

Interview: Director Gary Abrahams on Yentl. "Sometimes you need to be self destructive to become who you're meant to be."

Back in March, after seeing [Yentl](#) (★★★★★) at [Malthouse Theatre](#) in Melbourne, I wrote:

"We can only beg the theatre gods, or the Yeytser Ho're, for a Sydney transfer."

Well it seems the gods (and [Monstrous Theatre](#) and the Sydney Opera House) were listening and now, after two runs in Melbourne, this bold, dark and spiritual story of a young woman who disguises herself as a man to get an education, lands at the [Sydney Opera House from October 17](#) (the run has already been extended to November 10). I'm obviously not taking credit for the transfer, but I'm also not taking credit for the transfer on some higher, spiritual level.

Ahead of its move to Sydney, I got to have a brief chat with *Yentl* director Gary Abrahams who took a break from rehearsing his new play (*Werewolf*), written by Van Badham – which also sounds fascinating) at Arts Centre Melbourne, to answer some of my questions.



Gary Abrahams in rehearsals.

CULTURAL BINGE (CB): Hi Gary, thanks for taking the time to do this. Why don't you start by giving us a little bit of background on this production of Yentl?

GARY ABRAHAMS (GA): So this is the third season. The first season premiered in 2022 at the Arts Centre Melbourne. Then in March 2024, we had a return season at the Malthouse Theatre. It was just by chance the Sydney transfer happened. I'd been speaking to the Sydney Opera house since 2022 and it just so happened that a few weeks opened up this year.

CB: Have you made any changes to the script between runs?

GA: We did tweak it a bit before the Malthouse season. The season at the Sydney Opera House is going to be very, very close to the Malthouse season. You know, we're such perfectionists and you feel like the work's never done, but at a certain point you just have to let it be what it is. I have to also just trust that *Yentl*'s had the response that it's had because something's working. Despite its specificity, it still has a universality that anybody can connect with.

CB: Oh, I definitely think so. I'm an agnostic, former Christian, Anglo-Chinese, gay guy who has no real understanding of Jewish culture beyond the pop cultural references, and I was absolutely spellbound by it.

GA: Oh, well, that's really nice. It's really important to me that it does reach an LGBTQI+ audience because I think what it's exploring is so contemporary. *Yentl*'s own journey speaks to the inner struggle that so many queer people have to go through in their own life to arrive at a place of self acceptance and self realisation.

I think sometimes we do a disservice to LGBTQI audiences by disallowing the spiritual part of that conversation. I think a lot of queer people have had quite a negative experience with organised religion, but that doesn't mean that they don't have their own sort of personal relationship to their own soul or spirituality. And I think there's something quite healing about having the argument thrashed out in front of you on a level that is quite spiritual.



Nicholas Jaquinot, Amy Hack & Evelyn Krape. Photo: Jeff Busby.

CB: I remember being quite surprised by how actually spiritual it is as a play. Oftentimes theatre steers away from the formalised spirituality of religion. We deal with spirituality in a more artistic sense, but the idea that this is feels very embedded in a well established spiritual context.

GA: I think that's a particularly Australian view, and I agree with you. I think in Australia, we have a really, really difficult time going head on into big philosophical, moral, spiritual territory. Obviously I'm speaking from a Western perspective, but it's something that I think is sorely lacking within our theatre and in our art. You know, we skew completely away from deep spirituality, soulfulness, all of that into a very postmodern arena. And I think that's partly what people responded so strongly to with this show was that we did dare to go to those very deep spiritual places. I think people kind of crave that.

Regardless of how modern or agnostic you might be, or where your own spiritual practice lies, we all have that craving to understand ourselves on a deeper level and I think theatre is the perfect place to have that conversation in the modern world.

