

from the FOOTLIGHTS

JULY 2010

"Life shouldn't be all work and no plays."

<http://www.footlightsdc.org>

Footlights to Discuss David Ives's *New Jerusalem*

Our play for discussion on **Tuesday, July 13** will be *New Jerusalem: The Interrogation of Baruch de Spinoza at Talmud Torah Congregation: Amsterdam, July 27, 1656*.

New Jerusalem is a courtroom drama and we know the ending before it begins, but not much else. "In tried-and-true courtroom drama fashion, the audience sits in judgment as, in Act One, the case is made against Spinoza; in the play's second half, Spinoza delivers an eloquent defense. Ives's triumph is to make the complex and challenging ideas that Spinoza espoused not only accessible but compelling and theatrical," as one New York critic said two years ago in reviewing the play.

There is no record of what was said by whom on July 27, 1656 when Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated by Amsterdam's chief rabbi and the synagogue of Jews whose ancestors had fled the Inquisition that boiled over from Spain to Portugal. Spinoza did not write about that day or what had led up to it. Neither did his friends or enemies. All the good for a playwright who wants to imagine how one of the greatest of modern philosophers came to value reason above faith and the reaction of the societies around him that, at least, would not burn him at the stake.

Trade made Amsterdam the richest city in the Western world in the 17th century. But the Dutch had fought the Spanish kings for decades to get and maintain their independence. The Dutch looked nervously over their shoulders at the rising power of England. The plague in 1623-1625, in 1635-1636 and again in 1655 had cut the city's population by some 10 percent. But it grew rapidly largely because of immigrants seeking the safety of its relative religious tolerance toward Jews from Spain and Portugal, Huguenots from France, and economic and religious refugees from the Spanish-controlled parts of what is now southern Holland.

In return, the émigrés were expected to make no waves in the civil life of the Dutch Republic or in the religious life of the Dutch Reformed Church. Of course, the émigrés, particularly the Jews because they weren't even Christian, were expected to quietly keep the peace within their own communities.

Then came Baruch Spinoza challenging the basic principles of Judaism and Christianity. This could not be tolerated in the delicate balance of order in Amsterdam or in the Jewish or Christian groups themselves.

David Ives has written a play that is a "sheer brainy delight" on a "gripping subject," said a review in the *Village Voice*. He has presented "the conflict as a sort of impromptu seminar in Spinoza's theology and philosophy, interrupted with skeptical questions from the opposing team," said the review in the *New York Times*. "A play of ideas like *New Jerusalem* is rare and exciting," said the review in *nytheater.com*.

Please join us Tuesday July 13, 6:30 p.m. at the fine Italian restaurant Alfio's, as we hear and question **Jeremy Skidmore**, director and a frequent guest at Footlights, and **Alexander Strain**, the lead in the play and one of the finest young actors in Washington.

Footlights' Jerry Stilkind will moderate our discussion.

Alfio's is located on the ground floor of the Willoughby Apartments, 4515 Willard Ave., Chevy Chase, MD, 20815 (phone: 301-657-9133) – two blocks from the Friendship Heights Metro. Street parking is limited but valet parking is free at Alfio's.

Mary Ann Wren is taking reservations. She may be reached at wjwren@erols.com or 301-770-4572. The cost for dinner is only \$13 for a choice among 6 entrees, plus salad, bread, beverage and ice cream, and includes tax and tip. We suggest an additional \$5 contribution to Footlights.

Dinner is at 6:30 p.m. Please plan to arrive by 6:15. The program begins at 7:30 and ends at 9-9:30. You may come for the discussion only, if you wish. If you have to cancel, please let Mary Ann know as soon as possible, and definitely by noon on July 13, so we have an accurate count for Alfio's.

Read *New Jerusalem*

Copies are on order at Backstage Books, 545 8th Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003. Phone: (202) 544-5744. E-mail: backstagebooks@aol.com. Amazon.com or barnesandnoble.com are other sources.

See *New Jerusalem* at Theater J

Theater J is producing *New Jerusalem* from June 26 - July 25. Theater J is located in the DCJCC, 1529 16th Street NW Washington DC, 20036. You have a choice of 3 dates to see it at Footlights group rates: Sunday at 3 p.m., July 11, 18 or 25. Tickets are \$36. Simply choose one of the dates listed above and call 1-800-494-8497 or visit www.theaterj.org to reserve your seats. Use the code "FOOTLIGHTS" to receive your discount.

Footlights in September: Sarah Ruhl's *In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play*

In the 1880s, the newly-invented electric vibrator was hailed as a major medical advance for the treatment of both women and men for depression, *the vapors*, hysteria, and all manner of other human ills. (Who knew?)

Sarah Ruhl's Tony-nominated *In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play* is an entertaining history of this device, from being praised by Sigmund Freud for its usefulness, to the sudden and shocking realization that it might actually be used for fun, to its current status as something which arrives in the mailbox in a plain wrapper and is not spoken of in mixed company.

The play is also an amusing story of Victorian life and customs and marriage, of what was considered appropriate behavior, of their fascination with Edison's brand new electric lights and motors, and other little insights into lives we think and hope were totally different from ours in the 21st Century.

Although *In the Next Room* marked Sarah Ruhl's Broadway debut, we in the DC area have been able to see many of her plays in the past few years: Arena Stage produced her *Passion Play*, Round House did a fascinating *Eurydice* (a Footlights discussion play, February 2009), and Woolly Mammoth presented both *The Clean House* and *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, and will do the area premiere of *In the Next Room*. Ruhl is considered one of the most promising of all our young American playwrights, and is known for her unique and quirky perspective on human lives.

Look for our September newsletter for details on our guest speaker, meeting location and date information, as Footlights begins another season of modern drama discussion.

About Footlights

For more information about Footlights, check our website, <http://www.footlightsdc.org>. To subscribe to our e-list go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/footlightsdc/join> or send any message to footlightsdc-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

Calendar

- Tuesday, July 13, 6:30 p.m., dinner-discussion of *New Jerusalem* by **David Ives**. Our guest speakers are **Jeremy Skidmore**, director, and **Alexander Strain**, actor. At Alfio's, 4515 Willard Ave., Chevy Chase, MD, 20815. Reserve with Mary Ann, wjwren@erols.com or 301-770-4572.
- Sundays, July 11, 18 or 25, 3 p.m., performances of *New Jerusalem*. A post-show discussion is included. Tickets are \$36. At Theater J, 1529 16th Street NW Washington DC, 20036. Choose one of the dates listed above and call 1-800-494-8497 or visit www.theaterj.org to reserve your seats. Use the code "FOOTLIGHTS" to receive your discount.

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**
5800 Nicholson Lane, # L07
Rockville, MD 20852