

***Oslo* vs. *The Accords*: Examining the Global Consequences of Fractional Truths on Stage**





The cast of J.T. Roger's *Oslo*. Courtesy: Lincoln Center Theater.

J.T. Rogers' Tony Award winning play, *Oslo*, gives us a front row seat to the secret backchannel negotiations that made the Oslo Accords possible. The Oslo Accords, signed in 1993 by representatives from both Israel and Palestine, offered hope to people throughout the world that peace was finally being reached. However, until several months before the infamous handshake on the White House lawn between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli President Shimon Peres in 1993, few people knew that backchannel negotiations were taking place at all, let alone successfully. The process of getting to that moment was an arduous one that involved official negotiations overseen by the United States and the unofficial negotiations, which (though a part of documented history) were relatively unknown until Rogers' play dramatized them for the world to see. By all accounts, *Oslo* was a commercial success in London, New York City, and, now, Chicago. It was nominated for seven Tony Awards and won two, most notably the 2017 Tony Award for Best Play. The play, and its success, raises many questions. *Oslo* is a play written for an American/Western audience, that grew to prominence by tapping into contemporary cultural ideologies. By purporting to tell events 'as they occurred' and acting as many Americans' sole access point to the events surrounding the Oslo Accord negotiations, the play becomes a dangerous oversimplification of complex historical traumas. By examining the play itself, the playwright's intentions, as well as the marketing, critical, and audience discourses that surround it, this paper investigates the role of theater in depicting historical events, the continued colonization of Middle Eastern stories for commercial purposes, the promise of hope for peace, and the unintended consequences of fractional truths on stage.

THE OSLO ACCORDS

The story behind the agreement comes as a surprise to many, especially considering that two of the people who facilitated these negotiations weren't placed prominently in any kind of spotlight at the time, or even in the years after the Accords were signed. Mona Juul and her husband Terje Rod-Larsen, diplomats from Norway, were responsible for establishing the unofficial channel that laid the groundwork for the negotiations. Clyde Haberman, a foreign correspondent at the time the Oslo Accords were signed, saw the play and asked Rogers about Juul's absence from the media's attention, curious to know how she had eluded his as well. Rogers responded that, though Juul's role was always substantial, she was easily missed due to the secrecy of the entire process and her deemphasis on being the center of attention.^[1]

Juul and Larsen's policy was that these talks had to be different from any previous talks. In *Oslo*, Larsen's character explains that in International Relations, most talks are worked through using totalism, a model in which "all issues of disagreement are placed on the table; all organizations, representing all sides, are *at the table*."^[2] The structure is rigid, and the whole process deemphasizes the personal. Larsen suggests that these backchannel negotiations follow the model of gradualism: "a process of negotiation allowing the most implacable of adversaries to focus on a single issue of contention; resolve it, then move on to the *next* single issue; as they gradually build a bond of trust".^[3] Larsen asserts that building trust and getting to know the people with whom one negotiates makes the entire process smoother.

Official talks continued on in the public eye, while nine months of secret meetings were happening in Oslo under Juul and Larsen's watch. Larsen had to actively work to convince his government officials, Johan Jorgen Holst, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Marianne Heiberg, his wife and an executive of the Fafo Institute, to let him bring this idea into existence. This is dramatized in *Oslo* with the following:

HOLST: What, make peace in the Middle East?

LARSEN: Why not?

MARIANNE: Because it's the Middle East, Terje. They don't *do* peace.

LARSEN: Ah, but my friends, look at what is happening in the world: the grip of history is loosening. The Berlin Wall has just fallen the Soviet Empire, disbanded. My God, if Lenin-grad can revert to St. Petersburg, anything is possible.

MARIANNE: Terje, if the Americans can't force the Israelis and Palestinians to make a deal, what chance has Johan Jorgen?