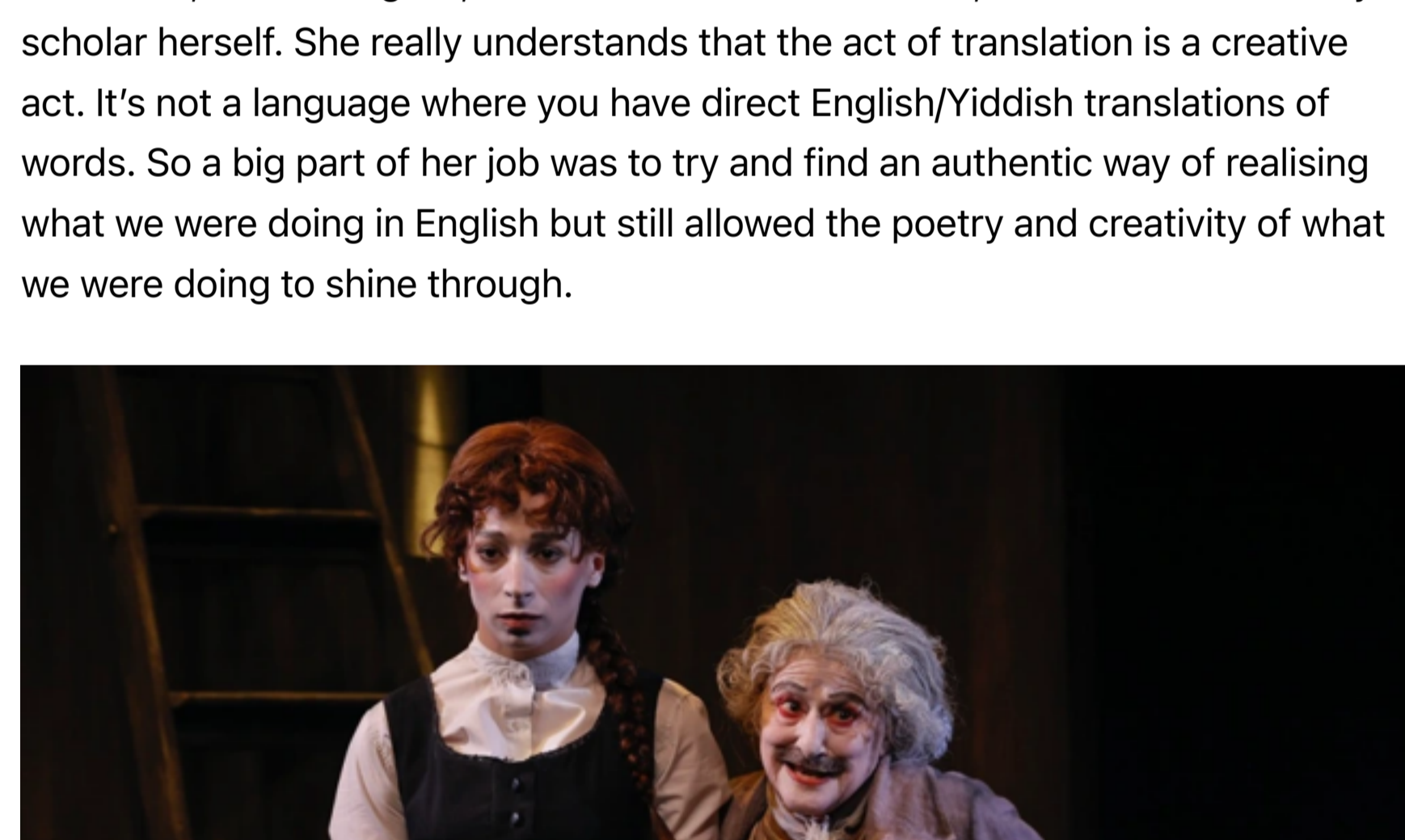
"I'm always interested in theatre that is never pretending to be anything other than theatre."

CB: I want to dig into the nuts and bolts of the show a bit. You went back to the original Yiddish short story by Isaac Bashevis Singer, and the play is presented in both English and Yiddish (with translations). How good is your Yiddish?

GA: I don't speak Yiddish. My grandparents were Yiddish speakers, so I've grown up with it, but I don't speak it fluently. Obviously, there's an existing Broadway show from the 1970s [Ed – You know the one, "Papa can you hear me?"]. So to get around that we went back to the original Yiddish story and that was the springboard for us and to make sure that we were presenting something that could have a conversation between the original culture and for western audiences.

