

British Theatre Guide

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Shalom Baby

Rikki Beadle-Blair

Theatre Royal Stratford East

(2011)

Set in both the Berlin of the Third Reich and present day Brooklyn, *Shalom Baby* is about two Jewish families, their stories told in parallel, and at the heart of both a Jewish mother.

In a Berlin where Jewish lives are already being restricted by new legislation, Frau Hanna Weissmann is looking for a *Shabbos Goy*. That's Yiddish, as she explains to the black candidate who turns up, for a gentile gentleman who helps a Jewish family on the Sabbath (when their faith prevents them undertaking various activities). Ike of African parentage but German born, wonders whether the dinner he will share as his reward will be substantial. "I'm a mother and I'm Jewish," Hanna replies. In this first scene Beadle-Blair explains things some of the audience won't understand, establishes that it is five years since Hitler became Chancellor, launches two distinctive characters, points the direction the play may take in treatment of those who are different and adds a sense of humour. Not bad for the first few minutes!

Writing and production, staged on a traverse, the floor painted with dancing silhouettes and the stage side of the auditorium with a black sky of moons and six-pointed stars, deftly plot the successions of scenes so that characters in one period are played by a matching character in the other, the sequence punctuated by 'Poetry Slams' in which each of the contemporary characters has a rap-like soliloquy. It even risks a dream sequence and quirkily and movingly pulls it off.

It is about tolerance and intolerance, prejudice, ethnicity, tradition, hope and love, pride and pain, guilt even, yet manages not to be preachy. Only for a couple of moments do characters begin to sound like mouthpieces, that's partly because these are such an interesting group of people, of each of whom it gradually reveals more. Whether under attack on Kristalnacht or searching for hidden drugs in an artist's studio these seem quirkily real people.

There is a fine performance from Nathan Cough as the black who wanted to join Hitler Youth and then falls in love with a Jewish girl, his paired role very different as quick-witted, fast-talking music business manager. Both moms are played by Mandy Fenton, one quiet and devoted to her brood, the other a smooth operator in the art world despite seeming rather scatty. Having led a hectic, multi-liaison lifestyle she is now trying to draw her family together.

Eldest son in Berlin who was a young communist thinks his fellow Jews are spineless. Richard Simons makes him likeable as well as admirable, until his prejudices spill out with an equal passion. In Brooklyn he seems quite different as a junky, but the pattern is the same, reaction to his own hopes and ideals being thwarted. His gentle sister in Berlin, a sparky sibling in the Brooklyn family is another distinctive double from Katie Borland. The younger, studious brother in both households turns out to be gay, very understated in Berlin but though more open facing prejudice of a different kind in Brooklyn. It is Tom Ross-Williams' performance, restrained until it comes to cracking point, that makes the closest bridge between the two families.

Then there are the outsiders: a persecuted Roma boy in Berlin and a Sarajevo orphan adopted by Brooklyn Jews. Kyle Treslove makes the first a terrified ghost hiding behind the dustbins, his budding artist orphan much more knowing. The real outsider is the Aryan son of the man who intends to marry Frau Weissmann who separates himself from the family donning new behaviour with his uniform; Toby Wharton plays him as a gentle character. But his counterpart is a would-be rap artist who has alienated himself from his own society, with a whole kitbag of hang-ups and his fiery antagonistic vitality helps drive the play, his self-revelation giving it its final high note. There is life after the holocaust.

Shalom Baby is a very formally structured play that could easily seem self-conscious. Beadle-Blair's own production and the sincerity of the performances ensure it doesn't and it throbs with life.

"Shalom Baby" runs at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East until 19th November 2011

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)