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Art & Theatre



**UNDERNEATH THE LINTEL:
A SERIOUSLY OVERDUE
LIBRARY BOOK**

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Underneath the Lintel: A seriously overdue library book

BY MICHELLE GENZ

Staff Writer

The comic drama currently on Riverside Theatre's black box stage opens before the play even begins, with the dowdy Dutch librarian who is the play's only character vacuuming the dreary set.

The stunt, complete with actor Jim Van Valen getting his leg repeatedly caught in the cord, only gradually draws the notice of the audience, as chuckles spread throughout the intimate space.

Once all eyes are on Van Valen, the rigid self-control of the librarian he plays quickly begins to boil over, his anger and accusations at whoever left a book in the overnight drop that is more than a century overdue, sputtering out of him. Twice he has to apologize when spittle sprays the audience.

The cracking at the seams of his lonely life is at once funny and pathetic. His obsessiveness over this grievous infraction is laid bare – 113 years! What a fine this guy owes! And what a coward, slipping it through the drop slot.

Rather than stew, he is moved to action: He's got to find him – and nail him good. He takes some vacation days to chase this man down, following a trail of clues that appear – the first being a book mark in the overdue Baedeker's travel guidebook: a claim check from a London cleaners for pants left in 1913 – and never picked up.



James Van Valen stars in *Underneath the Lintel*. PHOTO BY BENJAMIN HAGER

Van Valen's inflexible, stodgy librarian who had never left his hometown of Hoofddorp (except to tour the cheese factory at Gouda; it wasn't making cheese that day), could not be more ill-suited to dealing with the conundrums that follow. The book borrower's trail wallows back and forth in time, years, decades, even centuries out of sync with any comprehensible reality.

The illogic hurtles the librarian into blustery discourse; gob-smacked, he philosophizes to try to make sense of it all, in the process dropping clues about his own lonely life.

The borrower, he is convinced, had to have been the controversial character in Jewish mythology known as the Wandering Jew, a cobbler whose Jerusalem shop happened to be on the road Jesus took to his crucifixion. Jesus in his misery asked for succor at the Jew's doorstep – underneath his lintel, the top part of a door frame, but the crabby man sent him off. In response, Jesus, at least as crabby, cursed him to wander until the second coming. Or so the tale goes: the play has been considered both anti-Semitic and anti-Christian, since neither man is very nice.

All of this we learn because the librarian, fired for taking time off to track down the borrower, has rented a ratty stage to deliver his lecture. While few come to listen, he rants on nonetheless, tracing his "evidences" from London to China, Australia, Germany and finally New York. Van Valen's fine acting never flags, as he puffs up with fury, slamming an eraser on his chalk board to illustrate the next clue amidst billows of dust, and racing with urgency to click to the next slide in his clackity carousel.

As the dust clears for a final time, we realize that, like the Wandering Jew, the librarian's own life – and life for many – is accursed with senseless waiting, until the only point of living is to reach the moment when the aimlessness ends.

Glen Berger, the playwright, is himself Jewish. He wrote the play at the request of a Yale friend who needed something in a hurry to perform at

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a theater festival at Yale University; Berger polished it off in a month, and it premiered at the Yale Summer Cabaret in 1999. When the play was staged off-Broadway, Berger as understudy performed the role 200 times in a 400-show run.

Van Valen, an associate professor of theater and head of acting at Cornell College in Iowa, has perhaps caught a glimpse there of the cloistered self-importance that can afflict the guardians of knowledge. His bio in the play's program notes

states he hasn't acting at Riverside in a decade; we hope to see him again soon.

Riverside C.E.O and producing artistic director Allen Cornell directed the show. He always tells the black box audience how much he loves

the plays staged there and nearly always, it shows.

"Underneath the Lintel" has matinee and evening performances through Sunday, Feb. 8. Tickets are \$40. Call 231-6990 for tickets or go to www.riversidetheatre.com. ■