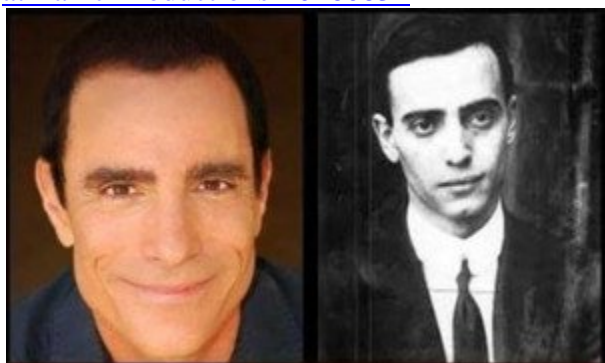




BWW Interviews: Joshua Finkel of PARADE at Panic! Productions

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One of the most heinous crimes of the 20th century was the one in which 13-year-old Atlanta pencil factory worker Mary Phagan was mysteriously murdered in 1913. The suspect, the girl's employer, Leo Frank, was unjustly convicted, mainly on circumstantial evidence as well as prejudice because Frank was Jewish. After being sentenced to hang, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, however, an enraged populace lynched Frank in 1915. The incident helped trigger the revival of the Ku Klux Klan in America.

The Mary Phagan case became a legend. Songs were written about it, a two-part television film was aired in 1988, and in 1998, *Parade*, a Broadway musical about the story, with a score by the highly respected [Robert Brown](#), won two Tonys (for Best Book and for Brown's score), despite closing after only 84 performances. On Friday, September 9, Panic! Productions brings this emotional, tragic story to Ventura County for the first time, with noted actor/director/teacher [Finkel](#) playing the part of Leo Frank. We sat down with Finkel, who is Jewish, to talk about the importance of the show and his emotions in playing the heroic Frank.

VCOS: Normally, when we see you here in the Conejo Valley, you're usually directing. But in this show, you chose to go out for the lead role. Why haven't we seen you as an actor and what is so special to you about *Parade* that you had to go for it?

JOSHUA: Well, I love working with companies out here when I can via an agreement through Actor's Equity. I played Lumiere in Cabrillo's *Beauty and the Beast* and performed with Musical [Guild](#) at the Scherr Forum a great deal as well. Additionally, I performed at the Granada Theater in Santa Barbara in the latest [M. Sherman](#) musical, playing Lew Fields in a musical about Weber and Fields called *Pazzazz!* But often there is not enough time in my schedule, or not enough (or ANY) AEA contracts to make it all work. But this summer I changed my priorities a bit. I wanted to act more so I moved things around to make it happen. Luckily, it worked and I've been acting a lot this summer. I put out some feelers and thankfully, this came through.

VCOS: As far as playing a role in local community theater here, we haven't seen you do that in a while.

JOSHUA: Normally it's a money issue for using an AEA artist, but Leo has been a bucket list role for me. So luckily, Panic! Productions and I made an arrangement with Equity and here I am.

VCOS: Why is this particular show and character on your bucket list?

JOSHUA: It's one of those roles that fits me emotionally and type-wise. I'm right for it. When I researched what he looked like, I said, "Oh, wow, we're actually pretty darn close." Plus there is some interesting family history that I want to honor. Even though he wasn't religious, my father was committed to his Jewish heritage and the establishing of Israel - plus his middle name, ironically, was Leo. He grew up in Brooklyn on Coney Island and experienced a lot of antisemitism in the Army and during various jobs he did in many parts of the country. So after the war, when the Haganah recruited him because they were looking for Jewish pilots to go over and fight for Israel's independence, he volunteered. He was excited that the Jews weren't turning the other cheek, running away, or allowing themselves to be deported.

VCOS: What is the Haganah?

JOSHUA: A Jewish paramilitary organization. The word means "defense." So he helped create and was a part of Squadron 101 in the original Israeli Air Force. So I think there is something about fighting antisemitism that is a big part of my upbringing and very appropriate here, especially with today's political climate. There is so much rhetoric that is fear based and hate based and division based instead of fighting and speaking for inclusion; so I think it's a really important time to do this show. Plus, I think it's the right role for me. As a director, I spend a lot of time fitting actors into a matrix and a picture. And this is one of those roles that really fits me. Plus, I know [Robert Brown](#); I directed the San Francisco premiere of *Songs For a New World* and that's when I first got to know him. So it's nice to be able to be connected to a piece that is not only important to me and I think important to our world right now, but is also written by such a talented colleague. I really love the journey of this show. I think it's important to seek out the truth and not judge a book by its cover; find out what's really going on inside a situation that could become potentially rigged in a certain way or slanted. Find out the whole thing before you make a snap judgment or act out of hearsay, fear or political spin. I think that's what the show's about. But it's especially about the heroic journey of Leo and Lucille, his wife-- how they don't give up and they overturn the decision of death. *Parade* is also about their deep relationship and how they come to find and truly appreciate each other as the show goes on.

