



[Home](#) / [Drama](#) / [The Great Divide – Finborough Theatre, London](#)

# The Great Divide - Finborough Theatre, London

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**Writer:** [Alix Sobler](#)  
**Director:** [Rory McGregor](#)  
**Reviewer:** [Stephen Bates](#)

105 years on from the events that it depicts, Alix Sobler’s new play could hardly be more topical. She makes the point herself that her account of the struggles of immigrants to integrate into a new society is timeless and need not relate to any specific groups – she tells us that they could be Ukrainians, Poles etc, but she makes her central character, Rosa, a Jew fleeing persecution in Russia during the first decade of the 20th Century.

The 90-minute one-act play, getting its world premiere here, is inspired by a real-life blaze at a shirt factory in 1911, in which 146 people perished, 130 of them women, mostly recent immigrants. Today, such a place would be in a Third World country and labelled a “sweat shop”, but then it was in Lower Manhattan and considered respectable. Rosa was to discover that this “promised land” would be quick to renege on its promises.

As played by Hannah Genesius, Rosa is a fiery and stubborn idealist, bringing with her to the United States many of the revolutionary thoughts then germinating in her home country. She travels with her sister Sadie (Miztii Rose Neville), who marries and becomes pregnant, leaving Rosa to earn a measly wage in the shirt factory under an unforgiving boss (Michael Kiersey). Rosa joins forces with her friend Manya (Emma King), who has a gift for writing poetry, to tell her story and that of other immigrants.

Sobler’s writing is angry and compassionate, but she finds room for humour and touching romance, particularly in the fumbling courtship between Rosa and her ardent suitor, Jacob (Josh Collins). Manya’s speech, detailing a future that will never come about is heartbreaking, as is Rosa’s resolution when she participates in gruelling strike action to improve factory conditions. The actors take on multiple roles and, under Rory McGregor’s direction, the ensemble playing is exemplary.

On a traverse stage, McGregor uses sounds and movement to inject energy and propel the production. The characters haul around trunks and suitcases to emphasise that they have not quite found a permanent home and Sebastian Noel’s plain period costume designs give them fitting dignity.

Sobler’s point is that the suffering and sacrifices of her imagined characters in this real but perhaps forgotten tragedy advanced the movement towards social change. Her play is a powerful and passionate reminder that small lives can make a big difference.

**Runs until 20 September 2016 | Image: Graeme Braidwood**


## Review Overview


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★★★★★

Powerful and passionate

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