calls irony a “relationship, within consciousness, between two selves.”⁹¹ Tragicomedy, he claims, unbalances its audience by introducing irony, which “splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity.”⁹² The audience member is cleft in twain, one half feeling the events of the play, the other half distant, analyzing the other half’s response, uncertain and questioning. Tragicomic theater throws ideas, dogmas, and philosophies up against the life they allegedly explain, and thus reveals their

⁸⁸ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 257.

⁸⁹ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 254.

⁹⁰ In an instance of meta-irony (as far as I’m concerned) De Man was posthumously found to have penned hundreds of articles for collaborationist newspapers during the Second World War, including one clearly anti-Semitic.

⁹¹ Paul De Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Revised ed. (Routledge, 2013), 212.

⁹² De Man, “Rhetoric of Temporality,” 214.

absurdity. It is a complicated dance of death, and as in the medieval *danse macabre*, “the simple equality of death is set against the complex inequalities of life.”⁹³

Just as Bakhtin identified clowns and fools, existing within and without carnival culture, as the incarnation of medieval Carnavalesque spirit, 20th century clowns uniquely exemplify the ambiguous spirit of modern tragicomedy. Canadian clown scholar Donald McManus notes that while “the popular perception of a clown is synonymous with laughter . . . clown as adopted by twentieth century artists, has more frequently been the means through which the contemporary tragic impulse has been expressed.”⁹⁴ Clowns embody the essential ambivalence of both mood and structure that mark modern tragicomedy, existing both inside and outside of the boundaries of dramatic fiction. This is primarily due to two seemingly oppositional yet somehow simultaneous rudiments of clown: the clown is either too smart to play by the rules of the universe, or too dumb to understand them. This can even be applied metatheatrically, in a kind of mimetic sidestepping where clowns even gain liberty from dramatic conventions; modern clowns, associated as much with “philosophizing, angst, and political criticism” as “physical comedy and fractured language,”⁹⁵ personify the “perplexing reality of laughter and tears”⁹⁶ that characterizes modern tragicomedy.

“This kind of double response arises when our initial recognition of the clown in his traditional role of wit and joker is denied and contradicted, when he is shown as capable of suffering the pains of mundane life, pains that would not have mattered to him or to us in his

⁹³ Northrop Frye, "The Mythos of Winter: Irony and Satire," in *Anatomy of Criticism: 4 Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 232.

⁹⁴ Donald C McManus, *No Kidding!: Clown as Protagonist in Twentieth-century Theater* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 11.

⁹⁵ McManus, *No Kidding!*, 12.

⁹⁶ Styan, *The Dark Comedy* 254.

artificial character.”⁹⁷ The clown is the tragicomic hero, close relation of the “anti-hero,” Styan’s “broken hearted clown . . . a gray hero.”⁹⁸ Unlike traditional comic “types” who show the audience merely one side, the modern clown’s relationship to its spectators is open, vulnerable, and direct. The modern clown exhibits a complexity of attitude and action that allows the audience to “suffer without the relief of tears” and “mock without a true relief of laughter.”⁹⁹

The clown’s concerns are the universal mundanities of life on earth, and, like Estragon and Vladimir’s waiting for Godot and eternally unsatisfactory fiddling with boots and bowlers, the clown’s complex reactions to the essential struggles of humanity mirror our own. The clown, exhibiting the human condition laid bare, can be more subtle and alive and, yes, “real,” than characters built with the goal of psychological realism.

McManus identifies the clown’s dualistic nature as one of few consistent traits amidst an admittedly disparate and multifarious history of clowns and clowning. Another coherent attribute, according to McManus is the “essential Clown-August dichotomy,”¹⁰⁰ a split between two primary types of clown popularized in 18th and 19th century Europe: the sophisticated White Clown (traditionally of higher status and painted in white) and the clumsier Auguste clown (traditionally of lower status, with exaggerated features and more realistic facial colors). McManus frames the White Clown-Auguste split as one of class struggle. In his conception, Augustes represent “anti-authoritarian, class conscious values,” and the White Clowns represent “pawns of the existing power structure.”¹⁰¹ While dramatic clowns, both modern and traditional, have certainly been figures of political criticism, McManus is quick to assert that the White

⁹⁷ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 270.

⁹⁸ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 273.

⁹⁹ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 260.

¹⁰⁰ McManus, *No Kidding!*, 16.

¹⁰¹ McManus, *No Kidding!*, 16.

Clown-Auguste split is “less a typology of clown so much as a theatrical dynamic, reflecting the relationship between any two clowns, their mimetic environment and the audience. This dynamic can be used to represent truths about the human psyche, social-political reality or even pseudo-religious spiritual planes, but it remains in essence a theatrical phenomenon to be adapted and interpreted.”¹⁰² The opposition of high and low clowns mirrors the essentially dichotomous nature of tragicomedy, which is why the two are so often found together.

All of this is to say that tragicomedy is a regenerative form. Gallows humor and the comic undercutting of tragic material suffuse tragicomedy with an irony that clutches the audience close while prying its eyes open. The tragicomic author, through the use of ambivalence, ironies, and contradictions, plays “the reason against the emotions and the emotions against the reason . . . the audience remains at a distance, yet within immediate call; impersonal, yet strangely involved.”¹⁰³ Through tragicomedy we can confront those issues on the edge of human imagination and understanding.

At the bottom of Dante's hell, which is also the center of the spherical earth, Dante sees Satan standing upright in the circle of ice, and as he cautiously follows Virgil over the hip and thigh of the evil giant, letting himself down by the tufts of hair on his skin, he passes the center and finds himself no longer going down but going up, climbing out on the other side of the world to see the stars again. From this point of view, the devil is no longer upright, but standing on his head, in the same attitude in which he was hurled downward from heaven upon the other side of the earth. Tragedy and tragic irony take us into a hell of narrowing circles and culminate in some such vision of the source of all evil in a personal form. Tragedy can take us no farther; but if we persevere with the mythos of irony and satire, we shall pass a dead center, and finally see the gentlemanly Prince of Darkness bottom side up.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² McManus, *No Kidding!*, 17.

¹⁰³ Styan, *The Dark Comedy*, 260.

¹⁰⁴ Frye, “The Mythos of Winter,” 239.

Yankl on the Moon fits into the meeting point of irony, dark comedy, modern tragicomedy, and Jewish gallows humor. The broad, energetic comedy of the play's first half open the audience up to the possibility of the more disturbing content in the second half. The play's most effective moments occur when tragedy and comedy exist almost simultaneously. Reb Mazl's lisping speech about the ghetto is one example. At the end of Yankl's conversation with the Angel of Death, after his Chelmer innocence is truly, finally shattered with the knowledge of the scale of the Jewish genocide, he unwittingly engages in a classic exchange of Jewish humor with the Angel:

YANKL

I begin to wonder if this is not perhaps...all my fault. She's right. I do stink. (*Beat.*) I doubt a bath would help.

ANGEL OF DEATH

But it wouldn't *hurt*.

The audience is allowed this unexpected moment of comic release after one of the most difficult scenes in the play. In this way comedy doesn't merely make tragedy palatable; the two combine and, allowing the audience the full release of neither, they are granted the deeper understanding garnered by the combination.

Ancient and Modern Foundations for Comedy as Response to Catastrophe

What is at stake in the reinstatement of laughter 'nach Auschwitz,' after Auschwitz, is not the fidelity of a comic representation of the Shoah but the reinstatement of the comic as building block of a post-Shoah universe.

–Sidra D. Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?”

Terrence Des Pres enumerates three prevailing ideological viewpoints that function as “regulatory agencies to influence how we conceive of, and write about, matters of the

Holocaust.”¹⁰⁵ As a work of theater, *Yankl on the Moon* breaks with all three of these conventions. Most significantly, my play defies Des Pres’ third “fiction” of Holocaust writing, which governs what he refers to as the requisite “attitude of solemnity,”¹⁰⁶ the expectation that any literary treatment of the Holocaust “must be serious, must be reverential in a manner that acknowledges the sacredness of its occasion.”¹⁰⁷ Des Pres writes:

To begin with, is laughter possible in literary treatment of the Holocaust? If possible, is it permitted? Is the general absence of humor a function of the event in itself, or the result of Holocaust etiquette--or both? . . . Can laughter be restorative in a case as extreme as the Holocaust? That something so slight should alleviate the burden of something so gigantic might, on the face of it, be a joke in itself. But then, humor counts most in precisely those situations where more decisive remedies fail. The situation, in this case, is our helplessness facing our knowledge of the Holocaust. The question is whether or not, on occasion, laughter can be helpful.”¹⁰⁸

I will now explain why Holocaust comedy is not only “possible,” “permitted,” “restorative,” and “helpful,” but necessary for contemporary culture.

The Contemporary Call for a New Theater of the Holocaust

First: to what is Holocaust comedy an alternative? Žižek refers to “the obvious failure of its opposite, the Holocaust tragedy.”¹⁰⁹ As a scholar, artist, and the grandson of a Holocaust survivor, I am inspired by my own experiences and those of my peers, Jewish and gentile, for whom traditional Holocaust representation, as tragedy, melodrama, and historical realism, feels out of tune with contemporary sensibilities. The majority of popular attempts to represent the Holocaust through fiction have abided by Des Pres’ three fictions: commitment to total uniqueness, historical accuracy, and a tone of seriousness and solemnity. These limitations

¹⁰⁵ Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?,” 217.

¹⁰⁶ Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?,” 218.

¹⁰⁷ Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?,” 218.

¹⁰⁸ Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?,” 218.

¹⁰⁹ Žižek, “Hitler as Ironist?,” 68.

dictate a creative atmosphere that “posits survivor testimony as the most direct encounter that any bystander to history can have with the ‘Event,’ documentary as the truest form of historiography and strict realism as the discipline for anyone of fictive mind.”¹¹⁰

The need, for a new Holocaust theater, free of these limitations, arises from the uniqueness of the 21st-century setting with regard to the exposure to and proliferation of media. The “New Media” age has brought us the internet, an omnipresence of digital interactivity and immediate, on-demand access to essentially infinite, ever-increasing, unregulated content, that can be accessed anytime, anywhere. A contemporary individual can realistically be exposed to more images in a single day than someone from the 19th century could view in weeks, months, or years. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard predicted this modern phenomenon in 1993 when he described “the interminable reproduction of ideals, phantasies, images and dreams . . . the endless duplication of consciousness.”¹¹¹ When Baudrillard refers to “the proliferation of signs ad infinitum”¹¹² and the substitution of “a fractal mode of dispersal” for “a mortal mode of disappearance,”¹¹³ it is almost shocking that he was writing in the early 1990s, before the internet had fundamentally altered the availability and ubiquity of media.

Baudrillard’s conception of contemporary fragmentation of meaning relates to comedy and a new Holocaust theater in two ways. Firstly, the non-stop “viral dispersal”¹¹⁴ of digital media invites a non-digital form—live performance—as a compelling alternative. Secondly, with regard to the failings of traditional Holocaust representation for a contemporary audience, it is

¹¹⁰ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 295.

¹¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London: Verso, 1993), 4.

¹¹² Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil*, 11.

¹¹³ Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil*, 4.

