

Born in hardship, nurtured by collaboration

Local audiences will have an opportunity to offer feedback on a new adaptation of a cabaret performed at the Theresienstadt camp in Czechoslovakia

By DEBRA FISHER GOLDSTEIN

Most often we experience the arts in their finished form — after weeks, months, sometimes years of revisions, resculpting and retooling. Rarely do we get the chance to witness the artistic process as it unfolds.

Art Maven



Rimon: The MN Jewish Arts Council

Rimon: The Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, an initiative of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation, has awarded a project support grant to the Playwrights' Center of Minneapolis, which will help to produce a contemporary adaptation of the musical cabaret *Laugh With Us*. The piece was originally written and performed by prisoners of the Theresienstadt camp in Czechoslovakia.

Local audiences will have a chance to see the results of a five-day

workshop on Dec. 13 at the center's Ruth Easton Lab and to even play a crucial role in the development of the production.

Opening up an artistic process that bears witness to this particular piece of history unleashes question after question. How could — and why would — prisoners in a camp produce humor? Can this cabaret, rich with inside jokes, ghetto slang and references grasped only by the residents, be understood and appreciated by an American audience 70 years later? Can a literal translation, with 143 explanatory footnotes, be restructured and reimagined for a modern-day stage?

Dr. Lisa Peschel, a theater historian and the play's dramaturg, has been working on this process since the late 1990s. Through the course of her Fulbright research and University of Minnesota doctoral work, she interviewed survivors of the Theresienstadt camp and conducted research in numerous archives. Subsequently she published an anthology of what were previously believed to be lost theatrical performances — almost all of them comedies.

"My collaborative process with this cabaret has its roots in the help I received from many people — surviving dancer Hana Lojinova and her family; lyricist Pavel Stransky, the last survivor of all the authors in the collection; and the families of co-authors

Felix Porges and Viteslav Horpatsky, who gave me permission to work with the cabaret," Peschel said.

Peschel now eagerly welcomes the next phase in her creative process.

"This is a very difficult task, as the cabarets produced in the camp were not intended for a completely different audience, years later, miles away," she said. "This is why we really need the perspective of our audience. I imagine there will be some disagreement — and I'm really looking forward



Courtesy of Lisa Peschel
Lisa Peschel is pictured with surviving Theresienstadt actor Jan Fischer in January 2005.

to it."

Co-collaborator Erika Eklund, of the Playwrights' Center, says this play is an important part of preserving what happened in places like Theresienstadt.

"This is an age when the Holocaust is passing from living memory into history," Eklund said. "Through this cabaret we have a rare window into the prisoners' present and how they used humor to cope with the unprecedented crisis unfolding before them."

The development of *Laugh with Us* will let its audience view the meaning

these cabarets had for the prisoners themselves.

"Theresienstadt was a 'model' camp," Peschel said. "The prisoners were granted some space and time for 'culture,' so that the world would not see the truth of the Nazi genocide. But although the prisoners were not doing the kind of slave labor we know from other camps, they worked hard, long days... But the energy of the theater and this collaborative process gave them release, gave them life. And perhaps the more desperate things got, the more they needed this release."

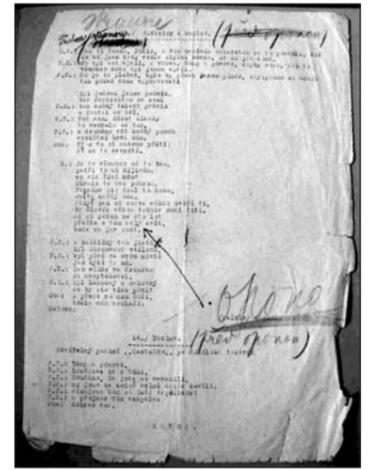
Jan Fischer, an actor in the ghetto, spoke of the relief of simply being onstage.

"There a person was," Fischer said. "In that moment he was free. Everything around us disappeared."

Can today's audience appreciate *Laugh with Us*, knowing the horrific ending to this most tragic story? How will playwright Kira Obolensky, director Hayley Finn and dramaturg Peschel "set the stage" for the audience, providing a context so that the audience will understand what they are about to see? Is the answer an opening narration or an original scene specifically written for today's audience?

Peschel welcomes these creative challenges and suggests that her collaborators may try a few options and let the audience decide.

We can look forward to seeing the



A page from the original script of the cabaret *Laugh with Us*.

results of the workshop, and being co-collaborators, when the show opens 7 p.m. Monday, Dec. 13 at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis.

Be prepared for anything. It's all part of the process.

The American Jewish World publishes the Art Maven column by Rimon: The Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, an initiative of the Minneapolis Jewish Federation. For information on Rimon, contact executive director David Jordan Harris at 952-381-3449 or: rimon@sabesjcc.org

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