

*Leopoldstadt* by Tom Stoppard

Longacre Theatre, New York City

Opening night October 2, 2022

Director: Patrick Marber

The Broadway production of *Leopoldstadt* by Tom Stoppard possesses the aura of a play that has met its moment. *Leopoldstadt* is that rarest of things in the contemporary commercial theatre: a serious play that is both a financial and critical success. The production played at over 87% capacity in its opening month of October 2022 and continues to be popular with audiences. Reviews centered in the range from positive to adoring (only a few reviewers qualified or dissented from this consensus). Ben Brantley of the Times lauds the play's humane and heartfelt sensibility, and NBC's reviewer announced "We need this play now more than ever," while Charles Isherwood of the *Wall Street Journal* declared "It's virtually inconceivable that this theater season will produce anything superior" (inconceivable? I do not think that word means what Isherwood thinks it means.) Social media posts, news stories, and publicity material inform audiences that the play is Stoppard's most "personal" (read comprehensible?). Stoppard himself was visible across traditional media discussing how he learned about how the Holocaust effected his extended family, and about contemporary anti-Semitism, cancel culture, and his future plans. Several actors appeared on the *Today* show to share how meaningful they found their work on this play.

I kind of hated it.

Specifically, I found the play's construction clunky, often amateurish, and its insistence on feeding spectators information frustrating. I spent long stretches of the play simply attempting to re-immense myself in the theatrical illusion. The play lands several moments of humor and of horror, and intriguingly dramatizes part of Stoppard's life story, but ultimately its impact is lessened by an over-reliance on transmitted information instead of dramatic interactions.

Performed over an intermission-less 2 hours and 10 minutes, *Leopoldstadt* tells the stories of two interconnected Jewish families in Vienna, from the final moments of the fin-de-siecle to the aftermath of World War II. The play's first seven scenes take place in 1899 and 1900, followed by one scene each in 1924, 1938, and finally 1955. The setting throughout is the Merz family apartment, located in the upscale Ringstrasse neighborhood, a household headed by the industrialist Hermann who has embraced conversion to Catholicism as his mode of assimilating into bourgeois Austrian society. As the play opens, his extended family and friends are celebrating Christmas. Stoppard has the fun you'd expect with the contradictions of this religious syncretism. "I don't mind Christmas, because baby Jesus had no idea what was going on," "but I feel funny about Easter eggs," a funny-enough quip. But then Stoppard immediately launches into a static scene of exposition and debate, in which two characters debate ideas and

share perspectives on the Issues of Their Day. In this scene, Stoppard wishes to air debates over Jewish assimilation, Theodor Herzl's Zionist project, internecine debates over Jewish identity, and the liberating effects of art and culture. Hermann Merz, born Jewish but a Catholic by conversion, proudly asserts that he is a valued member of "A city of art lovers and intellectuals like no other" (23), later triumphantly exclaiming "We're Austrians now! Austrians of Jewish descent" (24). Ludwig, a mathematics scholar and Hermann's brother-in-law, counters, rather too patly, "Assimilation doesn't mean to stop being a Jew . . . Assimilation means to carry on being a Jew without insult" (26). The historical information that Stoppard researched and wants to impart -- "the Emperor-King Franz Josef," he informs us, "emancipated his Jews in time for us to grow up with the same rights and everyone else" (24) -- is inadequately integrated into the dramatic flow of the play (characters in realistic plays should not tell each other what both know). The result kills theatrical momentum and leaves one wondering if there will be a quiz later.