¹¹⁴ Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil*, 4.

exactly the numbness engendered by modern day media saturation that inhibits effective engagement with tragedy and historical realism.¹¹⁵

Traditionally conceived Holocaust representation has therefore lost much of its ability to be effective or affective, “bombarded as we are by daily scenes of atrocity, by images that, recycled and routinized, become icons of our own numbness.”¹¹⁶ Holocaust representation that maintains an unquestioning devotion to traditional conventions runs the risk of becoming historically accurate self-flagellation. Literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman posits that when we value direct survivor testimony and stark historical realism as the only genuine modes of engagement with history, what we really achieve is, in Hartman’s words, “to cut ourselves, like psychotics who ascertain in this way that they exist. As if only a personal or historical trauma (I bleed, therefore I am) would bond us to life.”¹¹⁷ Even this strategy loses its efficacy for the modern viewers, anesthetized as we are by the inundation of images of atrocity. This “psychic numbing,”¹¹⁸ along with the inescapable digitization of the modern world, demands a theater of the Holocaust which can speak to those too numb for tragedy and too weary for historical realism.

Aristotle, Freud, and Žižek on the Bitter Irony of the Holocaust

In order to clarify why comedy is a particularly appropriate avenue for Holocaust theater, I would like to draw attention to three tripartite structures of representation, as found in the work of Aristotle, Freud, and the field of Holocaust studies. First, Aristotle, in his *Poetics* outlines

¹¹⁵ Baudrillard recalls Hannah Arendt when he writes of the “general aestheticization of everyday life, giving way to a pure circulation of images, a transaesthetics of banality” (Baudrillard, *Transparency of Evil*, 11).

¹¹⁶ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 295.

¹¹⁷ Geoffrey H Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 152.

¹¹⁸ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 296.

three possible types of relationships in theater: “What is done in a play inevitably happens between people who like each other, hate each other, or are indifferent to each other.”¹¹⁹ Second, Freud, in *Jokes and the Unconscious*, defines aggressive and satirical humor as “hostile,” and delineates three necessary parties: the joke teller, the object of aggression, and the joke’s passive audience. Third, in the field of Holocaust studies, participants in the events of the Holocaust are generally divided into three main categories: perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. I will now suggest a loose homology between these three triangular concepts which, further contextualized by the work of Slavoj Žižek, constitute a framework within which the relationship between the Holocaust and comedy is significantly clearer.

Aristotle further specifies, “If the action happens between two people who hate each other, there is nothing to pity in either what happens or the intention behind it.”¹²⁰ The perpetrators of the Holocaust were clearly motivated by hatred. The Nazis desired to frame their actions in the pitiable, noble vein of heroic tragedy (such was the popularized conception of the Third Reich). How, then, might they accomplish this, if what Aristotle says is true? The high theatrics of the Nazi Party make an analogy of performance impossible to ignore. Given both the anti-semitism at the core of their philosophy and their desire to evoke pity and national, racial righteousness, they were left with no option than to “perform” the genocide as comedy.

Recall Freud’s triangle of jokes: aggressor, victim, and audience. In Freud’s view, the act of joking is both aggressive and sexual—a hostile joke is a means to an antagonistic end, not the pleasure of humor. Freud suggests that the imposition of a victim-role requires a third party—an audience—to truly complete a hostile joke. The audience, witnessing the aggressive interaction,

¹¹⁹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. McLeish, (New York, Theatre Communications Group, 1999).

¹²⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. McLeish, (New York, Theatre Communications Group, 1999).

reinforces the power of the aggressor both by its inaction, and by its participation in the experience through bearing witness. Following this logic, to successfully enact a comedy the Nazis (clear aggressors in this scenario) would need victims and an audience. Impose inferiority on the victims; make them look ridiculous in front of bystanders, and all the elements are in play for a “successful” joke.

To tie this all together, I now return to the work of Slavoj Žižek. In keeping with the bitter irony that suffuses so much of his work, Žižek frames the perpetration of the Holocaust as a vicious joke. As proof, Žižek refers to

the multitude of practices which added the ironic insult to injury: the bands playing while the Jews marched to the gas chambers or to work, the notorious 'Arbeit macht frei!' inscription above the entrance to Auschwitz, and so on—unmistakable signs that the 'final solution' was carried out as a gigantic joke which submitted the victims to a supplementary act of gratuitous, cruel and ironic humiliation.¹²¹

The idea that the Holocaust was carried out as a joke fits in with Aristotle’s concept that the primary generic concern of a dramatist is the choice to pursue either comedy or tragedy. The specific elements of Nazi persecution that led Žižek to his conclusion support the idea that the ironic nature of their actions was an intentionally “comic” choice. By imposing the abjected role upon the victims and framing it as a performance as-if for witnesses, the perpetrators of the Holocaust intended to create comedy of the darkest, cruelest kind, and in doing so lend credence to their designation of Jews and others as “der untermensch,” filthy, ridiculous, subhuman individuals whose death and devastation could be laughed at.

In the face of this bitterly ironic framework, what better way to reclaim the affliction, the identity, the validity, and the very lives of those who suffered than in creating life-reclaiming comedy in the service of memorial, healing, and transformation.

¹²¹ Žižek, “Hitler as Ironist?,” 63.

Ancient Jewish Comic Tradition

These contemporary calls for a comic answer to catastrophe have deeply embedded roots in classical Jewish scriptural and rabbinic traditions of reconsecration after averted or experienced destruction. To explore this connection, consider John Morreall's theory of incongruity, which explains that humor frequently arises from a disjuncture between expectations and reality. Alice Solomon observes a particular incongruity in the dark nature of much of Jewish humor, which "often focuses on the gap between the ideal of the Jews as a chosen people and the reality of Jewish historical experience."¹²² The Holocaust is the most extreme example in Jewish memory of this incongruence between Jewish expectation and Jewish reality. Here, the comic mode functions as an expression of the deferred messianic promise.

Much of Jewish humor is based on incongruity between the real and the ideal. The Messianic ideal of being chosen did not fit with the reality of continuous persecution. Intellectual power, gained from Talmudic study, did not prevent external powerlessness. And the strength of being a geographically, culturally, and linguistically distinct community became a weakness as that community became increasingly segregated and isolated.¹²³

On one hand, the history of Jewish experience is marked by steadfast devotion to a single God (who loves us and by whom we were especially chosen from amongst all peoples), along with the consequent dedication to the study of scripture, observance of sacred commandments, and the belief in a future messiah whose coming will signal an end to all suffering and the satisfaction of the divine covenant. On the other hand, even a cursory glance at Jewish history reveals unrelenting violence, subjugation, hatred, exile, expulsion, pogroms, and persecution from all directions. These two seemingly contradictory constants, along with the Jewish inclination for questioning the divine, have led to a repeated question amongst members of the

¹²² Solomon, *The Paradox of Holocaust Humor*, iv.

¹²³ Solomon, *The Paradox of Holocaust Humor*, 58.

chosen people: “Chosen...for what?” Creative expressions of this incongruence have frequently (and fittingly) taken a comic tone; Tevye the Milkman speaks sardonically to God in the film of *Fiddler on the Roof* (based on the stories of Ukrainian Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem): “I know, I know, we are your chosen people. But once in a while, can’t you choose someone else?”¹²⁴

This essentially Jewish discord between promised providence and experienced destruction, itself rife for darkly self-conscious and self-referential humor, plays a significant role in the traditional Jewish conflation of comedy and catastrophe. Author Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, in her 2001 article “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?” discusses the ways in which, in Jewish tradition, the comic mode functions as a “belated approach to catastrophe.”¹²⁵ Ezrahi’s explorations of contemporary comic Holocaust media affirm that “such sensibilities [i.e. comic approaches to the Holocaust] are compatible with, and may even pay tribute to, some of the deepest impulses in the civilization that was decimated.”

Laughter cannot preempt the period of mourning and the tragic-epic vision of the world that emerges from a long wake. The comic reflex comes into being, in our time as in the centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, in the intersection of tragic historical knowledge and a reconsecration of the universe. It is in constant dialogue with messianic temptation and apocalyptic despair; released by the messianic promise of resolution, the comic is then animated by the deferral of that resolution.¹²⁶

Ezrahi illustrates manifestations of the comic reflex in the Jewish response to disaster through a “cluster of classical Jewish texts in which the argument for laughter after catastrophe can be grounded.” She discovers the “license for making poetry in the mean-time between

¹²⁴ “Fiddler on the Roof,” Directed by Norman Jewison. (United States: United Artists, 1971), DVD.

¹²⁵ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 288.

¹²⁶ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 288.

destruction and redemption”¹²⁷ in two books from Writings, the third part of the Tanakh: “Eikhah (Lamentations)” and “Esther.” These two texts are each connected with a specific holiday, the combination of which form a “ritual reenactment of the narrative of destruction and regeneration.”¹²⁸

What is particularly relevant in this context is that both the lamentational and the comic are linked to the cataclysmic—and that both are reflexively concerned with language and writing in the face of catastrophe: Lamentations and its attendant rites privilege literary (as opposed to literal) representations of catastrophe; Esther and its attendant rites privilege the comic and the carnivalesque.¹²⁹

The book of Lamentations is read yearly on Tishah b’Av (the Ninth of Av), a day of fasting and mourning that commemorates the destruction of the first and second Temples in Jerusalem, and the ensuing diasporization of the Jewish people.¹³⁰ In Lamentations, the “poetic dimension of the prophetic voice”¹³¹ is neither “magical . . . revelation” nor “utopian promise of redemption,” but, rather, “comfort through commensuration. Analogue, precedent, simile, metaphor assure the sufferer that . . . s/he is not alone. That . . . the shattered world can be made, if not whole, then once again, familiar.”¹³² Lamentations is therefore very particularly a literary response to devastation.

The Ninth day of the month of Av is also marked by various other tragedies throughout Jewish history, including historical expulsions, and, specifically, the initiation of deportations

¹²⁷ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 289.

¹²⁸ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 289.

¹²⁹ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 289.

¹³⁰ *Lamentations* is structured as a collection of poetic dirges lamenting the physical destruction and spiritual loss of Jerusalem, marked by abundant use of vivid imagery and metaphoric language.

¹³¹ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 289.

¹³² Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 289-90.

from the Warsaw ghetto to the death camp Treblinka¹³³ as part of Operation Reinhard.¹³⁴ In the decades following the Holocaust there has been much debate as to how Holocaust-specific mourning should make its way into the Tishah b'Av liturgy; despite the lack of a central rabbinic ruling, prayers and dirges for the Jewish people's most recent near-destruction are invariably invoked in contemporary observances of the holiday.

The book of Esther, also known as the Megillah, is the basis for (and a central element of) the Jewish festival Purim, which celebrates the quasi-historical story of the Jews of Persia's thwarting a plot for their total annihilation. Haman, vizier to King Ahasuerus and archetype of evil and Jewish persecution, seeks to destroy the Jews. His plot is foiled by the Jews Mordecai and Esther (herself recently wed to Ahasuerus) and Haman, along with his ten sons, are hanged on the same gallows he had built for Mordecai's execution. The story of *Esther* is relatively late, biblically, and concerns itself with a Jewish population already in exile from its geographic and spiritual homeland (that is to say, post-*Lamentations*). Rather than a direct transcription of historical event, *Esther* is a response "to a set of cultural paradigms and conventions: taking catastrophe as paradigm and defenselessness as the position of Jews in exile, the book of *Esther* quite stunningly imagines a different denouement."¹³⁵ *Esther* and the celebration of Purim constitute an example of "rewriting history as a gesture of self-empowerment."¹³⁶

Purim is an inherently comic, theatrical holiday, celebrated with acts of charity, prayer, public recitation of the *Megillah* (book of *Esther*), festive eating and drinking, and comic rites

¹³³ See: Rabbi Mordechai Becher, "History of Events on Tisha B'av." Ohr Somayach. <http://ohr.edu/1088>.

¹³⁴ Operation Reinhard was the Nazi codename for the plan that marked the first step in the Nazi's plan to systematically mass-murder Europe's Jews, euphemistically known as the "Final Solution)."

