

Golda's Balcony: Getting It Wrong

Dramatic works based upon historical events sometimes twist reality into an unrecognizable opposite well beyond what can be justified by legitimate theatrical license. No one expects what transpires on stage to be a strictly faithful account, but it is going too far to have George Washington support monarchy or Abraham Lincoln support slavery.

Playwright William Gibson comes uncomfortably close to upending truth on this scale in a one-woman portrayal of Golda Meir, a major figure in the Zionist movement that led to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 as what Britain's Balfour Declaration in 1917 promised would be "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." Meir as a child with her family escaped the murderous persecution of Jews in Czarist Russia and immigrated to the United States. She became a committed Zionist and married in 1917 on condition that the newlywed couple immigrate to Palestine, although World War I and its aftermath delayed their departure until 1921. Causing her personal distress and guilt, her husband and children became lesser priorities as she accepted increasing public responsibilities and became a part of the inner circle of the Israeli government for decades, serving as foreign minister from 1956 to 1966 and prime minister from 1969 to 1974.

Gibson conducted a series of interviews with Meir and from those developed a play, *Golda*, that ran on Broadway from November 1977 to February 1978, closing a few months before her death in December 1978. That play, with dozens of characters and a conventional structure, proved a flop. Only in 2002 at the age of 88 did Gibson rework his play into a one-woman format, presenting for the most part a nuanced and sensitive portrait of a woman who was one of the most widely known and recognizable international leaders of her era, a hard-edged diplomat whose political talents were often masked by her public image as the kindly grandmother of the Israeli state.

Despite a masterful and inspiring performance by Sandra Laub almost perfectly replicating the physical appearance, distinctive accent, and plain speaking for which Golda Meir was renowned, Gibson's very intense and entertaining play goes off the rails in choosing to frame the story around long-standing rumors that, as Israel faced existential destruction from invading Arab armies in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Meir threatened first use of nuclear weapons to blackmail American President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger into providing emergency shipments of arms and munitions needed to save Israel from destruction. Indeed, the play's title *Golda's Balcony* is explicitly said to refer to an observation point within the Israeli nuclear facility at Dimona.

The rumor that Meir was willing to trigger a nuclear apocalypse and start World War III was first reported by *Time* in 1976 based upon an anonymous source and given considerably more credence by journalist Seymour Hersh in 1991, although Hersh is notoriously unreliable on this and other matters. Nor is there any evidence for Gibson's implication that Nixon and Kissinger intentionally delayed critical aid to Israel after the Arab attack; the more plausible explanation is that America fell victim to the same combination of incompetence and overconfidence that led Israel to be taken by surprise in the first place. With Nixon preoccupied by the Watergate scandal, top aides including Kissinger and Chief of Staff Alexander Haig were worried about his mental health and often avoided telling him what was going on. When the Arab attack came and Kissinger was awakened by telephone and notified around 6am, historian Robert Dallek cites official telephone logs showing that Kissinger delayed calling Nixon for over three hours for fear of waking him. In the early days of the war, Kissinger, who at that point

had been Secretary of State for only two weeks, convened the National Security Council to ask for military aid to Israel, but was opposed by the Defense Department and the rest of his own State Department because they were convinced that the Israelis would have the situation well under control and did not need the help.

According to Avner Cohen who is the leading expert on this incident, the best evidence of what really happened is that under pressure by the military - and especially by panicked Israeli Defence Minister Moshe Dayan - to authorize a nuclear first strike, Meir actually resisted and refused to do it, backed by other members of the war cabinet. According to Victor Israelian, who at the time was a senior diplomat in the Russian Foreign Ministry, it was ironically Kissinger and Haig who, intending to send a message discouraging intervention in the Middle East by the Soviet Union, almost accidentally started a nuclear conflagration when, late in the Yom Kippur War without telling Nixon, they ordered American forces to the highest state of peacetime alert. Fortunately, the alarmed Russians declined to respond similarly and the crisis was defused.

There is undeniable dramatic tension in supposing Israel, whose reason for being was the killing of millions of innocent civilians in the Holocaust, ready to kill millions of civilians in Arab lands in a holocaust from a nuclear first strike, but this ethical precipice that forms the core of the play is a lie.

Golda's Balcony at Contemporary Theatre Company, 327 Main St, Wakefield. Thu (4/16), Fri (4/17), Sat (4/18), 7pm. Includes mature content, including subject matter not appropriate for anyone under 12. Tickets: contemporarytheatercompany.com/box-office/ or 401.218.0282.

Sources:

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<http://www.csmonitor.com/1993/1103/03191.html>