Underneath the Lintel
An Impressive Presentation of Lovely Evidences

By Glen Berger
Directed by Carey Perloff
The Geary Theater
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Dan Rubin
Editor

Elizabeth Brodersen
Director of Education

Beatrice Basso
Production Dramaturg

Shannon Stockwell
Publications Fellow

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**COVER** *Le juif errant*, by François Geogin (1826) (© RMN-Grand Palais [MuCEM]/Jean-Gilles Berizzi)

**OPPOSITE** *The Main Hall of the Old Main Library, Built in 1874* (courtesy Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County)
The Path of the Librarian in *Underneath the Lintel*

1. Hoofddorp, Netherlands
2. London, England
3. Bonn, Germany
4. Derby, England
5. Dingtao, China
6. New York City, New York
7. Brisbane, Australia
8. Acropolis, Greece
9. Paris, France
10. The coast of Norway
11. Juneau, Alaska
12. Uxmal, Mexico
13. Stamford, Connecticut
14. Easter Island
Overview of *Underneath the Lintel*

*Underneath the Lintel* was first presented at the Yale Summer Cabaret in New Haven, Connecticut, in August 1999, with the playwright performing the role of the Librarian. The Actors’ Gang in Los Angeles gave the play its first full production in May 2001. The New York production premiered off Broadway at the Soho Playhouse in October 2001 and ran for more than four hundred performances.

**Characters and Cast**

The Librarian .............................................. David Strathairn

**Setting**

Here and now.

**Synopsis**

A nameless Dutch librarian, alone onstage, welcomes us to his presentation. He has rented the theater for a single night to share what he believes to be an important tale of discovery. He explains how his routine job checking in returned library books and sending out fines—occasionally peppered by a small rivalry with his coworker Brody—was rocked one day in 1986 when a beat-up copy of *Baedeker’s Travel Guide* was returned 113 years overdue. Inside the book, he found an unredeemed dry-cleaning receipt from London, 1913, but when he went to send the delinquent book borrower a bill for his astronomical late fee, he discovered the listed address was in China. This remarkable situation vexed the Librarian, annoying him to the point of distraction. He began to dig into the mystery, which launched him on a worldwide quest. As he began to put together the puzzle pieces—“evidences”—he became convinced that he was tracking none other than the mythical Wandering Jew, a man cursed to walk the Earth until the end of days. The further the Librarian searched, the more obsessed he became—an ordinary man proceeding on an extraordinary journey, like the Wandering Jew himself.
A Note from the Playwright

By Glen Berger

A spot of grocery shopping, a few diapers changed, dinner, a chat on the phone, a shower, a shave, and an arduous mission retrieving a small round dog toy from under the couch—that has been my day today, and all in all, little to write home about, certainly nothing demanding deep consideration, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing strange. That is, if it weren’t for three incontrovertible Facts:

1) The universe contains well over 500,000,000,000 galaxies, with each galaxy containing over 1,000,000,000,000 stars, of which our vast, blazing, and life-bestowing sun . . . is one.

2) The Earth is 4,600,000,000 years old, in which time, from the Precambrian Era to the present, a dizzying, terrifying number of inhabitants—amoebas and trilobites, dust mites and Neanderthals—have all struggled to live from one hour to the next. (Indeed, more living creatures are in my stomach [and yours] at this moment than the total number of human beings that have ever existed.)

3) I will die. I will be dead in 60 years, though it’s entirely conceivable that I’ll be dead before the week is out.

And suddenly all the props holding up my warm and secure little existence are kicked away and used for kindling. The imagination is taxed to exhaustion and left numb and agape when it even begins to fathom the implications of these Facts. They beggar the most breathless hyperbole. Three simple Facts, three confirmed and undeniable Facts—the immensity of the universe, the incomprehensibly vast history of the Earth, and our inescapable mortality—loom over all of us like three paisley mastodons. When I shine these three Facts upon any moment in my life, suddenly nothing, absolutely nothing, isn’t strange, bewildering, and out of all whooping. These Facts turn every memorable or trivial or utterly forgettable moment of my existence—shopping, eating trout with spouse, lying prostrate retrieving dog toy—into the Apotheosis of the Comic and Tragic, the Inconsequential and Crucial, the Banal and Profound. These Facts loom so large, in fact, that they are rather easily ignored. Three paisley mastodons get up with us in the morning and sleep with us at night but, for the most part, they’re very quiet pachyderms, and consequently, amazingly, they blur into the unimportant background,
even though one day, with trumpeting bellows, they will trample me into oblivion. Time and again I explain to myself that these Facts are interesting, profound even, but not pertinent to my daily life. NO. In truth, everything else is but shadow compared to these Facts. They are the trump cards to all the ordinary cards I hold in my hand and call “my life.”

I write plays to help me keep these Three Facts in the front of my head. In other words, I write to try to keep myself engaged with the Bewildering and Infinite. But why did I write *Underneath the Lintel* in particular?

All my plays are first inspired by music, and *Underneath the Lintel* was inspired particularly by certain klezmer/Yiddish music from the 1920s (and earlier). The “jaunty melancholy,” the “dancing-despite-it-all” quality it contained, the defiance even—a certain “finding-joy-despite-all-the-evidence-to-the-contrary” quality in the music—compelled me to try to express it as a play.

In 1976, in Laetoli, in Tanzania, some members of Mary Leakey’s archaeology team were throwing chunks of dried elephant dung at each other, as archaeologists are wont to do in their free time, I suppose. When one of the paleontologists dove to the ground to avoid being pelted by dung, he noticed fossilized footprints of an animal, left in hardened volcanic ash from 3.8 million years ago. After two years of excavation, all number of animal prints were discovered, including, unexpectedly, unmistakably, the footprints of hominids—our ancient australopithecine ancestors. The fact that these prints were preserved—prints by an anonymous ancestor going about a no doubt everyday activity—testifies to me of the great Conundrum of History: What is saved, and what is lost?

There used to be a sequence in *Underneath the Lintel* that I considered and then excised before the New York production. After the Librarian points out the words on the moth’s wing, and calls them a “ghostly vestige,” he mentions how “vestige” comes from the Latin word “vestigium,” meaning “footprint.” The Librarian then alludes to the footprints left by our ancestors in Laetoli, and (unbeknownst to the Librarian) we see a slide of those Laetoli footprints, and then a subsequent 15-second slideshow depicting the subsequent four-million-year history of Humankind, full of our best and worst, and ending with a picture of a footprint left by the first man on the moon.

I loved the idea, and it looked really horrible when we actually tried to execute it, and then I hated the idea. So the sequence is out. But hopefully the idea can still be found in the play. “Still, we’ll proceed,” the Librarian says over and again, somehow we’ll proceed, we haven’t a choice, and perhaps such a sentiment has somehow driven the evolution of
humanity itself, in tiny steps. Oh yes, we’ll often go sideways or backwards, but continue we will, and perhaps “there is joy, too, in that.” What, after all, do we do with the fact that suffering has dogged humanity (and certainly not just humanity, but the three-billion-odd species that have populated this planet) every step of the way? Calculated cruelty as well as utterly random events—ten million die in the senselessness of World War I and a woman is struck down by a frozen block of urine. The fact that we die is a great fat conundrum, and it will continue to be a conundrum for me until . . . well until I die. What does my little life mean when set against the huge backdrop of human history? And what’s human history set against the ridiculously unimaginable backdrop of the history of the universe? (At the Rose Planetarium in New York, there’s a walk representing the history of the observable universe, and at the end of the walk there’s a single hair, representing the 50 thousand years of human existence.) And what do we do with the fact that because we only live our lives once, a single event, or a single mistake, can send our lives into a wholly unanticipated and undesired direction?

So it was while I was listening to the klezmer music, and trying to think of a dramatic structure that would allow me to encompass a lot of history (in lieu of the Three Facts), that I remembered the story of the Wandering Jew. Now I was quite aware that the myth of the Wandering Jew was originally an anti-Semitic tale, but the myth had taken on more complex meanings in its seven-hundred-odd-year history, and I felt, besides, that an artist can always appropriate myths for his own ends. (I would later discover that a film made in Yiddish by Jews in the early 1930s called The Wandering Jew was made to warn a generally ignorant world of the growing Nazi menace. In the film, the Wandering Jew is depicted as a noble figure, bearing witness to history. I’ve received letters calling Underneath the Lintel anti-Semitic. That said, I’ve also received letters calling the play too “pro-Zionist,” and also “anti-Christian,” for the portrayal of a cruel Christ, I suppose. So go figure.)

The first performance of Underneath the Lintel in New York was scheduled for September 18, 2001. The Soho Playhouse, being in Soho, was inaccessible for a week after the 11th, but we invited the neighborhood to see the show on the 19th. Yet although the events of 9/11 were singular and tragic, they were not, unfortunately, so out of the ordinary, when one considers the whole of history. On September 11, people were murdered out of anger and ignorance, victims who didn’t want to die, and weren’t expecting to die just then. Considered in this light, such events occur on larger and smaller scales every day, and have been occurring every day for thousands of years.

In a sense, despite the Wandering Jew’s seemingly unique situation, his predicament is the predicament of all humanity—he made a mistake, a single mistake “underneath the lintel,” when he put fear and self-interest ahead of compassion. Everyone does it all the time. And he was forced to live with that mistake the rest of his days. Did the punishment fit the crime? No. But that’s often true of punishments and crimes. And even though he was condemned to live for a near-eternity, the fact that he is not allowed to be anything more than a myth (by not being allowed to communicate his existence to his fellow man) puts him in practically the same spot as the rest of humanity: namely,
that his life means seemingly next-to-nothing in the great scope of history.

However, he is a human being, and he isn’t going to give up so easily. Humanity inevitably finds the strength, despite our mistakes and tragedies, to rebuild, to persevere, to proceed, until death does us in. Graffiti throughout the ages (in a Lascaux cave or on a New York subway train) testify to the fundamental human need to affirm our own existence to each other and to the Heavens. For our Librarian, the scraps left behind by the alleged Wandering Jew prove that he will never stop seeking “a way around” God’s edict. And if the Wandering Jew has been condemned by God to witness thousands of years of human suffering, then, almost in defiance, he will seek out all that is good and worthy and beautiful, and if he is forced to “walk,” he’ll do God one better and Dance. Which of course, God no doubt wanted all along. This is the defiance, sadness, and hope I found expressed so fully in the klezmer music I had been listening to.

