



Actors Ensemble
of Berkeley
presents

*Two Jews
Walk into a
War*

by Seth Rozin

Directed by Gabriel A. Ross

Saturday and Sunday, April 10th and 11th 2021, 7 p.m. PDT (6:30 p.m. preshow) 80 minutes no intermission

About the Playwright

Seth Rozin is the author of several plays, including ***Men of Stone*** (produced by Theater Catalyst, nominated for a Barrymore Award for Outstanding New Play), ***Missing Link*** (produced by InterAct Theatre Company, nominated for a Barrymore Award for Outstanding New Play), ***Reinventing Eden*** (produced by InterAct), ***The Space Between Us*** (readings at Abingdon Theatre and InterAct), ***Black Gold*** (National New Play Network rolling world premieres at InterAct, Phoenix Theatre, Prop Thtr, Arts West), ***Two Jews Walk Into A War...*** (NNPN rolling world premieres at Florida Stage, New Jersey Repertory Theatre, Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, Shadowland Theatre, Unicorn Theatre, Merrimack Repertory Theatre, InterAct, Florida Studio Theatre, GEVA Theatre and Barter Theatre) and ***JC3*** (readings at PlayPenn, Playwrights Theatre of New Jersey, InterAct). He has also written the book, lyrics and music for a new musical entitled ***A Passing Wind: The (Mostly) True Story of Joseph Pujol***, about the rise and fall of the world's greatest "fartiste," which received its premiere at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts' inaugural Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts in 2011.

Seth is the recipient of two playwriting fellowships from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the 2007 Smith Prize, as well as a 2002 new play commission from the Foundation for Jewish Culture. He is the founder and Producing Artistic Director of **InterAct Theatre Company** in Philadelphia, where he has directed over 50 productions, as well as a key player in the founding and shaping of the **National New Play Network**.

About the Director



Gabriel A. Ross was recently seen with **AE** in 2019's reading of ***A Dybbuk*** as Chonen/The Dybbuk. Prior to that, he played Guildenstern in ***Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*** many years ago. He directed the online workshop of ***Too Many Crucibles*** with **AE** last fall, and a reading of ***A Man For All Seasons*** in 2019.

Other recent directing credits include productions of *Proof* and *Greetings!* at Pacifica Spindrift and assisting the sold out immersive tour *OUT of Site: SoMa*. He was a TBA finalist for his role as Jason in *Action Hero* at The Rhino in 2019. He earned his MFA in Classical Acting from GWU.

Director's Note

I don't recall how I first discovered the story of the last Jew of Afghanistan. But I heard a tidbit and dug deeper. The more I learned about the infamous rivalry of Ishaq Levin and Zebylon Simontov, the more dramatic it seemed. I thought: someone should write a play about this. Then it occurred to me that someone probably did. And I was right. Twice! I first learned about another dramatic adaptation of this story: *The Last Two Jews of Kabul* by Josh Greenfeld. I tried to get in touch with him, but he wouldn't return my calls. I might have spoken with his mother. She said she would tell him I called. But she had an accent and I wasn't sure she understood everything I was saying. She remembered his play though. While trying to find another way I could get a hold of him, I learned there was another script about the same story! Possibly a third even. Anyway, that's how I came across Seth Rozin's script ***Two Jews Walk into a War***.

Two Jews Walk into a War is *inspired* by a true story rather than based on a true story. There really were two Afghani Jews by the names Ishaq and Zablon. They really did live in the synagogue in Kabul. They really did hate each other to death. They really were the last members of a 1000+ year old tradition. And the Taliban really did confiscate their Torah and other relics. The Torah is still missing and possibly caught up in some international intrigue. But this script takes very significant artistic license in order to create a story that progresses somewhere. Sadly, the true story did not have the arc of the drama you will watch.

In this story, personal conflict is motivated by different worldviews and reflected in different religious interpretation. Judaism simultaneously ties the diaspora together and tears it apart. It is the power of an unifying text and a diverse diaspora that provides the Jewish people with dynamism. The real Ishaq passed away in 2005. The real Zebylon still lives in Kabul and acts as caretaker of the synagogue. But on March 29, 2021, he revealed intentions to join his family in Israel after the High Holidays due to fears of a return to Taliban control of the nation after the withdrawal of American forces. Then there will be none.

Thank you for joining us.

About the Actors: Steve Budd



Steve Budd (ZEBLYON) is an actor, writer, storyteller, standup comic, and solo performer. He's acted with many Bay Area theater companies, including San Francisco Playhouse, Central Works, Custom Made, Symmetry, New Conservatory, Impact, and Marin Shakespeare, and has appeared in numerous indies, commercials, and industrials. His award-winning solo show *What They Said About Love* enjoyed an extended run at The Marsh in Berkeley and San Francisco in 2018 and delighted audiences in Ottawa, L.A., Indianapolis, NYC, Boston, and London.

His new solo show *What They Said About Sex* has been featured in The Marsh International Solo Fest and Playground SF's Solo Fest.

