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WEB EXCLUSIVE: Yom Kippur War, The Play

Two secular American couples are torn apart by political affairs and their own emotional conflicts.



by Ted Merwin
Special To The Jewish Week

From "Lysistrata" to "Othello," "Les Miz" to "South Pacific," plays and musicals are often set against a backdrop of war. For playwright Meri Wallace, it was the Yom Kippur War that proved irresistible as a springboard for drama. Entitled simply "Yom Kippur," Wallace's loosely autobiographical play focuses on two secular Jewish couples who have made aliyah, and whose lives change forever when their adopted country is suddenly attacked by Egypt and Syria on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar. The play, which opens July 16, is being presented as part of the Ninth Annual Midtown International Theatre Festival.

Directed by Halina Ujda, "Yom Kippur" shows husband and wife Ephraim (Orion Delwaterman) and Sara (Gayle Robbins) as they entertain another couple, Yitz (Shane

Jerome) and Yael (Arela Rivas), in their apartment in Jerusalem on the morning of the Day of Atonement. Yael is entering her ninth month of pregnancy, and Ephraim is trying to hide the fact that he is in love with her; he is still bitter at Yitz for winning her away from him years ago. The air sirens signal the onset of war, and the two couples are eventually torn apart both by political affairs and by their own unresolved emotional conflicts. By the play's end, they must decide with whom, and in what land, their true loyalties reside. Leah Vanessa Bachar,

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Annalisa Leoffler, Aylam Orian, Daniella Rabbani and Evan Sokol are also in the cast.

Wallace was born in Coney Island and attended Sheepshead Bay High School. She was active in Hashomer Hatzair (the Zionist Youth Movement) but first traveled to Israel at the age of 18. After she enrolled at Brooklyn College, the 1967 war broke out, and she moved to a farm in Hightstown, N.J., where young Jews were trained in communal living as a preparation for aliyah.

After living on a kibbutz, she moved to Jerusalem, where she studied dance and eventually opened her own dance studio. She ultimately returned to New York in 1975 and got a social work degree from NYU, whereupon she opened a private psychotherapy practice and began writing parenting books. Her best-known work, "Birth Order Blues," led to appearances on both local and national TV shows, including Montel Williams and "The Early Show."

Wallace, who now lives year round in Amagansett, L.I., started writing short plays just a few years ago. Her first 10-minute play, "Secrets Women Share," which debuted at the same festival last summer, is a series of six 10-minute plays about female bonding. "Yom Kippur," is produced by the playwright herself; she and her husband, Jonathan, recently founded their own production company, the Howling Moon Cab Company.

In a telephone interview with The Jewish Week, Wallace recalled what it was like living in Israel during one of the country's darkest hours. Part of what made the situation so frightening, she said, was the lack of information after the air sirens went off at two in the afternoon.

For even as Golda Meir agonized about whether or not to resort to nuclear weapons (as detailed in the recent play, "Golda's Balcony"), ordinary people on the ground struggled to find out the basic information about what was going on. "It wasn't like turning on CNN and seeing the planes hitting the towers," she said. "We knew nothing the whole day except that all the men were gone."

When they finally found out, she said, they were incredulous. "We had thought we were invincible; our army was so powerful, we were going into other countries and freeing hostages. We had absolutely no feeling of vulnerability." But after the war broke out, "the country was thrown into a depression, and a lot of people died," including the husband of one of her friends.

She wrote the play, she explained, in order to "convey the love of Israel that American Jews feel." At the same time, she said, she wanted to show what happens when this love is put to the extreme test. The Yom Kippur War, Wallace pointed out, both brought home to the Jewish State her essential vulnerability, and exacerbated the anxieties of many newcomers, who found that their own economic and physical security were also extremely precarious. This led many of them to flee in search of a more comfortable life. "We realized, both as a country and as individuals, that we couldn't take care of ourselves as well as we thought we could."

But as her characters do, Wallace still feels an intense and abiding attachment to the Jewish State, even from afar. "I still feel a tremendous kinship to the country; I feel like it's my country."

"Yom Kippur" runs from July 16 – Aug. 2 at the Workshop Theater, 312 W. 36th St. For tickets, \$18 (\$15 for students/seniors) and reservations, call Ticket Central at (212) 279-4200 or visit www.ticketcentral.com.

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