Part of working with Kadimah Yiddish Theatre is that we have so many people that can help us with translation and with interpretation. And Yiddish itself is very connected to spiritual study, because at yeshivas and schools, you're constantly switching between Yiddish and Hebrew and learning how to analyse text and read between the lines. Then question some more, and then explore further questions.

Of course, Rivka Margolis, who does all the translations, she's an extraordinary scholar herself. She really understands that the act of translation is a creative act. It's not a language where you have direct English/Yiddish translations of words. So a big part of her job was to try and find an authentic way of realising what we were doing in English but still allowed the poetry and creativity of what we were doing to shine through.



Amy Hack & Evelyn Krape. Photo: Jeff Busby.

CB: One of the big changes to the text is the personification of the Yeytser Ho're, the "Evil Inclination" (played by Evelyn Krape). Why was it important for this adaptation?

GA: It was an evolution. When we returned to the original short story written in Yiddish, we found some interesting slight variations between the Yiddish and the English translation. There was something slightly more open within the Yiddish that spoke about this thing inside of *Yentl* that compels her to do these things. Within Judaism there is this idea of the "Yeytser Ho're", your "evil inclination" (but that's an oversimplified translation). It just felt like the perfect analogy to describe what we were exploring. Everybody has this internal drive and sometimes it pushes you to be self destructive, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes you need to be self destructive in order to break down who you are, to become who you're meant to be.

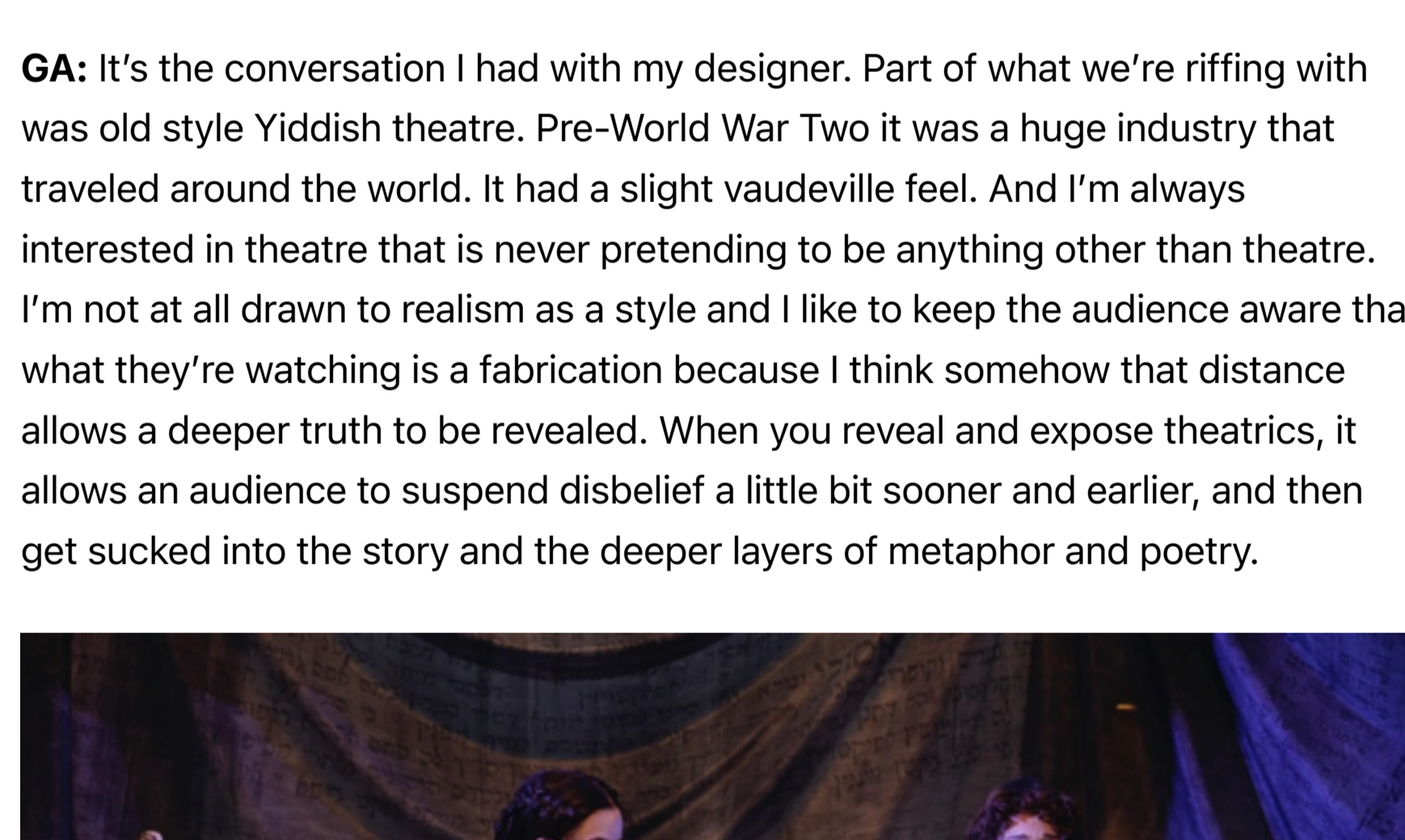
CB: I remember when I was watching it, you started off loving the Yeytser Ho're. The character is funny and rambunctious. It's the audience's gateway into the story. But then as it goes on, you realise it's not always acting in *Yentl*'s best interests...

