

— DRAMA —



Stan Barouh

Now, More than Ever, *Nathan* Inspires the ‘Sublime’

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s 1779 play, *Nathan the Wise*, is, if anything, a more powerful attack today on the “clash of civilizations” pathway for the different religions, than it was at the time it was written. Likewise, the alternative it clearly poses—that Christian, Jew, and Muslim should deal with each other by *competing to do good* and to improve the world—emerges even more starkly against the war which now threatens the world, should that alternative fail.

In a stroke of good fortune, the play was recently staged outside Washington, D.C., at George Mason University in Virginia. University playwright and professor Paul D’Andrea presented a two-hour play, adapted from Lessing’s five-act drama, under the same title. *Nathan the Wise* is the centerpiece of The Jerusalem Project, an effort to promote understanding among diverse groups at G.M.U., its theater, the Jewish Community Center of Northern Virginia, various high school classes studying the play, and others. With the near-collapse of Mideast peace efforts, and the

attempts to trap the United States into a war against Islam, the performance could not be more timely, or more vital for allowing the audience the opportunity to re-create the solution today, by observing the characters on the stage.

History Behind the Play

Lessing set the play in 1192, in the Third Crusade, after the Muslim warrior Prince Saladin retook Jerusalem from the Christians. Saladin then established the Peace of Ramla, which lasted until his death in 1195. During those three years, Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived in peace in Jerusalem, which Saladin believed possible because all three religions believed in the same God and revered the Hebrew Old Testament.

Lessing, the son of a minister, wrote the play as an intervention into his own times. It was a continuation by another means—irony—of his philosophical war against the theologians who believed in salvation through revealed religion alone. Lessing based his Jewish character Nathan on Moses Mendelssohn, his close

The Parable of the Rings: Nathan (Mitchell Hébert) receives the Sultan’s prized family opal during the climactic religious trial which concludes Paul D’Andrea’s adaptation of Lessing’s ‘Nathan the Wise’ at George Mason University in Virginia.

personal friend and collaborator in uplifting the culture of the German nation. Mendelssohn, in turn, had studied the works of the great Jewish-Arabic writer and philosopher Moses Maimonides, who was the historical Saladin’s physician at court. Mendelssohn credited this play with having a part in Joseph II’s magnanimous gesture in giving the Jews of the Austrian Empire rights, through the Edict of Toleration in January 1782. Lessing and Mendelssohn collaborated to defend the great thinker G.W. Leibniz, and made possible the German Classical period of Friedrich Schiller and the Humboldt brothers.¹

‘Improver of the World’

We see the noble character of Saladin’s soul early in the play, when he spares the life of his enemy, the Knight Templar. The young knight is shocked, and expects to remain a prisoner in one way or another. Saladin, who in D’Andrea’s adaptation adopts as his title “Improver of the World,” explains that he has recognized the image of his deceased brother, Assad, in the Frankish knight, and therefore is moved to show goodness; i.e., he recognizes the brotherhood of man (close to literal truth in this case). Inviting the knight to abide in his household, Saladin says, “As Musselman, as Christian . . . all one to me. . . I have never desired that one bark grow on all trees of the wood.”

In the character Nathan, we encounter a Schilleresque “sublime soul.” We hear that he refuses to lend money to anyone in need—because if he lent it, he would not be able to *give* as much to them (perhaps this inspired Schiller in his writings on the Good Samaritan). Nathan has taken a Christian infant to raise, three days after Christians murdered his wife and seven sons; after wrestling with his despair, he gives up

