

# *Jews. In Their Own Words: A propaganda play on ‘left anti-Semitism’*

By Jonathan Freedland, at the Royal Court Theatre, London

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*Guardian* journalist Jonathan Freedland’s first theatre work, *Jews. In Their Own Words*, is not a play. It is a propaganda performance to support “anti-Semitism” slanders against the socialist left.

The Royal Court Theatre in London, a venue with a history of groundbreaking theatre, has shamefully lent its artistic imprimatur to this campaign.

Even its supporters acknowledge that Freedland’s piece does not work as drama. That was not its purpose. Ostensibly an investigation of anti-Semitism, the piece is performed by seven actors from texts of a dozen interviews conducted by Freedland. The title gives an impression of some overview of Jewish opinion. Who is he kidding?

The dramatis personae is a roll call of conspirators in the right-wing campaign against Jeremy Corbyn and any left movement within and outside the Labour Party. Once Corbyn became party leader in 2015, the Blairite right moved urgently to destabilise his leadership. They wanted to prevent any possibility of a Corbyn-led government—fearing this would embolden millions of workers and youth opposed to austerity and war—and to justify a broader clampdown on the left, socialists especially.

Central to this coup—orchestrated with sections of the Conservatives, the media, military and intelligence establishments and agencies of the Israeli government—were denunciations levelled against Corbyn and all left-wing opposition to Israel’s brutal suppression of the Palestinians conflating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

This was focused on demands that Labour accept and act on the International Holocaust Remembrance Association’s revised definition of anti-Semitism, which explicitly branded political criticism of the activity of the Israeli state, above all its policies towards the Palestinians, as anti-Semitic.

Two publications were key. The *Jewish Chronicle* provides the most naked support for Israel but has been regularly criticised by press regulators for its editorial inaccuracy and distortions.

The *Guardian* acted as the campaign’s more “sober” house organ, with Freedland its linchpin. Ahead of the 2019 election,

Freedland expressed his “dread” of Corbyn in Downing Street. He discussed Corbyn in terms reminiscent of the rise of fascism, saying that “Britain’s Jews ... for the first time in their history, have concluded that someone hostile to them is on the brink of taking democratic power.”

Freedland spoke for a layer of exposed ex-liberals more worried by movement to the left than by the growth of the right. On stage we see a chart of rising anti-Semitic attacks, for example, but solely in the context of criticism of Corbyn. Jewish people facing attacks from the far right are politically disarmed. The growth of far-right racist violence receives nothing like the attention afforded to alleged “left anti-Semitism.” One speaker even says, “We accept it [anti-Semitism] when it comes from the far right, but not from your own party.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* is a trenchant political opponent of Corbyn, but accusations that he is a racist are risible. In 2016, even Freedland acknowledged that—“No one accuses [Corbyn] of being an anti-Semite.” Yet three years later, alarmed at a possible Corbyn government, he joined the campaign branding Corbyn a facilitator of anti-Jewish hate.

Actor Tracy-Ann Oberman had previously suggested to Royal Court artistic director Vicky Featherstone a play about “anti-Semitism on the left.” Oberman, a virulent anti-Corbynite, recently had to pay substantial damages and apologise to an academic for falsely accusing him of anti-Semitism. On stage this elicits a handwringing: “I made a mistake.”

Such accusations were not confined to Labour, but also used to threaten cultural organisations into toeing the line—the Royal Court included. The theatre came under renewed pressure for hosting works like Caryl Churchill’s response to the 2009 bombardment of Gaza, *Seven Jewish Children*, and for last year’s *Rare Earth Mettle* by Al Smith.

Smith’s play featured a predatory billionaire capitalist character, resembling Elon Musk, who wants simultaneously to solve the climate crisis and increase his profits by building electric cars. The character was named Hershel Fink.

There was an immediate outcry at this stupid use of a Jewish

name for a malevolent billionaire (the character was not Jewish). Soon afterwards Featherstone contacted Freedland to act on Oberman's earlier suggestion. The result is this long-planned smear piece against "left anti-Semitism."

Freedland's piece is a cavalcade of anti-Corbyn plotters. It features MPs Margaret Hodge and Luciana Berger, both prominent in the Jewish Labour Movement (JLM). JLM, a pro-Israel Labour affiliate that was refounded and reorganised to oppose Corbyn, is affiliated to the Board of Deputies (BoD) of British Jews and the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland.

