The 'Perdition' Affair

WHEN THE Royal Court Theatre decided at the last minute not to go ahead with its scheduled production of Jim Allen's play about the massacre of the Jews of Hungary in 1944, 'Perdition', a flood of discussion, polemic and recrimination was unleashed in the press. It had already been the subject of protests by various prominent Jews and of publicity in the press.

There are at least two issues involved in the 'Perdition' affair: artistic freedom and its limits; and whether or not 'Perdition' is anti-Jewish.

Allen and the director, Ken Loach, immediately raised an outcry against 'censorship', alleging that they were victims of a coordinated Zionist conspiracy. 'Perdition' was being crushed under the 'Zionist juggernaut', as Jim Allen put it when he told his side of the story to the Irish Times. They have received immense publicity for their assertions about the 'Zionist campaign to kill 'Perdition'. Predictably the anti-Zionist left, eager for evidence of Zionist conspiracy and Zionist power, rushed to defend 'Perdition' and echoed the charges.

Now, according to the Jewish Chronicle, the Board of Deputies of British Jews did decide to try where possible to prevent the play from being performed. There was an outcry, and no doubt private lobbying too.

But, given the subject of 'Perdition' and the nature of Allen's treatment of it, that is not surprising, nor necessarily very sinister. The charge of being anti-Semitic is still one that inhibits, and Allen's script does not (as we'll see) offer the honest reader who is not wearing blinkers much ground on which to build a convincing case that it is not anti-Jewish.

Allen, in that vainglorious, boastful tone which also infects some of his work, told Time Out: "Without any undue humility I'm saying that this is the most lethal attack on Zionism ever written, because it touches at the heart of the most shaming myth of modern history, the Holocaust. Because it says quite plainly that privileged Jewish leaders collaborated in the extermination of their own kind in order to help bring about a Zionist state, Israel, a state which is itself racist."

I know what I'm doing and I stand by my research and my analysis. I've had to get this right because I know how serious a subject it is."

Now I think 'Perdition' should be produced. Those Jews who have campaigned against it being produced are wrong in principle and shortsighted in practice. Ultimately their campaign, which has already boosted 'Perdition', will prove self-defeating and even self-wounding.

That said, the ballyhoo about the 'suppression' of 'Perdition' is disingenuous and no more than a 'smart' political campaign. It has not been banned or 'censored' — in fact it has been assured a greater audience when it is produced, as it surely will be, and not only in Britain.

There is a corollary to the idea of freedom of artistic expression and to the idea that censorship is to be rejected and opposed: the corollary is that those who disagree with the work also have the right to free speech — that they have the right to protest, denounce, clamour against it and picket it. At a certain point such an outcry may convince some of those involved in the enterprise to abandon it.

The 'freedom' to produce 'Perdition' does not include the right to demand that those who feel badly stung by it should be quiet and passive.

I have read a late draft of the play. It takes the form of a libel case brought by a surviving Hungarian Jewish leader, Yaron, against the author of a pamphlet accusing him of collaborating in the destruction of the nearly one million strong Hungarian Jewish community in 1944. By virtue of the libel-case mechanism, the usual not-guilty-until-proven rule is reversed. Yaron has to prove his innocence.

The play alleges that 'Zionism', with something like 5 million Jews already dead, needed the corpses of a million more Jews in Hungary to help it strengthen the moral case for setting up Israel after the war. Allen argues that Zionism shared the racist assumptions for 'persecution' from 'its own' side, and that that was the basis of a collaboration even to the extent of sacrificing the Jewish millions in Europe. Zionism was concerned only with saving the notables and the rich. Basing himself on the well-known 1950s Kastner libel case in Israel, Allen depicts the Jewish leaders as saving their own skins and the skins of a few rich people at the cost of agreeing to the killing of 800,000. Somehow the picture of events in Hungary is also part of the Zionist conspiracy, though it is not clear how it all fits together (at least to this reader).

