

The Mistake

A drama on the beginning of the nuclear age by Michael Mears

Claudia Delpero

Claudia Delpero edits Europe Street News (europestreet.news). She saw the play at the Arcola Theatre in London in February 2023.

‘An atomic bomb doesn’t just fall, someone has to drop it,’ is the testimony of an 80-year-old woman who lost her husband in Hiroshima, in 1945. Nomura Shigeko, a young woman at that time, interpreted by British-born Japanese actress Emiko Ishii, repeats that statement on stage with all the exasperation of a survivor.

The responsibility for that bomb, it turns out, was not just with the person who dropped it, but also with several others whom Michael Mears, author and lead performer, brings together in his play *The Mistake*.

Powerful and heart stopping, *The Mistake* explores the circumstances that led to the dropping of the first nuclear bomb, a catastrophe close to the end of World War Two. The action takes place in Budapest, Berlin, London, Chicago, Washington, Long Island, Tinian Island and Hiroshima, with Michael Mears brilliantly interpreting the key figures involved.

He is the ingenious Hungarian-German-American scientist Leo Szilard, inventor of the bomb, and daring General Paul Tibbets, pilot of the plane who dropped it. He is also Albert Einstein, who alerted US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt that Nazi Germany was attempting to build an atomic weapon; Enrico Fermi and Robert Oppenheimer, the physicists who participated in the creation of the first nuclear reactor and nuclear test explosions; and President Roosevelt himself, who greenlighted the project.

Michael Mears has been working as an actor for four decades, in theatre, film and television. He has written and performed three solo plays for the stage and seven for

BBC Radio 4. His 1990s show about homelessness, *Soup*, won *The Scotsman* Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival. He performed his more recent play, *This Evil Thing*, about Britain's World War One conscientious objectors, more than 100 times across Britain and the United States. His film and television appearances include *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Little Dorrit*, *The Good Soldier Schwejk* and *Last Night in Soho*, as well as *Parade's End*, *Sanditon* and *The Crown*.

Michael decided to explore the topic of nuclear weapons in 2002. On the anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing that year, he read two interviews in *The Guardian*: one with General Paul Tibbets, the other with poet Fumiko Miura, a survivor of the second atomic bomb, launched over Nagasaki a few days after the first one at Hiroshima.

'I thought it would be fascinating to think of a drama where the elderly pilot meets a survivor and is confronted with what he did,' Mears says.

He started to research the project and to take inspiration from the journal of a survivor. But it was only around the 75th anniversary of the end of World War Two, in 2020, that the idea took shape.

'The Hungarian scientist discovering the nuclear chain reaction, Leo Szilard, was fascinating to me. He was a brilliant physicist, passionate about science and experimentation but at the same time he was really anti-war. There was a complete revolution in his thinking that this weapon should never be used and yet he helped to build it. He had guilt about what he had done, whereas the pilot had not. There are these two contrasting male roles, alongside the story of the female survivor, so building and dropping the bomb are dovetailed with its actual effect,' Mears adds.

'The other thing I learnt is that this is a complex story and it is not black and white. Learning how difficult the military mission was, the meticulousness with which it was prepared, the skills and commitment it required was eye opening. You sort of respect the persons even though you disagree with them,' he continues.

'Probably my biggest insight is that people's motives are rarely straightforward, they are often complex, involving all kinds of deals and compromises with themselves. There are no villains – only people doing what they believe to be right at the time. But sometimes what they believe is right can lead to catastrophic consequences for others.'

The narrative of the play reflects this complexity linking science, politics and personal stories. It is informative, as it explains events without being one-sided. It is moving as it connects history to life and the emotions of the people who were at the centre of it. It also leaves the audience with many questions, topics for discussion and probably a desire to know more.

Do we need war to appreciate peace? Do we need a tragedy of these proportions – the two atomic bombings killed between 129,000 and 226,000 people – to bring an end to war? What other technologies is science developing that could be used with fatal consequences by ‘mistake’?

‘On a broader scale, it is my hope that the play, as well as being a dramatic and moving theatrical experience, will also provoke debate, informed debate. I am a pacifist and I hope that audience members who are not opposed to nuclear weapons will think more deeply about what this entails and what the prospects of a nuclear conflagration would mean for the planet. Above all, I hope that the play will change the hearts and minds of those who are not convinced about nuclear disarmament – and strengthen the hearts and minds of those who are,’ says Michal Mears.

The Mistake was performed twice in London in July 2022, at the Edinburgh Festival in August 2022, and again in London, at the Arcola Theatre, in February 2023. It returned to the Arcola in April, and will tour Britain in the autumn of 2023.