VCOS: Was their relationship documented or was this dramatic license on the part of the playwrights?

JOSHUA: It's documented to a certain extent. There is some dramatic license in the show, as there is to some extent in all shows. This currently licensed version is the revival, which has been changed somewhat from the original Broadway production. One of the things I miss is a bigger arc between Leo and his lawyer, Luther Rosser. In the original, you really see Leo standing up to Rosser's ineptitude and eventually firing him and taking on his own defense. In the revival, he is barraged by all this false testimony, conjecture, and lies during the trial but you don't get a chance to see Leo fighting back or having a lot of interaction with Rosser. Leo was a smart guy. He went to Cornell, was trained as a mechanical engineer; he comes from a wealthy, German-based family. Leo was an American, born in Texas, and when he was three months old he moved to Brooklyn. His family was wealthy and were in business. So Leo, as a business man, engineer, and an educated affluent Jewish New Yorker, I think he would know about the law and have several friends who were Jewish and non-Jewish lawyers. So I don't buy the fact that in this revival that he would be so silent and allow all this stuff to fly through the air and not speak up, and not fire Rosser. So I'm trying to bridge this physically because there are no lines that really defend it, only a couple. And I would have loved to see more of Leo's intelligence and fight come out in the courtroom. That's a hard thing to watch - I've seen *Parade* a couple of times, once on Broadway and once in a revival here, and every time I see that court sequence I get so agitated - why isn't he saying anything? Why isn't he fighting? Why is he standing for all this? He's too smart for that. He's not some country bumpkin who doesn't know how the law works or who wouldn't know a million Jewish lawyers from Brooklyn to defend him. In real life, he had a real cracker-jack team. But what is also interesting is that in real life, Leo's lawyer Rosser was an employee of Governor Slaton's law firm! The Governor, who was in the middle of an election cycle, was trying to get a quick conviction for whoever killed Mary Phagan, and I think that is another possible corruption that could be brought out to justify Rosser's ineptitude in this version of *Parade*.

In the book, there is a great "good ol' boys" relationship between the Governor and Dorsey who is the prosecutor. I think he colluded with Dorsey and perhaps even Rosser to quickly convict one of these two guys who were being held as suspects. Sadly, Leo Frank ended up being the target of that plan. The relationship between Slaton and Dorsey is clearly laid out in the book but I suggested that we see and physicalize some sort of secret handshake agreement between Slaton and Rosser even though it's not in the book as a scene, so we understand Rosser's involvement in the scheme of not having Rosser defend Leo well, so he's quickly convicted and ergo assures the Governor's reelection.

VCOS: Tell me about [Robert Brown](#)'s score.

JOSHUA: The music is glorious. It's sweeping, wonderful, and emotional.

VCOS: And it covers a lot of ground, too.

JOSHUA: Yes it does. It has this kind of 1912 Copland Americana with Jason's groove added in. There are some amazing love duets. It's really exciting to sing the music but the stamina you need is intense. It really demands a lot of stamina. It's like singing the "Soliloquy" from *Carousel*. The songs are probably three minutes long but they feel like six minutes because of the energy it takes to do them.

VCOS: Are all the songs in the show like that?

JOSHUA: No, but a few of them are. There are three or four what I call "ride-out" notes where I hang on a high note for seven or eight measures. I have to do that three or four times. So you just have to be on your game.

VCOS: I get the impression that the show has the same kind of feel, with regard to the tragic folk hero, as does another show that depicts an era around this time, and that's *Floyd Collins*.

JOSHUA: *Floyd Collins* has much more of a folk/bluegrass/Appalachian feel to it while this has an easier, more melodic lilt to it. It often has a nice 6/8 pulse to it as well as as an irregular pushed syncopated rhythm at times, going between a 4/4 march melody, or a straight 3/4 or 6/8 waltz feel to an irregular 5/4 melody full of unpredictability. This complexity keeps the audience on it's toes. It can create either a great churning tension in the music or a wonderful soaring, romantic or heroic feel. It's beautiful and it will stir your heart and mind.

VCOS: Would you play this role differently in a large theater as opposed to the small, intimate venue you're playing in?

JOSHUA: You know, I don't know. It might cause me to be larger physically at times.

VCOS: Well, would you consider Leo a larger-than-life character?

