

History on the Cusp of Myth: J.T. Rogers' *Oslo*

Abstract

J.T. Rogers' *Oslo* has had an extraordinary run for new 'straight' drama: sell-out performances both in New York and London, and 7 Tony nominations. But what is it? On the face of it, *Oslo* is a history play – a carefully imagined reconstruction of secret talks that became the precursor to the Clinton/Arafat/Rabin Camp David meetings that resulted in the 1993 Oslo Accords. The subject and the players have been thoroughly researched by J.T. Rogers, and the play's reception has been largely celebratory. This perhaps is the result of a play-going public's appreciation of some intelligence in political debate and no doubt an appreciation of the play's optimism, despite the ultimate failure of the Accords. This paper looks closely at three questions posed by Rogers' play: 1) IS it a history play, and if so, how does it apprehend/narrate history? 2) Murray Krieger once said that history is the child of myth that never altogether escapes its parentage – is *Oslo*, in this sense, an unruly child of myth – not so much a history play, as it is a trans-historical political lesson? 3) If *Oslo* is NOT a history play, to what end does it employ its very specifically researched context?

Keywords

Oslo peace accords, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, J.T. Rogers, Oslo back channel, historical drama, history play, PLO, peace process, Yassir Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin

Full text

“At my core, I feel unsettled about a certain skilled sentimental myth-making lurking in Oslo....The play seems intended to be valedictory and oracular, and without question, a message of hope in the quagmire should not be diminished.”

(Bradley, 2017)

“Myths have sprung up. As in fairy tales, the focus is strongly centered on the individuals involved, as are the explanations.”

(Waage, 2000: p3)

With a somewhat privileged 'upbringing' (commissioned by the Lincoln Centre and nurtured by New Dramatists), *Oslo* has had an extraordinary run for an original 'straight' drama: sell-out performances both in New York and London; two wins, including Best Play, from seven

Tony nominations, and several other awards¹. But what is it? On the face of it, *Oslo* is a history play – a carefully imagined reconstruction of secret talks that became the precursor to the Clinton/Arafat/Rabin Camp David meetings that resulted in the 1993 Oslo Accords. The subject and the players have been thoroughly researched by J.T. Rogers, and the play’s reception has been largely celebratory. This perhaps is the result of a play-going public’s appreciation of some intelligent political debate and no doubt it is an appreciation of the play’s optimism, despite the ultimate failure of the Accords. But Elizabeth Bradley’s misgivings, quoted above, deserve a deeper consideration, and this paper intends to look closely at three questions posed by Rogers’ play: 1) IS it a history play, and if so, how does it apprehend and narrate that history? 2) Is Bradley right about its ‘myth-making’ quality? Murray Krieger once said that history is the child of myth that never altogether escapes its parentage – is *Oslo*, in this sense, an unruly child of myth – not so much a history play, as it is an attempt at trans-historical political lesson? 3) If *Oslo* is NOT a history play, to what end does it employ its very specifically researched context? My hope, in addressing these 3 questions, is to unpack the deeper signifying historiographical/literary and structural elements operating within the play.

My first question -- is it a history play? -- feels counterintuitive. As Rogers and others have stated, it is a carefully researched account of historical events, played out over three acts, so surely it is a history play? This question isn’t particularly easy to answer. Not only is it difficult to define a ‘history play’, but defining ‘history’ itself remains a theoretical minefield. Competing theories about the porous boundaries between ‘history proper’ and other kinds of discursive representations of the past or present have complicated if not disrupted entirely our confident expectations about what distinguishes history from other kind of writing practices. We’ve also come to see that the very act of narrativising history is

¹ *Oslo* won the Best Play 2017 in the Drama Desk, New York Critics’ Circle, Lucille Lortel, and the Outer Critics’ Circle awards.

ineluctably theory-laden. Contemporary considerations of the history play often analyse such works in a somewhat ambiguous way. In a review of *Performing the Past: Memory, History and Identity*, Mare Van Den Eeden considers that ‘the fundamental split between history and memory...has been deeply challenged,’ and states that “most historians now hold that history and memory should be regarded as overlapping phenomena and should be studied in relationship to each other.’ (2011: 616) In his Introduction to *Performing History: Theatrical Representations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre*, Freddie Rokem describes a ‘subgenre loosely called a ‘history play’ or ‘history performance’ (2000: 3) and writes that “Theatrical performances about historical events are aesthetic adaptations of revisions of events that we more or less intuitively (or on the basis of some form of general knowledge or accepted consensus) know have actually occurred.’ (2000: 6)

