"I Want to Create a European-Jewish-British Theatre Where Women Have a New Role": An Interview with Julia Pascal

By Tina Wald, University of Cologne, Germany with assistance of Johanna Hauke and Chrissula Kalpaki, University of Cologne

Julia Pascal was born in Manchester, the granddaughter of Romanian and the great-granddaughter of Lithuanian Jews. After studying dance as a child she moved into theatre and was trained as an actor at El5 Acting School. After four years work in theatre, TV and film she read English at London University. After graduation, she joined the National Theatre where she became the first woman director with her adaptation of Dorothy Parker's writings, the Platform Performance *Men Seldom Make Passes* which ran over two years. She became Associate Director of The Orange Tree Theatre for a year directing plays by Fay Weldon, Bertolt Brecht, Alfonso Vallejo and Howard Brenton.

She formed *Pascal Theatre Compan*y and produced plays by Seamus Finnegan, Karim Alrawi, Thomas Brasch, Melanie Phillips, Carole Rumens and Yana Stajno. As a playwright she has written *Theresa*, which deals with the Channel Islands' occupation, *A Dead Woman on Holiday* set in The Nuremberg Trials and *The Dybbuk*, a new take on Anski's version. These three formed *The Holocaust Trilogy* which were produced at The New End Theatre. Other plays set in World War Two are *Year Zero*, *Woman in the Moon* and *The Yiddish Queen Lear*. Her adaptation of *The Golem* has been presented to young people and her *St Joan* was a response to the French National Front's presentation of Joan as a racist icon. All her plays are published by Oberon Books. Her radio play *The Road To Paradise* was broadcast on BBC Radio 4. *Crossing Jerusalem*, set in the second intifada, was commissioned by The Tricycle Theatre and produced in spring 2003. Julia's next play is set in the Muslim communities of Lancashire and is commissioned by The Bush Theatre.

Julia Pascal on Directing

Tina Wald: You are not only a writer but also an actress and a director. When did you first discover your interest in theatre and how did it develop?

Julia Pascal: When I was a child I used to do a lot of ballet and I wanted to be dancer, so I think it started at that moment. I went to Drama school and worked as an actor for four years, always playing foreigners - very boring - or prostitutes or drug dealers - so limiting. And little by little I realised that I was on the wrong side. I thought maybe I'm a director but I didn't

know how to become a director. There were very few women directors in that period and there were no schools of directing. So I went to university at twenty-four as a mature student. I read English at London University between twenty-four and twenty-seven and then I went back into acting at the National Theatre - playing again foreigners, playing a Russian revolutionary military part in a play about Russian Revolution. But at the same time I was actually in my finals. So it was a very heady moment, we were rehearsing in the afternoon, playing at night on tour and I was studying to three or four in the morning. It was a very stimulating period in my late twenties. When I was at the National Theatre I asked if I could direct something. So I compiled *Men Seldom Make Passes* from Dorothy Parker's writing, which became a Platform Performance. I discovered I was the first woman to direct at the National, so I got some press, which was sort of good and bad for me. The so-called liberal male directors such as Peter Hall and Trevor Nunn resented that this publicity exposed how male-dominated theatre directing was. They ran the two main theatre flagships at the time: The National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company. My exposé of how few women worked as directors embarrassed them. After the National Theatre I went to the Orange Tree Theatre, which is a pub theatre in Richmond. There I learned the business of running a theatre. I learned to do budgets, to direct plays and to promote new writing.

Then in l983 I founded my own company PASCAL THEATRE COMPANY and got into raising money, directing plays, finding writers; at that time there was a lot of money for New Writing. Today I'm writing much more and rather hate having to find money. I'm beginning to pull out of producing. I'm getting commissions for other companies who employ me as a writer, which is sad in a way because it means that I direct less, which I miss.

TW: What is the difference between directing your own plays and directing other writers' plays?

JP: When you are directing your own, you can insult the writer much more easily, "you wrote this? It's shit, get rid of it." You can't do that with other writers; you always have to consult them. When it is your own you know the journey you've made and you can see quite fast what does not work once you rehearse the piece. I think it is also very useful that I've been an actor. I see when the actors are struggling with the text and I can reconsider the writing when I think that it is not quite right at this point.

I've never directed a Shakespeare. When I started directing I realised that outside of the main subsidised theatres it was very hard for younger directors to direct the classics

because money was focused on contemporary drama. So there is a hole, a gaping hole in my directing experience. For instance, I would love to do *The Merchant of Venice*, which is the trickiest play in the world to me. I was just in Venice and I thought: I know how to do it. But the RSC or the National are not going to be interested in me because I haven't been doing that before. So there are areas of frustration as well.

TW: Have you ever seen one of your plays directed by somebody else?

