



Society : WP Drama  
Production : Two-Gun Cohen  
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Venue : Redbridge Drama Centre, South Woodford

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## Show Report

Sometimes I get to see plays and productions that do more than just entertain. Some make you think, some tell good stories and some educate and inform. For me, Two-Gun Cohen did all of these in a wonderful hour at the Redbridge Drama Centre. The story of Morris Abraham Cohen was not one that had ever touched me and I suspect most of your audiences. How can that be? This was a remarkable biography of an extraordinary man and I am so grateful to Spencer Simmons and WP Drama for bringing it to us.

As a warm-up to an August Edinburgh Fringe run, Jonathan Meyer and Brian Seaton took this opportunity to run the reworked play to two live audiences. The close proximity of the studio at the RDC looks to be a similar venue to the 52-seat capacity of the Space On The Mile where your production is playing and I hope taking the play to Edinburgh proves as exciting as it sounds.

The theatrical challenge is how to keep an audience engaged in an unfamiliar story about someone they've not heard of, with little movement, just two characters, no plot twists and little set, costumes or props. There isn't even a development of the relationship between Morris and Seymour to hang onto. This could have been a fascinating lecture or talk with PowerPoint slides to aid the audience but then we wouldn't have got to meet Morris and heard his story from the man himself. In truth, this raw telling comes down to the unaided, safety net free, abilities of the writers and performers. For me and the intense atmosphere of the audience I was part of, you held our attention completely. We were engaged and engrossed in this story, so much so I could have taken another 30 – 40 minutes.

### Writing

The writing of this well-researched story was made up of many remarkable anecdotes. This resulted in the audience never getting stuck or bored with one aspect as we were always onto another story and with the promise of the two guns explanation coming soon. The use of the two characters gave a format more like a chat show or An Audience With... production. I've seen many Evenings With ... as a celebrity, sportsperson or politician recounts stories of their career and most use a journalist or presenter to keep the stories moving and on track. This was the type of format used in Two-Gun Cohen and it worked very well. We were told early on that Morris was "pretty good at talking" and later "you may have noticed". This gave permission, if it were needed, for Morris to tell his story.

The history information given by both Morris and Seymour was well signposted and kept to an accessible overview. The elements of the Chinese political landscape and main players were well explained and I was able to follow most of the unfamiliar wars, civil wars and political manoeuvrings. The notes in the programme were a great help to look back on afterwards.

At Spencer's suggestion I did read his article on the [www.twogunscohen.co.uk](http://www.twogunscohen.co.uk) website. I also found that a Two-Gun Cohen Google search provides plenty of further information and insights, again how have I missed this?

## **The Players**

Brian Seaton started us off explaining Seymour's backstory relationship with Morris. Not always best of friends but someone to talk to where there was 'little else to do'. Having established that relationship, Seymour was well placed to start the fascination with Morris and in that way represent the listening audience as all good chat show hosts do. Brian displayed the manner of a man of the foreign office, born in China and now part of the Consulate, and made Seymour very believable. His pace, diction and characterisation were very good and the fondness that developed for Morris meant the solo ending felt genuine and believable.

Jonathan Meyer was truly outstanding as Morris Cohen. His rapid pace of delivery pushed the narrative onwards throughout, only letting up to make a considered point either through laughter or a pertinent remembrance. Jonathan took us to the places Morris experienced; the London streets, the boxing ring, Canadian ham and eggs, the cards, dice and pistols, the reading of the Torah on the Sabbath, even the Farnborough Military Hospital were all brought to life. We met the people Morris met; Pedler Palmer, Harry, his father and mother, (who he respected and feared) Bobby the cowhand and of course Dr and Madam Sun. The break into the accents were fun and authentic in a Damon Runyon style which, at times, the writing appeared to have a nod to. Morris's admiration for Dr Sun shone through and we understood why "he'd be ready to follow" him. We also saw his admiration for the beauty of Madam Sun in a lovely moment when the pace dropped and Jonathan's face showed the fondness and love he had for her.

Jonathan's pace and attack in telling the story was complemented wonderfully by purposeful gestures and facial expressions. I often find myself telling amateur actors to stand still, stop moving your arms, calm down, but in Jonathan's approach this heavily animated style aided the story telling, audience engagement and character of Morris. It was wonderful to watch and admire and showed that when done appropriately, with skill and discipline, an animated style can add so much to a performance.

I liked Morris's casualness towards the interrogation and then his pain of the aftermath of the torture. His gruff rolling accent seems a genuine East London/Canadian drawl - a voice of a life well lived. The 'true story' of the Edinburgh surgeon was brought to life by the accurate accent and aside to the audience. As was the "her words not mine", which brought a laugh.

Overall, Jonathan's Morris Abraham Cohen was absorbingly believable. Jonathan became Morris. We saw Morris being interviewed; this was An Evening with... Morris Cohen, the real person. An extraordinary portrayal for over an hour, very well done.

The run in Edinburgh will increase the familiarity of the dialogue for both actors and no doubt the words will come easier with each performance. There were certainly a lot to commit to memory and congratulations on that impressive feat.

## **Direction**

The bare stage furnished with thin grey blankets, pots and pails was powerful in itself and will help with easy transportation to Edinburgh. The opening sound effects of the use of the pail was a good attention grabber and this was made reference to when the two men were eating. The stillness of the piece was augmented by the two stools which allowed for some variance in height and positioning of the two actors. The sleep scene following the torture provided a different picture with Seymour

on his knees and Morris sitting on the floor. These few variants worked well and gave some variety to the main centre stage focus.

The Japanese voice overs from Kunio Hino gave authenticity and felt worryingly Big Brother from the unseen captors. The way Morris was troubled by the pains and injuries from the beatings reminded us of the horror of his experience at Kowloon without this becoming sensationalised or overly dominant to the play. The hesitant hug of the two men at the end was fittingly touching and an awkward show of affection in that time and place.

Brian's solo piece in spotlight explaining what happened next, brought the story to a fitting conclusion and the banner showing Ma Kun's tombstone was an interesting addition. The violin playing as a back drop in the Klezmer style was also a lovely touch.

I was in admiration of Jonathan and Brian who didn't appear distracted by the numerous latecomers on Thursday evening. The side door to the studio is partially on stage and latecomers are unable to make a silent subtle entrance. Both actors ploughed on through without missing a beat which was impressive. I appreciate it's difficult to find a place to admit latecomers but in managing a smooth running of the play, I would consider a different strategy than that exercised on Thursday.

I didn't really understand the choice of costumes. Both matching and simplistic, almost neutral, but a strange choice I thought. You presumably discussed different clothing and made a conscious decision to go black trousers and white shirts. Might I suggest you think again before Edinburgh and perhaps consult other trusted friends. The props were authentic, the costumes were not.

I feel privileged to have witnessed this project. A well written, well-researched biography brought to the stage by a small team of talented performers and directors. I wish you all well for Edinburgh and wonder where the story of Two-Gun Cohen will take you all after that.

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