¹³⁵ Ezrahi, "After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?," 290.

¹³⁶ Ezrahi, "After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?," 290.

and performances involving masks, costumes, and audience participation. A *Purimschpiel*, a farcical play based on the story of the *Megillah*, is generally performed, and often included contemporary satirical references in addition to scriptural material.¹³⁷ On Purim, “the Jewish world is officially turned topsy-turvy (nahafokh-hu) for one day each year and saints and villains become interchangeable.”¹³⁸ This articulation of Purim as an expression of Bakhtinian carnivalesque refers in part to an often-invoked comment in the Talmudic tractate *Megillah 7b* that “A person is obligated to drink on Purim until he does not know the difference between ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordechai.’”¹³⁹

The ambivalent, restorative nature of Bakhtinian folk humor supports the role the comic plays in *Esther* and its festival celebration in commemorating the Jewish evasion of catastrophe. *Esther*’s happy ending is at once jubilant and highly unlikely—and therefore all the more representative of the redemptive powers of the carnivalesque. American scholar Scott Shershow explains the ambivalent nature of the comic happy ending which, “contrived out of opposing approaches to reality, often evokes opposing interpretations and an ironic tension between them . . . the happy ending magnifies the world with its infinite sense of the possible, and diminishes it with its ironic sense of the impossible.”¹⁴⁰ In Ezrahi’s exploration of textual response to catastrophe, “what is most salient is the segue from the lamentational-epic to the comic mode. . . . The book of Esther, as captured in its performative rituals, never lost its status as parody.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ It is worth noting that internationally renowned Holocaust author, professor, and activist Elie Weisel refers in the scenic notes of his play *Trial of God* that “the play should be performed as a tragic farce: a *Purimschpiel* within a *Purimschpiel*.”

¹³⁸ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 290.

¹³⁹ Yanki Tauber, “Are Jews Actually Supposed to Get Drunk on Purim?” Chabad.org. http://www.chabad.org/global/popup/default_cdo/aid/2814/jewish/The-Purim-Drunk.htm.

¹⁴⁰ Scott Cutler Shershow, *Laughing Matters: The Paradox of Comedy* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 20.

¹⁴¹ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 290.

The journey from *Lamentations* to *Esther* therefore represents a shift in Jewish responsive style from threnody to parody. Yet *Lamentations* is not merely a reference point for understanding *Esther*. *Lamentations*, despite its treatment of felt, experienced, unavoidable catastrophe is itself a textual basis for laughter after calamity. How? The answer can be found in a story from the Midrash.¹⁴²

Commenting on a verse near the very end of *Lamentations*, the Midrash “confirms the artistic vision of restoration”¹⁴³ as identified by Ezrahi. Midrash Eikhah Rabba,¹⁴⁴ section 5, passage 19, tells a story of a group of rabbis and their varying responses to the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem. Rabbis Gamliel, Eleazar ben Azariah, and Joshua, upon observing a fox crawling through the ruins of the Second Temple, rend their garments, weep, and despair, fearing the fulfillment of *Lamentations* 5:18 (“For Mount Zion, which has become desolate; foxes prowl over it.”¹⁴⁵). The three are shocked to see their companion, Rabbi Akiva, laughing. Upon being questioned, Akiva reveals his merriment to be the product of Talmudic analysis and reasoning. He refers first to 8 Isaiah 2, which states “And I will take unto Me faithful witnesses to record, Uriah the priest, and Zechariah the son of Jeberechiah.” Akiva explains that these two men, who lived during the time of the first and second temples respectively, each made prophecies which, considered in conjunction reveal that the desolation in which the rabbis stood was itself a sign of coming redemption and rededication. Uriah said “Zion shall be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps” (26 Jeremiah 18). And Zechariah said “There shall yet old men and old women sit in the broad places of Jerusalem, every man with his staff in his hand

¹⁴² “Midrash” refers to various collections of homiletic Rabbinic texts used to comment upon, explain, and interpret the verses of the Tanakh, often filling in stories and characters merely suggested by the biblical narrative.

¹⁴³ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 290.

¹⁴⁴ The Midrash on *Lamentations*.

¹⁴⁵ *Lamentations*. In Judaica Press. http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/16461.

for every age . . . and the broad places of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the broad places thereof” (8 Zechariah 4). Akiva explained that he rejoiced because the present destruction was a fulfillment of Uriah’s words, and therefore, Zechariah’s words would also be fulfilled.

On the site of his people’s spiritual and physical ruination, Rabbi Akiva, martyr, master, and legendary sage, laughs. Ezrahi notes “the delight that Akiva takes in conflating texts and wordplay, in storytelling, even at such proximity to the ruined shrine, suggests that he is living more in the desire and less in the anxiety of ultimate resolution.”¹⁴⁶ The word *Metzahek*, which describes his comic response, shares an etymological root with the emotion expressed by Abraham and Sarah when informed that the two would be blessed with a child¹⁴⁷, Yitzhak, whose name shares the very same root word: *Tzahek*, laughter. Ezrahi perceives that “because, like Sarah’s redemption from barrenness at the end of (her) days, the entire story of Israel’s redemption at the End of Days had already been foretold in the prophetic books, laughter in the wake of catastrophe involves an elaborate act of faith as well as an act of decoding.”¹⁴⁸

These narratives depict a biblical, rabbinic basis for Jewish comic tradition, with its customs, structures, and contradictions. *Esther* and *Lamentations* (as well as its Midrashic commentary) constitute a traditional Jewish precedent for the argument that, as Des Pres put it,

¹⁴⁶ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 307.

¹⁴⁷ This story, found in Genesis 18, finds Sarah eavesdropping on a conversation between God (disguised as a traveler) and her husband Abraham. God promises to the pair a son, and Sarah, well past childbearing age, laughs behind the tent flap. God confronts Sarah, saying “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” Sarah denies her laughter, to which God replies: “Nay. Thou didst laugh.”

¹⁴⁸ Ezrahi, “After Such Knowledge, What Laughter?,” 291.

“a comic response to calamity is often more resilient, more effectively equal to terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic.”¹⁴⁹

Yankl on the Moon, then, is a play responding to a contemporary need, grounded in ancient traditions of comedy and calamity. What follows is the script of *Yankl on the Moon*, as performed at Emory University in the Burlington Road Building black box theater in March of 2014.

¹⁴⁹ Des Pres, “Holocaust Laughter?,” 220.

YANKL ON THE MOON
A tragicomic Holocaust folk tale
by Jake Krakovsky

The set is small and simple. Three set pieces anchor the space: a rectangular wooden crate (CR), a square table with a stool (UC) and an old-fashioned wooden water barrel (CL). UL there is a doorway created with hanging cloth.

NOTE: Yankl on the Moon is to be performed by a single actor, who, by virtue of vocal and physical choices, (and unless specified otherwise in the script) embodies every character in the play. Character names are therefore notated only to clarify which character is speaking which lines of text. When YANKL speaks purely as YANKL, he tends to address audience members quite directly. The show is highly movement-oriented, and actors taking on the role should make full use of their vocal and physical capabilities, as well as the space, props, set pieces, etc.

Pre-show. As the audience enters, Klezmer music is playing. YANKL is seated at the table, attentively studying a musty leather-bound book. When the time comes, music fades out into a recorded curtain speech. Silence. YANKL rises, leaving the book on the table and crosses out the “doorway,” returning with an empty basin and a metal washing cup, filled with water. He places both atop the barrel, and proceeds with ritual washing. Whispers a prayer to himself. Washes his face. His eyes are drawn up and out and...

YANKL

The moon is still in the sky. After all that has happened. Unbelievable.

(YANKL returns the washing bowl to its place, and crosses to the table. He consults the book, before lifting his eyes to the audience and acknowledging them for the first time.)

YANKL (cont.)

You don't dishonor the dead. So you can't laugh when I tell you the stories. There's nothing in my village now but nothing. The dead. (*Crossing DC*) And me, Yankl.

(YANKL transforms into REB MITZL. This is the first time we see a character transformation, so this shift is slow and deliberate. Later in the play the shift from one character to another can vary to reflect the tone of each moment.)

REB MITZL

As long as you can talk about someone they are not dead.

(YANKL takes this thought in, then opens the book, finds a page, and is off!)

YANKL

There has always been a hogwatch in Chelm. (*Closes the book, returns it to the table*). And every hogwatch has lived in this same hogwatch hut. On the very edge of Chelm. Not quite in, not quite out. I am the last in a long line of hogwatches. The hogwatch before me was Burpo the Farsighted. Burpo was an excellent hogwatch, and died tragically when he mistook a beehive for a herring sandwich. That day was my birthday! You see, a child born on the day of a hogwatch's death is chosen—CHOSEN!—as new hogwatch that very day.

Everyone in Chelm, from the tiniest, wrinkliest little babies to the tiniest, wrinkliest old men, has a role to play. Charna the Gravedigger, Itzik the Florist, Gluckel the Merchant, and so on. In this way we keep our heads on straight, you see? Well, except for Gluckel that is, but our Rabbis determined that her lopsidedness was a blessing. And me? Well, no matter what Zufya the Shamash told you I am not a swineherd!

You see, the Jews in Chelm are so pious that, to be safe, we always go the extra mile in obeying God's commandments.

It is my duty to patrol the perimeters of Chelm for pigs. Pigs, you see, aren't just unkosher. They are devious. Wriggling in the mud, they display their cloven hooves as if to say "Yum yum eat me up! Look at me, I'm kosher!" But they're not, of course. So I keep watch, maintaining the purity and safety of our modest village. And not once, not ever, not a *single time* has a pig set hoof in Chelm.

The position does, of course, have some drawbacks. Not everyone in Chelm respects a hogwatch. When I was younger, the crueller children would mock me on their way to study, saying I looked like a pig! I wondered if this was because I spent so many hours with my nose pressed to windowpanes. Looking in on rituals I could not perform.

As hogwatch it is my duty to keep the shtetl clean, but in doing so I sacrifice some of my own cleanliness. My thoughts are impure, unkosher, and so I do not enter the synagogue. I may not touch the Torah. But that doesn't mean that I'm not part of this village! I remember one year, so clearly, on Rosh Hashanah. Everyone inside the shul, chanting, dancing, celebrating! My nose pressed to the glass. (*He notices someone below him.*) Oh! Reb Mitzl. Happy New Year. Shanah Tovah.

REB MITZL

Yankele! Mazel Tov. Another year without pigs!

YANKL

The Shtetl of Chelm sits nestled in an isolated valley between two small mountain ranges in eastern Poland. Through the tall front gates, and you can see the home of Shmendrick—there's his wife, Mrs. Shmendrick, and all the little Shmendricks playing in the yard. Further down the road—Hello up there!—Zindl and Beshl, the builders, fixing the roof of Itzik's flower shop.

(*To GLUCKEL*) Oh, Gluckel! Gluckel, hello there! You're looking very lopsided today!
(*Laughs*) Stop it you wonderful woman. (*To audience*) Ah see, Zufya the Shamash and Zecharia

the Record-Keeper, deep in intellectual conversation—and in their stockings no less! Their boots must still be at Reb Zeidl’s shop.

Chelm, all the sages agree, was created on the sixth day--when humanity was fresh! But the exact mechanism of Chelm’s birth is one of great debate among the scholarly and devout. On the question of Chelmogenesis our three rabbis were split. Reb Meezl, Reb Mazl, and Reb Mitzl. Going about their business they resemble a lumpy black cat, its three heads constantly mewling and chasing its tail.

