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Zalmen or the madness of God: Tribute performance to Professor Elie Wiesel at Harvard University

This performance is being produced as a tribute to **Professor Elie Wiesel**, the distinguished author and winner of the **1986 Nobel Peace Prize**. The foreword of this event will be given by Dr. Joel Rappel, Director of Elie Wiesel's archives Center introducing Mr. Alex Koifman from the Russian Jewish Community Foundation and Mrs. Rosian Zerner, niece of victim composer Edwin Geist and former vice president of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust.

Mr. Moti Sandak, Director & Chief Editor of All About Jewish Theatre will deliver a presentation on [The Holocaust On-Line Theater Collection \(HTC\)](#) : Who will carry the word? New Holocaust Remembrance and Education:: Act 3.0 .

Visionary director **Guila Clara Kessous** stages eighteen actors and one puppet to transmit the testimony of suffering, dealing with burning questions such as the role of religion and the risks of assimilation.

This event is sponsored by **The Harvard University Center for Jewish Studies**, The Lab at Harvard University and Pforzheimer House.

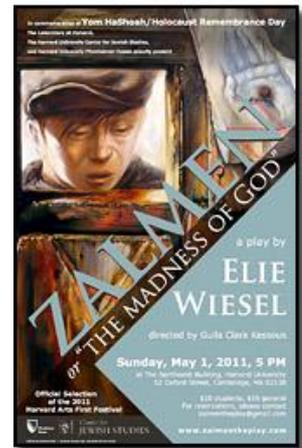
SYNOPSIS

Set in a post-Stalinist Russian synagogue on the eve of an appearance by a Western acting troupe, Elie Wiesel's play has been described as a cry of anguish about the collective guilt of "the Silent". The old Rabbi of the town has nearly given up hope of ever seeing his people breathe the pure air of freedom. As he, his neighbors and congregants alike kowtow to the local officials who gently coerce them to comply and remain silent.

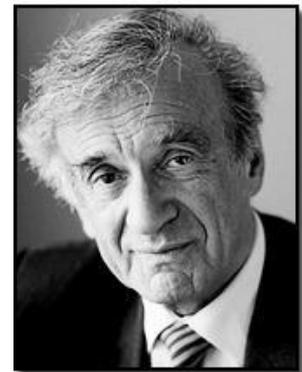
Most who are familiar with the works of Elie Wiesel will think of his memorable semi-autobiographical novels, his two-volume memoir or his long and unflagging effort to bring the issue of human rights--not only Jewish human rights--before the eyes of the world. Here, we see a different Wiesel, even different than the man who stood up to Ronald Reagan when he urged him (unsuccessfully) not to visit Bitburg. It is not so much that his theme--the plight of oppressed Jews-- is unfamiliar. Rather, it is how it is revealed. It is not only a theatrical work but a prospective of post-World War II history and the struggle of Jews in a recently established post-Stalinist Russia. [Listen to Professor Wiesel discuss the Tragedy of the Believer](#)

NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR Guila Clara Kessous

Written after a trip to Moscow in 1968, the play brings to life the celebration of Kippur—the Jewish holiday of Atonement—by the great Rabbi Yehuda-Leib Levine in which Elie Wiesel participated in 1965. Wiesel had been struck by the terror of the Russian Jews, a group of



Zalmen or the madness of God, Poster by Samuel Bak



Elie Wiesel

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people who, twelve years after the death of Stalin, still remained powerless in their isolation from the rest of the world and were subjected to perpetual surveillance by the Russian authorities.

Elie Wiesel had already done his "duty" as a witness writing about this subject in novel form in *The Jews of Silence* in 1966. However to "more effectively" testify to courage of Russian Jews he decided to stage it for the theater in 1968 on the advice of his friend, the director, Hy Kalus. In "All Rivers Run to the Sea: Memoirs", Wiesel describes his meeting with the great Rabbi Yehuda-Leib Levine:

"It was while thinking about the play that I was going to write that the tormented and resigned face of the great rabbi reappeared in my mind. If Malraux was right, it was literature's responsibility to correct, to repair injustice: so, on the stage, I will attempt to correct the injustice that the Rabbi Lévine faced; he would accomplish on stage what he never dared to undertake in the synagogue in Moscow. Such would be the theme of the play."

The writing of *Zalmen or the Madness of God* was thus another way for E. Wiesel to bear witness, making use of the stage as a new method of communication to "repair" and "correct" reality...

Therefore, my own work with the actors has been focused on their acceptance of Zalmen's madness which erupts onto the stage and has no boundaries. An infinite number of actions are at Zalmen's disposal even if he maintains a course of action that leaves him able to invent and reinvent the role at any moment. The actors must accept the element of surprise and remain ignorant as to what awaits them from Zalmen, who leaps up from out of nowhere and is capable of the most ridiculous reactions. In the story, it is he who guides the plot; because he is the one telling the story, he is the Witness.

I also wanted the dramatic intensity centered on the character of Misha, who for me is at the heart of Elie Wiesel's play. What will become of the new generation? What will become of the young Misha torn between his father who refuses to instill in him even the most rudimentary Judaism and his grandfather, the Rabbi, keeper of the Jewish tradition, towards whom he feels inexorably drawn? In order to better understand this dilemma, I chose to make Misha a puppet... so as to better show the manipulation at play.

"To correct reality" ...to end the cycle of productions of Elie Wiesel's plays with *Zalmen or the Madness of God* carries a certain amount of symbolism for me... it is in line with the idea of "Tikkun Olam", the desire to "repair" the world, to redefine it, to make it better...through the duty of testimony via the stage.

When and Where?

"Zalmen or the madness of God"
 a play by Elie Wiesel
 produced and directed by Guila Clara Kessous

Sunday, May 1st, 2011, 5:00PM
[The Northwest Building at Harvard University](#)
 52 Oxford Street
 Cambridge MA 02138
 Tickets: \$16 general, \$10 for students
 To make reservations, please email zalmentheplay@gmail.com
<http://www.zalmentheplay.com>



Guila Clara Kessous

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