

## A Family Torn Apart by Imminent Peace

Theater J's Shattering 'Pangs of the Messiah'

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The corrosive effects of perpetual crisis wear almost as meaningfully on an audience as they do on the characters of "Pangs of the Messiah," Motti Lerner's heated and ultimately heartbreaking portrait of a besieged Jewish settlement on the West Bank.

The time in which this provocative Israeli playwright sets his drama is a few years into the future, but the scenario he unfolds feels entwined with the tragic here and now. In the play, at the Goldman Theater, a peace accord is about to be signed in Washington between the Israeli government and the Palestinians that will cede the West Bank to a formal state of Palestine -- a change that will mean the enforced removal of Shmuel (Michael Tolaydo) and his fellow settlers from the hilly enclave to which they have dedicated their lives.

Lerner lays out the spectrum of passionate reactions within Shmuel's circle to convulsive, swiftly evolving political events in ways that give intriguing complexity to a people and a movement often painted as a monolithic cadre of occupiers. The playwright's tale is apocalyptic rather than sympathetic -- it's about the inexorable pull of extremism, and the amplification of suffering to which radical beliefs inevitably lead.

Yet, regardless of your preconceptions, Lerner compels you to see not only the array of viewpoints on the side of the Israeli settlers but also the faces. The play is a visit with those who reside in the vicinity of doom, in a neighborhood that seems both sun-kissed and cursed.

Director Sinai Peter's splendid production for Theater J -- featuring sharply drawn performances by, among others, Tolaydo, Laura Giannarelli as Shmuel's wife, Amalia, and Alexander Strain as their fragile son, Nadav -- marks the play's first performance in English, according to the company. (The fine translation is by Anthony Berris.) Lerner wrote it in Hebrew 20 years ago, when its title was "Waiting for the Messiah"; in addition to modifying the title, he has updated events and specified the year as 2012.

However, the fictional political developments he describes in "Pangs of the Messiah," as reported throughout by the voice of an actual newsman, Dan Raviv, never seem outlandish. (That the play holds up after two decades speaks as much as anything to the intractability of the issues it examines.) In contrast to Lerner's fascinating if hyperbolic "Murder of Isaac," a piece set in a post-traumatic-stress ward among the disabled veterans of all of Israel's wars -- and which had an American premiere last year at Baltimore's Center Stage -- "Pangs" frames its arguments in fairly sober and naturalistic terms.

The setting is the sleek hilltop home of Shmuel, a rabbi and a leader of the settlement, who, Lerner suggests, is the embodiment of a paradox: He's both spiritual and practical. He's enough of a moderate to be on speaking terms with Israel's conciliatory-seeming prime minister, yet sufficiently devout in his investment in a Jewish state that includes the West Bank.

As the prospects for the peace agreement intensify, so do the fissures in Shmuel's family; the settlers appear to be more furious at their own government than at their Arab neighbors. Hard-liners such as Shmuel's son Avner (John Johnston) and son-in-law Benny (Joel Reuben Ganz) -- the latter having been in prison for killing Palestinians with roadside bombs -- agitate for resistance against the Israeli army, while Avner's wife, Tirtzah (Becky Peters), argues vehemently against any kind of violence.

Caught in the middle are the innocents, such as Strain's tenderly rendered Nadav, a simple soul who is joyously engaged in the building of his own home, and who does not quite grasp the huge moral and political implications that this normally mundane activity has acquired.

The ideal audience for "Pangs" might be one with some familiarity with Israeli politics. Sorting out the ideological branches of Shmuel's family tree becomes a bit labored in Lerner's more schematic first act. We learn, for instance, that Avner and Tirtzah have just arrived from Washington, where Avner had some role representing the settlers' interests. It takes some time, too, to understand all the facets of Shmuel's responsibilities in a community fragmenting over the potential peace treaty.

But these concerns are allayed in the second act, as the momentum of outside events accelerates and Shmuel must try to reconcile the precepts of his faith with the struggle over his settlement's destiny.

Set designer Kinereth Kisch picturesquely realizes Shmuel's world: a living room full of glass and light overlooking a handsome valley of modern houses. In bright costumes by Dalia Penn that look as if they were inspired by citrus groves, the family members shuffle in and out in nonstop rotation, coming to rest only when the flickering of a TV news broadcast catches their eyes. It's as if their nerves are so frayed that they cannot bear to engage one another for more than a few minutes at a time.

The director and actors bring Shmuel's family to vibrant life, from Lindsay Haynes's terrific Chava, broken by worry that husband Benny will return to a life of terrorism, to Giannarelli's excellent Amalia, wed as much to a man's religious dream as the man himself. Ganz, Johnston, Peters and Norman Aronovic contribute solidly. And the exceptional Tolaydo takes us resonantly with him on Shmuel's path from adroit mover and shaker to anguished bystander.

While it might be helpful to know something about the Middle East at the outset of "Pangs of the Messiah," Lerner's shattering conclusion requires no information at all. It's the universal handbook of human frailty that is his poignant guide, and ours.

*Pangs of the Messiah*, by Motti Lerner. Directed by Sinai Peter. Lighting, Martha Mountain; composer, Hannah Hakohen; sound, Clay Teunis. About 2 hours 15 minutes. At Goldman Theater, D.C. Jewish Community Center, 1529 16th St. NW. Call 800-494-TDKS or visit <http://www.boxofficetickets.com>.



Photography by Stan Barouh