REB MEEZL

Reb Meezl was of the belief that an Angel, flying around distributing souls, ran smack into a branch, spilling an entire sack of souls down into the valley.

REB MAZL

Reb Mazl held a very similar belief, but with the crucial and non-negotiable difference that the Angel’s sack sagged, and was caught on the tip of Mount Tumbus, ripping a hole through which all the souls tumbled down into Chelm.

REB MITZL

Reb Mitzl simply taught that God said, “Let there be Chelm.” And there was Chelm. And it was good.

YANKL

It’s a beautiful place, Chelm. In the winter, the whole shtetl is covered with thick white powder, thicker even than the dandruff from our Rebbes’ beards.

REB MEEZL

It would be a sin to spoil such a sacred sight with mud, or footprints.

REB MAZL

Or hoof prints.

REB MITZL

Or shit!

YANKL

Now, you must understand, in Chelm, ideas, when they come, come as quickly and as thickly as the Polish snow--or the Rabbis’ dandruff--and *especially* so for our three beloved Rebbes.

REB MEEZL

Aha! We must build a wall around the snow!

REB MAZL

We must make for everyone special shoes that they may walk upon the snow without spoiling it.

REB MITZL

We must cover all of Chelm with a woolen blanket, to keep the snow safe and cozy!

YANKL

Thus disagreeing, our three Rebbes put their heads together. Such wisdom, such sanctity, such dandruff!

REB MAZL

Aha! We shall declare it illegal for any Chelmer to step foot on the snow!

REB MEEZL

Vunderlekh! Mazel Tov, Reb Mazl!

REB MAZL

Todah Rabah, Reb Meezl!

REB MITZL

Mazel Tov, Reb Mazl!

REB MAZL

Todah Rabah, Reb Mitzl! Ha ha ha ha ha! Come, Rebbes, let us retire to my house to drink vodka, and pat each other's backs! Ha ha ha ha!

YANKL

But the Rebbes' revelry would soon be interrupted when Rebbetzin Mazl came home from the bathhouse. Rebbetzin Mazl was, as you might imagine, Reb Mazl's wife, and between you and me, she was the wisest Chelmer of all. Her hair was red and her hands were rough, her big beautiful face had a big beautiful beard, and nobody but *nobody* in all of Chelm would dare cross her when she put her big beautiful foot down.

REBBETZIN MAZL

Vot's going on in here? Vodka? Patting backs? Explain yourself, Husband!

REB MAZL

Wife! Come, drink and pat backs with us! We have solved the problem of the snow!

REBBETZIN MAZL

Of course you have, Husband. What's your *brilliant* solution?

REB MAZL

We passed a law that it is now illegal for anyone to step foot on the snow!

REBBETZIN MAZL

You cabbage head! If it is illegal for anyone to step foot on the snow, how will Zufya the Shamash go house to house, knocking on everyone's shutters, to wake the village for morning prayers. How can Zufya knock-knock on shutters when it is illegal to step in the snow?

(The three Rebbes “Hmm...” in turn.)

REB MITZL

She’s right!

REBBETZIN MAZL

Don’t you worry, my sweet bowl of borscht. I have a solution to your solution. We will find the four strongest Jews in Chelm--and they will carry Zufya on a table! This way *his* feet will *never* touch the ground!

REB MEEZL

Vunderlekh! Mazel Tov, Rebbetzin!

REBBETZIN MAZL

Todah rabah, todah rabah, ha ha ha ha ha! *(They all dance)*

YANKL

Their dancing and whirling caused a dandruff-flurry as beautiful as the snow flurry outside. And it seemed as though the vodka and back-patting were endless. *(Beat. Suddenly, YANKL has an idea. HE runs and checks the book, and—)* Aha! The story of When Shmendrick Went to Warsaw. Now Shmendrick, I should clarify, was a schmuck—a lazybones daydreamer who cared for nothing but idle adventures. One day, Shmendrick was struck with an itch. The itch fermented in his gut, paining him with gas and nausea, until one day it erupted out of him as an idea. All of Chelm could hear the bellow that burst forth from the Shmendrick family outhouse.

SHMENDRICK

I...will...go...to...WARSAW!

YANKL

His wife pleaded.

MRS. SHMENDRICK

A Shmendrick is not made for long journeys and open roads. Stay home! And do some work for once! What good will you be out in the world? Watch over the children while I go to market if you’re so hungry for danger!

YANKL

But Mrs. Shmendrick’s words fell on deaf ears. And with a chunk of bread and an onion in his pockets, Shmendrick set off for Warsaw. After a long day of walking, Shmendrick’s feet were aching powerfully.

SHMENDRICK

I’ve come so far already, and Warsaw is nowhere in sight! I will nibble my bread and onion and rest for the night. *(Gasp!)* But tomorrow, when I wake, how will I know which way to go? *(Beat.)* Aha! I will point my boots in the direction of Warsaw. Thank you boots, holy and full of

holes, who protect me from corns and bunion and blisters. Goodnight! (*In an instant, he is snoring*).

YANKL

Early the next morning, a blacksmith was walking on his way to work.

A BLACKSMITH

Heh! By his dopey grin and drooling mouth I can see this man is one of those fools from Chelm. I will switch his boots around and point them back where he came from, (*he does so*) that will show him. Heh!

YANKL

Satisfied with his prank, the blacksmith carried on his way.

SHMENDRICK

(*waking up*)

Good morning, Shmendrick! I'd better get moving if I want to reach Warsaw! (*singing:*) OOOOH, *Shmendrick's goin to Warsaw! Doot doo doo doo doo. SHMENDRICK's goin' to Warsaw! Deet dee dee dee dee! A-gonna see some things and-a meet some people that I never ever before-saw! Hmm hmm hmm—WHAA? Could this be Warsaw already? Thank you, Lord, for having blessed me with such powerful thighs and calves. Ah, Warsaw! (Beat.) Wait a minute...this place looks like Chelm! Is this my Chelm? It looks like my Chelm...but that is impossible. Yet how similar the buildings all look! Every tree, every cat and dog, it all looks so familiar. And that woman coming down Goldberg street—she looks just like our Charna, the grave-digger. Excuse me, what town is this?*

CHARNA

Haah?? Shmendrick, you've been getting into the herring juice again! This is Chelm, of course, where else? Now outta my way while I'm still living!

SHMENDRICK

Oh my! I'm not in Warsaw at all. This must be...a second Chelm! Identical to the first! And oh look, here too they have a Zufya the Shamash, and a Rebbetzin Mazl, and a Reb Zeidl the Cobbler, and—look! Their Gluckel is even more lopsided than ours is. (*Gasp!*) In that case, surely there must be...a second Mrs. Shmendrick as well!

MRS. SHMENDRICK

Oy! My sweet Shmendrick! Thank God you've returned; we were certain you had died. You must be famished. Come. Sit. Eat!

SHMENDRICK

Huh. (*to audience*) My wife back in the first Chelm would never be so generous—and to a stranger, no less! Perhaps this second Chelm isn't quite identical after all.

YANKL

Mrs. Shmendrick brought out plate after plate of blintzes, and Shmendrick gorged himself. It seemed the sour cream was endless!

SHMENDRICK

This second Chelm, I like it more than my first Chelm! But I have a wife and children there, just like you...

MRS. SHMENDRICK

Don't ever leave us again! Who will watch over the children when I go to market?

ALL THE LITTLE SHMENDRICKS

Yeah! Who will watch over us when Mama goes to market?!

SHMENDRICK

Incredible! My wife back home never speaks to me except to scold me, and my children don't listen to a word I say. But for you, beautiful woman, I would stay home and watch the children every day!

MRS SHMENDRICK

(to audience)

He should have gone to Warsaw ten years ago...

SHMENDRICK

But wait... where is *your* husband? Certainly if Chelm 2 has a second Mrs. Shmendrick, it must have a Shmendrick 2...too!

YANKL

The three Rabbis of Chelm all had different theories about the disappearance of the other Shmendrick.

REB MEEZL

He may have become possessed by a dybbuk with a naughty temperament!

REB MAZL

He probably went on another herring raid and got sick on herring juice.

REB MITZL

Shmendrick 2 was a schmuck, a lazybones daydreamer who cared for nothing but idle adventures. Noting like you, Shmendrick 1, so brave and well-traveled. Shmendrick 2 has probably fallen off the edge of the earth.

YANKL

What they *did* agree on was that in Shmendrick 2's continued absence, Shmendrick 1 may live in his place, husband to his wife, and father to his children. As the years went on, Shmendrick

would occasionally ask his wife if she ever missed her first Shmendrick. She'd ask him the same, and the two would agree; no. They were happier this way. And *occasionally* she would ask him if he ever intended to travel again.

SHMENDRICK

Why leave? All roads lead to Chelm. All the world is one big Chelm.

(Beat. SHMENDRICK fades back into YANKL, who pauses and considers what story to tell next. Then):

REB ZEIDL

Aha! Now the shoe is on the other foot!

YANKL

Thus spake Reb Zeidl the Cobbler, the night he captured the moon in a barrel. Reb Zeidl always wanted to be a rabbi. Since we already had three in Chelm, he figured making shoes would be the closest thing. One year, it came to pass that the people of Chelm needed a way to light their dirt roads on dark nights. Gluckel kept tripping and falling, and we worried she would become so lopsided she could no longer stand! One evening, Reb Zeidl the Cobbler gathered the wisest people in Chelm outside his shop.

REB ZEIDL

Here is my plan. On many nights, I have seen the moon inside my water barrel. We will capture the moon, and use its glow to light Chelm on dark evenings! Everyone knows the moon is more important than the sun! The sun only shines when it is already daylight. But the moon shines at night, when we really need it. Everyone, go home, grab wood, hammer, nails, and we will trap the moon when it comes down to bathe.

YANKL

Everyone did as he said, and when they were all gathered, the clouds parted, and there was the moon, *(spotlight on barrel)* in Zeidl's water barrel, just as he promised!

REB ZEIDL

Now!

YANKL

The Chelmers dove on the barrel, covering it with boards and nailing it shut.

REB ZEIDL

Aha! Now the shoe is on the other foot.

YANKL

Quite proud of themselves, the Chelmers went to bed. A few nights later...

ZINDL AND BESHLE

Reb Zeidl! Reb Zeidl!

REB ZEIDL

Zindl, Beshl, it's late! Your boots will be ready in the morning. Go home!

ZINDL

It's not that, Reb Zeidl!

BESHL

It's Gluckel—she's fallen again!

ZINDL

She's so lopsided she's almost upside-down!

REB ZEIDL

Chas v'shalom, god forbid! I'll take care of this.

YANKL

But when Reb Zeidl pried the barrel open...

REB ZEIDL

Nischt. Empty! Zindl, Beshl, come, help me pour out the water—I fear the moon may have drowned!

YANKL

But even at the bottom of the barrel...

REB ZEIDL

Nothing. *(Gasp!)* Someone must have stolen the moon. Stop! Thief! Ring the alarm!

YANKL

Just then, the clouds parted, and the moon snuck into view overhead.

REB ZEIDL

You sneaky moon! You've escaped from the thief! Well stay up there, if you like it so much. But remember—you're always welcome here in Chelm!

YANKL

The moon chose to remain in the sky. But once a month, it will disappear from its heavenly throne—

REB ZEIDL

And only Reb Zeidl knows where to find it. Shah, shah. I won't tell anyone you're here. Get washed up and you'll be good as *new*. You deserve a good barrel soak, after such a long journey! And without even a good pair of shoes!

(Beat. ZEIDL fades back to YANKL.)

