

Seven Jewish Children was written in response to events in Gaza in 2009. It immediately caused controversy, eliciting sharply opposed views from different readers and audiences. It offers seven vignettes, beginning with the Holocaust, moving quite quickly to Israel, and ending with events in Gaza.

Although it has been performed several times, first at the Royal Court Theatre, much of its impact has been generated through its dissemination – and dissection – on the internet. Its reception is in some ways uniquely modern – the many parodies would not have found their audience so easily without the internet, and the heated blog discussions obviously could not have taken place in the first place in an offline world.

When I talk about the play I want to think about it as a kind of autonomous being – compare how Milton describes a text in *Areopagitica*: ‘For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul whose progeny they are.’ In other words I don’t offer an opinion on the author’s intentions, or suggest that all the effects which I see in the play are intentional.

The controversy centred around whether the play was a fair, moving and legitimate response to events in Gaza – or whether it was a piece of biased propaganda. You can play around with these oppositions though – something can be both moving and biased for example. One of my own main responses to the internet discussions was a feeling that people were criticising Churchill for the wrong reasons. It didn’t seem to me adequate to dismiss this play as stupid, bad, obviously and grotesquely anti-Semitic, completely one sided. The evocation of the child being begged to keep quiet by her family is moving, I think, and there are also liberal Israeli voices to be heard. Some perfectly reasonable people think this is a positive piece – it’s easy to find examples of unambiguous anti-Semitism in English literature – this is nothing like those.

But to me that fact is itself actually part of the problem. It would be hard to find an audience who wouldn’t protest at anything which was obviously and crudely anti-Semitic. And I suspect many well intentioned, civilized and intelligent people responded positively to 7JC. But many equally moderate, intelligent and entirely reasonable people found it deeply offensive.

Many have focused on the perceived racism of calling the play ‘7 Jewish Children’. This is highlighted and challenged by one of the many rewrites - ‘7 Muslim Children’. There have been several other responses or parodies, including *Seven Other Children*. This begins with a Palestinian child at the time of the Nakba, and continues with subsequent children being indoctrinated into thinking Jews are evil and should be destroyed, becoming suicide bombers. My problem with this play, personally, is that I think it is cruder than Churchill’s – there is very little space for the more moderate Palestinian voice here. It may inspire strong feelings but not a huge amount of debate?

One of the problems which has been identified is the trajectory of the play – it moves from the Holocaust to Gaza, from the unbearable implied death of a Jewish child in Europe to the deaths of Palestinian children in the recent conflict. The implication, many have felt, is that suffering has traumatised the survivors of the Holocaust – or the Jewish people as a kind of personified group if that makes sense - and turned them into aggressive child killers. This taps into a common way of describing Israel – Israelis are described as Zionazis and Gaza compared to the Warsaw ghetto.

There are all sorts of problems here. The simplest one is that, although Israel was indeed founded three years after the end of WW2, the creation of Israel wasn't simply a response to the Holocaust. Many Jews fled to what is now Israel from Europe at the end of the nineteenth century. Others escaped persecution from Arab countries in the Middle East. I believe roughly half of Israeli Jews are of Middle Eastern origin – and half come from Europe - and of course not all of those will be Holocaust survivors or their descendents.. The history of the region is extremely complicated and violent – many Palestinians were also displaced from their homes in 1948 of course - but not uniquely so – compare eg India and Pakistan. Lots of the countries in that region were created or shaped in rather awkward ways.

So this trajectory in Churchill's play – victim becomes aggressor – compare eg narratives of child abuse – seems questionable to many. The confusion between Gaza and the Holocaust is clearly reflected in various calls to cancel Holocaust memorial events because of Israel's actions.

Another problem for me is the fact that the wider history of anti-semitism is sometimes swallowed up by the enormity of the Holocaust. It's important to see the repeated patterns though – if we had maybe seen in this play generations of Jewish children being persecuted through the ages before the Holocaust – and then seen something of say 1950s anti-Semitism in Russia and also anti-Semitism in c.20 Middle East outside Israel – that might have added a bit more perspective.

