



Three Sisters of Merseyside

Diane Samuels and Tracy-Ann Oberman have written a play, shortly to be premiered, that recreates Chekov's 'three sisters' as Jewish women in Liverpool.

JUDI HERMAN talks to DIANE SAMUELS about how the play came to be written – and why Liverpool

enthusiasm, she confides: “I’m a great believer that when art works there’s synchronicity involved and you don’t plan it, it just happens.” Certainly the play born out of her collaboration with Tracy-Ann Oberman seems *besheret* (meant to be) for everything does indeed seem to have come together at the right time.

It was Oberman who first had the idea of a Jewish *Three Sisters*. “I live opposite Tracy-Ann and sharing a cab one day, we started talking about how Jews are represented on stage in England,” she

Two Thousand Years was running at The National Theatre and “they kindly gave us a week with a studio and a Jewish company and lots of things clicked”.

Diane credits David Newman, a director, for the idea of two ‘Moscovs’. “We wanted to make it New York because it’s such a hub of Jewish life and making it Palestine was obviously another option – but we can play them off each other and it says a lot about Jewish identity in the world. Without giving anything away, there’s even a character whose journey is from her ‘Moscow’, ie New York, to Palestine...”

When Diane chose Hope Street with its places of worship and its connotations of hope and despair, she discovered that there was an American air force base nearby – a neat parallel with the soldiers in the battery in Chekov’s play. Another piece of the jigsaw was in place. This gives me shivers up my spine. “Yes, it all fits!” she agrees, excitedly. “American GIs have that glamour and excitement. The play is full of the scarcities of the austerity years and they bring the luxuries, nylons and treats like chocolate and dried fruit. It really works in that time and it gives you a whole new understanding of Chekov’s play as well as becoming something fresh and new.

explains. “We have often seen representations of Jews just being people and Jewish attitudes and language and rituals being no big deal. Tracy-Ann revealed that she wanted to workshop *The Three Sisters* with an all Jewish company to explore this.” So the pair shared a desire to see authentic Jewish life on stage.

Interested, Diane read the play and they agreed that for an all-Jewish cast it would need to be transposed to a different time and place: “because there would not have been Jews in that social milieu in Russia at the turn of the century.”

As they searched for the right time and place, somewhere in the 20th century: “Far enough away to give some perspective and close enough to resonate with contemporary life and concerns – and where something significant is happening in Jewish life”, Diane was struck by the play’s long speeches about work. “They really resonated with the language and ideology of Zionism with which I was raised. So I suggested setting it in the lead up to the establishment of Israel and of course it needs to be set in a provincial community – Liverpool because I knew the community and how Zionist it had been.”

Oberman was captivated and the synchronicity continued. Mike Leigh’s

This article is part of the 16-page feature on the Jews of Liverpool in the January issue of *Jewish Renaissance* magazine.

Anglican and Catholic Cathedrals stand at either end of Liverpool’s Hope Street, and until the 1930s there was a synagogue on Hope Place. Now it’s the setting for *Three Sisters on Hope Street* the new play based on Chekov’s famous work by writer Diane Samuels and actress Tracy-Ann Oberman.

The play opens in 1946. The Lasky sisters, Gertie, May and Rita, share their once grand home on Hope Street with their asthmatic brother, their aunt Beil and family friend Dr Weinberg. The girls’ search for meaning in a rapidly changing post-war world leads to their yearning to leave the city ravaged by war. And just as Chekov’s sisters yearn for Moscow, the Lasky girls have ideas of escaping to a new life... and they have not one, but two ‘Moscovs’ in their sights – New York and Palestine.

Post-war, Liverpool’s Jewish community was full of Zionist fervour on the eve of the birth of the State of Israel. So the play premieres as the City becomes European Capital of Culture 2008 at the start of Israel’s 60th anniversary year.

It’s all a matter of synchronicity for Liverpool-born Diane Samuels. Perched on a stool in the wardrobe room at Hampstead Theatre, her eyes shining with

Dancing with GIs



“It gives you insight into the experience of Jewish community life in England. There’s poignancy because the community then was much bigger. The 1930s art deco synagogue in the play, Greenbank, is closing this year, because there aren’t enough people to make a congregation.”

Samuels’ research is informed by such personal experience – and talking to older family members about the 1940s. “My aunts Savvie and Nita bounced off each other and the revelation was the anti-Jewish riots in Liverpool in 1947, so Act 3 is set during the riots.” Riots in both Liverpool and Manchester were in response to the Irgun bombing of the King David Hotel and hanging of two British sergeants.

