



The trigger that set off World War II

In August 1939, a fake attack on Germans in Poland was the catalyst for war. Now the incident has been turned into a play. **Rebecca Abrams** speaks to the playwright Erik Kahn as the piece opens in London

It's a murky mid-November day and central London is churning with traffic, but Erik Kahn is irrepressibly upbeat. He is over from New York with his Danish-Israeli director Charlotte Cohn to cast the UK production of his play *Canned Goods*, which will be running in London at Southwark Playhouse. It's day two of auditions and Kahn is impressed by the quality of the actors and their sensitive readings of the script. Already one of them has come up with a gesture that he and Cohn like so much they plan to use it, whoever gets the part.

Kahn looks somewhat miscast as a playwright, being more dressed-down corporate than artistic in his neat navy shirt and creaseless sports jacket. Perhaps this is not so surprising, given that he's a full-time intellectual property lawyer and

this is his first play. But *Canned Goods* didn't come from nowhere. "I'd written plays for my own interest before but never done anything with them. With this play, I knew I was not interested in just writing for my drawer. It comes out of everything I've been doing with my life up until now."

Set on the border between Germany and Poland, *Canned Goods* dramatises a little-known Nazi operation, codenamed *Grandmother Died*, which took place on 31 August 1939, involving a Polish attack on the German-speaking radio station at Gleiwitz. One of a coordinated series of strikes, this was a false flag operation, intended to justify Hitler's 'pacification' of Poland and deter Britain from declaring war. Instead, it precipitated the outbreak of World War II.

A taut one-act psychological thriller, the play unfolds over two days and centres on

three German prisoners, held captive for reasons they cannot at first fathom, and the Nazi SS officer who holds their fate in his hands. The plan is to dress the prisoners in Polish uniforms, shoot them and plant them at the radio station to make it look as if they'd attacked it and been killed in fighting. As the prisoners piece together the gruesome role in store for them, the tightly confined physical and temporal frame of the play serves to ratchet up the dramatic tension and underscore the human tragedy.

Kahn first came across *Grandmother Died* in 2018, driving over the George Washington Bridge while listening to the audiobook of William Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. "The idea of it as a play came to me very easily. I could imagine these characters trying to figure out what

was happening to them: what it would be like to know you're going to die? How could you retain your dignity?"

The characters are a skilful blend of real and invented. Two of the prisoners – Birnbaum, a Jewish professor of theology, and Kruger, a German janitor – are Kahn's inventions. The third, Franciszek Honiok, an unmarried Catholic farmer, is based on a known prisoner, plucked off his farm seemingly because no one was going to miss him. *Grandmother Died* was, among other things, a cynical piece of theatre that needed nonentities for the lead roles.

SS officer Major Naujocks is also a real figure. Recruited by Reinhard Heydrich, he later described himself as "the man who started the war". He was called as a witness at Nuremberg but not prosecuted and, in 1947, was found guilty of war crimes in a Danish court. He served just four years of his 15-year sentence and lived in Hamburg until his death aged 54 in 1966.

Researching the play took Kahn several months and included reading transcripts of Naujocks' Nuremberg deposition. "He was someone who saw himself as important. He was very proud of his role in *Grandmother Died*." The finished playscript makes use of actual speeches and broadcasts and is largely faithful to historical facts, not least the chilling nickname given to the prisoners: 'canned goods'.

The play premiered in New Jersey in May 2024 to enthusiastic reviews, but getting it staged was not plain sailing. Several theatres rejected it, uncomfortable with some of the content, in particular a speech by Kruger, the janitor, in which he justifies his hatred of Jews. "Kruger is being very honest – he can't see beyond his own perspective. When people have strong views, they don't necessarily want to have their opinion changed."

In another controversial moment, an unrepentant Naujocks calls on Jews in the audience to identify themselves, before gloatingly telling them, "I am still right here among you". Kahn's wife (who is not Jewish) was not the only person to advise him to remove this speech, but Kahn

insisted both this and Kruger's had to stay. "They bring the play right up to the present. Antisemitism and antisemitism are still here."