LARSEN: But that's their problem. The Americans can strong-arm both parties to the table, but just because you drag a horse into a bar does not mean it can mix its own cocktail.^[4]

Marianne Holst wasn't the only one who was skeptical. The Palestinian and Israeli representatives whom Juul and Larsen had contacted were unsure of what to expect; they questioned their motives in general, and challenged the potential efficacy of these "negotiations" (also stipulating they not be called so). Before the Israelis and Palestinians arrived in Norway for the first meeting, Ahmed Qurie, the Finance

Minister for the PLO, and Yossi Beilin, Israel's Deputy Foreign Minister, made it clear that because of the significant risks that both sides were to assume, they needed Larsen's assurance of *strict* confidentiality. The play notes the high stakes for both parties in that the Israeli government would fall and Qurie would be killed if word got out.^[5] For the next several months, the secrecy of these talks was maintained.

STAGING HISTORY & THE COLONIZATION OF MIDDLE EASTERN STORIES

As history records, a bargain was reached. The deal was for Israel to remove its presence from both Jericho and Gaza (and eventually the West Bank). The Palestinians would have "limited autonomy" for five years in those specific places, and within one year there was to be an election for the PLC (Palestinian Legislative Council) and the creation of a Palestinian police force.^[6] Details *not specified in the Accords* were to be dealt with during the next five years, including exactly how Palestine was to be demilitarized, potential territorial compromises, and other essential points around how Palestine was to be governed.^[7] To this day, these agreements have not come to pass.

In 1993, the world celebrated and hope persevered. The play dramatizes just how important (and surprising) this was to all involved:

LARSEN: Abu Ala...what is that sound?

QURIE: They are crying/All of [the PLO]/They did not think they would live to see this day.^[8]

Munther Amira, a Palestinian activist who is now in his forties, remembers it clearly: "We were dreaming, we were fighting. We wanted peace and to have our own state, like any other nation, to have our determination. We thought Oslo would do all these things for us." Emanuel Shahaf, a senior government official in Israel when the Accords were signed recalled "hope reverberating across Israel." He goes on to say, "People felt the vision that things were going to change, that they were finally getting somewhere."^[9] Now, more than twenty-five years since the Oslo Accords were signed, we have seen that this hope was premature. Extremists on both sides vowed to invalidate the Oslo Accords and, to some extent, have been successful in doing that.^[10]

Maen Hammad writes in his article, "Why Palestinians Like Me See Little Hope 25 Years After the Oslo Accords Opened the Door to Peace," that "Palestinians have now marked more than 50 years of Israel's occupation and over 11 years of the illegal blockade of the Gaza Strip. The number of Israeli settlers, whose presence in the Palestinian territories is illegal under international law, has tripled since the signing of the Oslo accords."^[11] While the Oslo Accords signaled the start of a new era, that new era has not been what many had hoped it would be.

Given that the Oslo Accords have been considered, by many on both sides, to be a failure for some time, one might wonder from where Rogers' impetus to write *Oslo* came. The foreword to the published play provides some context of the events that led to the playwright's intrigue. Rogers was collaborating on the play *Blood and Gifts* with one of the Lincoln Center Theatre's resident directors, Bartlett Sher, when Sher arranged for Rogers to meet Terje Rod-Larsen and Mona Juul, Sher's friends of many years.^[12] The conversation with Larsen and Juul about their involvement that led to the Oslo Accords inspired Rogers to develop their story into a script. He received a commission from the Lincoln Center Theatre to write

the play that would become *Oslo*.

Oslo occupies a complex position between history and dramaturgy. Rogers calls it a “scrupulously researched, meticulously written fiction.”^[13] Rogers spent more than two years doing research and conducting interviews for this play. He considered himself “gripped (by the) events” that were almost preposterous in their strangeness.”^[14] He has made it clear that he chose to write about the Oslo Accords because he thought the tale itself was interesting, not out of an explicit interest in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict or through any other international lens. In an interview, Rogers said: “The political act of my work, I would argue, is to expand outward who and what is being discussed on the American stage...Not because I have a civic duty to do it, but because I think it’s f---ing interesting.”

