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Playwright Joshua Harmon on What Inspired 'Bad Jews'



From left to right, Philip Ettinger, Molly Ranson, Tracee Chimo and Michael Zegen in 'Bad Jews.'

ILLUSTRATION: JOAN MARCUS

By Kathryn Lurie

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"Bad Jews," a biting comedy currently in production at the Roundabout Theatre Company, throws into stark relief the complicated and often explosive relationships between three young-adult Jewish cousins whose grandfather – a Holocaust survivor – just passed away.

The conflict arises when the cousins disagree on who should inherit a treasured heirloom – the grandfather's Chai necklace ("Chai" means "life" in Hebrew). The argument centers on Daphna, who feels very in touch with her Judaism, and Liam, who is not as religious, and why they each think they should have the necklace.



Joshua Harmon

Add to the mix Liam's new tattooed girlfriend, Melody, and his brother, Jonah, and the four-member cast – Tracee Chimo, Philip Ettinger, Michael Zegen and Molly Ranson-- pitches forth a continuum of wild, emotional breakneck back-and forth that vacillates between laughter and venom.

"Bad Jews," previously performed at the inaugural Roundabout Underground Reading Series in February 2012, opened Oct. 3 at the Laura Pels Theatre to strong reviews. Roundabout extended the show for another week, through Sunday, Dec. 22.

Joshua Harmon, the show's playwright, is currently a student at Juilliard's Lila Acheson Wallace American Playwrights program, led by Christopher Durang and Marsha Norman. Having already earned degrees in playwriting from Northwestern and Carnegie Mellon, Mr. Harmon, who had applied three times previously to the Juilliard program, used "Bad Jews" as his submission when he was finally accepted.

Mr. Harmon sat with the Journal to discuss the gestation of "Bad Jews," what he thinks it means to be a modern Jew, and how, at 30, he's already living his dream.

What inspired you to write this story?

When I was in college I went to a Holocaust memorial service. I had been to many

growing up, but the theme of this service was grandchildren of survivors. So instead of having a survivor speak, it was my peers at college talking about their grandparents' experiences, and I found it really unmoving. I think there's just something that happens when you're an eyewitness to something that imbues you the power to tell that story, even if you're not a natural-born storyteller. So to hear the story from someone who wasn't there. It just didn't carry the same kind of weight, and it scared me. So I left feeling a little shaken up.

How did you come up with the title?

The idea for the name 'Bad Jews' just popped into my head a year later, irrationally, and I started to take notes about the play, but then I just put that notebook away for six years.

What made you pick up the play again?

I had a fellowship at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, N.H. I went up there with this idea that I was going to write a Very Important Play -- not "Bad Jews." It was right when Tyler Clementi had died. So I was going to write this very important piece about... I don't even know what. So I spent two weeks writing this play and I had like 200 pages of junk. At the MacDowell Colony, you get your own cabin in the woods and on the walls of the cabins are the names of all the people who have been there. Mine had Alice Walker in it. So you're like, uh, how am I supposed to compete with Alice Walker?

Why did you consider your Very Important Play junk?

There are very few people who can write from that righteous indignation place. I am not one of them. And so I got depressed and then I was like ok, you have another week and a half here, you better figure something out. So I picked out my old notebook with this very strange little Jewish play that I had thought about writing and said, "let's give it a shot."

This show is about family. Do any of the characters resemble anyone in your family?

They don't. It's not based on my family. There was no conscious effort to write about anyone in particular. I see a lot of me in it, all over the place.

There's a lot of vitriol during some of the monologues from Daphna and Liam. Where does that come from?

It was really fun to tap into that. I saw something that Tracee [Chimo] said, where someone asked her "how do you get so angry?" She said "it's there -- it's not what I lead with, but it's in me and I just bring it out and play with it in this play." So I think I was just trying to tap into feelings that I don't really feel that often. I'm not a terribly angry person. I'm not really angry at all. Anger—it can just like, take you, and that's why some of those monologues are so long.

There's a poignant moment from Jonah in the end, but he has little dialogue through most of the play. Do you think the one we hear from least is the one who's most affected by the death of the grandfather?

I'm really fascinated by really quiet characters. As soon as they speak, everybody wants to hear what they have to say. They have power in silence. So I'm not coming down on anyone's side but I think that, like the audience, he's listening to a lot, so when he has something to say we're ready to hear it.

Do your characters represent the different perspectives of being a modern Jew?

I don't think they're talking heads, but if you're a young Jewish person who's engaged at all with your religion, you've met people from all sides of the spectrum. You've met people who are incredibly invested in it, and people who are incredibly dismissive of it, and everything in between. Those are things I've been around.

What are you writing now?

Roundabout commissioned me for a new play, and I've been in the early stages of working on that. But I also have a play that I've been working on for two years that's about a guy and his three best girlfriends, and the girlfriends are all getting married, so he's going from wedding to wedding – on the circuit, as it were.

Is there more pressure now to write something really great?

There's totally pressure. I just got this amazing email from Chris Durang where I had said "I'm not so naïve to think it's always going to go this way—I know it's downhill from here." And he said "it's not downhill. It's up and down. And you'll learn a lot from the down." I just need to be in it for the long haul.

What do you want for yourself five years down the road?

My dream has been to be a playwright. In five years if I'm still able to make a living being a playwright and having plays that get produced, that in an ideal world mean something to someone, I mean, this is the dream.