

Joshua Sobol

By Steven Dedalus Burch

Biography:

Joshua (Yehoshua) Sobol was born in Tel Mond, an agricultural village close to Tel Aviv in then Palestine in 1939. His father was a Russian agronomist, his mother from Poland, and his grandmother, whose home he grew up in, a Zionist and a former Bundist. His early career included writing and publishing short stories written during his experience as a member of Kibbutz Shamir. In 1965 he went to Paris and studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, returning to Israel as a teacher after his graduation in 1970.

In 1971, his first produced play, *The Days to Come*, premiered at the Haifa Theater, home to most of his plays for the next sixteen years. Politically leftist and sharply critical of his government, Sobol has caused several controversies with his outspoken views, expressed not only in interviews and in essays, but in his plays where he frequently dramatizes historical events and characters in order to address moral and political questions of current Israeli life.

The Vilna Trilogy:

In 1984, *Ghetto*, the first of his Vilna Trilogy, premiered in Haifa and then received a hugely successful production at the Volkstheater in Berlin under the direction of Peter Zadek. Since then, it has been seen around the world in more than sixty productions and brought Sobol numerous best play awards from Germany, Japan, England (the coveted Olivier Award), and most recently, Chicago (the Jefferson Award for best production). It has also brought vociferous complaints from many audiences disturbed by the play's painful portrait of Jews attempting to survive the Nazis at seemingly any cost.

In the Vilna Trilogy (*Ghetto*, 1984, *Adam*, 1989, *Underground*, 1991) Sobol attempts nothing less than to put an entire society on stage through interrogating the memories of its survivors and to examine that society's response to the moral cataclysm commonly called the Holocaust. Using historical fact, diaries, and the first-hand recollection of survivors from the Vilna Ghetto, Sobol explores what he perceives as the central moral question of that time and, by extension, our own as well: how any individual can choose good when choosing good over evil is not an option. In the plays' central linking character, Jakob Gens (c.1899-1943), the historical leader of the Vilna Ghetto, Sobol "creates" one of the most emotionally and morally complex roles in the modern theatre. And Sobol's trilogy, with its extraordinary stagecraft demands, incisive characterizations, and troubling morality, may yet come to be recognized as one of the true landmarks in the theatre of our time.

Vilna had a Jewish population before World War II of over 70,000, which constituted the largest single ethnic bloc of the city. This community had existed and flourished since the end of the fifteenth century and it was renowned as the Jerusalem of Lithuania for its wide cultural life, many rabbinical scholars, and centers of Talmudic learning. But by the time of the Nazi invasion in the summer, 1941, there were no recognized Jewish organizations to deal with this invasion. Beginning in July, 1941, the Germans began kidnapping Jewish men from the streets and their homes. Officially reported as being sent to work camps, these men were in reality taken to Ponar, a popular picnic area just outside the city limits, where they (and later women and children) were shot in a continuous series of mass slayings. These executions were not known among

the majority of the Jewish population at the time. By the time the slayings became public knowledge, it was too late.

During the first week of September, 1941, six wounded women escaped to Vilna from the pits at Ponar and were secretly taken to the Jewish hospital in Zawalna Street. There they told their stories of being led blindfolded to the pits and shot. Fearing reprisals if the Germans heard about the survivors, the hospital personnel, along with police chief Jakob Gens, kept the stories secret. But very shortly after this, wide-spread ongoing *Aktionen* by the Nazi *Einsatzkommando* succeeded in the liquidation of over 50,000 men, women, and children (mostly at Ponar) and herded the remaining 20,000 Jews into two small ghettos.

A Jewish council (*Judenrat*) was established in the ghetto, but was formally dissolved by the Germans on July 10, 1942 and full power transferred to the head of the Jewish police, Gens. During the two years of its existence, until the ghetto was liquidated on September 20, 1943, an extraordinary attempt was made by several individuals and hastily set-up organizations to save the remaining Jews from extermination by bullet, starvation, and disease. It is in this two-year period, from the women survivors' escape from Ponar to the liquidation of the ghetto, that Sobol sets the action of his three plays.

Ghetto (1984) addresses the formation of a Ghetto theatre; *Adam* (1989) recounts the horror of the day when the ghetto's inhabitants were persuaded to surrender the leader of the underground resistance to the Nazis; and *Underground* (1991) dramatizes the work of the hospital wards which, under the auspices of false documents, secretly treated cases of typhus and illegal pregnancy. All three are presented through the troubled memories

of three of the Vilna Ghetto's former inhabitants: the lone survivor of the theatre company, the mistress of a resistance leader, and a homeless psychotic.