JOSHUA: No. Now this is an interesting dichotomy. People speak of him in the play as being "so quiet" and "so sure." But in the book, he's oftentimes very verbal, biting, and combative. So I'm constantly trying to find the physicality where he becomes shy and introverted, stressed and awkward, which people misread as secretive. They take that and they spin it into something evil or covert, like when he rubs his hands or looks at the floor and doesn't look anyone in the eye. "You can tell he's guilty," they're thinking. So the thing that I've looked into that justifies these extremes of behavior is that he's really fastidious and methodical with a pretty intense condition of OCD. I think Leo needs to be in control with everything in his life. And when he doesn't have that control in business, at home, or in his dealings -- and certainly when this false case starts to build around him with an inept lawyer or lots of lies in the press motivated by antisemitism, it causes him great stress and upset. So I'm bringing that into the play, which allows him to glare and get upset if things are not rigorously accurate.

Also, in real life, Leo Frank was president of the Atlanta chapter of the B'nai B'rith, so he was really well respected, a good guy, dependable, and counted upon. And I never tip the hat to imply that he is lecherous or could even possibly be misconstrued as being this abusive, philandering person.

VCOS: Does he get the audience's sympathy at the outset? Is there ever any doubt in their mind that he's innocent?

JOSHUA: I don't really want them to, but I want them to see that he's a little snippy and uptight from his OCD and from his need to control things. But he's involved in charity and things he gives his time to. He does provide very well for his wife, Lucille and even though they are very different, cares about her family. So even though he's not super-intimate or emotionally accessible, he's an honorable guy who is more distracted with putting work first so he can put aside a nest egg for his family. He is shy and somewhat prudish talking about sexual relations in front of their maid, Minnie. But this kind of makes people think he's cold. But I do not see Leo as guilty or devious.

VCOS: As an acting coach, which of the other roles in the show do you consider the meatiest and most challenging?

JOSHUA: His wife Lucille is certainly a great role, but they're all challenging in their own way. For example, the way Leo's lawyer, Rosser, is written, or underwritten, as the case may be, I think it's really challenging to find a way to justify and stay active. What I also love is the redemption Governor Slaton has from the collusive choice he made with Dorsey and Rosser. Because Lucille eventually gets over her embarrassment of being ridiculed in the public eye around this issue and is completely convinced of Leo's innocence, Lucille goes and gets in Slaton's face demanding that he reopen the case, and because there's all this noise coming down from the North saying "what are you doing to this upstanding guy?" Slaton is under all this pressure to do so. I mean, governors were writing in from other states, in real life, protesting this thing. So Slaton relents and he and Lucille personally re-examine the witnesses and find out the truth. The witnesses WERE coached and lied. But because the local public pressure and outrage around Mary's death was so great, there was this cry of "Hang the Jew!", he felt that he couldn't get away with pardoning him completely. So they commuted the sentence from hanging to life imprisonment. Two days afterwards, and this really happened, a lynch mob came, the Knights of Mary Phagan, as they called themselves, stole him from Middlebrook Prison in central Georgia, kidnapped him, and hanged him anyway. Slaton lost the re-election and Dorsey became governor. So it's really interesting, the history behind it all. The Knights of Mary Phagan included the ex-governor of Georgia and the top officials in town. Those were the people who did this, going against the law because of antisemitism. This all happened in August 1915. Three months later, those same people resurged and rebooted the KKK. The KKK was kind of gone for 45 years after the Civil War. As kind of counterpoint, from the B'nai B'rith connection, the Anti-Defamation League, the ADL, was birthed as well, to defend Jews from antisemitism. As Leo says to his captors at the end of the play, right before he is hanged, "I have a feeling that God chose me for a reason." But the warm epicenter of the play is Leo's relationship with Lucille, who keeps fighting for him all the way to the end, and I am so in love with that arc of the story.

VCOS: Why is this such a great time to do this show?

JOSHUA: In our current political and social climate, it's very important to be doing this play now, and for everyone to see this play and understand that this is an absolutely true story and to hear how the political rhetoric of today is absolutely echoed by this. It's not really that long ago - it's just a hundred years ago, but at the same time, in some ways, you think, "Oh my God, here we are again."

VCOS: Especially when you realize that a fringe, extremist group like the one that lynched Leo Frank, is now in control of one of our major political parties.

JOSHUA: Right. And the kind of whirlwind that happened during the trial, based on lies, conjecture, and half-truths, I mean, thank God for Politico to cut through the crap. But there's an amazing parallel to what happens in the play. This is not a conjectured story. This really happened and it can happen again. And in some ways it IS happening again right now. Wake. Up.

[Finkel](#) owns and operates the Creative Combustion Acting Studio and is a sponsor of VC On Stage. *Parade* plays September 9 - 24 at the Hillcrest Center for the Arts in Thousand Oaks. For dates and showtimes, see the VC On Stage Calendar.