

# CURRENT REVIEWS

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by **TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER**

## One Jewish Boy

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*Photo by Cooper Bates*

### **Echo Theater Company at the Atwater Village Theatre**

Upcoming British playwright and screenwriter Stephen Laughton is certainly a major talent to be watched. His award-winning play *One Jewish Boy*, now being introduced to the west coast by ever-ferreting (in a good way) Echo Theater Company, heralds a truly unique voice for our times—someone who takes on big and troubling societal issues not often addressed and boldly explores how forces beyond our control plague us as we careen through our shaky existence on this risky planet.

Jesse (Zeke Goodman) is a sweet Jewish lad from North London who falls bigtime for Alex (Sharae Foxie), a mixed-race woman who is equally taken by him. As Laughton's play flips in a dizzying timewarp back and forth from the year they meet to the year their relationship crumbles due to the increasingly more frightening cultural winds of recent times, we are whisked along on their difficult ride as they navigate the current ever-encroaching epidemic of antisemitism, as well as dealing with which side the partners land on issues of the Zionization of Israel and the power-mad Benjamin Netanyahu 's brutish war on the Palestinians.

Laughton's themes are fascinating and thought-provoking, made all the more effective by his smooth knack for writing dialogue that's both real and euphonious. That doesn't mean there aren't problems bringing *One Jewish Boy* to life. Although director Chris Field's kinetic staging and Justin Huen's exceptionally clever and illuminating set help keep the piece moving and somewhat decipherable, I found the way the action zipped back and forth through the initially endearing and later traumatic aspects of Jesse and Alex' romance became jumbled, confusing, and ultimately repetitious.

Laughton heavily resorts to either gooey lovemaking or bitter confrontation to tell his tale—it might be interesting for someone more ADHD than I am to count the number of times one character tells the other "I love you" in the 90-minute playing time. I think the audience should be given credit to see the point without hitting us over the head to make sure we get it.

When my own first play debuted in 1994 at the Victory Theatre here, the artistic directors Maria Gobetti and the late great Tom Ormeny tried to get me to make judicious trims before opening night, all of which I adamantly refused to do. It was my first play, see, and at the time I thought everything I had ever wanted to say had to be included in this one piece. By the time the film version of *Surprise Surprise* was shooting a decade later and four other of my babies had been produced in the interim, every cut or alteration the producer/director asked me to make in my screenplay I slashed with complete abandon.

I suspect such a case of First Play-itis might have also befallen *One Jewish Boy*, as the writer may just have tried to take on too much, too many themes and issues to address at one time by two characters, no matter how sturdy the actors and director may be.

Goodman is absolutely winning as the fragile but lovable Jesse, a truly heartfelt performance that, with Fields' expert guidance, keeps the conspicuous indulgences of the play somewhat at bay. When Jesse's life is all but insurmountably challenged when he is savagely attacked on the London streets simply because of his ethnicity, his character's lingering fear and pain is authentic and touchingly realized.

Foxie, however, has a far more difficult task, one that never quite gels as Goodman's conflicted love interest. Although I think most of the fault lies in the writing, I found her Alex glaringly one-note; except for brief moments of levity and/or happiness, her tortured, frantic overreactions become too annoying to make the character someone we can care about. Still, there's not much room for subtlety as Alex is written.

This issue clearly must circle right back to Laughton. How are we expected to be sympathetic toward someone who professes her undying love for her partner over and over again, yet is willing to abandon her marriage and infant child when her lover needs her the most is nearly unconscionable. I guess Alex missed the part of the ceremony when she promised all that "for better and worse" stuff.

Despite my druthers here, *One Jewish Boy* still provides an excellent theatrical experience, made all the better by how Goodman, his director, and designer are able to lift a problematic yet promising new work to an impressively elevated status due to their consummate skill and imagination.

**THROUGH APR. 28: Echo Theater Company, Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. 747.350.8066 or [EchoTheaterCompany.com](http://EchoTheaterCompany.com)**