

An indictment of fascism and Zionism

## A fitting tribute to a man of principle

Perdition by Jim Allen premiered at the Gate Theatre, London

**Paul Bond**  
**13 July 1999**

Twelve years after its premiere was dramatically cancelled, Jim Allen's play *Perdition* has finally reached the stage. The Gate Theatre hosted the production, which opened shortly before Allen's tragic death from cancer on June 24, 1999. One of the more prestigious fringe theatres in London, their production is a fitting tribute to the socialist writer.

The action of *Perdition* owes much to the real trial of Dr. Rudolf Kastner in Israel in 1953.\*

The play is set in a London courtroom in 1967, immediately after the "Six Day War". Ruth Kaplan has written a pamphlet, *I Accuse*. In it she says, "I accuse certain Jewish leaders [in Hungary] of collaborating with the Nazis in 1944." Among them she includes her former library colleague Dr. Yaron who, she writes, "bought his own life and the lives of others with the price of silence". Yaron sues for libel, against which Kaplan pleads justification. The play records the court proceedings.

Yaron was a member of the World Zionist Organisation at the beginning of the war. The play explores the extent to which Zionism, as a nationalist political tendency, sought an accommodation with fascism as a means towards building an Israeli state in Palestine. Allen wanted to show that, because of its intention to build a Jewish homeland, Zionism did not oppose the rise of anti-Semitism. Rather, Zionism saw anti-Semitism as insurmountable. The only response proposed was emigration to Palestine.

Allen's horror at the Holocaust is a key factor in his understanding of the foundation of the state of Israel. The crucial differentiation in the play between collaboration and co-operation hinges on whether it was better to save a handful of "prominent" against the mass of poor Jews—saving pioneers for the new state, or a far larger number of assimilated Jews. The defence lawyer, Scott, quotes David Ben-Gurion, founding father of the state of Israel, addressing a meeting in December 1938 at which he said:

"If I knew it was possible to save all the children in Germany by bringing them over to England, and only half of them by transporting them to Israel, then I would opt for the second alternative. For we must weigh not only the lives of these children, but also the history of the people of Israel."

Allen accuses the leaders of Zionism of keeping silent and of not acting to prevent the massacre of Hungarian Jews so as to further their political goal of a Jewish homeland. The trial is not about

Kaplan and her "libel". It is about the origins of a state "coined in the blood and tears of Hungarian Jewry." As Yaron puts it: "I am on trial here, not the person who slandered me." By the end of the play the jury (the audience is openly addressed as such) have accepted Kaplan's argument and Yaron himself questions whether his actions were justified.

*Perdition* was first offered for staging to the Royal Court theatre in 1985. Production was delayed several times, before an opening at the small experimental venue the Royal Court Upstairs was fixed for the end of January 1987. The board of the Royal Court, anxious over any historical controversy, submitted the script to several academics. Martin Gilbert, biographer of Winston Churchill, and David Ceserani led the charge of academics supportive of Zionism, eager to denounce the play as historically inaccurate.

For daring to attack Zionism, Allen was labelled as "anti-Semitic". The dispute became increasingly bitter and ever more nakedly about censorship. Max Stafford-Clark, artistic director of the Royal Court, withdrew his original support for the play in the face of the attacks by Ceserani and Gilbert. Noted film director Ken Loach, director of the play and a long-time collaborator with Allen, asked in a letter to the *Guardian* newspaper why Stafford-Clark "speaks only to Zionist historians and activists about a play to which they were politically hostile? There are many, academics and others, who support the play." Under threat of hostile influences on the Royal Court's funding bodies, Stafford-Clark withdrew the play 48 hours before its first performance. In spite of support from such figures as Erich Fried, Noam Chomsky and Maxime Rodinson, Allen was vilified and the play languished.

What strikes the viewer finally able to see *Perdition*, after all the attacks and slanders, is its burning humanity, the belief in a better world, something that marked all of Allen's work. Scott, in his impassioned and moving summation, asks: "If anti-Semitism is indeed 'the Socialism of fools', should we not ask where and how that consciousness arose in the first place? What is it in our society that generates this evil?"

In 1987, Ken Loach pleaded for a chance for his cast to be allowed to stage a reading of the play in order to disprove the allegations of anti-Semitism. In performance, Loach's assertion is triumphantly vindicated. Allen's text, aided by the clarity of Elliott Levey's direction, is quite explicit on the difference between

Zionism and Judaism, anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. The text bristles with the agonies of the Holocaust, agonies which some of the play's wilder critics in 1987 would have had one believe Allen was denying.

