# *Nathan the Wise*

Written by Paul D'Andrea after G.E. Lessing. Trans. Gisela D'Andrea and Paul D'Andrea. Dir. Rachel Silverman. Chicago Festival of the Arts, The Theatre Building, Chicago, IL. December 2005.

As I planned my trip to see the new Chicago Festival of the Arts theatre company's production of *Nathan the Wise*, I wondered silently, "Why *this* play, at *this* time?" What would this play, set in 1192 Jerusalem, during the final year of the Third Crusade, have to say to a contemporary audience in Chicago? It is a rare and welcomed experience to see a play completely "fresh"—that is, not having read it, not having studied and/or taught it, and after the two hours and fifteen minutes of experiencing this production, I knew the answer to my silent question.

As I settled into my seat inside the South Theatre of the Theatre Building, I heard prerecorded Middle Eastern music and the fighting sounds of war—the beginning of a sound design which effectively took us into the world of this play. After a brief curtain speech by director Rachel Silverman telling us of her theatre company's season theme of "tolerance," lights came up to reveal tiers of curtains bordering a small open proscenium stage. Due to generally strong work from this ensemble of actors, and fine direction by Rachel Silverman, we understand the big ideas of this play: faith, self-determination, courage, and tolerance.

*Nathan the Wise* is about various peoples of God—Christians, Muslims, and Jews—all meeting challenges to their faiths and addressing a question raised in the play: "What is the one true faith?" Nathan is a rich Jew living in 1192 Jerusalem. Here rules the charismatic Saladin, an Islamic leader, who defeated the Crusaders in a recent battle (although the war-at-large is slowly grinding to a halt) and who has agreed to a local peace treaty with King Richard the Lion-Hearted. Saladin now allows Catholics to return to Jerusalem. Driven to be an "improver of the world," Saladin has spent much of his money on those in need. Saladin's sister, Sittah, urges her brother to seize Nathan's vast wealth, in order to help make Islam the one true religion of the land. Saladin's treasurer then reports a desperate financial situation for Saladin's regime, caused by Saladin giving

too much of his money away to the needy.

Meanwhile, Nathan's house is set fire by an anti-Semite, and Nathan's daughter, Recha, is rescued from the burning home by "an angel sent by the sultan." This gallant rescuer is Curd von Stauffen, a young Christian. Recha then fantasizes about her rescuer while in her bedchamber. Recha wonders "Is it right for a Jew to love a Christian?" Here the audience hears in Recha's question something resonant with contemporary concerns about tolerance in this society, where its parallels may include: 'Is it right for a black person to love a white person?' or 'Is it right for a man to love another man?' or 'Is it right for a Catholic to marry a Unitarian?'

Another question raised in the play is 'When, if ever, do acts of violence further God's will?' Heraklios, a church head, Saladin, and his sister Sittah debate what Saladin's next course of action should be. The Koran is recalled and its message cited that no religion should be attacked. Soon Nathan interrupts their conference and offers Saladin an enormous amount of money, if Saladin agrees to be bound to the will of God in his life. Saladin agrees to this proposal. Meanwhile, troubled and celibate, Curd von Stauffen clumsily woos Recha. He tells her that he came to Jerusalem to fight for God, but then asked himself, "Does God need me to fight for him?" The two quickly profess their love for each other. It is clear here as well that this notion of fighting for God or doing as God would want us to do is an issue with modern day relevance that is not lost on the audience. The sense of jihad today in Iraq comes to mind…as do the nationalism and the bumper stickers in our country which tout "Support Our Troops" or "God Protect Our Troops." Then as now, both sides fight with the conviction that God is on *their* side.

In the second half of the play, it is revealed that Recha is not really Nathan's biological daughter, and moreover, that she was born Christian. Because Nathan has raised a Christian child as a Jew, Saladin's guards have imprisoned him, and a trial takes place at the palace. Saladin asks what is the law of the Christian church. "To burn the Jew" replies an attending priest. Saladin questions this, then claims that the matter falls under Muslim law, since Recha is a Muslim, baptized Christian. Recha's complex identity speaks well to today's ever increasing melting pot American society. Her character is simple and virtuous, despite her profile being complex. The priest asks Nathan why he has chosen to be a Jew. He also asks him, "Which is the one true faith?" Before Nathan can reply, the priest reminds him that a man who denies his own faith shall be killed. Nathan tells the story of a father and his three sons, each son wanting a particular ring from their father. Not wanting to disappoint any son, the father gives the ring to an artist, who makes two imitation rings which are not discernable from the original. The father then gives each son "the" ring. As with the undistinguishable rings, Nathan concludes that none of the three religions—Christianity, Islam, or Judaism—can be determined as the "true" one.