Rogers interviewed Larsen at length, and did research on others involved: “I stalked the characters, through memoirs and TV interviews. But the lines on stage are all mine; there’s no verbatim. My rule, though, was that no one expresses views that they didn’t hold.”^[15] Throughout his “scrupulous” research, however, he failed to consult any living participants of the Accords who wasn’t Norwegian, despite including their characters and supposed views in his play. Yossi Beilin, a prominent figure in both *Oslo* and the Accords, received no attempt from Rogers to contact (let alone interview) him to learn of his views.^[16]

Joel Singer, Israel’s delegation’s legal advisor during the Oslo talks and a significant character in the play, spoke to a reporter from Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, and said, “*Oslo* is a good play; it’s interesting and enjoyable...But there’s very little resemblance to what you see on stage and what actually happened in Oslo. Even though they claim that the play is based on extensive research, there’s almost no link between what you see on stage and what really happened.”^[17]

As noted above, Rogers is quick to explain that his play isn’t verbatim and it makes no claim to be documentary theatre. In an interview with Brendan Lemon at the Lincoln Center Theatre Blog, director Bartlett Sher agreed with this philosophy surrounding *Oslo*: “Theatre is not about facts, it’s about truth”.^[18] Art has the unique ability to demonstrate the number of liberties it is taking with the truths of a story. By recent example, *Hamilton* takes multiple liberties with the historical moments it represents and illustrates that it is doing so through the use of song, dance, and by highlighting bodies that have been historically marginalized. While art is not obligated to represent events exactly as they occur, that lack of obligation comes with certain ethical caveats.

The 2011 film “The United” about the Manchester United Team and the aftermath of rebuilding the team after the 1958 plane crash focuses on the “Busby Babes”. However, Sir Matt Busby, the Manchester United legend whose recuperation is dramatized in the film, was neither consulted nor interviewed once. This outraged his son: “I can’t understand it, it’s called United, all about the Busby Babes. You think they’d contact the Busby family wouldn’t you?... Why didn’t they include other players that died and were injured in the crash?”^[19] This isn’t the first story where true events have been fictionalized for dramatization, but Busby brings up the point that what the dramatization leaves out can seem disrespectful and hurtful to the living.

In “Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics” Bakhtin notes that “a monologically understood world is an objectified world, a world corresponding to a single and unified authorial consciousness”^[20]. Monology, meaning “a single voice”, takes us toward monologic discourse, “a discourse in which only one point of

view is represented, however diverse the means of representation."^[21] In authoring this play, Rogers positions himself as the arbiter of the monologic. In *Oslo* when Larsen is trying to get Holst and Marianne on board with the idea of a backchannel, he says, "We have what the US can never have: the appearance of neutrality."^[22] While Rogers' *Oslo* certainly has the appearance of neutrality, how neutral can it be when presented in the Western world, and when the play is created by one person who chose to center this story on the Norwegians rather than on either of the two marginalized groups?

Other than the foreword in the printed play text, Rogers makes no indication that his play could be bending the truth. The language reads as realistic and the style of the play offers nothing to sever the ties it holds to realism. While a production like this might inspire a few people to do their own research and learn more about the subject matter, the average audience member is liable (even expected, given Rogers' own claims about the thoroughness of his research) to take the events enacted before them as truth. What knowledge of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict does an average American audience member have? The studies below will examine the inherent biases with which audiences enter a theatre. With these biases already at play, as well as Rogers' questionable success in shedding his own, how unbiased can their interaction with *Oslo* be?

AN "UNBIASED" PLAY FOR A BIASED AUDIENCE

The Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan group, "conducts public opinion polling, demographic research, content analysis and other data-driven social science research" and does "not take policy positions."^[23] In April 2019, they conducted a survey with 10,523 adults split into two groups. One group was asked whether they felt favorably or unfavorably about the Israeli people, and then the Palestinian people. The other group was asked the same question about the Israeli government and the Palestinian government (acknowledging that there isn't one unified Palestinian government, but working to create a binary opposition with the Israeli government). The results from the group that was asked about the Israeli and Palestinian people are worth noting. 25% of people felt favorably to Israelis, while only 8% felt favorably toward Palestinians.

