

'Sacrifices' dramatizes the Second Temple story

• By HANNAH BROWN

As the streets of Israel are filled daily with angry protesters, and Jews worldwide mourn the destruction of the Second Temple on Tisha Be'av, what could be more compelling and timely than a musical about the conflict and strife that led up to that ancient tragedy which continues to cast a long shadow on contemporary Israeli life?

That's the question Eli Kaplan-Wildmann, an American-born, Jerusalem-based theater creator asked himself a few years ago, and he was inspired to dramatize the Second Temple story in an English-language musical called *Sacrifices*. Working alongside an international team of theater professionals, Kaplan-Wildmann hopes to stage *Sacrifices* as an off-Broadway production.

It's especially relevant today because, "This tale of our forefathers, of our sages, is about how we went through this and we didn't think our city and our society could end, no one thought of that as an option... but it happened."

While Kaplan-Wildmann acknowledges that it is a story with special meaning for Jewish audiences, he feels it has universal relevance, "This is a story about a kind of destruction that has happened in many places, to many people... It's also about hope that it can be prevented... and all it needs is for people to take action."

On the website for the show, Kaplan-Wildmann wrote, "In searching for the one moment, the blame, the finger to point, *Sacrifices* reveals that corruption never stems from one single, easily removed source. It leaves us with an idea of building, creating and planting, rather than destruction and blame."



DESTINY REA and Michael Maliakel in the English-language musical 'Sacrifices.' (Sacrifices)

Broadway and musical theater are filled with unlikely ideas that became hits, and even classics. *Sacrifices'* premise is no more improbable than that a rap musical about the founding fathers – *Hamilton* – would become a monster hit. Or that a show based on a 2007 Israeli film about Egyptian musicians stuck in a Negev town would be adapted into a musical that won 10 Tonys – but that is what happened with Eran Kolirin's film, *The Band's Visit*.

Kaplan-Wildmann mentioned *Evita* as a huge hit that didn't sound like it would become the toast of Broadway: "I may not care about Argentinian history in the mid 1900s, but I care about this woman because she has the same needs and motivations as characters that we know from our own lives."

If you enjoy English theater productions in Jerusalem, you have likely seen Kaplan-Wildmann's work, because he directs and produces musicals for Starcatcher Productions. Among his recent productions for Starcatcher as a director are *Rent*, *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Hairspray*, and he has done lighting and production and set design for many Starcatcher shows, including *Spring Awakening* and *Pippin*.

He trained at New York University, where he received a degree in theater design and directing, but decided to return to Jerusalem after his studies ended.

Once he got the idea for *Sacrifices*, Kaplan-Wildmann, who was raised Orthodox and who now describes himself as "traditional egalitarian," worked to come up with a story that would speak to audiences

around the world, but which was firmly rooted in Jewish history and which would provide a contemporary take on the ancient story. *Sacrifices*, he said, is about, "creating a new society with no sacrifice, no bloodshed, only love, only good deeds, and how that's what's going to fix the world."

He acknowledged that, "All these big ideas are not what make a musical successful. It's the characters and the story of people and what we've been working on over the past few years is getting that part to be something that engages people."

The story mixes the traditional, well-known characters, such as Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai (aka Ribaz), with some very different Jerusalemites, including a rebel handmaiden, a temple artisan, and a naive aristocrat. Their stories illustrate the diver-

sical music pieces. His opera, *Theodor*, was commissioned and produced in a full production by the Israeli Opera.

Cnaan's score for *Sacrifices* blends Eastern and Western influences. Andrew Zachary Cohen, who wrote the lyrics for *Sacrifices*, is creator of the cabaret theater productions, *Don't Ask The Lady*, and the upcoming *That's How It Goes at 54Below*. Kaplan-Wildmann noted that both Cnaan as a secular Israeli and Cohen as an American Jew balanced his own more traditional upbringing and perspective on the story.

Next, Kaplan-Wildmann, Cnaan, and Cohen were joined by Catie Davis, a New York City-based director who has worked in theaters across New York and around the world. Her recent credits include *The Magnificent Seven* (Flint Repertory Theater), *Missed:Connections* (Manhattan School of Music), *Le Comte Noir* (Broadway on Demand), and *Empath* (TheatreLab).

DAVIS AND Kaplan-Wildmann were introduced by a mutual friend in 2019, when he was looking for a director for *Sacrifices*. Davis, who is not Jewish and was not familiar with the Second Temple story, said, "As the writers looked at how they wanted to reach, not just a Jewish audience, but a much broader audience... They wanted to include someone on the creative team who wasn't entering the show with a deep understanding of these stories."

Having researched the stories and knowing them much better now, she added that, "... the thing that really struck me about the show, even though I didn't know the history of the Talmudic story that it's based on, is that it sounded so contemporary to me, it sound-

ed like it was speaking to any modern city. And I was really interested in a story of four people from all different walks of life whose lives get intertwined with one another and with the fate of the city... It's a new story that has not been seen onstage before in this way."

Sacrifices has been performed in workshops and staged readings starting in 2017, in both Tel Aviv and New York. After a performance in 2019 in front of a New York audience that didn't go well, Kaplan-Wildmann was considering putting the show on hold. But Davis, who had recently signed on, wanted to keep working.

"I was ready to take a break, but she brought in a new energy," he said.

COVID came along and gave the team time to devote to reworking the show. Collaborating via Zoom, "we did a down-to-the-bones rewrite." The lockdowns were challenging for Kaplan-Wildmann, a gay co-parent of two young children who also works as a creative director for various projects, but he managed to rewrite the show.

In March 2023, the Manhattan School of Music performed a development workshop. Each workshop and reading have brought improvements to the show, Kaplan-Wildmann said, and the team is now looking for investors who can help bring the show to the next level. More information about the show and clips of the songs can be found at sacrificesthemusical.com.

While he acknowledges that getting a show this complex up and running is an uphill battle, Kaplan-Wildmann remains positive and feels that audiences around the world will respond to the musical.

"*Sacrifices* is about creation, not just destruction," he said.