This is less *Jews. In Their Own Words* than *JLM. In Its Own Words*.

Hodge led repeated provocations against Corbyn. She triggered the failed 2016 right-wing putsch against him with a motion of no confidence, later screaming in his face "You're a fucking anti-Semite and a racist!"

She compared conditions *inside the Labour Party* to "what it felt like to be a Jew in Germany in the '30s." Her émigré father had said, "You've got to keep a packed suitcase at the door Margaret, in case you ever have got to leave in a hurry."

Luciana Berger was also prominently involved in attempts by the Parliamentary Labour Party to remove Corbyn, leading to a no-confidence motion being levelled against her by her own constituency party.

Four far-right figures have been convicted of racially abusing Berger, including neo-Nazi National Action supporters. But the focus of her criticisms was always Corbyn and his supporters. She outrageously implied that her constituency party's anger was motivated by the same right-wing hatred. Berger later joined the Liberal Democrats.

Hannah Rose, a former president of the Union of Jewish Students, is another speaker here. She also left Labour rather than risk a Corbyn victory. Her sister Ella, a former JLM director who worked at the Israeli embassy, collaborated with Shai Masot, an embassy spy trying to discredit pro-Palestinian politicians and destabilise government figures seen as hostile to Israel.

The script defers throughout to Dave Rich of the Community Security Trust (CST), a charity which provides advice on identifying anti-Semitism. CST has close links to pro-Israel groups associated with leading anti-Corbynites.

Rich is the author of *The Left's Jewish Problem: Jeremy Corbyn, Israel and Anti-Semitism* (2016), taken from his CST-funded doctoral thesis.

The coup's line is reinforced by fellow thinkers like Oberman and novelist Howard Jacobson, who campaigned against Corbyn from outside Labour, having voted Liberal Democrat to oppose Brexit.

In 2017, *Jewish News* reported "groans" when Jacobson told a meeting there was reason to believe there would be a Labour government by the end of that year. He was speaking alongside Joan Ryan, of Labour Friends of Israel, and right-wing Labour

MPs integrally involved in anti-Corbyn plotting, like John Mann, to ensure that did not happen.

Freedland also presents the *Financial Times* journalist Stephen Bush, a supporter of Blairite Andy Burnham's 2010 campaign for Labour leadership and chair of the BoD's racial inclusivity commission. Echoing Hodge's slanders, Bush speaks of a 19th-century equivalence drawn between money, capitalism and Jews, in order to attack socialist analysis at the time "when Marx was writing."

Freedland only moves outside those plotting against Corbyn and the left to legitimise their smears and slanders further. We have Edwin Shuker, a member of the BoD, which states authoritatively and misleadingly on its website that "We are the voice of the UK Jewish community."

We have a pseudonymised Talmudist, who sums up the argument: "Zion is Jerusalem, it is home," therefore "We have no other story." On this basis, "We are all Zionists," and false accusations of anti-Semitism once again have free rein.

As Abram Leon, author of the Marxist study *The Jewish question*, noted, "like all nationalisms and even more intensely—Zionism views the historic past in the light of the present ... [It] tries to create the myth of an eternal Judaism, eternally the prey of the same persecutions."

None of those championing Freedland's piece has any illusions about its qualities, which are not the point. What matters is its political intent, with enthusiastic descriptions like "leftie mea culpa" (*Daily Telegraph*) and "an act of penance" (*Times*).

This is underscored by the renewed attacks on Churchill. Jacobson, who led the charge in 2009, repeats his abuse here, calling her play "mediaeval."

The political slander is directed at Churchill's criticism of Israeli policy and her attempt to trace the ideological route from the horrors of the Holocaust to the repression of the Palestinians. Her title is attacked for referring to "Jewish" children, not "Israeli" or "Zionist." This is how the slander works.

Reviewing Freedland's play in the *Jewish Chronicle*, John Nathan described Churchill's "humanitarian response to the atrocious death of Palestinians in Gaza" as "itself inhumane." He called this "humanitarian response" a "10-minute crime against humanity."

To get to that debased point requires a systematic campaign against any left movement of workers and youth. Freedland and the Court have given that campaign what Nathan describes as "undoubtedly ... a moment in the battle against Left-wing antisemitism."



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