Yaron is an agent of Zionism, and his 'collaboration' is said to be Zionism collaboration. Yet most references to his motives in the play put it down to the desire to save his own skin. Allen's play is admittedly 'based on', or mainly based on, the work of Lenni Brenner, 'Zionism in the Age of the Dictators'. This book is a narrow-visioned and narrow-minded polemic aimed at laying part of the blame for the Nazi massacre of the Jews on the international Zionist movement of the time and by extension on Israel now. Grotes-

* It comes out in paperback in April under the imprint of Al Saqi books and reported with an introduction by Maxine Rodinson, the scholar and anti-Zionist polemicist (who in fact does not support the 'destroy Israel' camp, believing in the right of the Palestinian Jews to maintain a Jewish state there).

** The play has received a wide circulation in manuscript form. The Royal Court sent copies of it to all the London theatre critics.
inquently unfair, narrow and tendentious readings are made of every incident that can be construed against Zionism — and Israel. The argument is developed as if Zionism were something that developed completely outside the Jewish community and through the machinations of a small and alien minority. This alien force then 'betrayed the Jews'. It is a lawyer's brief style of argument, intent not on 'the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth', but on indicting Zionism and Israel.

Allen is far more incoherent than Brener because Allen is far less in control of his material. His 'aim' strays far more often than Brener's. The demon to non-Zionist Jews caught up in the horror of the Nazi ghettoes. Allen is Brener's epigone. Brener argues his theme seriously and unconvincingly. Allen does not argue and speaks in generalities. Allen is the quality of the play. You could have had an intellectually serious debate, a discussion of the issues, and you could have a dramatic representation of the experience of the Jewish victims of Nazism. Allen gives neither.

At first I could not understand why, but then I thought about the comment of the Moscow Trials of the 30s, those stage-managed affairs in which the old Bolsheviks, broken and morally destroyed, mouthed the scripts that had been prepared for them. I eventually understood why; the heavy hand of politics then and now is so inseparable from the theatre. You can see the lines being pulled. The dialogue does not develop naturally, but according to the needs of a one-sided polemic. Yaron breaks down at the end and 'understands', he explains away, the gaffes of Titnick. The theatre degenerates into a kind of byzantine Jew and others who could not get themselves believed — that hell-hole — when they told the truth about the Nazis.

Many other examples of the same sort of vulgarity-Trotskyism read backwards into history could be culled from the play. This is not a serious way to deal with history. But of course neither Allen nor Brener are really concerned with history. Their real concern is with the 'present' situation.

I think it is a pretty vile play, and a bad one too. Writing in defence of the play in the New Statesman, Ken Loach and Andrew Horn have described Allen as the 'best socialist playwright of his generation'. Perhaps the key generation, and even then it depends on what generation you place writers like Arnold Wesker and David Edgar in, to mention only two others. What is unique about Allen's work is that he writes using an idiomatic style that is the very essence of Trotskyism. He glorifies the class struggle and direct action and working-class people involved in it. This is what makes him important and worthy of special respect. Plays like 'The Big Flame' (about a war-in Asia at Liverpool port) are by turn brave and wonderful — though limited — revolutionary socialist propaganda.

But the basic political content of everything Allen has done (everything I know anyway) is profoundly similar to before. After all, Trotskyism is an essentially revolutionary and political force. Beyond that he is as good as his 'storylines'. Thus, 'Days of Hope', about the years from War I to the defeat of the General Strike, plainly draws on the Trotskyist leader's own political experience. And the memoirs of pacifist war resisters like Fenner Brockway — and it is very good indeed.

Allen's problem in 'Perdition' is precisely his 'storyline' — derived from Brener and the present-day public opinion on the way to Trotskyism left, on whose fringes he has remained for the last 25 or 30 years. In a way Allen can be used as a symbol of that Trotskyism. For it is not just that Trotskyism over the last two decades has been the loss of its own class politics and the absorption of quite alien politics, especially Third World nationalism of various sorts. Wherever at the time of the Arab-Israeli war in 1948, the Trotskyists took sides, calling on Arab and Jewish workers to unite, the Trotskyist movement is typically Arab nationalistic and bigoted against the Jews of Palestine. Allen's work shows this. He never overcomes the ideas of Trotskyism; this wretched play glorifies and promotes the anti-Jewish ('anti-Zionist') accretions to those politics over the years.