YANKL

As hogwatch I try to focus on my duty. But I never spot even a single trotter! Just goes to show how good a job I'm doing. And so, alone in the valley, my mind would wander. Always my thoughts would return...to the Torah. Our Torah scroll was the pride of Chelm, and had been in our community for countless generations. How I longed to hold it close and gaze upon the sacred letters! As Hogwatch I was not permitted to touch the Torah, of course. Denied the sweetness of the holy book in my hands. This I understood--we couldn't take chances. What if one day I were to actually *see* a pig! And then to touch the scroll? No, it would be a shandah. But I began to grow restless. How many times had I stood watching at windows? Longing to be a part, to understand why my heart was aching. So I broke the rules. Shah, shah! It was a sin, I know. But though my thoughts were contaminated with curly tails and dirty hooves, my flesh was clean. I snuck into the shul, late at night, when everyone else was asleep in their beds...

(YANKL rounds the doorway and lights shift to cool blues. YANKL peeks his head through the door, and music (The Klezmerim's "Tuba Doina") plays. YANKL dances with the Torah. It is tentative at first, then vibrant, earnest, and sensual. At the height of the dance, there is a stark, sudden shift in light and sound. The music is replaced by loud, abstract sounds of marching or gears turning, and the cool lighting is replaced by mostly-darkness. YANKL returns the book to the table, and a sharp square of white light appears. He crosses downstage through it and begins speaking as the sound fades out.

YANKL

When you are dancing, the world is as small as your four walls, and the floorboards beneath your feet. I open my eyes and three walls collapse in a cloud of dust and gunpowder. In the blink of an eye, suddenly and without warning, our abusers arrived from the West. German soldiers. In the fertile soil of Chelm, ghetto sprang up like a barbed wire cornfield, slicing through our valley, cutting off the rounded borders of our village with sharp angles. Strangers with guns and uniforms entered our land and suddenly our lives were no longer our own. There were regulations. Rules. No one may leave the ghetto. Food was to be strictly rationed. Curfews, special clothing, and other such measures. All on punishment of beating or death. To understand our new situation, our three Rabbis called an emergency meeting. *(Lights back to normal).*

REB MEEZL

Shah, shah, quiet down everyone. Itzik, get your finger out of your nose, this is important. Reb Mazl?

REB MAZL

Thank you Reb Meezl. *(To audience).* Many of you are wondering—what will happen to our modest little village? And why? How will our life change, captives as we are? We must be cleverer than ever before. The thugs from the west have shrunken our city down to a meager portion of its grandeur—our rations are similarly shrunk. Very little food will be coming in through the fence. Those of us brave, small, and well-lubricated enough may perhaps attempt to smuggle underneath our captors' noses—the thought brings fear to my heart. We will have to make do. Therefore, henceforth: all potatoes will be known as chicken breast. All bread crust

will be called sweet cake. And all water will be sour cream. And in this way we will fill our bellies! Reb Mitzl?

REB MITZL

Our Yiddish tongues have been burnt by German coals. The Messiah will come tomorrow. They have caged us like birds. The Messiah will come tomorrow. Remember Amalek, who attacked from behind in the desert. The Messiah will come tomorrow. (*Long beat.*)

REB MAZL

Thank you, Reb Mitzl. Everyone! We have always been poor. And now the poorest amongst us need our help more than ever before. Not everyone can afford to pay others to smuggle. It is for this reason that I propose we install a new poor box, here, in the shul. For tzedakah, for charity—one of the greatest mitzvot a person can do. I've asked Zindl and Beshl to build it, and everyone who can, will be expected to contribute.

YANKL

When everyone was in *shul* the next day, Zindl and Beshl presented the Tzedakah Box proudly.

ZINDL

We nailed it right to the wall—

BESHL

Right at chest height!!

ZINDL

So no one can miss it coming in and out of shul!

BESHL

And you can drop a zloty in the box!

REB MEEZL

Vunderlekh. It is at times like this, when our enemies surround us and danger lurks inside our own walls, that deeds of loving-kindness are most important.

REB MAZL

But wait! A box filled with money, generously given by the community, would be an awful temptation for a thief. Or the soldiers, brutish parasites who take what they want and argue only with the butt of their guns. We simply cannot take chances...

ZINDL

Okay okay okay okay okay

BESHL

We really did it this time! We climbed up a ladder—

ZINDL

We hung the box from a chain—

BESHL

Nailed the chain to the synagogue ceiling!

ZINDL

So no thief will ever be able to reach it!

BESHL

Isn't it great?

(REB MITZL pulls out a coin and attempts to donate it. Short clown routine.)

REB MITZL

If the box is hanging up high from a chain, how will we put our money inside?

ZINDL

Okay, okay, okay, okay, okay

BESHL

We got it this time, we swear!

ZINDL

That last plan was foolish--we know!

BESHL

But this one's a real keeper!

YANKL

Zindl and Beshl stood apart to reveal a great spiral staircase, leading right up to the Tzedakah box. Everyone agreed that it was a brilliant solution. But everything was not so simple in the ghetto. At times even the natural genius of the Chelmers seemed a single drop of perfume against the acrid smell of iron in the air.

Shmendrick no longer watches the children while his wife is at market. There is no market. So Shmendrick watches for the Messiah while his children smuggle bread and onions through the ghetto fence. *(Long pause.)*

Knock Knock. *(YANKL does whatever is necessary to get a "Who's there?" from the audience.)*

Zufya the Shamash *(Zufya the Shamash who?)* Zufya the Shamash, knocking on the shutters. One evening, in their revelry, our abusers danced through Chelm in drunken boots, ripping the shutters off every window of every home. The soldiers, laughing, tossed the shutters in a pile in our town square, and decorated it with shit, and piss, and cigarette butts. And every morning. Performing his sacred obligation. Knock knock. Who's there? Zufya the Shamash. Zufya the Shamash, knocking on shutters. To wake the village for morning prayers.

My life changed in the ghetto too. There were new elements to my responsibility. I watched for hogs and I watched for soldiers, and I kept track of their whereabouts and patterns. Reporting back to the Rabbis, hoping to gain a certain kind of safety. But in the ghetto nothing was certain.

One evening in particular I had been very lucky. The dark, moonless sky seemed to hide no danger, and I didn't see a single soldier while patrolling the ghetto. I feel like Moses, parting a sea of hogs before my staff, high walls of pig bellies crashing down and dissolving into frothy pink borscht. I round a corner (*Beat.*) And the sea of pink is gone. Through a cloud of dust I see black boots and black guns, shoving a black cloud of my people through the gate of the square, and disappearing. From behind me I hear rough voices shouting in German. (*Looks at barrel. Looks at audience. Beat.*) I made a choice.

(YANKL jumps into the barrel. A very sudden lighting shift. The following text is heard in YANKL's voice over the loudspeakers.)

On the moon, it's difficult to breathe. And to hear. The air is thin, and you must inhale and listen very slowly. At first it's like you've plugged your ears and nose with beeswax, everything muffled and faraway. Then sounds begin reemerging, distant and dusty, and if you lift your eyes up from the glowing surface, you can see the world. You can see Chelm. You see like God sees.

On the moon, a child ripped from her mother's arms looks like a tiny speck, the smallest dot, splitting apart into two smaller particles. Someday soon a Jew will split the smallest particle of all, and gain such dominion over air and fire that he will make the burning bush look like a *purimshpiel*. The small dot split. Pale hands forced apart. The roar of empty space between mother and daughter. An explosion. The desert is set ablaze with pillars of cloud and pillars of fire.

On the moon, machine guns don't sound like staccato wood-block percussion. They sound like cruel laughter. Bullets in slow motion. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha .Ha.

In the blood and mud, the laughing bullets and the echoing cries grow more distant. I'm cold. And I'm wet.

When I overheard German soldiers laughing and saying that the ghetto was to be liquidated, I laughed too. Our abusers seemed not to remember that after Noah, God promised to never again destroy the world with a flood. Chelmer that I am, I took them at their word. Words are blessing in Chelm. Our abusers bend language to their will, wrenching out words like "Liquation." "Special Measures." "Final Solution."

Words have been thieved of their meaning. I was fooled. There are no words on the moon.

(After a short beat, YANKL bursts out of the Barrel. Accompanying quick light shift. Long beat.)

I did not realize that to dig a grave you must shift the entire planet with your spade. I have been doing Charna's job but it only makes it clearer that she is gone. Her graves were works of art, seamless stitchings of ground and grass. My graves don't compare. Great lumpy things dotting the valley like giant warts.

All Chelm is a graveyard. Everyone I know has their head in the ground like an onion. And it's easy now to visit neighbors. No headstones, I am not strong enough to lug boulders. But I know where everyone lives. (*Indicating, painfully :*) Zufya the Shamash. Gluckel the Merchant. Reb Zeidl the Cobbler.

Did you know that the dead talk in their sleep? If you put your ear to the ground, you can hear echoes. Words still trapped inside their bodies. Seeping up through the earth. (*Knocking*) Reb Zeidl? Reb Zeidl? (*To audience :*) Shh! Listen!

REB ZEIDEL

Nayn rabonim kenen keyn minyen nisht machn...ober tzen shusters yo!

YANKL

Nine rabbis cannot form a minyan...but ten shoemakers can. And what's one hogwatch to do, then? (*Pause.*) Dig. And wait. (*Pause.*) I cut my hair with a knife and mirror, recite the Kaddish for myself, and nestle into the earth like a scroll in a mezuzah. I must be equal to my fellow Chelmers, equally fated, so I can join them in the World to Come. (*Long beat. YANKL waits for death. Then, suddenly realizing:*) Who will bury me!? Who will spill earth on my head? O God, if you have not forgotten Chelm, send some messenger to finish the job. A crow, a bear, a gust of wind! Please! Who buries the gravedigger?

(Long pause. In the following section, the voice of the ANGEL OF DEATH is heard over the loudspeakers.)

ANGEL OF DEATH

You're not a gravedigger, Yankl.

YANKL

(Pause.)

Hello?!

ANGEL OF DEATH

You're a hogwatch. You're a wonderful hogwatch. But you're a terrible gravedigger.

YANKL

Who are you? (*Beat.*) An angel? (*Beat.*) The angel of death? Well where the hell have you been? I've had to bury the entire town myself! Now you must bury me.

ANGEL OF DEATH

I have been...busy.

YANKL

Busy. With what? Where on earth could you find a bigger collection of dead Jews than Chelm?
(*Silence.*) What? (*Silence.*) WHAT?!

ANGEL OF DEATH

Yankl...all the world is Chelm. (*Silence*)

YANKL

How many? (*Silence.*) HOW MANY?!

ANGEL OF DEATH

Six million.

YANKL

Six million. Murdered?

ANGEL OF DEATH

No. One murder. Six. Million. Times. (*Silence.*)

YANKL

Bury me. Please. It is the only thing.

ANGEL OF DEATH

No. You have more to do. You have responsibility. You, my little hogwatch, must go on.

YANKL

If I am not to die, tell me something. Name this for me that I might know it. Plague, pogrom, war—these are words. I know that none of them are big enough. Please. Tell me its name.

ANGEL OF DEATH

There are many names for the unnamable. Hebrew: Shoah, the catastrophe. Yiddish: Churban. Destruction. The traveling Roma, your cousins in wandering and persecution, shout in Romani: Porafmos, "Devouring." Or whisper, Kali Traš, "Black Fear." One word will find its way into mouths across the world...Holocaust. From Greek, it means "burnt whole." Like the sacrifices in the Beit haMikdash. Personally, I do not like this word. You know as well as that those who persecute are in no position to offer holy sacrifices. If you are to know this thing you must name it yourself, Yankl the Hogwatch.

