



## Supporting Notes: Ritual Reconstructed Films

### “The Purim Spiel” (Film 3) & Post-Performance Discussion (Film 4)

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## **Supporting Notes: Ritual Reconstructed Films**

### **“The Purim Spiel” (Film 3) & Post-Performance Discussion (Film 4)**

These documentaries are the third and fourth in our sequence of LGBTQI-Jewish ‘ritual year’ films. The third film captures a re-production of a musical ‘Purim Spiel’, replete with references to London topography and gay (male) life. The Purim Spiel shown in this film was first written and performed by a group of Gay Jewish men at the height of the 1980s AIDS crisis and as such it can be seen as an act of defiant laughter which incorporates both Jewish and Gay (predominantly camp) performative identities, subverting still further the transgressive, subversive Festival of Purim in which the world is turned ‘upside down’ and during which cross-dressing is permitted, an act which in traditional Judaism is usually completely forbidden.

One of the factors which makes this film so fascinating is that in this version a number of the original cast are performing again, either the same or different roles from when the Spiel originally took place; allowing reflection on both changes in LGBTQI culture and demonstrating a depth of connection between the Jewish gay community which has persisted from the 1980s to date.

The original Purim Spiel (which premiered in 1984, and which was audio recorded on that occasion) has been reconstructed in the absence of an extant script from a lovingly transcribed (by our film Director, Searle Kochberg) version of the audio recording of a performance. On that occasion the performers were all male; but in 2015, the performance of the Spiel for the first time includes women from the broader LGBTQI community, inevitably creating a different performance dynamic reflective of a changing era. Within the fourth film, in short interview discussions interspersed with the performance, the actors consider the nature of Jewish Gay culture in the 1980s as well as how it has developed and changed; and the nature of the broader inclusive categories of LGBTQI identities common in the 2000s.

The Purim Spiel shown in this film was performed (as is traditional) in a synagogue, on a date very close to the Festival of Purim. See ‘Notes on

the Ritual Cycle' elsewhere on this website for further information about Purim.

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The second short 'Purim' film (the fourth in our sequence of the LGBTQI Jewish Year documentaries) consists of a post-performance focus group with the actors and associated team who were part of the performance in 1984 and (some) again in 2015. Within this focus group, themes of the changing nature of Jewish LGBTQI culture across time, and the nature of 'camp' which were reflected upon within the earlier film, are explored further; along with considerations of the connection between Purim and tropes common to LGBTQI identities such as 'being masked' or (as a result of stigmatised sexual orientation) required to hide one's identity in some contexts, in a manner similar to that of Queen Esther in her role as a 'hidden Jew' (see further below).

## Background

The Jewish Festival of Purim occurs every year sometime between the middle of the secular months of February and March (varying by date as a result of occurring within a lunar-soli calendar (see Introduction to the Ritual Year). Purim is a carnivalesque festival which commemorates the quasi-mythological historical survival and armed resistance by a Jewish community in danger of genocide, in this case people living in a diasporic community in Persia around the years 483-473 BCE (based on dating by some Biblical scholars who suggest that Ahasuerus is in fact the Babylonian King Xerxes I as a number of the events described in the story would fit with such a historical timeframe)<sup>1</sup>.

The festival of Purim is marked in Synagogues by the reading of the Megillah (the scroll containing the Book of Esther), the story which tells

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see: Paton, L. (2009) *Esther: Critical Exegetical Commentary*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group and for a summary of the Purim narrative as well as historical background Levi, G., Kaufmann K., and Barton, G. (1906) 'Ahasuerus' in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Vol 1: p284-285) available at: <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/967-ahasuerus> (Accessed 11-2-16). Classical texts which are closer in time to the events detailed in the Book of Esther also offer an alternative suggestion, as while Ahasuerus is identified as Xerxes I (ruled 486–465 BCE) by Herodotus (translated by Burn, A. 1972, *Herodotus: The Histories*, London: Penguin Classics); Josephus in his 1<sup>st</sup> Century BCE *The Antiquities of the Jews*, suggests (Book 11, Chapter 6) available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2848/2848-h/2848-h.htm#link112HCH0006> 11-2-16) that Artaxerxes II (ruled 405–359 BCE) was the King at the time when this story took place.

of the Persian Jews' deliverance from a genocidal plot instigated by the wicked Vizier Haman who sought to destroy the successful and well-established Jewish community at the heart of the Babylonian empire. The redemption of the Babylonian community occurs as a result of the dangerous but ultimately successful intervention of Queen Esther, a 'secret Jew', and the second wife of King Ahasuerus who hears from her Cousin Mordechai of the machinations of Haman, and that the King has signed a document allowing the massacre of Jews throughout the Kingdom. Interestingly the Book of Esther is one of the only two texts (the other is the Song of Solomon) included in the Jewish/Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) which do not mention God, and as such this text and the Festival itself, is a celebration of human ingenuity and survival rather than divine intervention.

