



First English-language opera about Herzl takes on his life and legacy

‘State of the Jews,’ by composer Alex Weiser and librettist Ben Kaplan, explores the dissonance at the center of the Zionist visionary’s character



Gideon Dabi as Theodor Herzl, center, with Temple Emanu-El Chorus.

Steven Pisano

grapple with his legacy and what it really means.”

Herzl (sung by Gideon Dabi) is referred to as Moses multiple times, both positively and mockingly. Herzl’s wife, Julie (Kristin Gornstein), even teases him, saying, “Moses didn’t make it to the Promised Land either.”

As Kaplan puts it, Herzl “was this prophetic figure who dreamed up a vision that he never lived to see but that ultimately came to fruition. And today, we’re still dealing with the ramifications of that history.”

Kaplan and Weiser began composing the opera in 2016 before intensifying their efforts in 2018. By the next year, they had completed the first full version. Initially, they workshopped the piece with a piano arrange-

ment before expanding the instrumentation.

The final orchestration features a small ensemble, including a piano, string quintet and clarinet, with a choir and four principal singers on stage. Over time, the production evolved into a fully realized performance, involving a larger creative team, including a director, lighting and costume designers.

Meanwhile, another opera about Herzl, in Hebrew, was staged by the Israeli Opera last year.

Kaplan and Weiser structured their opera around the final year of Herzl’s life, weaving a timeline that oscillates between 1903 and 1904 while incorporating flashbacks with Julie. Herzl’s political career, though brief – from 1896 to 1904 –

was packed with intense activity. His death at just 44 added to the urgency and drama.

“Herzl’s story is agonizingly tragic. All of his children died in tragic circumstances, one in a concentration camp – a horror on so many levels,” Kaplan says.

“We thought a lot about how to frame that tragedy, how to ask the questions without forcing an answer. The opera had to capture both the agony and the ecstasy of longing for peace, for resolution – while also confronting the feeling that it may always remain just out of reach.”

One of the central elements of the opera is the character of Julie Herzl, whom Kaplan and Weiser deliberately highlighted to

deepen the story’s emotional and personal dimensions.

“Through her character and their interactions, Herzl is seen in two ways – as the visionary, the prophet, the historical icon, but also as a flawed, complicated man,” Kaplan says. “And Julie had her own struggles, her own conflicts with him. In fact, Theodor has more lines overall, but Julie has more arias.”

Musically, Weiser used musical references to deepen the historical dimension. “One example is the waltz,” he says.

“Julie’s three arias are all waltzes, reflecting her Viennese background, but each waltz evolves to mirror her state of mind. In her first aria, she reminisces about the man she married – the playwright, the dreamer, the

man who loved the lightness of cafés and conversation.

“The music starts as a light waltz but then becomes colder, more distant, reflecting where their relationship is. In a flashback to their honeymoon, the waltz is livelier, more buoyant, but still carries an undercurrent of something unresolved.

“And in her final aria, when she sings about how her life has been ruined, the same musical material is pulled apart – it’s no longer a waltz at all. That transformation, from grace to fragmentation, mirrors her emotional journey.”

Weiser says many of the arias in the opera are adapted directly from historical sources. “For example, Julie’s ‘Sixth Zionist Congress’ aria is based on things she said. And her final aria,

where she ultimately resigns herself to joining the movement, is closely modeled on a statement published under her name in The Jewish Chronicle of London.

“Historians suspect that someone else wrote it for her, and she just approved it for publication, likely for political reasons. But that moment – where she appears to accept Herzl’s cause – isn’t usually part of the myth. It complicates the story and makes it much richer.”

Weiser also included some musical quotations. We hear “Hatikva,” the song that would become the Israeli national anthem, but in the Yiddish pronunciation of that era.

Kaplan says he and Weiser recognized that history often becomes reductive over time.

“We felt it was important for audiences to engage with that – not just as a pre-World War II world, but a pre-World War I world,” he says. “The structures of society, the way people spoke and thought – it was all so different. We spent a lot of time researching how people might have approached these ideas and conversations.”

Kaplan and Weiser, both directors at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research – an institution dedicated to preserving Jewish culture and offering Yiddish language classes – collaborated on another opera, “The Great Dictionary of the Yiddish Language,” which was performed at the MANCA Festival in Nice, France, last May.

This opera follows a group of Yiddish linguists, survivors of the Holocaust, who had settled in New York after fleeing Eastern Europe. Their struggle extended beyond the physical devastation of genocide to the erasure of an entire culture and language. Determined to preserve what remained, they embarked on an ambitious project to compile a comprehensive Yiddish dictionary.

But disagreements arose over the tome’s scope and approach. The project’s leader envisioned a monumental 12-volume work akin to the Oxford English Dictionary, dedicating 25 years to its creation. Despite his lifelong effort, he completed only the sections for the letter aleph before he died. Curiously, this covered nearly 20 percent of Yiddish vocabulary.

For Kaplan, this opera held deep significance. “The opera explores that struggle: How do you save a language? How do you preserve a culture that has been nearly erased?” he asks.

“The debates among these scholars explode into larger questions – not just about linguistics, but about history, identity and survival. That tension, that urgency, felt incredibly operatic to us.”

Getting back to Herzl, what’s compelling for Kaplan and Weiser is that the Herzl opera – like Herzl’s legacy – is still evolving and taking on new meaning.

As Weiser puts it, “Even when we staged a slimmed-down version of the opera a few years ago, there was a war – the Israel-Hamas war of 2021 – and even then we were saying, ‘This piece feels different now than it did a year ago.’ But in a way, those events only intensified what was already there. Herzl’s story is unfinished history – it’s still unfolding.”

Kaplan: ‘His story is agonizingly tragic. All of his children died in tragic circumstances, one in a concentration camp: a horror on so many levels. We thought a lot about how to frame that.’

“Did Herzl’s vision succeed or fail? It depends on who you ask. One person might say, ‘It worked. It’s a miracle!’ Another might say, ‘It didn’t work at all.’ That’s what makes his story so compelling – it’s still an open question, deeply personal and constantly evolving.”

Kaplan adds: “The opera ends with Herzl’s reinterment in Jerusalem, which was his final wish. On the one hand, his dream came true – Jerusalem became the capital of a Jewish nation, and he was buried there. But on the other, whether you look at it from the time of his death, from 10 years ago when we first discussed this opera, from five years ago when we staged it, or from today, the question of achieving true peace and refuge remains unresolved.”

In the opera, Julie Herzl sings, “This book will haunt us.” His ideas, his contradictions, they linger, unresolved. As artists, this history completely haunts us,” Kaplan says.

“It reminds me of the dybbuk in Yiddish folklore: a spirit that clings to you and refuses to let go. Herzl’s story is like that. It stays with us, demanding that we wrestle with it.”