

Edward Said back for the Festival

by

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Is Brighton and Hove ‘the place to be’ for *you*. Or are you still searching? If so, Edward Said is your kind of person. A Palestinian, born in 1935 in West Jerusalem (the part which fell to Zionism in 1948), a United States citizen, ‘a minority [Anglican] within the Christian minority [largely Syrian Orthodox] in an Islamic majority setting’, his mother Lebanese, his childhood home Cairo, his schooling British and American, his adopted home New York City, among his passions Western literature and classical music. Could anybody be more out of place? No wonder that he chose this very phrase for the title of his moving autobiography (*Out of Place*, 2000).

I first met Said when he was interviewed by Jacqueline Rose at the Brighton Festival in 1995. I had corresponded with him about a colloquium at Sussex University which I wanted him to address, but his leukaemia and a heavy programme made this impossible. Neither then, nor later, have we spoken for long, but I had the impression of an intense, but caring and approachable man, someone who suffers not only physically but also from the mental turmoil of his people. He is tall, lean and has a shock of black and greying hair; his face has recently taken on a pinched look from which his dark eyes look out almost accusingly at a world which would often prefer to ignore him. As a prophet of our fractured times, he is to some (myself included) a hero, but to others a target for character assassination and even death threats.

Until the fall of the remainder of Palestine in 1967 Said took little interest in politics. As an ambitious American academic his Palestinian identity was his weakest card, particularly in that fateful year with its euphoria at Israel’s swift victory. But Said’s integrity would no longer tolerate such a division of himself. Since then he has maintained with ever-greater vehemence that literature, and the position of the intellectual, cannot be divorced from politics. ‘I guess what moves me mostly is anger at injustice, an intolerance of oppression, and some fairly unoriginal ideas about freedom and knowledge,’ he said in 1976.

Said’s most famous book *Orientalism* (1978), followed up by *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), developed the idea that the West has deep-rooted habits of thought about the East (and other parts of the non-West) and that these serve to justify international crimes. For example, Lord Cromer, the imperial ruler of Egypt, wrote: ‘The mind of the oriental, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description.’ It was such an attitude which enabled Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, to approve in 1917 a policy of settling Jews in Palestine without considering the ‘desires and prejudices’, as he put it, ‘of the 700,000 [Palestinian] Arabs.’

For Said the central question is: ‘Can one divide human reality ... into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?’ His resounding negative leads him, amongst other things, to a radical proposal for peace in his native land. ‘Israel today,’ he writes, ‘is simply not

a purely Jewish state [it has one million Palestinian citizens] and ... Palestine is simply not a purely Palestinian Arab state [400,000 Jewish Israeli settlers live there].’ He concludes that, in collaboration with like-minded Jewish Israelis, the Palestinians should campaign for a binational state in which Jews and non-Jews live together, while retaining their distinctive identities.

The remarkable aspect of Said’s friendship with the Jewish-Israeli musician, Daniel Barenboim, is the extent to which the latter is *not* like-minded. The title of their recently published collected dialogues, *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society* (2002), reflects this difference. Barenboim, champion of the peace process, and Said, who dismisses it as ‘all process and no peace’, barely meet on the political stage. What they share is a passion for music and a belief in its power to reconcile. Barenboim’s controversial conducting of the first Wagner performance in Israel, and their joint creation of an Israeli-Arab youth orchestra are the subject of taboo-breaking discussions.

Had I never encountered Edward Said, I would have become a convert to the Palestinian cause. But his writing has provided me with a breadth of understanding (and not only of this conflict) which I would have struggled to achieve on my own.

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At 7.30 on Sunday 19 May, as part of the Freedom and Independence weekend of the Brighton Festival, Fergal Keane will interview Edward Said. Tickets £10, obtainable at the Dome Box Office. (Brighton & Hove Palestine Solidarity Campaign can be contacted at: BHPSC, PO Box 208, BN1 4WZ.)