It is entirely improbable that Jim Allen is himself hostile to Jews, but that is not the issue here. He embraces politics which by demonologizing Israel are in their logic inexplicably hostile to Jews, most of whom identify with Israel. The theme Allen puts forward, and in which he never quite surrenders, is that the play do not balance it as he wants them to — is that Zionists, i.e. Jews, and today the most dominant political current among Jews, share responsibility with the Nazis and their East European collaborators for the massacre of the Jews.

This is a vastly enlarged version of the blood-libel of Christian anti-Semitism against the Jews. In the old version the Jews were accused of murdering Christian children and using their blood to make the bread, which was then presented to the God. In this version the Jews are accused of helping to murder millions of Jews to ingratiate themselves with the Nazis and thus — mysteriously — to gain the support of the Jewish people, thus to have the support of the Jewish people. By the people who live in that state and their sympathisers outside of the original sin of 'Zionism' can save them; and if they do not do that, then their defeat and the 'smashing of those who believe' is legitimate and a holy political cause.

Both Allen and Brenner (in 'Zionism in the Age of the Dictators') deny that they are indulging in the obscenity of blaming some of the victims of Naziism for the killing of their enemies. Jews. Allen's use of the word 'Zionist' he has named the Holocaust. But listen to Brenner himself when he recounts a controversy he was recently in. Someone in the US reported that Levitas, the USSR daily, had favourably reviewed 'Zionism in the Age of the Dictators' under the headline 'Zionist collaborators: a journalist unmask dirty deals with Nazi chiefs'. A special summary of the book was placed in libraries all over the USSR.

(Probably that the thesis that Zionism is a two-faced beast which is a two-faced beast, where Jews have been for decades and are still today in various ways penalized.) Brenner explains that he sent a copy of the article to the historian David Dawidowicz, 'remarking that I saw nothing improper about it. [The reviewer] had said, among other things, that during the World war, Brenner points out, Zionism showed its real meaning; for the sake of its ambitions, it sacrificed the blood of millions of Jews'. Khilko had taken the book very seriously (cited in the American, p. 172).

Neither the poisoned politics, nor the history, nor the drama of these 'anti-Zionists' are of any use to help to socialists who want to champion the cause of the Palestinian Arabs and to advocate their right to an independent state alongside Israel.

John O'Mahony
The ‘Perdicion’ affair: a letter

JIM ALLEN is accused of being ‘vainglorious, boastful’ and the campaign against the banning of Perdicion is described as being ‘smart’ and ‘disingenuous’ (‘The Perdicion Affair’ by John O’Mahony, WLG).

For he it from me to accuse John O’Mahony of these sins, despite setting him up as some form of expert on the subject matter under discussion. But where O’Mahony is wrong is when he equates freedom of speech for anti-Zionist and socialists with the right of those who disagree with Perdicion to campaign for its banning. It’s like saying that a film on police violence against pickets or M15 on TV can only expect the state to react and seek a ban and those who seek to oppose such a ban are ‘smart’ and ‘disgusting’.

Of course the state will seek to ban that with which it disagrees, as it did over ‘Real Lives’ or indeed the refusal of the BBC to reshoot Jimmy Allen’s playing the award winning ‘Days of Hope’, but since do marxists recognize such bans as merely something to be expected? We campaign against them precisely because the prevailing ideas in this society are racist and freedom of speech means freedoms, those of the vast majority of people in this country. So too with Perdicion.