JP: Yes, I saw a student production of *The Dybbuk* that was extraordinary. It was marvellous. Very visual. They used ladders to create those images of bodies that we see in newsreels of the liberation of Belsen or Auschwitz. Sam Boardman-Jacobs, the director had a woman just sliding down the ladder. That was terrific. They did it in Wales and they used a lot of Yiddish singing in it, although all of the actors were Welsh and in no way biographically connected to the Jewish experience. That was the most extraordinary. For them, it meant something else, because also the Welsh culture had been oppressed and was dying. It was exciting; I liked it. Sam later produced and directed the Holocaust Trilogy with his students at the University of Glamorgan and he was highly inventive with the staging. He had twenty-five people on stage whereas I did the plays with five. He has great vision and empathy for the period and that gave his productions an acute insight. I've seen other productions of other plays. I haven't quite understood what was going on, but never mind. What can you do! There have been student productions in the U.S., which I have not seen.

TW: You just mentioned that you were the first female director at the National Theatre when you did *Men Seldom Make Passes* in 1978 and that back then there weren't many female directors in general. Has this changed? What is it like to be a woman director today?

JP: It has changed very slightly, very little. You get women in every position but in general women are still on the fringe. What has happened since then is that more women are going to television and film because the independent production companies have been brought into the main TV and cinema arena. The market is open there, but not in theatre. There has been a huge move towards diversity in the founding of theatre work. So the Arts Council, which is the main funder, is putting a lot of money towards getting black companies and black directors in. That area has been encouraged. But in terms of women any push towards 50/50 equality is considered unimportant, which I find pretty shocking. I've written about it

enormously in the press and I don't know what else to do except create work and perhaps be a model to others and encourage other women.

It is very hard to promote yourself. If you work on the fringe it's difficult to get the best critics. I didn't insist on directing *Crossing Jerusalem*, which I could have done, because I knew that if they brought in an older male director, the old male critics would find that much more respectable, and of course they did. That's the system. I should say that I was delighted with my director on *Crossing Jerusalem.* Jack Gold, who is known best as a film director, was very supportive of the work and worked in very close collaboration. I have no problems working with an established male director as long as trust and respect is there. In this case this was certainly the case. Also the play was initially backed by The Tricycle Theatre's Artistic director Nicolas Kent, who pushed me as a writer. These experiences were challenging and positive. However it is very hard for women to get major funding in the subsidised theatre and, currently, all the major flagships are headed by men.

Funding women's work in the theatre is a problem: unlike black and Asian work, it's not on the top of anyone's agenda. As for the women themselves, it is distressing to note that they are fractured and form no pressure group. Black practitioners have harried the Arts Funding bodies but women never have. They are frightened of being ostracised and that's what actually happens. Back in the l980s I got a letter from Trevor Nunn telling me I would never work for the Royal Shakespeare Company, for articles I had written in the press about sexual apartheid in the subsidised theatre. Speaking out means possible blacklisting. Nunn's letter threatened my future employment.

TW: Had you explicitly criticised the RSC in these articles?

JP: Yes. Because it is a state-subsidised company and it is headed by men who believed themselves to be great liberals, but in fact they did and do continue to appoint younger versions of themselves. It is very male, very patriarchal. They bring in a woman director from time to time but they are still a minority. Men are considered good for directing productions with big budgets. The power still remains in the hands of men. There are exceptions, of course. Genista McIntosh, the former administrator of the National Theatre used to be a very powerful woman. She was one of the few. These prejudices against women are unconscious but deeply rooted within the British system. Theatre comes from the church, another male preserve. In comparison to the state-subsidised companies, the commercial theatre is much easier for women, because commercial theatre doesn't mind if you are a dog, a giraffe, or a

woman. They don't care, it's just about making money - whereas the state-subsidised theatre has its own censorship. And women have flourished more in television, film and radio because these are newer media. There isn't this church-holy-place-feeling about that. Theatre in Britain and I would say internationally has an unspoken political agenda. There is little solidarity amongst the women, which is really painful because they are mainly white middle-class women who don't know enough about solidarity and collective action. When the big debates did happen, there was a point in the 1980s when sectarianism was on the agenda. During the conference of women theatre directors and administrators, one woman suggested buying a theatre in the West-End and getting Princess Diana as a patron. I said: "No, it's crazy. We have this state system; we should demonstrate or go on strike because more than 50 percent of the audience are women." The Arts Council shouldn't fund theatres that don't move towards 50 percent or affirmative action. But affirmative action is not a British way of life, it's an American one. There is tremendous apathy and laissez-faire here. It's very hard to get any sort of movement against the status quo. As a result the same white male middle-aged or young, middle-class hierarchy from Oxford and Cambridge continues.