I mentioned that there is a tendency to describe Israelis as Zionazis and what is happening to Palestinians as another genocide. This is deeply problematic, given the cold blooded and industrial methods of Nazism. However distressing or even horrifying the situation of ordinary Palestinians – the Palestinian population has grown rather than shrunk. You could argue that the attack on Gaza was disproportionate, injudicious, conducted in a way which recklessly endangered civilians – but the same could be said of other wars including some in which the UK has participated. The agony of parents whose children died in Gaza is no different, no less tragic, than the agony of parents whose children died in the Holocaust – Anne Frank's father for example. But the circumstances of those children's deaths are very different. Even if you take pretty much the most critical line on Israel compatible with being vaguely rational the civilian casualties in Gaza have nothing in common with those of Holocaust victims that the latter don't also share with the victims of Western attacks on Iraq and Afghanistan, Russian attacks on Chechnya etc – also Sri Lanka, a terrible conflict happening at roughly the same time and apparently focused on a not dissimilar complex clash of interests. I've read figures ranging from 7000 to 20000 for the death toll of that conflict but I'm not aware of any plays about it.

An important issue is raised by Churchill's focus on children – from both sides. This emphasis taps into the 'blood libel', the idea that Jews practice ritual slaughter on Christian children. This idea initially rang only very vague bells with me even though I'd done a Medieval English MA and should have known more about it. There's an interesting discussion about this in The Guardian following an article by Rich and Gardner (1 May 2009). There's a case for responding to this anxiety about the play a bit sceptically – does every death of a child caused by a Jewish individual or state have to reference the blood libel? But what is certain is that the Jews/child killing link taps into Jewish

sensitivities in a way in which the average non Jewish viewer or reader of 7JC probably wouldn't be aware of. Whatever the *playwright's* intentions this is an example of how the *play* is all the more effective for polarising viewers – one part of the audience is dismayed and insulted – the other section is not immediately equipped to understand why this might be so – and therefore may think the other side is over reacting, responding dishonestly or whatever. I had some sympathy with Guardian readers who responded negatively to this remark: “The virus of antisemitism is easily transmitted by those who are not aware they are carrying it. Churchill almost certainly does not intend it, but her play culminates in powerful antisemitic resonances.” But at the same time I think those authors had a point. Here's a comment, written by me, posted on Engage (website campaigning against anti-Semitism). I'm responding to someone called Dr Dawg who is complaining that Churchill doesn't actually say Gaza is like the Holocaust. We also refer to another commenter called zkharya who is very critical of 7JC.

@Dr Dawg – you said “But neither the author nor her defenders is calling the Gazan carnage a “Holocaust.” The equivalence there is in zkharya's mind—and in the inflamed rhetoric of a few street protesters who insult our intelligence.”

I just came across the following on a comment on Harry's Place. It is taken from publicity material for a performance of the play. (The comment was posted at 12.05 pm on 16/5 on the thread about 7 Other Children)

“Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza by acclaimed playwright Caryl Churchill. What do you tell a child when her government is trying to kill her? What do you tell a child when her government is killing other children?”

Here the more implicit and potential link between the Holocaust and Gaza in 7JC has been intensified by the fact the two sentences beginning ‘What do’ are nearly identical. (The rhetoric seems to suggest, it might be argued, that today's Israeli child is like a (non-Jewish) child in Nazi Germany.) OK, it's not precisely saying Gaza is a ‘Holocaust’ but it does show how the play is open (I think) to such a reading – and that there are readers who are receptive to that kind of interpretation.”

This is an example of how you could argue that the play itself may have no symptoms of disease but still perhaps carries the virus.