Who is the real anti-semitic? Who is the real anti-Semite? Who is the real reactionary? Who is the real political establishment? Lord Goodman in ‘The Standard’ (a paper well known for its anti-racism, the ‘Independent’, the ‘Mail’ and ‘Sun’, Martin Gilbert (biographer of Churchill) in the ‘Telegraph’ and a leader in the same paper (the Telegraph opposed to anti-Semitism). Finally, in the ‘Times’, no less than Bernard Levin takes an identical position to that of O’Mahony; Perdicion is anti-Semitic, but he defends its right to be staged. This is the same ‘Times’ which is at present defending Nazi war criminals on the run in Britain and accusing those who wish to see them hunted down at pursuing vendettas.

Likewise the overwhelming majority of the media treats the Palestinians as terrorists and a problem. The Israeli state is still treated as the David of the Middle East, the Israeli state as democracy, and Zionist figures like Ben-Gurion with awe and respect. Films and documentaries deal with the Holocaust through the prism of Zionist hindsight with the message being that a Jewish state would have prevented catastrophe.

Perdicion ran contrary to all this which is why there was a massive Zionist campaign for it to be banned. This campaign included many non-Jewish Zionists, people like Conor Cruise O’Brien and other reactionaries, who would never lift a finger to fight racism but who were willing to speak out against Perdicion.

The only time we would support a ban was if Perdicion was a play attempting to incite racial hatred. It doesn’t, O’Mahony knows it doesn’t, as do its mainly Jewish cast and the many Jews — Holocaust survivors included — who support its being shown. O’Mahony argues that Perdicion argues that Zionism needed an extra million dead Jews in order to achieve statehood. It doesn’t, indeed it says quite the opposite. What it does do is show the mixture of Zionist totalitarianism and ‘realpolitik’ that led the Zionists to attempt to obfuscate the efforts of others to mount rescue campaigns at the critical time.

Comparisons of Perdicion with stage-managed Moscow trials or blood-libel feudal-Christian anti-Semitism are absurd. Why not compare it with the trial on which it is based, that of Kasner, where Kasner too failed to put up a defence? In making this absurd judgement, which the Jewish Chronicle immediately picked up on, O’Mahony fails to deal with the substantive material of the play. He doesn’t ask what type of movement it is that obstructs rescue in the West by insisting on Palestine as the only destination for Jews, which concluded an economic transfer agreement with Nazi Germany, which sees a ‘divine hand’ in anti-Semitism even today, that separates out Jews from non-Jews in Israel today in just the same way as European anti-Semites sought to do with Jews.

The interminable attack on Perdicion can only give sustenance to those who seek to portray Zionism as some form of national liberation movement rather than a danger to Jews and Arabs alike.

Tony Greenstein

A reply

Tony Greenstein praises and justifies ‘Perdicion’ by pointing to some of those who are against it. That’s altogether too crude. Yet it is the normal standard of judgment used by the two-camps left in world politics.

Here, as with everything else, the serious Marxists left needs an independent judgment. On a second reading, I think I was too soft on ‘Perdicion’, much too soft.

The factual accuracy of Allen’s account of Hungary has been contested on a number of important points. Here I will discuss what Allen makes of what he says are the facts.

A ‘Hungarian Zionist leader’, ‘Yaron’, has been accused of ‘collaborating with the Nazis in the mass murder of Hungary’s Jews in 1944. He has brought a libel case against his accusers. Towards the end of the play Scott, counsel for Yaron’s opponents, asks Yaron about a train on which, after negotiations between Jewish leaders and the Nazis, 1684 Jews escaped. How were the 1684 selected? Yaron says their first choice was to save the children.

Scott: Why didn’t you?
Yaron: Eichmann and Witzl recognized it. They thought it was a children’s transport and might attract too much attention.

Scott: Number 12 and a day were already leaving for the KZ by Auschwitz?
Yaron: It was their decision. Scott: And so naturally you didn’t...

Yaron — the Jew, facing the mass murder of his community by the Nazis — is presented as a free and equal collaborator with the Nazi leadership.