There is a distinctly feminist theme within the Festival of Purim, not only in the central narrative of Esther, but also in the celebration of women as people with agency and sharp intellect. Women under formal Jewish law (*'Halakah'*), unlike many other ritual observances, which traditionally are gendered in the requirement of degree of observance; are obliged in all Jewish traditions, and since ancient times, to hear the annual reading of the Megillah of Esther as "*they also were involved in that miracle*" (as specified under the ruling of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi in the 3rd century CE) and see further the Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 4a which further stresses the requirement on women to participate in this ritual activity.

The Megillah of Esther under ancient *halakhic ruling* should be read aloud in any language understood by the congregation (rather than assuming that the listeners will adequately understand Hebrew or Aramaic, the languages commonly spoken by ancient Jewish communities) to ensure that the narrative is clear to diasporic communities. Moreover, if someone cannot attend a synagogue service when the Megillah is read, for example as a result of poor health; childbirth; age or infirmity; or caring responsibilities; an ancient requirement exists that it should be read aloud to them at their own home, such is the importance of the narrative of Esther to the ritual year.

## **What the specifically LGBTQI elements in the Purim Spiel as shown in this film?**

A *Purim spiel* (Yiddish for 'play' but in the sense of a glib, persuasive, funny, convincing narrative rather like a complex joke) is in traditional format a humorous dramatization of the story of Esther and the Purim story. It is known to have been performed in a broadly similar manner for at least 1000 years in European Jewish communities, whilst public re-enactments at Purim of the 'hanging' of the evil Vizier Haman who had masterminded the plot to commit genocide, were known to occur as early as the 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE in the Levant<sup>2</sup>.

By the mid-18th century, in Ashkenazic Eastern Europe, the annual Purim Spiel had become transformed into a satirical performance with local references, song, music and dance. The story of Esther's saving of her people shrunk to a simple core narrative which frequently was of less importance than local variants and 'dressing'; somewhat akin to Pantomime in the UK, in which localised references and topical themes are interspersed with a traditional folk tale. In addition, stock characters, (not that dissimilar to those found in Commedia Del Arte<sup>3</sup> but with distinct Jewish characteristics, names and traits) would be found in these performances. Thus there is an ancient history of innovative folk performance combining elements of both the sacred and the profane, which underlies the Purim spiel as know it.

In the current day (particularly in the USA) Purim Spiels whilst retaining the central narrative will often incorporate anything relating to Jewish humour and Judaism (or indeed references to popular TV programmes, particularly those written by Jews or featuring recognisable Jewish characters<sup>4</sup>) that will entertain an audience celebrating the Festival of Purim. As such, an LGBTQI version of the Purim Spiel is fully in keeping

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<sup>2</sup> Leuchter, J (undated, from internal references probably early 2000s). *The Fascinating Evolution of the Purim-Spiel* Reform Judaism (US) online resource available at <http://www.reformjudaism.org/fascinating-evolution-purim-spiel> (accessed 13/02/16).

<sup>3</sup> Sandrow, N. (1975). *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, New York: Harper and Row. p12.

<sup>4</sup> See for example access to Purim Spiel scripts (often available on providing a donation to a charitable organisations or to assist a local synagogue) at: <http://templebethmiriam.org/creative-purim-spiels/> (accessed 13/02/16) or newly written to order: <http://shushanchannel.com/sample.html> (accessed 13/02/16)

with the history and character of this distinct form of ritualised, festive entertainment.

In the Purim Spiel presented within the RR film there is a complex mixture of distinct Gay (specifically 'camp'<sup>5</sup>) elements as well as explicitly geographically Jewish London textual incorporations – for example reference to favourite 'cruising spots' such as Hampstead Heath; clubs and restaurants (both those familiar to middle class Jewish families where Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs etc. would take place; in addition to well known London Gay bars of the period) and coded messages pertaining to inter-faith relationships which potentially mirror both the Purim story and relationships between Gay men which cross faith and cultural boundaries as a result of sexual orientation.

Characters performing in this version of the Purim Spiel also participate in cross-dressing (not uncommon in the traditional Spiel) but with clearly 'camp'/drag costumes so that individuals who are gendered/identify as male might perform female roles – and women performers appear as male gendered characters. Thus Esther is in this version of the Spiel a Drag Artist (perhaps a Trans person?) who is a flamboyant Diva character prone to breaking into appropriate numbers from musical theatre.