For so many reasons, the sophistications of postmodern literary theory has made us wary of strict genre definitions, which might in some way threaten our ability to detect nuance, ambiguity or intertextual playfulness. Rogers himself is on record as having ‘wanted to write a play, not a textbook or a reenactment. I sought to capture the spirit of those real events’. Thus, he explains, while ‘The historical events in Oslo are all true...I have taken dramatic liberties. I have theatricalized and reinvented -- all to focus my play on the radical act at the center of the actual Oslo Channel.’ (*Oslo*: 4) These words from Rogers underpin his fairly traditional approach to working up events into the form of a ‘performed’ history with *Oslo*. Despite its very recent production, Rogers seems not to share the tendencies that Paola Botham – looking to other theorists – has discerned in so much contemporary historical dramas towards ‘radical’, ‘oppositional’, or ‘revisionist’ points of view (2016: 82). Nor does Rogers’ work acknowledge much in the way of the increasing analytical/historiographical complexities that Ute Berns attributes to the idea of ‘history as a multiplicity of co-existing though distinct temporalities’ (2015: 3). Instead, Rogers’ play assumes a fairly untroubled relationship with the past and sets out to convince us that what we’re about to see is just ‘how it was’ – an approach underscored by the play’s opening line: “It’s all true. I’m not making this up.” (*Oslo*: 11) Like most traditional historical narratives it centres primarily on a few powerful men and employs realism to embody and reenact its events.

Structurally the play is also quite traditional, made up of a series of scenes which (apart from Act I where important characters are introduced at various points within a year or so of the talks) are played out in nearly chronological order over 9 months. In its telling, the play raises many questions about the relationship between identity, history, and memory, but never does so in a self-reflexive, ironic or postmodern way. Instead it renders its tale as the memory of a collective endeavour, narrated here by Mona Jule until, in the very final moments of the play, all the characters speak out to the audience to bring us up to date on what has happened since the depicted events of 1993.

While acknowledging the myriad difficulties in defining a history play, in order to attempt an answer at my first question, I am going to propose a working definition, which is that the particular characteristic of a history play lies in its focus on the socio/historical forces that determine change/progress/events shown within a specifically designated time period. But in another, perhaps more literary sense, we have also to consider what is specifically foregrounded in any given literary construction of those socio/historical forces and I think, where *Oslo* is concerned, what occupies the foreground is the very tightly drawn location (far from any actual conflict), the determining power of individual personality, and the metaphorical reduction of whole and varied geopolitical forces and opinions down to a few voices operating here as representative of those wholes. And perhaps here lies one of the structural tensions within the play: *Oslo* is nothing if not concerned with the dramatic representation of a specific historical process, and yet what is depicted is nearly entirely an evolving relationship between a few people. It takes a broader context to prevent our apprehension from collapsing into simple equations of personal, possibly idiosyncratic, qualities equaling historical progress. If we bring some of that broader context to bear (knowledge of *Oslo I*, *Oslo II* and the subsequent collapse of both) we might view this tension with some post-facto irony.

Oslo is not the first of J.T. Rogers' plays to be seen at the Royal National Theatre in London. In 2009 Rogers contributed to the Tricycle Theatre's extraordinary cycle *The Great Game*:

Afghanistan, which employed 12 short plays to cover the history of Afghanistan from 1842 to the present. Rogers expanded his piece from that cycle, *Blood and Gifts*, into a full-length play which was directed by Howard Davies and produced by the National in 2010. Both *Oslo* and *Blood and Gifts* bear a distinct family resemblance: both tell the story of well-meaning, foreign semi-officials attempting to sort out intractable problems in the middle east, both tell the story of ‘secret channel’ meetings, and both look closely at questions of trust and the sharing of personal lives as critical factors in political solutions. In *Blood and Gifts*, the action ends with Jim Warnock, an American CIA operative, finding that his trust has been betrayed by Abdullah Khan, a man he had mistakenly thought shared his values. The Americans are seen here, largely, as both naïve and somewhat boorish, although Warnock is presented as a man with vision: “...because here, right now, I have a chance – we have a chance – to do what is right.” (*Blood and Gifts*: 25) Interestingly, the play never gives Warnock the chance to explain exactly what it is that he thinks is right in the context of an increasingly complex Soviet-Afghan war in 1981. But Warnock is positioned throughout the piece as a ‘good’ American whose values we, as the audience, trust, and whose betrayal we sympathise with.