The scenes set in 1924 and 1938 are marred by this same informational overload. In the 1924 scene, Stoppard wishes to give us a capsule version of Austrian politics after World War I, again forcing dramatic characters into the function of authorial mouthpieces. The first part of the scene is dominated by Jacob, (who in the opening scene tried to top the Merz's Christmas tree with the Star of David), now wounded and bitterly disillusioned. The character is written without subtlety or much sympathetic understanding, and Seth Numrich acts the part at high, overdramatized volume. (Stoppard also steers directly into the shoals of cliché; in 1924, one of the characters has returned from America as a bit of a flapper, and yes, we do see her dance the Charleston). This scene has a moment of comic invention in which a lawyer seeking a cigar cutter is mistaken for a tardy mohel -- "Don't worry, I'll bite it off" says the former, not the latter. It's quite funny, but it can at the same time appear as if Stoppard is sugarcoating the pill of information he is determined we swallow. The scene in 1938 ends with tragic horror as the Merz family is evicted from its apartment, but the beginning of the scene is clumsily written. We hear British journalist Percy Chamberlain (also played by Numrich) yelling about the Evian Conference (in which European countries turned their back on the growing pre-war refugee crisis); the problem is that Stoppard fails to establish for the audience who this character is until much later in the scene.

The preponderance of such debates, exposition, and under-dramatized information is the signal flaw of the play's construction. Too often, watching the play is an experience of listening to things Stoppard wants us to know, and that awareness frequently jolted me out of the dramatic flow. Stoppard seems unaware that a theatre audience will never remember a fraction of the historical knowledge it is being given, or at least being made to listen to, but he has found no limiting principle that would prevent him from transcribing his historical research into the play. He is apparently committed to referring to all the topics he discovered: in addition to the ones already mentioned, we hear about political amnesia in postwar Austria, Nazi-appropriated art, displaced persons camps, Klimt, British foreign policy re Palestine, radical politics after World War I, and, this being Stoppard, higher mathematics, and some jabs at Freud -- they're all there, and sometimes simply name-dropped, rather than given adequate dramatic development. (The flaw of too much information is of course more troublesome in performance, when spectators desire immersion and emotional flow, than in reading, when the reader is in control of the pace of the experience and prepared to absorb information.)

The plot lines as well as conversational substance are drawn from secondary research by Stoppard into Holocaust literature. As Hermione Lee relates in her recent biography *Tom Stoppard: A Life*, “He pillaged from everywhere, without covering his tracks: he *wanted* the play to show up the historical testimonies it had emerged from” (739). The sheer amount of researched material predictably lends the production a kind of second-hand, distanced texture. Stoppard seems to use the stories rather than simply dramatize them, giving us (or at least me) the feeling that the characters exist principally as vehicles to carry the play’s themes. And too often, especially given Stoppard’s literal historical treatment and the fact that the Holocaust has been aestheticized, memorialized, taught, and popularized for decades, the production’s lessons and admonitions land with an air of familiarity if not repetition. It may not be entirely unfair to suggest that this play is the more effective the more unfamiliar is its audience with the history of the Nazi genocide.

The production, directed by Patrick Marber, does its best to serve Stoppard’s script. Projections, lights, stage movement, costume, and sound add beauty and meaning to what the audience sees. Each scene is preceded by projections of photographs designed by Isaac Madge, which depict pre-World War I Jewish life, adding historical context but also providing a space for the audience to recall contemporary refugee crises. Marber arranges an initial stage picture in which the family tree is projected on an opaque scrim in front of the actors, creating a resonant tableau in which each character appears behind their name. Richard Hudson’s set presents an elegant drawing room. Lighting by Neil Austin bathes the initial scene in a kind of sepia glow of burnt umber, and later shifts to a deep blue, then a gray and finally a bare, bright white light in the last scene where we see the apartment empty except for its grand piano. The elegant costumes by Brigitte Reiffenstuel first feature a range of browns, tans, and rusty reds, and subsequently neatly establish the play’s changing time periods. Adam Cork’s resonant sound design includes breaking glass, anti-Jewish chants, the footsteps of anti-Semitic marchers, and, as the Merz family is finally evicted from its apartment, the ascendant buzz of military bombers flying overhead.

