

TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

If I Forget



Photo by Jenny Graham

Fountain Theatre

The late great Doris Roberts once told me she thought the rudest thing a friend can do is come see you in a play and then not stay after to say hello—not to gush, necessarily, or say something insincere if you hated it, but just to give a hug. My personal default in such situations has always been, “My lord, what a lot of work you guys have put into this!”

Despite having several people I adore involved in the Los Angeles premiere of Steven Levenson’s *If I Forget*, I left the Fountain Theatre after the performance and, after blubbering something indecipherable to the Fountain’s Producing Director Simon Levy about having no words and asking him to explain my emotional exit to those friends and colleagues I wasn’t staying around to give that hug, we made a beeline for our car before the tears really started to flow. After a seven-decade passion for live theatre and reviewing plays on a regular basis since 1987, leaving the theatre that verklempt was a first for me. I was simply too moved to talk.

Before I write anything else, I can say without a shadow of a doubt this indelible, magnificently staged and expertly performed LA debut of *If I Forgot* is the best mounting of a new American play I've seen done in 14 years, way back when *August: Osage County*'s Barbara first started insisting her mother eat her fish.

Just as Florida's notorious hanging chads put yet another halfwit candidate in the White House and not long before the World Trade Center made its move to help reduce the American Dream to rubble, liberal Washington, DC Jewish Studies professor Michael Fischer (Leo Marks) is on the brink of a major life change. On one hand, his mentally fragile daughter Abby is on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem at the height of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict trying to find herself by searching for the roots her vehemently non-religious father never taught her to seek, while closer to home, after the recent death of the family matriarch, his father (Matt Gottlieb) is clearly no longer able to live alone, an issue Michael and his two fiercely opinionated and more than occasionally nightmarish sisters are now forced to address.

At the same time, his university has recommended him for tenure just as his new book is about to be published. His manuscript at the center of the play's conflict is a highly personal and purposely outspoken treatise about what it means to be a Jew in America a half-century after the Holocaust that Michael hopes, though drastically controversial, will lift his reputation as an author from stodgy and unappreciated academia to more universally celebrated heights.

The large and generally fucked-up Fischer clan is the epitome of so many typical modern upper-middleclass Jewish families I personally know so well: well-spoken, quick-witted, and seemingly functional on the surface but below the bravado and public persona they strive desperately to maintain for the outside world to see, they are filled with communal self-hatred and a basically inexplicable sense of near-primordial guilt. This is part of what Michael's book will address—the publication of which has already sparked a petition to repress it.

Michael is the only member of the family who is not a fervent supporter of Israel and its aggression against the Palestinian state, nor is he onboard with how our government responds to the issue. In his book, he pleads that people must “forget” rather than wallow in the memory of the Holocaust and move on or, for American Jews, “this will be our last chapter.”

He believes we as a people have ironically missed the lesson that nationalism only breeds disaster and that the horrific Death of the Six Million has become the center of Judaism in America, surpassing all the important and selflessly passionate work that has been done by our community to promote and embrace human and civil rights. As Jews since the Holocaust have focused more fervently on assimilating into the mainstream of society despite the reality that we are still hated by more people than accepted, we have lost the innate ability to be obstinate, to be warriors, to fight for what's right no matter the odds, something which with we have been gifted and have embraced throughout history. “We're white people now,” Michael insists. “We're respectable.”

Levenson, who won the Tony for his book for *Dear Evan Hansen* and wrote the screenplays for *Tick... Tick... Boom!* and *Fosse/Verdon*, creates dialogue that quickly becomes a rapid-fire assault on the

senses, with voices rising and tempers flaring and characters continuously interrupting one another. Yet through all the noise and the shocking revelations unearthed along the way, there is a remarkable humor—truly, in Levenson's hardly Neil Simon-like storyline, I can guarantee the laughs are as strong and frequent as anything in *The Sunshine Boys* or *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*. In less talented directorial hands than *Seinfeld* alum Jason Alexander and without this exceptional ensemble of actors, I do fear, however, that *If I Forget* could surely be forgotten.

Marks does yeomen duty as Michael, staying at the center of the tale throughout without much of a break to take a breath. The character could easily become unlikable, especially in a theatre predominantly full of American Jews (hey, it's live theatre, okay?), many of whom during the performance we attended gasped audibly at the radical beliefs his character pontificates upon along the way. Only an actor as sincere as this man could win them over, which he does completely, even if they do not buy his ideology.