Oslo also tells an international tale, but sidelines the Americans. Instead, it involves three main geo-political groups: the Norwegian facilitators and representatives of Israel and Palestine. Of course, at this point, it would be more correct to say representatives of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation since, as Hanan Ashrawi has pointed out, prior to events in the early 90s, it was not acceptable to speak of Palestine as a geographical noun, but only of the adjective, Palestinian. The voices here represent the PLO at a very specific moment in history and, I think importantly, a point at which the PLO - through various diplomatic ventures - had come to be a recognised voice in international negotiations. The history depicted in the play is

of the now public (but once clandestine) talks that took place in Norway, in parallel with the official talks that were happening elsewhere. The play begins with Terje Rød-Larsen, director of the FAFO² institute and his wife, Mona Juul, who worked in the Foreign Ministry, confessing to the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Johan Jorgen Holst, that they have begun secret talks with the Israelis and the Palestinians. Holst's first reaction is anger, but Mona insists that the talks could lead to something important: 'We *are* trusted on both sides. We have always supported Israel *and* the Palestinian cause, while maintaining a strict neutrality on the issue of statehood.' Rød-Larsen confronts Holst more directly, asking 'What are you afraid of, Johan Jorgen? The world is cracking open. All I am saying is to think about new possibilities. Imagine what can be achieved now!' (14)

In spite of Holst's disapproval, Juul and Rød-Larsen continue to pursue their mission to set up secret 'back-channel' talks and that mission is fueled by Rød-Larsen's certainty that the reason negotiations fail in the international arena is directly linked to the fact that the negotiating model itself is not fit for purpose:

In International Relations, most conflicts are negotiated using the model of Totalism. All issues of disagreement are places on the table; all organizations, representing all sides are *at* the table. The rules are rigid, the procedure impersonal and time and again the results are absolute failure. Thus to facilitate an effective negotiation, you must learn to use the model of Gradualism....This new model -- *my* model -- is rooted not in the organizational but in the personal....But hear me: to use this model is not without risk. For when you unleash the personal, the Furies can come out. And once this process begins, there is no going back. Events will move faster and faster, stretching you to the breaking point. But through it all, you must push on. Believing that whatever mistakes are made, whatever unforeseen events your action unleash, the risks are worth it. Because if you succeed, you will change the world. (18)

² The acronym of the Norwegian Institute for Applied Social Research

Juul assents to this statement adding that ‘this idea, this process is what drove everything - everything - we said and did.’ Thus, in the opening few pages, Rød-Larsen and Juul lay their cards on the table: historical processes - indeed, world-changing historical processes – can be the result of facilitating a dialogue that has the potential to build trust between opponents. And this lays down the pattern for the play: in the ensuing scenes we witness the breakthroughs and the setbacks of the Israeli and Palestinian representatives as they adhere to Rød-Larsen’s ground rules: business is to be conducted in one room, and ‘the personal’ in another: ‘...out here we share our meals, talk of our families, and light the fire. My friends I must insist upon this rule. For it is only through the sharing of the personal that we can see each other for who we truly are.’ (33) In the end, the secret talks progress well enough to lead us to that historic handshake in the White House rose garden in 1993.

There is no doubting *Oslo*’s good will, nor the way in which it depicts political possibility and intelligent discussion in an age where either can seem thin on the ground, but there is something worth looking much more deeply at here. The ultimate theme of the play is, of course, the dream of peaceful negotiation, and it is very hard to argue with the idea that if two opponents can be persuaded to see the mutual humanity in one another, they have a basis for building trust into a negotiating process. But however *Oslo* celebrates the triumph of this process, there are a number of questions that remain for the viewer in 2017/8 - not the least of which is whether the accords actually, ultimately, set the peace process *back* for both Palestinians and Israelis, particularly in terms of intensifying the extremist elements on both sides³. Certainly Rabin’s assassination at the end of a peace rally in 1995 by a man known to be

