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### Elie Wiesel's Theatre: A Conversation with Guila Clara Kessous

By Debra Cash

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For decades, English-language readers of Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel have assumed that among his many novels, essays and lectures there were very few excursions into theatre – the plays "Zalmen, or the Madness of God" of 1968, and "The Trial of God" of 1976. Boston University doctoral candidate Guila Clara Kessous, who left her home in France to study with Wiesel, was startled when her professor told him that a third play existed – a one-act play now called "**Once Upon a Time: a black canopy, a black sky,**" commissioned in 1969 by French radio. It had never been translated into English.

Kessous' one-time-only staging in Boston on December 10, 2007 mixed projected Shoah images and [video](#) of American Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors of Greater Boston President Israel Arbeiter reading the role of **The Witness, a role Wiesel performed himself in the original radio broadcast**, appearing alongside a cast of professional and student actors, singers and dancers.

I sat down for a conversation with the remarkably self-possessed and well-connected actress/director over tea at an oversized dining table in a formally decorated salon owned by Boston University. This edited version of our conversation retains some of Kessous' slightly unidiomatic English formulations. Kessous hopes to combine a directing career with academic work, and has plans for future projects that will feature noted French performers.

**Debra Cash:** I know that Professor Wiesel came to you with the script for Once Upon A Time, but why now? Obviously, this piece had been untranslated and unproduced for what, 40 years? There would have been any number of opportunities for him to come forward before this.

**Guila Clara Kessous:** When I came from France to work with him [on a PhD in comparative literature at Boston University] on his theatrical work which was not really known, Professor Wiesel himself let me know that there were not only two plays, and gave me a copy of ["Il Était une Fois."] ]

For me, directing this play was a way to put my work to the test, my intellectual and theoretical work, to see how we can connect directly with

