

THE MELTING POT BY ISRAEL ZANGWILL
DECEMBER 2017 AT THE FINBOROUGH THEATRE
DIRECTED BY MAX ELTON

ABOUT THE PLAY

After his family are massacred in a pogrom, Jewish composer David Quixano escapes to New York City, in search of a new life. There he falls in love with Vera, a beautiful Russian Christian.

Inspired by the multitude of ethnicities in his new home, David's exuberance bursts forth in his composition – an "American Symphony". But, as characters from his past begin to reappear, David is confronted with the terrifying realisation that his "melting pot" burns the good with the bad.

The play asks whether vicious divisions of race, religion and class ever really be left behind? Or is the idea of a cauldron of nations, free of ethnic divisions and hatred, an impossible dream?

Originally performed in Washington DC in 1908, The Melting Pot received its UK premiere at the Royal Court Theatre in 1914 and transferred to two West End theatres. Unseen in the UK since 1938, the play popularised the phrase "melting pot", and remains a determined celebration of multiculturalism.

PRESS RESPONSES

The Guardian
Michael Billington

Israel Zangwill's The Melting Pot (1908) is a classic example of a work that has acquired new urgency.

Zangwill (1864-1926) is largely forgotten today but he was a self-styled "cockney Jew" who found fame in the US and whose work was eagerly endorsed by President Roosevelt. You can see why: The Melting Pot is an unashamed tribute to the idea that America is "God's crucible in which all the races can combine". That phrase is spoken by David, a Russian-Jewish musician who has fled to New York and dreams of writing a great American symphony. But David's idealism constantly comes up against reality: his first backer turns out to be a fierce antisemite and the girl he loves proves to be the daughter of a Russian aristocrat involved in the pogrom that killed David's family.

The play raises an acute moral dilemma: whether the sins of the past have to be forgiven in order to create a better future. But while Zangwill veers towards melodrama, his play is abundantly alive. For a start it demonstrates the hatred and prejudice many Jewish immigrants had to confront: at one point David's putative sponsor, wishing to see him return to Europe, chillingly observes: "I'll

send as many Jews as you like to Germany.” Yet, at a time when the US supreme court is reinforcing Trump’s ban on arrivals from six Muslim-majority countries, the play is a poignant reminder of America’s historic role in admitting peoples from all over the globe. Max Elton’s excellent production is alert to the play’s topicality and there are strong performances from Steffan Cennydd as the young idealist, Whoopie van Raam as his gentile lover and Peter Marinker doubling effectively as a Jewish patriarch and a Russian monster. You come out feeling you have seen a vibrant play by a dramatist who, like Clifford Odets and Arnold Wesker, has the capacity to feel domestically and think internationally.

The Arts Desk
Katherine Waters

★★★★

Israel Zangwill’s 1908 play *The Melting Pot* characterises Europe as an old and worn-out continent racked by violence and injustice and in thrall to its own bloody past. America, on the other hand, represents a visionary project that will “melt up all race-difference and vendettas” to “purge and recreate” a new world. This timely revival of Zangwill’s committed writing doesn’t merely prompt us to ask whether the quintessential American dream has permanently curdled – it’s also a great play, wonderfully produced.

Mendel Quixano, played by Peter Marinker, is a Jewish musician and New York immigrant. A little too old to devote himself to the aspirations America inspires in his youthful pogrom-surviving composer nephew David (Steffan Cennydd), he lives with his gripey Yiddish-speaking mother Frau Quixano (Ann Queensbury) and ekes out a living as a piano tutor. His cynicism, an evident product of the scant opportunities available to him as an educated immigrant of a certain age, is worn with genial humour and alleviated somewhat by pleasurable little hypocrisies such as breaking the *Shabbos* to go dancing. Enter Vera Revendal (Whoopie van Ramm), a beautiful young revolutionary aristocrat who has fled Tsarist Russia and now runs a shelter for refugees (but not Jews). She is looking to coax David into performing again for her charges because he is a great musician, and – unaware that he is Jewish – she is more than a little besotted. The stage is set, the questions posed. Will David and Vera’s love overcome the prejudices and obstacles that stand between them? Will David’s musical genius be recognised? Is America the land of opportunity and dreams, or the end of the line for the world’s broken and dispossessed?

This production by Bitter Pill makes some judicious cuts to Zangwill’s cast and script, and Zangwill himself is introduced as a narrator to set each scene. In part this is because the Finborough is an intimate stage lacking the technical wizardry of a larger theatre – but whether the experience of a traumatic memory or a New York rooftop, sound and lighting by Piers Sherwood-Roberts and Ben Jacobs convincingly convey a sense of place, and Allegra Fitzherbert’s understated set deploys careful details to distinguish between households separated by culture, class and economic security. Worth mentioning, too, is a neat trick that has Peter Marinker playing three roles: Zangwill, Mendel and Vera’s father, the Baron Revendal. Both the Baron and Mendel succumb to the whims of their own

prejudices; Zangwill points the way to overcoming hatreds ranging from mild to murderous.