The Librarian made a mistake underneath the lintel—sending the one girl he ever loved away. His ensuing, long-sublimated spiritual crisis feeds his determination to find meaning in the clues he uncovers.

But my point isn’t that we should all believe in the Wandering Jew, or even in God, for that matter. Rather, anything at all—for the Librarian it was an impossibly overdue book—can be an invitation to the miraculous. And also this: that in the face of overwhelming existential bewilderment and terrible suffering, to respond with a little defiant dancing (in all its myriad forms) is a very human and very wondrous thing.

On one end of a spectrum is Coincidence, on the other end Profound Serendipity. The only difference between the two is how much meaning we choose to ascribe to a particular event. I’m still working out where on the spectrum I should put the following:

A few months back, I was paging through an encyclopedia of philosophy when I came across the word “Sublime,” which is defined as “the presence of transcendent vastness or greatness. . . . While in one aspect, it is apprehended and grasped as a whole, it is felt as transcending our normal standards of measurement. . . . It involves a certain baffling of our faculty with feeling of limitation akin to awe and veneration; as well as a stimulation of our abilities and elevation of the self in sympathy with its object.”

The word sublime comes from “sub” (under) + “limen” (which, like “limit,” is a word derived originally from . . . “lintel”). Though we rarely recognize the place, underneath the lintel is where we stand every day, every moment, of our life.

This essay was first published in 2003 as the “Afterword” to Underneath the Lintel.
Little Quiet Moments of Being Aware

An Interview with Playwright Glen Berger

By Underneath the Lintel Dramaturg Beatrice Basso
Introduction by Dan Rubin

Playwright Glen Berger believes we are shaped by series of small random occurrences. This is true of the writer himself, who is who he is, in part, because he skipped kindergarten. As a “Jewish kid in the very WASP-y milieu” of Virginian suburbs outside Washington, D.C., Berger already felt like an outsider even before entering school as an oddity, a year younger than everyone else in the first grade. In a moment of fortuitous inspiration, Berger attempted to find his place in this new situation using humor. “I did some sort of spontaneous comedy bit, and it seemed like I was accepted by the class. From that point on, I thought, ‘Okay, let’s cultivate that.’”

From the earliest points in his memory, Berger has been interested in writing, specifically humorous writing. In third grade, he used a short-story assignment as an excuse to write a dramatic epic about the Revolutionary War and the Continental Congress. (“It ended with some really inspiring line from John Madison.”) He continued his first-grade comedic efforts in comedy troupes throughout high school and college, but it took a trip to England for him to find his voice. On a six-month stint abroad following college, Berger, as he describes it, “sat in a room with these little black journals and just wrote and wrote and wrote.” To his surprise, the exercise in self-discovery actually worked: “I came back writing much differently than I had before. It seemed like almost a joke to me at the time, but it turned out to be true. A couple years after that, I felt like I didn’t just find my voice but maybe, maybe I had something small to say—my own little contribution.”

The multi-award-winning Underneath the Lintel—which has been translated into eight languages, ran for more than four hundred performances off Broadway in 2001–03, and has received more than two hundred productions in the United States—is but one of Berger’s many “little contributions.” These also include the plays O Lovely Glowworm, or Scenes of Great Beauty, which A.C.T.’s Master of Fine Arts Program performed in 2010, and Great Men of Science, Nos. 21 & 22, among others. He is currently writing an American trilogy inspired by the folk music of the Kingston Trio. His television credits
include two Emmy Awards (and ten nominations) and more than 150 episodes for children’s series, including *Arthur* (PBS), *Peep* (Discovery/The Learning Channel), *Big and Small* (BBC), and *Fetch* (PBS), for which he was head writer for all five of its seasons.

Berger was also the co-bookwriter for the famously fraught *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* on Broadway, directed by Julie Taymor, with music by Bono and The Edge of the band U2. He recently wrote a book about that experience—*Song of Spider-Man*—published by Simon & Schuster, which hits the shelves in November. ‘When I sat down to write the book, my entire plan was, I’m *not* going to write a tell-all. I’m going to write this beautiful piece about collaboration,’ and it turns out that I wrote a tell-all. I didn’t think that’s what I was doing when I was writing it. The approach is that everybody involved, *everybody* involved, are all good people. It’s an account of what happens when good people have to deal with circumstances that wind up being overwhelming—all in the name of putting on a play.”

The circumstances surrounding *Lintel*, both its creation and A.C.T.’s production, have been a far cry less overwhelming—but no less interesting. Production dramaturg Beatrice Basso asked Berger about his most-produced play when she spoke to him by phone in August.

*Underneath the Lintel* premiered in 1999 at the Yale Cabaret. It’s been 14 years since its inception—more than a decade of events both in the world and in your life. You’ve written so much in the interim, but this play seems to keep coming back. How has your relationship with it changed over time, and are you still excited about it? What do you think is the hook that keeps theaters and audiences wanting to see it? What keeps it so alive?

It’s very strange, because at the Yale Cabaret I was the one who performed it—I wrote it quickly and I didn’t think anyone else was going to be able to memorize it—so I actually wrote it to the very limited number of strengths I have as a performer. Because of that, I had a more intimate relationship with this play than others I had written. When it ran in New York [October 2001], I was the understudy and I filled in for about one hundred shows, and around my 50th performance, I started spontaneously rewriting it onstage. The other actors [T. Ryder Smith and David Chandler, who both played the Librarian during the off-Broadway run] had complained about a transition or two, and I had the attitude of, “Whatever, just act it.” But then *I* had to do it. So I had the opportunity to continue to refine it in a way that I hadn’t been able to with my other plays, to get under the skin of the thing, and see how it flows from beat to beat. By the time I was done performing it, after about one hundred performances, I was feeling confident about it as a piece. As opposed to my other plays, this one still feels like a living and breathing thing. I performed it for a “one-night-only” event a couple of years ago in the theater where it was first performed, and getting back in it, it felt like an old friend.

I guess what [the continued interest in *Lintel*] tells me about people out there is that there really is a yearning to figure out why we’re here on this planet. I find it heartening that it has seemed to strike such a chord, because it tells me that the play does resonate
with people, or at least awaken in people the questions, “What are we doing on this planet? What are we doing being alive?”

One thing that always surprises me rereading *Lintel* is that it starts very small. The lens is focused very tightly on this very specific man in this little library in a small town, and it opens up to encompass the history of humanity and mythology, both through time and space.

You never know if you’ve hit upon an idea that’s going to allow you to explore that so easily. It’s like starting a crossword puzzle and having no idea if it’s going to be a hard one until you’re done. This play wound up being easier to write than just about everything else I’ve written. I just lucked into this idea and structure that allowed me to do what I wanted to do without too much misery at the writing desk. What is weird is that it’s about one person who takes this story in his suitcase all over the world, and there was no way I could have known at the time that it would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It’s bizarre, getting these Google Alerts about productions of *Lintel* in Hong Kong and Athens, literally all over the globe—and then I google the images and see all these different Librarians and their suitcases presenting this story.

Even though the Librarian is supposed to be Dutch, do you see cultural specificity in the different embodiments of him in productions around the world?

You do see some interesting things. There was a very good production in Dublin, and it’s not uncommon there to have a little crucifix on the wall because it’s such a Catholic country. You wouldn’t notice it, except then, as you’re listening to the story, it becomes more resonant. I’d never seen a crucifix on the wall in any other production. Little things. There’s a lot of commonality: you always get ragged-looking men—and women, because there’s a female version out now, too.

I wonder if the laughs hit in the same places depending on where it is playing.

That’s a good question. I know from performing it myself, from night to night, you could never predict when the laughs would come. Every audience is different, even in New York City.

I don’t think of this play as a comedy. I think of it as a deep, resonant play with a lot of humor. But you did say at some point, “Almost everything I write is a comedy,” and you’ve talked about humor and how it can facilitate harder, deeper questions.

The last couple of summers I’ve been acting in Chekhov’s *The Seagull* at Lake Lucille in upstate New York. I’ve noticed Chekhov called it “A Comedy in Four Acts,” even though it’s heavy, heavy stuff; but you do [find the humor]—and God bless him, you get a sense of what Chekhov was after. He was saying something deeper about his perspective on life in general. I guess at the end of the day, there’s something forgiving about humans if
we’re going to call *The Seagull* a comedy; despite the tragedies and mistakes and foibles, there’s a certain warmth towards humans and their condition.

In *Lintel*, both the Librarian and the Wandering Jew make one mistake, miss one opportunity, and that determines the rest of their existence. Do you believe that life can change because of one false step?

Definitely. Some false steps are inevitable. I look at it like tracking the course of a stream that has its own individual way of getting to the river and the ocean. I have three children, and I can see those moments in their lives. As a father, you register, “This day, this will affect the rest of their lives. They will remember this and it will become part of the biography they carry around until they die.” They don’t realize it yet, but I do. You become aware of how these random events start creating who these people become—but you roll with it. We all roll with it.

I took one walk with my father, with the dog, once. He stopped as he was walking the dog and said, “I do this from time to time because I like to remind the dog that this is what we’re doing, that we’re going for a walk.” I nodded and moved on. I don’t go a week without thinking about that.

Do you think it was because, in that particular moment, you were suddenly made aware of your father’s awareness?

I don’t know. It can get really deep! Maybe when he was stopping the dog, he was also stopping me and reminding me that I was going on a walk—I suddenly became aware of everything: oh yes, *I’m* going on a walk. I’m Glen Berger and I’m with my father and I’m on the street and I’m alive. It was a moment when I was fully aware, and it was exciting. But it wasn’t Disney World, you know? It was just a little quiet moment of being aware. Maybe for that reason I still think of that moment.

It’s very Buddhist. You’re Jewish by upbringing, right?

Yes, although Buddhism has affected my thinking more than anything else. Especially when I was writing *Lintel*, I remember being very keen on how a Buddhist would approach klezmer music. I have phases of Buddhism, and then not, which is probably very Buddhist of me. [*Laughter*]

What is the hook for you in Buddhism?

