

Finding a Way Back to the Land of Granada

Theater



ELIZA BROWN

Naked Aggression: Lindsay Torrey as a talking bear wielding a chair.

By Gwen Orel

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In 1992, 500 years after the country expelled them, Spain formally welcomed back the Jews. This is the premise for the new play “Granada,” produced by Polybe + Seats, which ran through November 22 at the Access Theater in New York.

Playwright Avi Glickstein, whose family comes from Eastern Europe and whose father is a rabbi, did not consult any Sephardic Jews when he was writing “Granada”, though he used images from Sephardic and Moroccan folktales for much of his fantastic and fabulist play. “That’s part of the problem,” he said with a sigh, after a performance in mid-November. “There isn’t a lot of crossover between the two communities.”

The Prince of Spain (Ari Vigoda) welcomes a representative Jewess, the Young Woman From Egypt. Egypt? It’s where philosopher Moses Maimonides, author of “The Guide for the Perplexed,” hailed from — no coincidence. In the first scene, the woman informs the prince that she is the resurrection of Maimonides. Not the reincarnation, but the resurrection — she imbibed his soul while visiting his tomb. As the woman, Sarah Sakaan displays compelling passion and strength when she announces her identity, and the play feels exciting.

Then “Granada” spins into threads of different tales. They are engaging, but they lessen the impact and tension of the premise. A talking bear (appealing Lindsay Torrey) that takes speaking roles in other characters’ flashbacks introduces the play, but still, it feels like a whimsy overdose when we leave behind contemporary Spain to go into the woods. The prince’s trusty female aide, Djoha (Indika Senanayake), hides the prince in the forest to avoid assassination by the woman, who has threatened to kill him if he does not apologize to the Jews for their expulsion. The prince meets a princess (winsome Jill Usdan, whose transformation into a bird shows off nimble physicality) who has hatched from a grapefruit. Other stories fly by. It’s a bit like a Sephardic “Midsummer Night’s Dream.” It’s certainly not the Forest of Arden, but everybody comes out changed in the end.

Glickstein took the bear and the grapefruit imagery from Sephardic and Moroccan folktales. He conceived the play in part as a corrective to the predominance of Ashkenazic imagery in American theater. “I was thinking about how underrepresented it is,” said Glickstein, who is finishing his Master of Fine Arts in playwriting at New York University. The company commissioned the play from him last spring. The Holocaust is a huge wound in the Jewish psyche, the expulsion from Spain less so, he explained. It’s a good point, but doesn’t acknowledge that a tragedy 50 years old stings more than one that we have had to deal with over the course of 500 years.

The use of the fairytales, to Glickstein, is a way to get closer to the arc of the return of Maimonides, not a digression. The tales of kings and magic are like the analogies that rabbis use to explore philosophy. Director Jessica Brater concurred, adding that the company wanted the audience to feel that the images are incomplete, “loaded with meaning, but not knowing what it was.” Many of the Sephardic tales, Glickstein said, center on themes of forgetfulness. Some of the stories are incomplete. Knowing that, the story of the princess hatched from a grapefruit, who warns the prince not to forget her, has a haunting power. Naturally, people trying to remember their identity while hiding it — as was the case for many conversos — would fear forgetfulness. It’s a disappointment that the performance itself wasn’t able to make this point.

In Act 2, I counted at least three tales to follow, in addition to the framing device and the larger story. It’s dizzying, although it’s also exhilarating to see a young company taking so many theatrical risks and investing in its creativity. The company is eight years old, and its name is

based on an essay by Gertrude Stein, Glickstein explained. It expresses the company's desire to create a theatrical landscape, not just tell a story that the audience is always a little bit ahead of or a little bit behind. "We want people to come to the theater and do the work," Brater said. If you're willing to do that work, "Granada" offers a colorful landscape of Sephardic imagery. The 1992 welcome back ceremony that inspired Glickstein did happen — and there never was an apology. That's a story worth telling.

Gwen Orel is a freelance writer on theater, music and film. She has a doctorate in theater arts from the University of Pittsburgh.