

# Searchlight in the Night Sky: *The Spanish Prayer Book*

*Angela J. Davis's gorgeous new play at The Road Theatre*  
By Steven Leigh Morris



Revelation at Sinai

*THOMASINA: . . . the enemy who burned the great library of Alexandria without so much as a fine for all that is overdue. Oh, Septimus! — can you bear it? All the lost plays of the Athenians! Two hundred at least by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides — thousands of poems — Aristotle's own library!.....How can we sleep for grief?*

*SEPTIMUS: By counting our stock. Seven plays from Aeschylus, seven from Sophocles, 19 from Euripides, my lady! You should no more grieve for the rest than for a buckle lost from your first shoe, or for your lesson book which will be lost when you are old. We shed as we pick up, like travelers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those*

*behind. The procession is very long and life is very short. We die on the march. But there is nothing outside the march so nothing can be lost to it. The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language. Ancient cures for diseases will reveal themselves once more. Mathematical discoveries glimpsed and lost to view will have their time again. . .*

–Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (1993)

Once in a while, too rarely, a new play-of-ideas comes along that, without stridency or straining to be self-important, speaks out in an increasingly inhumane world, of what it means to be humane. Angela J. Davis's *The Spanish Prayer Book* (in a world premiere at The Road Theatre on Magnolia), one such work, is a more modest literary descendant of Tom Stoppard's 1993 *Arcadia*. Whereas Stoppard used the strict order of gothic landscape gardening as a springboard for investigations into chaos theory, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and the unknowability of the past, Davis uses ancient Hebrew texts, also to create a compound of disparate elements that nonetheless congeal into a larger view.

In its gentle, unassuming and sometimes playful way, *The Spanish Prayer Book* stands in defiance of tribalism and barbarism, old and current, like some lonely protestor holding up a placard in a vicious storm. If anybody sees and appreciates that placard, then the playwright's efforts will not have been in vain. The play meets its goal by connecting people and ghosts through an historical dreamscape, from the Spanish Inquisition through Nazi Germany, to New York and London in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The central character is the eponymous 14<sup>th</sup> century, illustrated Hebrew text of *The Spanish Prayer Book*, while the play is loosely based on a 1984 court case regarding ownership of that book, and related icons.

Smuggled to Germany during the Spanish Inquisition (when possession of any Hebrew writing in Spain was a capital offense), the *Prayer Book* and other rescued, sacred Hebrew texts all resided in a Berlin library, perhaps for centuries, until the rise of the Nazis and their penchant for book-burning threatened their existence. With the help of yet another smuggler (perhaps a profit-seeking Nazi, perhaps a rabbi), the texts made their way to Great Britain via the United States.





## The Talmud, translated into Korean

When the books were about to be sold at Sothebys auction house in London, the court case raised issues of “stolen property” and the rightful ownership of sacred works. And that seems to be the starting point of Davis’s scintillating, interlocking concerns that make up her historically-based fiction: Who has the right to own religious icons? Do they not belong to everybody? These questions inevitably extend to the precarious and often arbitrary manner in which stories get passed down – not just stories but the legends that come to define us and inform our core beliefs. To quote one of the rabbis in the play, “The story is the breath of the book.”

The crisis of our particular cultural moment in the United States is a crisis of narrative – assumptions of who we are as a nation enshrined in our founding documents and on our statues, once commonly understood, though not always observed: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.” As those bedrock lines of our collective mythology are being questioned and redefined, then who, what, are we becoming? Our narrative has, until recently, been one of invitation and assimilation.

Albeit indirectly, from the remove of centuries and continents, Davis underscores a theme of symbiotic assimilation by showing how profoundly the Hebrew books were influenced by their creators’ Arabic neighbors. The following dialogue is between two Americans: a schoolteacher named Michaela (Allison Blaize), to whom her now late rabbi father (Allan Wasserman) willed the smuggled texts after keeping them hidden for decades; and her father’s academic protégé and Michaela’s increasingly intimate friend, a Muslim historian named Julien (Richard-John Seikaly):

(JULIEN turns the pages to an illustration of three youths locked in a burning furnace. Though from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the image eerily evokes the Holocaust. MICHAELA gasps.)