The Mistake — Upcoming dates

September

Fri 8th Dartington, Devon, Studio 1 (to be confirmed)
Tue 12th Chester, Wesley Methodist Church
Wed 13th Caernarfon (NW Wales), Galeri Theatre
Thu 14th Aberystwyth Arts Centre (West Wales)
Sat 16th Wickenby, Lincolnshire, Broadbent Theatre
Wed 20th Stratford-on-Avon, Bearpit
Thu 21st Cardiff, Sherman Theatre Studio
Fri 22nd Sibford School, Banbury
Sat 23rd Walton-on-Thames, Riverhouse Barn Arts Centre
Sun 24th Chichester Arts Centre
Thu 28th Hull, Hull Truck Studio
Fri 29th Cambridge, Corpus Playroom (7pm)
Sat 30th Cambridge, Corpus Playroom (7pm)

October

Wed 4th Doncaster, McAuley Catholic High School
Thu 5th Pontefract, Ackworth Quaker School
Sat 7th York, Theatre Royal Studio
Tue 10th York, Bootham Quaker School

Wed 11th Bewdley Festival

Thu 12th Midland Arts Centre, Birmingham, Hexagon Theatre

Fri 13th Northampton, Royal and Derngate — Underground

Sat 14th Northampton, Royal and Derngate — Underground

Tue 17th Birmingham, St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic School

Thu 19th Diss, Corn Hall

Fri 20th Aldeburgh, Jubilee Hall

Sat 21st Bury St. Edmunds, Quaker Meeting House

Mon 30th Canterbury Festival

*Other dates may be added including, possibly, in Berlin.
michaelmears.org*

Szilard Petition to President Truman ►

In July 1945, Leo Szilard and 69 co-signers from the Manhattan Project wrote to US President Truman asking him to consider his moral responsibilities when deciding to use the atomic bomb. They wrote:

'The development of atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this direction, and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of their future development.'

The efforts of Szilard's and other scientists associated with the Manhattan Project did not prevent Truman from authorising use of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. Nevertheless, Szilard and other scientists continued their campaign to warn the world of the dangers presented by atomic weapons and the opening of the atomic age. Szilard continued to probe the moral implications of the atomic and nuclear age in his writings and research. His short story collection, *The Voice of the Dolphins*, provides fascinating insights of relevance today.

Image source: <http://www.dannen.com/decision/index.html>

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July 17, 1945

A PETITION TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Discoveries of which the people of the United States are not aware may affect the welfare of this nation in the near future. The liberation of atomic power which has been achieved places atomic bombs in the hands of the Army. It places in your hands, as Commander-in-Chief, the fateful decision whether or not to sanction the use of such bombs in the present phase of the war against Japan.

We, the undersigned scientists, have been working in the field of atomic power. Until recently we have had to fear that the United States might be attacked by atomic bombs during this war and that her only defense might lie in a counterattack by the same means. Today, with the defeat of Germany, this danger is averted and we feel impelled to say what follows:

The war has to be brought speedily to a successful conclusion and attacks by atomic bombs may very well be an effective method of warfare. We feel, however, that such attacks on Japan could not be justified, at least not unless the terms which will be imposed after the war on Japan were made public in detail and Japan were given an opportunity to surrender.

If such public announcement gave assurance to the Japanese that they could look forward to a life devoted to peaceful pursuits in their homeland and if Japan still refused to surrender our nation might then, in certain circumstances, find itself forced to resort to the use of atomic bombs. Such a step, however, ought not to be made at any time without seriously considering the moral responsibilities which are involved.

The development of atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this direction, and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of their future development. Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.

If after this war a situation is allowed to develop in the world which permits rival powers to be in uncontrolled possession of these new means of destruction, the cities of the United States as well as the cities of other nations will be in continuous danger of sudden annihilation. All the resources of the United States, moral and material, may have to be mobilized to prevent the advent of such a world situation. Its prevention is at present the solemn responsibility of the United States--singled out by virtue of her lead in the field of atomic power.

The added material strength which this lead gives to the United States brings with it the obligation of restraint and if we were to violate this obligation our moral position would be weakened in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes. It would then be more difficult for us to live up to our responsibility of bringing the unloosed forces of destruction under control.

In view of the foregoing, we, the undersigned, respectfully petition: first, that you exercise your power as Commander-in-Chief, to rule that the United States shall not resort to the use of atomic bombs in this war unless the terms which will be imposed upon Japan have been made public in detail and Japan knowing these terms has refused to surrender; second, that in such an event the question whether or not to use atomic bombs be decided by you in the light of the considerations presented in this petition as well as all the other moral responsibilities which are involved.

R Shapp
R M Mulliken

EP Wigzell
Georges D. Monod
Leo Szilard

J. G. Wilson
W. F. Zachariasen
Francis R. S. Hooka
John A. Simpson
Walter Barstow
John R. Howe

Frank Foot

