



Zalmen or the Madness of God
A play by Elie Wiesel

Review by John Joseph Fahey, Boston City Paper, May 12, 2011

Appropriately on May 1st, in commemoration of Yom Ha Shoah/Holocaust Remembrance Day, Elie Wiesel's play *Zalmen or the Madness of God* was performed at Harvard University at the Center for Jewish Studies, in collaboration with The Laboratory and Harvard's Pforzheimer House.

Zalmen... is set in a post-Stalinist Russian synagogue; Wiesel's theme – collective guilt resulting from silence and complacency towards the local officials – is manifest among several key characters: the Rabbi – effectively played by Janet Buchwald and also between congregants, who are admirably played by James Bocock, James Beck, Emmanuel Straschnov, Steven Burstein and Efraim Shapiro and who, in effect, provide the conflict.

The Rabbi's docility and contentment is understandable given the mere thought of the Holocaust; however, the confrontation between Shapiro and antagonist Bocock gives pause to the audience that silence and denial is very much real – as is evidenced by the reaction of some of the congregants themselves (the congregants - the ensemble, are compelling as well.)

Perhaps the Rabbi's acceptance of the status quo is justified, but one may ask the question: is mental anguish such a heavy price to pay to preclude political retaliation? The rabbi's silence is obvious but Bocock's characterization of a doctor who is obscure in his Jewish heritage because of political pressure comes across quite convincingly as does Shapiro's character who provides the antithesis.

Zalmen... uses audio visuals as well as puppetry (good use of symbolism) in this 2 hour presentation. Just prior to the performance, and quite fittingly, the audience heard several speakers speak about Wiesel's work, notably holocaust survivor Rosian Zerner from Kovno (Kaunas) Ghetto, Lithuania.

Wiesel's play carries a message, and like his book *Night* where he recalls his own experience in a concentration camp as a child, his message of collective guilt comes across loud and clear in a setting that far transcends a small town.

The production was produced and directed by Guila Clara Kessous.