Julia Pascal on Producing Jewish Theatre in Britain

TW: What has changed in the Arts Council's policy concerning woman's theatre and Jewish-British theatre since Blair?

JP: Nothing at all. There is even more talk about "diversity," and more white middle-aged bureaucrats appointing people because they are black. It's ignorant and it's stupid. There is no long-term thinking on this issue. It's just: "We are guilty, we are white, we had the Empire. We throw money at black companies. Please go away!" The problem is, getting state subsidised money for Jewish work is almost impossible. The subtext to this is the belief that Jews are rich, therefore they don't deserve state subsidy. So I don't get Arts Council money to fund my projects. For instance, I had done my children play *The Golem* in multicultural schools and just applied for a grant from the Arts Council. It was turned down. The Arts Council told me to my face that "Jewish work is not a priority, black art is." I am all for black arts getting funding but so should all minorities. I've done black work and it was immediately funded. So it's not about the quality of the work, it's absolutely about the Arts Council's policy. And it's very frustrating. It's also somewhat out of date. Our newest, most disadvantaged immigrant population now comes from Eastern Europe, but the Arts Council has not pushed them to the top of the list. I do think liberal guilt about empire is the muddled

thinking behind these funding decisions. What is worse is that the Arts Council, which is a quango, is not a democratic institution. Nobody votes these people into power. They are known as "the great and the good" and they pick the causes that please them. All goes on behind closed doors and is very secret.

Julia Pascal on Acting

TW: You often collaborate with the actress Ruth Posner who survived the Warsaw Ghetto. How important is personal experience in a production of a Holocaust play? Is it difficult for actors with first hand experience to re-enact their experiences? Does it enhance the authenticity of the play?

JP: The answer is "yes, it is difficult" and "yes, it does enhance." For Ruth it was terribly difficult. The first play I did with her was *Theresa*. We worked with the German choreographer Thomas Kampe. And it was very tense to begin with. He said to her one day, "Where did you learn your German?" because she speaks really good German. She said "from the Germans" and the room went very quiet because of course that is how she learned it, hiding in Poland as an Aryan with a false passport. There was a problem for him in so far as he was playing the Jewish son in *Theresa* and various Nazis as well. He wouldn't do the Hitler salute for example. And I got up and said "Look, Thomas, you do it like that" and then I realised that of course he just couldn't do it for obvious reasons. It was very poignant watching him playing both Nazis and Jews. He obviously much preferred playing the Jew. You could feel that. So that means the baggage that people brought was terrible on one level, but wonderful on another because there was truth on stage. Theresa was a young woman when she came to Britain, she wasn't sixty - I changed it. I didn't want to cast a twenty-year old. I wanted to cast someone who had the actual experience in her body. For example, at the beginning of *Theresa* I play the "Blue Danube," and when we rehearsed that scene we spent a week just moving to it remembering her life. So it wasn't kitsch waltzing but it was about recovering Ruth's own war experiences. It was jagged and disturbing because the audience feels the experience through Ruth's body even if they cannot grasp it intellectually. Physicality is important for all my productions.

TW: Similarly, in your introduction to *Theresa* you state that Ruth Posner evokes the memory of Nazi occupation through her very presence. Can you elaborate on that? How can the audience sense her past?

JP: British audiences hear Ruth's Polish accent. I used some of her experience, such as little Polish songs from her childhood. In a way she has got an arrested development of someone who left at twelve; her Polish is that of a child but she is a woman, she is seventy. Somehow it transmits to the audience that there is a Polish child in the body of an older woman. They don't know exactly what it is all about, but they feel the strangeness, the "Verfremdungseffekt" if you like. There is something very European about someone who has come from Poland and lives in Britain. Ruth didn't have an English education until she was thirteen or fourteen. Until today she retained her Polishness, there is no way that that ever gets lost. I mean people always ask me where I am from. I was born here but I clearly transmit something that is not English because my grandparents who were Romanians brought me up. I don't know what that is, but it's not an "English framing" if you like. So similarly with Ruth, that's felt immediately. And I wanted that. It is a certain mood, a certain atmosphere about people.

Similarly with Thomas. He is not a polished actor but he is a wonderful dancer and performer and in fact he has a special knowledge because he has been brought up by Nazi teachers, he says, and his father was a real fascist. Thomas has struggled to deal with that and that struggle comes across on stage. If English actors played these roles, the tension would somehow dilute.

Julia Pascal on Writing: From Facts to Fiction

TW: You did a lot of research for all of your plays. Could you explain about the process of transforming your research into fiction?