Additionally, in the Gallup's annual World Affairs survey conducted each February, findings revealed that: "The majority of Americans remain partial toward Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with 59% saying they sympathize more with the Israelis whereas 21% sympathize more with the Palestinians. While still widespread, sympathy toward Israel is down from 64% in 2018 and marks the lowest percentage favoring Israel since 2009. Meanwhile, 21% sympathizing more with the Palestinians, statistically unchanged from a year ago, is the highest by one point in Gallup's trend since 2001."^[24]

To analyze what an American audience might know about Israel and Palestine, one must first look at how both are discussed in the media. In a FAIR Report from 2001 responding to accusations that NPR was under-reporting Israeli casualties and fatalities, the study indicated that: "During the six month period studied, NPR reported the deaths of 62 Israelis and 51 Palestinians. While on the surface that may not appear to be hugely lopsided, during the same time period 77 Israelis and 148 Palestinians were killed in the conflict."^[25] That means there was an 81 percent likelihood that an Israeli death would be reported on NPR, but only a 34 percent likelihood that a Palestinian death would be."^[26]

In his recent book, "The Wrong Story: Palestine, Israel, and the Media", author Greg Shupak demonstrates the problem in this way: "People can and do think critically about the media they consume.

Yet when media outlets misrepresent issues, they hamper the public's capacity to systematically understand the topics of the day.”^[27] Shupak references “cultural contexts” and “well-established knowledge structures” which he argues, in the West, include a significant amount of Islamophobia. Later, this paper examines Western feelings and knowledge structures for and against the Palestinian and Israeli people.

Rogers summarizes the difference in medium between the stage and the page: “In journalism, you lay out the facts; you explain this is what happened so the reader can be informed. But theatre doesn’t do that. What the theatre does is to keep asking questions. It doesn’t provide answers. So, as a playwright, I want to show more and more complicated voices of people who aren’t normally on the stage.”^[28] Rogers’ sentiment here, while noble and perhaps applicable to the majority of American plays, is woefully misguided inasmuch as it relates to *Oslo*. It presumes that the audience enters the theatre with a basic working knowledge of the subject matter to which these “questions” refer. In absence of that knowledge, the audience is only able to answer these questions based on their emotional response to the play and feeling validated in that response by accepting its contents as truth.

Itamar Rabinovich, who played a role in the actual Oslo Accords (as Rabin’s peace negotiator with Syria), furthers this perspective in *Theatre and Politics in Oslo*:

A play that is not only based on real and relatively recent events of an ongoing political process, but derives much of its dramatic power from the sense that it is depicting them truly, cannot be judged in purely theatrical terms. This would be true even if it were not the case that for theatregoers...Roger's version will be the only version of these events that they know. And yet, Rogers’s play makes for remarkably sloppy history, in matters both large and small.^[29]

THE PROMISE OF HOPE...

This play will, for many people, be the most significant and thorough source of information they have about this issue. It will color many audience members’ perception of the countries and the people involved. When the audience at the National Theatre was interviewed after seeing *Oslo*, some of the comments included: “Powerful; really true”, “Like unpicking the onion to see what was really going on”, “This stuff actually happened, this isn’t just pure fiction”.^[30] That these responses utilize words such as “true,” “real”, and “actually” introduces word-of-mouth as a powerful new threat toward the ability of the public to objectively understand this very complex issue, especially when these words are bolstered by those of the playwright, the director, and marketing teams (this paper later analyzes the role of marketing and its relationship to the audience’s expectation of truth). Theatre is powerful, transformative, and incredibly influential. The responsibility that accompanies the use of those traits is profound; failure to employ them responsibly can lead to irrevocably damaging consequences.