*MICHAELA: What – ?*

*JULIEN: Book of Daniel. The king of Babylon threw three Jewish youths into a burning furnace. They emerge unharmed.*

*MICHAELA: Wouldn't that've been nice. . . That looks . . . Arabic.*

*JULIEN: Well, it's from Yemen.*

*MICHAELA: That's . . . shocking —*

*JULIEN: They all lived side-by-side. A Yemenite King even adopted Judaism.*

*MICHAELA: And the kingdom lasted what — ten minutes?*

*JULIEN: More like 120 years.*

There you have it: cultural assimilation dating back 700 years verified in literature, if literature can be believed. (It is, after all, fiction.) Nonetheless, the pigments on the pages point to some kind of literary and cultural assimilation, arm in arm. The American experiment in cultural diversity and inclusion would appear to have at least some precedent. And this is how the play, without a single political reference, thumbs its nose at current tribalism and its accompanying bigotry and barbarism, the world over.



Richard-John Seikaly and Allison Blaize in *The Spanish Prayer Book* at The Road on Magnolia.  
(Photo by Brian M. Cole)

The play's emotional/ethical center lies in Michaela, a divorced atheist struggling to pay the medical bills for her anemic daughter. Michaela's financial problems will be relieved if she signs a document permitting a London auction house to sell the ancient books that were placed in her care by her devoutly Jewish father. She desperately needs the money yet feels the pangs of conscience that she has no right to it, not at the risk of further privatizing sacred texts protected for years by her dad. Her spirit guides include the ghost of her father; the ghost of her grandfather (Carlos Lacámara) who was instrumental in ushering the sacred books out of Berlin; her mother (Laura Gardner) — estranged from her father years ago — and whom she visits in London; and Julien, who, like Michaela, expresses ambivalence over selling religious icons for personal gain.

While Julien and Michaela study the books in the British auction house in 2007, they scarcely notice the ghosts of Michaela's grandfather Alexander (also a rabbi) and the director of the Berlin library's rare books department, Channa Wild (Tiffany Wolff) — her costume marked by the Germans with a yellow Jewish star. All four characters occupy the same playing space, though two are on different continents and in different eras. Such is Davis's dreamscape. Channa is pregnant, and Alexander has to tell her that her husband is presently in a concentration camp. Clearly, her current employment in the Berlin library is not a long-term prospect. From almost 70-years into the future, Julien's relentless investigations unearth Channa's destiny.

(Amy Tolsky ably portrays a British customs official, an auction house assistant, and a law clerk.)

Lee Sankowich directs a Spartan production that literally picks up speed. The production gets off to a clumsy start hindered by lackadaisical pacing of dialogue that is clearly written as repartee. The result is a lugubrious tone at the outset that needs to be animated. Nonetheless, the production recovers long before the damage is terminal. Though the ensemble is uniformly strong, Blaize's Michaela, and Wolff's Channa are particularly nuanced and endearing.





Tiffany Wolff and Allison Blaize (Photo by Brian M. Cole)

Yuki Izumihara's remedial set features blocks and projections (to establish locales, and which are striking when beaming onto a wall the beautiful illustrations in the ancient texts, while the characters peruse the actual books). The play's time-warping and soaring ideas invite more of an allegorical canvas than is offered here. This is more of a lost opportunity in the design than an actual impediment.



Rare ancient Hebrew book confiscated in Turkey's Malatya

The Road Theater deserves enormous credit for producing this intricate, beautiful and important play. On October 3, Duncan White (who teaches history and literature at Harvard University) wrote an essay in the *New York Times* calling into question the prevailing assumption that the Internet poses the greatest threat to authoritarian regimes. Not so, White claims. Books are the larger threat to governments determined to stifle free expression, he asserts – largely because the readers' actions, while reading, are untraceable, and the books themselves, so long as they're not incinerated, can't be hacked or altered. Hence the moves in recent history by Russia, Turkey, North Korea, Egypt, and the Taliban, to crack down on publishers and writers of books, who challenge prevailing orthodoxy.

In *The Spanish Prayer Book*, Michaela shares her excitement over the ancient books for their artistry as much as for their content. The passage also reveals the often exalted quality of Davis's writing:

*There's so much! . . . passing stories — for hundreds of years! . . . And, all the work! . . . Just to make the pages themselves so — so beautiful! — so people would feel something just holding the*



*books in their hands . . . the — the pigments, even! Crushed jewels and gold — and, and tiny, blood-red insects that someone had to peel from the trunks of oak trees.*

Civilizations rise and fall in perpetual, barbaric hailstorms, but the tools of art and of its related beauty are perhaps all we have for perspective, to remind us of how those who went before have helped those to come. Enduring gifts from ghosts, as we struggle to assess what on Earth we think we're doing.

***THE SPANISH PRAYER BOOK / By ANGELA J. DAVIS / Directed by LEE SANKOWICH / Presented by THE ROAD THEATRE COMPANY, 10747 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hollywood; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; through Nov. 23. (818) 761-8838. <https://roadtheatre.org>. Two hours, with intermission.***