

LA STAGE TIMES

FIRST PERSON

Silent Witnesses — Children Who Survived the Holocaust

by Stephanie Satie | October 2, 2013

I write and perform solo plays. I'm especially interested in the way historical events — cataclysmic events — affect personal lives. Inspired originally by Anna Deavere Smith, much of my work falls into the category of Theater of Testimony.

As the daughter of refugees from Eastern Europe who shrouded their origins in an uneasy silence, I developed a voracious appetite for stories wherever I found them. As a child, I would morph into friends or acquaintances, assuming their speech patterns, their gestures — it was my way of seeing the world from other perspectives.

I began writing solo plays in the 1980s with **Duse**, **Heartburn and Me**, an autobiographical piece about growing up in Brooklyn, and surviving in the New York theater. Gradually, my gaze drifted beyond my own life to a wider world.



In 1998, I created **Refugees**, set in a classroom where English as a Second Language was taught to adults. What began as an actor's "survival job" became a life-changing event and finally, a solo play. **Coming to America — Transformations** followed in 2002, based on interviews with nine extraordinary women from Iraq, Iran, India, Afghanistan, El Salvador, Russia, Cambodia, Serbia and Armenia who found themselves uprooted and transplanted in America.

Silent Witnesses is my fourth solo play. It found me. In 2005, I performed **Coming to America** as a fundraiser for a group called Child Survivors of the Holocaust. Many in the audience were good-looking women. When I mentioned that, one woman said, "people don't save the ugly puppies," and then, "why don't you tell our stories?"

Of course they would be my next subjects. I had no idea what would emerge, but they welcomed me into their homes and told me their stories. I recorded them and internalized their accents and gestures. Dana, my first interviewee and now friend of my soul, said, "I don't know what I'm doing, but I want this in someone's hands. I'm putting it in yours."

Extraordinarily, these women retain their memories through a child's lens, yet infuse them with the wisdom and even the humor of the adults they've become. Their stories are different from other Holocaust narratives. They were kids and, according to many older survivors, "it never happened to them." Most were hidden "on the outside". Many were separated from their parents and siblings as small children, never to see them again. And still, "it didn't happen to them?"

Silent Witnesses was the most challenging piece I had ever undertaken. The stakes were enormous as I carried



Stephanie Satie in "Silent Witnesses." Photo by Rick Friesen.

this precious cargo and needed to find a frame for it. Of course I had my brilliant director, Anita Khanzadian, to guide me.

Then, I had a crisis. I felt obscene, appropriating these women's experiences, so I turned the script into a four-character play, wrote countless drafts, had readings with fabulous actors. Still, I felt I had lost my way. Maybe I was too possessive of my subjects; maybe I'm just an only child who wants to keep all the good parts for myself. But I returned to what I knew how to do.

I never thought about the implications of being Jewish. As a kid in Brooklyn, nearly everyone I knew was Jewish. It wasn't "a something." It was normal. I don't remember when I became conscious of the Holocaust. I heard whispers about neighbors moving in with numbers on their arms. **Fiddler on the Roof** introduced me to pogroms, which were probably what brought my grandparents here. My mother probably remembered them, but it was never discussed.

Not until I traveled to Europe for the first time and took an overnight train from Paris to Hamburg did it become palpable to me that millions like me had been transported along these same tracks just 30 years earlier. And then, of course, came the stunning realization that if my parents had not been brought to America, I would never have been born.



I am not brave like any of the characters I portray in **Silent Witnesses**, but I listen and learn from them and try to send this into the world. As I am inspired and moved by the stories I hear, I hope you will be too. In the safety of a darkened theater, we can silence the din of our daily lives and eavesdrop on the experience of others unlike ourselves.

Silent Witnesses, Whitefire Theatre, 13500 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks 91423 Sundays 7:30 pm. Through October 27. Tickets: \$20. <http://silentwitnesses.brownpapertickets.com>. 800-838-3006.

**All photos by Rick Friesen.

Stephanie Satie is a Los-Angeles based actor/writer. She has appeared at Odyssey Theatre, Fountain Theatre, Fremont Centre and Theatre 40, and she is a member of InterAct Theatre Company. She has toured her solo plays internationally.