The three big words for me are: curiosity, compassion, and perspective—perspective specifically applies to this play. Those are the three gifts that I want to give my children, the three things that I try to infuse my plays with, to convey to an audience. That was the impetus behind trying to encompass a huge amount of time, the two thousand years the play encompasses. And even that two thousand years doesn’t begin to touch the surface of the amount of time I really want to cover.
Your way into this play was through music, right? I wish I was the sort of playwright who starts a play when he realizes, “This relationship between two people would make a great play.” I think that would be an easier way to start. But I don’t think that way. I hear a piece of music and I think, “Oh my gosh, there’s a play in there!”

I’m meeting a lot more people these days who are both actors and musicians—mandolin and banjo and guitar players—which is great. There really is something fantastic about live music. It’s so theatrical, but I don’t always want to write “musicals.”

Was it the first impulse for Lintel?

I heard klezmer music from the 1920s that spoke to me, but I didn’t know what it was saying. That’s usually how it starts. Sometimes it’s just a chord change. I just knew that there were these qualities in klezmer: a great minor key and a lively dance.

Originally the play was going to be five characters, and it took awhile for me to realize the play was one character who was a bit of a detective and a bit of a crazy person. Actually, I woke up from a dream one night—I’m just remembering this now, I totally forgot about this—it was a dream about an old man taking us on a journey from yesterday to today in a stagecoach after a horse had just been put down. When I woke up from that dream, I realized, “Oh, okay, it’s a one-person play. And he’s going to take us across a large expanse of time.” Soon after that I realized, “Oh, the man has never been on a stage before. But he likes it. And he wants more of it.” And then it grew from there. I realized it wasn’t a performance, it was a lecture. As soon as you realize those things, as a writer, it takes you off the hook, because any stumbling and bad mistakes aren’t the playwright’s fault, they’re the character’s fault. As I’m writing something, I try to find the scapegoat for all of my shortcomings as a writer and blame it on the character. [Laughter]

I love that this is a one-man show, but many different actors (including yourself) have played the role. Do you think it can be performed by many different kinds of personalities?

I’ve seen hyperactive actors who got through the play in an hour and five minutes, and I’ve seen others who take way too long, about an hour and 45 to get through it. It does seem to accommodate a lot of different acting styles. What fascinates me even more than that is how different directors approach it. Some do it very, very straight and say, “Oh, we’ll just rely on your words, Glen.” Then others find some beautiful theatrical flourishes that make the play much better than the thing that got set down on paper.

The [2006] Long Wharf Theatre production was great because [director] Eric [Ting] really opened up his imagination without, I felt, betraying the spirit of the thing. It totally worked for me on an emotional level. Of course, I’ve seen other productions where I’m crawling under my chair, but that’s how we playwrights live.
You’ve written a lot of multicharacter plays and musicals, and children’s television as well. How different are all these beasts that you tackle?

At the end of the day, it’s always story. Story doesn’t come as naturally to me as it does to other people, but that just means that I try harder. I value story a lot, and so I appreciate a work, whether it’s children’s television or *Lintel*, that has a story that leads up to a revelatory moment by the end of it. Especially when it comes to kids’ TV—they’re merciless, children are! They will tie you to the stake and put the torches to the wood if you drop the ball. You’ve got to engage them every second, and you engage them with story more than anything. Story is the name of the game, no matter what you’re doing.

You seem to come at writing from science and philosophy. How did you come to be a writer?

I want to write about what fires me up, and that’s what fires me up as a writer. I mean, writing—what’s writing? It’s just putting words together. Writing isn’t writing, writing is thought. It’s not so much how you put words together; it’s the thoughts you’ve formulated and what you feel like you need to say. And what you need to say is something that you have an overwhelming desire to share, because it’s so cool!

There are so many great science writers out there. When I watch a David Attenborough nature special or read a great book about evolution by Steven Jay Gould, I become aware that our existence is an extremely bewildering one in the best possible sense of the word. What I’m trying to convey in my writing, more than anything else, is that excitement, that sense of getting fired up about the very fact that we are alive.

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**Why the Librarian Is Dutch: A Note from the Playwright**

The Dutch have a wonderfully bureaucratic streak in them (or so I’m told). They also tend to have a facility for other European languages, and I’ve known more than one person from the Netherlands whose English was truly remarkable, with a nearly imperceptible accent. (I also just have a soft spot for the Dutch.) My point is that the accent should be very light, and the actor should pay more attention to developing the “idiolect,” meaning “an individual’s unique way of speaking.”
Holding the Pieces Up to the Light
An Interview with Scenic Designer Nina Ball

By Dan Rubin

Many if not most plays open with stage directions that relay what the playwright has in mind in terms of setting. Some of these notes are quite sparse. Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot begins: “A country road. A tree. Evening.” Some, on the other hand, are quite extensive. In A Long Day’s Journey into Night, Eugene O’Neill describes the living room of the Tyrone’s summer home down to the books on the bookshelves (“three sets of Shakespeare, The World’s Best Literature in fifty large volumes,” among other titles). Much can be made of the playwright’s intended tone from these early instructions. So what can one discern from the opening stage direction of Underneath the Lintel?

The Librarian has rented the space for the night, and from what we know of the Librarian, we can assume he didn’t have much to spend for it. Perhaps the auditorium we’re in has been dark for some time, or perhaps the theater is “between shows.” Props and other detritus from other shows can litter the back of the stage, or be seen in an exposed back room. An air of dilapidation wouldn’t be a bad thing. I’ve always pictured the Librarian as giving this lecture in a not-so-good part of town, on a rainy night, to perhaps only four or five down-and-outs more interested in getting dry from the rain than listening to a lecture by a Dutchman. Over the course of the evening, however, the “lecture” should imperceptibly turn into “theater.” The detritus, unnoticed and seemingly unimportant at first, can unexpectedly take on significance, alluding to scenes and history mentioned in the play. The lighting can become warmer, more “theatrical,” etc., and what seemed like a random strewing of objects, or a random water stain on the wall, for instance, can turn out to be not so random after all.

We posed this question, and others, to Underneath the Lintel scenic designer Nina Ball.

In Underneath the Lintel, the Librarian has rented a theater for a one-night lecture, so for him, this is a found space. Why does this play need a scenic design at all?

I guess you could argue that it doesn’t. You could do it completely with just a room. It has to be some sort of presentational location, whether it’s a public building or a theater—anywhere you could put up signs and attract people to this location in order
to give this lecture. So you actually do not need a scenic design beyond the necessities—his suitcase, a table, a tape player, some way to show slides, and something to write on, either a chalkboard or a whiteboard. Everything else is really just where [the director and scenic designer] want to take it.

The bigger challenge for us is that the Librarian makes the comment, “This place, it’s not great, but it’s the nicest place that I could afford”—and we’re in The Geary Theater! So we’re trying to fight against that, but, at the same time, we are where we are and there’s no denying that. Also, it’s a one-man show, so we needed a way to transform the stage into a place that can hold one actor and be believable—a way to close down the stage so it won’t feel so vast and empty and echo-y.

Carey and I have gone far and wide, and come back, and gone far, and come back again, and what was striking to us were old images of forgotten vaudeville theaters, theaters that are condemned or empty or have been torn down but are still gorgeous places with a ton of history. Also, The Geary’s past, with it falling down in the [1989 Loma Prieta] earthquake, was an inspiration, as well. What do all these theaters look like when they are in a state of disrepair and a little bit lost, or when they’ve lost their true glory? Or when they’re still used, but they’re not anywhere near as grand and magnificent as they used to be? For whatever reason, this place we’ve created for *Lintel* is run down, but it still has this beauty and history that are important, as this is a play that’s about the breadth of history.
What was the advantage of thinking about this space as a vaudeville theater rather than The Geary’s stage?

In vaudeville houses, the stages were usually very shallow. You couldn’t have the same wing space that we do now in these bigger theaters. So this design puts the Librarian in a more compact and intimate space, rather than in the vastness of the empty Geary stage. The old vaudeville drops are up in the air, the old hemp line, the instruments are around, the props storage is onstage—we really loved the idea of the props, the actual tools that one uses to tell stories, being visible. But it was also very important not to make it a big junk pile. There’s a sense of order, there’s a sense of place for the eye to rest. We’ll be working hard to make sure that there’s that lived-in and beautiful chaos, but within that chaos, there’s order and a sense of calm, as well. That’s another challenge.

Are most of the props from past A.C.T. productions?

It’s a mixture. We’ve got this treasure trove of old A.C.T. pieces that have their own stories and their own lives, and we’re bringing those back, but we’re not making those super obvious. At one time we toyed with the idea of a treasure hunt that the audience could play along with, [asking them to identify the A.C.T. productions in which the props previously appeared,] but that didn’t seem to serve this story. I think, yes, those things are there and they add to the fabric of the history, but we didn’t want it to be a distraction so that the audience is thinking about another place or play when we want them to be here with us now. What are the pieces that help tell the story? How do we arrange them in a way that’s simple and beautiful? It’s a lot of fun, digging through the Geary stock and transforming the space into a vaudeville theater.

Lintel’s opening stage direction says that, over the course of the evening, the “lecture” should imperceptibly turn into “theater.” How does the set help make that happen?

In the beginning of the play, the set up is very basic: the Librarian, his suitcase, his table, his chair, his chalkboard, and his projection screen. Then over the course of the evening, the events become more magical. Maybe a painting that’s been there the whole time will take on significance and pull focus when he’s speaking about his lost love. Or maybe there will be a light that comes on to frame a lintel when he’s talking about that particular story, or maybe when he’s taking a trip to Australia, a water stain takes on new significance. There are little things hidden throughout the space that will come alive as we progress. At the beginning things come out of the suitcase, and as the evening progresses things start coming out from other places, as if he either hid them there before or that’s just where he needed to find them at that moment. It’s a little piece of magic even though it could be something that he arranged.
Have you had many conversations about the existentialism of the play, and have those conversations influenced the set?

*Lintel* is an internal struggle: it’s about the Librarian trying to prove the existence of this man, but the quest takes him on what is really his own personal journey. He goes from being someone who is trapped in a mundane life that he’s content with, to someone who has been excited by passion and will not stop until he can spread that knowledge to others. It’s infectious for him. Over the course of this action, he goes from this reserved individual to this wildly gesticulating and passionate guy. Sometimes he’s elated and sometimes he’s distraught and on the verge of a breakdown. We watch his struggle and journey in front of our eyes as he’s transformed by this story—and he continues to be transformed. We watch this mystery unravel as the Librarian tells us the stories while also explaining who he is.