Recha says that "the true ring can make its owner loved by God and humankind." She indicates that Nathan is the one man loved by God and humankind. Nathan recalls how years ago he was given a child (Recha) by a friar. A prayer book is consulted, which confirms that Recha and Curd von Stauffen are siblings. Curd von Stauffen now understands that the meaning of life, for him at least, is to "improve the world." Saladin declares that all present (Christians, Muslims, and Jews) must "strive in offices in love." Nathan is free to go.

Certainly, in today's world much can be done to "improve the world"…especially

among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. It is not enough to say "Stop the war!" or "Launch a preemptive strike!" Rather, we must dare to consider that God is on both sides of any war, in that we are all God's children. There is room enough for both the Koran and the Bible to be "right" about bidding us all to "strive in offices in love." Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's preference for debate rather than fixed answers is quite evident in this production of *Nathan the Wise*. Saladin is a methodical and free thinker. The message we hear in this play is for all of us to do as Saladin does and slow down, allow input from a variety of sources, and then, with temperance and tolerance, strive to bring justice forth. And while this may sound a bit simplistic to some, it is nevertheless appropriate advice for our sensation-driven news media in the United States. We Americans live in a culture where we simply switch the station in order to avoid listening to "the other side" who (we have already determined) are a little nuts because their views are not our own. Our current world society needs this sort of return visit from one of the Enlightenment's key writers.

Rachel Silverman and her artistic team, including a generally strong cast of twelve actors, have much to be proud of from this production. They have taken a challenging play and created a memorable, if mixed, theatre experience. Despite the proven talents of Gisela and Paul D'Andrea with this translation (making a very old play more immediate for us), *Nathan the Wise* remains very episodic, and this makes it challenging for the audience to get caught up in the story. In short, the plot is so involved, convoluted, and occasionally vague, that it becomes challenging at times for the viewer simply to follow who is who, and what is what.

The finest moments of the night belong to the stage veterans in this cast. David Darlow's Nathan achieves that delicate balance of being a sophisticated leader of the people, while remaining completely believable as a man of God. We see this most of all during the prison scene in the second half, when Nathan is visited by Curd von Stauffen, Recha, and others the night before his trial. Michael Fosberg's Saladin is also quite memorable, in that we see a three dimensional person—someone (like the rest of us) who is both weak and strong. Saladin is quick to imprison Nathan, yet he is also determined to hear from a variety of sources before rendering judgment. Saladin consults the Koran and voices other than his own at the trial, before deciding what to do with Nathan. Also noteworthy is Susan Gosdick's aristocratic Daya, who, early on in the evening, allows us to witness a deliberate and precise physicality in her scene with Nathan's daughter, Recha. Throughout the evening, her Daya gives Michael Fosberg's Saladin much to respond to, and contributes to a richly complex, yet clear performance of Saladin. It is a nice reminder that actors are, to a large degree, as dynamic as their scene partners push them to be.

There are, however, moments that contribute to an overall mixed theatrical experience. One such moment is a backhand hit to the face, which occurs in an early Saladin scene, which is not well executed. Another instance is the curious twirling physicality (he essentially "dances" off-stage) of Saladin's treasurer, as he exits after delivering sobering financial news to Saladin—one of a few moments that simply do not seem to align with the rest of the play's story. The play is an epic journey that is established early on as being realistic. The treasurer's unexpected dance-like exit interrupts this reality for no apparent reason.

There is also an imbalance with the play's story and the space in which it is produced. Rich, mature, and skilled actors' voices seemed to be without a proper home in this space. Strong light emitted from an exit sign at the back of the house, which prevented true black outs, and so the endings of some scenes, like one early beheading scene, were anticlimactic. While I normally do not like to fault a theatre space, this particular space is simply not grand enough for the skill of these actors, nor for the telling of this story. Unfortunately, these technical shortcomings did occasionally take us away from the story of this play.

Nevertheless, with Debbie Baer's beautifully designed costumes (clearly placing us in a Sultan's world of luxurious textures), and Linda Buchanan's appropriately open scenic design (for this too small stage and twelve actors), Rachel Silverman's obvious skill as a director is well complimented. The long rich robes, sashes, and head-dresses of this world are accentuated nicely by Lee Keenan's lighting design, which keeps the colors where they need to be—grounded with gold (wealth) and brown (land).

How refreshing then to have an alternative to *A Christmas Carol* on a snowy December night in Chicago, especially as *Nathan the Wise* is a play that resonates with significance for today's global village. By play's end, as Nathan is released, Curd von Stauffen realizes Nathan's lesson for all, that there is no one true faith, but rather, that Christians, Jews, and Muslims all must, as Saladin declares, "strive in offices in love." As I left the Theatre Building, I knew the answer to my silent question: "Why *this* play, at *this* time?" This play was sounding the alarm and calling for peace and tolerance at a critical time in our increasingly unstable world.

***Eric Thibodeaux-Thompson***
*University of Illinois at Springfield*