³ See, particularly, Kursh (2016) and Said (1993)

heavily opposed to the Oslo accords seems to demonstrate this view. And one needn't look far to find widespread criticism of the accords in terms of how their lopsided agreements disadvantaged the Palestinians, but perhaps the most interesting source of these comes from a Norwegian historian, Hilde Henriksen Waage, who has spent much of her academic life researching and writing about the Oslo 'back channel' negotiations. She points out that in spite of the claims made by Rød-Larsen, Juul and Egeland about Norway's 'similar' close ties with both Israelis and Palestinians, there was a clear asymmetry in the relationships, with the Norwegian-Israeli relationship much stronger, and dating back to 1948, while the Norwegian-Palestinian relationship dated from a cautious acceptance of the PLO as a legitimate negotiating voice in 1980. (Waage, 2000) That asymmetry is something that we need to look at more deeply as we consider the disadvantages of diplomacy conducted at a distance, by well-meaning, intelligent, upper middle-class Norwegians.

Before we can get to this, however, the play's representation of history is worth analysing carefully, because particularly at this point in time, we are likely to find massive historical solutions hammered out over waffles and whisky in genteel drawing rooms more comforting than it should be.

Metahistorical Analysis

A full metahistorical analysis might seem premature since we have not, perhaps, answered the question about whether *Oslo* is a historical play. But it may advance our consideration of that question to look at the way in which it emplots the historical events upon which it is based.

Oslo might be considered to be a comedy in which, White, following Frye, says, ‘Hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man over his world by the prospect of occasional *reconciliations* of the forces at play in the social and natural worlds.’ (1973: 9) But to conclude that the play is written as comedy is to lose sight of who or what is actually at the heroic heart of the piece, and where *Oslo* is concerned, the hero is almost certainly *the process* -- the ‘gradualist’ trust-building model espoused by Rød-Larsen -- which is, as the play’s conclusion reminds us, still there, still waiting for us if we can only see it:

We created a process. Seeing all this, is that not clear? A model -- that can be used again -- to bring implacable enemies together, to find a way forward. Together....If we have come *this* far, through blood, through fear – hatred – how much *further* can we yet go? There! On the horizon. The Possibility.
Do you see it?
Do you?

[*He waits. He stares at us.*]

Good. (115)

It is the model itself which is placed as the hero, since undoubtedly implacable enemies will come and go, history will unfold, wars and empires rise and fall, but the model remains. It is in this sense that I would argue the play is in fact emplotted as a Romance, which ‘is fundamentally a drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero’s transcendence of the world experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it...It is a drama of the triumph of good over evil, of virtue over vice....’ As such, the process, in Hayden White’s words, gives “human life an awareness of its potentially heroic nature.” (1973: 8)

As a Romantic work, with its emphasis on the transcendent, it becomes at once clear why *Oslo* never engages too deeply with the negotiating issues it raises - which is not to say that those

issues aren't included, but simply that they aren't the focus of the drama. The focus of the drama is how, despite the setbacks, the arguments, the tensions and the disruptions, our eyes remain very clearly directed toward the ongoing, developing relationship between a few men in one room or the other. Personal details are as significant in the play (such as learning that both Qurie and Savir have daughters with the same name) as are any political details being hammered out in the arguments, and in fact any deeper consideration of what the final Declaration of Principles included is alluded to but not really articulated. And given the massive blow-back generated by that Declaration of Principles, a closer consideration of what they finally included would have seemed to have been merited in this context.

Given this emphasis on the relationships between the players in the historical field within which the play operates, we might consider further the way in which *Oslo* -- whether or not we conclude that it is a historical drama -- implicitly suggests a mode of historical explanation, which Hayden White, following Kenneth Burke, would identify as Formist: 'In Formist conceptions of historical explanations, the uniqueness of the different agents, agencies, and acts which make up the events to be explained is central to one's inquiries, the "ground" or "scene" against which these entities arise.' (1973: 14)

Certainly *Oslo*'s emphasis is on personality as a driver of historical change, and specifically it emphasises single personalities, or small groups of 'visionary' personalities as the driving force of change in the world -- a declaration it makes more than once.⁴ This conception