As the star-crossed couple, Vera and David are the play's moral compass. Cannydd and van Raam make valiant efforts but there's a brittleness to their performances, as if they can't quite get to the emotions packed within the pieties. Where Cannydd's David is more monosentimental, so to speak, than monomaniacal, Vera's world-weary wit and sardonic imitation of the aristocratic mores she abandoned in Russia get lost in van Raam's earnest delivery and pat come-backs. Both performers come alive playing the nuances and extremes suffered by desperate lovers, but for the most part they seem disinclined to grapple with the darker side of the fervent hopes suffered by – and extolled to – the new generation of self-proclaimed Americans who are old enough to remember Europe, yet young enough to cherish hope.

Weirdly though, this hardly detracts from the show because it's a top-dollar production which deserves a bigger stage. A less intimate setting would aerate the production's few unevennesses and since we expect impossible love to become possible (and vice versa), goodness doesn't need much depth to carry an audience along. What is rewarding about Zangwill's writing and Max Elton's direction are the pains taken to cast gentle humour on petty bigotries and to humanise (though not excuse) the most reprehensible of characters – mass murderers are people after all.

Take the crisis point, a stand-off between Vera's father, the Baron, and her fiancé David. David has recognised the Baron as the commander of the pogrom which killed his family. Suddenly their union seems impossible, washed by waves of blood. The Baron threatens David with a pistol; then, even more terribly, he hands him the gun. Here, Elton's direction sings. Cennydd's David stands, his shaking back to the audience, hunched by grief and rage, his anguish private, inaccessible. And so it is Marinker's Baron upon whom this high drama pivots. He looks out over the audience, and we clearly see the brutish masculine challenge, we sense his yearning for oblivion now his daughter is lost to him, we see his disappointment when David, shot through with fatigue, returns the pistol to him. The justice meted out to the Baron isn't the old world's vengeance, it is the justness of living with the realisation of having blood-dipped hands that have lost forever the person he loves most in the world. And for a moment we have sympathised with a murderer. What, we must ask ourselves, are the things a human crucible never can – nor should – purify?

The rest of the cast are pitch-perfect. Hayward B Morse's conductor Herr Pappelmeister is played with impish superciliousness, Ann Queensbury as Frau Quixano is an endearing biddie whose despairs and enthusiasms meet with natural humour, Alexander Gatehouse's Davenport is the smarmy embodiment of inherited millions (all that's missing is the blonde comb-over and tan), and Katrina McKeever as Irish maid Kathleen threatens to steal the show with incorrigible bombast and fair-wind pronouncements.

Yes, it's moralising, but it's hugely entertaining. Go see it.

Broadway World

Nicole Ackman

★★★★

It is chilling to think that *The Melting Pot*, a play that revolves around anti-Semitism in America and Europe, was first performed in 1908, decades before the atrocity of the Holocaust. The Finborough Theatre production marks the first time in almost 80 years that it has been staged in the UK, with its last production being in 1938 just before World War II.

While this production has some flaws, it is incredibly timely in a post-Brexit world, with American President Donald Trump stirring up xenophobia and normalising prejudice. Baron Revendal's comment, "You Americans are more sentimental than civilised", feels apt.

It tells the tale of David Quixano, a Russian immigrant composer in New York City, who falls in love with a Russian Christian named Vera. David, while haunted by his memories of his family's death in a pogrom, is dedicated to the ideal of the crucible, or "melting pot", of America. He struggles to reconcile his American patriotism with his uncle and grandmother's love for their Jewish faith and heritage.

The play was written by the British son of Russian immigrants, Israel Zangwill. It popularised the term "melting pot" as a way of describing the way that America had come to be a combination of many races, faiths and ethnicities.

Steffan Cennydd gives a dramatic and earnest performance as David Quixano. He brings raw emotion to the scenes in which David has episodes of seeing his family killed in the pogroms, and a charming naiveté to the parts in which he speaks about his American ideals.

Another standout performance comes from Alexander Gatehouse as Quincy Davenport, a member of the American idle rich, flippantly spending his father's oil money on cultural ventures. His bravado and stage presence perfectly depict a "playboy millionaire", also in love with Vera and providing a striking contrast to David's humble and honest affection.

Peter Marinker doubles as both Mendel Quixano, David's uncle, and Baron Revendal, Vera's aristocratic Russian father. He's considerably better in the role of the dastardly baron, which he delivers well. Ann Queensberry is impressive in the small role of Frau Quixano, mostly because all her lines are in Yiddish.

Hayward B Morse as Herr Pappelmeister, the German conductor, seems to be the crowd favourite as he managed to draw many laughs from the audience. His execution of Pappelmeister's German accent and lines in German are remarkable.

Max Elton's production makes good use of the cosy Finborough Theatre, with

Allegra Fitzherbert's purposely shabby living room set adding to the intimate atmosphere.

The music, composed by Piers Sherwood Roberts, is very lovely, especially when a bit of David's "American Symphony" is played. However, it felt like the show could have benefited from a bit more music.

There are some shaky moments, including some fumbling of lines and language that feels outdated. Having Peter Marinker introduce each scene change feels a bit awkward and some of the costumes don't look appropriately period, especially in comparison to the others.

These issues aside, *The Melting Pot* is a good production of a great play with a few standout performances. It is frightening to realise that a play written about anti-Semitism before the Holocaust ever occurred feels timely today. It certainly gives its audience much to think about over this festive season.