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The Voice of 'Survivors' Finding Inspiration, Tolerance, and Hope From Our Past



Survivors tells the story of 10 actual Holocaust survivors in real time as they are experiencing the unfolding of the horrific events (photo by Christy He)

by Zach Rosen

If the innumerable performances of Shakespeare's plays are any testament – theater has the ability to preserve a story for centuries. And it is exactly that preservation that the play *Survivors* hopes to achieve at the Raise Our Voices event at the Marjorie Luke Theatre this Thursday, October 19, at 7 pm.

Written by **Wendy Kout** – a film and TV writer who worked on such programs as the legendary *Mork & Mindy* – *Survivors* tells the stories of 10 Holocaust survivors. But not just the horrors they experienced, but the hope and inspiration they found along the way. The play will have a heavenly a cappella backdrop provided by the Inner Light Gospel Choir (directed by **Dauri Kennedy**) and the Dos Pueblos High School Jazz Choir (directed by **Courtney Anderson**), and will wrap up with a Talkback from the cast and Kout, moderated by the *MJ*'s own **Gwyn Lurie**.

The inspiration for *Survivors* began when Kout received a phone call from **Ralph Meranto** from CenterStage Theatre in Rochester, New York. Ralph had just returned from a funeral of saying goodbye to yet another Holocaust survivor in his community. He told Kout about the program they had of bringing survivors in to middle and high schools to speak that had been incredibly impactful on the students. "And what was saddening for Ralph – what is saddening for all of us – is that as time goes on, we are saying goodbye to more and more of our survivors," expressed Kout. Rochester had been a thriving Holocaust survivor community at one time and Ralph felt sorrow about the idea of losing their voices and eventually having to shut down what had been such an influential program.

While Ralph and Kout both acknowledged there had been wonderful testimo-

nies recorded by different organizations – "But that experience happens on the screen. You are watching the screen and you're listening and you're respectful. You're not in contact. You're not being impacted by a survivor." As the two contemplated the idea of doing something theater-based around this, Kout said to Ralph, "You're going to do something theatrical with these stories," and he said, "No, Wendy, you're going to do something with these stories."

The two spent the next year discussing thoughtfully about how to do this and what was developed is a one-hour teaching play that tells the history of the Holocaust through the eyewitness accounts of 10 actual Holocaust survivors. While Kout mentioned that this play was born out of "sorrow and a need," she wanted to bring dimensionality to each survivor that young students and audiences of all ages could relate to. They used a young cast and the story is told in real time as the events of the Holocaust are unfolding – rather than a retelling of historical accounts.

"You're watching them go from the beginning before the rise of Hitler when life was good and free, and when they just got to have their young issues of – 'oh, I hate my boyfriend' and, 'oh, my mother's driving me crazy.' You know, they're typical teenagers, right? And then they're thrust into this horror."

Although the story revolves around the horror of the Holocaust, speaking with Kout – "hope" was the word that came up repeatedly about the play. Kout wanted to not just focus on the trauma felt during their experiences, but rather, uncover how each of these survivors found hope and the drive to continue and overcome while being faced with the unimaginable challenges that they faced.

By focusing on the personality, quirks,

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and intricacies that each individual had, *Survivors* allows the audiences to personally connect with each one, and maybe even see components of themselves in each survivor. Four of the 10 individuals were still alive when Kout began writing the play in 2017 and she was able to do extensive interviews with them. She also interviewed family members and friends of all 10 survivors to best capture their character. The result was a play that brought depth to each featured survivor's story.

Survivors was met with astounding praise and popularity. "Since 2018, we've been performing this play, there are now five independent national and international productions that tour," said Kout. "It's not just the telling of history; it's the 'Never is Now' component. And how do we as individuals as a community deal with hatred, intolerance, bigotry, racism, homophobia – all of it – how are we dealing with it? And how do we step up and stop being silent?"

Melding of the Minds

While *Survivors* has gone on to success, it was with the show's current producer, **Genie Benson**, that the performances took on an extra layer. Benson is the child of two Holocaust survivors. Her father was a partisan fighting in the forest and getting people out through the underground tunnels and sewers out of the ghettos. He was the youngest child and tried to warn his family – but they wouldn't listen to him – so he ran to the forest and hid, losing his whole family except one brother. Benson's mother, **Sidonia Lax**, was a young, only child from a wealthy family whose dad left the ghetto one day when he heard there were fresh apples outside the walls and never came back.

Benson's parents later met in L.A., got married, and had three children – of which Genie was the oldest. During their lifetime, Genie's father didn't like Sidonia speaking publicly about her Holocaust experiences. But after his passing nearly 30 years ago, "My mom started being very outgoing about talking about the Holocaust. She went to Jewish schools, non-Jewish schools. She spoke a lot in Burbank and Pasadena and for organizations and everybody knew her ... It sort of became her legacy to talk about her story as much as possible," said Benson. Sidonia became extensively involved with the March of the Living program, going to Poland each year – a place she thought she'd never return to. Sidonia unfortunately passed last December, but her legacy lives on with her impact on young students, and now with Benson's work on *Survivors*.

It was about a year and a half ago that



Survivors incorporates a young, diverse cast to further connect with students of all ages and backgrounds (photo by Christy He)

Benson saw a Facebook post from Kout of a glowing review of *Survivors*. The two had met in college and Benson called up Kout and they began to discuss the play. Benson – who has a production company that brings artists from Israel to the U.S. – asked her production questions and more about the play. As the two spoke, they developed a new angle – the casting of a diverse group of performers – for the play and they formed a partnership that day and built a West Coast touring company, Arts for Change!

Their first public performance was at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles to a sold-out crowd and standing ovation. By casting performers from different ethnic backgrounds, they wanted the performers to speak to, and ultimately connect with, students of all backgrounds. Each performance features a Talkback at the end where the audience can ask questions, and they've found that oftentimes students and audiences are directing questions to the performers about how their own experiences and cultural background relate to the character they're portraying. The hope is to help audiences pull inspiration and understanding from a range of experiences – not just the Jewish one. Or as Kout puts it, "We're learning from the past to create inclusivity and tolerance in the present and in the future." 🌟

Visit <https://teev-e.simplertix.com> for tickets and more information.

Zach Rosen is the Managing Editor of the Montecito Journal. He also enjoys working with beer, art, and life.