⁴ Larsen, describing the risks of his process concludes by saying that if it succeeds, 'you will change the world'. (18) Mona describes the meeting of Savir and Qurie: 'Two men in a room, in a room, extend their hands and history begins to change.' (59) Savir says to Qurie 'you and I, Abu Ala, we are going to change the world.' (77)

of historical explanation -- in terms of what actually drives historical change -- is well-suited to a romantic emplotment and in *Oslo* it reinforces the sense that history articulated through the will to overcome personal difference means always seeing the personal as historically potent, and underscores the centrality of individual agency in the historical process. Further, this emphasis on the personal and the individual within *Oslo* appears to operate a kind of metaphorical reduction -- where the part stands in for or is seen as the whole -- which carries with it a specific difficulty: if Qurie is the voice of Yassir Arafat and Beilin or Savir the voice of Yitzhak Rabin or Shimon Peres, the greater difficulty is that Rabin, Peres, and Arafat become the 'voices' of Israelis and Palestinians in a way that at once flattens out the widely disparate voices within those historically opposed and internally contiguous communities⁵. This is, of course, a general difficulty in political negotiation, and it had serious consequences for the wider historical reception of the Oslo Declaration. The play also operates reductively in another way, which is to say that whether one individual is more powerful than the other is not a particular consideration within Rød-Larsen's process. More important than any given position or personal quality is the process itself, which is presented as somewhat 'blind' to any personal quality other than a willingness to participate under its rules. Indeed there is a scene in which Norwegian bodyguards, Israeli academics and senior politicians drink whisky and exchange anecdotes with each other in a spirit of democratic collegiality. And early in the play, talk of Norway's neutrality sets the tone for a scene in which participants are treated with equal dignity, respecting the principle of common humanity that Rød-Larsen's process is built upon. It becomes tempting, then, to be lulled into a kind of complicity with the play's argument that Norway's neutrality towards all sides is a constituent part of what made Norway the ideal facilitator for the back channel talks in

⁵ See Aly (2013)

the first place. But this is an American play, written by an American playwright and these insistences upon the importance of neutrality require a closer consideration.

Oslo and ‘neutrality’

The play’s foreword by Andrew Bishop says that Rogers himself describes his play as ‘a scrupulously researched, meticulously written fiction.’ (x) As such, one supposes that the list of characters involved is drawn from historical record. There are nine Norwegians -- Rød-Larsen, Juul, Holst, Egeland, Marianne Heiberg (administrator of FAFO Institute), the housekeepers and the body guards (all of whom have speaking roles). The Israeli contingency has seven voices in this play: Shimon Peres (Foreign Minister), Yossi Beilin (Deputy Foreign Minister), Uri Savir (Director of Foreign Ministry), Joel Singer (legal advisor), Yair Hirschfeld, and Ron Pundak (academics), and of course the recorded voice of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The Palestinians have only two: Ahmed Qurie (Finance Minister of the PLO; known as Abu Ala) and Hassan Asfour (official PLO Liaison). For the record, the Palestinians actually had at least two other voices involved in the Oslo process that might have been included here: Maher al-Kurd (economic adviser to the PLO)⁶ who was later replaced - under interesting circumstances - by Muhammad Abu Kush (another economic adviser to PLO)⁷; both close associates of Arafat who were at various times present. There was also an Egyptian lawyer, Taher Shash, who was called to Oslo to examine the DOP from the Palestinians point of view⁸. Given these facts, it seems curious that the play includes so few representatives of the Palestinians’ part in the process.

⁶ See Eisenberg & Caplan (2010: 173)

⁷ See Pradt (2012: 47)

⁸ See Shehadeh (1997: 159, *fn* 3)

This imbalance alone almost certainly guarantees that the Israeli voice is the overwhelming presence in the debates presented here, and so it proves: the six Israeli characters speak 348 times in the play, and the Palestinian characters speak 211 times. This means that of the total, 62% of the lines spoken by one side or the other are from those representing the Israeli side. Only 38% are from those representing the Palestinian side. Along with the numerical imbalance, the lead Palestinian character, Qurie, is largely left on his own to articulate the Palestinian view, because the other Palestinian character, Hassan Asfour, has only 25 lines across 3 acts, and of those, 5 lines are delivered in Arabic and 7 consist of 7 words or less. Beyond this limitation, the character of Asfour is sharply delineated as a communist ideologue who speaks rather like a Marxist robot. On the question of how pan-Arab states view the Palestinian plight he says: ‘Our cause is an opiate they inject into the proletariat masses so they will not turn their anger on their own decadent capitalist masters!’ -- the textbook coldness of which prompts a witty punchline for Uri Savir: ‘(pretend *‘aside)* Abu Ala, I don’t want to alarm you, but I think that one might be a communist.’ (99)

But these statistics still don’t tell the whole story, because the count above is only a count of when each character speaks – not of how long they speak. If we count the actual lines of text spoken by each character instead of just the number of times each character speaks, a pattern begins to develop⁹:

Israeli Voices		Palestinian Voices	
<u>ACT I</u>			
Beilin	70	Qurie	131
Hirschfield	92	Asfour	18
Pundak	22		

⁹ This kind of count is not, of course, an exact science, but I have counted every full line of text and also counted 2 half-lines as one. Where lines are more fragmentary I attempted to roughly average the word count into 1 line.