When talking to “the other side” is illegal, it’s not difficult to imagine how strenuous the Oslo Accords discussions were. Reviews frequently call the play “inspiring”, likely in part because of the improbability of the situations at hand. However, because the nature of theatre is to create neat, narrative plots and structures, this generates a problematic space for this work and other works of historical fiction. Even though the end of the play provides a coda that informs the audience of events that have happened since the Oslo Accords came into being, the audience has now seen Palestinians and Israelis on stage in front of them achieve a kind of peace. An audience may think, if they were able to achieve it then, what’s

stopping the PLO and Israeli government from reaching such an agreement now? In his New York Times review of *Oslo*, in reference to the coda, Clyde Haberman wrote, “Some would say it was naive of me (along with plenty of others) to have ever thought that Israelis and Palestinians had made the psychological breakthrough necessary to put their torturous past behind them.” This sentiment, the articulation of getting over decades of complicated and illegal dealings between Israel and Palestine as a “psychological” problem speaks to what little information Americans have reasonable access to and are able to process regarding the conflict. Even with the postscript of information in the last moments of the play detailing what has happened since the Accords, the audience is left with an ambiguous call to action and, worse yet, no desire to look into how such peace could be attained again (if one contends it was ever reached in the first place). There is also no individual interrogation of what *their* role in it might be.

Even though the promises of the Oslo Accords remain unfulfilled twenty-five years later, the play still allows for some (albeit potentially false) hope. *Oslo* also doesn’t hyperbolize the impact of the Accords as seen in the last section of the play:

MONA: January 1994

HOLST: Four months after the Rose Garden signing, John Jorgen Holst died of a heart attack.

BEILIN: One month later, an Israeli settler kills twenty-nine Palestinians as they pray at the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron

SAVIR: Tel Aviv. November 1995

SINGER: During a demonstration in support of the Oslo Accords. Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin is assassinated by an Israeli extremist who opposes hem

QURIE: February 1996. On a bus in Jerusalem, a Palestinian suicide bomber detonates himself, killing twenty-six Israelis.

ASFOUR: And in the hallway of his apartment building in Gaza, Hassan Asfour is beaten almost to death. His attackers are never found. He retired from public life[...]

BEILIN: The Second Intifada begins

QURIE: Ahmed Qurie becomes Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority. Two years later the PLO was defeated at the ballot box by Hamas. He retires from public life....^[31]

However, as Bashir Abu-Manneh points out, “the Oslo negotiating formula... is to assume parity between the occupier and the occupied and treat both as equal...The play...dramatize(s) the notion that it’s more important to get enemies talking than to worry about the outcome of their negotiations. Much of the positive praise surrounding the play is that it ‘actually seeks to achieve...an earnest and unfazed rehashing of the Oslo negotiating formula.’ Further, if peace fails, it’s because of ancient enmities rather than the conditions beyond the negotiating table.”^[32] The idea that an ancient hatred is the real cause for all of these problems is one that seems to be brought back to the table time and time again as an explanation for larger failings. The thesis of “ancient hatreds” is one that people in the Western world use to

“oversimplify and misidentify the causes of international conflicts based on poorly considered comparisons”.^[33] This has been the case with Israel and Palestine, the Balkans, and, most recently, Syria.

It dangerously provides one with the idea that Palestinians and Israelis are irrational and driven to hate each other due to some primal instincts that they possess, and opposed to valid grievances one way or the other. The character Terje Rod-Larsen ends the play with these lines:

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. My friends, do not look at where we *are*; look behind you. There! *See* how far we have come! If we have come *this* far, through blood, through fear—hatred—how much *further* can we go? There! On the horizon. The Possibility. Do you see it? Do you? Good.”^[34]

Hope, a connotatively dense word, is used frequently in conjunction with *Oslo*. In Joe Dziemianowicz’s review of the piece in Daily News, he writes: “Can we make peace with enemies? *Oslo* gives us hope.”^[35] Do these reactions point at a fundamental misunderstanding of the lasting success (or lack thereof) of the Oslo Accords, or are they rather an indication that national morale is low and that we need something to hope for?