Or take this exchange:
Scott: In your earlier testimony you said that you were innocent of committing treason against your own people.
Yaron: Yes.
Scott: Liar! The evidence presented in this court has proved beyond any reasonable doubt that you collaborated with the Nazis.

Yaron: We represent the greatest interests of our people.
Scott: By sending them to the gas chambers?

Yaron (agitated): I explain, but you won’t listen!
Scott: The language is unequivocal: betray. There was a distinction between the Hungarian Jews and the Zionists of Zion and the Jews in SI, but not that distinction by all this talk about ‘representing their best interests’. To save your own hide you practically led them to the gates of Auschwitz. You offered soothing assurances while the ovens were made ready, the transports organized, the deportations signed, and the lists already made up.

Yaron: I told you. Our Zionist tradition demanded...

Scott: Dogma before people!
Yaron: Not to save our hides. Scott: Not from ignorance.
Yaron: No.
Scott: What makes?
Yaron: No.

Scott: From conviction then. (Pause) Was it worth it? Was the purchase of nearly one million Jews worth the price?

Yaron (as if reciting): The crea-
personal self-serving by Yaron.

Yaron is allowed some spirited
lines, for example accusing Brit
ain and the USA of refusing to
help the Jews in their hour of
need. Thus far, the anti-Semitic
propaganda within the movement
now surpasses the level of old-
time anti-Semitism or Hitler's
stock-in-trade polenism. There is
a laudable sense of the sort of
stunt.

Take another comment from
Yaron: They allowed themselves
to become Eichmann's Trojan
Horse, the Zionist knife in the
Nazi fist. The simple little
tapestry with which they were
murdered, not just by the
force of German arms, but by the
calculated, JensenCreasy of the
terrorists. But, by the same
play, Allen criminal zigzags between
denouncing Zionists and Jews.
The result is that they are more of
the former than the latter.

In the following sentence he
leaps back to 'Jews' to avoid
open absurdity: "In terms of
Jews and non-Jews, I think
people left in Budapest were
those Zionists' The use here of
the term often favoured by anti-
Semitic writers as an almost
representative of the whole, is
full of Christian images in
appropriate places.

Secondly, the Council allegedly
snaps: Is it morally
right to bomb the drop
on Hiroshima?

Yaron: No. Then kindly spare me
your ethical fumings.
The hatred and loathing
embodied in this passage, the
detestable enthusiasm of the play,
is palpable, and I'm not sure it is
just loathing of 'Zionism'.

Yaron is characterised as
a snarling, revenged and vicious
ex-convict who collaborated with
his oppressors and helped them
to destroy his own people for
reasons of an international,
absolute, mystical commitment
to 'Zionism'. The playwright allows
Yaron to offer no real defence:
Yaron's attitude is to say 'It was
even a Stalinist-type
ambiguity between Zionism
and religion. In fact most of
the Zionists in that period were
and remained religious. This is
one of many examples of the
way that Allen's type broaches
far beyond the play the whole
controversial movement, to Jews in
general, and to his people.

Despite all the histrionics,
noteworthy are three sentences
said about how it all fits together
—how the betrayal of Hungarian
Jews (including lots of Hungarian
Zionists) serves the Zionist
propaganda. The play
zigzags between political
assertions and explanations in terms of
necessity accompany progress
gains, and the hard doctrine of
Zionism [sic] — i.e., as defined by
the ruthless measures, identified
with the movement. The
responsibility for Yaron's 'collaboration'
is justified within the historical
context of what was necessary to
achieve the goal. In this context,
when the Germans were killing
Jews, Yaron says, "We need to
kill Jews."

But in Hungary, we can say
with confidence that those
might have saved many lives.
No such thing can be said of the
Jewish ghettos in Poland, who
were surrounded by the Nazis, and
all resistance was met with im-
mediate mass murder, whose
potential scale at any moment
was always unknown.

Yet this is how the judge
sums up, supposedly dealing
with Hungary but speaking at the end
of the play, in which Hungary and
Poland everywhere else in
Eastern Europe have been
incomprehensively mashed together.