We’ve tried as much as we can to support that journey, to help him find himself and find the answers that he needs in order to have some sense of peace about where he is and where he’s come from. The final moment of the play is the Librarian just standing...
there. He’s gone through this roller coaster of emotion and human perseverance, and he has nothing left. And yet, in the end, much like the Wandering Jew, the character he’s been trying to explain, he finds himself in a place where he must stand, he must find the beauty and the power in life. We support that journey by keeping the set simple, as the backdrop for this man. As we said in the beginning, we don’t need a set. So if we don’t need one, then what do we need to help the Librarian emotionally, while staying out of the way? The solution we came up with is beautiful to look at, while being both simple and complex. I think it has a lot of texture.

Taking into account the subtitle of the play (“A Presentation of Lovely Evidences”) and listening to you talk about his search in connection to the set seems to highlight the importance of physical objects in this play.

We were struck by stuff; in and of itself. It’s just that: it’s clutter. And yet you pick any one object and hold it up to the light, and it takes on so much significance. The more you know about an object, the more magical that tiny thing becomes. That was big inspiration for us: taking the mundane and holding it up to the light and looking at it for all its beauty and studying it and being able to appreciate it.

We were inspired by Joseph Cornell’s boxes, and there is an artist [Orhan Pamuk] who collected the cigarette butts of his lover for four years, and just lined them all up, and each one is from a different day. It’s a beautiful art piece in the way that he displayed each of these cigarette butts. I mean, they’re just cigarette butts! Who cares about them? And yet, within that context, and knowing his love for this woman, and the obsession that he had for her, they become this amazing thing to look at. So that was a powerful concept for us, the idea of pulling out something small and insignificant and making it important.
The Wandering Legend of the Wandering Jew

By Dan Rubin

I cannot agree . . . that the study of a legend such as that of the Wandering Jew has no substance or significance in itself and can lead nowhere. On the contrary, it leads one everywhere. . . . It takes one all over the Western world, from Istanbul to Los Angeles, with stopovers all the way from the North Pole to the South, to the Near and Middle East, with even an overnight sojourn in the Far East. . . . It surveys the whole history of the Western world from the time of Christ—nay even of Adam—to the days of Hitler and beyond.


Biblical Origins

The origins of the Wandering Jew legend can be traced back to the Bible, though not to a singular biblical figure. Rather, one can find the merest hints of this tale in the New Testament accounts of St. John and Malchus, which, over many centuries in the oral tradition, coalesced into one remarkable story of suffering and piety.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus Christ first told his disciples that he would be tortured and killed, Peter took him aside and rebuked him, “This must not happen to you!” Christ’s reprimand was swift. He scolded Peter for putting the interests of man before those of God. Death was not an enemy: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it,” he told his followers. He concluded, “I tell you the truth, there are some standing here who will not experience death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

According to the Gospel of John, Christ later asserted that he could have his disciples live until Judgment Day if he wished it. “If I want [John] to live until I come back, what concern is that of yours?” he again scolded the ever-impertinent Peter. Rumor of John’s immortality spread among Christ’s followers, to the extent that the author of the gospel found it necessary to clarify: “Jesus did not say to him that he was not going to die,” only that he could make that happen *if* he wanted to. But it was too late. The legend
began circulating even before Christ’s death: St. John the Beloved would tarry about for millennia, awaiting the return of his teacher.

Malchus could not have been more different from John. He was the servant of the high priest who sent a squad of soldiers and officers to arrest Christ in the orchard of Gethsemane after Judas betrayed him. In a futile attempt to defend his rabbi, Peter drew his sword and cut off Malchus’s ear before Christ could order him to desist. (In the Book of Luke, Christ restores the ear.) The next day, Christ was brought before the high priest Annas to answer questions regarding his disciples and teachings. A nearby, unnamed officer did not care for what he heard, and he struck Christ on the face, demanding, “Is that the way you answer the high priest?”

Through what folklorists call the power of “transposition,” over much iteration of the biblical tales, the servant Malchus and the unnamed officer became one figure. Half a century later, we can pick up the legend of this unfortunate man in *The Spiritual Meadow*, a collection of pious stories by a Byzantine monk named John Moschus, born in Damascus, Syria, around 550 CE. In one of the tales, an unhappy monk named Isodore, who lives in Cyprus, reports meeting a half-clothed Ethiopian who claimed to be condemned as “the one who struck the face of him who made us all, the Lord Jesus Christ, during his passion.” He was still wandering the earth five hundred years after his crime.

**Finding Form During the Crusades**

After 12 hundred years of storytelling, transposition rolled the legends of St. John and Malchus into one—adding a dash of Cain for flavor. (After killing his brother, Cain was told by God, “You will be a homeless wanderer on the earth.”) Scholar George K. Anderson acknowledges that the exact point of origin for the legend we know today is obscure, but the blending of the biblical characters likely occurred as the story migrated back and forth from the West to the Near East during the Crusades (a series of Holy Land wars fought between 1096 and 1291). Italy appears to be an important point of dissemination.

In 1215, Pope Innocent III convened the Lateran Council and presented 70 decrees on a wide range of topics, from bureaucratic housekeeping to the treatment of heretics and the conduct of the next crusade. The final four canons gave instructions on how to deal with people of the Jewish faith. They contain an unsurprising degree of anti-Semitism, decrying the treacherous Jewish practice of usury, banning Jewish men from public office, ordering “a difference in dress [that] distinguishes the Jews . . . from the
Christians” to discourage intermingling, and commanding that in the days leading up to Easter the “blasphemers of Christ” be banned from appearing in public.

The resolutions also recommended “that nothing connected with the affairs of our lord Jesus Christ be omitted” when spreading the good word. As Anderson explains it:

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 . . . encouraged belief in any legend, however un-Christlike in nature, as long as the legend glorified the wonders of God’s works and his miracles. Thus the Jews, who had killed Christ, were nevertheless to be tolerated because their continued and continuing existence demonstrated the greatness of God’s mercy. And the conferring of eternal life upon a mortal, sinner or not, wanderer or not, would obviously come under the head of a miracle. Indeed, this motive is apparent in the very first references to the Wandering Jew.

As Anderson alludes to here, it is from around this time that we have our first written account of the Wandering Jew since Moschus placed him in Cyprus in 550 CE. The Bolognese Latin chronicle Ignoti monachi Cisterciensis S. Mariae de Ferraria chronica et Rycardi de Sancto Germano chronica priora kept records dating from 781 CE to 1228. A 1223 entry tells the following story.

In a monastery of Ferraria, pilgrims came before a group of nobles that included Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, Pope Honorius III, and King John of Jerusalem. The pilgrims reported they had seen a “certain Jew in Armenia, who had been present at the Passion of the Lord and, as He was going to His martyrdom, drove Him along wickedly with these words: ‘Go, go thou tempter and seducer, to receive what you have earned.’ The Lord is said to have answered him: ‘I go, and you will await me till I come again.’” According to the pilgrims, this man cannot die; every time he reaches the age of 100, he returns to the age of 30, the age he was when he offended Christ.

Five years after this record was made, English chronicler Roger of Wendover of St. Albans monastery (Hertfordshire) picked up the legend, possibly from the Italian chronicle, but more likely from a shared antecedent, in his Flores historiarum (Flowers of History). He added a number of new embellishments. In 1228, Roger noted the visit of an unnamed Armenian archbishop to St. Albans. He writes:

[The archbishop] was asked whether he had ever seen or heard anything of Joseph, a man of whom there was much talk in the world, who, when our Lord suffered, was present and spoke to Him, and who is still alive in evidence of the Christian faith; in reply to which a knight of his retinue, who was interpreter, replied, speaking in French, “My lord well knows that man, and a little before he took his way to the western countries, the said Joseph ate at the table of my lord the archbishop in Armenia, and he was often seen and held converse with him.”

The Armenians were then asked what had passed between Christ and Joseph, to which they replied that the man had committed his regrettable offense as Christ was on his way to be crucified:
When therefore the Jews were dragging Jesus forth, and had reached the door, Cartaphilus, a porter of the hall in Pilate’s service, as Jesus was going out the door, impiously struck Him on the back with his hand, and said in mockery: “Go quicker, Jesus, go quicker; why do you loiter?” And Jesus looking back on him with a severe countenance said to him, “I am going, and you will wait till I return.”

According to Roger’s account, Cartaphilus (kartos philos, or “dearly loved,” an allusion to St. John the Beloved Disciple, perhaps) is still waiting. At the time of his crime, he was 30 years old, and when he reaches the age of 100, he reverts back, a detail also seen in the earlier Italian version.

The Armenians continue to explain that eventually Cartaphilus was baptized and took the name Joseph. He dwells in Asia Minor, passing his time in holy conversation and attesting to the Bible’s accuracy: his very existence is proof of it. He relates what he witnessed pertaining to Christian history “without smiling or levity of countenance, as one who is well practiced in sorrow and the fear of God, always looking forward with fear to the coming of Jesus Christ. . . . He places his hope of salvation on the fact that he sinned through ignorance.”

Joseph Cartaphilus was apparently popular. The Armenians say he received many visitors, accepting their society but never their gifts. Notably, in this early depiction of the Wandering Jew, the figure more or less stays put, letting those who seek his audience come to him—a stationary missionary.

Matthew Paris, Roger’s successor as the St. Albans chronicler, copied the 1228 entry about Cartaphilus in his Chronica majora, adding a few choice details—for example, when he reaches the age of 100, he suffers a seizure before returning to the age of 30—but not substantially changing the story. What he did do, however, was supply an illustration, the earliest known likeness of the Wandering Jew.
The story Paris’s illustration tells deviates enough from his predecessor’s description that scholar Suzanne Lewis argues the artist must have known other variations of the tale:

The action occurs on the Via Crucis [Way of the Cross, i.e., as Christ carries his cross to his crucifixion]. Christ appears at the right, shouldering the cross. However, the vertical shaft has a spike at the bottom so that it resembles a processional cross, causing the instrument of the Passion to traverse time and space from the Crucifixion in Jerusalem to the medieval present in a visible reflection of the legend’s central temporal juxtapositions. Dressed as a peasant, Cartaphilus hunches over a pickax as he utters the fateful taunting cry, “Vade Jhesu ad iudicium tibi preparatum,” [“Go, Jesus, to the judgment that has been prepared for you”] in a speech which differs from Roger’s text. As his long speech scroll unfurls to touch Christ’s elbow, it appears to assist him momentarily in supporting the arm of the cross. Inscribed on a second scroll extending stiffly to the right, Christ’s response is also at variance with Roger’s text: “Vado sicut scriptum est de me. Tu vero expectabis donee veniam.” [“I will go as it has been written for me. But you will wait until I come.”] Matthew has given Cartaphilus the attribute of Cain, a pickax, perhaps to reinforce the idea of eternal wandering as the punishment by alluding to Cain’s fate in Genesis. Paris’s drawing in the Chronica majora is the earliest known representation of the Wandering Jew and was very probably his original invention, but its sophisticated interpretation, temporal conflations, and allusion to the legend of Cain suggest that the newly invented iconography was based on a richer set of literary traditions than is evident in Wendover’s text.