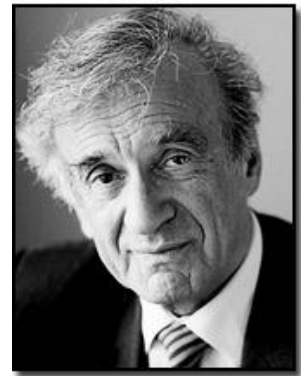


Debra Cash



Guila Clara Kessous

<a href="#">Merchant of Venice</a>	the audience the idea of religion and the Shoah. From my point of view, that is why I wanted to do it now [during the fifth year of her studies].
<a href="#">Michael's Corner</a>	
<a href="#">New Publications</a>	Concerning the 40 years, when I asked Professor Wiesel he said "I didn't give permission to anybody."
<a href="#">Open Space</a>	
<a href="#">Open Stage - Intercultural Junction</a>	<b>DC:</b> That's flattering! <b>GCK:</b> That's very flattering.
<a href="#">Philadelphia Stage</a>	
<a href="#">Play Reviews</a>	<b>DC:</b> Was this a work Wiesel had put aside because he felt he had represented some of those ideas more completely in prose, or was it simply more demanding technically to put together and present a play than to publish a story or a novel?
<a href="#">Production Point</a>	
<a href="#">Productions on Tour</a>	<b>GCK:</b> This play was published as part of a collection in French. [It is] a theatrical dialogue but even the editor said it wouldn't fit in [the English edition.] From my point of view, the play Once Upon a Time has a lot of allusions to the work of Jean Paul Sartre, of Camus, I will not say existentialism, but [these writers' work was a] great influence. Professor Wiesel said that he thinks Holocaust and theatre cannot fit together.
<a href="#">Recommended Website</a>	Holocaust goes beyond theatre.
<a href="#">Research &amp; Collections</a>	
<a href="#">Revisiting the Past</a>	
<a href="#">Solo Performance - Online Catalogue</a>	<b>DC:</b> He has said that about novels, too!
<a href="#">Spanish</a>	
<a href="#">Spanish / Español : Artículos</a>	<b>GCK:</b> What is very interesting is that when Zalmen was staged in Washington [Wiesel] said there is no better way to face a problem than putting it on stage -- and he was quoting Sartre! So all these paradoxical ways of seeing theatre [as engendering] a very big attraction and deep repulsion interests me a lot. Each time he was making me remember "I do not consider myself a playwright;" "this is not my tradition;" "this is avodah zarah (idol worship)," so each time I was saying to him "so why, why did you use theatre for those particular plays?" And he was telling me that "I didn't have a choice." From what I understand, he was telling me that the message he had to deliver was made specifically in a way that theatre would be the [best] intermediary to deliver it.
<a href="#">Spanish / Español : Noticias y actividades culturales</a>	
<a href="#">Story Theatre</a>	
<a href="#">Success Story</a>	
<a href="#">The Arab- Israeli Melting Pot</a>	That's basically the topic of my thesis. In Zalmen, he is transferring the action and focusing on Russian Jews and that was made just after his journey in Russia. For the Trial of God in '79 it's obvious that this is a metaphor for what happened during the Shoah. But Once Upon a Time deals directly with Nazism, and that was very hard for him to put on stage. So I really do think he reached a paradoxical way of transmitting [his ideas] through a media that is originally goy but that was necessary to deliver a certain message and touch people. And that personally fascinated me.
<a href="#">The Bible on Stage</a>	
<a href="#">The European Research Center</a>	
<a href="#">The New York Scene</a>	
<a href="#">The Next Generation</a>	
<a href="#">Theatre and Physics</a>	<b>DC:</b> Is there a significant difference in the philosophical and the theological challenges in The Trial of God and Once Upon a Time?
<a href="#">Theatre in Spotlight</a>	<b>GCK:</b> In The Trial of God I think the setting itself is a memory of his childhood with his father who had a shop and a policeman came very often -- and the idea of violation of privacy with those people representing order and being violent or asking for money. Taking some bottles without pay was very common -- he has said that in different novels.
<a href="#">Upfront Europe</a>	
<a href="#">What's New in Israel ?</a>	
<a href="#">What's New in London ?</a>	The character of Maria is autobiographical because the servant in Wiesel's family was also known as Maria -- and he was telling me that this was one of his favorite characters, the nonjew so dedicated to the Jews. When everything is lost she says "I have faith in their God."
<a href="#">What's New in Washington DC ?</a>	



Elie Wiesel

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Once Upon a Time doesn't have the same peacefulness. We are in '68, we are in France in the middle of a big revolution with the students. Also the theatrical background changed totally: we see the work of Ionesco and Beckett. Waiting for Godot was a very big influence for Professor Wiesel.

**DC:** It is striking that Elie Wiesel chose someone as young as you to direct this play—not someone who was a survivor or someone who had been working professionally in theatre for last 40 years. Was that freeing or just intimidating?

**GCK:** I describe this task as a fantastic burden, it was an amazing opportunity for me of course. First, I needed permission for the translation, and then the directing and when I had both it was amazing. Choosing a student of his, I think, was a way for Professor Wiesel to show his extreme generosity; he always has a very special way to relate to students, giving us not only the opportunity to see or discuss things with him but also to go deeper. When you are with Professor Wiesel he lets you speak. And of course he knew the work I had already done.

**DC:** In your program note you quote Professor Wiesel as saying in 1974 "we live in an age of theater, in which the most important messages are being said, not in books, but on the stage..." and adding two years later "since the end of WWII, the most important and meaningful words have been said on the stage: Brecht and Beckett, Sartre and Camus, Hochhuth and Ionesco influenced this generation as much as novels had influenced the previous one, and perhaps more." Do you think that's the paradox he experiences with different genres or do you think that quote comes from a time when French theatre was at its most innovative and demanding – and that maybe is no longer true?