In addition to the LGBTQI thematic elements of the Spiel there is an additional transgressive quality in that Haman who is in the traditional story a villain, is seen as 'not a bad man' who indeed acquires love interest with Esther's mother who is characterised as a stereotypical, high camp version of a 'Jewish mother'. Moreover 'Harry Hamman' in this Spiel could indeed be Jewish himself. Despite the moderately sympathetic rendering of Haman/Hamman (as a failed nightclub fixer)

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<sup>5</sup> Susan Sontag in her celebrated 1964 essay 'Notes On "Camp"' in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrer Straus & Giroux (available online at: <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Sontag-NotesOnCamp-1964.html> accessed 15/02/16) defines 'camp' as "love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.. something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques.... Camp is the consistently aesthetic experience of the world. It incarnates a victory of "style" over "content," "aesthetics" over "morality," of irony over tragedy". In particular, 'camp' is often associated with a particular type of 'frivolous' Gay male aesthetic from the 1960s onwards albeit with a marked decline in popularity post 1990s as alternative (and more political and serious) LGBTQI 'identity markers' came to prominence in public discourse and performativity.

the traditional element of using 'noise makers' to drown out his name<sup>6</sup> and booing when he is identified in the script are incorporated into the performance; whilst King Ahasuerus is represented as a wealthy club owner with coded reference to 'back rooms' in his premises where sexual activity could take place between the men who frequent the club.

The happy ending at the end of the RR Spiel performance is achieved not through the slaughter of non-Jewish characters as in the somewhat blood thirsty original, but with the partnering up of key characters with their love interests, (seeking happiness in Golders Green – a well known Jewish London locality, with reference made by ecstatic characters to the triumphant pleasures of acquiring a large middle class home and new furniture) and joyful musical numbers rendered 'more Jewish'. Thus for example, instead of the cast singing "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" (from the musical 'Kiss Me Kate') we hear "Brush Up Your Talmud" and note too, the interspersing of Yiddish terms into certain key phrases and songs.

It is worth commenting also on the fact that this latter element – that of incorporating well-known musical theatre scores into the Spiel – can be seen as a further manifestation of a particular 'Jewish camp' sensibility, given the association (particularly for a 1980s audience) with a type of aesthetic manifested in popular Hollywood musicals scored by Jewish (Gay) composers including Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim; the work of Michael Feinstein (Ira Gershwin's archivist) in re-popularising 'The Great American Songbook'; and the spectacular choreography of Jerome Robbins. The success of movies such as 'Cabaret' (which focused on overt themes of Gay identity and 'divine decadence' in the face of rising anti-semitism and oppression in Nazi Germany; and which importantly had music and score by Gay Jewish song-writing team John

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<sup>6</sup> In the traditional Purim Spiel, on the 54 occasions when Haman's name is spoken aloud during the public reading of the Megillah in the synagogue, the congregation engages in the whirring of rattles, stamping and booing to drown out his name, similar to the way in which a villain in pantomime is booed in 'mainstream' British theatre.

Kander and Fred Ebb, can perhaps be considered as a 'high watermark' of camp Jewish cultural performance.<sup>7)</sup>

Indeed as Boyarin et al, explain in their edited 2003 collection *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*<sup>8</sup>:

*"While there are no simple equations between Jewish and queer identities, Jewishness and queerness yet utilize and are bound up with one another in particularly resonant ways. This crossover also extends to the modern discourses of antisemitism and homophobia, with stereotypes of the Jew frequently underwriting pop cultural and scientific notions of the homosexual. And vice versa".*

Thus in the Ritual Reconstructed Purim Spiel and subsequent discussion (see further below), this complex relationship is both celebrated and explicitly 'named'.

#### **Film 4: the post-performance focus group.**

In this documentary (the second Purim film in the RR series) we present a focus group which took place immediately after the Spiel was performed, during which, participants consider the nature of 'camp', changing LGBT cultures; and representations of Gay men from the 1980s to the present day. Key aspects of this discussion include debate on how and why Purim contains transgressive gendered elements even in 'traditional' Jewish form; and the way in which an 'queer' Purim Spiel written today would be fundamentally different, explicitly incorporating reference to lesbianism and trans issues and which moreover would probably be less 'camp' with the decline of this type of performative 'Gayness' as the range of explicit identifying markers and role models available to LGBTQI people have expanded, as society's attitudes have transformed in the intervening decades.

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<sup>7</sup> In relation to 'camp' and the connection to Jewish sensibility See further: Meyer, M. Ed. (1994) *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*, Routledge: New York; Padva, G. & Talmon, M. (2008). "Gotta Have An Effeminate Heart: The Politics of Effeminacy and Sissyness in a Nostalgic Israeli TV Musical". *Feminist Media Studies* 8(1), 69–84 Clum. J (2001) *Something for the Boys: Musical Theatre and Gay Culture* New York: St Martin's Press.

<sup>8</sup> Boyarin, D., Itzkovitz, D. & Pellegrini, A. eds. (2003). "Strange Bedfellows: An Introduction" in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* Columbia University Press p1.



In conclusion, these two separate films create a unique portrait of how and why the Purim Spiel performed for this project link both LGBTQI and Jewish culture and thus creates a transgressive ritualist synergy within a traditional carnivalesque context.

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