TOTAL: 184 149

ACT II

Savir	174	Qurie	113
Beilin	18	Asfour	5
Hirschfield	12		
Pundak	9		
TOTAL:	213		118

ACT II

Singer	113	Qurie	88
Savir	99	Asfour	5
Beilin	39		
Hirschfield	21		
Pundak	5		
Peres	30		
Rabin	9		
TOTAL:	316		113

As the acts progress, you can see the number of Israeli voices increase, and the number of lines of text these characters speak increases as well. And although Qurie remains throughout, the voice representing the Palestinian point of view becomes slowly overwhelmed as the play goes on. Along with these severe limitations in terms of articulating a Palestinians point of view, the play has other imbalances that affect our perception. Not the least of these is the way it exploits language to ‘prime’ our perception of the Palestinians. I use priming here in its psychological sense, wherein exposure to a particular stimulus has an influential effect on subsequent stimuli.

Specifically, we can look at the way in which the word ‘terrorist’ is used in the play. The media have a long history of portraying and talking about the PLO in terms of terrorism, and most people of a certain age retain strong memories of PLO terrorist acts - perhaps most notably at the Munich Olympic games. But despite the fact that Israeli terrorist organisations such as Irgun, Lehi, Haganah, and Palmach were operating forcefully in the years up to the Israeli war of

independence, and in spite of the continued occupation and building of settlements for more than 40 years in defiance of UN Resolutions outlawing such activity, the word terrorism is not applied by western media to Israel. Instead, Palmach is described variously in biographies of Yitzhak Rabin as a 'pre-state Jewish armed group' or a 'commando force'. These descriptions occur in biographies of Rabin because it is a matter of record that Rabin was an early member of Palmach, an organisation that was a forerunner of the Israeli army but in its pre-state ('terrorist'?) manifestation carried out military operations, including a number of serious bombings.

In *Oslo*, the word 'terrorist' is used 7 times, and each time it is applied to a Palestinian. Similarly, our introduction to the Palestinian cause is skewed, since immediately following Mona Juul's declaration that Norway is trusted by both sides because they have maintained a strict neutrality, Norwegian Foreign Minister, Jorgen Holst, responds with the play's first reference to Yasser Arafat: 'Mona! The Palestinian cause is led by Arafat and the PLO, who wish to wipe Israel off the map. Are you seriously suggesting Rabin talk peace with the man the Israelis call Hitler in his lair?' (14) This is worrisome enough, since there is no response to this assertion and certainly no mention is made of how the Palestinians might view Rabin, or Meir, or Peres, but of course the script gives the game away fairly clearly in Act III when Marianne Heiberg who works for FAFO declares: 'If we were in the Israelis' shoes, would we be paranoid? This is Yasser Arafat we're talking about. I know we're neutral but -- please.' (95)

Neutrality seems to have a curious meaning to these well-intentioned Norwegians. These reactions to, and characterisations of, Arafat are in stark contrast to the first mention of Yitzhak Rabin, which involves a memory that Larsen recounts to Holst about how he had made a foolish

mistake in his first impression of Rabin: 'Had you been there, you would have seen to the very core of this man. For like Rabin himself, you are a visionary and bold statesman: able to see what others cannot; willing to act when others will not.' (12) Despite these clearly imbalanced introductions to the leaders of both sides -- a terrorist on one hand and a 'visionary' on the other -- the Norwegian talk concludes here with Larsen's declaration that the Norwegians have what the US can never have: neutrality.