The play proceeds through examination and cross-examination. Allen does not overdo the points he wishes to make and thereby reduce his characters to stereotypes. When Orzech (Alfred Hofman), the former Polish Communist Party militant, describes being handed over to the Gestapo after his release from a Stalinist jail, the political lessons are only inferred. On the one occasion when they are spelled out explicitly ("I managed to escape and return to Warsaw" "Where you joined the Resistance?" "Yes, but first I resigned from the Communist Party"), the exchange provides the one moment of humour in the play.

A former Labour MP Karpin (Peter Birrel), also an active Zionist before the war, testifies in Allen's piece. Again the playwright does not simplistically spell out the connection between the nationalism of social democracy and the nationalism of Zionism.

It was raised against him in 1987 that Allen "overestimated the intelligence of his audience". That belief in his audience, both as rational, intellectual beings and as the fabric of the political future, is what makes Allen so compelling as a playwright. He does not talk down, nor does he shy away from difficult concepts or facts. Karpin is a world away from the current Labour Party type, yet Allen gives us the material necessary to assemble a view of Labour's politics for ourselves.

The performances of the witnesses are uniformly good. Joyce Springer's Miriam Moser looks almost comically dressed up for a big day out, until she starts talking about the operations performed on her in Auschwitz. She captures perfectly the mixture of shame and defiance, the look of someone who has been waiting for the right person to tell these things to.

The main bulk of the play, however, falls onto the legal characters. Rebecca Gethings was an admirably unfussy junior defence counsel, Antonia Green, providing the perfect foil to Ian Flintoff's defence lawyer Scott. Flintoff is the only member of the cast to have been part of the Royal Court company as well. He barnstormed and grandstanded, but this was present in the text. Allen made Scott the horrified conscience of the play, as well as its probing, analytical tool. Ultimately, the case is decided by a fact which comes unexpectedly out of the examination of Miriam Moser, but Scott is the one who is appalled enough to be struck by it, and then cool and detached enough to pursue it.

In 1987, Flintoff was to have played Lawson, the plaintiff Dr. Yaron's lawyer, and I felt the lack of a similar presence in the performance of Penny Bunton. Bunton was good on her feet, questioning and attacking witnesses, but during cross-examinations she sat with a twitchy lack of composure that seemed to start too soon in the proceedings and run too wildly out of control. It was the one time I felt that Levey had tilted the odds in favour of the defendant Kaplan's charges against Zionism prematurely and counter to Allen's script.

Undoubtedly the stars of the piece, on whom the greatest emotional burden fell, were Morris Perry as Yaron and Osnat Schmool as Kaplan. Perry took us along a journey of self-revelation, from the self-assured successful figure who had sued

for libel, through the confusion of the Nazi occupation of Hungary, to being confronted and made aware of what he had done. Perry showed us brilliantly a man reduced to only his humanity, stripped of position and dignity, but determined, from his mistakes, that others should be made aware of the horror and learn from them.

He is shown the way by Schmool's magnificent Kaplan. Here is a perfectly ordinary woman, stumbling over ideas, embarrassed at the conclusions she has reached, put in an awkward situation. She has reached these conclusions from her own researches: at no point during the war did the Zionist leadership call on Jews in Europe to resist. For Kaplan this is *the* lesson that must be learned. Zionism offered a national homeland, but the right of Jews to live wherever they wish must be defended. Harried and ridiculed, she triumphs through her dignity and her stubbornness. It was a fine performance indeed.

The play is a powerful one, even if somewhat wordy and static. In a small theatre and with a good cast, as here, it is compelling and involving. Perhaps the final words should be Allen's, from Scott's summation:

"If our remorse for what happened to the Jews is to have any meaning, must we not tear out the roots of this evil and eradicate it completely so as to ensure that never again will a people be exterminated simply because they exist? If another major economic crisis occurs at some time in the future, can we with confidence assert that fascism will not arise again like a broken sewerage pipe disgorging its filth and corruption on society? Have we been given not a victory over Fascism, but a reprieve, a warning, a breathing space?"

It is a source of some satisfaction that Jim Allen lived long enough to see this, his contribution to that process, so well effected at last.

\* In 1944 Nazi-occupied Hungary, Kastner was a Labour Zionist leader and Jewish Agency official. He made an agreement with Adolf Eichmann—in return for keeping quiet about Auschwitz, a few of his relatives, friends and Labour Zionist associates would be released. After the war, journalist Malchiel Greenwald published an account of Kastner's squalid actions. Whereupon the Israeli Attorney General sued Greenwald for libel (Kastner was by now a spokesman for the Ministry of Trade and Industry). Although the court found in Greenwald's favour, this decision was reversed on appeal. By a majority verdict, the Israeli Supreme Court found that Kastner's actions were morally justifiable and convicted Greenwald of criminal libel for calling Kastner's actions "collaboration".

*The World Socialist Web Site will shortly publish an obituary of Jim Allen.*



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