JP: The research is the most exciting part. When I'm doing a new play, I think I could do research for the rest of my life. The act of moving from research to writing is pure hell I have to say. For instance for *Woman in the Moon*, I interviewed a lot of people who have been in Camp Dora. I ended up with ten monologues by men who had been there. It was extraordinary but I thought, "This isn't a play," the structure of a series of monologues is boring. At first I didn't know what to do with it. Then I read a lot about Wernher von Braun, and I started to read about science and moon landings and it took me somewhere else. I did not know how to connect all this. But suddenly I thought: "Well everything has a myth behind it. What's the myth? Is it Faust?" Like Faust, Wernher von Braun sells his soul to the devil for knowledge but he's never going to hell, he is going to the moon. And once I got that, it's Faust back to front because he doesn't die, he is celebrated. Once I got that I could write the play.

The starting point for writing is the finding of some sort of leitmotif or myth or fairy tale or some structure. That's the hardest and I'm in that stage at the moment with the next play. It was easy with *The Yiddish Queen Lear* because Shakespeare gave me the spine of the plot. With *Theresa* I knew she left Vienna, she came to London, she went to Guernsey, she was gassed in Auschwitz. In a way I knew the journey and then it was just a question of collaging different styles together.

In addition to this leitmotif, I have an idea of mood. For instance in *Theresa*, I knew I wanted to use English music hall as a style in the scene when Theresa comes to England. In the coffee house-scene, I wanted to express the Vienna Coffee House and the end of the Austrian Empire and sweetness and beauty and kitsch almost and then the brutality at the same time. So it's mood and taste and smell I go into and that determines the style.

TW: At what point and how do you decide what the style of a particular play will be like, whether it will be naturalistic or rather more experimental?

JP: Before you write it. And it's really hard for me to write naturalism, which is strange, because most people write naturalism first. But my reference is sideways: through imagery and music. It's very hard for me to discipline myself to go to beginning, middle and end, to think linearly.

And that's a debate we had amongst women in those conferences about "Do women write differently from men?" I don't think that women write differently from men but I think you make a choice to go that way or the other. So I'm sometimes forcing myself to do what I find a bit harder, a bit more difficult, which is writing linearly.

From Page to Stage

TW: When you start to rehearse the play, in how far do you collaborate with the actors? Do you revise the script during the rehearsal process according to their ideas?

JP: Certainly with the early plays and with *Theresa* and *Crossing Jerusalem* I did. Even before I started to rehearse *Crossing Jerusalem*, I made sure that quite a few Arab men read the Arab roles I had written. At one point they said, "No this isn't right, his brother would never speak to him like that. He is not giving him enough respect." I listened to that and then I changed it and made the character more respectful. That was very useful. So yes, I listen hard, you have to, especially if you write out of your own culture.

TW: Your plays always seem to end with complex and powerful images. Such as in *The Dybbuk*, where you note that in the final scene "the movement must be perpetual, symbolising the murder of six million but the effect must be of death and rebirth. You can kill a people, but you cannot kill their culture." How did you translate this notion into a stage image?

JP: I told the actors that they must not be victims, physically. Five actors were walking through a corridor of light and we used pops and costumes in a new way. For example, there were moments of breaking traditional Orthodox Jewish images such as women wearing men's prayer shawls. This was mixed with women tearing their hair, throwing up playing cards as if to mock fate or lifting men who were weak or ill. So you have the feeling of a crowd of people or extraordinary crazy things going on but as if each one came through the light another one is behind them. So when the light was very slowly fading you kept seeing people arriving and falling, arriving and falling. That is the ghost continuing in your brain. The image of the people falling and returning as the light disappears leaves an after image on the retina like a ghost, which goes back to the original first speech of *The Dybbuk* and reflects how I feel in Germany. I just came back from Prague and I feel the same thing. The ghosts are still there. I wanted to make the audience undergo a catharsis, to go out full rather than depressed. It is really hard to stop the actors going down into depression, particularly Ruth. I find that quite a struggle. I make them realise that they have to push out a ray of physical energy, which the audience feels. I want to show resistance and struggle, not the defeat of the Jews. Of course they were defeated but this is art and the fact that I am making this piece of theatre is an act of resistance against the Nazi annihilation machine. Also, working with a German like Thomas means that the work has resonance of unity between those who were made enemies.

TW: Your play *Woman in the Moon* ends with an impressive combination of visual and acoustic elements:

> Lights fade gradually as we hear a sound mix of St Matthew's Passion, the Internet, "you've got mail," The Apollo Moon landing in 1969, the countdown, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. We have lift off!!! which mix with the Mozart. The cast climb as if going into a rocket. There is smoke, giving the double image of people being gassed and people going to the moon.

Can these visual and acoustic elements transmit meaning which language is not able to? Is this an attempt to express the inexpressible?