In *Ghetto*, as Jewish bodies were perishing under Nazi torture, an almost quixotic attempt was made by several people to salvage the Jewish soul by preserving Jewish culture through the formation of a theatre company who would perform skits, musical numbers, and full-scale dramas for the ghetto's inhabitants and, occasionally, the Nazis. Sobol intersperses his community's story with various songs and skits from the historical theatre's actual repertoire, creating a highly theatrical play within a play as the ghetto theatre's performers were able to mix satirical commentary on their situation within their musical numbers. Noting the play's affinities with Brecht's epic theater and the German satirical cabaret of the 1920s, Yael Feldman acknowledges that the "impact of the original ghetto songs and the sketches of musical review, staged as they are within the horror of liquidation, is nothing less than chilling" (Feldman, "Identification With the Aggressor" 166).

The play introduces five figures from the historical files of the Vilna Ghetto. Preeminent among them was the Jewish chief of police, Jakob Gens, who had become the head of the ghetto when the Germans disbanded the Judenrat and transferred its power to him. *Ghetto* also dramatizes the collaboration by Gens and the Jewish police in the liquidation of Oshmyany, a smaller ghetto in a suburb outside of Vilna, and in the hanging of six Jewish criminals for a murder committed during a robbery in the ghetto. The remaining four characters are Hermann Kruk, the Bundist librarian who at first opposed the formation of a theatre company (and whose actual diary provided much first-hand information for Sobol); Hans Kittel, the music-loving Nazi officer who directly

carried out the orders of liquidation; Weiskopf (no first name is given), a tailor who convinced Kittel and other Nazis to let him open a factory to restore uniforms for German soldiers; and Srulik (Israel Segal), a ventriloquist (whose response to an unseen interviewer's question about the very last performance of the theatre company provides the play with its narrative frame).

According to Sobol, Gens' attachment to the principle of preserving Jewish culture at a time when the ghetto was being slowly destroyed came from his "conviction that normalization and productivization . . . were the key to saving as many people as possible [and he] regarded the theatre not only as a source of livelihood and employment for the actors but also as an invaluable emotional outlet which would boost morale and help to normalize ghetto life" ("A Theatre in the Wilna Ghetto" 228). In the question of morale, Gens was quickly proven to be right. No fewer than 111 performances were given in the first year, and from January, 1942, when the ghetto's theatre opened to the liquidation in September, 1943, the ghetto's population of twenty thousand people had bought seventy thousand tickets.

Over the objections of the Bundists, especially Kruk, who attempted to stop the cultural activity by displaying banners and handbills declaring "No theatre in a graveyard" and "No concerts in a graveyard," Gens pushed through his plans for a vigorous renewal of cultural life in the ghetto and in the course of the play succeeded in finally winning over many to his viewpoint, including Kruk. But along with this robust cultural activity, Gens also ruled the ghetto as an autocrat, attempting to stave off the coming extermination by convincing the Nazis that it was in their interest to keep the ghetto alive and productive during the war. The way that Gens bought time from the

Germans (for he was convinced that Germany was losing the war) was to “collaborate” in the liquidation of the population through negotiation, consortment, and bribery. When groups of Jews were demanded for execution or removal to the camps, Gens frequently reduced their numbers by weeding out the elderly, the infirm, the criminal.

When he could not bargain, he resorted to trickery. Sobol dramatizes (*Ghetto* 181-182) one such occasion when in 1941 the Germans ordered all inhabitants of the ghetto to register. With yellow certificates, Jews could work and their families were issued blue tickets. But the tickets only recognized four members per family: husband, wife, two children. In November another round-up occurred requiring all Jews without certificates and tickets to be deported. As families passed through the ghetto gate, Gens stood and supervised the removal of Jews without certificates. As related by Kruk with a grudging astonishment, a family of five came through and Gens hit one of the boys with a cane and separated him from the family. Savage indignation swept through the crowd. Then a family of three passed through. Gens stopped them and berated the father of this family for failing to keep track of all his sons, and pushed the other family’s boy into this group, causing Kruk to sardonically observe, “And Jakob Gens, the Jewish Jew-killer, saves another child” (Sobol, *Ghetto* 182).

