

## ARTS&ENTERTAINMENT

### ‘SURVIVORS’ fuses with on-stage diversity

By URIEL PEIZER

OCTOBER 2, 2023



(photo credit: Kathrine Kohl)

A play that is currently being staged in schools and theaters throughout the US provides an innovative and inclusive approach to teaching the Holocaust.

*SURVIVORS* teaches about the Shoah through the various testimonies of 10 survivors. According to playwright and co-producer Wendy Kout, what differentiates this play from others on the subject is the diverse cast that consists of and reaches out to non-Jewish ethnic groups.

Auditions were open to all, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or gender. However, one of the main goals was to cast young actors who could accurately portray the survivors at the age they were when the Holocaust was taking place.

It's not an original idea to cast minority groups in plays where normally the setting would be an all-white cast. Other plays, such as those staged by Shakespeare In the Park's producer Joseph Papp in New York City, have been performed by diverse actors. Another great example is *Hamilton: An American Musical*, with a diverse cast in which minorities take center stage and embody the main roles.

According to Kout, young audiences who watch these diverse young actors on stage are able to identify with them on a deeper level that further connects them to the subject matter.



95-YEAR-OLD Holocaust survivor David Lenga speaks after witnessing a performance of the play. (credit: Kathrine Kohl)

“The capacity to connect to more people and create empathy between us is so important in this divisive time. We want our cast to be diverse because our audiences are diverse. We are trying to create a bridge of understanding,” said Kout.

The play focuses on 10 different survivors’ testimonies, handpicked to be presented to schools around North America. There are currently five productions of SURVIVORS playing all over the country and also heading to Canada. The Stand With Us Holocaust Education Center has been working closely with the production to be able to bring the play to different schools all across the country and help combat antisemitism in schools. A close friend of Kout’s was the artistic director of the Center Stage Theater commissioned in 2017 to write the Holocaust-teaching play to tour schools in Rochester, New York. The impetus was the creation of a program that would bring survivors to schools to talk about their experiences. As more survivors died or became too frail, the program was shut down. Kout was asked to bring that kind of testimony to the stage.

“One month after I got commissioned to write a play about Holocaust survivors there was a major antisemitic event that took place in Charlottesville, Virginia where neo-Nazis were marching outside with lit torches screaming the “The Jews will not replace us!” and that’s when I realized I wasn’t just writing a history play – I was writing a warning play. This heavily motivated me in my work and encouraged me to say never is indeed now,” Kout said.

### **10 is a sacred number**

KOUT EXPLAINED that she chose 10 survivor testimonies because in Judaism, 10 is a sacred number. In Judaism, you need 10 to complete a minyan (prayer quorum). “It was incredibly difficult to choose the final 10 Holocaust survivor testimonies because each story deserves its own play, each story is unique in its own way and should be heard by all,” she said.

One of the greatest challenges was that the play needed to be an hour long and it needed to be able to tell the entire history of the Holocaust; this played a role in selecting survivors’ testimonies whose narrative echoed the timeline of the Holocaust.

The rise of Fascism, the birth of the Hitler youth, the miracle of the Kindertransports – all the major events that took place during the Holocaust were what Kout was looking to portray through the survivors’ testimonies that she chose to highlight on stage. Kout looked for love stories, humanity, and hope in the testimonies she chose to become messages transmitted to her audiences in schools and theatres.

Accuracy was of paramount importance to Kout so she consulted with and received support and assistance from many Holocaust educators across the country who are involved in the fields of Holocaust history and combatting antisemitism.

Kout mentioned that as she adds or makes changes in her play, she is always on the lookout for what is going on in today's world: "How can I make the Holocaust relevant to the antisemitism that we are currently seeing and trying to combat. What is the connectivity to what is happening today and how does that parallel the Holocaust." Examples are the recent book burnings and book bannings that were recently added to her play to make her audience contemplate our current world problems where book burning and banning are not something from the past but happening all across America. This topic is later discussed with students during the Q and A session after the play ends, where the actors give examples of the books that were banned.

Genie Benson, the producer of SURVIVORS, attended high school and college with Wendy Kout. When Benson read an article about the play as it toured New York and Philadelphia, she called Kout and suggested expanding it to other locations.

Both of Benson's parents were Holocaust survivors and her mother Sidonia Lax was very active and outspoken when it came to the Holocaust and sharing her story with others. She survived the Auschwitz death camp by cobbling soles to the shoes of Nazi soldiers.

One of the people Sidonia impacted was California senator Henry Stern who met her when he was 12 years old and she came to speak to his class in school. Sidonia's story was to remain with him for many years to come; he was so taken by it that he shared her testimony at his bar-mitzvah the following year and stayed in touch with her for many years. Currently, Stern is on the California corroborative that helps make Holocaust and Genocide education mandatory in the state of California.

Benson mentioned how "it's beyond belief to have standing ovations; and how special it is to see people standing in line trying to get tickets for a sold-out show about the Shoah. That's pretty remarkable!"

Benson also expressed how important it is to have such a diverse cast portraying Holocaust survivors and that they don't have to be white.

"We want to connect to all of our audiences. We want those kids in the audience to understand that it could have been them! They need to stand up for their friend who is being bullied, they need to stand up!"

Originally, the project began with just touring schools, but now it has expanded to touring around the country, not only in schools but also on stages, where all are welcome to join the audience, and families and adults in general can attend.

"Everyone needs Holocaust education!" Kout said.

These are currently all independent productions in different locations and different cities, but it's the same play with the same mission: combatting antisemitism and fighting hatred while encouraging tolerance and inclusivity through Holocaust education in the theater.

At SURVIVORS's Los Angeles premiere at the Museum of Tolerance Theater, the front row was reserved for Holocaust survivors and their families. Benson mentioned how important it is for

the actors to look into the eyes of a survivor in the front row and to see the powerful reactions in their eyes – as if they were performing in front of history. This creates a forever impact and makes it a performance they will never forget.

“The whole reason we are doing this play is because someday there won’t be any survivors sitting in the front row,” Kout said.

After a performance of SURVIVORS, there is always a Q and A with the audience. At one, 95-year-old survivor David Lenga stood up and said, “I must tell you that your powerful play indeed fills a dire need to enlighten the vast ignorance in the larger public. For this noble effort, I salute you and applaud your so impactful play.”

That meant the world to Kout, who said, “When a Holocaust survivor stands up after a show and commends us for the work we are doing that’s the most meaningful experience we could have.”