



ENTERTAINMENT – LIVE STAGE

Phantom Siblings: Silent Witnesses at the Whitefire Theatre

by Nick Emmon

Dana picked a daisy and started a war. It was all her fault, she says, and everyone knew it. It was her fault the Germans came and her father left. If only she had left that perfect white daisy well enough alone, the bombs would never have dropped and the Jews would never have had to die.



So begins *Silent Witnesses*, the stunning new work from actress Stephanie Satie and director Anita Khanzadian, which pulls from the real-life group therapy sessions of four women who survived the horrors of the Holocaust as children. Their testimonies are filled with these kinds of confused, terrified, and naïve recollections, which could only have come from the minds of innocent children tossed headfirst into modern man's most unspeakable atrocity. Their stories are vital, yet they remained untold for decades until the efforts of one Los Angeles therapist brought them into the light. *Silent Witnesses* is all at once a vivid remembrance and a violent purging of the past. Most of all, for the audience at least, it is an extraordinarily affecting piece of theater.

"There is a hierarchy of suffering, and the children are at the bottom," recalls one survivor, grimly. The statement is a recurring theme throughout *Silent Witnesses*. The four girls were mostly shielded from the grisly atrocities committed at the concentration camps, and because of this fact, their suffering is often downplayed in the eyes of history. Their therapy sessions, and *Silent Witnesses* by extension, are largely a statement from these women that yes, the Holocaust happened to them too. They were pulled from their mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers at an age where they could not have possibly understood the reasons why or what was in store for them. Theirs are stories of hiding, survival, and the struggle to cling to humanity amidst the inexplicable.

Bringing these stories to marvelously spirited life is Stephanie Satie, who is nothing short of spectacular as the one-woman force behind *Silent Witnesses*. The actress has a deep-seated empathy for these women that clearly exude from the stage. She displays a clear-eyed understanding of not just how important these stories are, but how important it is to tell them truthfully. Adopting a small variety of accents and props, Satie switches between characters simply and effectively. In portraying a rapid-fire conversation between two of the women, for instance, she uses a scarf as an identifying prop, wearing the garment hanging loosely from her neck while playing one character and wrapping it around her neck for another. Additionally, Satie smartly adopts accents to differentiate between the four women, making each one easily identifiable and imbuing each with a distinct personality of their own.

Why were they spared while so many died? It is a question that is handled with disarming honesty in *Silent Witnesses*. The reasons for their survival, it seems, are mostly random, and any attempts to explain otherwise would be disingenuous. There is an implicit undercurrent of survivor's guilt within their stories which underlines the complex and often conflicting emotions that these women have carried with them their entire lives. They were pretty, one of the women asserts. No one wants to talk about it, but they were pretty, and that is why they survived. Paula explains that the adult Jews hid her because she had a nice singing voice. If not for that, she thinks, she likely would not have been spared.

Above all, *Silent Witnesses* is about closure, not just for these four women, but for every Jewish child who survived the Holocaust. They are all "phantom siblings", as one character memorably phrases it. There is a pervading sense that, more than anything, they need the world to acknowledge what happened. Once we hear their stories, we can begin to understand. We learn that Paula was saved from the concentration camps by Russian soldiers. We are then shown a photograph, taken by the Russians shortly after her rescue, of her amongst other dirty-faced children in striped pajamas behind a barbed wire fence. The pajamas were for show, she explains, meant to cover their filthy and emaciated bodies. The fence they are standing behind was once electric. People died on that fence, she remembers. Already, the world was trying to cover up her Holocaust.

Silent Witnesses is not just an incredibly moving piece of art, but it serves as the vital purpose of giving a voice to those who went voiceless after the war. These children were expected to pack up their memories and forget about them as if all that had happened were merely a bad dream. Appropriately, *Silent Witnesses* ends with a recording of the real-life Paula Lebovics singing at an Auschwitz memorial service decades after her childhood imprisonment. At the time, the audience included world leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Dick Cheney. She sings, and at long last the world hears her voice, the same singing voice that kept her alive in the face of indescribable evil so long ago. She and her phantom siblings are silent no more.



Silent Witnesses is performing at The Whitefire Theatre, located at 13500 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks. Showtimes are every Sunday at 7:30 PM, now until October 27. General admission is \$20, students and seniors are \$17. For more information, call (800) 838-3006 or visit <http://silentwitnesses.brownpapertickets.com>.