

COMMENT

Empty chair at Peres's funeral

ISRAEL
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ONE OF the biggest question marks hanging over the funeral of Israeli founding father Shimon Peres was whether any Arab leaders would attend. As luminaries from 70 countries headed to Jerusalem, people wondered: Would Egypt's President Sisi attend? He sent his foreign minister. Would the Palestinians send a representative? They did: President Abbas himself.

Alongside this speculation, however, was a potent reminder of rifts within Israel that endanger the country's future every bit as much as the frozen peace process. While condolence notes poured in from far and wide, including from Jordan's King Abdullah, the largest grouping of parties representing Israel's Arab minority, the Joint List, announced that it would shun his funeral.

"The Arab public's memory of Peres is different than the narrative about him in recent days," Joint List leader Ayman Odeh stated.

"To Peres's credit, he pursued peace while building a partnership with members of the Arab public, and the evidence is that 90 per cent of the Arab public voted for him in the 1996 elections." But, he added: "There is strong opposition in Arab society to the architect of the occupation who introduced nukes to the Middle East, and I regret that, as president, he elected to support Netanyahu and his policies." He also cited Peres's early enabling of the settlements.

The response to this was one of dismay from most quarters. MK Erel Margalit of the left-wing Zionist Union party said that "the decision of the Arab parties not to respect the moments of bidding farewell to... one of the leaders of the peace camp and pioneers of the peace process, makes one wonder who exactly they represent." Even those on the right, like Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who virulently opposed Oslo, had joined in the public eulogising.

"You were the big hope for coexistence," Odeh — who became leader of the party in 2015 — was told on a TV panel show a few hours after the funeral. By shunning the ceremony, one TV analyst told him, Arabs had missed a chance to "be human beings."

The Joint List was slaughtering a much-cherished sacred cow. The move showed just how delicate the relationship between Israeli's Jewish majority and its 20 per cent Arab minority is, and just how far Jewish and Arab perspectives can diverge when it comes to national symbols like Peres. Such differences relate to the very nature and history of the state, to decades of bad blood.

Hoping that these differences will not get in the way in moments of national crisis or mourning, will only entrench them further.

While he shared in the grief of Peres's family and friends, Odeh explained, on a "political level, this is national mourning. I have no part in it. Not in the narrative, not in the symbols that exclude us." On October 1, Israeli Arabs commemorated

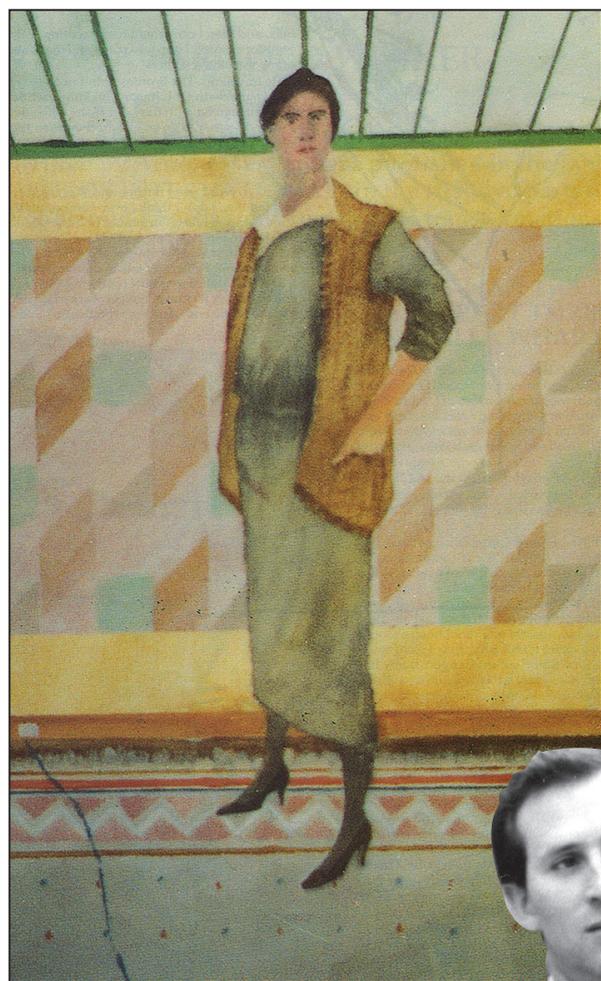
clashes in northern Israel in 2000, in which 13 Arab protesters were killed. "Can anyone feel our pain, or doesn't anyone care," he asked, adding, "I try to feel the historical pain of the Jewish people — the Holocaust, the pogroms... I'm asking Jews to feel my historical pain."