JP: Yes, it's a sort of film. As you read it, it sounds like film to me. I like playing with different time zones. In the first scene I've got fifty people just crossing and wearing different clothes from the 40s to today. I love the idea that the past is the present. I have related today's mobile phones to what happened in l943 in Camp Dora. We are absolutely linked to that period even if we don't know it. I suppose young people today see Camp Dora as the Middle Ages, whereas I see it just on the back of my shoulders because I know the men who were there. So it is an attempt to bring it to the audience, to show them the latest work of the past and the present. Yes I think that is the joy with the theatre that you can do that.

TW: Music plays an important role in your plays. What criteria do you apply when choosing it?

JP: It's terribly emotional and coming from the gut. It's not that I have a great knowledge of music, it's coming from what I've heard and what speaks to me. Before I wrote *Woman in the Moon* I walked through my tiny flat about a thousand times playing "St Matthew's Passion." "St Matthew's Passion" evokes the great Christian iconography, and it is totally connected to all these Holocaust stories. I used it to bring in Christianity through music. Christianity is never mentioned in the text but the music places it right at the beginning to subliminally show a connection between the cruxification and the revenge circle which ended in the holocaust. I see the Holocaust as linked to the Catholic church's blaming of the Jews for the death of Jesus. The Protestant church was equally antisemitic during most of its history. So the beauty of "St Matthew's Passion" is seductive and critical.

TW: I had the impression that you don't only use music as language, but also language as music - especially when you use languages which most of the audience won't understand. Does every language have specific meaning to you?

JP: They have rhythm to me. I suppose it is like the rhythm of the heart, the rhythm of the brain. It is an important question to me what sort of English I use because it seems like either of Anglo-Saxon or of French root. My next play is about children of Pakistanian background and God knows what sort of English I'm going to use in a setting in Northern England. So that decision is huge to me in terms of musicality and the effect it has on the audience. I think it comes from hearing a lot of languages as a child, most of which I didn't understand. I must

have heard six languages growing up till the age of about eight, apart from English. I think that is the residual, the desire to plug into that and to give it back.

TW: Could you describe the difference between French and British English in terms of sound and rhythm?

JP: It is not merely a difference of sound and rhythm, it is an emotional difference. Anglo-Saxon English is tougher. If you want to do that (*claps her hands*) you use Anglo-Saxon, if you want to make it sweeter you use French. For instance when I did *The Dybbuk* I had to look at the original source, which is of course translated from Yiddish and I don't read Yiddish. So I looked at it in English translation, which is a very bad American 1950s one and I thought I don't want to use any of this. So I read a French one and translated it into English in order to include my own translation into my Dybbuk story where necessary. I wanted to get it closer to kaballah, to make it sound more mystic than the really tough Anglo-Saxon English. These are the decisions no audience is ever going to know but they will respond to the different choices I have made through the emotion of hearing French-based or Anglo-Saxon based English. I must have learnt this studying poetry as a schoolgirl and it comes back to me when I write now.

TW: How important are aspects of irony and humour in your plays?

JP: Humour is very important in my plays because Jewish humour is just part of my everyday life. Even when I interviewed survivors, humour came up in all areas. For example Jews from Eastern Europe like my family find German Jews a people apart. They are called "Yeckes" here. This expression is the Yiddish for jacket because German Jews even in a very hot climate - in Israel for example - would never take off their jackets. I have used this in a scene in *Theresa* when Theresa meets a German professor whom she momentarily takes to be her son. He is stiff and more German than the Germans, which is doubly funny and touching in a Jewish refugee who ends up working as a bellboy in a London hotel.

I often noticed that people come with a very serious attitude to my plays thinking it's going to be humourless political work. They are surprised when they start to laugh during the performance. I am always pleased as Jews got through some of the horrors by mocking it.

Julia Pascal on A Dead Woman on Holiday and her experience of cultural difference

TW: In *A Dead Woman on Holiday* you link the Nuremberg Trials to the love affair between Sophia and Paul. In your introduction to the play, you say that you meant to explore "the notion of a seemingly impossible love between people of two different cultures." Can you elaborate on the aspect of cultural differences in the play?

JP: I was not brought up in a religious family but in a family very conscious of being Jewish. My father was completely traumatised by the Holocaust. He had spent the war in India as doctor in the Army. He came back to England and learnt that his Lithuanian cousins had been murdered in a forest in 1941/1942. This had a huge effect on him in terms of marrying within our community. He used to tell me "Better you marry a Jew who beats you than a non-Jew who is nice to you." As a result of which I've rarely had an intimate relationship with a Jewish man. I had to deal with this incredible pressure as a young woman and now I'm very interested in other groups who have the same sort of pressure. With Thomas, my German choreographer, I can talk so easily about things that I can't talk about with my French husband for example because he hasn't come through the same story.

