

ROBERTA BARKER

SONGS OF THE EXILES

SINCE ITS HALIFAX PREMIERE IN MAY 2017, 2b Theatre's production of *Old Stock: A Refugee Love Story* has enjoyed international acclaim. Co-created by playwright Hannah Moscovitch, singer-songwriter Ben Caplan, and director Christian Barry, it has played to full houses and admiring reviews in centres as far-flung as Edinburgh, New York, London, Sydney, and Utrecht. Most of Canada's major cities have embraced it. It won seven Robert Merritt Awards in 2018, was nominated for six Drama Desk awards in New York in the same year, and most recently was the winner of the 2018 Nova Scotia Masterworks Award. In Fall 2019, *Old Stock* returned in triumph to its home city, playing to sold-out houses at Neptune's Studio Theatre. On the night I attended this run, the audience greeted the show's final notes with a genuinely adoring standing ovation.

What is it about *Old Stock* that excites such love and admiration from spectators? On the surface it is a simple piece of work, described on 2b Theatre's website as "a humourously [sic] dark folk tale woven together with a high-energy concert." About half of its 80-minute length is taken up by a series of two-person scenes exploring the courtship and marriage of Moscovitch's great-grandparents, Chaya (Mary Fay Coady) and Chaim (Eric da Costa), who meet in the immigration queue at Halifax's Pier 2 in 1908. These sequences are interspersed with the "concert" portion of the evening, in which Caplan all but lifts the roof off the theatre with a series of klezmer-inspired songs about love, trauma, faith, sex, rage, and parenthood. Because the actors contribute to the musical portions of the show as musicians, singing and playing instruments in Caplan's band, it would be wrong to describe the "folk tale" half of the evening as in any way separate from the "concert." Nevertheless, it's arguably the contrast between them—the dialectic between Caplan's wild charisma and the wry, subterranean emotion of Coady and Da Costa's dialogues—that allows *Old Stock* to offer such a moving window on the immigrant experience.

“We made it! You made it! Others were not so lucky,” Caplan’s character, the Wanderer, tells the audience as the show opens. Playful, tender, and defiant, the Wanderer’s songs call upon multiple powerful strains of the Jewish spiritual, poetic, and musical tradition to pay tribute to the resilience of exiles and survivors. The opening number, “Traveller’s Curse,” warns those who “fell out of [their] mother[s] on the right side of the border” of the dire consequences attendant upon denying hospitality to those less blessed by chance. The joyously bawdy “Minimum Intervals” reminds us of the Talmud’s instructions regarding the appropriate frequency of conjugal relations. Chaya and Chaim’s marriage is celebrated by Caplan’s moving intonation of “Od Yishama,” a Hebrew wedding song whose lyrics are taken from the prophet Jeremiah:

Od yishama be'arei yehudah

Uvechutzot Yerushalaim:

Kol sason vekol simchah,

Kol chatan vekol kalah.

(It will yet be heard in the cities of Judea

And the parts of Jerusalem:

Sound of joy and sound of gladness,

Voice of the bridegroom and voice of the bride.)

A burst of wild celebration from the band greets this assertion of future joy, but Caplan and his co-creators are clearly aware of the darkness that haunts it in the Book of Jeremiah (33:10-11), where it responds to enemies’ declarations that the cities of Judea are “desolate, without man and without inhabitant and without beast.” Soon, as Chaya and Chaim’s marriage threatens to crumble under the weight of their conflicting desires and contrasting traumas, Caplan offers the bleakly scatological “Plough the Shit,” which acknowledges the necessity of compromise in a world that often looks more like an “overflowing gutter” than the Promised Land.

In ballads like “Fledgling” and “What Love Can Heartbreak Allow,” meanwhile, Caplan draws poignantly upon the legacy of great contemporary Jewish musicians, such as Montréal troubadour Leonard Cohen. Blending folk, jazz, and pop influences, these songs express the complicated mixture of old and new that shapes the lives of first-generation immigrants. Particu-

larly moving is the lullaby “Now is the Quiet,” which declares that

the ocean once dreamed
it could shine high above
but protecting, reflecting the sun
is enough

The tenderness with which the usually boisterous Caplan invests these lyrics is steeped in his obvious admiration for the generations who have sacrificed their own dreams in order to make a better life for their children, often in the face of almost insurmountable challenges.

Perhaps the show’s pivotal song, though, is “Truth Isn’t Found in a Book,” which offers an homage to the Jewish tradition of “intensive, rigorous, and constant interpretation” of the scriptures. Having posited that the Bible was given “along with an oral tradition” and that “some of the best bits were not written down,” Caplan goes on to offer a rapid-fire string of examples:

an eye for an eye means fair compensation
it doesn’t mean take up arms with another nation
anything written down can be twisted apart

don’t be ashamed to talk about your mental health
try to love your neighbour like you love yourself
that’s one in there but it always gets forgotten

Melding ancient maxims with very contemporary dicta, this song renders explicit the fact that Caplan and his collaborators are telling Chaya and Chaim’s story in order to encourage the audience to reflect not only upon the conflicts of the past but also upon the polarized present moment. When it comes to the question of how to deal with that moment, “Truth Doesn’t Live in a Book” responds with the assertion that “you have to live in the world to get to the truth.” Irrepressible, generous, and self-mocking, Caplan’s very presence seems to affirm the rightness of this assertion.