Marks spews out Michael's frustrations and laments how no one is willing to hear what he has to say to the point that his brow looks permanently furrowed and his voice is in danger of becoming so raspy he could dub Danny DeVito. As I mentioned to him the day after the performance, he must leave the theatre exhausted and sleep until noon the next day, as an actor as brilliant as Marks could not possibly play this role without it taking its toll on him physically; Michael could not be an easy guy to live with for a long run—which I suspect this will be.

The entire cast is splendid, especially in how smoothly they bounce off one another. As Michael's obnoxious, ball-breaking, self-centered yet still deeply loving pair of ever-circling banshee sisters Holly and Sharon, Valerie Perri and Samantha Klein are blood pressure-rising perfection as people I personally knew all too well, so convincing I nearly broke out in hives thinking of my own growing years. Gratefully, spending a couple of hours in their presence took away a lot of lingering guilt I've felt by not going back to Chicago for my aunt's funeral several years ago. It's that hives thing, you see.

Gottlieb is both majestic and heartbreaking as the siblings' proud, stubborn, clearly ailing father, particularly moving as he describes in a lengthy monologue what the soldiers encountered when they liberated Dachau, while Jacob Zelonky is a true find as his schleppy grandson Joey, who works hard to understand what's going on in his fueling and troubled family despite how obviously his mother and aunt insist on keeping him out of the loop.

As the two characters who stumbled unwittingly into this mess, Sile Berminham as Michael's Swedish shiksa wife and Jerry Weil as Holly's nebbishy husband hold their own quite nicely despite being cast in the play's least flashy roles. Both give performances that again could be lost in the shuffle, yet Bermingham and Weil remain infinitely watchable, providing work that made me check in on them and their reactions even when they had little to do besides cringe at the antics of a family which today they might have second thoughts about marrying into.

Beyond it all, may it be said that the creative genius of Alexander is apparent at every sharp turn. His staging is offbeat, dangerously stylized, and fascinatingly kinetic. I wondered if the directorial choices were his own or written into Levenson's script, but was assured the unique visual choices and fluidity of

this mounting were entirely his idea. It is a monumental accomplishment and surprisingly, the intimate, somewhat bareboned yet always versatile Fountain stage is the quintessential venue to present *If I Forget*. In a space the size of the Taper or the Wallis or Geffen's mainstages, I believe our (literally) in-your-face closeness to the Fischer clan could easily be compromised.

This is mirrored in every design element, from Donny Jackson's lighting cornering the action as it unfolds on Sarah Krainin's cramped *American Buffalo*-like set, indicating the family's treasured but brutally downtrodden shop crammed with memorabilia and metal shelving that is miraculously able to transform from one location to another with the actors seated in the corners throughout the action equally ready to change the setting as they are to enter into a scene.

This is accomplished with surprising gracefulness, augmented by a gossamer recurrent image of Michael's troubled daughter Abby played by Caribay Franke, who enters between each scene to silently express her woes by dancing Allison Bibicoff's angular and jarringly expressive choreography, leaping onto and over furniture and appearing in silhouette behind glass doors lit from behind.

If I Forget was first presented at the Roundabout in New York in 2017. Earlier I compared my reaction to Steven Levenson's masterpiece with my first look at Tracy Lett's Pulitzer Prize-winning *August: Osage County* in 2008. To qualify for Pulitzer consideration, a play must be written by an American playwright, preferably original in its source, and above all "dealing with American life."

How the Pulitzer committee missed at least nominating this amazing new classic of theatrical literature five years ago when it debuted is anybody's guess. I believe no work in recent history does a better job of chronicling what it's like to be a Jew in America at the end of the 20th Century, a condition that two decades later is even more difficult to navigate. Although we have all been forced to learn how to deal with our drastically different political opinions as citizens of our crumbling country on so many levels besides our age-old cultural divides, it has not happened without great pain. *If I Forget* opens all the wounds, but in an urgently important, brilliantly lyrical and theatrical way.

THROUGH SEPT. 10: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Av., LA. [323.663.1525](tel:323.663.1525) or fountaintheatre.com