

REVIEW

In Seven Days, a new family drama by Jordi Mand, explores the impact of MAiD through a Jewish lens

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Shaina Silver-Baird as Rachel and Ron Lea as Sam in In Seven Days.

HANDOUT

- **Title:** In Seven Days
- **Written by:** Jordi Mand
- **Director:** Philip Akin
- **Actors:** Shaina Silver-Baird, Ron Lea, Mairi Babb

- **Company:** Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company
- **Venue:** The Greenwin Theatre at the Meridian Arts Centre
- **City:** Toronto
- **Year:** Runs to May 16, 2024

Assisted suicide, mercy killing, death with dignity, the right to die – the language has regularly evolved, but whether and when it is appropriate to help a loved one end their life have been a matter of debate in plays since the beginning of Western theatre.

Indeed, the word “euthanasia” comes from the Greek for “easy death,” and the subject comes up in the tragedies of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles.

In *Women of Trachis*, for instance, Sophocles presents arguments for and against in his dramatization of the myth of Herakles, who asks his son, Hyllus, to place his ailing body on a pyre and light it.

Hyllus: “This is too much to ask – to murder you and thus pollute myself by killing my own blood.”

Herakles: “You will be curing my disease – you alone will be the healer dealing with my pain.”

Will this age-old dramatic tradition – found from Henrik Ibsen’s 1881 problem play *Ghosts* to Brian Clark’s 1980s issue play *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, to name just two – evolve or die in the wake of legal medical assistance in dying (MAID) in Canada?

In *Seven Days*, Jordi Mand’s new play, now at Toronto’s Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company, explores MAID in a Jewish context and gives a sense of how ancient emotions remain even as the dramatic stakes have diminished.

Sam (Ron Lea), a Jewish lawyer in an unnamed Canadian city, whose cancer has returned and spread, has sought medical assistance to end his suffering – but tells his adult daughter, Rachel (Shaina Silver-Baird), just seven days before he plans to end his life.

Shelley (Mairi Babb), Sam’s much younger partner, has had more time to take in the news and seems to accept it – or has given up on trying to convince him otherwise.



In *Seven Days* is slice-of-life, rather than a will-he, won't-he suspenseful drama, or dramatized religious debate, and as a result it sometimes lacks drive. HANDOUT

Rachel, however, feels her father is asking too much of her to accept and be there for his death. She enlists Eli (Ralph Small), Sam's friend since childhood and also his rabbi, to talk him out of it.

Eli reminds Sam that, in the Jewish tradition, the preservation of life is paramount and it is forbidden to shorten it. He repeats to Sam, in Hebrew and then in English, the commandment "Thou shall not murder." He says Sam is committing murder – as is the gentile doctor who will be assisting him.

Does Eli really believe this? This scene is the one in which the subject of assisted death is mostly heatedly discussed – but one of many in which Mand pulls back from complete confrontation between characters. Her instinct is to move toward reconciliation and understanding – and her play is ultimately about how the people who love Sam come to accept and are changed by his decision.

That *In Seven Days* is slice-of-life, rather than a will-he, won't-he suspenseful drama, or dramatized religious debate, means it sometimes lacks drive. It's not quite a comedy, though there are many laughs to be found, starting with an amusing argument between Shelley and Rachel about poppyseed versus sesame seed Montreal-style bagels.

Among the performances, I liked how Babb resisted being likeable as Shelley, and I also appreciated how Brendan McMurtry-Howlett as Darren, Rachel's ex-boyfriend of seven years, introduced a little edge in a confrontational scene with Sam.

While this is the strongest piece of writing I've seen from Mand in many ways, she does sandpaper away too many of the complexities of the situation for my taste. The safe style is captured in the way Rachel drops the occasional curse word only to have Shelley always scold her – "Language!"



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In Seven Days did seem effective, however, in moving an audience, judging by the tears on opening night. The play is receiving a highly polished production,

with Philip Akin's strong direction most visible in how he sews everything together with silent, sped-up interstitial scenes.

The Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company recently announced its 2024-2025 season, and I see Human Cargo's production of *The Runner* is on the playbill after a succession of runs were subject to pandemic- and then protest-assisted early ends.

This seems like a good time to set the record straight: During the furor over the show's recent cancellations in British Columbia, it was inaccurately described by the PuSh Festival as an Israel-set production created by artists with "no religious or cultural ties to the region."

But the Jewish artists who were part of *The Runner*'s creative team included the late director Daniel Brooks, who also acted as dramaturge; he was responsible for the astounding union of physical elements in the production that struck me as saying as much about moral murkiness as anything in playwright Christopher Morris's text.

A theatrical production is the complete work of art; a script is just a component. This is too often forgotten – and it bothered me that it was lost in this discussion.

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