I want to consider two further areas – the circumstances in which the play was created and produced and its qualities as a literary text, in particular the absence of named characters. Churchill is a patron of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. She has said herself that she sees the play as a political event. Its performance is inevitably always an intervention of sorts into debates about the I/P situation. Although the play certainly makes some gestures towards fair play it is a partisan play, a piece of agit-prop. There is nothing necessarily wrong with that. But in the case of Israel there are additional complications. It is I think demonstrably true that modern anti-Semitism often manifests itself as anti-Zionism, as an extreme and disproportionate dislike of Israel. This is a terribly vexed issue and I can't go into it in detail – but although robust criticism of Israel need not be anti-Semitic you will often see anti Israel discourse shading into anti-Semitism.

Even if we don't think 7JC is anti-Semitic it can perhaps, as we've seen, be thought of as a vector for anti-Semitism, as a respectable cultural artefact which fosters and nurtures anti-Semitism while remaining able to exonerate itself from charges of racism.

[Since originally writing the following section I have been in contact with people who attended the event at the Bolton Octagon. The people had different perspectives on what happened – I should add that no one has asked me to change what I have written or been anything other than civil. But on reflection I think it would be fairer to take out references to named individuals and add that it is always difficult to be sure that any account of an event is completely accurate and unbiased, even if it is completely sincere .]

Here is an extract from a comment on Engage by a blogger. She is commenting on a recent production of both the plays you've been reading at the Octagon.

'Yesterday's event at the Bolton Octagon was, of course, predictably depressing. The actual format of the event did not and could not promote real debate because of its structure whereby the Director called upon people to speak and most simply recited pre-prepared statements slamming Israel. We endured all the usual slogans (ethnic cleansing, massacre etc.) and were treated to quite a few downright lies including the bizarre claim from 'X' that no rockets were fired into Israel in the months prior to Cast Lead.

I found it particularly revealing that 'Y' repeatedly tripped himself up by saying 'Jews' instead of 'Israelis'.

...

A particularly significant moment for me personally was when, in the interval just after I had 'outed' myself as an Israeli, I suddenly found that the stairs and corridors leading to the lobby emptied magically before me as various audience members pressed themselves against the walls as though they were afraid of any type of contact. Far from being curious at the chance to meet a real Israeli, these people seemed terrified that something, anything, might upset their world view.'

So although a defender of the play might point to it and quite fairly say 'but here is a liberal, positive Israeli voice who recognizes that this is a complex issue and can see both sides' the play's real audience at this performance don't seem to have taken away that message.

I'm normally the kind of critic who focuses on words on the page rather than on circumstances of production, audience composition, etc – but in this case, given that the play is a political as well as a literary text, I do think it's quite important to look at the contexts within which it is performed and received.

Moving on to its formal qualities.

A particularly significant aspect of the play is its lack of conventional 'characters'. Each scene features one (silent) child and a confusion of adult voices. I want to think about the implications of this. In particular I want to think about the way this technique is used to demonstrate that Israel is being given a fair crack of the whip while simultaneously allowing the prejudices of anti-zionists to be fed. A contributor to debate on Engage, Zkharya again, compares Churchill's treatment of Israel with Soviet show trials where the state would speak, ostensibly on the accused's behalf, the prosecution coopting the role of the defence.

For me much of the interest of the play is centred on the question of the distribution of lines. For example who says 'tell her she's a special girl'. Is it a voice associated with the softer remarks or the

more assertive, angry lines? In other words is it a generic remark which any adult might say of a child to cheer her up or does it in any way invoke the idea of Jews as chosen people? This phrase is often used within anti-Semitic discourse to imply arrogance or ruthlessness. I wasn't really aware of this, just as I wasn't really aware (except as some vague memory wrapped up with Chaucer) of the 'blood libel'. This is all connected with my sense that the play's effect, if not its intention, is to mean different things to different audiences. Like some strange alien in an sf film it takes on different appearances depending on who is looking at it. If you know something about anti-semitic tropes you'll find plenty here and will therefore be more likely to interpret the play as anti-Semitic. If you are not attuned to these maybe you'll respond to it as an entirely fair comment on a conflict with horrible consequences for many innocent people.