Gens’ policy was ruthless but simple: save as many Jews as he could by whatever means at his disposal; delay the implementation of the final liquidation; and hope that the Russians would arrive before that fateful day.

Driven as he was by a profound sense of compassion for his people, Gens was ruthless against those who threatened to undermine the entire scheme. In June, 1942, his police hanged six men in the ghetto. Five had been convicted of murder during the

course of a robbery, an incident Sobol recreates in the second act of *Ghetto*. The sixth had merely stabbed a policeman who recovered from his wound. But this sixth man was a Gestapo informer and Gens took the opportunity of ridding the ghetto of a lethal troublemaker (Tushnet, *Pavement of Hell* 172).

On still another occasion a partisan was discovered at the ghetto gate to have a revolver and, in a panic, shot and killed one of the Jewish policemen, Gens personally pursued him and shot him to death. Yet Gens was also respectful toward the partisan underground movement, tacitly approving their activities while keeping the peace. After his police caught partisan member Moshe Shutan, Gens taunted him by asking how many dozens of Jews of the ghetto's 20,000 inhabitants the partisans would save. Interviewed on film four decades later, Shutan reflected, "His [Gens'] arguments - given his point of view - left me helpless. I couldn't argue with him" (*Partisans of Vilna*). Gens then issued Shutan a work permit and allowed him to rejoin his resistance group in the forest.

On September 14, 1943, Gens was arrested, accused of aiding the partisans (he had covered their escape into the forest through an elaborate ploy of organizing mass deportations of the ghetto inhabitants to work camps in Estonia), and was executed the same day. The day before, he was warned what the Germans were planning to do to him and was advised to flee the ghetto. Fearful of German reprisal against the remaining inhabitants of the ghetto in retaliation for his escape, he refused (Tushnet 196, Arad 425). Nine days later on September 23, 1943 the ghetto was liquidated. Between mass executions at Ponar and transfers to the death camp at Majdanek and to labor camps in Estonia, only 2-3,000 of the ghetto's original inhabitants survived.

From the ghetto's beginning, Gens' policies made him enemies, yet many believed in him and felt that, hard though his way was, he was doing his best to save as many Jews as he could. Gens instilled a 'Work to Live' ideology and, even though opposed by the FPO (Fareinikte Partizaner Organizatzia, or United Partisans' Organization), it is presented sympathetically by Sobol and historians Arad and Tushnet among others as a sound strategy, despite its ultimate failure. Still, hatred for Gens and his seeming complicity with the Nazis was intense if not wide-spread within the ghetto. In 1942 a remarkable "trial" was held at one of the school clubs Gens had helped organize. The historical figure of King Herod the Great was placed on trial, with students acting as prosecutor and defender before a court made up of scholars. Fifteen-year-old diarist Yitskhok Rudashevski was chosen to prosecute and in his diary, as well as in his brief, he clearly analogized Herod, the corrupt Jewish ruler of imperial Rome, with Gens. Of what Gens felt or said about the trial, there appears to be no record. But Gens knew full well how he appeared to many in the ghetto. At a literary gathering to award a prize to a novelist and a poetess, Gens gave a remarkable speech, acknowledging that in his efforts to save as many Jews as possible, he stood before them willingly with blood on his hands: "And in order to save even a small part of the Jewish people, I alone had to lead others to their deaths. And in order to ensure that you go out with clear consciences I have to forget mine and wallow in filth" (Tushnet 169-70).

Sobol uses a large portion of this speech to end the second act of *Ghetto*. By this point in the play we've seen Gens bribe the enemy, procure prostitutes, and host an orgy for the Germans, begin the theatre company, hang Jewish criminals, bully his Jewish opposition and threaten them with reprisal, and set up factories for Jewish and German

mercenaries. At this point in the play he is drunk and alone on stage. It is to us in the audience that he addresses these extraordinary words, taunting us with our easy and speedy judgment. And of course we will judge him. History and Sobol's play demand it. But Sobol and the historical Gens also demand that we examine our "clear consciences." In the play, Gens' final words to the speech are a taunt to his audience: "A clean conscience for Jakob Gens? I couldn't afford one!" (Sobol, *Ghetto* 203) As if, Sobol is saying, we can.