**GCK:** Maybe both. There is this paradoxical way of seeing theatre in Professor Wiesel. I remember he was telling me that he thinks that theatre prevents the author from talking directly to the spectator, to the audience, because there are those intermediaries, the director, the actors.

**DC:** As opposed to the interior conversation between the author and reader of the novel.

**GCK:** Yes. Again, I was asking him so why, did you write these plays? [He said] The message I needed to deliver at that time really needed to be said. It was as if there are multiple media or maybe multiple languages – Hebrew or Yiddish or French—and that he needed a kind of shaping in order to deal with [the material he wanted to present in the plays].

In '68 of course those playwrights were not loved! And after '68 there was this big paradox in France—what else? After Becket, after Ionesco, you reach a certain level of the absurd that leaves you empty inside...the idea is how can I touch the audience through theatre after Becket, how to survive the post-Becket trauma?

In '78 [with The Trial of God], Professor Wiesel was using a very traditional form of Jewish theatre, an obvious purimshpiel. The frame is avodah zarah, but the tool inside of the frame is still your language – the purimshpiel -- and the message is wrapped like a candy and delivered in another way that may be a more efficient way. That is the way I see it.

**DC:** Given that you are a French speaker, and would have been equally

competent to direct this in France, was there a particular reason to present it in English?

**GCK:** Since I directed *The Trial of God* I realized the very deep difference between the French text and the [published] English translation. First of all, the play is not *The Trial of God*, it's *The Trial of Shamgorod* [the name of the village that has been decimated by pogroms] but the editor thought that it was more provocative or clearer to people to have [the name be] *The Trial of God*.

I wanted to do *Once Upon a Time* in America because there was this fantastic opportunity to do it with Jews, non-Jews, survivors, children. And it was even more pedagogical than aesthetic. I did not want the Shoah to be the ashes to grow new flowers. I did not want to create a new form of art, the art of suffering, but to find another media to stay in the mind of *The Witness*. I was opening the entire play with the kaddish, the sound of a train and the Max Bloch niggun of Kol Nidre and that was the idea of opening the entire play with a question: Kol Nidre is said on Yom Kippur to cut all the promises but which promise? Isn't it God who broke the promise to Abraham?

[With the complexity of historical multimedia projections over the action of the dancers and actors] I was happy when people said we didn't have time to [derive] meanings. That was exactly what I wanted to do because Shoah has no meaning except the craziness of hate.

**DC:** Why did you do only one performance as opposed to a run of a few days?

**GCK:** Professor Wiesel gave me permission for two times, one [performance] in Boston and one in New York so that was the deal. Second, that if you see the different plays that I directed before, all of them have been done only one or two times.

For me, theatre is the art of the ephemeral: you will not be able to touch the audience a hundred times the way you touch them just once. When I go to the Avignon Theatre Festival I make the play once. It's the supreme test when you are a director to see the value of your work because there are 600 performances per night and there are performances that may be without any audience. I've found that there are people who are interested in work I am doing -- and there will be 100 and they will know that if they are not seeing it this particular day they will not be able to see it.

The actors are the specific funnel for the message, to be humble like Moshe Rabbenu, for the message being transmitted. I think that this should be done only one or two times.

Raising them [on a stage] and having someone else listen is the principle of human transmission in community. When we say [in the amidah] "open my lips and through my mouth will go your message" that is exactly the position of being the transmitter of a certain message. If only theatre would do that! The more we can turn the light on more and more and help [audiences] understand that they are not only here to listen and to be brainwashed and go back to sleep after. We can just make them understand that the look is not only directed [towards the stage] but to themselves.

I am not looking for theatre to become sports but I am looking for it to have a more human collective meaning. At the end of *Once Upon a Time*, we had the consul of Germany and consul of Israel and they lit a candle for Hanuka. It was amazing. If we do more of this, it is very simple. We do not only [need] conferences to have meaning. Sometimes the

meaning comes itself, from art.

**C Debra Cash 2008**

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