We get used to the 'tell hers' sometimes being used to preface things which are not true, or not wholly true. So by the time we get to the description of the six days war the impact of a true statement 'tell her how big their armies were' might be interpreted as a falsehood. If you have the same person speaking this line who said 'tell her this wasn't their home' (reference to the Nakba in which many Palestinians were displaced) that could have an unconscious effect upon an audience's reaction. Of course because it's such an open play – slippery or subtle – you can always point to a way of reading it which is more sympathetic to Israel – it's a bit like Aesop's bat which can present itself as either a mouse or a bird in order to avoid being eaten by either of its picky predators.

The references to checkpoints in section 6 come before the references to bombs in cafes which suggests that the checkpoints were imposed purely as a punishment. The bomb bit is also perhaps overshadowed by 'tell her they (stones) are not much good against tanks'.

It's as though the adults, even the 'nice' one(s) are conspiring to hide the unfairness and onesidedness of the conflict from a child.

"tell her we kill far more of them"

"don't tell her that"

I have to say I experienced a moment of pleasure reflecting on these two very simple lines.

You could either imagine the first one as arrogant and the second as gentle. Or you could reverse them completely. It reminded me of the bit in the Faerie Queene when Red Cross is arguing with Despair and there is one stanza which could work with either of their arguments (for or against suicide) because it's so subtly ambiguous. Churchill isn't Spenser – but I do part company with those critics who say it's simply a bad play, full stop.

Something similar goes on with

Tell her we're entitled

Tell her they don't understand anything except violence

Tell her we want peace.

The first line here is maybe a bit iffy – or many would see it that way. The second line here seems downright unpleasant. So what about the third line? Is it from a similar voice or a different voice? Is it genuine – or a lie?

Going on to the Gaza section

Who says these lines?

Tell her they're terrorists.

Tell her they're filth

You can see once again that you can create different effects depending on what associations you have with each voice. Is it a gentler voice or a harsher voice saying they're terrorists? And is the next voice the same or different?

And look at the movement here:

Don't tell her about the family of dead girls

Tell her you can't believe what you see on television

Tell her we killed the babies by mistake

We move from deception to implicit deception to – what?

This has generated a lot of comment and I agree with those who see the potential for seeing the last line as a further deception, an invocation if you like of the blood libel. OF COURSE that's not the only or even the most obvious reading though.

Then we get into a hysterical and hateful rant – then we move finally to a quieter tone.

Don't tell her that.

Tell her we love her.

Don't frighten her.

But is this a shocked adult trying to correct a lone maverick, someone who's slightly crazed? Or is it yet another deception – maybe an ostensibly 'nicer' adult trying to shield the child from the truth about Israeli hatred for Palestinians, a truth she isn't yet ready to hear. The final voice isn't saying 'you're wrong or crazy' – just 'don't tell her that'. So we can read it in the slightly more perverse way I've suggested.

I want to end by suggesting that asking whether the play is anti-Semitic or not isn't perhaps the right question. Despite the Milton quote plays don't really have opinions and I'm not sure this play has one fixed meaning. I want instead to encourage you to think about how it operates and about the way in which it slots into other discourses – ancient tropes of anti-semitism which may just seem

irrelevant today, anti-Israel discourses within other contexts, etc. It seems to please strongly pro Palestinian, anti Israel audiences and alienate pro Israel ones. I'd say, tentatively, that neutral audiences often perceive it to be fairly evenhanded. All those points seem to add up to a balanced play – just as the BBC takes comfort from being attacked from right and left.* But it is important to note again that Jewish/Zionist readers will perhaps see things in the play which aren't so readily available to other readers. Are they, in a sense, responding to a different play?

*It has been pointed out, quite correctly, that the BBC point isn't an accurate analogy – the play would be like the BBC if *both* sides hated it. Also my point about 'neutral audiences' is itself problematic – does the play attract many entirely 'neutral' people, and how should we define 'neutral' ?