

The God Must be Crazy

Details

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Elie Wiesel play at Harvard to mark Yom Hashoah

As a survivor of the most heinous act of inhumanity ever perpetrated, Elie Wiesel has good reason to question his Creator and even to question the logic and sanity of God. In his early play, “Zalmen or The Madness of God” (www.zalmentheplay.com), Wiesel grapples with such monumental issues. On May 1, others are invited to think through them as well as this play will be mounted at Harvard University as part of a marking of Yom Hashoah- the day of remembrance of the Holocaust. This production is also being put on as a tribute to Wiesel himself and will be introduced by Dr. Joel Rappel, Director of Elie Wiesel's Archives Center, Alex Koifman from the Russian Jewish Community Foundation and Rosian Zerner, former vice president of the World Federation of Jewish Child Survivors of the Holocaust.

Featuring 18 actors and one puppet, the play, which was originally written in 1968 and which is now being directed by Guila Clara Kessous, tells the story of a group of post-Stalinist Russian Jews celebrating the holiest day of the Jewish year- Yom Kippur; the Day of Atonement. Through the character of Zalmen, the rabbi, and others in the congregation, it makes clear the suffering while leaving many burning questions open for audience consideration. Among these are the still very timely and provocative questions of the role of religion and the responsibility of those who do not speak out against evil.

“[This] is Elie Wiesel’s only play that does not directly deal with the [Holocaust],” Kessous points out. “It is the very first play published by Elie Wiesel and the author at that time believed theatre was an important media.” In fact, Kessous notes that, in a 1974 interview, Wiesel suggested that “we live in an age of theater, in which the most important messages are being said, not in books, but on the stage.” As he had already won such acclaim and garnered so much attention with his seminal books like Night, Wiesel turned to this second media to reach even more people.

“The writing of ‘Zalmen or the Madness of God’ was thus another way for Wiesel to bear witness,” Kessous says, “making use of the stage as a new method of communication to ‘repair’ and ‘correct’ reality.”

Though the roles of Zalmen and the Rabbi were originally written for one actor, Kessous explains that Wiesel later rewrote the play to allow the characters to be conscious of each other. So while Wiesel suggests that Zalmen still serves the role of the rabbi’s “conscience,” he is also free to serve as the “underground voice of an entire population” and, in fact, the “voice of God.” It is this voice, Wiesel suggests, that people hear “at the exact moment they cover their ears.”

As director, Kessous has worked to focus the actors on their acceptance of Zalmen’s madness – a mental disturbance that “erupts onto the stage and has no boundaries.”

“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,” she says, noting that, as the main witness, it is Zalmen who tells and drives the story.

Kessous also strove to develop and emphasize the character known as Misha who, she says, represents the next generation. In addition the many questions the play already asks, Kessous

wanted to provoke additional questions like, “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?” So while Wiesel gave Zalmen more individuality and humanity by making him his own character, Kessous takes such aspects away from MIsha.

“I chose to make Misha a puppet,” Kessous explains, “so as to better show the manipulation at play.”

Though art imitates life, it can also improve upon it and also to suggest things about it. In this play, Wiesel had an opportunity to “correct reality,” Kessous says. Even so, the main lesson in the play rings true in real life – that is that, whether on stage or off, mankind must work to make the world better (what is often referred to as “tikkun olam”).

“The lessons...are in line with the...desire to repair the world, to redefine it, to make it better,” Kessous says, “through the duty of testimony.”