The first mention of the PLO comes from Yossi Beilin -- described as 'rising star of the Israeli Labour Party, right arm and protégé of the great Shimon Peres' (20) -- as he explains that the Israeli government's refusal to negotiate with the PLO. He then presents Israeli military action as defense against Palestinian aggression: 'The Palestinians are killing our settlers, and our soldiers, and themselves; our army is shooting back and children are getting killed' (21). It is important to the process of the Oslo talks that history is not a focus - the challenge instead is on moving forward. So when history is alluded to - as it is above in this first conversation between Beilin and Larsen- it has a particular weight. Conversely, in Mona Juul's first conversation with the Palestinian representative, Qurie, history comes in the form of admonishment:

...your Chairman Arafat's recent backing of Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War so infuriated your now-former Arab allies that they expelled ninety thousand Palestinians guest workers, thereby creating such a financial catastrophe for your people that now the PLO is stuck in Tunis, unable to pay even your electricity bills...(23)

The introduction of Qurie here as representative of a group backing Saddam Hussein would be a potent cue for an American audience who, while almost certainly knowing that the US was funneling much money into Israel, would probably not be aware that Iraq (along with Kuwait)

provided significant financial backing for the PLO - a thorny example of *realpolitik* which left Arafat with a particularly tricky dilemma. Without context, the quick introduction to current difficulties made by Mona Juul quickly associates Arafat with Hussein in a way that creates - for an American audience certainly - an instant villain.

The PLO is further described in Act I when Mona, explaining the setup of the first discussions to Jan Egeland (Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister), assures him that Ahmed Qurie will come as the voice of the PLO. To this Egeland replies: 'Mona! There is no voice of the PLO but Arafat's! Beneath him it's a labyrinth of backstabbing factions -- and you know this! Who is this Ahmed Qurie? How can you be sure this man has even told Arafat what he is doing?' (28)

Egeland's clear suggestion is that one side is more factionalised and perhaps more dangerous than the other, but the assertion is curious, ironic, and downright misleading. There were indeed factions within the Palestinian political spectrum, but these of course were matched on the Israeli side, and were indeed not only reflected at the very highest level with the well-documented rivalry between Rabin and Shimon themselves, but at the wider level, most tragically with the assassination of Rabin following a celebration of the Oslo accords by an Israeli 'extremist'¹⁰ (as noted, the Western media is shy of referring to Israelis as 'terrorists' even when they are assassinating Prime Ministers).

But there are more troubling implications when descriptions of Arafat and Peres are delivered by Larsen in a meeting with Egeland. Arafat is described first as a 'bloodstained terrorist' whereas Peres is described as 'the orchestrator of every diplomatic breakthrough the Israelis have ever achieved'. (28) We are now primed to expect terror from the Palestinians and

¹⁰ See Elmasry (2014)

diplomacy from the Israelis, but history doesn't sustain this kind of characterisation of the two parties at this particular juncture. It isn't difficult at all to uncover the historical fact that it was in fact the Palestinians who first attempted to broker peace in 1988 by offering a tentative two-state solution. Arafat's move was considered so ground-breaking that he was invited to speak to the UN in New York. In response, the deal was rejected by both the Israelis and the US and the then Secretary of State, George Shultz refused Arafat a visa, thereby blocking his address to the UN (despite the fact that the 1947 United Nations Headquarters Agreement states that the United States is not supposed to 'impose any impediments to transit' of people invited to the United Nations on official business)."¹¹

The culminating evidence of imbalance in the play occurs near the end of Act III, when the play includes footage from the ceremony held in the Rose Garden in 1993, with Rabin and Arafat shaking hands as Clinton smiles on. But it is Rabin who is given voice as the footage rolls, and we hear him speak about having had 'enough of blood', which leaves us with the strong impression that this tentative peace is the result of Israeli diplomacy. Arafat's voice, of course, is not heard. Given its clear biases it is very hard to conclude that *Oslo* treats its rivals fairly. Its celebrated process is presented as a weapon to dissolve all differences, yet the play's very structure reinforces difference and imbalance. But does this mean that the whole of its romantic apprehension and articulation is lost in what appears to be an unself-conscious diminishing of the Palestinian voice?