The actors, in general, are challenged by the script’s construction. Given the multitude of characters and events, the actors do not always avoid what theatre folk call “rushing,” meaning the actor is seemingly under an injunction to shout their line very quickly before the next actor does so. The story arc of 1899-1900 offers the play’s longest throughline, but was marred by less than ideal acting. David Krumholz overacted the part of Hermann, coming off as a bit silly, thus restricting audience involvement. Faye Castelow as Hermann’s adulterous wife Gretl opts for some strategic underacting, leaving her character a bit of a cipher. In the play’s best performance, Brandon Uranowitz imbues the mathematician Ludwig with rueful melancholy, and later plays Ludwig’s great-nephew Nathan, with a sharply convincing sense of loss, betrayal, and bitterness. Arty Froushan has another intriguing and powerful dual role, playing the arrogant Austrian soldier Fritz, who makes cruelly clear how Hermann as a Jew is literally beneath contempt, and as Leo, a stand-in for Stoppard himself whose self-understanding is shaken in the play’s final scene.

This scene, set in 1955, exemplifies my split response to the play, as it contains both its sharpest and most self-indulgent moments. In this scene, we re-encounter three characters as adults who we saw earlier as children. One is Leo Chamberlain, born Leopold Rosenblum, who has forgotten being rescued and brought to England from this very apartment before World War II. Portraying Leo as a foppish “comic writer” from England, Stoppard establishes a clear parallel between character and author, which continues when Chamberlain elucidates what he loves about England – its “fair play and parliament and freedom of everything, asylum for exiles and refugees, the Royal Navy, the royal family . . . Oh, and I forgot Shakespeare.” This platitudinous response draws audience laughter. Then, in the strongest moment of the play, Nathan (the great-nephew of Ludwig) rounds on Leo, castigating how totally and willfully he has disavowed his own early self: “No one is born eight years old. Leonard Chamberlain’s life is Leo Rosenbaum’s life continued. His family is your family. But you live as if without history, as if you throw no shadow behind you” (96). The authorial self-critique is sharply rendered; Stoppard underlines the moral fault involved in not knowing about his past and roots until late middle age, thus powerfully making the case for the duty of historical remembrance.

Just prior to the end of the play, Stoppard creates a flashback to the seder scene, and the play offers a moment embodying the act of remembrance. All the characters from 1900 are brought back to life, and the stage is set and lit so that we are in two time periods at once, before the catastrophe and after. This stage device brings home the emotions of loss, absence, and the destruction of innocence better than anything else in the play; it is a welcome instance of Stoppard using dramatic form to show us, rather than to tell us, something.

If the play had ended there, we might have been spared what I experienced as its most manipulative moment. Extremely near the end of the play, Leo is offered a hand-written family tree and asks about the fate of those on it -- just as happened in 1993 when Stoppard met a relative from the Czech Republic. (Theatre-goers were emailed a version of Stoppard’s essay “On Turning out to Be Jewish,” so presumably the playwright wants us to be aware of this parallel.) The replies are what one expects: suicide, bombings, cancer, death marches, and, finally, Auschwitz – uttered seven times and the last word of the play. The audience appeared to be moved, and clearly Stoppard wants to make these ultimate moments land with the force of revelation. But this strategy seemed bizarre, frustrating, even maddening to me. I knew already that a good percentage of any given pre-war European Jewish family perished in the Holocaust, so being told this felt redundant and unnecessary.

Going further, this final gesture intentionally deployed these signifiers of genocide to establish a final tone of high seriousness for the play. One does not have fully to endorse Theodor Adorno’s famous remark “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (or Maurice Blanchot’s “Keep watch over absent meaning”) to infer that the danger of Stoppard’s pat conclusion here is both aesthetic and moral. This ending reinforced my final reaction to the production, that Stoppard is writing not simply out of his own life, but fundamentally to and for himself. The play appears finally a personal thing, a way for Stoppard himself to reckon with his own conscience over his belated awareness of family members lost in the genocide. While it may be churlish to begrudge the positive, heartfelt responses of audiences and reviewers to this serious and well-intentioned

play, critically assessing *Leopoldstadt* within the context of Stoppard's career may prove a challenging task.