A respectful but uneasy relationship between Gens and the resistance reached a crisis on July 15-16, 1943, in a betrayal remembered afterward as Witenberg Day. Slightly fictionalized by Sobol as the core event of the second play of the trilogy, *Adam*, this historical crisis occurred when a minor Communist Party activist, after arrest and torture by the Gestapo, named Isaac Witenberg the head of the FPO, the partisan resistance group. Fearful that this would bring on the liquidation that he had feared for so long, Gens called a secret meeting of the leaders of the FPO. As the meeting progressed, Gens' Jewish police entered and arrested Witenberg, but within minutes, as Witenberg was being led to jail, the resistance mobilized and rescued him, whereupon he went into hiding.

At first, the remaining resistance leaders were convinced that Gens had betrayed them to the Germans and would not listen to Gens' explanation. Knowing that this rescue would surely bring the Gestapo into the ghetto and that the Nazis would seek reprisals as well, Gens hastily called a public meeting. At the top of his voice Gens asked the crowd if the safety of the ghetto should be imperiled because of one man. The crowd yelled back to give Witenberg up and save the ghetto. Chaos ensued as the crowd began

to rush around the ghetto searching for the hidden Witenberg. Finally, Gens convinced the leaders that the Gestapo had no information about the resistance, that this was not a conspiracy against them, and that if they gave up Witenberg, Gens would do everything in his power to free him. After a long night of painful reflection and recrimination, the leaders asked Witenberg to give himself up. He did and was taken into custody and presumably tortured. The next day, he was found dead from poisoning, most likely cyanide potassium. According to Yitzhak Arad's history of the Vilna Ghetto, Gens had supplied Witenberg with the poison just prior to Witenberg's surrender (Arad, *Ghetto in Flames* 393), a scene dramatized by Sobol in *Adam* in which the two men grimly share their hope that the ghetto can be kept alive for just another four or five months (Sobol, *Adam* 329).

In his introductory essay to *Adam*, Michael Taub remarks that Gens' seeming collaboration with the Nazis and his moral ambiguity are seen by an idealist in the first play as reprehensible, but that Sobol is attempting to contest a range of conventional notions regarding heroism and collaboration with one's enemies. (Taub, *Israeli Holocaust Drama* 15). In *Adam* Sobol focuses on the two days of the Witenberg affair and deliberately and dramatically contrasts Gens with the principled leaders of the underground resistance.

Adam's structure as a memory play is more complex than *Ghetto* with the events of the past occurring simultaneously on stage with their remembrance by Old Nadja, a retired actress who was also Adam's (Witenberg) lover in the ghetto. Old Nadja's reconstruction of the events of Witenberg Day occur during Israel's 1982 war against the PLO camps in Lebanon. Drawing an implied parallel between the Vilna resistance

fighters and the Palestinian guerrillas, Sobol investigates the destructive arguments advanced by idealists with guns. At this period in the ghetto's existence, Gens was almost literally sitting on a powderkeg. The revolt in the Warsaw Ghetto in the Spring of 1943 resulted in Holocaust architect Himmler's orders for the liquidation of all the large ghettos. Gens knew about the resistance and tacitly supported it as long as the leaders did not threaten the safety of the ghetto. But when a Communist agent was arrested and gave the Gestapo the name of Isaak Witenberg, Gens feared the Germans' discovery of the resistance movement's existence.

As dramatized by Sobol and confirmed by the participants of this event, Gens' only hope was to turn Witenberg over to the Gestapo, hope the Nazis knew nothing about the resistance, and try to buy some time before the liquidation order became a reality. The crux of the play is the heroes' realization and agreement that to betray their leader might mean survival for themselves and the ghetto. In the world of Gens and Sobol, idealism means death and destruction. Earlier in the play, Sobol dramatizes this in an exchange between Gens and the Nazi officer Kittel, who does not want the ghetto liquidated because it will mean his being sent to the Russian front, and who acknowledges to Gens that Germany is run by idealistic fanatics who will destroy the entire country (*Adam* 289).

What dominates this exchange is the tone of moral fatigue between the two pragmatic antagonists. On the one hand, Kittel's Germany is portrayed as plunging into a non-stop orgy of self-destruction through the idealism of its leaders and on the other, Gens' ghetto is threatened with destruction because of the idealism of its freedom

fighters. Essentially both men are powerless to stop these events yet each attempts to finesse, to negotiate, to bargain away the coming reality.