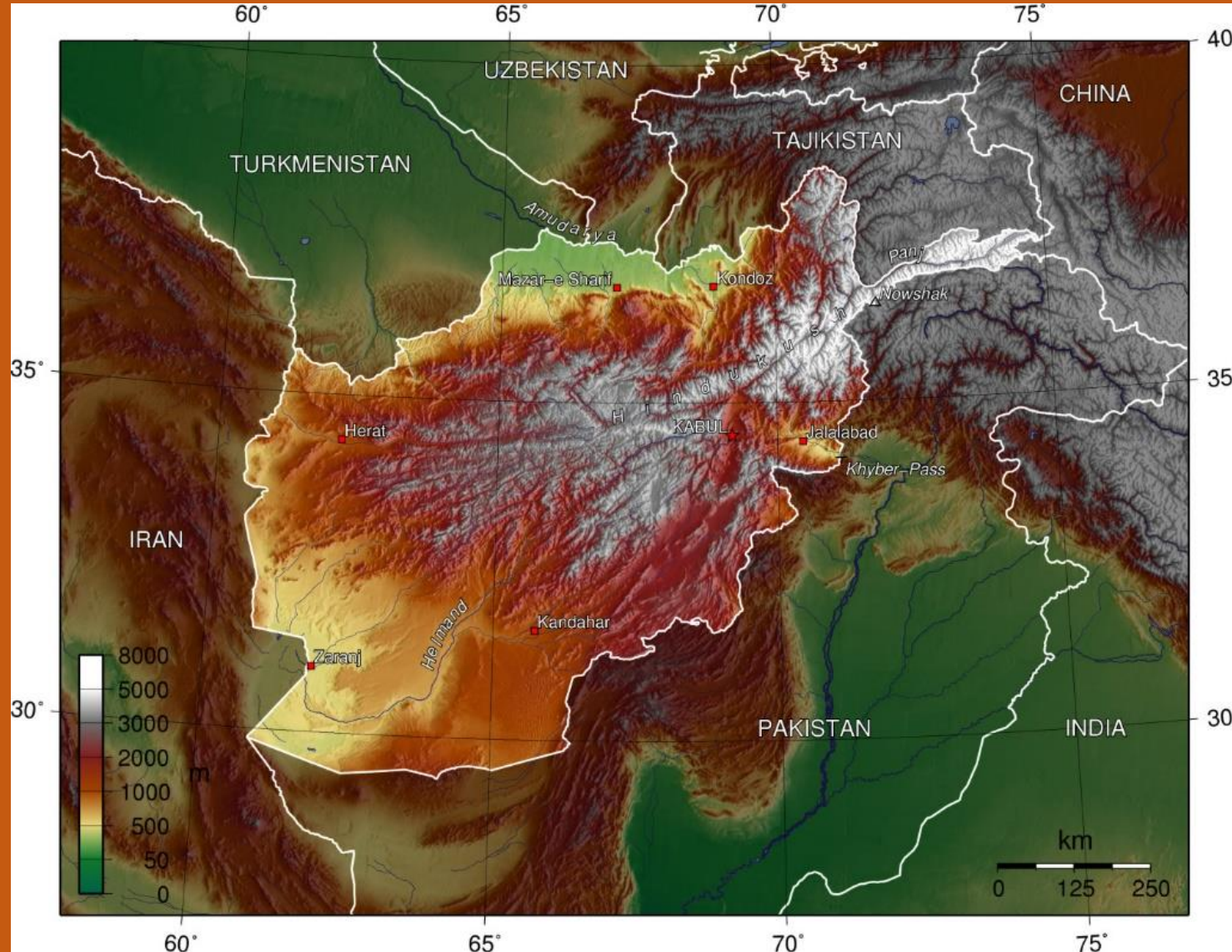
About the Actors: Abe Bernstein



Abe Bernstein (ISHAQ) started acting when he was 60. Since then he has been in seventeen plays, eight staged readings, four solo performances, and four performing troupes. He likes acting because it allows him to do and say things he would never have the nerve to do or say in real life--and blame the playwright!

His favorite roles have been in *Dark of the Moon*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Fantasticks*, and *Cabaret*. He has been in three staged readings with Actors Ensemble of Berkeley, and he has performed with Oakland's Stagebridge Playback Theatre Troupe.

Afghanistan



Afghanistan is a landlocked country, wedged between Iran and Pakistan to its south, east, and west, and the Central Asian republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north, with a tiny sliver of a border with China. It's location has made it the locus for clashes between rival civilizations for centuries.

Geographically, **Afghanistan** is dominated by the Hindu Kush mountain range, which runs down the center diagonally from the north-east. The rugged landscape means the nation is historically more of a collection of isolated valleys connected by arduous mountain passes - ambush points for individual travelers as well as invading armies – none of which have ever really conquered **Afghanistan** for long.