With Caplan as their MC and chorus, Coady’s Chaya and da Costa’s Chaim take the audience on a narrative journey that reaffirms the value he places upon lived experience. Both have fled from anti-Semitic pogroms in

Romania, but, as the Wanderer tells us, “Chaya got out *before* it was too late,” while “Chaim got out *after* it was too late.” The irrepressibly hopeful Chaim “looks forward because there’s no looking back”; as we and Chaya come to understand, for him the memory of home is inextricable from the horrific act of violence that destroyed his entire family. To Chaim, Canada promises a new beginning, and Chaya, the first person he encounters on Canadian soil, immediately embodies desirable possibilities. “I like meeting you,” he tells her as they stand in the immigration queue, adding, “The new world: not so formal.” Chaya quickly puts a damper on his flirtation, declaring, “We’re not planning to stay. We’re here until Romania’s . . . not so bad, then we go back.” Although she never does go back to Romania and accepts Chaim’s offer of marriage by the play’s second scene, Chaya’s relationship to her Canadian life will remain a complicated one. She mourns her old home, the dead husband she lost on the road out, and the young bride she will never be again.

Moscovitch is one of contemporary theatre’s greatest writers of character, and Chaya is one of her greatest creations. At first sight, she seems the very opposite not only of the optimistic Chaim but also of the ebullient Wanderer. She is dryly sardonic, chronically unimpressed, and tough as nails. Coady, who has been with *Old Stock* from its first production, plays her with wry stylization, often capping her laconic remarks or precise gestures with a little shrug that seems to say, “That’s all you’ll get from me.” She gives a hilarious, technically adept performance whose subtle but unapologetic theatricality somehow manages to render Chaya more human than a more naturalistic approach might do. At times, indeed, the power of Coady’s work threatens to upstage the more conventional acting of da Costa. In the end, however, the contrast between the two performers mirrors the contrast between the two characters and thus helps to tell the tale of the show.

At its heart, *Old Stock* is the story of Chaya and Chaim’s struggle to find whatever love their very different forms of heartbreak can allow. The Wanderer sums up the challenges involved in the marriage of these two exiles by remarking that although “they’re in a country where no one’s trying to murder them in their beds,” arrival in this land doesn’t erase the effects of past trauma:

After all, they’re from a long line—from Sarah to Leah to Jezebel—of preparing for a worst that usually comes.

Can these people be happy?
 They're so out of practice.
 These are chosen people, of course, but what, you might ask, have they
 been chosen for?

The answer, it initially appears, is pain. Starting from a place of good will, Chaya and Chaim quickly find themselves divided by their very different takes on their old and new lives. In an attempt to drag his new wife away from her longing for a past he cannot share, Chaim deeply wounds her on their wedding night by suggesting that she was only the second choice of her beloved first husband, Yochay. In retaliation, Chaya cuts him off, offering mechanical sex in order to conceive the child who is her one real investment in futurity, but refusing all emotional connection with him. Although the birth of their son Sam begins to close the gap between them, in the end it takes his near-fatal bout of typhus to heal the rift. The baby's illness triggers both of his parents' worst memories, as Chaim cannot help but flash back to his little brother Samuel's murder and Chaya frantically recalls her first husband's death. In this shared trauma, as well as in their mutual relief at their son's eventual survival, Chaya and Chaim find a meeting ground. Their pain, in the end, is the seedbed of new possibilities.

At one of the play's most crucial moments, while Chaya prays over her ailing son, the Wanderer appears to drape his prayer shawl gently over her, as if enveloping her both in the power of Jewish tradition and in the compassion of his narrative. At first, the huge, anarchic Caplan and the small, reserved Coady form an unlikely pair, but as Chaya slowly opens herself to a new life and a new love despite the heartbreaks of the old they turn out to have a great deal in common. In particular, they both embody the idea that the only way to survive and thrive is by learning to look at ourselves and others with compassion, forgiveness, and humour, wherever our homes may be.

As *Old Stock* ends, the Wanderer briefly tells us the stories of Chaya and Chaim's descendants, ending with their great-great-grandchild Elijah, who is Hannah Moscovitch's own son. Looking Chaya and Chaim in the eyes for the first time, he closes the play's formal narrative with simple words of congratulation: "Mazel Tov." Through all their trials, these quiet heroes have prevailed. "Others were not so lucky. Others are not so lucky," the Wanderer acknowledges in the production's coda. As he and his band of "angels" pre-

pare to pack up and move on to a new town, he declares, “I hope they’ll look past our ‘barbaric cultural practices’ to our shared humanity and open their doors to us, as you so graciously did.” This pointed reference to ex-Prime-Minister Stephen Harper’s Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act reminds the audience that *Old Stock*’s story is not, in fact, over. Not only do Chaya and Chaim’s legacies live on, but new exiles continue to arrive on these shores, wondering—as these two young people did a century ago—what love their heartbreak can allow. Playfully and searingly, with joyful tunes and images of darkness, *Old Stock* invites its audiences to welcome these wanderers. Like Chaya and Chaim, we are often divided by different histories, beliefs, hopes, and fears. Perhaps *Old Stock* has been so beloved by audiences because it offers them a way of moving forward into the future not through these divisions but rather through the stories that we share.