Paris mentions the Wandering Jew again in 1252. He reports a second visit from the Armenians, who again mention Cartaphilus. They stated they knew “without a doubt” that the man is still living, and that “this is one of the wonders of the world and a great proof of the Christian faith.”

**Medieval Variations**

As Roger of Wendover wrote, at the turn of the thirteenth century the Wandering Jew was “a man of whom there was much talk in the world.” Philippe Mouske, archbishop of Tournai, France, recorded a tale similar to those from St. Albans in his Chronique rimée in 1243; it also features an Armenian archbishop who claims to have met the eternal wanderer. In an Italian variation of the legend, astrologer Guido Bonatti of Forli calls the condemned man Johannes Buttadeus (“Striker of God”) and suggests that his movements were no longer restricted to the Near East: Bonatti saw Buttadeus as he “passed through Forli in the year of our Lord 1267.” Buttadeus apparently was on a pilgrimage to Santiago. Other passing mentions of the legend suggest that it was quite popular throughout Italy in the thirteenth century.

Variations evolved in different regions in the West and East over the next 300 years, coinciding with a continued, pervasive sentiment of anti-Semitism. In one Florentine
version from the mid 1400s, the Wandering Jew (here named Giovanni Bottadio) is a fortune-teller who can stay in one place for only three days; he has a knack for finding forgotten treasure, can turn invisible, and cures the ill. In a tale from 1484, the Fleming Jan Aerts van Mecheln says he voyaged to Jerusalem, where he met a mysterious, naked, long-haired Jewish man by the name of Jan Baudewyn. He is guarded behind nine sets of doors and speaks but once a year—on Good Friday to ask if “the Man on the Cross” has returned yet. Just glancing at him will convince a man to accept the Christian faith. Other Jerusalem-based versions often refer to this man as Malchus.

In Spain and Portugal, the idea that the Wandering Jew was a cobbler was introduced: we first find this detail in Cristobal de Villalon’s 1557 *Crotalon*. In this Spanish variation, we also see the first written hints of the incredulity felt toward men claiming to be Juan Espera en Dios, as the cursed man was known on the Iberian Peninsula. Villalon begins, “Superstitious rascals and vagabonds make out that there was a shoemaker who stood in the ‘Street of Bitterness’ in Jerusalem.” Anderson comments that this points to “a disbelief which later becomes so marked as to make the Wandering Jew an object of low comedy, synonymous with deceit, imposture, and low life.”

Introducing Ahasuerus

While the legend picked up elements from these variations (e.g., the Wandering Jew’s inability to stay put longer than a fixed amount of time; his occupation as a shoemaker), it was the publication of Matthew Paris’s *Chronica Majora* in London (1571) and in Zürich (1582) that prompted what Anderson calls “the most important single milestone in the progress of the Legend of the Wandering Jew”: the *Kurze Beschreibung und Erzählung von einem Juden mit Namen Ahasverus* (henceforth, *Ahasverus*), printed in 1602, authorship unknown. “Had it not been for this pamphlet,” Anderson argues, “it is altogether likely that the Legend, like many another legend of extrascriptual origins, would have trickled out into a sandy desert and have been known only to the antiquarian and the specialist in folklore.” *Ahasverus* became the basis for nearly all of the treatments that followed.

The story of *Ahasverus* takes place in Hamburg in the winter of 1542. Paulus von Eitzen, a doctor and bishop of Schleswig, tells the author that, while he was visiting his parents, he attended church and saw a very tall, barefoot man about 50 years old. He had long hair and, despite the inclement weather, wore nothing but a pair of badly worn trousers and a cloak. When asked, the man said that he had been born in Jerusalem and that his name was Ahasuerus and that he had been a shoemaker. When Jesus was sentenced to death, Ahasuerus had hurried home to watch the procession, which was to pass right by his door. Eitzen recalls what the man said happened next:

He took his little child in his arms and stood before his door, that they might see the Lord Christ go by. Then, when the Lord Christ under his Cross was led by, he leaned for a moment against the Jew’s house. The anger of the Jew rose up more than ever, and with curses he ordered Him to pack and be off to where it
was fitting for Him to go. Then Christ looked sternly at him, and spoke to him with meaning, “I will stand here and rest, but you must walk!”

Immediately the Jew put down his child; he could stay no longer in the house. Rather he had to follow along and see, as it had been ordained him. Afterwards everything came to pass; it was impossible for him to return to the city of Jerusalem and to enter it. His wife, his child, and his relatives he never saw again. Forthwith he went into foreign lands, one after another, until the present time.

A prudent skeptic, Eitzen quizzed Ahasuerus about history, and found the man’s knowledge unparalleled. Furthermore, Ahasuerus could speak all languages. During the doctor’s time in Hamburg, he never witnessed Ahasuerus laugh. The man didn’t eat or drink or talk much, and he said he had no need for money. As with Paris’s Cartaphilus, people came from all around to visit Ahasuerus, some to listen and some to judge. He would suffer their incredulity but never their blasphemy, and he believed God was preserving him “so that the godless and unbelieving may remember the death of Christ, and be turned to repentance.”

The author of Ahasverus claims that he heard similar accounts from other people and that in 1575 ambassadors returning from Spain reported seeing Ahasuerus in Madrid. Ahasuerus was also said to have been seen in Danzig, Poland, in 1599 and Lübeck, Germany, in 1601. He was a man with “soles on his feet so thick that one can measure them with the thickness of two fingers across. They are as hard as horn because of his long walking and traveling.”

The author concludes, “What are we to think of this man? One may be free in his judgment. The works of God are wonderful and inscrutable.” But at the beginning of his account, he calls his text a “strange report of a Jew, born at Jerusalem, named Ahasuerus, who pretends he was present at the crucifixion of Christ.” Indeed, continuing the trend set by Villalon in 1557, most tales that follow offer a disclaimer of sorts. These authors don’t necessarily believe the legend they are promoting—but they believe it their duty to relay what information they have. Toward the end of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, a number of scholars wrote treatises against the myth, for example, a 1723 Frankfurt pamphlet “concerning the Immortal Jew, in which it is shown throughout that in the nature of things he never existed.”

Fact or Fiction?

From the time of its publication, Ahasverus, with its many adaptations and translations, acted as the basis for the legend of the Wandering Jew. It made its way to France, England, Belgium, the Netherlands, and a host of Slavic and Scandinavian nations. In German-speaking countries, he was referred to as der ewige Jude (“the Eternal Jew”), whereas in Romance-speaking countries he retained the earlier established epithet.

Eventually, the myth moved beyond its religious implications and became a subject and central symbol for artists, especially poets, but also novelists, balladeers, and playwrights. Around the turn of the twentieth century, Eugene Sue’s popular 1844 novel
Le juif errant—which introduced Ahasuerus’s sister, the Wandering Jewess, among other things—was the foundation for most people’s knowledge of the Wandering Jew. Many critics (including none other than Edgar Allen Poe) thought it supernatural trash, and most serious folklorists dismissed it out of hand.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the character of the Wandering Jew has been adopted by numerous street artists and lunatics—"imposters," according to Victorian folklorist Sabine Baring-Gould. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, one such supposed mountebank gained notoriety in England. He could list all of the Apostles and describe what they wore. He had a familiarity with foreign tongues and locations and a knowledge of history that amazed his audiences, even the representatives Oxford and Cambridge sent to test him. After wearing out his welcome in England, he apparently moved on to Denmark and then Sweden. Then he vanished. This man, or different "imposters" entirely, resurfaced in England in 1818, 1824, and 1830.

In 1857 New York City, "a sensation was created in William street, by the appearance of a man on the pave with a long floating beard, and dressed in loose pantaloons, with a turban on his head," reported the Deseret News, the first newspaper published in the Utah Territory. The man read from a "little manuscript Hebrew book" and represented himself as the "veritable Wandering Jew." A rabbi came to question him and found him expert in Hebrew, Arabic, Phoenician, and Sanskrit. The short article concludes, "The Rabbi invited him to his house; but, said the stranger, 'Nay, I cannot stop. The Crucified One of Calvary has pronounced the edict, and I must not rest. I must move on—ever on!'

He was last seen on Thursday, but to where he has departed no one can tell."

Eleven years later a "genuine Ahaseurus" was discovered in the village of Harts Corners, a few miles outside New York. The individual, apparently injured and abiding in a shanty, had a long white beard, a "large hooked nose, larger ears, and finger nails about an inch long." When questioned by villagers, he said that "the voice of the only one he loved was silent in the tomb before printing was invented, or America had ever echoed to the cry of liberty," and that he had arrived in the United States from Siberia via the Bering Strait.

The people of Harts Corners thought he was "cracked," but, the journalist reporting on the occurrence wrote, "In his hasty departure on this occasion as he is said to have done on many others, he left a memento by which his identity was fully proven. This time it was an old volume of extracts from the Babylonion [sic] Talmud, in the Hebrew character. On a fly leaf was a short account of his birth, parentage, the sentence of the Savior and his subsequent wanderings, all clearly proving that he was the identical bona fide Wandering Jew." The book was in possession of one Michael O'Grady, who lived a short distance from the shanty. The skeptical author concluded: "By applying to him, any one sufficiently interested may doubtless obtain further details in relation to this—the very 'last sensation;' of course they may!"