(Silence. YANKL makes eye contact with every single person in the audience. Then, to the ANGEL:)

YANKL

I name it Gornisht. Nothing. There are huge piles of nothing in the fields. Chanting, shuckling where our shul once stood. Thin, scruffy nothing in the schoolhouse. Warm, fearless nothing, kneading nothing into Challah. *(To audience)* So much nothing! Never before did we have such wealth in Chelm, so much of anything. And I alone can benefit from this unexpected prosperity. How lucky! What a blessing! To have these empty riches all to myself. And so I say Gornisht. I say Nothing. *(Beat.)* They were always talking about a deal, an arrangement. Something about...

REB MEEZL

Chosen people!

YANKL

All this nothing still doesn't add up to the empty space where God was supposed to be. Tell me, dear angel. Tell me this. God. If God. Where is God in all this?

ANGEL OF DEATH

God is in all things, Yankl...

YANKL

Don't answer me with riddles!

ANGEL OF DEATH

Yankl. I have for you a task.

YANKL

A *task*? What could I possibly do for you? You refuse to fill in my *grave*, but please. Tell me. What can Yankl do for you?

ANGEL OF DEATH

Go to the bathhouse, Yankl.

(Long pause. YANKL sniffs his armpit.)

YANKL

Oh so now I stink too? Perhaps what you smell is Chelm itself rotting away underneath us.

ANGEL OF DEATH

Listen to me. It is time. God has chosen you for a reason.

YANKL

There you go again with that word. It sticks like undercooked fat in my mouth, and chew as I may I cannot swallow. *(Beat. YANKL believes the ANGEL has gone. To the audience:)* I begin to wonder if this is not perhaps...all my fault. She's right. I do stink. *(Beat.)* I doubt a bath would help.

ANGEL OF DEATH

But it wouldn't hurt.

(YANKL hears this and rushes back around and through the doorway. A lighting shift as he enters the bathhouse...)

YANKL

On a bench in the steam room, wrinkled, shrunken, and huddled together: the three Rebbes of Chelm! They looked if everything but their souls had been shvitzed away in the steam. Reb Meezl? Reb Mazl? Reb Mitzl! You're alive!? What are you doing here? Please tell me what's happening. Please tell me what to do. The Angel of Death sent me here! Everyone else is gone. I buried them. I can't be Chelm all by myself! I'm just a hogwatch—I'm not righteous or learned like you. How can I carry on a tradition I don't even understand?

REB MITZL

A man tells stories so that the waves of silence do not drown him.

REB MAZEL

Find the Pinkus, Yankl.

REB MEEZL

The Chelmer Pinkus! Zechariah the Record-Keeper's book! Every tale, every story, every law and tradition of Chelm is contained inside. Birth, death—every Chelmer is in the Pinkus! Keep our people alive. Keep Chelm alive. Tell the stories.

YANKL

You want I should find some book? Even if I find the Pinkus and tell the stories—who am I to tell them to? Everyone I know is dead!

REB MITZL

As long as you can talk about someone, they are not dead.

YANKL

The Rebbes stood and let their towels fall softly to the floor. Reb Mazel opened wide the door, and they rushed out...and the three Rabbis of Chelm dove...naked and pruned...headfirst into the sparkling snow bank. Where they melted. The steam rose up from the snow and twirled into Hebrew letters, which hung in the air, flickering like candlelight. *(HE reads the words from the air, but speaks them in the Rebbes' voices:)*

REB MEEZL

I was.

REB MAZL

I am.

REB MITZL

I will be.

(Long silence. And then: whoosh!)

YANKL

A gust of wind and it was as if it had never been. I stood in that spot I don't know how long. *(Long beat.)* A second great wind shook me awake, bits of frost flying off my beard. And on the other side of the valley...I saw something. Two big somethings—and getting bigger. A massive lion, being chased down by a massive deer! I froze as the two monstrous creatures bounded towards me...and flew right past me! I chased them, following the animals into the center of Chelm. They leapt and bounded through the streets, whipping down alleys and around corners, until they disappeared into a house. The house was crumbling, and overgrown with vines. I pushed my way inside. The deer chased the lion into the bathtub, where they both...swirled down the drain. *(Beat)*. Is anything in the world solid anymore? Or is all flesh doomed to liquidation. In my tearful laughter I almost failed to notice, at the bottom of the tub, a book. A big book. The Pinkus! Of course! This must be the home of Zechariah the Record Keeper! Finally, I could fulfill the Rebbe's request. Finally, I would understand—finally peace!

(YANKL opens the book with excitement. Turns a page. Turns another. With each turn he grows more distraught until finally he shows the audience:)

YANKL (cont.)

Gornisht. Nothing. Every page empty. Our stories...our history...all of Chelm! (HE *almost begins to weep, but then—*) No! No, I remember now. Zechariah the Record Keeper, looking like a billy goat. Puffing his way down Goldberg Street, the Pinkus in his hands. A voice—who's?—in my ear:

A VOICE

There goes Old Zechariah. Toting that big book of his. You know, they say there's *nothing* in that big book of his.

YANKL

Nothing?

A VOICE

Nothing. He's got it all up here. But he carries it everywhere he goes—in case he should forget.

(Long pause. YANKL jumps down off the barrel. Removing his hat, he becomes JAKE, and addresses the audience.)

JAKE

Yankl on the Moon is my attempt to fulfill the Rebbe's final request. I could not find the Pinkus so I wrote my own. As a 21st century Fool and a third-generation survivor of what Yankl calls "the Gornisht," I live with the million-ton millstone of this history on my shoulders. Something we can read about, learn about, but only understand from a distance that feels interstellar.

As an honors thesis, I started with questions. What does a new theater of the Holocaust look like? I feel like one of the Fools of Chelm when faced with something so huge and so horrible. So who better to tell this story than Yankl, the last fool.

In a moment, the music will play, and my foolishness will be over for the evening. But *Yankl on the Moon* is only beginning. We have big plans for this piece, and lots more to discover. You all have feedback cards. Please, if my play made you feel, or think: share with me. Thank you for letting me share with you. (*Bow music plays. **End of play.***)

CHAPTER 3

REFLECTIONS

Yankl on the Moon is a play that refused to be forced. Try as I may, try as I might, it came when it came and I had no choice but to ride those waves. The concept for *Yankl* was born from two seemingly conflicting desires. On one hand, I felt an urgent need to write about the Holocaust. My grandfather is a survivor, and his experiences coupled with my Jewish education and upbringing has kept the events of 1933-1945 in my mind from a very young age. On the other hand, the art that I feel compelled to create rarely aligns with the artistic conventions of traditional Holocaust representation: in my original work I am not generally one for historical realism or outright tragedy. I began to understand how these two impulses might fit together in the spring of 2013 when I took Deborah Lipstadt's course on the history of the Holocaust. I was struck then by two notions. The first: that while I found the class endlessly fascinating and deeply challenging, I was unsatisfied by much of the media with which we engaged. The second was the sense of humor that Dr. Lipstadt (herself an internationally respected figure in Holocaust Studies) brought to many of our lectures and discussions. The seeds of *Yankl on the Moon*, planted long ago, began to germinate.

Process

This experience has since been one of both tension and cohesion between scholarly and creative work. In a sense, my theatrical and scholarly questions were the same, and I chose two different methods of simultaneous exploration. This double path became more fruitful than I could have predicted. My research brought up continuous questions and concerns associated with

the concept of “Holocaust comedy.” What I could not definitely answer in my critical writing, I sought to explore through metaphor in my creative writing. When an image or line seemed to “click” (or not) in playwriting or rehearsing, I would later return to the theoretical realm—how did this discovery relate to what others have considered on the topic, and how could it inform my own scholarly writing. Constructing the play, this back and forth between analytic and imaginative (an interplay Nietzsche would pin on the Apollonian vs. Dionysian dichotomy) became a consistent source of both questions and answers.

I began rehearsing *Yankl* with about half of the script written, and a less-than-complete picture of the play’s structure. What at first seemed like an inauspicious beginning came to be a rich opportunity to create, shape, and experiment in the moment, as I explored, without the limitations of a hard and fast script. As I rehearsed, I quickly realized something else was missing: other eyes in the room. I needed an ersatz audience, someone off of whom to bounce ideas, and whom I could trust not to answer questions for me, but to collaborate as a shrewd director, helping me make my own discoveries and offering advice from a different perspective. I have always done my best work in the presence of brave, supportive, like-minded collaborators, and I knew exactly who to call for this project: Seth Langer.

Seth and I have been close friends and artistic collaborators since around the age of eight. We have similar aesthetic interests, similar pasts and upbringings, and very different thought-processes. This makes us an excellent team. I also knew Seth would understand that this was my project, and that he had all the necessary skills to play this important, challenging supportive role. I chose to bring Seth on as director.

Working in this way proved quite generative—Seth’s presence in the room allowed me the opportunity to spitball, brainstorm, and improvise with the guarantee of an astute sounding-

board and record keeper. Our initial weeks of rehearsal together were mostly table work. This, in reality, meant that I would pace around my living room ranting, moving, thinking aloud, and Seth would take notes, offer commentary, and prompt me with occasional questions. His feedback made me aware of when I contradicted myself, and helped me to identify emerging themes and motifs as I (invariably) repeated myself. Some of the most fruitful exercises from this period were the “homework” assignments Seth would give me after each rehearsal. For example: “Jake, you keep talking about how you want to bring the community of Chelm to life. For tomorrow’s rehearsal I want you to bring in the names of twenty villagers with one line of dialogue written for each.” These assignments helped me hone in on the core issues for the piece, and kept me accountable to my own goals.

Two other quite basic strategies were crucial in these early stages of development: voice recording and writing by hand. Voice recording was essential for capturing moments of inspiration that I could neither predict nor afford to forget. Many of my strongest images, concepts, and pieces of dialogue came to me in flashes—while driving, walking to class, or at 4:00am with a toothbrush in my mouth. I also knew from my experiences as an improviser that I sometimes think more clearly and more creatively when speaking aloud on my feet than if I’m writing in silence. For these moments, my omnipresent smart phone and its microphone feature became a great boon.

With regard to writing by hand: I quickly learned that the computer, for me, is a source of —no surprise—infinite distraction and procrastination. What I knew internally (but did not yet fully understand) was that writing by hand also serves to open up my mind in a way that laptop typing never could. I wrote before that this play would not be forced; it demanded organic creation. Many, many of the pages I wrote never made it into the final script. Sometimes a single

sentence would lead to a new, successful scene, and the rest of its original scene would be filed away. Because of this, as often as I could, I would sit down with pen and paper, free of distractions, and attempt various exercises I have learned in creative writing courses, which generally involve timed, sustained free-writing inspired by a scenic outline, visual word-cluster, piece of music, and other sources.

In this vein, my experiences in Tim McDonough's course *Creating New Works: Solo Performance* were of the utmost benefit. The course is both a survey class in established solo artists, and a laboratory for creating new solo work. In this way we studied established techniques, styles, and qualities of the very particular form that is theatrical solo performance, even as we experimented with our own nascent solo works. In class, I had the opportunity to share work I was developing in my writing and rehearsals with like-minded peers and a professor experienced in creating solo theater. This, along with the course's structure of research, assignments, in-class writing, and workshopping, became essential to my development process.

