

HOLOCAUST THESE ARE REAL PEOPLE WHO LIVED AND ARE NO LONGER WITH US'

Inspired by 'Hamilton,' diverse docudrama based on survivor testimony is touring US

In under an hour, 'Survivors' touches on Nazi racial laws, Kristallnacht, and the Kindertransport rescue. 'The survivors in the play are warning us,' says playwright Wendy Kout

By **MATT LEBOVIC** Today, 6:03 am



Almanya Narula, Nyani Totty and Sheer Aviram in the West Coast production of playwright Wendy Kout's 'Survivors,' May 2023 (Photo: Katherine Kohl)

A few days after playwright Wendy Kout was asked to create a play about Holocaust survivors, white supremacists took to the streets of Charlottesville with chants against Jews and immigrants.

“Those tiki torches lit a fire under me,” Kout told The Times of Israel. “That’s when the urgency of this play was fully underscored.”

Wanting audiences to connect with the Holocaust through eyewitness testimony, Kout wrote “Survivors,” a docudrama commissioned by CenterStage of Rochester, New York. Since 2017, the play has toured North America with a new cast for each region.

“The survivors in the play are warning us,” said Kout, a veteran TV writer who co-produced the “Survivors” West Coast tour.

In early May, the company performed at Adat Ari El, a progressive Conservative congregation in Los Angeles. The audience of 250 included community leaders and students who’d recently participated in March of the Living.

The West Coast “Survivors” cast, said Kout, is unlike previous casts.



Actress Almany Narula portrays Holocaust survivor Ellen Lewinsky in ‘Survivors,’ Los Angeles, May 2023 (Photo: Kathrine Kohl)

“This is a diverse cast of various backgrounds and various races,” said Kout, who was inspired by the Broadway phenomenon “Hamilton.”

In just one hour of stage time, Kout’s survivors touch on many turning points in the timeline of the Holocaust, including the Nazi racial laws, Kristallnacht, and the Kindertransport rescue. Photographs of those events are projected behind the actors, adding to the play’s authenticity.

“We chart history through these personal accounts,” said Kout. “This helps people experience history in the most human way, and that is through the heart.”



Scene from playwright Wendy Kout’s ‘Survivors,’ Los Angeles, May 2023 (Photo: Kathrine Kohl)

Since touring Rochester, “Survivors” has been performed at theaters and schools in Philadelphia and Victoria, Canada.

Before rehearsals begin, cast members are invited to learn about the men and women they portray, including the opportunity to view the testimony used by Kout to develop the play.

“These are more than characters,” said Kout. “These are actual people who lived and are no longer with us. We all carry that responsibility to honor those people and their stories,” said Kout, who — along with co-producer Genie Benson — arranged a tour of Holocaust Museum LA for the West Coast cast.



(From left) Genie Benson, co-producer; Wendy Kout, playwright and co-producer, and Evie Abat, director of the west coast tour of ‘Survivors,’ Los Angeles, May 2023 (Photo: Chrisy He)

After each “Survivors” performance, the actors take questions from the audience. Some actors connect their own painful heritage to aspects of the Holocaust, while others respond to students’ questions about, for example, what it’s like to act in a play.

The play’s West Coast premiere took place at Calabasas High School in May, and was attended by 500 students. By the end of the show, said Benson, all of the students had stopped looking at their phones.

‘It’s not the elders looking back’

Throughout “Survivors,” audience members are addressed directly by the actors.

“But we in Germany are not safe... and it’s not just the Jews who are endangered,” says survivor Ellen Lewinsky, who hid from the Nazis in a small factory near Hitler’s bunker.



Actor Casey Adler portrays Holocaust survivor Henry Silberstern in ‘Survivors,’ Los Angeles, May 2023 (Photo: Kathrine Kohl)

“Hitler declares there are other ‘undesirables’ poisoning his pure Aryan race,” says Lewinsky. “Gay people, black people, priests, anyone physically or mentally challenged, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the Roma and Sinti people. We are all hated and persecuted.”

After Lewinsky speaks about the genocidal worldview of Nazi Germany, she adds, “Some of you in the audience may experience this kind of abuse and injustice... and fear.”

Breaking the fourth wall helps engage young people in the experience, said Kout, as does having the action take place in live-time, as opposed to characters recollecting the past.



Scene from playwright Wendy Kout's 'Survivors,' Los Angeles, May 2023 (Photo: Kathrine Kohl)

“It’s not the elders looking back. It’s them as it’s happening. The audience is going through the shock in real-time, and that’s more connective emotionally,” said Kout.

The Adat Ari El audience of “Survivors” included several elected officials, one of whom shared his opinion of the play with The Times of Israel.

“This is the kind of work California’s Holocaust Education Council is looking to offer to public schools around California,” said state senator Henry Stern.



Scene from playwright Wendy Kout's 'Survivors,' Los Angeles, May 2023 (Photo: Kathrine Kohl)

“This is an access point for the uninitiated, that’s somehow familiar and horrifying,” said Stern, the son of actor Daniel Stern.

“The play is a way to break and vivify the history of hate that can survive beyond this last generation of survivors,” said Stern.

To bring “Survivors” to much larger audiences online, two versions of the production will be recorded in Rochester this summer: the play itself and a “making of” documentary, said Kout.

‘Others are not so lucky’

At the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, survivor Henry Silberstern was selected by Josef Mengele to be a “Birkenau boy,” a group of adolescent boys chosen by the SS physician for slave labor.



Scene from playwright Wendy Kout's 'Survivors,' Los Angeles, May 2023 (Photo: Kathrine Kohl)

“We have many jobs in all parts of the camp... and at the railway station... where the incoming families are forced to leave their suitcases as they are marched off to die or become slave laborers,” says Silberstern in “Survivors.”

At 12 years old, Silberstern was deported with his relatives and friends to Auschwitz, where most of them were murdered. Silberstern found ways to survive while other “Birkenau boys” — there were 89 in total — perished alongside him.

“I am lucky and find a pair of boots in a suitcase,” said Silberstern. “These boots keep me warm and probably save my life. Others are not lucky. Almost all of the 89 boys’ families are gassed and cremated there.”



Scene from playwright Wendy Kout's 'Survivors,' Los Angeles, May 2023 (Photo: Kathrine Kohl)

After liberation, Silberstern returned to his hometown near Prague, where as a 15-year-old he was placed in an orphanage. Seizing the first opportunity to leave Europe, Silberstern traveled to Canada, where he gained citizenship and built a family.

“We lost more than our childhoods in the Holocaust. We lost our families and our best friends. My brother, Rolf, was both to me,” says Silberstern.

“Survivors” closes with each of the 10 survivors explaining some of the life lessons they’ve learned.



West Coast cast of playwright Wendy Kout's 'Survivors,' in a pre-show ritual, Los Angeles, May 2023 (courtesy)

"That's life. You find a new dream and make it come true," says survivor Helen Przysuskier Levinson.

Another survivor, Rosemarie Marianthal Molser, gives advice about not hating.

"I didn't hate. Hatred is like drinking poison and hoping the person you hate will die," she says.

From the perspective of “Survivors” West Coast co-producer Genie Benson, the play is about resilience. “People come out of ‘Survivors’ feeling they want to help and that there is hope,” said Benson, for whose late mother — [survivor Sidonia Lax](#) — the Adat Ari El performance was dedicated.

Each of the play’s survivors, said Kout, “went through this horror and came through [the other side](#) to build meaningful, contributing, beautiful lives.”