GA: Or is it? That's a sort of ambiguity, the duality that we're exploring. It does go to some very dark places but if *Yentl* hadn't gone to those dark places she may not have arrived where she needed to be by the end.

We wanted to toy with the ambiguity of it all because that's life. Life is neither good nor bad. It's chaos and order, creation and destruction, all at the same time. It was important for us to bring *Yentl*'s arc to a place where she had to make peace with both sides of her femininity and her desire to be a religious student.

CB: This is kind of a basic question about the production, but why the pale face makeup?

GA: It's the conversation I had with my designer. Part of what we're riffing with was old style Yiddish theatre. Pre-World War Two it was a huge industry that traveled around the world. It had a slight vaudeville feel. And I'm always interested in theatre that is never pretending to be anything other than theatre. I'm not at all drawn to realism as a style and I like to keep the audience aware that what they're watching is a fabrication because I think somehow that distance allows a deeper truth to be revealed. When you reveal and expose theatrics, it allows an audience to suspend disbelief a little bit sooner and earlier, and then get sucked into the story and the deeper layers of metaphor and poetry.



Genevieve Kingsford & Amy Hack. Photo: Jeff Busby.

CB: You've worked quite a lot with adaptation. You seem to have an affinity with this kind of hardcore, literate, theatre adaptation. What draws you to these works?

GA: That's such a lovely question, because yes, you're right, I did my masters in writing and directing, but my focus was on adaptation. I just always remember, as a child, whenever I was reading a book or watching something, I always had that part of my mind that was reimagining it. What I love about theatre is that it's a combination of various artistic languages. Literature, but there's also cinema, music, dance language... I just love theatre as an art form. I love the conversation that I have to have with the original writer, to kind of wrestle with the ideas through the making of the work. I'm a voracious reader and I listen to a lot of music and I watch a lot of cinema and TV but theatre really is my main language. And like, there's so many great stories that already exist, you don't want to have to keep reinventing the wheel.