The sound and movement of a human body in space is my first and foremost concern when I approach the production of a piece of theater. Once I had devoted substantial time to development from a playwriting standpoint, my immediate priority was to physically explore the world I had been creating. I brought in another close friend and collaborator, TC Kinser, as a choreography and movement consultant. I had already written a dance sequence, and wanted someone who was not just a physical theater practitioner, but also a dancer in a more traditional sense. TC and I took the written material and what pieces of staging I had been experimenting with and began to develop on our feet.

One series of exercises was particularly rewarding. I created a list of twenty or so thematic "key words." These included: "walls," "God," "Chelm," "Pinkus,"

“we had a deal,” “ghetto,” “liquidation,” “nothing,” “chosen,” “Hogwatch,” “abusers,” “Rabbi,” “moon,” “Torah,” “death,” and some others. Then we collected images (photography, paintings, etc.) that we felt connected us to the script at that point. We printed the research images and spread the papers all around the room. We explored the space, and developed physical responses (gestures, movements, generally 1-5 seconds long) to images of our choosing. The exercise that followed brought an invigorating element of chance into the room. Two of us would stand back to back. On a count of three, we would turn to face one another—one person would perform a movement, and the other would simultaneously speak aloud a random word from the word bank. The results were often serendipitous in the unlikely, powerful juxtapositions of images and text that were generated. Sometimes the initial combination was perfect, other times we would try the movement again with a different work, chosen to match or contrast it. The material generated in these exercises was instrumental for the next step in my process: shaping and blocking the show.

I prefer to work with a fully rehearsed, very specific physical score. The nature of a piece like *Yankl*, where I need to embody a large number of characters, often with quick transitions in between, dictated that I create a set blocking for every single moment of the play. A framework like this reflects the acting training I have received at Emory; I know that with a specifically crafted physical score I needn't rely on how I'm feeling on a particular evening, and can trust my muscle memory. A set score also allows for the freedom of improvising with a safety net.

This stage of rehearsing began as the script was coming together more formally. Each rehearsal would begin with an hour or two of table work, primarily devoted to cutting script material down in an effort to tighten the arc of the play. All in all, I cut two full scenes and probably over thirty minutes of material in these penultimate weeks, all, I feel, to the benefit of the work. We set a schedule of scenes, and once we had blocked a scene initially, I strove to have

the material memorized for our second rehearsal with it, where I would experiment to discover details, colors, and nuances in each moment. Seth's role as director at this point was to keep me aware of what I could not observe directly myself, and to help me settle on strategies and performance choices that were most effective.

This staging strategy also requires diligence, experimentation, and the willingness to fail repeatedly before finding a solution that sticks. Artistic challenges came in many forms. One example: as I play over a dozen characters throughout the show, each character needed a very specific physical and vocal to make them clearly distinguishable from one another. I found Reb Mazl a particular challenge—of the three Rabbis, he often has the longest segments of text, and delivers in-the-moment speeches about the state of affairs in Chelm. I wanted his voice to be in some way inherently comic, which, in contrast with his more somber speeches, would provide a challenge to the audience's perception. I tried a variety of voices and tones (for a while experimenting with an over-the-top Jerry Seinfeld impression) before I landed on a confident, booming voice, but with a speech sound substitution of /r/ for /w/. This brought a silly tone to Reb Mazl's quite serious speech about life in the Chelm Ghetto, a tragicomic balance which dared the audience to laugh and but kept them on edge, as I felt was appropriate for the scene.

The final week of rehearsal found us incorporating technical elements and polishing the performance itself. TC has experience as a lighting designer, and served as light and sound technician for the performances (I designed sound). We devoted one and a half rehearsals to tech design, working to create simple, yet evocative lighting that would highlight certain heightened moments. For the last few days before performance, Seth was out of town, so I rehearsed sans director, bringing the play fully to its feet with help of TC and Lauren Levitt, our house manager.

We managed three full technical rehearsals in costume. After each rehearsal I received notes from TC, Lauren, and India Duranthon, a friend and fellow theater artist.

Results

On Saturday night, the first evening of *Yankl on the Moon*, the audience was at 53 of its 57-seat capacity. On Sunday night, the count was close to 80 people. This stellar (and fire-code-infringing) turnout was not just a numerical success. Audiences were overall attentive, responsive, engaged and present. The spectators generously gave me their trust, and allowed me to bring them on Yankl's absurd, sad, strange journey. I was repaid in full with laughter, tears, and, closing night, a deeply satisfying and totally unexpected full standing ovation.

While the immediate audience responses were encouraging, humbling, and gratifying, more germane to my scholarly and creative purposes was the articulated feedback, in the form of handwritten feedback emails, video interviews, and face to face conversations.

Before each performance, audience members were handed a feedback sheet. The following is a list of the questions on the sheets, with a selection of interesting responses:

What images, phrases, or moments stand out in your memory? Why?

- “Your command of the space, over your body, over your energy is just incredible”
- “The general naiveté of the Chelm-ers was just so lovely done that it becomes so easy to fall into their innocence. It makes the coming of the Holocaust so much more powerful.”
- “The significance of words/names. Words are the only way this chasm of time & inhumanity can be communicated”

- “There is a moment in that dance when Yankl is holding the book—the Torah with outstretched arms and it seemed as though God was pulling away from him as he was attempting to pull God closer to him. That image is still fresh in my mind even as I write these words a day later. It was beautiful imagery to me even if that was not the playwright’s intent.”
- “Gornisht was incredibly profound. I think that was the most moving part for me. Did you create that? I deeply loved that part.”

At any point did the play affect you physically? If so, how, and in what moment(s)?

- “THE EMPTY BOOK MADE ME GASP.”
- “The transition to dancing with the Torah to Yankl delivering to us the news of the Holocaust/invasion of Germans into Helm just shocked me—caused me to freeze right in my seat. I felt like I got the wind knocked out of me.”
- “The realization that the world is Chelm on your face made tears well up in my eyes.”
- “When Yankl asks where else there could be such a collection of dead Jews, and the pause...I flinched.”
- “Your movements in the synagogue deeply affected me, almost physically. I could feel the joy”

How do you relate to the subject matter of the play?

- “I, too, stand outside the sacred and look in, wishing. I, too, have unmet obligations to the dead.”
- “The serious shift resounded to the pangs of loss and my world shifting I’ve experienced. It’s incredible how much more human silliness is than trying to be normal.”

- “It was amazingly human—I can’t think how to say it. It’s beautiful and kind.”
- “Hard to say—the subject of the Holocaust is very hard to approach & yet through the eyes of Yankl (and other townspeople), it feels current—like a small town that could be thriving today, people I would know from anywhere.
- “I think the entire piece dares you to laugh. The opening lines allude to how one mustn’t speak ill of the dead but the performance has so many funny moments it creates an interesting tension. I think you successfully make use of the performance idea that if you can make an audience laugh first you can make them cry. Makes it all the more powerful.”
- “Genocide doesn’t stop. The stories go on. Voices are still silenced.”
- “Storytelling as reliving as rebirth as remorse as resistance (in no particular order)”
- “as an outsider, an invisible one, as a story teller, as a keeper of dreams”
- “Its subject matter I “know” but can never really know or understand. And I think so much of the power of the piece is in its forgiveness of the audience—go on, laugh, clap, incorporate real life into your thoughts about the material because it can’t be felt in a vacuum of soberness anymore”

Were there any moments that confused you? Did you ever feel disengaged from the story?

- “small moments at the top but I was surprised how quickly I was immersed”
- “I felt totally engaged and cannot think of a moment where I was confused. You created many characters—residents of Chelm and I felt I knew them all. The three Rebbe’s would be hard to confuse. They looked different, sounded different, and you were able to express their distinct ideas clearly—even as you moved quickly from one character to another.”

- “When the voice comes over the speaker—not confusing, exactly. I liked the dialogue but felt disengaged by the intrusion of technology; it made me aware of watching a play.”
- “No. It felt like a fairy tale. The narrative itself was simple, though the content complex.”
- “The Angel of Death conversation seemed a bit too “educational.” The emotion was spot on but the language was didactic rather than expository—sadly I cannot think of a different strategy though.”
- “The ending was a tad confusing as the transition between real horror and mystical things was a bit hard to follow.”

My favorite Chelmer is _____

- “Shmendrick, **because** he learned to be content.”
- “Shmendrick **because:** his journey reminds me of the fool’s journey from the tarot cards. In the sense we are all on the same journey, moving forward optimistically with our heads high, even when we’re about to fall off a cliff”
- “The Rabbis **because:** I enjoyed the quick POV change, & the history/philosophy presented through the eyes of respectable but unbelievable voices.”
- “Yankl **because:** he knew who he was, loved his town and its people---and was not such a fool after all.”
- “Shmendrick **because:** though he may have been a schmuck, he believed in something, chased it (albeit shortly) and saw his home, his world in a new way.”
- “The Shmendricks **because:** Best reigniting of a marriage that I’ve heard in years!!!!”

Future Plans

In theatrical experimentation, results cannot be quantified as they can in the hard sciences.

But by every rubric with which I can honestly measure, *Yankl on the Moon* has been an

overwhelming success. The flood of emails, text messages Facebook posts, and in-person conversations have been nothing but positive. More than that—people seem truly, deeply, and uniquely affected by my play. On more than a few occasions I have heard from audience members that it was unlike anything they had ever experienced before. That said, I have no intentions of resting on any alleged laurels. I have big dreams and big plans for moving forward with *Yankl on the Moon*. In today's economic climate, solo performance is ideal for both performers and theaters. I have already spoken to some producers in Atlanta who are interested in giving the play at home. I'm also thinking seriously about the possibility of touring the show, to theaters, synagogues, community centers, and anywhere that would have me. In the meantime, I will be revising, re-writing, and polishing this piece which I have come to love so dearly. I never before knew the thrill of performing, alone, something that I had written myself. No theatrical experience can compare. I put all of myself into *Yankl on the Moon*, and I know it will be with me for a long time.

APPENDIX A: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ALT. HOLOCAUST FICTION

I make no pretensions toward including here a complete bibliography of all “alternative” or “non-traditional” Holocaust fiction. Rather, these are works with which I engaged in a significant way, and which influenced my scholarly and creative processes. I have included selected quotations to give brief examples of the tone of each piece.

Plays:***The Cannibals* by George Tabori, 1967**

Tabor subtitles his piece “the extraordinary tale of a dinner party as told by the sons of those who attended the feast and the two survivors by whose courtesy the facts are known.” Grotesquely ironic from start to finish, it is through this meta-theatrical, multigenerational, mimetic distance that *Cannibals* justifies its comedy. This play stands out for its powerful, anti-naturalistic, ensemble-created imagery, and the thematic distinctions made between experiencing something and inheriting that experience.

KLAUB: How would you describe the atmosphere of the cattle car?

UNCLE: Terror.

KLAUB: As for instance?

UNCLE: Mauer had a fit and choked to death.

KLAUB: Very good. Anything else?

UNCLE: Boredom.

KLAUB: Go on.

UNCLE: Humor.

KLAUB: Could you be more specific?

UNCLE: I’d rather not.

HIRSCHLER: “Say, where d’you think we’re going?”

HELTAI: “California.”

HIRSCHLER: “Isn’t that too far?”

HELTAI: “Too far from what?”

(All laugh.)

***How We Danced While We Burned* by Kenneth Bernard, 1973**

The only attempted professional production of *How We Danced* was cancelled by the playwright, “because it failed to project his intended ironic outrage, without which, he realized, it could be grossly offensive.” The play takes place in Hell, which looks like a small, overheated German beer hall. The evening is a grotesque vaudeville variety show, and acts that don’t please the proprietor (equal parts Nazi Commandant and Borscht-belt Jewish comedian) are tossed violently out a door in the back labeled “EXIT.” At one point, Hitler shows up in a white tutu. *How We Danced* is strange, evocative, relentless, funny, disturbing, unique, and *entirely* unproducibile.