So it is terribly complex and I guess you're attracted to the opposite. I am interested in that reaching out across cultures and I think this struggle is in *A Dead Woman on Holiday*. The fight that Mark Twain expressed when he evoked the idea of tired old Europe and the new Eden of America are hinted at within the characters and experiences of Paul and Sophia. I think Sophia is a fierce character and a damaged person. This duality between Europe and the U.S. is also in the play through Dee Dee. She represents the American who is unable to imagine the European bloodbath of the twentieth century because of her experience of living in such a secure society as was the U.S. in the forties. I wanted to look at the American-European division between the New World and the Old. I guess it's a personal quest but I think it has resonance for many people. As for the central story which asks who is the correct partner in life and should he or she have the same culture and history - well, this is an eternal dilemma for all of us. These are the big questions for me. It's an exploration; I have no answer.

TW: *A Dead Woman on Holiday* ends with a complex image: "Spot on the shape of the German Woman smoking a cigarette. Let the smoke be prominent as a reminder of the smoke of six million. Paul and Sophia move towards one another as the lights fade to blackout." Could you comment on this juxtaposition of images of a love affair and the Holocaust?

JP: I think we have to love each other or we die. I'm interested in the love affair between Germans and Jews and Gentiles and Jews in Germany and Middle-Europe. Hitler came in 1933, but before 1933 we had this extraordinary connection and collaboration of Jews and Gentiles in art and elsewhere. In a way I miss that but maybe I have a romanticised idea of how it was before 1933. In a recent reportage I was affected to hear one Jewish survivor say, "We loved the Germans but they didn't love us."

Perhaps this final image also has to do with my father's generation. He was certainly psychologically damaged by what happened in the Holocaust even though his experience was not direct. It made me focus on those who have suffered from the Holocaust without being in a concentration camp; people who suffered by extension if you like. It became very interesting for me to think of that generation and of us, their children. Because I know a lot of children of real survivors. I don't think I'm a child of a survivor at all, but I know children of survivors and grand children of survivors who are still suffering the effects of the previous generation. I think today's wars are still about *that war*. I don't see the Middle East or Iraq as something separate. I certainly see it as an extension of the Second World War.

Julia Pascal on *The Yiddish Queen Lear* and the female reassessment of Jewish tradition

TW: In your introduction to *The Yiddish Queen Lear* you explain that "Looking at a Queen Lear rather than a king gave me the chance to explore a non-traditional Jewish family where greed, selfishness, promiscuity and ambition could be explored from the female point of view." Could you elaborate on your use of a female point of view in your remake of Shakespeare's *King Lear?*

JP: I suppose there have been very few plays about Jewish women where they are not just stereotypes. What I want to do with all my work is to create a European, a Jewish, a British theatre where women have a new role, where they're not just stereotypes. Esther, the Yiddish Queen Lear, does not represent the cliché of the young beautiful Jewess; she is a monstrous character. I said to the actors I wanted monstrous people because that's what those actors I wrote about had been. They had been egotistic, rude, and ambitious. I enjoyed writing Jewish actresses because their very profession was provocative. Jewish women were not supposed to go on the stage. It was considered a really promiscuous thing - however, there were a few Jewish actresses. I was thinking of a particular woman who had a Yiddish theatre in Warsaw.
I never wanted to create idealised sweet Jews; I wanted to show them as bad and as mischievous as everybody else. I also found Esther very attractive on stage as a character. In

Crossing Jerusalem I have another horrendous middle-aged woman. So I wanted to just break the mould of Jewish mothers and present something newer and challenging.

TW: In your introduction to *The Yiddish Queen Lear* you mention that as a girl you weren't allowed to go to your grandmother's funeral and that this prohibition came as a suprise to you. Can you elaborate on the role of women in the Jewish community in general?

JP: My family was not orthodox; they were observant but great Zionists. I think that was a Holocaust reaction. So, I was brought up as an ordinary British girl in an ordinary British school. I didn't go to Jewish schools, but my father made it very clear that education was not for women and after school I should maybe get a job or get married fast and have children.
The role of women never really hit me till this funeral, when suddenly my grandmother's house was full of men with big hats that I had never seen before. And the mirrors were covered with sheets, so that you wouldn't see the angel of death in the mirror. I mean, it's all this East European superstition, I don't think it's anywhere in Jewish law. And suddenly, the cars were ready and I put my coat on and I was told: "Oh, you don't, you stay in the house. Women don't go to the funeral." And I said: "Why not?" It is assumed that women will make a fuss. It comes back from the old country: Women would tear their hair, scream and shout and throw themselves on the grave. I think it's a relic of that. I'm not sure it's true of all Jewish practice. I've heard of many others where women do go to funerals in Reform Judaism.
I insisted on going to my grandmother's funeral and it was very important to go.

