



Yehuda Hyman in his dance action, *Jew in the Pool*. Adults encouraging their children to play in the Holocaust memorial pool in Freiburg, Germany makes a mockery of the main synagogue destroyed there. Photo by Thomas Kunz

Jew in the Pool

Presented by Yehuda Hyman

The presentation begins with Yehuda Hyman addressing the audience.

Hyphens in the text indicate a slowing of Yehuda's speaking, sometimes with added movements.

Stage action descriptions are blocked in grey.

YEHUDA: I bring this to you from Freiburg, Germany. Some images.

PART 1 - Fabric/Body/Air

A wind came up in the bright bleach sunlight
and it blew my Jerusalem *Tallis* with its
broad black stripes away from my body

The inside of my arm pressed the end of the fringed shawl
against my torso
and then the other side flew up into the sky

high above the pool of memory
Gedenkbrunnen

I grabbed the side of the *tallis* with 6 fingers and it
streamed up into the air behind me like a magic carpet.
And I began to walk

Nature is the best choreographer

This composition of fabric, body and the speed of air felt
correct
Just so
Inevitable

If you dance outside long enough something will happen

I had entered the pool at 12 o'clock
and by the time I pulled my Swatch Watch out of my

damp pocket it was 2:15 and I was very tired
and hot
I allowed the fingers of my right hand to burn and sparkle
and began to turn

*He revolves slowly to show the audience the large yellow Jewish Star
hand-painted on the back of his white shirt.*

the torso twisting
turning round
Theater in the Round
But this is not a performance
This is an Excavation.

I am standing in a pool of memory
and I am the Jew in the pool
and I am excavating what happened here.
Do you know what happened here?
Wissen Sie was hier geschehen ist?

PART 2

I wrote the words down on August 7th, 2018 after my dance actions in Freiburg so that I would remember what my body did. This was the second summer in a row that I was doing this dance action. I hadn't meant to come back and do it a second time but the work wasn't finished. Today, I am primarily going to talk about the first summer.

Freiburg, if you don't know, is a city in Southwest Germany. It is a big university city. It is in the *Schwarzwald*: the beautiful black forest region of Germany. It's heavily touristy. It is known as the "green city of Germany" - The *Freiburgers* are very proud of their ecological awareness and it is the warmest city in Germany. What was I doing there? I was on vacation. I was visiting my friends, Eva-Maria Berg and her husband. Eva Maria is a wonderful poet who I met in 2008 at an Artists' Colony in Spain and she invited me to come visit her in the *Schwarzwald*. She and her husband live in the town of Waldkirch. It's about 30 minutes from Freiburg and I've been to visit them eight times. It's my summer vacation.

So, in August 2017, I arrive at the Freiburg train station and my friends pick me up and they drive me to Waldkirch and we have a lovely lunch and then they say, "We have to tell you something. It's not very nice but something happened last week in Freiburg and we want you to know and we'd like to know what *you* think about it." And by "what *you* think" they mean "*you* as a Jew."

When I come to Freiburg it's usually fun. It's vacation. We laugh and we talk and we look at the shooting stars. We drink lots of very good wine (they live in the wine-growing region) and we also share our experiences - commonalities and differences. Eva and her husband were born in Germany after the war. I was born in Hollywood after the war. They were the German generation that inherited what had happened in the war: the shame, the guilt, the darkness. I inherited the silence of my father. My father was a Polish Jew from *Ratno*. He was lucky to get out in 1938 just before they sealed the border. He left Poland from the port of Gdynia. He was on one of the last boats that a Jew could board to get out. He was on his way to New York City

and he never saw his family again. And I grew up in a little house in West Los Angeles where my father never talked about the Holocaust. He never mentioned it. And he rarely mentioned his family.

So, Eva and her husband were telling me about what had happened just the week before. About the *Gedenkbrunnen*. *Gedenkbrunnen* means "Pool of Commemoration."

Freiburg has a big plaza in the center of the city and it's called the *Platz der Alten Synagoge*, the Place of the Old Synagogue, because the synagogue was there until it was burned to the ground on *Kristallnacht*, November 9, 1938. It was never excavated and it became a trash heap for a long time and then it was turned into a parking lot for a long time until 2006 when the city decided they were going to renovate the plaza, this large piece of real estate, if you think about the size of Lincoln Center Plaza in New York City, it's about that size. They were going to turn it into a very beautiful public space, but what to do with the spot with the burnt remains of the synagogue which was never excavated? They took a lot of proposals from architects and two architects came up with this proposal:

*Yehuda now begins to move around the whole stage and
physically enact what happened - beginning with laying
out the map of the Gedenkbrunnen.*

They would build an elevated grey granite slab in the shape and dimensions of the actual footprint of the destroyed synagogue - and it's about so high off the ground (*Yehuda holds his hand about two feet off the ground*) and in the center - I'm not going to go in there now - there are vents in the granite floor and water will come out of the vents and flow over the side of the platform and disappear into vents in the pavement. And that was the idea.