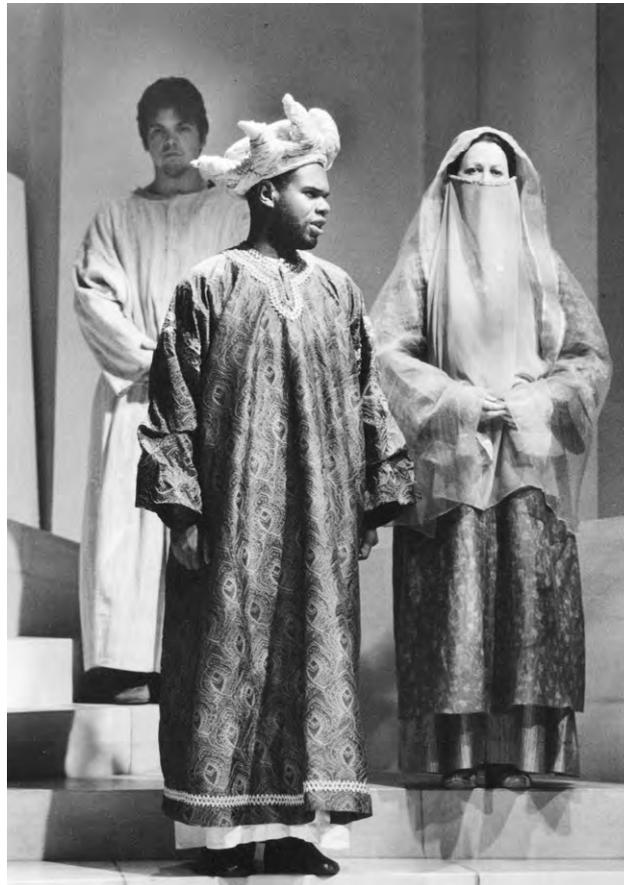
hatred and thanks God, saying, “Oh God, for seven, already one Thou givest!” He would be pleased to give his beloved adopted daughter Recha in marriage to the Knight Templar if it were possible, all demonstrating that to practice one’s religion is *to do good*, not merely to believe a dogma. This is the application by Lessing of the “Peace of Westphalia” principle that ended the Thirty Years War (1618-48): The only way to end a religious war is to walk away from it, forget all injuries, and work for the benefit of the former enemy.

The Parable of the Rings

In D’Andrea’s adaptation, the conniving of doctrinal zealots produces a trial of Nathan. These are either professional theologians like the Patriarch, or the shallow Daya, the Christian companion whom Nathan has hired to care for his daughter, and who still believes that Recha belongs with her own blood—Christians—in their own soil—Europe. In the trial at the conclusion of the play, where Nathan is defending his life in answering the no-win question—“Which is the true religion?”—Nathan delivers Lessing’s parable of the three rings:

A man was given a ring, which made its bearer beloved of all men. The gift was to be passed down to the son most beloved of the father. So it was, until one father had three sons he loved equally. When he was alone with each, the father imagined he loved that son the best, and promised each the ring. In old age, not bearing to disappoint two of the three, he determined to have two exact copies made, so each son would think he had inherited the magical ring.

After the father died, each son believed he had inherited the true ring as promised, and that his brothers were lying. They go before a judge, who rules that none of them seems worthy of love at that moment; perhaps after a thousand years, the true ring might be recognized, when its bearer would be loved



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Sultan Saladin (Craig Wallace) orders a truce between Christians and Muslims in Jerusalem after taking the city in 1198; behind him is his sister and confidante, Sittah (Kimberly Schraf).

for the good he had done.

Thus, whichever brother does the most good, will be recognized as holding the “true” ring. *So let it be with religions*, says Nathan. Thus, Lessing’s Nathan forces the audience to discover, by mentally re-enacting Lessing’s parable, that the truth of the ring cannot be known by its appearance to the senses, but rather, by the goodness it inspires, as demonstrated in the real world.

Ecumenism means neither doctrinal compromises resulting in a mush, nor a collection of religions with equal rights in a pantheon; but, rather, acting on those religious truths which can be known and demonstrated by reason, such as that all men are made in the image of God in their capacity to make creative discoveries.

Moses Mendelssohn, the model for Nathan, in his *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, written in 1782-83, cites the great Rabbi Hillel the Elder,

who, when pressed to deliver the entire Law in brief, said, “Love thy neighbor as thyself. This is the text of the Law; all the rest is commentary. Now go and study!”

Lessing further insists that miracles are performed by human beings, not by Heaven: The design of creation allows the scope for potent human action, which the credulous call miraculous.

Changes in New Production

D’Andrea’s production is an adaptation, with substantial divergences from the original. This works best in the stretto created with the parable of the rings being dramatized at the conclusion, rather than simply recited in the middle of the drama. There is the typical problem of too much playing for laughs by the actors. Worse, Nathan himself is not consistently played as the sublime character Lessing intended him to be.

In fact, it is exactly the lack of education in the quality of the “sublime” which has made

so few people ready to act outside popular opinion, to avert tragedy. Drawing on Schiller’s discussion, Lyndon LaRouche has described the sublime as the quality such that “in the bowels of horror, people come forth as individuals, who are able to grasp the situation, intervene into the situation, and, by the method described by Plato [posing a paradox], to transform themselves, and thus gain from that, the ability to rise above the situation, to save a people that is not worth saving, but to lead them to safety.”

Nathan and Saladin demonstrate the sublime, and this company has largely succeeded in bringing out the fundamental intention of Lessing in this play, which is all too rarely performed.

—Anita Gallagher

1. See David Shavin, “Philosophical Vignettes from the Political Life of Moses Mendelssohn,” *Fidelio*, Summer 1999 (Vol. VIII, No. 2).