HITLER: I love the flowers. Each day when my official duties are finished, I got to my flowers. I have read flowers, blue flowers[...]white flowers, black flowers. And I love each one of them. I touch them. I fondle them. I tickle them. I smell them. I roll on them. I talk to them. I sing to

them. [...] Every day I can't wait for my official duties to be over with. Fifty thousand to the front! Airplanes! Cruisers! bombs! Kill the Jews! I sign everything!—But all the time I am thinking only of my flowers.

***Laughter* by Peter Barnes, 1978**

Laughter is a two-part play, with a prologue and epilogue. The prologue features the immaculately dressed AUTHOR declaring that “comedy itself is the enemy!” while being subjected to various cartoonish embarrassments. Part One (“Tsar”), in 16th century Moscow, dramatizes the shattering cruelty of Ivan the Terrible. Part Two (“Auschwitz”) takes place in Berlin, in the banal bureaucratic offices of Auschwitz. The epilogue is a stand-up comedy routine from Bimko and Bieberstein, two concentration camp inmates who tell black Jewish jokes as the two of them die, along with their act. *Laughter* is starkly compelling theater, though its opprobrium on laughter, accusatory tone, and grotesque black humor are likely to alienate audiences more than include.

AUTHOR: Laughter's too feeble a weapon against the barbarities of life. A balm for battles lost, standard equipment for the losing side; the powerful have no need of it. Wit's no answer to a homicidal maniac. So, in the face of Atilla the Hun, Ivan the Terrible, a Passendale or Auschwitz, what good is laughter?! (*His trousers fall down to reveal spangled underpants.*) Root it out! Root it out!

***The Trial of God* by Elie Wiesel, 1979**

Elie Wiesel is known far more readily as a survivor, prominent political activist, and author of famous Holocaust novel-cum-memoir *Night* than as a playwright, and his need to write in this way lends credence to the significance of theater in Holocaust discourse. In his script notes, Wiesel writes: “The play should be performed as a tragic farce: a *Purimschpiel* within a *Purimschpiel*.” Three minstrels and an innkeeper enact a trial of God for his crimes against humanity; Satan (disguised as a devout Jew) serves as God's defendant, and the play ends, trial incomplete, with the arrival of a massive pogrom. *Trial* is an affirmation of Jewish identity and an aggressive challenge to God that makes use of meta-theatricality as well as moments of mask, clowning, song, and farce. Some powerful dialogue and images, but overall clumsy in dramatic construction.

BERISH: I lived as a Jew, and it is as a Jew that I shall die—and it is as a Jew that, with my last breath, I shall shout my protest to God! And because the end is near, I shall shout louder! Because the end is near, I'll tell him he's more guilty than ever!

***The Model Apartment* by Donald Margulies, 1990**

Model Apartment is multi-generational response that speaks to 1st and 2nd generation experiences with humor, vivid imagery, and cutting pathos. The sterile, artificial nature of (holocaust survivors) Lola and Max's model apartment is juxtaposed with the grotesque bodily excess of their daughter, Debby, who is obese and mentally disturbed; imagery of famine and feast, starvation and binge, memory and reality collide. The actress playing Debby wears a “fat suit” which is shed when she appears as Deborah—Max's first daughter who died in the Shoah—and the past is transposed onto the stage, just as it is burned into Max's memory. The comedy in

Model Apartment is subtle and never forced, and while the material is at times extreme it generally flows quite naturally. Unique, funny, very effective, and thematically rich.

DEBBY: They're all inside me. All of them. Anne Frank. The Six Million. Bubbie and Zaydie and Hitler and Deborah. When my stomach talks, it's *them* talking. Telling me they're hungry. I eat for them so they won't be hungry. Sometimes I don't know what I'm saying 'cause it's *them* talking...

***The Survivor and the Translator* by Leeny Sack, 1990**

Sack subtitles her piece "A solo theatre work about not having experienced the Holocaust, by a daughter of concentration camp survivors." *Translator* works (and works well) in the tensions between Polish and English, mother and daughter, inheritance and testimony. An avant-garde, second-generation response, *Translator* makes use of poetry, song, dark comedy, and performance art techniques to communicate the nuanced experience of someone who is not herself a victim yet feels deeply the weight of her mother's suffering.

LEENY: Okay, I'm going to need your help for this. Please. When I give you the signal—I will give you this signal—(*I put my hands out in front of me palms up.*) would you please say, "To what do you attribute your success?" Okay? So I will give you this signal," (*I put my hands out in front of me palms up.*) "and you say, "To what do you attribute your success?" All right. (*I sit on the edge of the bed and cross my legs. I saw with a strong Polish accent*): I am a very famous, successful Polish comedienne. (*I signal the spectators: hands out in front of me palms up. They begin to say "To what do you attribu—."*) *I cut them off by yelling*: TIMING! (*Sometimes they laugh. I laugh even when they do not.*)

***Camp Comedy* Roy Kift, 1999**

A carnivalesque treatment of the true story of German Jewish actor and film director Kurt Geron, who was coerced by Nazis into creating a propaganda film depicting Theresienstadt concentration camp as a healthy, humane place. The play's maniacal impresario ("Imp"), a clear derivative of *Cabaret*'s MC, guides the action of play along, interspersed with songs and dance numbers. An interesting (if flawed) characterization of the tension between fictional representation and historical testimony through the juxtaposition of theater and film.

EPPSTEIN: Pull yourself together man! A concentration camp is not a center for the propagation of ethical behavior. It's about survival. First and last, survival.

LIPPMAN: And what's the point of survival, Herr Epstein? If we end up with the moral standard of pack rats?

Films:

***Life is Beautiful* by Roberto Benigni, 1997**

Upon its release, *Life is Beautiful* was met with starkly polarizing reviews—some found it to be the ultimate disrespect (a concentration camp comedy?!) many felt it was a cinematic milestone (the film was awarded the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film and Benigni won Best Actor). The film is a touching (and, in a sense, age-old) comedy of a father constructing an elaborate fiction to shield his son from the horrible realities of their condition. Beautifully crafted scenes

and moments cannot entirely make up for the film's reliance on Christian imagery of vindication and the degree to which the Italian Fascist setting diminishes the film's Jewishness.

GUIDO: They make buttons out of people? What else?

JOSHUA: They cook us in ovens!

(Guido stares at him and laughs.)

GUIDO *(laughing)* They cook us in ovens? I've heard of a wood-burning oven, but I never heard of a people-burning oven. Oh, I'm out of wood, pass me that lawyer over there! No, that lawyer's no good, he's not dry! Come on Joshua, get with it! Let's get serious now.

***Train of Life* by Radu Mihăileanu, 1998**

Hardly a moment of pathos is safe from comic undercutting in this film about a Ukrainian shtetl's attempt to deport themselves out from under the noses of encroaching Nazi forces. Unique in its focus on community and distinct tone of Yiddishkeit, *Train of Life* is a fantastical counter-narrative which, from its use of stock characters to its deeply improbable plotline, makes no pretensions toward realism. It's a richly comic folktale in the Chelm tradition that shows us how things might have been—and only in the very final moment are we starkly reminded that how things might have been is not how things actually were. A fascinating, if at times convoluted, Holocaust tragicomedy.

(The train is at a checkpoint. Mordechai, in disguise as a Nazi officer, has just successfully fooled a real Nazi into allowing the train to pass.)

MORDECHAI: Heil Hitler!

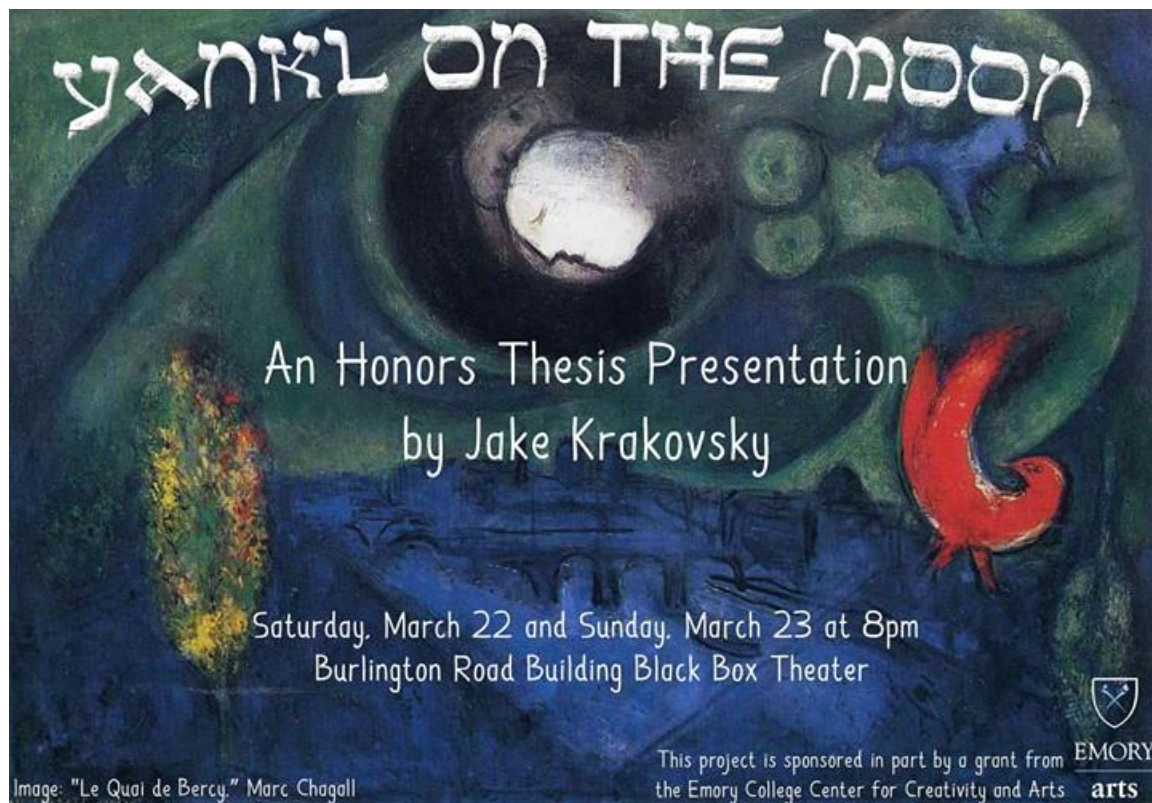
VILLAGER: *(under his breath)* L'chaim!

Literature:

***A Blessing on the Moon* by Joseph Skibell, 1997**

I have not encountered, in theater, literature, or film, a fictional treatment of the Holocaust that balances humor, horror, poetry, and fantasy with the same deftness as Skibell does in *Blessing on the Moon*. Chaim Skibelski, along with the Jews of his village, has been shot through the head and tossed in a pit. To his great surprise, he continues to wander the earth, (aided at times by his Rebbe in the form of a crow) in search of his family, of answers, and of the World to Come. Fantastical, magical, haunting imagery crafted with a consistently subtle touch put this novel firmly in the modern canon of Jewish folktale tradition. *Blessing* breaks every "rule" of Holocaust representation and triumphantly succeeds.

"I was lying in a pit with all my neighbors, true, but I was ecstatic. I felt lighter than ever before in my life. It was all I could do not to giggle.

APPENDIX B: *YANKL ON THE MOON* PUBLICITY POSTER¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Designed by the author, featuring the painting "Le Quai de Bercy" by Marc Chagall.

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