

# In 'Mrs. Stern' and 'Racecar,' Humans Keep Repeating Their Worst Mistakes

Pernicious patterns figure heavily in two thought-provoking plays on small Manhattan stages.

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Inside the jail cell, the police officer is registering his freshly arrested prisoner — a young Jewish woman suspected of political criminality. It is 1933 in Berlin, where determining who belongs and who doesn't is of paramount concern to the government. So he inquires about her birthplace (Germany) and her parents' (same). And her parents' parents'.

“My father's family lived in Königsberg for 200 years,” she tells him.

“Oh!” he says, not unpleasantly. “And before that?”

Jenny Lyn Bader's play “Mrs. Stern Wanders the Prussian State Library,” at WP Theater, is inspired by real events. The married woman of the title is better known as the writer Hannah Arendt, who was indeed arrested in 1933, before she fled Germany.

Directed by Ari Laura Kreith, “Mrs. Stern” is one of two thought-provoking plays on small Manhattan stages in which pernicious patterns figure heavily. Watching Bader’s drama, though, the repetition is evident not in the text but in global trends — in every nation that has embraced some strain of nativism or clamped down on freedom of expression, association, inquiry.

Hannah (Ella Dershowitz) has been hauled in for allegedly making the Nazis look bad: mimeographing antisemitic statements and imagery published in German newspapers for a Zionist group to disseminate abroad. A librarian reported her. Now Hannah, with her agile intellect, aims to unlock the humanity in Karl (Brett Temple), the police officer, and thereby free herself.

In this well-acted, precisely calibrated production by Luna Stage, she jokes, she flatters, she takes advantage of assumptions about female naïveté. Painting herself as dreamily curious and irreproachably truthful, she introduces moral doubt that smudges the crisp corners of Karl’s certainty. She plays him, really, but what she appeals to is his decency — his capacity for loving his neighbor as himself. A low priority, historically, once fascism rears its head.