

Witnesses recounts horrors of Holocaust

By NATALIE QASABIAN · Daily Trojan

As the writer and performer of four speaking parts in her play *Silent Witnesses*, Stephanie Satie recounts true stories from child witnesses of the Holocaust and delivers a performance so believable, the audience begins to question how she transforms from one character to the next so swiftly and flawlessly.

Though the play deals with less than uplifting material, Satie crafts the narrative around personal awakenings and closure, rather than feelings of bitterness or hate.

The one-woman play, which is currently being performed at the Whitefire Theatre in Los Angeles and previously debuted in New York, will keep you anything but silent about the talent and craftsmanship at hand. Theatergoers can count on Satie's performance to dazzle, stimulate and remind audiences about the power of live theater.

The story revolves around four women: Paula, Amelie, Hannah and Dana. They all have one thing in common: They're all child witnesses of the Holocaust who have kept their stories hidden for decades. When they meet in a group therapy session led by Dana, these women gain the strength to tell their individual stories from each other's displays of courage.

Attending the sessions together, each woman uncovers a piece of herself that she had previously written off as buried too deep to be retrieved. Together, these four women piece together the fragments of their broken childhoods.

Silent Witnesses keeps itself rooted in the character transformations and constantly works to keep the tone lighter than you might expect from such a weighty story. As a writer, Satie meticulously weaves moments of comic relief within each story to give audiences a breath of fresh air amid the tales of truly horrific experiences. As an actress, she executes those moments beautifully, never lingering on the joke for laughs, but

rather keeping them organic to the story and the characters.

The balance of tone in *Silent Witnesses* must also be credited to director of the play, Anita Khanzadian. Khanzadian is no stranger to survivor stories, and has collaborated with Satie on two other projects. Khanzadian said she felt drawn to this story because she "totally identifies with these characters."



Solo show · Stephanie Satie wrote and stars in *Silent Witnesses*, a play that follows four survivors of the Holocaust who meet in group therapy. – Courtesy of Rick Friesen

Khanzadian said she heard stories of the horrors of genocide growing up because her mother was orphaned in the Armenian genocide, the first genocide of the 20th century. Khanzadian's personal connection to the survivors' stories undoubtedly contributes to the richness of the play.

Satie also teaches literature and writing at California State University Northridge. She previously received grants from the L.A. Department of Cultural Affairs, the California Council for Humanities and the California Arts Council for her work.

With this knowledge about her backstory in mind, it's no wonder Satie effortlessly plays four different characters throughout the 75 minutes of the play.

By crafting personal ticks such as the accents and mannerisms of each character, Satie keeps Paula, Amelie, Hannah and Dana separate as four distinct characters.

She bounces back and forth from Dana to Hannah, and then interjects as Paula or Amelie as if all four women were in the same room. Though these transitions have the potential to feel jumpy or jarring to the audience, Satie's seamless transitions are mesmerizing to watch.

A minimalist approach to staging, lighting and sound design brightens the spotlight on Satie's performance, and by extension, the meaning behind the witnesses' stories. Designed by Carol Doehring, the lighting punctuates the location by changing from warmer hues to cooler ones, and guides the eye as Satie shifts characters. The play uses few props other than the chairs signifying the different characters.

Sound works as a catalyst for the play, triggering transitions between scenes. At the beginning of the performance, the haunting sounds of bomber planes trigger Dana's memory of meeting the three women. A song performed by Paula Lebovics, one of the witnesses who gave Satie her witness account, caps off the story.

Silent Witnesses goes to great lengths to deliver a potent story about a difficult subject without a bitter aftertaste. Satie brings together the perfect mix of drama and truth, making *Silent Witnesses* a personal and hopeful story tied to the Holocaust, but not defined by it.

Silent Witnesses allows the characters to tell their stories and free themselves from the captivity of their secrets. The objective of the play isn't to point fingers of blame. Rather, it's the display of courage of these women to tell their stories with brutal honesty to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive.

Catch Silent Witnesses on Sundays from Sept. 29 – Oct. 27 at 7:30 p.m. at the Whitefire Theatre, at 13500 Ventura Blvd. in Sherman Oaks, Calif. 91423.