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### Performing Diaspora: Jewish Identity, Place and Nation in the Purimspiel Dramatic Tradition

Considered by many to be the progenitor of Jewish theatre, Purimspiel have been performed in Jewish communities in Europe and worldwide for nearly five centuries. Purim is a Jewish festival marked annually in the Jewish month of Adar in celebration of salvation from genocide as narrated in the biblical story of Esther. This story tells of diasporic threat and survival, and as such, Purim artistic practices (and especially the Purimspiel) express the ways in which Jewish communities have historically engaged with their own status within a global, national and diasporic context. Purim, as Daniel Boyarin has suggested, 'holds promise for the theorizing of Diaspora'.<sup>1</sup> Purimspiel, from various countries and periods since the Renaissance, contain explicit and implicit reference to their specific community's contemporary attitudes and conceptualisations of Diaspora and nationhood. The Purimspiel offers further opportunity to consider the relationship between the imagination and performance as well as Diaspora and Jewish identity construction. It is a genre in which the negotiation of geopolitical and religious identities is pervasive, if not always explicitly so. The project will focus on three primary areas: drama; place and space; and the enemy.

#### Drama

This study will investigate the relationship between belief, national/diasporic identity and artistic practice, in order to develop an understanding of how artistic practice in performance affects the continuity and discontinuity of ethnic and religious identity. It will explore to what extent such practices are not merely an expression of belief or identity but how they constitute and shape those identities. Understanding Jewish attraction to nationalist, Zionist and assimilationist strategies and practices – as seen in these dramas – provides a model for understanding how religious and ethnic identities are sustained, or lost, in migration and diaspora. This work will explore new concepts in its development of a model of 'diasporic performativity' in which questions of identity, space and place will be central. The tensions between *performance* – the enactment of a pre-set formula that depends on a Cartesian dualism of inner and outer self – and *performativity* – in which the internal is an effect of the external – are exposed in the Purimspiel. The plays are both consciously theatrical and performative in their simultaneous invocation, transformation and creation of specific identities.

#### Place and Space

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Boyarin, 'Introduction: Purim and the Cultural Poetics of Judaism—Theorizing Diaspora', *Poetics Today*, 15.1 (1994), 1-8 ( p. 3).

In Purimspiel homelands may be evoked in order to transcend the world's logic, so that God's protection over his people becomes paramount. Arguably, Purim *per se* is a festival about the negotiation of place. It is the festival of the topsy turvey and, as such, in the festivities a transcendent space is invoked that denies the world order and the intractable material realities of hostile environments. The performance of these plays often becomes most prominent at moments of persecution in which the transitory space of Purim transgresses the boundaries and logic of the lived place of, for example, the ghetto. Unlike Christian dramas on biblical themes, in the Jewish Purimspiel the events of the Bible are often presented in order to bring to mind the land of Israel itself, to transport the diasporic community momentarily, through memory and imagination, to a homeland and space of belonging. The establishment of the State of Israel means many plays reflect the ways in which different groups conceptualise Israel as both an ideal and politically current national 'centre' in imaginative performance. The Purimspiel tradition provides a focus for this discussion in an artistic practice that has complex and profound relations to the more explicit political assertions of different Jewish groups.

### The Enemy

Embracing non-Jewish modes of behaviour is a common practice in this 'topsy turvey' festival and as such an explicit engagement with 'the Other' spills over into the Purimspiel. The plays therefore present a site through which investigation into the construction of identity is especially valuable. The various rituals within Purim function to construct the Jewish participant as a national and – perhaps most significantly – a chosen subject. The project seeks to trace the structural logic of chosenness that is inherent within both diaspora and the nation-state: a logic that leads to the polarization of self and enemy. Because Purim is a festival imbricated in violence, as Elliott Horowitz's work on Purim violence elucidates, Purimspiel engage with notions of violence in its depiction of enemies; an important notion in the constitution and prevalence of diasporic identity in its differing contexts.<sup>2</sup>

The project will seek to address such questions as: What kind of non-diasporic or pre-diasporic fantasies does the Purimspiel feed its audiences? How responsive is it to historical/cultural change and trauma (for example the holocaust)? How do bawdiness and parody function in this apparently religious genre? This project will also address more general questions, including: How successful is performance in creating and sustaining a diasporic identity that has no physical homeland? How does diasporic identity and its relation to performance shift when its relation to a national homeland transforms?

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<sup>2</sup> Elliot Horowitz, 'The Rite to be Reckless: On the Perpetration and Interpretation of Purim Violence', *Poetics Today*, 15 (1994), 9-54 and more recently *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton University Press, 2006).