As we have seen throughout the history of the legend, what was written down is only part of the Wandering Jew’s story. Clearly from this author’s final remarks, other "sensations" were common in nineteenth-century New York, other appearances of
Ahaseurus that were left unrecorded, perhaps because they were not all that infrequent. This has been true since the days of Roger of Wendover’s 1228 chronicle entry, when Joseph Cartaphilus was a man much talked about in the world. These accounts are merely brief resting points for a legend that is constantly moving, retold by people who view the eternally wandering man as a potent symbol of human weakness and holy power, but also of human resilience in the face of an at times overwhelming existence. And, of course, we cannot discount the possibility that the legend continues to circulate because the Wandering Jew continues to wander—leaving books behind as he goes as proof that he was here.

**SOURCES**

“I Was Here”
Leaving Our Mark Throughout Time

By Shannon Stockwell

No one knows for certain how the practice of writing on walls first started, who the first person was to pick up a sharp tool and scratch something into a rock, who first drew on a cave wall with a burnt piece of wood. We know that the impulse to leave our mark has been around since the dawn of humanity; the evidence can be found on every habitable continent in the world. Some anthropologists believe that cave paintings represent a major turning point in human evolution: this is the moment when we separated ourselves from the rest of the animal kingdom through the mere awareness that we exist.

The oldest surviving cave drawing that has been discovered appears in the cave of El Castillo in Spain. Through carbon dating, archaeologists determined that cavemen made the small red dot and several ghostly outlines of hands 42 thousand years ago. Such hand outlines are a recurring image in prehistoric painting. Anthropologists posit that the artists would place their hands on the wall and spray/spit liquid paint over their hands using their mouths, leaving an outline when they moved their hands away. These are humanity’s first “tags”—symbols that say little more than, “The person who made this symbol was here to make it.”

The preserved walls of Pompeii hold some of the most famous examples of ancient graffiti. Pompeii was a thriving Roman city until 79 CE, when Mount Vesuvius, a volcano about 12 miles from the city, erupted and covered it in a layer of ash. The eruption froze the major cultural hub in time, giving us a unique glimpse into the everyday lives of ancient Romans. Graffiti is abundant on the walls of Pompeii. What is striking is how similar these inscriptions are to what you might find in any modern-day gas station bathroom—a kind of graffiti dubbed “latrinalia” by folklorist Alan Dunde in 1966 (he objected to the term “shithouse poetry,” because not all inscriptions on bathroom walls are composed in verse).

There is Pompeiian graffiti of a sexual nature: “Weep, you girls. My Penis has given you up. Now it penetrates men’s behinds. Goodbye, wondrous femininity!” and “Amphicatus, I know that Icarus is buggering you. Salvius wrote this.” There is graffiti about bathroom-related topics: “Apollinaris, the doctor of the emperor Titus, defecated well here.” There is, of course, graffiti about love: “Lovers are like bees in that they live a honeyed life.” Simple advice also abounds: “A small problem gets larger if you ignore it.”
Additionally, walls were used as a kind of discussion board for fans of Roman gladiators: men and women would write about their favorite fights, draw pictures of their favorite gladiators, and comment on each other’s drawings and messages.

Then there is the simplest kind of graffiti: “Satura was here on September 3.” Often, it is this non-genre of graffiti that gets overlooked in historical accounts and academic analyses. After all, it’s not funny, shocking, or informative. And there is so much of it, ubiquitous in every culture during every time period. “Satura was here on September 3.” We don’t and can’t know anything about Satura, so why study his inscription? Was he poor? Rich? Did he love? Did he have a favorite gladiator? Did he have a family? All that we know is that Satura was there, in Pompeii, on the third day of an unspecified September. On the other hand, we know more about him than those who wrote nothing at all. Because he left his mark, I am writing about him now. Satura lives on two thousand years after he was buried in ash.

Another example of ancient graffiti is found in the basement of a church in Smyrna, in modern-day Turkey. The building was damaged in an earthquake in 178 CE and rebuilt, but the basement, filled with rubble, was left untouched. (As in Pompeii, disaster preserves hints of humanity.) During an archaeological dig in 2003, the basement revealed a layer of plaster covered with large amounts of graffiti, and that layer covered yet another layer of plaster, also covered with graffiti. Most of the graffiti consists of “I was here”-type messages. Remarkably, a large number of them were written in ink, which means that either citizens of the city walked around with a pen and ink all the time (they didn’t), or that the graffiti was premeditated and people brought pen and ink to the basement for the express purpose of writing on these walls. That the marks they left seem insignificant underscores the importance of the act rather than the message, and apparently it was sanctioned, or at least encouraged. The wall acted as life’s guestbook. Unfortunately, much of the graffiti was destroyed during the excavation due to exposure to the elements.
In Orkney, Scotland, there is an ancient chambered cairn (a kind of tomb) known as Maeshowe, which is thought to have been made in 2700 BCE. When it was first excavated in 1861, archaeologists discovered graffiti written in Norse runes on the walls. These runes confirmed the tale told in the *Orkneyinga saga*, written in 1230 CE, which claims that in the eleventh century, a group of Vikings became lost in a snowstorm and found shelter in Maeshowe. While in the cairn, the Vikings left about 30 separate inscriptions. Again, we see similar themes: love and sex (“Ingigerth is the most beautiful of all women” drawn next to a picture of a dog); some descriptions of what may have been the Viking’s purpose (“Crusaders broke into Maeshowe. . . . To the north-west is a great treasure hidden. It was long ago that a great treasure was hidden here. Happy is he that might find that great treasure. Hakon alone bore treasure from this mound”). Mostly, however, the runes consist of those most basic statements: “Tryggr carved these runes.” “Ottarfila carved these runes.” “Benedict made this cross.”

In the eighteenth century, the abundance of latrinalia—which was often humorous and written in verse—inspired a few printed collections. In 1731, a man using the pseudonym Hurlo Thrumbo published a volume called *The Merry-Thought: or the Glass-Window and Bog-House Miscellany*. The book contains several bits of the “best” graffiti found in bathrooms, on windows, and on doors. Most of the items published relate to acts that happened in the bathroom: “Because they cannot eat, some Authors write; / And some, it seems, because they cannot shite” and “Privies are now Receptacles of Wit, / And every Fool that hither comes to shit, / Affects to write what other Fools have writ.” (Indeed, as the poem states, it became customary to copy these odes.) The fact that someone saw fit to collect these musings reinforces the act: if these writers wrote to grasp at some form of immortality, then being published in a book helped them achieve that goal. While several historians believe that graffiti was accepted and possibly encouraged in the past, it was largely looked down upon during the Victorian era, and ordinances were passed in England that for the first time made graffiti a punishable offense.

In the bay to the north of San Francisco, the Angel Island Immigration Station is home to some of the most haunting graffiti found in our country. After the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, it became increasingly impossible for Asians, especially Chinese people, to immigrate to the United States. At the Angel Island station, which was operational from 1910 to 1940, immigrants were kept as prisoners until they could be questioned, often for several months. With little else to do and no other way to express themselves, prisoners carved the wooden walls of their rooms. Many wrote poetry of longing and sorrow, leaving their work unsigned; some left advice to future inmates; others wrote only their name and a date. The guards covered all of it up with putty and paint.

In the cases of both Angel Island and Victorian England, authorities wished to exert control over the human impulse to leave a mark, whether because the act was seen as defacement of public spaces or simply because it was against the rules. The suppression of graffiti only grew stronger throughout the twentieth century, even as graffiti artists grew more prolific.
New York City joined the war on graffiti in the late 1960s, shortly after an inscription reading “TAKI 183” began appearing in all five boroughs of the city. The graffiti was eventually traced to a teenager named Demetrius who lived on West 183rd Street. Often praised as the forefather of modern graffiti, he became a folk hero, spawning emulators and admirers. He was the subject of a 1971 *New York Times* article about the rise of graffiti and the growing cost of removal. While others may have preceded him in tagging their names or pseudonyms around the city, Demetrius became famous because his tag was so ubiquitous (made possible by the fact that he worked as a messenger and traveled all over the city). After Demetrius graduated from high school and left for college, he “retired” and his tag disappeared. He was interviewed several years later about the seemingly political implications of his actions, but he denied them: “We did it because there was nothing else to do, and it was easy to do it.”

While Demetrius may have dismissed his scribbling as a way to pass the time, the act has more serious sociological implications. Some scholars have noted that graffiti seems to be most popular in marginalized or oppressed groups, hypothesizing that those groups have no other means of expressing themselves in a way that will be heard. Sociologists David Ley and Roman Cybriwsky write, “Middle-income Americans have ample opportunity to sublimate their territorial needs, but many of these options are closed to the inner-city dweller. . . . An exotic nickname, a garnished signature, identify a new personality and a space conquered, a mark left.” Graffiti is accessible to a wide range of people—no need to go to art school, no need to be a great writer, no need to actually say anything, but its public location ensures that the graffiti will be seen. All that’s needed is a can of spray paint, a marker, or even one’s keys. These factors make graffiti the perfect medium with which to assert one’s identity in a world where it is usually pushed aside.

Graffiti, therefore, has become a popular form with which to express political opinions. The urban artist Banksy has gained notoriety in recent years due to both his mysterious persona (although his art has been well known for more than a decade,
no one has been able to determine the artist’s identity) and the political and social commentary present in his work. Banksy has called the art of graffiti a form of revenge, a kind of guerilla warfare: “Graffiti is one of the few tools you have if you have almost nothing. And even if you don’t come up with a picture to cure world poverty you can make someone smile while they’re having a piss.” His more famous works depict a masked man preparing to throw a bouquet of flowers as though they were a grenade or a Molotov cocktail, two London policemen kissing, and a young girl holding a bunch of balloons attempting to float over the West Bank barrier.

While not as visually complex as Banksy’s work, are the “I was here” scribblings any less political? Especially when written by a member of a marginalized or oppressed group, this simple, declarative, almost stupidly obvious statement becomes powerful. “Society may ignore me but it cannot ignore this!” they seem to shout. Simply writing “I was here” asserts one’s existence despite all attempts to wash it away or paint over it and pretend it never existed in the first place. And when we consider the uncaring universe, perhaps we are all marginalized, or at least ignored. We all have reason to yell, “I was here!” in whatever way we can.

Today, graffiti and urban art comes in all forms: the now-traditional tags; yarn-bombing (the act of crocheting or knitting around a public fixture such as a fence or a tree); the mainstay of writing in bathroom stalls; intricate, mural-sized pieces covering the sides of buildings; initials carved into trees. Modern technology such as Facebook (where members create their identities on their “walls”), Twitter, and FourSquare can even be understood as a kind of sanctioned graffiti (indeed, journalists have called the Pompeian graffiti “the tweets of antiquity”)—though not necessarily anonymous in the same way that graffiti is, it is still a way to affirm one’s existence. What is “checking in” on FourSquare other than saying, “I am here, at this place at this moment?”