Not so long ago, before Israel was established in 1948, Arabs and Jews were fighting each other under British Mandate rule in territory that now makes up the state. Violence between Arabs and Jews, inside and outside the Green Line, has continued throughout Israel's history. Mohammad Barakeh, head of the High Monitoring Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel, said at a rally marking the 2000 clashes: "We are excluded from all events, and all of a sudden it's important for Israel if we participate in the funeral of Shimon Peres?"

This fraught relationship can easily tip into outright tension, and sometimes violence. We saw it when, on election day last year, Netanyahu warned that Arabs were heading "in droves" to vote. We saw it during the 2014 Gaza war, when most Arabs opposed the war, while most Jews supported it. Alongside peace with the Palestinians, working for a two-state solution, and forging ties with states in the region, Israel needs to heal these rifts for the sake of its future. Peres's successor, incumbent President, Reuven Rivlin, is one of the only public figures who has made this issue a priority.

At the funeral, novelist Amos Oz said that "peace is not only possible, it is inevitable because we have no other place to go, nor do the Palestinians." Neither do Israel's Arab citizens, many of whom identify more with the Palestinian narrative than the Israeli one.

For true, long-term stability, Israelis must face these internal divisions. They are as dangerous for the country's future as the continued impasse in negotiations.



There are no dead ivy leaves. Just a line of washing, a well-chosen chair, a perfect table — and the words! Who has written this, I wonder, and who has made this beautiful staging?

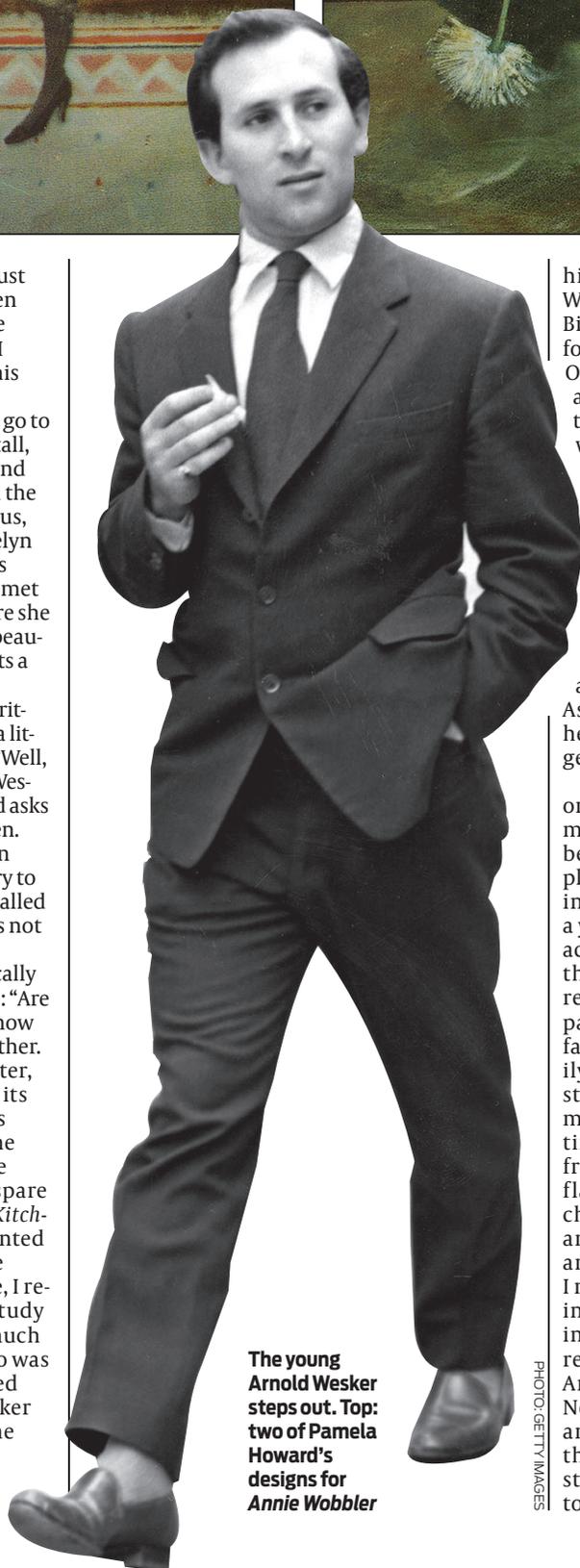
There's a small café, and we go to have a cup of tea. And then a tall, elegant lady comes up to us, and says she knows we come from the Birmingham Rep. She thanks us, and introduces herself as Jocelyn Herbert, the designer. She says she has been in Germany and met Bertolt Brecht and that's where she had learned to "place things beautifully in the space." Thus starts a lifetime's friendship.