So, the week before I got to Freiburg, in August, 2017, the City announced a "Sneak Preview" of the new public square and it was a very hot day, and the plaza was very crowded and the Mayor - Mayor Salomon - not Jewish, but Salomon is his last name - was there and there were speeches - and, uhm, they turn on the water and it comes flowing out of the vents in the center of the granite platform and people climb onto the platform and they began to party: children, adults, teenagers, it became a big party. And the Mayor on his microphone said, "You see how the people of Freiburg embrace their place. You see all the children of so many colors. This is a sign of hope for the future. This is the people's pool!"

Except it wasn't for all the people.

So, the next day after I had arrived, my friends take me to see this *Gedenkbrunnen* and it's a grey day and when we get there the weather is cool and uhm - I don't know what to think. First of all, I'm surprised that there's no signage anywhere about the burning of the synagogue, nothing. There are a few children quietly walking around the pool with their parents. And my friends point out that in the center of the pool there is this - you really have to be in the pool to see it - there is this big round bronze plaque - the color of it is almost black - it's black on top of a dark grey surface - and it has text about the burnt synagogue. It was formerly outside the



Young women dancing in the Holocaust memorial pool in Freiburg, Germany makes a mockery of the main synagogue destroyed there. Photo by François Blum

pool, it was put up in the 1960s, but as part of the design, the architects had decided to remove it from where it was and embed it in the floor of the pool and cover it with water so it's impossible to see unless you're standing right over it. So I'm looking at this pool and my friends are concerned, you know they're always concerned about me and I know they want to know what I think... and I have to say, I'm not horrified. I just think it's bizarre and I don't know what to think.

So I go back a few days later and it's hot, hot, hot. And as I approach the *Platz der Alte Synagoge* and I go over to the *Gedenkbrunnen* there's a full-blown party going on: there are people running through the water and taking Selfies and celebrating and eating ice-cream cones and talking on their cell-phones. There're little dogs running through and taking a piss and children tugging their little boats and throwing balls and screaming and yelling. On the outside of the pool, there are people lying on beautiful beach towels and they're applying their sun-tan lotions and what really captures my eye is a woman who climbs onto the platform and she's wearing a kind of sexy black dress and she pulls it down exposing her naked breasts and she lies down in the pool on her back and she has a bottle of shampoo and she starts shampooing her hair and massaging her breasts and taking a swig from a bottle that contains something alcoholic and then she gets up and she does this very sexy dance, which, I have to say is - good - with her bare breasts there - and children running around her and nobody's doing anything and I'm watching this and I - I - I just can't put it together. This party on top of the unexcavated burnt remains of the synagogue. And you know, I don't know what to do.

What I do think is that I need to talk to a Jew. And I don't think there are any Jews there in the immediate area but I DO remember that, across town, there is a synagogue that was built in 1986 but it's always been closed the other times I've passed by there. So I walk over there quickly and there's a bulletproof glass door - most of the

synagogues in Europe have a bulletproof door. And there's a poster in the door taped to the glass from the inside, facing the outside. The synagogue has put it there. It is a blow-up photograph of the opening day ceremony of the *Gedenkbrunnen* with people celebrating in it - and the synagogue people have written across this photograph, one word: *SHANDE!* - exclamation point - SHAME! - so now I know how the Jews feel, which is not what I've been hearing at the pool location, that the Jews are ok with this. That's not true.

Anyway, I call my friend Eva. She comes to Freiburg and I take her to the synagogue to see the poster and she's just filled with anger. Eva is a gorgeous poet and she's also an activist and she's done a lot of work in her town to uncover the Nazi past. So we talk for a long time. And then I go home that night. I know I have to do something and I don't know what but I think if I just talk or scream nobody's going to listen to me and I don't really speak German so I just decide, well, I have my *yarmulke*, my black velvet *yarmulke* with me and I have my Bar Mitzvah *tallis* with me (the only *tallis* I have at that point) and I decide I'm going to put them on and I'm just going to go in the pool and I'll be what's NOT in there - anything remotely Jewish. And I'm going to be the Jew in the Pool. And I'll do some kind of movement but I don't want to do performance. And um I go to bed feeling resolved and good and I wake up and I feel really nauseated, and scared, cause I don't know what could happen.