This ancient need to affirm our existence is an intensely, singularly human impulse, stemming from our awareness of and uneasiness about how small we are compared to the rest of the universe. Our desire to overcome our own insignificance manifests itself any way it can: carving the initials of our loved one inside a heart on a tree, tweeting 140 characters about our day, writing our names on a park bench or bathroom stall. An anonymous graffiti artist calling himself “Omar” once explained his tag this way: “How many people can walk through a city and prove they were there? It’s a sign I was here. My hand made this mark. I’m alive!”

1939 New York World’s Fair Time Capsule

For the 1939 World’s Fair in Queens, New York, the Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Company constructed the bullet-shaped Time Capsule I from an alloy made of tempered copper, chromium, and silver. Its contents, sealed snugly inside an airtight glass envelope, were selected based on how well they captured American life at the time. It contains items in five different categories: “Small articles of common use,” “Textiles and materials,” “Miscellaneous items,” “An essay in microfilm,” and “Newsreel.” It is to be opened in five thousand years, in the year 6939.

Baedeker’s Travel Guide

Coinciding with the expansion of travel via railway and steamship, Baedeker’s Travel Guide was established by German publisher Verlag Karl Baedeker in 1827. The first guide of its kind, focusing on the “practical needs” of the traveler and guaranteeing a high degree of accuracy, it became hugely popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Kings and governments may err, but never Mr. Baedeker,” Jacques Offenbach wrote in his operetta La vie Parisienne. Baedeker’s remains in print to this day; its current promotional catchphrase is “Knowledge opens worlds.”

Bonn Trip

The foundations of the city of Bonn, Germany, predate even the Wandering Jew: the fortress Bonna was first mentioned in the writings of the Roman Florus around 10 BCE; it was destroyed around 69 BCE. Bonn Castle was destroyed by Norman attacks around 880 CE. After making it through the Thirty Years’ War relatively unscathed, the city was almost completely destroyed during the war with the Netherlands in 1689. After World War I, Bonn was occupied by Allied troops from 1918 to 1926; in 1944–45 during World War II, bomb attacks devastated much of the city center, after which the city was occupied by American troops. Bonn was the de facto capital of West Germany from 1949 until German reunification in 1990, when the Berlin Wall was torn down. Bonn lies about 375 miles southwest of Berlin. Potsdamer Platz, where the Librarian’s suspected Wandering Jew supposedly boarded a tram in 1912, is a roundabout...
in Nordstadt, a northern district of Bonn. (It is not nearly as impressive as the incredibly busy railway station by the same name in Berlin, which introduced Europe’s first traffic lights in 1924.) Wittelsbach, where the tram conductor threw off the Wandering Jew, could be a reference to Wittelsbacherring Street, about a mile away from Potsdamer Platz. The world’s first electric tram line opened in Berlin in 1881.

Brisbane, Australia
Brisbane is the capital and most populous city in the state of Queensland; it is the third most populous city in Australia.

Buchenwald
Established in 1937, Buchenwald was one of the largest concentration and forced labor camps within the original German borders; in fact, it was a system of camps surrounding a main facility. Buchenwald was operational through the end of World War II in 1945. While it was open, the camp saw about 250 thousand prisoners from around Europe; at least 56 thousand male prisoners were killed, 11 thousand of them Jewish men. Starting in 1941, it was also home to a varied program of medical experimentation—including hormone transplants to “cure” homosexual inmates.

Buck Dance
A buck dance is a kind of clogging, but with extra kicks, stomps, and taps to generate more sounds per beat. Importantly, it is a solo dance: dancers step to their own rhythm rather than attempting to synchronize with those around them. The buck dance was invented, or at least greatly influenced, by African American slaves and popularized by minstrel performers during the late nineteenth century.

Cetewayo, King of the Zulus
Cetshwayo (sometimes transliterated as Cetewayo) kaMpande was the last king of an independent Zulu nation (South Africa) from 1872 through 1879. In 1879 he was defeated by Great Britain in the Anglo-Zulu War and exiled to Cape Town; his kingdom was divided among 13 chiefs.

China Trip
In Lintel, the Librarian’s hunt takes him to Dingtao, near Kaifeng, in China. Dingtao is an ancient county of Heze, the westernmost city of the Shandong province. The county is reputedly named after Fan Li, a famous royal advisor during the first millennium BCE, who later became a wealthy tycoon; translated, Dingtao means “where Fan Li lives.” Dingtao lies along what once were important trade routes and is about 90 miles east of Kaifeng, which is one of the Seven Ancient Capitals of China. The bustling metropolis along the legendary Silk Road served as the capital for 166 years, beginning in 960 CE, during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE). Located in the Henan Province, Kaifeng is known for having one the oldest Jewish communities in China, established when the city was the capital. During the national turmoil of the transition from the Tang Dynasty to the Song Dynasty, many communities were displaced. After order was restored, the Song emperor
invited refugees to return; among those who accepted his invitation was a Jewish community, which was granted audience in the imperial palace. The emperor accepted a tribute of cotton goods from the group, saying, “You returned to my China. Honor and observe the customs of your ancestors,” which some scholars believe represents the formal start of the Jewish community in Kaifeng. To this day, several hundred Kaifeng residents consider themselves members of the House of Israel, despite the fact that they have had no rabbi for two centuries, no synagogue for several generations, and remember essentially nothing of the faith and traditions of their ancestors.

While in China, the Librarian has a stopover in Beijing, which is about four hundred miles north of Dingtao, where he notes that the locals keep crickets as pets. Crickets and other song-making insects have long been associated with luck in Chinese culture; their songs were associated with springtime farming. They were kept as pets as early as 770 BCE during the Chun Qui period. During the Song Dynasty, cricket fighting became a popular recreational pastime. The Librarian’s musing about crickets makes him think of the 1887 flood in Honan. China has had a particularly long and terrible history of flooding, but it is the Hwang Ho (or Yellow River) that has been responsible for the most catastrophic incidents, so much so that westerners have dubbed the river “China’s Sorrow.” In 1887 flooding killed nearly two million people; in 1931 the death toll was almost four million; and in 1938 it was almost one million. The Librarian is probably referring to Henan Province; when the dikes failed in 1887, 50 thousand square miles of Henan, including 11 large towns and hundreds of villages, were under water.

Doughboy
Doughboy was a common nickname for U.S. soldiers that came into use during the Mexican-American War of 1846–47 and gained popularity during World War I. Its origins are unclear.

Edison Cylinder
The Edison cylinder is a device used for recording sound invented by Thomas Edison in 1877; the inventor showed it off to the New York staff of Scientific American, according to a December 22, 1877, report: “Mr. Thomas A. Edison recently came into this office, placed a little machine on our desk, turned a crank, and the machine inquired as to our health, asked how we liked the phonograph, informed us that it was very well, and bid us a cordial good night.” The device records sound by etching patterns of vibrations onto a cylinder covered in wax or foil. The technology was outdated by 1908, when many recording companies started using discs; Edison finally gave up on cylinders in 1913.

Funnel-Shaped Hat
In the early Middle Ages, a distinctive feature of Jewish dress was the Judenhut, a tall pointed or funnel-shaped hat, usually yellow. Its use was widespread among Jewish men throughout northern and western Europe, so much so that it became a Jewish symbol, displayed on Hebrew manuscripts, seals, and coats of
arms. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, distinctive Jewish dress became a symbol of oppression. To ensure that they would be distinguishable from Christians, the governments of France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and others forced Jewish men and women to wear badges, usually a yellow or red round or ring-shaped piece of fabric.

**Goggle box**

Goggle box is British slang for a television set.

**Helen Shattock**

No reports of a Helen Shattock being killed by a frozen block of urine falling from an airplane can be found, but urban myths about airplanes dumping waste while in the sky have been circulating since at least the 1980s. These stories purport that the waste, exposed to the sub-zero temperatures that occur at high altitudes, freezes instantly as it plummets to the earth. In response to several worried calls from people who believed that they had been hit by this “blue ice,” the Federal Aviation Administration released a fact sheet explaining that, yes, blue ice exists (it comes from tubes leaking the dark blue chemical used to deodorize waste), but by the time that it reaches the earth, it has melted and dissipated so as to be completely imperceptible to the human eye. “Lavatory waste is contained in a holding tank until the aircraft lands. Manufacturers take great care to ensure this holding tank is secure. The apparatus to access the tank is located on the exterior of the plane. It’s physically impossible for a pilot to dump a tank while in flight. That exterior lever means only the ground crew can operate the valve that opens the tank while the plane is on the ground.”

**Hobson’s Choice**

A Hobson’s choice gives the appearance of selection among differing options when there actually is none. Thomas Hobson (1545–1631) ran a thriving horse
rental business in Cambridge, England, renting mainly to students from Cambridge University. He refused to let his customers choose their own horses; instead, he obliged each to take the horse nearest the stable door. Hobson’s choice—“this or none”—was proverbial as early as 1660, perhaps because his learned clientele traveled far and wide, spreading his fame as they went.

Holy Scamander

Scamander was the god of the largest river in the plain of Troy, and was reputably the ancestor of that great city’s kings. He was an enemy of Achilles and the Greeks.

In situ

A Latin phrase literally meaning “in position,” in situ is used in many scientific fields. In archaeology, it refers to an artifact that has not been moved from its original place of deposition, which is essential to accurately understanding what that artifact has to say about the culture from which it came.

Job

The Book of Job in the Bible tells the story of Job, a man whose faith in God is tested when Satan (with God’s permission) brings on a series of tragedies. Job never renounces God, but in the end God still questions him: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you possess understanding! ... Who shut up the sea with doors when it burst forth, coming out of the womb, when I made the storm clouds its garment, and thick darkness its swaddling band, when I prescribed its limits, and set in place its bolts and doors, when I said, ‘To here you may come and no farther, here your proud waves will be confined?’ Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, or made the dawn know its place, that it might seize the corners of the earth, and shake the wicked out of it?’” The Librarian recalls the highlighted line, in which God explains how he holds back the oceans, when he is gazing up at the “unreachable” stars outside Brisbane.