Released yearly since 2012 and produced by the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, the March 2019 “Happiness Report” found surprising results.^[36] The report surveys 156 countries “using six metrics: GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, the freedom to make life choices, social support, generosity, and perceptions of corruption.” In spite of the United States having a relatively strong economy and lower crime rates than the previous year, the “US dropped in the rankings for the third straight year and is now the 19th happiest nation on Earth.”^[37] These numbers, coupled with Rogers’ own observations about Americans being hungry for hope, offer some insight into the enthusiasm of the audience’s response; perhaps in a time when Americans are experiencing a steady decline in overall happiness, it’s not difficult to understand an increased desire to remain hopeful.

FOR WHOM, AND TO WHAT END?

Given the epilogue, one has to wonder, what is the point of the play? Perhaps it serves to indicate that process is more important than product and that peace can happen again. However, if peace is dependent on getting people into a room and getting to know each other, it is not possible if both groups don’t have equal access to the “room” first. With the systems in place such as they are in the West Bank, most Palestinians don’t have access to Israel proper; so if the “room” were to be in Jerusalem, many would not even be able to step inside. Even if they are able to be in the same place, Palestine is an Israeli-occupied territory, placing it on less than even footing with Israel. This imbalance of power severely hinders meaningful discussion. Abu-Manneh’s writing asks the audience to consider what a negotiating room looks like when both parties are treated as equals, but may not actually be equals. With unequal parties in one room, “you will get an outcome that reflects their fundamental inequality”. Even if done so unintentionally, the more powerful side will inevitably use that power to produce more favorable results for itself. So the weaker side will continue to have “no real leverage and no objective protection” and be forced “to undertake one concession after another”. He continues:

The ploy of *Oslo* is to rehash this disastrous political formula, wherein the Palestinians have no external

political protection and that their fate is in the hands of their occupiers... Israel's condition for negotiations is that the Palestinians leave aside the international laws, conventions, and UN resolutions that safeguard their rights as an occupied people and come and talk peace "without any preconditions" (as though international law is a constricting precondition rather than a mechanism for conflict resolution). What this creates is a structure in which the weaker side has already conceded all of its core rights, even before it starts negotiating. ^[38]

An interesting moment happens in the play where, in order to finalize the negotiations (at least for that moment), Peres allows the document to be ambiguous, "In the name of... constructive ambiguity... we will accept that in the *final* stage of *further* negotiations, the future of Jerusalem will be addressed."^[39] This defense of "constructive ambiguity" is in response to Ahmed Qurie's implied criticism that the language of these negotiations opens up numerous loopholes that could effectively nullify the participants' responsibilities to adhere to these agreements; Peres implies that this is a feature, not a shortcoming. Given the power dynamic at play here, the convenience for Peres leaving these loosely worded agreements on the table for future discussion cannot be ignored. The Accords at this point become more of a handshake deal than anything else, and certainly not an enforceable contract.

The Telegraph wrote that *Oslo* "harkens back to an era when reconciliation [between Palestine and Israel] seemed genuinely possible." Seeing as how *Oslo* was getting its start at Lincoln Center during the most recent presidential election, it is understandable that the audiences were longing for hope. Given the circumstances, it's no wonder that people applauded it. The idea of peace in the Middle East is an attractive one... especially when it's facilitated by white Norwegians and being presented to a largely white audience. When Rogers was asked about the relevance of *Oslo* now, he said:

I can only answer that now because I've seen the play with an audience... What's fascinating is that after we opened at Lincoln Center there was a profound response from the audience about how this play is about our political moment during an election year in the United States—about people who are enemies trying to find a way to connect with each other. That was completely unintended, but it makes total sense. ^[40]

When this play was being presented, there had been a blockade on Gaza for nine years and Israeli settlements continued to encroach on Palestinian land in the West Bank at an alarming rate. So while the *Oslo's* audience had the privilege of feeling like this was about a current "moment" or about enemies trying to "connect" with each other for three hours in a theatre one night, Palestinians and Israelis do not get to enjoy that same feeling.