At the end of the third play in the trilogy, *Underground* (which deals with the successful efforts to hide a typhus epidemic in the ghetto from the Germans), Gens and Kittel continue their negotiating ploys until there is nothing left to negotiate: the order for liquidation has come, and the Nazis know that Gens has used the transfers of the ghetto inhabitants to Estonia as a smoke screen to cover the evacuation of the partisans to the forest. Gens is under arrest and the leader of the Germans, Neugebauer, is ready to execute him (and did, according to an eyewitness, Arad 425). Kittel makes one last attempt to negotiate for the life of Gens: urging Gens to tell them where the remnants of the partisans are hidden in the ghetto and his life will be spared. As imagined by Sobol, it is a powerful conclusion to his themes as Gens refuses Kittel and goads the Nazis into killing him on the spot:

You can kill me. It's easy to kill a man. A bubble of air in the veins, a drop of filth in the blood.

(Kittel aims at Gens' chest.)

I am a man and you are that filth that kills me. FIRE!

(Kittel fires a shot. Blackout.) (Sobol, *Underground* 42-43)

The mirror image Sobol has constructed of these two morally tired pragmatists is destroyed in this final confrontation. By killing Gens, Kittel acquiesces in the Nazis' decision to liquidate the ghetto, thereby ensuring his own probable destruction at the collapsing Russian front. In the history of the Vilna Ghetto and in Sobol's trilogy, Jakob Gens emerges as a deeply complex character who was obviously aware of the corruption

done to his soul. But Sobol does not see such corruption as evil in itself. In fact, this corruption presages a greater good because it declines judgment and accepts the existence of an Other. In a lecture, Sobol detailed his thoughts:

I think the human being is impure. Purity is not a human attribute. I know myself and I'm not pure, my thoughts are not pure, my feelings are not pure, nor my dreams are pure and God knows what else. The moment you cannot accept any more your impurity . . . is the moment you start dealing with this point of reversal. You start to project the fear of your impurity on everyone. This fear is projected on everyone who looks different, smells different, everyone who behaves differently, talks differently, or prays differently to his God, and immediately he is a candidate for annihilation . . . The drama of our time is the desperate struggle of human beings, individuals, and some groups against this leading tendency . . . I feel attracted to subjects and events which have to do with this clash between those who have the passion to destroy and those who have the passion to resist it and say no. There is no purity, let us be as we are. Do not ask us to be pure, to be saints. We are impure, and let us live like this (Sobol, "Theatricality of Political Theatre" 111-112).

Commentary:

Not everyone agrees with Sobol, however. When *Ghetto* first opened in New York in 1989, *New York Times* critic Frank Rich refused to look at the play's morally conflicted characters as anything but stereotypes, especially the money-grubbing Weiskopf, and dismissed Sobol's Brechtian play within a play as a musically inferior

Cabaret. More critically damning was an article by Holocaust survivor and Nobel-prize winner Elie Wiesel who was distressed at Sobol's unflattering portrait of the Jews in the ghetto, calling it not just false and nasty but "'Hilul hashem' – blasphemy or profanation" (Wiesel 38).

Also troubling to many, especially in Sobol's native Israel, is his use of the story of the Vilna ghetto to advance his leftist, seemingly anti-Zionist political views. To Sobol's many detractors in his country, he appears to equate the racism of the Nazis with the "need" by Jews to preserve a specifically Jewish state. Indeed, as Yael Feldman correctly points out, Sobol's choice of his materials is deeply influenced through Israel's political crises in the 1980s, and that Sobol quite deliberately and provocatively sets up parallels between the arguments advanced by his characters in the Vilna ghetto with those resembling the critics and defenders of Israel during the Lebanon War (Feldman, "Whose Story is It Anyway?" 225-26). Clearly these plays are not intended to be seen solely as a documentary recreation of one small corner of the Holocaust. In *Ghetto*, the Bundist scholar and librarian Kruk's argument against Zionist philosophy is energetically rebutted by none other than the Nazi scholar Dr. Paul who, as indicated by Sobol in his stage directions, is meant to be played by the same actor who enacts the role of Kittel.