Raised in a household that was "strongly Jewish-identified", Kahn spent his childhood in Scarsdale, NY. His father's ancestors were part of the Guggenheim family – "not the wealthy part" – while his mother's family were from Poland and France. A maternal cousin was a member of the French resistance and helped Jewish children escape over the border into Switzerland.

His family lit candles every Friday night, but did not keep kosher. In 1970, when Kahn was five, his brother Danny, then eight, and sister Judy, 11, were hijacked by the PFLP, a Marxist branch of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, on a flight from Israel. "They were fine, but it definitely had a big impact."

Before training as a lawyer, at Cardozo Law School in New York, Kahn studied history and philosophy of religion at Hobart College, and he maintains a keen interest in religious philosophy and ethics. "I am 100 percent Jewish but au fond a humanist," he says. "I don't believe any one religion is better than any other, although some are less tolerant than others." It's a viewpoint mirrored in *Canned Goods* by the Jewish character Birnbaum, who is as well versed in Christian scripture as in Judaism and quotes readily from Saint Augustine and Saint Francis of Assisi.

Kahn's attachment to his Jewish identity, however, has undoubtedly been strengthened by 7 October and its aftermath. "The world was so eager to throw Jews under the bus. I had theatres saying they wouldn't do the play because it was too Jewish. I had Jewish people saying we should keep our heads down, not invite scrutiny." He found both responses "very depressing" and has been still more frustrated by the wilful ignorance of many pro-Palestinian protestors.

Like Mark Rosenblatt's *Giant*, which recently transferred to the West End after a sell-out run at the Royal Court, *Canned Goods* makes powerful use of the past to speak to the present in its discomfiting portrayal of antisemitic views that have become distressingly normalised since 7 October. It is equally concerned with the manipulation of truth and manufacture of fake news. What was central to Operation *Grandmother Died* 80 years ago is central to all our lives today. For Kahn, "*Canned Goods* is a response to where we are now," he says. "It is my way of pushing back." ■

Canned Goods is at Southwark Playhouse, London until 8 February. See p56 for info. **Rebecca Abrams** is the author of *Licoricia of Winchester: Power and Prejudice in Medieval England* and *The Jewish Journey: 4000 Years in 22 Objects*.

"The play makes powerful use of the past to speak to the present"



JEDLY DESIGN; COURTESY ERIK KAHN; ALAMY

Playwright Erik Kahn



LAST CHANCE! THE PRODUCERS

As one of theatre's most madcap musicals comes to the end of its London run, **Judi Herman** looks back at the hit show's history

Since *The Producers* first barged its way onto the big screen in 1967, it has had a wild old ride. And Mel Brooks, New York's legendary comedian, actor and filmmaker, is the man responsible. Not only did he write and direct the original comedy, he then wrote the music and lyrics for the Broadway adaptation in 2001, and further worked on writing the 2005 film adaptation of the stage adaptation. Are you still with me at the back? Now, thanks to director Patrick Marber (*Leopoldstadt*), the show has (since last November) been celebrating a triumphant return to the capital.

The story centres on a scheme devised by washed-up theatre producer Max Bialystock and shy accountant Leo Bloom. The pair think they can con their way to making a mint by overselling shares in a Broadway musical that they're confident will succeed in failing. The flop in question is *Springtime for Hitler: A Gay Romp with Adolf and Eva at Berchtesgaden*, a panegyric to the Führer by an unhinged ex-Nazi officer. The title song, as performed by a chorus line in skimpy Nazi uniforms, is worth the ticket price alone.

The stage show has won record numbers of awards on both sides of the Atlantic, with 12 Tonys under its belt, alongside a Grammy and three Oliviers, including Best Musical. It has also featured a roll call of talent, which in the UK includes Nathan Lane, Jason Manford, Peter Kay, Leigh Zimmerman and Lee Evans.

Trailing glory, Andy Nyman, Marc Antolin and Joanna Woodward take centre stage in Marber's production, which runs at The Menier Chocolate Factory near London Bridge until Saturday 1 March. ■

menierchocolatefactory.com