Kilroy

Kilroy is a figure in simple cartoon drawings, seen peeking over what appears to be a wall with the words “Kilroy was here” next to it. This version of the cartoon seems to have originated during World War II and became a popular form of graffiti, appearing in unusual places, including the top of the Statue of Liberty. One probable origin of the phrase “Kilroy was here” was explained in 1946, when the American Transit Association hosted a contest to find the original author of the phrase (the prize was a trolley car). Many men came forward, but only James J. Kilroy (1902–62) of Quincy, Massachusetts, had evidence linking him to the meme. He was a welding inspector at the Bethlehem Steel shipyard during World War II who wrote “Kilroy was here” to mark the completion of his inspections; the ships then went out unpainted, so soldiers often saw the unexplained name during their deployments. To some, it was a lucky talisman. The cartoon, originally a separate entity from the name “Kilroy,” began as the English Mr. Chad, who often found himself attached to “WOT! No____?” lines (e.g., “WOT!
No Petrol?”); it was a humorous way of bringing attention to serious shortages and rationing during World War II. The exact origins of Mr. Chad are unclear, but many suggest that the drawing is linked to a diagram representing an electric circuit. It began circulating in the early 1940s. No one knows how Kilroy and Mr. Chad teamed up.

**London Trip**

On the Librarian’s trip to London, he visits a number of popular locations for tourists. He watches the *changing of the guard* outside Buckingham Palace. He goes to the Bloody Tower, another name for the Tower of London, which was built in the 1220s; it gained its gruesome name because it is thought to be the place where the sons of King Edward IV were murdered by Richard, duke of Gloucester. And he visits what remains of the Roman Wall, also known as the London Wall, a three-mile-long defensive barrier built by Romans in 200 BCE. He finds the Chinese laundry he is looking for on Holloway Road, one of the main shopping streets in North London; the road dates back to at least the 1300s.

**Lord Harry**

“By the Lord Harry” is a mild British oath referring to the devil.

**Les misérables**

The 1984 musical created by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil is adapted from the 1862 epic novel by Victor Hugo. The multicharacter story is set in nineteenth-century France and spans 17 years, culminating in the June Rebellion in Paris of 1832. The musical, which premiered on Broadway in 1987, has been translated into 21 languages, has been performed in 42 countries, and has received more than one hundred major theater awards, including an Olivier and a Tony.

**Mount Perboewaten**

Mount Perboewaten is a volcanic mountain on the Indonesian island of Krakatau. On August 26, 1883, the volcano sent an ash cloud 20 miles into the air, and the resulting tremors triggered several tsunamis. The next day, there were four major eruptions, the last of which made the loudest sound ever recorded: it could be heard three thousand miles away. The eruption completely destroyed the northern two-thirds of the island and killed more than 36 thousand people. At that time, Krakatau was a Dutch colony.

**National Trust**

The National Trust of England, established in 1884, is a charitable organization that restores and protects cultural and environmental treasures of the country.

**The Netherlands**

The Librarian lives in Hoofddorp, Holland, an unremarkable town, founded in 1853, just outside Amsterdam and very near the airport. *Hoofddorp* translates into English as “main village.” It has several bibliotheken (libraries) where the Librarian might work. He says that he has rarely left his town, but he once made a trip to Gouda, about 30 miles away. In addition to hosting its centuries-old
cheese market every Thursday, the city of Gouda also has a Cheese and Crafts Museum and a number of dairy farms that are open to the public. The Librarian also mentions Rotterdam, which is the second-largest city in the Netherlands, boasting one of the largest ports in the world; it is often referred to as the “Gateway to Europe.”

Pesach Meal
Pesach is the Hebrew word for the Jewish holiday Passover, a celebration of the Jews’ liberation from slavery in Egypt. The holiday lasts for eight days, beginning with a traditional seder (feast) on the first night. The Pesach feast incorporates the eating of bitter herbs, charoset (a sweet paste made from fruits and nuts), parsley or celery, roasted lamb, and a hard-boiled egg—all symbols of the Exodus. The Last Supper was a Pesach meal, which is what the Librarian is alluding to when he recounts the legend of the Wandering Jew; like Jesus himself, the Jewish cobbler would have also celebrated Passover the night before he offended Jesus on his way to Golgotha, also called Calvary, the skull-shaped hill where Jesus was crucified.

Photostat [sic]
Photostat is an older term for photocopy, derived from the name of the early projection photocopier on which copies were once made. The Photostat was invented in 1907.

Tales of the Wandering Jew
The Librarian could be referring to Brian Stableford’s Tales of the Wandering Jew: A Collection of Contemporary and Classic Stories, which was first published in 1991.

Thomas Wright and the Lord of Derby
Derby is the United Kingdom’s most central city, 130 miles north of London. There is no record of a Thomas Wright working in the employ of the Lord of Derby from 1720 to 1754, but one of the city’s famous sons is painter Joseph Wright (1734–97). He finished Earthstopper on the Banks of the Derwent in 1773; it depicts a man blocking foxholes at nighttime beside the River Derwent in Derbyshire. This painting appears to be playwright Glen Berger’s inspiration for Thomas Wright’s account of the Wandering Jew in Lintel.

Tiberius
Tiberius Claudius Nero (42 BCE–37 CE) was Roman emperor from 14 CE to 37 CE. Coins from the time of Tiberius are
significant because they are mentioned in the New Testament Book of Luke. Pharisee spies ask Jesus whether one should pay taxes to the emperor. Jesus replies, “Show me a denarius [coin]. Whose image and inscription are on it?” The spies reply, “The emperor’s.” To which Jesus concludes, “Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Vending Machine Deaths

A study done by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission in 1995 found that, between 1978 and 1995, there were at least 35 deaths and 117 injuries caused by people tilting, rocking, or jiggling vending machines in attempts to retrieve stuck items or unreturned change. After this study, several vending machine companies began printing warning labels telling people not to juggle the machines, which can weigh up to one thousand pounds.

The Wandering Minstrel

There is an 1834 play called The Wandering Minstrel, by London playwright Henry Mayhew (1812–87), but no plays could be found by that title that could have been performed in Holland in 1777. This does not mean one did not exist.

“When It’s Night-time in Italy”

The song “When It’s Night-time in Italy It’s Wednesday Over Here” was composed by James Kendis with lyrics by Lew Brown. Billy Jones recorded it in 1923—not April 1904 as the Librarian in Lintel believes, at which time Jones would have been 15. Jones made his recording debut in 1918; he teamed up with Ernie Hare in 1920 to create The Happiness Boys, and they sang popular tunes, mostly light fare and comic songs, including “When It’s Night-time in Italy.” The Wandering Jew would have been attracted to this song for a number of reasons in addition to its jaunty tune. Its lyrics have an international flavor and feature a protagonist looking for answers about the world:

There was a Rah-Rah-Rah-Rah college boy threw all his books away. / He said, “I've lost my appetite, my hair is turning grey. / I know my Greek and History, and Latin is a pie, / But if East is East and West is West, then won't you tell me why:

When it’s night-time in Italy it’s Wednesday over here. / When it’s fish day in Germany, / You can’t get shaved in Massachusetts. / How high is up? I'd like to know / How low is down? And when will we have snow? / There are people who hesitate, but corned-beef makes them cheer / When it's night-time in Italy it's Wednesday over here.” . . .

I saw a Chinaman / Fight a Scandinavian. / Up stepped an Englishman, and said, “I'd like to speak. / Why kick this man around? / Why strike him when he's down? / Just hit him with a hammer and then bite him on his cheek!”

Up stepped an Irish cop / Who said, “This fight will have to stop. / I'd like to know what the scrap is all about.” / They said,
“When we tell you, / It will drive you nutty too.” / And so they held the traffic up while they tried to figure out.

YIVO Institute for Jewish Research
The YIVO Institute was founded in 1925 in Eastern Europe in an effort to document and study Jewish culture, language, and literature. In 1940, during World War II, the institute was able to move to New York, becoming the only pre-Holocaust institution that survived World War II and a move to the States. It houses an archive of more than 385 thousand books and periodicals and 24 million documents, photos, recordings, and films.

Zabludow
A shtetl (small Jewish town) in Poland, Zabludow was first settled in 1522 along the Lithuanian border. By 1897, the thriving Jewish population numbered 2,621, representing 68 percent of the town’s population. After 1905, however, emigration to other countries, such as China and the United States, swelled with people fleeing anti-Semitic pogroms—violent attacks on Jewish people with the purpose of wreaking havoc and demolishing communities—during the Russian Revolution. The Revolution of 1905 was set off by a sharp downturn in public opinion of the Russian autocracy in response to the disastrous Russo-Japanese War. On January 9, 1905, troops opened fire on protesters calling for governmental reform from Tsar Nicholas II—what is now known as Bloody Sunday. This incident threw the country into turmoil. Right-wing politicians promoted the idea that Jewish agitators were responsible for the uprising against the government, an idea exacerbated by anti-Semitic newspapers.

After Poland gained independence in 1918, the Jewish population of Zabludow began to rise again, and in 1939, many Jewish refugees from other parts of Poland arrived, seeking asylum from the Nazis. The Nazis invaded the town in June 1941, burning down the town center and the synagogue. The Jewish townspeople were forced into ghettos and taken to extermination camps; none returned to Zabludow after World War II.

Zebrina Pendula
Tradescantia zebrina—formerly known as Zebrina pendula and commonly referred to as wandering Jew and sometimes inch plant—is a very popular trailing plant native to Mexico. It is commonly grown as a groundcover and in hanging baskets. It has tiny lavender-purple flowers.
Questions to Consider

1. Is the journey of the Librarian about more than catching up with the Wandering Jew? Why is this legend attractive to him? What themes and ideas does the playwright explore using the legend of the Wandering Jew?

2. At what point in the performance does the Librarian’s “lecture” imperceptibly turn into “theater”? How does the scenic design help facilitate that transition?

3. Playwright Glen Berger begins his plays with music as his inspiration. How is *Underneath the Lintel* reminiscent of the klezmer music that inspired it? How does the production use music to help tell the story?

4. In what ways do people say, “I was here”?

5. In his interview, Berger talks about a very strong memory he has of taking a walk with his father. What strong memories of fairly ordinary occurrences do you have? Are these moments perhaps more extraordinary than you realized at the time? In what ways did these moments shape who you have become?

For Further Information . . .