Anyway, I decide to go, and I get on the train and get there in thirty minutes and -uhm - I didn't have this on that day (*Yehuda points to the Yellow Star on his back*), that was the next year, and uhm, I get to the pool and my idea is that I was just going to go in there and do my thing until the sun went down. And I wasn't going to tell anybody. But when I got there, I decided I better tell somebody, and I call my friend Eva and I say, "I'm going in the pool with my *yarmulke* and my *tallis*" and she says, "I'll be there in thirty minutes."

I get to the pool. I take off my shoes and socks. I take my little *yarmulke* and I put it on my head. It's a hot, hot, hot day, the pool is packed. With

children and adults. I take out my kinda raggy Bar Mitzvah *tallis* from the '60s. It's a "stole" style tallis. I lift it up and say a *Bracha* over it. I put it over my head. This is all done really slowly so that the hundreds of people in the square can see me and I step - up - into - the - pool and my feet hit the water and I feel really - good. It's so cool under this hot sun. And I start to walk - kind of a very slow walk- I don't know what I'm doing - a *Butoh*-like walk but it's kind of *Jew-toh* and children are - are movin' around me and they're curious and the adults are kind of uncomfortable at this party. I'm like Moses parting the Red Sea and they're moving to the side. And the children are really sweet - some of them are looking at me and they say, "Allo. Allo" - like they think I'm a clown and they want to play with me. But I can't play because I'm not here. I am - a ghost. And I make my way to the center of the pool and I start to revolve so that everyone can see me. So I start turning very slowly so that everyone - can see - the Jew - in the Pool.

And - kids start splashing me. They just want to play - you know - it doesn't bother me. Uhm, and as I'm turning I start to smell - smoke - that was in this spot - and the fire - and I just start to do a little excavation - what was here *(all through this Yehuda is doing a very slow improvised movement score of searching - looking into the ground and discovering, with his body, the horrors of what happened there) -*

What was here?

And whenever I think I'm being too dancey I pull back. Because I don't want them to think that this is a performance - I'm not performing. Really not. And I start to uncover things:

A wedding. Down there.

A Bar Mitzvah.

A *tallis*.

And I start to - over the next three-and-a-half hours - perform every Jew gesture I can possibly think of in the pool - and then not - then just standing there - so I'm doing "The Wise Jew," I'm doing "The Happy Jew" and "The Sad Jew" and then "The Afraid Jew" - Jew, Jew, Jew, Jew, Jew and I then I get down into the water, which smells faintly of urine, and my tallis falls off and becomes wet with water so I just use it as part of the whole thing. And - the kids are getting a little more aggressive - cause I'm sort of ruining their party - and the adults are really unhappy with me - and as I walk by them with their cell phones in the pool - they are deliberately speaking louder as if to say, "You are not here" - which make me - angry. And so I - scream *(He goes into a highly contorted pose of a fierce scream - but does not use his voice and holds the silent pose for a beat - and then drops it) -* really loud and then I think that's not a good thing cause I'm scaring the children - which I don't wanna do cause it's not the children's fault.

So this goes on and what it really becomes is - eventually - I only want to show what was removed from this pool, which is... beauty. *(He is doing a lyrical, mystical dance with his arms - a prayer) - Adonai Echad.*

And I see everyone - and I realize that - we're the same. There's no difference.

So while this has been going on - I want to say that - I am also connec-

ting with my family - which is here - under the water *(he's crouched on the floor in the water)* and that's very distressing and I -

*Yehuda lets out a brutal scream of pain.
He pauses.*

And then I feel a hand on my shoulder and a calm voice says, "I think you should stop now. You're making people very upset. And I'm worried for you."

So I get up and there is this man who I had noticed staring at me before. This Muslim man. I recognized this young man who had been sitting outside the pool. He was looking at me very concentratedly - and he looks to me like a Sufi - I know some Sufis back in New York and he has that calm vibe - and we have a kind of long conversation which is interesting because everything around the pool stops because now there's a Jew and Muslim standing in the pool, talking for a long time. And I'm kind of irritated because I don't want to stop at that time - but this is really important, too. I won't go into it right now but this was really important, too.

(Yehuda's time was almost up at the conference).

Nothing was resolved but it was good.