We have seen that underneath this account of some historical meetings, something profoundly transhistorical is being promoted - an absolute bedrock of human nature that could, in

¹¹ See Pears (1988)

the right circumstances, disarm even the most entrenched conflict -- it is at this point we begin to uncover what I would argue is the foundation of *Oslo*'s central mythologising idea. The ultimate failure of the Oslo accords is not at issue here, nor is the detail of the agreement worked out, because the hero -- as noted, the process itself -- is presented as triumphant, no matter the outcome. And this is why this 'history' play can't really include history -- the actual thing hammered out (the Declaration of Principles) can't really be considered within this frame because, as Roland Barthes reminds us, myth is by its nature depoliticised language. For all its 'scrupulous research' and its representation of things 'as they happened', the fundamental mythological proposal it puts to us is that, stripped of politics, anger and stubborn entrenchment, human beings can glimpse a common humanity in one another and gradually learn to trust. The reason that we haven't achieved peace in the world is that we haven't had a process based on building trust into a negotiation. There is something incredibly appealing about this idea, particularly in the often good-natured humanist context that *Oslo* provides. But we succumb to its charm at our peril. Because what it suggests is the idea that very differently lived experience is not central to the constitution of the individual and, indeed, that individuals can readily divest themselves of that lived experience where language is concerned. As if, could a tiger speak, we might share experiences with one another in a mutually meaningful way because language is simply a transparent function of our intellect and desire to communicate, and not a constituent part of -- created by and creating -- lived experience. Similarly, what *Oslo* proposes is that a core part of ourselves may be revealed as existing apart from lived experience - a kind of metaphysics of 'common core-ness' -- through which we can access a purer, more transcendent exchange.

It is difficult, when considering mythological discourse not to come back to Roland Barthes, and perhaps most apposite in this case is his short essay on The Great Family of Man:

The myth of the human 'condition' rests on a very old mystification, which always consists in placing Nature at the bottom of History. Any classic humanism postulates that in scratching the history of men a little, the relativity of their institutions or the superficial diversity of their skins..., one very quickly reaches the solid rock of a universal human nature. (1993: 101)

Of course, a quick survey of the history post-Oslo reveals that somewhere between this ideologically naturalised bedrock of common humanity and the synecdochic reduction of the diverse Palestinian or Israeli positions to one or two voices, the Oslo back-channel talks carried the seeds of their own destruction from the start.

Conclusion

In what may be admiration for its intelligence and optimism, I believe that we get blindsided by *Oslo*. It is in fact, not a history play at all in the terms I described earlier - it is closer to a traditional romantic tale in which the central heroic character (the 'process') wanders into dangerous territory and attempts to triumph against evil, or to bring a harmonious closure of some kind. Whatever its trappings, *Oslo* does NOT look at the socio/historical forces that determine change/progress/events in a specifically designated time period, because the historical field it depicts is so drastically reduced. But more than that, its concerns are not with those forces except insofar as they filter through the personal, because *Oslo* can only see ONE force determining change/progress/events in a specifically designated time period, and that is human personality. The play's reductive approach is a kind of methodological parsimony, which proceeds from the idea that highly complex phenomena like the Israeli/Palestinian conflict can

be explained through their simplest fundamental principles or parts -- and in this case, the personalities of individual 'spokesmen' and their willingness to build trust based on a mutual humanity.

As a rather heroic tale of 'what happened' – featuring a somewhat flawed hero -- it certainly means to appeal to the better angels of our nature. Offering a simple reduction that looks like salvation, it conveniently wraps things up just at the point where 'real' history, quite ruthlessly, began to take its central theory apart, revealing the limits of this proffered salvation. The stubborn complexity of response on all sides to the Declaration of Principles that were issued post-Oslo demonstrated the dangers of the 'process's' reductive philosophy, which required that one voice articulate a complex web of opinion based on years of traumatic lived experience on either side. Behind the curtain, of course, is the asymmetrical power relations that are never explored and which are, indeed, replicated here in the subtle ways that ensure the Palestinian view is undermined throughout. All that might be forgivable if the play didn't exhort us to stop worrying now and just get on with putting people together in rooms with waffles. Perhaps a useful final view of *Oslo* the play has been articulated already by Hilde Henriksen Waage whose extensive research into the Oslo process revealed the fact that some of the most important documents relating to the Oslo meetings have been "lost". Waage clearly has her suspicions about this loss and about what we might have learned about our 'hero' from those missing documents:

The missing documents would almost certainly show why the Oslo process probably never could have resulted in a sustainable peace. To a great extent, full documentation of the back channel would explain the disaster that followed Oslo. More broadly, it would have shed important light on the limits of third-party mediation by a small state in highly asymmetrical conflicts. Indeed, the Oslo process could serve as the perfect case study for flaws of this model. (2008: 63)

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