

"Hamlet" at New Swan Shakespeare Festival, 2016, dir. Beth Lopes. Photo: Paul Kennedy.



TO BE OR NOT TO BE BIBLICAL?

Introducing Orange County's First Shakespeare Retreat

BY JULIA LUPTON

In a drafty castle in Scotland, a wife urges her husband to commit a crime that will change their lives forever. On a vast heath in prehistoric Britain, one brother uses deception to steal the birthright of another. Wandering in that same stormy landscape, an old man suffers great losses and indignities, well beyond anything he has deserved. In the court of Denmark, a man connives to kill another man in order to marry his wife. That man is also his brother.

Perhaps you recognize in these scenarios some of Shakespeare's most famous plays: "Macbeth," "King Lear," and "Hamlet." And perhaps you also recognized the biblical stories that Shakespeare freely adapted to his own purposes: Adam and Eve; Jacob and Esau; Cain and Abel; The Book of Job; David; and Bat Sheva.

This summer, in a growing partnership between the Jewish Collaborative of Orange County and the New Swan Shakespeare Center, adults of all ages and backgrounds can explore these questions in a week-long immersive performance and study experience, July 25-29, on the UCI campus. Guest scholar Hazzan Matt Austerklein will guide participants through an interactive journey into the Bible stories behind one of Shakespeare's funniest plays, "The Comedy of Errors." (Yes, the Torah can be funny, and yes, the silliest farce can yield food for thought.)

"The Comedy of Errors" begins in the aftermath of a shipwreck inspired by the Book of Jonah. The play takes place in Ephesus, an ancient city that has housed Phrygian, Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities and is thus ripe for interfaith exploration.

It's also a play about marriage and family. When

Luciana, who's still single, lectures her married sister Adriana about being a better wife, she quotes Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 to make her case. Later, Adriana quotes Psalm 128 to her meshugganah husband in an effort to get him in line. These feisty women handle the Torah as a tool for living in a battle of the sexes that is also a contest of wits and a search for harmony.

Text study will be leavened with plenty of performance. Actors from UCI's New Swan Shakespeare Festival will share their creative process in a special workshop just for participants. And the evenings will be filled with festive meals, lectures, and performances at UCI's beautiful open-air New Swan Shakespeare Theater. Most afternoon sessions will be streamed for home viewing.

The week will feature a special performance by Jason Feddy and Ava Burton, a medley of songs and monologues called "Shakespeare's Fool." Jason is a British singer-songwriter serving as cantorial soloist for Temple Isaiah in Newport Beach and creative musical partner to Rabbi Tilchin at the Jewish Collaborative of Orange County.

The Western world's two greatest reads have been in dialogue through the ages. Shakespeare was immersed in a Biblical culture defined by both the fluency of everyday worship and the controversies of the Reformation. The England of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries often looked to the history of Israel as a model for its own burgeoning nationhood.

In plays combining Catholic, Protestant, Judaic, and classical source materials, Shakespeare struggled to think beyond the religious divisions of his day. He also



New Swan Shakespeare Festival's 2019 production of "The Merchant of Venice" opened with a Shabbat tableau. Rabbi Marcia Tilchin advised the actors and director on the staging. Photo: Paul Kennedy.

narrated the rise and fall of kings using the lives of David, Solomon, and Saul as guides. These factors make his plays a rich resource for interfaith study and personal healing as well as psychological and historical analysis.

This adventure in text study is the brainchild of Rabbi Hazzan Marcia Tilchin, founder and spiritual leader of the Jewish Collaborative of Orange County (JCoOC). Rabbi Tilchin first became enamored of close textual reading through her Shakespeare studies as a college theater major: "In the same way that biblical narratives and poetic wisdom throughout TaNaKh speak to every facet of the human experience, so too is the spectrum of human behavior, emotion and existential woe essential to so many of Shakespeare's characters and dramatic themes. When I entered the seminary and became immersed in biblical exegesis, one of my first thoughts was – 'this reminds me of how I learned to read Shakespeare, line by line and image by image.' I was not even thinking about the biblical and religious references in Shakespeare's works." Rabbi Tilchin compares creative productions of Shakespeare's works to modern commentaries on the Torah, which renew the meaning of historic texts.

Rabbi Tilchin's cantorial colleague, Hazzan Matt Austerklein, fell in love with Shakespeare when he got to act in the plays in middle and high school and then attended Shakespeare Camp at the American Shakespeare Center in Staunton, Virginia. "There we were immersed in Shakespearean language and history while watching nightly productions of Shakespeare," Matt shared. He thought he'd become an English teacher or a professional cellist. Although he chose the cantorial path instead,



Rabbi Marcia Tilchin and her daughter Sheindl at the New Swan Shakespeare Theater. Photo: Julia Lupton.

he never lost his love of the Bard, and he has organized Jewish Shakespeare Week in the synagogues he's served over the past decade.

A scholar of Jewish music, Hazzan Austerklein is currently pursuing his Ph.D at the Halle-Wittenberg University in Germany and will offer a special lecture about the professionalism of Ashkenazi cantors in early modern Europe (1500-1800).

Since its founding in 2016, JCoOC has enhanced Jewish life in OC and nationally, fulfilling its core mission to help people connect their passions and purpose with Judaism. As Rabbi Tilchin puts it, "Judaism can be accessed in countless ways. Worship is but one portal through which people can experience Jewish culture, ethics, peoplehood, wisdom, spirituality and creativity. JCoOC strives to create a unique array of connection points in the realms of justice work, healing opportunities, artistic expression, and more. Hosting a retreat like this is an example of this vision fully realized."

The New Swan Shakespeare Center has been part of that evolving vision for several years. Rabbi Tilchin consulted on New Swan's 2019 production of "The Merchant of Venice," advising director Eli Simon and the cast on the inclusion of a Shabbat candle-lighting scene. I have contributed lectures on Shakespeare and Hebrew wisdom literature to the Collaborative's Advanced Learning Institute, which is also sponsoring the retreat.

I asked the two clergy what they want participants to get out of the retreat. Hazzan Austerklein told me, "I want people to discover that the same human questions alive in Shakespeare's plays are alive in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic texts. And they'll see that the same tools readers apply to Shakespeare—curiosity, sensitivity to text, and grappling with big ideas— also illuminate the Hebrew Bible."

For Rabbi Tilchin, it's simple: "I can't get enough Shakespeare or Torah! What about you?" As a Shakespeare scholar and a lifelong Jewish learner, I couldn't agree more.

Register now for Shakespeare and Sacred Text: A Midsummer Retreat, July 25-29, on the UCI Campus at www.jewishcollaborativeoc.org/retreat2022. Spaces for the full program, including theater tickets, are limited. Come laugh and learn with us! ☆

JULIA LUPTON IS PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND CO-DIRECTOR OF THE NEW SWAN SHAKESPEARE CENTER AT UC, IRVINE AND A FREQUENT TEACHER IN THE COMMUNITY. JRLUPTON@UCI.EDU