The judge (Allen), "argued
that this was not cooperation but
collaboration. That Eichmann
needed the help of the leaders in
order to hoodwink the Jews
and make it easier for them to
gather and participate in their
own destruction.

The judge then picks out the
sentence of 'evidence' to summarise
Allen's case — and he cites the
North American Council giving
the Nazis total control over all Jews,
as if it were the Jewish leaders'
fault.

The Council allegedly
distributed postcards from
Auschwitz inmates written at
gunpoint, to reassure the Jews in
Budapest. The judge says the train
at length. Yaron's
opponents had claimed 'that the
train was filled with privileged
categories, young and
eminently prominent, a fact
which Dr. Yaron himself did not
contend. He... justifies the selec-
tion by saying that it had been
left to Eichmann, who would have
been flooded with cripples,
old people, and socially
worthless elements.'

Yaron says: "The judge (Allen)
understood the defence made by
and for Yaron. 'Defence'
has entered a plea of justification.

Yaron: We have an unusual
moment when the words defamatory of
Dr. Yaron... were true'. The judge
has "understood Yaron to say that
Yaron collaborated with the
Nazis, but he justifies this
cooperation by saying that this
was the only way that he and
his people could help their
community.'

'Perdition' makes its account
of events in Hungary in the
1940s, serving Allen not only
the well-known and surrounded
Jewish ghettos in Eastern
Europe. Characters
giving 'evidence' garlanding
including Yaron is a nasty little
behaviour of some of the strange
satchets who ran the Judenschatz
(Jewish Councils) in Polish
ghet
ded, Being thus, and now,
the Council is out of the picture.

It may be legitimate dramatic
treatment to show the Jewish
inactivity, and focus material. But it works
totally against registering the
graduations of experience of the
Jews as Jews.

For 1944 Hungary, it can be
argued in retrospect that refusal
to comply with Nazi instructions
in the ghettos may have served to
end, though immediately it
would have led to mass slaughter
of unknowable proportions and
in the time of their death. The
renegade's mode to people
who's alternative was to give the
signal for mass slaughter to
continue.

The Jewish community
was unarmed, facing the Nazis,
and surrounded also by a
considerable degree of Hungarian
anti-Semitism, and therefore
without a clear alternative. But
the Nazis this traditional
Catholic prejudice was almost
debatable. Jewish leaders hoped
to play a role until the Russian
army drove the Nazis from
Hungary.

But in Hungary, we can say
with confidence that those
might have saved many lives.
No such thing can be said of the
Jewish ghettos in Poland, who
were surrounded by the Nazis, and
all resistance was met with im-
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For 1944 Hungary, it can be
argued in retrospect that refusal
to comply with Nazi instructions
in the ghettos may have served to
with the cruel criteria of Zionism? Nothing. This passage is an example of the incoherence, and the slipping and sliding from one thing to another, that makes 'Perdition' a bad example even of what it wants to be (though it does help hypocritically to wrap up the poisoned political).

After the judge makes a few more 'legal remarks', he sends the jury away, telling them to "consider your verdict", and the curtain falls. The pretense is that the audience is the jury. But really the judge has been the jury. And his verdict is plain and clear: the Zionists collaborated with the Nazis in order to help get Israel. Like the judge's smoothing-up, the final speech by counsel for Yaron is really just part of the political indictment. Much of it is tongue-in-cheek rhetoric which really conveys, and is meant to convey, the opposite of what is said. This, for example:

"Mr. Scott went to great lengths to prove that Dr. Yaron acted as a representative of the Jewish Agency, and yet, as we have heard, Dr. Yaron never denied this. Throughout his political life he has consistently identified the problem of the Jews with the need to establish a Jewish Homeland in Palestine, a Jewish renaissance in the land of Israel. That was always his primary goal."

"But this of course raises problems for the defence which was never touched on. And with good reason, for if Dr. Yaron acted as the official representative of the Jewish Agency in Palestine, then why single him out as a collaborator? Why not go the whole hog and accuse the entire Israeli cabinet of collaboration?"

