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# A People's Theatrical History of Howard Zinn

*Playwright Found Kindred Spirit in Jewish Activist Author*



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By Ed Rampell

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Is the bard mightier than the sword? As war rages around the globe, playwright Bianca Bagatourian ponders this question as she brings "The Times of Our Lies, A Play about the Life and Times of Howard Zinn" to debut at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

The Brooklyn-born and raised son of Jewish immigrants, Zinn, who died in 2010, was a Boston University political science professor and activist-author known as the "People's Historian," who

chronicled America from the bottom up, looking at the role played by ordinary people in shaping the course of human events. In 1997's "Good Will Hunting," Matt Damon's character says of Zinn's perennial bestseller since 1980: "If you wanna read a real history book, read Howard Zinn's 'A People's History of the United States.' That book'll f\*\*kin' knock you on your ass."

Bagatourian, who first encountered Zinn around 2005, shares similar sentiments. Her sensibility was greatly informed by her experiences as a descendant of Armenian genocide survivors. She grew up in a middle-class family in Iran in the 1960s and writes politically-minded plays that eschew theatrical conventions. "Remnants of a Liquid World" looks at the Iranian Revolution from a child's point of view. Written in Shakespearean verse, "Living an Explorer's Desire" is about immigrants. "March" is based on oral histories of eyewitness accounts of the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

Bagatourian, whose constant obsession is man's inhumanity to man, encountered a soul mate in Zinn, the bombardier who turned his back on war and became an avatar exposing atrocities and crimes against humanity. Zinn was also a playwright who wrote "Marx in Soho" and a bio-play about anarchist Emma Goldman.

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## ED RAMPELL: How did you meet Howard Zinn?

BIANCA BAGATOURIAN: Around 2005, I was living in Boston for a while and I'd read Howard's book before. I went to a talk at MIT where he and [Noam Chomsky](#) were speaking and he impressed me so much just by his facility in speaking to the people and how he took difficult political situations and broke them down and made them so easily understandable and avoided all the jargon. Suddenly, I was listening to him and thinking, "Oh, I understand him." This is what I thought. And so I read more and more Howard Zinn books and I thought, "Now I understand what's going on in this country, more than before." When I was in my master's playwriting program I was experimenting with new forms of theatre and I thought, "What about interview theatre?" And I went to meet Howard Zinn and said, "I feel so much of news in this country has been turned into entertainment. Why don't we try and turn entertainment into news?" He smiled and shook my hand and said, "Okay, let's do it." So we started from there and we went on through emails and interviews and phone calls.

What always struck me as interesting is that the first time you'd meet Howard Zinn he'd shake your hand and one of the first things he'd say is: "You know, I was a soldier. You know I dropped bombs when I was young." It was a declaration he'd make to everyone — like a confession. I understood that that was such an important point of his life, and I really wanted to start from there. And for me, I was so affected by soldiers who go to war today. They come back and I see these 24-year-old boys with glazed eyes and they'll never be the same again. It seems like such a crime. I wanted to integrate the stories of these soldiers today going to Afghanistan and Iraq and places around the world with Howard's as a young man.

## Describe the play's style.

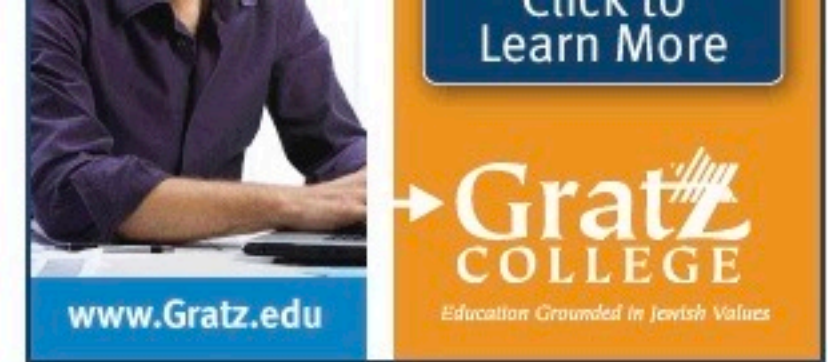
Five actors, two males, three females, all rotate and play Howard Zinn at different times.

## At some point Howard's going to be played by a black woman?

We liked that idea and I ran it by his daughter and she liked that and we know Howard would have loved that. The people play Howard Zinn because he is the voice of the people. In fact, the play has an underpinning of a Greek tragedy structure. It starts off with a prologue, we have the chorus appear and it reiterates what we've just seen. The chorus in a Greek tragedy portrays the voice of the people and it's so perfect because Howard was the voice of the people.

## Tell us about Howard's daughter and her connection to your play?

Myla Kabat-Zinn is a lovely, lovely lady. She took to my play right away and said, "How can I be of help?" She has been my biggest supporter. She has helped me with the estate of Zinn, to get rights for doing this play, getting photographs. Also, I spoke with her a lot, giving me gestures Howard would use. It was sad that Howard was gone. I had questions and I couldn't just call him up anymore! I just loved him. I felt like it was such a loss to humanity, this man I feel has done more for peace in this world than many Nobel Peace Prize winners we could mention.



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## **Who are some of your other producers and backers?**

I'd like to mention [Viggo Mortensen](#), first and foremost, because he was our hero. He was the first person that stepped in and put money down, with no questions. He just said, "As long as it's for Howard." We got Eddie Vedder, wonderful man — he was an inspiration to us because he's got this song, called "Bush Leaguer." He puts on a Bush mask and does this dance, which is an inspiration for a dance in our play.

## **War and crimes against humanity are your recurring themes.**

Being Armenian I find myself writing a lot about genocide and atrocities. I went to Rwanda two years in a row. The first time I went was with the head of playwriting at Brown University, Erik Ehn, to just witness the genocide that happened there. He kept telling me that because of my background I should come one year. Finally, I went the year that my mother died. I was really depressed and needed a change. It was one of the most profound experiences of my life, very life changing. I was in a country where 98% of the kids have no parents and I was mourning my mother. I remember standing in a circle and I said, "My mother just died," and they all started clapping for me. "But you're 40! You've had your mother for 40 years! I've never seen mine! I lost mine when I was 3!" So they were clapping for me and that changed my whole perspective. I was like, wow — what people of genocide go through.

## **Being Armenian, do you feel like a kindred spirit to other peoples who have suffered genocide, such as the Jews?**

Absolutely! Whenever I'm in a genocide museum and read the stories of the survivors what just amazes me is that they could be identical to the stories of my ancestors. We've all been through the same thing — and it still continues.

## **We're talking on a day that Israel is conducting a ground invasion of Gaza and a passenger plane was recently shot down in Ukraine. Can theater stop war?**

I don't know if it can stop war but my idea is that war is the wrong answer. If it's the right answer, how come it just goes on and on and on and we still continue? Killing is not the answer. I don't feel that as human beings we have the right to kill other human beings. I don't understand how war sanctifies that killing. In many countries you're not supposed to kill human beings but then you go to war and it's okay to kill people. Who are we to give ourselves the right to do that?