Armed with such research, Samuels and Oberman worked on the characters’ biographies. Father arrives from Kishiniev, escaping its pogroms with his sister. He marries a New Yorker and their daughters spend time in New York as Chekov’s heroines do in Moscow. But they’re Anglicised Liverpool-bred first generation, educated in private schools.

Samuels explains her working process with Oberman. “We worked together, collaboratively, and it was really rich and wonderful, full of creative dialogue, a key part of authoring this work. We talked and then I’d go away and write and come back to look at it together. She’d come up with the actor’s perspective, that desire for more background which was fascinating for me and really illuminating.”

Diane’s father proved nostalgic for the 50s, when his enterprising father opened an American diner, The Punch and Judy, by Lime Street Station. “It became this iconic Liverpool place,” Diane smiles proudly. “It’s where Paul and John would meet Brian Epstein when he came from London

about a record deal and they’d go and have a coffee and talk about it. My grandfather loved all things American and this influenced the Lasky family. In the austerity years, he had enough money to have a Chevrolet shipped over from New York, which was outrageous. So I had all these stories but the Liverpool I grew up in, after the War, was a different place. I remember in the mid-1960s there were still bomb sites everywhere.”

Samuels was born in 1960 and the family lived in Childwall. “People who know Liverpool say ‘Oh, that’s the posh area and I thought it was just the Jewish area!’” she confesses. “Most of my friends were children of my parents’ friends whose own parents were also friends and relatives so it was a bit like growing up in a shtetl – transplanted into north-west England into Merseyside. When I read Isaac Bashevis Singer I said ‘Oh my God, I recognise this world – it’s that Eastern European heritage!’”

Her parents owned a deli and her father still attends synagogue regularly. “A United congregation, so traditional. When I go up for the opening, my dad has said you’ve got to go to shul with me!”

Samuels attended King David High School. “My friends and I were really into feminism. There was this prayer you had to say in Assembly. The boys said ‘Thank you God for not making me a woman’ and we had to say: ‘Thank you God for making me as I am’ and we changed it to ‘Thank you God for not making me a man’ and we all got detentions!”

The Zionist ideology of the play’s characters comes from personal experience. She recalls vividly how she learned of the Holocaust at school: “We were raised to believe we should all go and live in Israel. When I was 12 we were taken into this room, with no preparation, and Rabbi Simons (from Gush Emunim, the hard-line right wing movement) shows us a film of the Holocaust and the bodies being shovelled and none of us had seen that graphic stuff before. We all went into shock, people crying. He slams the TV doors and says ‘Right, that’s why we’ve got to have the State of Israel’ and that was the message.”

Although she was tempted to make aliyah, she says she didn’t visit Israel for many years. “I didn’t know how to relate to it during the 90s in my post-Zionist state but I’ve gone back more recently in an Arab-Jewish writers’ group dialogue.

“So in a sense I was raised with Israel as my ‘Moscow’. This is where you go; this is where it happens, so I’ve wanted to



Co-writer Tracy-Ann Oberman had the original idea for the play

write about this for a long time. When Tracy-Ann and I sat in that cab, I never thought that’s how I’d get to deal with the idealism and the despair of Zionism – and for me that’s what this play is really about.”

Now the play’s in rehearsal with a cast of 11, all playing Jewish characters. So is the world of the play hermetically sealed? “Well it’s the world of the family in the house; so we don’t go out in the street,” she says ruefully. “The only non-Jewish characters are offstage. It would have been nice to have them but the budget didn’t stretch.”

She laughs when I joke she has a minyan. “We talked about that only today in rehearsal. The Jewish half of the cast has to explain the terms!”

She continues more seriously: “The thing that’s really being created in rehearsal is the sense of family, of community and it’s already beginning to form. There’s a real sense of the warmth and spirit of the play embracing and communicating itself through the actors. Chekov is a master and I’ve learned from working with his original. It’s only possible to take it to a new place because he’s done something so consummately. We’ve been passed something really amazing. There’s lots of different voices and experience in there.

“I said to Tracy at the workshop at the National ‘This play’s not about you and me – this play is in charge, we’re just vehicles for bringing it into being and when it has done with us it’ll chuck us out.’ The play is like a living creature; it’s vital, it’s got its own life. A lot of people, for all different reasons, from all different perspectives have got together to make it come alive and I think the audience will get that experience. I think it’s going to be wonderful.”

