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## Amid War and Grief, Theater Offers Hope and Solace

Theater critic Michele Willens looks at a slate of new plays and finds that they offer not just escapism at a difficult time, but also inspiration.

This morning, I switched from a 24-hour news channel to the network airing an ice -skating championship. I do not generally follow the sport, but somehow, moving from escalating death statistics, to watching young men and women gliding, twirling, and flipping felt like a necessary salve.

I do not hide from bad news, believe me. Though I currently cover the theater world and have spent the summer in Los Angeles attending more than a dozen shows and events. Rather than necessarily taking me to a sunnier place, these works find creative ways of helping us see we are not alone, that we cannot forget, and that yes, women have been very much a part of the stories.

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One play takes place on Martin Luther King's final night and features King and the maid who did much more than clean his room. She may or may not have stolen his heart, but she stole this show. Another play dealt with a pair of unlikely—but apparently true—friends Muhammed Ali and Stepin' Fetchit. Here, too, the woman between those iconic figures tells most of the truth.

As time went on, the horrors of the real world couldn't help but creep into consciousness and impact audiences' experiences. Wendy Kout's play, "Survivors," uses the actual words of those who endured the Holocaust. It received standing ovations, from all ages, who saw it at [\*The Museum of Tolerance\*](#), The Reagan Presidential Library, and other venues. When a 97-year old actual survivor stood to compliment the cast and crew, there wasn't a dry eye.



A new historical play that is especially timely: Wendy Kout's play, "Survivors," uses the actual words of those who endured the Holocaust.

I also attended the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a company called [\*The Braid\*](#), formerly the Jewish Women's Theater. This company continues to tell the stories of women who have mattered, either in the public sphere, but, more often, in their private lives. The legendary songwriter Diane Warren was honored, and again, the headlines of the day were overpowering background for the event. (Security at the event was frightening enough.)

# Shakespeare and the MeToo Movement

A playwright named Jessica Kubzansky has written a highly innovative Shakespearean takeoff called “[\*Measure STILL For Measure\*](#).” This one ends on a timely, harrowing note that makes you wonder if the Bard was the first to recognize the MeToo movement.

Even a show called “[\*Sea Of Terror\*](#),” about two couples getting together for a dinner, catches the current spirit (see top photo). It is a dark comedy that explores the complexity of social anxiety, as well as finding comfort—or not—living in one’s own skin. If there was one word that summarized the summer, I’d vote for anxiety.



Art will remain to tell our stories.

And finally, I saw “[\*Every Brilliant Thing\*](#),” a one-character interactive piece in which the playwright-performer is trying to deal with his mother’s suicide. It is hilarious at times, though the concept is about trying to find things worth living for, as well as the genetic fear that a child may reach the same place as a beloved parent. The man tells the tale, but the late woman’s presence is deeply felt.

I left that one crying more than laughing, thinking about one of my closest friends, who has been in facilities battling depression for almost a year. Her friends can think of so many brilliant things she has done in her life, though she cannot find any.

## The Beauty of Escapism

My last event was for a foundation named for a late great rabbi. (Who it so happened, married my husband and me.) Among the wonderful speakers, including honoree Nancy Pelosi, one said “it is the art that will remain to tell our stories.”

There is no doubt that most people—especially Broadway tourists—go to the theatre for escapism. All the more reason to applaud those who use stages—of any size—to relay what so many of us are feeling: a sense of “holy discomfort” as one speaker so aptly described it. Bravo.

*Michele Willens’ podcast is called “Stage Right...Or Not.”*

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