I ask her timidly who has written these plays, and suddenly a little jovial man behind us says, "Well, actually, I have — I am Arnold Wesker," and sits down with us and asks us if we liked what we have seen.

"Oh yes," we say and explain that we are staying in Coventry to see them all and something called *Look Back in Anger*. "Well, that's not mine," he says dismissively.

Then he looks at me quizzically and says those familiar words: "Are you...?" And I say: "Yes" and I know we will go on knowing each other.

But, it was several years later, when my career was well on its way that we met again. I was working in France during the '70s and, in Paris, saw Ariane Mnouchkine's marvellous, spare production of Wesker's *The Kitchen*. This was the theatre I wanted to make. Then, in Lyon at the Théâtre Nationale Populaire, I reunited with my old Jewish Study Group friend, the late and much missed Michael Kustow, who was also working there. We talked about the impact of the Wesker plays, and Michael told me he knew the Weskers well, and would introduce me. And so it was that Arnold and



The young Arnold Wesker steps out. Top: two of Pamela Howard's designs for *Annie Wobbler*

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

his wife Dusty (CEO of the Arnold Wesker Industry) invited me to Bishops Road dinners — famous for food and talk and arguments. On the walls were paintings of artists they admired, Philip Sutton, Lisa Dalton and John Allit's wonderful, detailed paintings of Whitechapel life. Apart from words, Arnold loved and appreciated art, and was himself a good artist. He greatly admired the linear drawings of Feliks Topolski — as I did — and this consolidated our connection. There were many readings and even rehearsals in Bishops Road, and later Ashley Road, where Arnold could hear his words live, and we could gently make some suggestions.

In 1982, Arnold was writing his one-woman plays, and invited me to design *Annie Wobbler*, maybe his most autobiographical play, where an old charwoman in the East End transforms into a younger, ambitious writer and academic. Arnold took me and the actress Nichola McAuliffe on research trips to the East End, passing places where my father's family, and Arnold's own family had lived. As we walked the streets, he began telling us his memories. This was the only time I remember Arnold talking freely about his roots. The old flat in Fashion Street had barely changed; it still had the sinks and lavatories on the landings and a rickety wooden staircase. I made numerous on-site drawings, and later four acrylic paintings, and used the details to recreate the on-stage world of *Annie Wobbler*. It started at the New End theatre in Hampstead and went on to the Fortune theatre via the beginning of this story... the Birmingham Repertory Theatre.



Ayman Odeh

PHOTO: AP