Julia Pascal on Theresa and her reconsideration of British national identity

TW: Your play *Theresa* sheds an unusually critical light on the British role in the Second World War. Did you have any troubles in producing and staging the play for that reason?

JP: Yes, it's critical of the British. I had trouble selling *Theresa*, to begin with, when I rang up theatres and said: "This is about the Channel Islands and their collaboration with the Nazis," and they said: "We don't believe that happened." It wasn't public knowledge back in 1990, but now it has entered the public domain. When I started researching I found a photograph showing a British policeman bowing to a Nazi. Even I found it shocking when I saw the photograph. It's disturbing because the mythology is that the British are the good guys, that they would never behave this way, and yet they did. So it has a terribly difficult resonance when it is played in Britain. The play is still banned in Guernsey. This is because I reveal the

name of the Bailiff, a major collaborator and because the children of this Bailiff, and his grandchildren, are still in power. And so it is still hushed up. Instead of being hanged, the Bailiff was knighted. This is British hypocrisy. They covered up the level of collaboration on Guernsey and Jersey because the war was over and it was important to move on and hide the real history. Today there are still files which are hidden from the public.

Julia Pascal on *Crossing Jerusalem* and her experience of staging the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

TW: You already mentioned your new play *Crossing Jerusalem*, in which you focus on the conflict between Israel and Palestine. How do you portray this conflict?

JP: Through the Israeli family. I took twenty-four hours in the life of this Israeli family. The mother is an estate agent, which has got huge symbolic meaning because if you are dealing property in Israel, then who owned the property before 1948? The family gathers at her office and when they are going to have lunch, they realise that there is no food in the house. Because of the bombings going on in the supermarkets, she has been too frightened to go shopping. So they decide to go to this restaurant in an Arab town in Israel proper, where one of the Arab waiters turns out to be the son of a man who worked in that family many years before. When this man intrudes the family life, the whole conflict comes out. Writing the play was difficult concerning the choice of language because they would be speaking Hebrew and Arabic and I'm writing in English. Although I know about ten words of Hebrew and I've heard Arabic, I could never write a play in those languages. If you hear Israelis speak it sounds brutal and very crude to British ears. I decided to use quite an American English because British English sounded wrong and because a lot of Israelis do have a slight American accent. And I spent weeks just listening to Arabs on the radio to hear the sounds of their voice in English. I found there was not just one Arab accent but that, just like the Israelis, their accents depended on the influences they heard and who taught them English. This freed me up as a writer. Eventually, the actors played it with very mild Israeli accents and very mild Arabic accents for the British audience. During the performances, the audience was very silent, attentive and frightened, certainly the British ones. Some of the Israelis were offended and said things like "Why do you show this? Haven't we got enough problems? You are a Jewish woman, you shouldn't be doing this." For instance, there is a speech by one of the Arab men, who talks about Martin Luther King's *I Have A Dream*. His dream is to see Israel without Jews. It's a poetic speech but of course it offended many spectators. But I included it, because I've heard it. We also had

difficulties casting an actor for that role. It is very hard to find Arab actors because Muslim Arab parents are unlikely to support their children going onstage. I think we met every Arab actor in London. Eventually, we chose Daniel Ben-Zenou, a Moroccan Jewish actor, and Nabil Elouabi played his brother. Nabil is of North African Muslim background. This combination worked very well as the two became great friends.

TW: How did people react to your plays, and particularly to *Crossing Jerusalem*? Did you have a particular audience in mind when you were writing it?

JP: I don't really write for an audience, I write for what obsesses me. And I try to humanise, if you like, the intellectual debate. But I never know who is going to come. Obviously, a lot of Jews come because they want to know. And for many it is a relief to see their experience on stage. Many were upset by *Crossing Jerusalem*. During a performance, one rather orthodox Jewish man came up to Daniel and said: "As a Jewish boy you should be ashamed playing an antisemite." That was funny. And I knew that the play was working. But the text is not just about Arab antisemitism, it also shows Israelis saying terrible things about the Arabs. Many spectators were pleased that I tackled the big current issues. I had Palestinians come to the performances as well, and Arabs who came to the performances were happy with the play. But I heard there were some Israelis who refused to come. Lots of British people who knew nothing about the situation came and said: "I didn't know what was going on and this helped me to understand a bit more." We had a lot of young black women who were ushers, 18-year-olds, and they knew nothing about it. And they said: "What's this play all about?" And I said: "Watch it." They watched it three or four times. They said: "Still, I don't completely understand. Why is everybody crying when they leave?"

TW: You just said that you write about what obsesses you. But don't you also feel a responsibility for representing certain groups within society? And is it a pressure?