"Accuse the Israeli cabinet, not of doing vile things to the Arabs under its rule (though that is the sort of consideration that 'Perdition' appeals to), but of collaboration in the mass murder of Jews...? Absurd, yes, but one Israeli prime minister, Ben Gurion, is linked elsewhere with Yaron, as we have seen."

I have pointed out that Allen makes Hungary serve for all the Jewish ghettos, ignoring the different conditions in Warsaw after September 1939 and Budapest just after the Nazis seized Hungary in 1944. He has his characters tell horror stories about the Polish ghettos and the Judenrat there. Add to this the way that, when supposedly polemizing against Zionism, he often uses 'Zionist' and 'Jewish' interchangeably; and add the way he zig-zags in explanation of Yaron's motives from desire to save himself to Zionist grand design -- the fire is forever wobbling away from the Zionist alleged target to include more and more Jews.

The loathing and hatred he spews out targets not 'Zionists' but Jews. Does Allen mean to do that, or is the effect unintentionally produced by sloppiness and lack of control over his material? At first I thought the latter, but I'm not sure any more. Certainly the 'balancing' remarks — which are there — and the conventional warning against a revival of fascism put into the mouth of Scott towards the end of the play, do not and cannot offset the anti-Jewish drift of the play, as Allen intends them to. The picture presented by Allen (like Brenner, and like the Stalinist inventors of the thesis of links and identification between the Nazis and Zionists) is, as I've already said, an inversion of the old Nazi idea of the 'Jewish-Bolshevik' world conspiracy. In Allen this is replaced by a sort of 'Jewish-Nazi' conspiracy, made to seem slightly less lunatic by being described as a 'Zionist-Nazi' conspiracy against the Jews, and backed up by examples of

John O'Mahony
The ‘Perdition’ debate

I would be the last person to complain that the reply to my letter in Workers' Liberty 7 was more than four times the length of the original.

However, it might have been helpful, to say nothing of honest, if John O'Mahony had explained that the chunks of Perdition quoted were early drafts that were, as with most plays, articles, etc., discarded, amended, deleted and added to.

For example, the phrase ‘Zionist knife in the Nazi fist’ does not appear in the play, having been deleted at an early stage. Whatever its dramatic effect, politically it would not have been justified and Allen accordingly cut it.

To quote something that is not in the play itself but in a draft, and this was a common feature of attacks on Perdition, suggests an inability to come to terms with the thesis of the play, still less to prove the horrendous charge of ‘anti-semitism’.

It is for the above reasons that I will refrain from commenting point by point on O'Mahony’s critique of the draft and will confine myself to one instance. For making a connection between the Jewish religion and Zionism, Allen is guilty of a “Stalinist-type amalgam between Zionism and religion. In fact most of the Zionists in that period were atheists or not especially religious”.

The relevant quote in the play is as follows:
Scott: Would you agree that most of those early Zionists were atheists and non-believers?
Yaron: Yes.
Scott: They rejected all religious concepts?
Yaron: Yes.
Scott: Would you say that they were nationalists who directed all their efforts to the settlement of Jews in Palestine?
Yaron: Yes.
Scott: Well, how did the rabbis take it? This sudden rupture with the Jewish religious tradition?
Yaron: There was conflict... but over the years agreement was reached.
Scott: A sort of pact?
Yaron: Their aims became complementary.
Scott: Was this because without the stamp of biblical approval, Zionism could never have legitimised its claims to Palestine?... Zionism annexed the Jewish religious tradition.

As this passage demonstrates, Allen’s handling of the complex interrelationship between religion and Zionism is far more subtle than O'Mahony’s caricature of it, viz. an attack on “Jews in general, or his idea of Jews”.