Making two appearances, first in Act Two and the second time in Act Three, Dr. Paul is based on another real-life model working out of the Rosenberg Foundation, for "the investigation of Judaism without Jews" (Sobol, *Ghetto* 189), to record and preserve the Jewish culture before it is obliterated forever. In the mouth of the Nazi, the *faux* Jew, Sobol relates a Hasidic legend of a king who has had a fight with his son and banished him from the castle. Later, thinking better of his deed, the king sends a messenger to find

his son and ask him what three wishes he would have. The messenger returns with the reply of “bread, clothing, and a place to sleep” (191). From this, the king determines that his son has truly forgotten to be a prince because a prince would have only asked for one wish: to return to the castle where the other three wishes would automatically be granted. Sobol, through Dr. Paul, intends that Israel be seen as the castle, yet in Kruk he provides an alternative reading:

you’ve got it all wrong. The son understood the situation perfectly. He wished for what he needed: Men aren’t at home because of any particular soil - - they’re at home with their heritage, with their traditions. *That’s* the loss they must guard against. Without culture, they lose their identity (192).

Against this Dr. Paul argues that Kruk’s belief that “socialism in the Diaspora would allow for the survival of Jewish culture” (191) and that Kruk’s brand of Zionism will leave it “to the Gens of this world” (192) who, as Jews, are “horrifying caricatures -- something you might see in a funhouse mirror” (191). In the third act, when Gens asserts that he will order Hebrew to be taught in the schools and “Palistinography” (206) and further asserts that anyone “not in agreement with the new policy of nationalism is hereby barred from all key positions” (206), Kruk (Sobol) retorts that the Germans have succeeded.

Some of Sobol’s defenders have denied that he equates Zionists with Nazis, arguing, like Rachel Shteir, that Sobol’s image of the funhouse mirror is only a critical trope for examining Israel’s current crisis (Shteir 41). Certainly Sobol himself has

elaborated on this metaphor, considering the funhouse mirror as a distortion of the same image, an image which Sobol finds in the traditional carnival:

[the world] is a carnival . . . life is turned inside out, it is “le monde a l’envers,” the world we know is capsized, turned upside down. All the laws, taboos, and restrictions are abolished for the duration of the carnival. There is no more hierarchy, no respect, no manners prevail. There is no longer any difference between people . . . You go out in the streets and take part in the carnival . . . This special kind of mixture is probably one of the characteristics of the Nazi era, when the king of a carnival became the leader of a nation. As a result, history became a bloody carnival
(Theatricality of Political Theatre 108-110).

Sobol further cites that what happened to the populace of the ghetto was a “desacralization of human reality . . . Desacralization of human values, profanation of anything that is saintly, anything valuable in human life” (109). During the carnival “rationality and irrationality no longer exclude each other, they now complement each other and become two facets of the same phenomenon that is the human being” (109).

Sobol is deeply interested in how a society, any society (especially one that prides itself on its moral and cultural values) can lose its bearings and bring down a reign of terror on a minority group. In his trilogy, there is a troubling and troubled response to what many in his homeland accept in the current Israeli-Palestinian situation. Racial and cultural purity was once used by the Kittels and the Rosenbergs to kill an entire people and eradicate their culture. Jakob Gens becomes the dramatist’s stratagem to cut through all questions of purity and morality by forcing himself and those around him to accept a

moral equivalence between themselves and their annihilators. Only by doing that could a town (and by extension, a culture) survive. Only by accepting the blood on his hands and by “plunging . . . into the sewer, and [leaving his] conscience behind” (*Ghetto* 203) could a moral man save himself and that culture. By showing Gens weeding out the non-productive “undesirables” from the ghetto, Sobol holds up the funhouse mirror to the Nazis and forcefully rebuts the criticism of Wiesel and others, arguing against any portrayal of Jews as martyrs.

Other scholars, among them Lawrence Langer, Freddie Rokem and Robert Skloot, while acknowledging the validity of some of the criticism of Sobol’s detractors, nevertheless praise these plays for their theatrical energy and approvingly note the provocative arguments that anyone, even a Jew, can become a Nazi (Rokem “On the Fantastic” 48). Throughout Sobol’s *Vilna Trilogy*, the character of Jakob Gens looms, making us mindful of the many sacred and profane contradictions that can reside in the human character and obviously did in him. Bully, killer, liar, tyrant, betrayer, Jakob Gens never lost sight of his self-proclaimed mission: to save his people and to save their culture. Joshua Sobol has rescued a man from history’s footnotes, a man clearly for his time and for ours, put him on the stage in front of us, and has him ask us all the troubling, unanswerable questions. In his speech to the writers, he said that he was willing to be judged for his actions. Sobol provokes us throughout his trilogy to ask ourselves: can we, dare we, be the judges?

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