

Coexistence, With Oud

By TED MERWIN 

June 10, 2014, 12:00 am



With all the hoopla surrounding the 50th anniversary of “Fiddler on the Roof” on Broadway, the musical’s final scene of the shtetl-dwelling Jews being forced off their land lingers in our minds. But to visual artist and playwright Tom Block, it is not just Jews, but Arabs as well, who have suffered displacement from a cherished homeland.

In his new play, “Oud Player on the Tel,” Block imagines a friendship blossoming between a German Holocaust survivor and a Sufi villager in the British Mandate period that preceded the founding of Israel. It will be read this Saturday evening at the 14th Street Y with live oud music played by Rabbi Zach Fredman (one of this year’s “36 Under 36” Jewish Week picks). It is one of seven plays the Jewish Plays Project, founded by David Winitsky, is presenting at the Y.

“Oud Player,” directed by Winitsky, is the tale of Amir (Rajesh Bose), the Sufi leader of a small village outside Jerusalem, who strikes up a friendship with Melke (Matthew Boston), a middle-aged survivor. Meanwhile, Melke’s son, Mortiz (Adam Perabo), and Amir’s nephew, Mahmoud (Ryan Shams), each independently take the name of an American used car salesman, Herb Gordon, and compete to peddle vehicles to the local population. But political realities ultimately overshadow the desires of both the Jewish and Arab characters for peace and prosperity. Block’s own six-foot murals of Jewish and Arab mystics serve as the backdrop for the stage.

In an interview, Block called “Oud Player” a kind of “forensic history,” a “digging up of forgotten and overlooked” encounters between Jews and Arabs. But rather than a true story, he said, the play presents “one possible future” that was “buried under the Zionist and Pan-Arab nationalist energies” that both arose against Christian Europe in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

Like “West Bank Story,” the Academy Award-winning short film from 2005 about dueling falafel stands, in which an Israeli soldier falls in love with a Palestinian fast food cashier, “Oud Player” has what Block calls an “absurdist, tragicomic” dimension. But the play is also more serious in tone. “The Jewish characters see Israel as a phoenix rising from the ashes of the Holocaust, while the Arabs see it as a nakba — a catastrophe.”

According to Winitzky, “Given that the Israelis and Palestinians seem so far apart these days, it’s hard to believe in coexistence.” But he calls himself an “incurable optimist” who believes that “people who share so much can not only coexist, but even embrace each other.”

“Oud Player on the Tel” will be read on Saturday, June 14 at 7:30 p.m. at the 14th Street Y. A talk-back with Middle East peace activists will follow the reading. Tickets for this play (and the six other plays in the Jewish Plays Project series) are free, but must be reserved at www.jewishplaysproject.org/tickets.

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