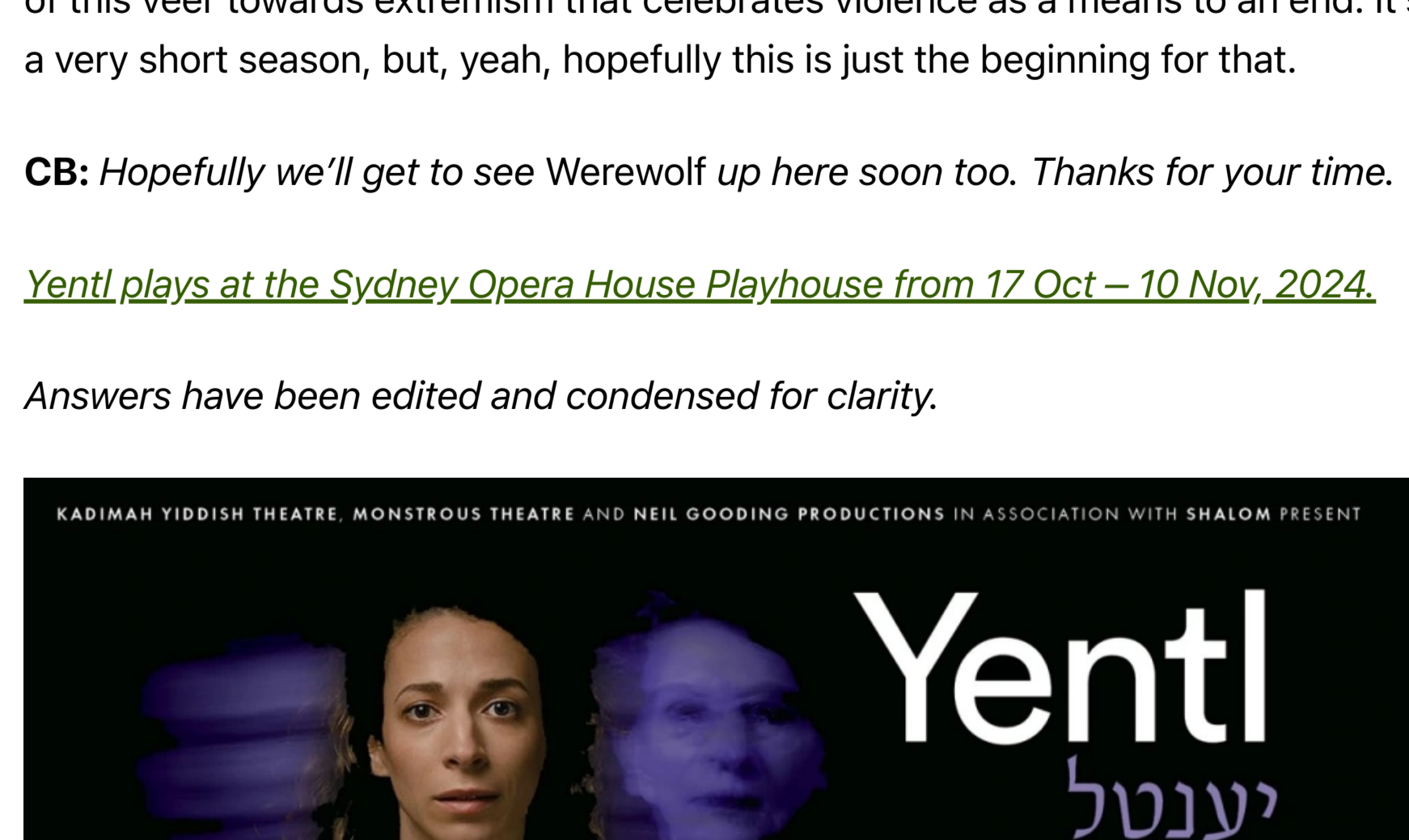
CB: You're in rehearsals for a new show at Arts Centre Melbourne, before you get back into the rehearsal room for *Yentl*. Tell me about *Werewolf*?

GA: I've just opened a production of the opera *La Bohème* and the new show opening at the Arts Centre is with Van Badham. *Werewolf* is a kind of crazy political horror story. It's a very, very audacious piece of work that is exploring how people on the left get radicalised into a sort of violent extremism. I'm sure she won't mind me saying this, but she's been very disturbed by some of the stuff that she's been seeing. And part of this work is trying to explore and make sense of this veer towards extremism that celebrates violence as a means to an end. It's a very short season, but to see *Werewolf* this is just the beginning for that.

CB: Hopefully we'll get to see *Werewolf* up here soon too. Thanks for your time.

[Yentl](#) plays at the Sydney Opera House Playhouse from 17 Oct – 10 Nov, 2024.

Answers have been edited and condensed for clarity.



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