JP: You're right, responsibility is coming all the time from different sides. And I certainly felt pressure when I did *Crossing Jerusalem*. After interviewing survivors for my earlier plays, I always felt that my play was quite true to their spirit. I took bits from one person and mixed it with other people. But now I think it's very important for me to write about today and I am not sure I'll keep on writing about the past any more, although it's much harder to write about today because you have no distance. Great art is emotion recollected in tranquillity and

tranquillity is rarely something you can have when you write about the here and now. Writing about today is like writing on the run. It's more frightening in a way because it is so easy to get it wrong, especially when I'm writing out of my culture. So the terror is quite strong. Not in the rehearsal room because most actors don't know the politics of a play and here I feel a responsibility to make sure the actors understand. It was difficult to explain the atmosphere of Jerusalem to the actors who were not Israeli. They came with all sorts of assumptions which needed deconstructing. I show the volatility of the Israelis in *Crossing Jerusalem*, which is something that is not known here. People tend to think all the Israelis are bastards and killers. One Jewish character called Varda says: "The Arabs have got twenty-three countries. Why don't they leave us alone and go there?" And yet later the audience discover she had a love affair with an Arab as a younger woman. My aim was to expose how an individual can hold many different opinions at the same time. All I hoped to do in the end was just to break stereotypes of the Israelis and Arabs, make people question and see how complex the conflict is. If you feel the audience leaves changed, then you feel you've done something.

Julia Pascal on her British-Jewish identity

TW: You were confronted with two different cultures when you were brought up in Manchester and had a British education, but still a Jewish family background. You mentioned your father who suffered from the experiences of the Holocaust. How did you cope with this double-culture?

JP: Badly, I think. Very badly. My parents lived in Blackpool, which is a working class seaside town. My grandparents lived in Manchester in a more bourgeois setting and I lived in both places. When I went to school I felt very different. I remember that in the first history lesson in primary school the teacher went around the class saying: "Well, your family were probably Irish, and your family were Anglo-Saxon." And then she saw me and she just ignored me.

My parents would say: "Well, you can go to prayers in the morning. And you can sing hymns about God but you mustn't sing that Jesus is the son of God. Absolutely not. And if people tell you that Jesus was killed by the Jews, you say no, it was the Romans!" So, I'm about five and I'm getting all this stuff and they talk about "the English" and I say: "Who are we?" There is a tremendous fracture in that thing, and I hated being Jewish. Absolutely hated being different. As a child, you are conservative and you want to be like everybody else. I didn't know how to mix on the playground. I was very isolated. It was only at Grammar

School that there were a few more Jewish girls and it was very academic. And then I felt fine. We moved to London and then there were also black kids in school. It was much easier then. You know, I was just one of many.

It wasn't till I was much older that I began to see that actually it was quite a valuable experience, and certainly as a writer, to be the outsider, it's the best thing that could happen to you. But it's agony till you get to that point. And I still don't find it easy. I am asked almost every day: "Where are you from?" And I say: "Manchester," and they look at me. And I know they are thinking: "That's not what we want to know." What do I say? If I say I'm a Jew, it makes me sound like I'm an orthodox religious Jew, which I'm not. What do I say? It's delicate.

Julia Pascal on future projects

TW: Which are your future projects? You mentioned a new play? Do you again research a particular topic?

JP: I am trying to write a play that is not about Jews, but I'm still interested in double-culture. I am going back to the North of England and look at children whose parents or grandparents came from Pakistan or Bangladesh. I'm interested in the double-culture of Muslims living in Northern England; it's very different from my Jewish-Northern-England experience. I feel we must look at what is happening in Muslim diversity, in Muslim life in Britain.

And yes, I do enormous research. I went to Bradford where they had riots and to areas in Lancashire where the The British National Party is active. I went to one particular school and I interviewed children and adolescents over the last six months; I just listened to their stories and recorded them. There are a number of problems in schools all over the country. For instance, the mothers of some of the children in the school I went to in Rochdale don't speak English. So the children speak Urdu or Bengali at home, which means that their English is not good. When the children show me their work, I can hardly read what they have written, because their spelling in English is like me writing Japanese. They can't spell, they can't write, and these are children attending a good school. What's the future for them? Another problem is the racism the children are confronted with. When I got a taxi, the white taxi driver came up with all this racist stuff, which I just listened to because it's important for me to hear what ordinary white working class people think. So, somehow, all this research is becoming a play. I'm on the second draft. At the stage when a writer has to junk her research and just concentrate on character. Hopefully my outsiderliness will give some insight into this

particular area. I just want to break some boundaries and use my own experience to make characters who surprise the audience.

TW: Thank you very much for the interview.

JP: It was a pleasure. Thank you.

The interview was conducted in London in June 2003 and was updated in March 2004.