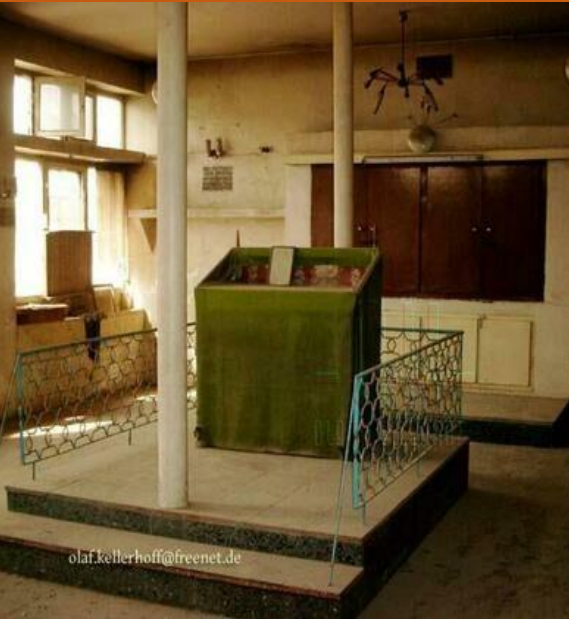
Kabul



Kabul is the capital of Afghanistan. Located in a high mountain valley connected to Pakistan via the famous Khyber Pass, **Kabul** was a major stop on the Silk Road to India. It has been the official capital of Afghanistan since 1776, though long prominent in Afghan history. Numerous empires passed thru **Kabul**, including the Afghan Empire and the Mughal Empire of India, which conquered India from **Kabul**. The first Mughal emperor, Babur, lived in Kabul for twenty years.

Kabul's grandeur and cosmopolitan nature has been celebrated for centuries by poets and statesmen. Babur himself was buried in **Kabul** and the inscription on his tomb reads *if there is a paradise on earth, it is this, it is this, it is this!*

The Jews of Afghanistan



As a stop on the Silk Road, and the nexus of empires, **Afghanistan** had Jewish merchants, traders, and artisans for centuries. Evidence of a Jewish presence dates back to 538 BC, during the time of the Persian Emperor Cyrus the Great, who released the Jews from the Babylon Exile, and financed the Second Temple.

For centuries, **Afghanistan's** Jewish community centered around Herat. The Yu Aw synagogue dates back to 1393. Some restoration happened in the past 20 years. It is currently used for housing and a school. In 2013, a trove of medieval documents was discovered in abandoned caves. Known as the Afghan Genizah, the documents detail the lives of Afghanistan's medieval Jewish community.

Prior to the 20th century, the Jewish population may have been 40k. At the beginning of the 20th century, the community was about 5k, split between Herat, Kandahar, and Kabul. Emigration to Israel was permitted after '51, and there began a steady exodus, which accelerated with the collapse of the monarchy in the early 70's, replaced by a Soviet client state, followed by constant civil war, egged on by outside forces. By the time this play takes place, the Taliban had been driven from Kabul. Only 2 Jews remained both residing in Kabul's synagogue. The building escaped destruction due to its indistinguishability.

The exiled Afghani royal family claims Jewish lineage to the tribe of Benjamin. Many also suspect the Pashtuns, Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, have Jewish ancestry given the similarity of their customs.



Actors Ensemble of Berkeley

Actors Ensemble (**AE**) is a non-profit corporation which has been producing plays in Berkeley since 1957. We currently present several shows a year at John Hinkel Park Amphitheatre and Live Oak Theater, and recently other venues such as LaVal's Subterranean or The Old Finnish Hall, and now online. Our website **www.aeofberkeley.org** has a comprehensive history as well as our open call for proposals for **2021** and **2022**. We always have open auditions and welcome folks interested in participating on- and off-stage – write us at **info@aeofberkeley.org**

We regard theater as a medium of entertainment, an opportunity for reflection, and a stimulus for change. For this reason, we are dedicated to the idea of an acting company as an ensemble: a group of equals working together to give life to a playwright's ideas.

We select plays which give participants the chance to amplify their theater skills and to develop their capacities for communication. We hope to entertain our audiences, to stimulate and touch them, and to affect their lives.

Actors Ensemble is governed by a volunteer board of directors. The board of directors, actors, staff, and volunteers donate their time to maintain our community theater. As in the case with almost all performing arts groups, paid admissions defray only a percentage of our operating expenses.

Sources

Jewish Virtual Library: Afghanistan Virtual Jewish History Tour, By Alden Oreck

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/afghanistan-virtual-jewish-history-tour>

Atlas Obscura: The last operating synagogue in Afghanistan

<https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/the-last-operating-synagogue-in-afghanistan-kabul-afghanistan>

Wikipedia: History of the Jews in Afghanistan

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Afghanistan

Wikipedia: Afghan conflict: 1978-present

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghanistan_conflict_\(1978%E2%80%93present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Afghanistan_conflict_(1978%E2%80%93present))

Revolutionary Women of Afghanistan, Photo Gallery (where our lead image came from)

<http://www.rawa.org/gallery.html>

Credits

Publicity, Tickets, Slideshow

Jerome Solberg, Gabriel Ross

Costumes and Props:

Gabriel Ross, Jerome Solberg, Cast

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