PEACE AS A MARKETING TOOL

Theatre first reaches audiences through marketing. The difference between what audiences of *Oslo* know and what those who work in advertising for theatres that produce *Oslo* know about the play's intent, and the actual history of the Oslo Accords, is something very much worth examining. For TimeLine Theatre's ongoing production in Chicago, the play is described by their social media as documenting the "improbable path toward peace". Another social media post from TimeLine Chicago Cultural claims that the events dramatized in the play worked to "[push] two foes to reach something neither thought truly possible—peace." Is this what the character of Shimon Peres means in the play when he says "What we must not do is allow the details to obscure the bigger picture."^[41] Should not the bigger picture that the

Oslo Accords, by all political accounts, have failed and that peace was, in fact, not achieved? During TimeLine's 2019 production, audience members were clearly engaged in the storytelling and snapped their fingers in lieu of clapping when Jan Egeland, the Deputy Foreign Minister, finally gets onboard Terje Larsen's plan and says "Let's fucking do it!"^[42] When Mona Juul reprimands the group for fighting by saying "Stay in this room and find a way forward!" the audience applauded uproariously, as though they themselves were now part of the peace process and needed to help keep it moving forward.^[43] When former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hilary Clinton were in the audience of the New York production, during the scene where then-President Clinton is seen in the handshake footage, the audience stood up and applauded the Clintons: "The audience leapt to their feet...and turned to the Clintons and started roaring. The actors applauded from the stage. It went on for two or three minutes."^[44] This adrenaline-fueled, meta-theatrical moment of Broadway history—a theatre full of engaged audience members *and the actors on stage* halting the performance for two to three minutes to applaud the attending president associated with the powerful visual that had just been displayed—while certainly an exciting one, was comprised of people who, in that moment, forgot or chose to ignore President Clinton's policies relating to Israel and Palestine prior to that famed moment on the White House lawn completely.

The act of bringing enemies together for the greater good seems impossible and thus "inspiring", as documented by Chicago director Nick Bowling, and several critics of the New York production. After the play finished its run in New York, Rogers was asked how he thought the show would be received in London. Rogers replied: "Who could have foretold the change in audience response from last summer, when we were in the Newhouse, to this summer when, post-election, people are so hungry for hope? A year ago, I thought I had written a play about Israel and Palestine. Now, it's also about Democrats and Republicans. And I have not changed a single word in that direction."^[45]

In a review she wrote about the New York production, Roma Torre said, "While that peace didn't last, this excellent play offers hope that history can once again repeat itself."^[46] Recently, Jared Kushner, pushing for the Peace to Prosperity plan said: "For too long the Palestinian people have been trapped in inefficient frameworks of the past... The Peace to Prosperity plan is a framework for a brighter, more prosperous future for the Palestinian people and the region and a vision of what is possible if there is peace."^[47] With the idea of this peace plan and the idea of achievable peace, it's natural to wonder--will this time be different? The famed words of Edmund Burke continue to ring: "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it."^[48]

CONCLUSION

In the middle of *Oslo*, Yossi Beilin tells Terje Rod Larsen that "[he] should pay attention to what [people] actually say and not just listen for what you want to hear."^[49] This concept can (and ought to) be applied to the play as a whole. Dramatizing these events in order for Western audiences to feel that peace is possible, perhaps even simply achievable in the Middle East seems like Rogers is listening for what he wants to hear. But by paying attention to those invested in the subject matter for reasons beyond "it's f---ing interesting," we learn the less inspiring but far more accurate truth--that the Oslo Accords failed.

It has now been more than twenty-five years since the Oslo Accords were signed. J.T. Rogers' play *Oslo* brought the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the forefront of theatre audiences' minds. But, when it is presented to an audience who have the privilege of not having to live with the personal ramifications of

the failed Oslo Accords on a daily basis, we must ask ourselves, what does *Oslo* truly deliver? And for whom?

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