It is even more interesting that the most persistent Zionist critic of the play, David Cesarani, in an article in the Jewish Quarterly, makes the exact opposite point. “Zionism is perceived here as an entirely modern movement without roots in Jewish religion or culture... Such an analysis is simplistic and ignores the role of rabbinical figures like Mohilever and Kook who were ardent Zionists, not to mention the whole stream of Mizrachi, the religious Zionists”.

Whilst arguing a diametrically opposite case from O'Mahony, Cesarani still draws the same conclusion, i.e. Perdition is anti-semitic! Whatever Allen says is anti-semitic. Why?

Because his play looks at the Holocaust from an explicitly anti-Zionist perspective. On this Cesarani and O'Mahony agree. The difference between Cesarani and O'Mahony is that the former at least has a basic understanding and knowledge of Zionism, albeit...
A reply

As always, Tony Greenstein doesn’t debate the issue in dispute. He worries around the edges of it, quibbling over second-class details and reading the questions he is supposed to be dealing with.

The chunks of Perdition I quoted were not from ‘early drafts’ where ‘would I have got them?’, apparently, the version just published in book form was the fourth. The one I quoted from was the second. This was published in The Forward at the Royal Court Theatre, and it got some circulation, initially when the Royal Court sent out copies to theatre critics.

The third draft was, I understand, also the second version of the second after Allen made cuts under pressure of his critics. The fourth, printed, version there are massive changes. Most of what I quoted above in my Forward Royal Court, version, has been cut.

Ah! says Greenstein, in the middle of a raging public controversy that is so wide in extent, the one due for production, but is impermissible and scandalous because six months later the author will publish an extended version.

Allen massively changes his arguments under pressure, in such a way that he concedes a great deal of the political and historical criticism of his opponents and all their moral case. Yet he maintains his thesis. I would say that that is a scandal.

Allen and Brenner both have a picture of Zionism as some outside force, allying with antisemites and Nazis, hijacking the Jews. At the same time Allen sometimes conflates secular, Zionist, and Jewish religious communities. I thought that was important because it leads Allen, whose explicit hatred is directed at the devil-in-ex-machina Zionists, to juxtapose the two layers of the Jewish communities who were not Zionists.

Perdition does not ‘look at the Holocaust from an explicitly anti-Zionist point of view’. Incidentally, it is the Holocaust as raw material for a seapocating historical forgery whose target is the existing state of Israel.

In the guise of an independent exposé of the alleged role of the Zionists in helping the Nazis kill Jews, it presents a Zephonphobic message whose current political implication is that, for instance, someone who, like Allen and Brenner, would destroy the Jewish state. It is not history. It is not critical and polemical of a political trend from fascism to the New Right to globalization.

The contribution of this book is an Arab-chauvinist propaganda drive to deny the rights of the Israeli Jews by branding the foundations of Israeli society as the responsibility for the Holocaust.

Zephonophobia on that level is comprehensively hostile to most Jews — whatever Allen’s feelings about Israeli Jews — but I had no doubt that Allen was not anti-semitically person.

Analysing the passages I quoted in WJ 7, I no longer felt sure about that. If the passages quoted and commented on don’t explain why to the non-Greensteinian reader, then repeating them here will not help, and is anyway impossible.

Even Dr Levenberg, veteran Zionist and author of the original Institute of Jewish Affairs Report on the same script that O’Malley quotes from, stated: ‘I am not making anti-semitic arguments but some viewers of the play will not be able to avoid forming a negative attitude about Jews.’

What is it that O’Malley is able, with such certainty, to brand Perdition as anti-semitic when Jews with a proven record of having fought anti-semitism and anti-Zionism are the subject of the viewpoint? Indeed, how is it that an avowed Trotskyist can become not merely an ardent apologist for Zionism today, but for its past too, even if it does mean lining up with the most reactionary sections of bourgeois opinion?

Finally, if going against a bourgeois tide of opinion on questions of ‘world politics’, so be it. Certainly it is preferable to providing a socialist coal, Militant-style, for imperialism. O’Malley it may be, and that is a third way, to revolutionaries it is merely the old reformist path.

Tony Greenstein