At the end, I come out. Eva's there with a bottle of water. She's looking very worried. It's three-and-a-half hours since I've been in there and it's a hot, hot, hot, hot day. And for the next few days we stand outside the pool, Eva and me - and we put papers on the ground - one word on each paper: "Do - You - Know - What - Happened - Here?" "*Wissen - Sie - Was - Hier - Geschenken - Ist?*" and we stand there and answer questions and that was a great experience. It was very difficult. I got yelled at. I got thanked. A whole very complicated conversation.

I go back to Brooklyn. A lot of people that I met around the pool had organized. They write an open letter to the Mayor, it's published in the newspaper. The Mayor issues a statement that, "Yes, something's not quite right with the design. We're going to have a City Council meeting, we're going to invite the Jews and we'll talk about it."

On September 12th, 2017, a hundred people, many of them who I had met in those four days, link hands and stand around the pool in a silent vigil.

And a couple of weeks later, three signs go up around the pool - with a picture of the old synagogue before it was burnt and an explanation and asking people to please be respectful.

So, all of us who were involved in this were feeling very hopeful last fall.

And then winter came. The water got turned off for the winter anyway. Spring came. The Mayor didn't make it in the next election. They got a new Mayor.

And then it got hot.

And they turned on the water.

And people went back in the pool.



Demonstrators form human chain around the pool at the Square of the Old Synagogue in Freiburg, Germany. Photo: François Blum

And the messages I was getting from my friends was that it was actually worse because people were digging in saying, "This is our place."

So I went back to Germany this summer with a fancier tallis. A bigger tallis - and more theatrical. My tallis. And I painted a yellow star on my back so that there would be no question. Because a lot of people had said, "Who is he? What is he doing there?" So there was no question. And this time I danced in there for three days. And, uhm, a week after I left, two new signs went up - with a photograph of the burnt synagogue and the writing said - "please be respectful and do not enter the pool."

So that's kind of it. There's a lot more to talk about. Things are in process. Nothing's solved but things are moving and I thank you for your time.

ADDENDUM: On October 23, one week after I delivered this presentation at the Jews and Jewishness in the Dance World conference, I received a letter from Mayor Martin Horn, the New Mayor of Freiburg in response to a detailed letter I had written him about the situation at the *Gedeknbrunnen*. He said that he had hoped that my "involvement would kick off a public discussion and heighten awareness of how people should behave in relation to the memorial pool. Unfortunately, we now realize that further measures are required to inform tourists about the terrible history of the old synagogue." In June, 2019, I received blueprints from the Mayor's office with plans that included, among other items, pictograms around the site depicting forbidden activities (i.e. swimming, stepping onto the platform, trash, dogs, etc.) a bronze model of the former synagogue to be situated near the pool, and a separate documentation/information center about National Socialism to be opened within walking distance from the pool. As of this writing (September, 2019), the pictograms have been installed (in addition to the four standing signs around the pool which give detailed information about the tragic history of the site).

However, the situation remains unresolved. When the weather gets hot, as it always does in Freiburg in the summer, the pool once again becomes a magnet for inappropriate and disrespectful behavior. This has been documented in photographs recently posted on social media and in the *Badische Zeitung*. There have, thus far, been 17 separate meetings between members of the City Council and members of the Jewish community of Freiburg about a redesign of the *Gedeknbrunnen*. Descendants of the Jews of Freiburg have requested that the water be replaced by planted flowers; a large Menorah be installed in the center of the platform along with several stones from the foundation of the old synagogue, and that plates with the names of the 351 Jewish victims of Freiburg (first deported to Gurs, France and then to Auschwitz where they were murdered) be installed around the rim of the fountain. This has not happened.

Yehuda Hyman is an award-winning playwright, choreographer, actor and Artistic Director of Mystical Feet Company. He was born in Los Angeles to immigrant parents from Russia and Poland. Plays include *The Mad Dancers*, *Center of the Star*, and *Swan Lake Calhoun*. Honors include the Kennedy Center New American Plays Award, the NEA/TCG Playwright-in Residence Grant and LABA Fellow/14th St Y. An M.F.A. in Dance from Sarah Lawrence College (2014), he currently teaches Devised Theater at Manhattan School of Music. He recently choreographed Paula Vogel's play, *Indecent* at the Guthrie Theater. His essay, "Three Hasidic Dances" was published in *Seeing Israeli and Jewish Dance* (Editor: Judith Brin Ingber, Published by Wayne State University Press) and in *Dance in America, A Reader's Anthology* (Editor: Mindy Aloff; Published by Library of America). His play, *The Mar Vista* (developed at LABA) premiered at the Pershing Square Signature Center, March, 2019. yehudahyman@gmail.com