

In her solo show, *Silent Witnesses*, Stephanie Satie portrays four women, all childhood survivors of the Holocaust, who share their stories as a celebration of the human spirit. The idea for the play, which will be staged on Sept. 20 at the South Pasadena Library, came to Satie when she was performing at a fundraiser for Child Survivors of the Holocaust, Los Angeles.

"It was a parlor performance," Satie said, "and I was doing *Coming to America*, which is a series of nine monologues of women who came from horrendous circumstances — from Afghanistan, Cambodia, Russia, Serbia and El Salvador — and remade their lives in America."

During the Q-and-A, Satie commented on how good-looking the child survivors were.

"One person said to me, 'Well, nobody saves the ugly puppies,' which is a line in the play. I was blown away, and I thought, 'Oh, my God, I have a theme here.' And they suggested that I use them for new material," Satie said. "In 2005, I started interviewing women who had been at this event, and they were forthcoming and wonderful."

Satie, who plays all four roles, has structured her script as an informal support group consisting of three women and a therapist, Dana, who is also a survivor.

"I don't know where to begin or end with Dana," Satie said, "because Dana is absolutely heroic. She was a child who was hidden on the outside, meaning that she was hidden in a rural village in Poland with her mother. Her mother pulled her through, because her mother was an attractive, skillful, resourceful woman who lived creatively. Dana inherited her resourcefulness, but without the wiliness. Dana is the nexus of this group," Satie said.

Another of the witnesses, Paula, is the only one of the group to have been in a concentration camp.

When life in the ghetto became too dangerous, her family sent her into the woods, where she had to fend for herself. After being sent to a work camp, Paula was moved to Auschwitz. After her liberation, she lived in a German displaced-persons camp for six years.

"Her story is extraordinary, because she is so articulate, so tough, also brilliant, and her survival was in her own hands," Satie said. "She has to bring herself to tell her story. She was never allowed to tell it; she was silent and afraid to tell her story. When she came to America, she was forced to assimilate, quietly, because no one wanted to know about what she experienced. So her journey is to bring out her voice."

The journey that a woman named Amelie has to make, according to Satie, is to go beyond her fear. She is very involved with archives, books and facts, because she can't seem to access her Holocaust experience.

"She was hidden with families in Belgium, and she was very afraid and very frail, because she had asthma. She was just like

a terrified little Chihuahua, just quaking all the time, and yet she survived, through very kind families in Belgium," Satie said.

The fourth member of the group, Hannah, has to remember what she can't face. She was hidden by a family in Holland, but was kept indoors after she was recognized on the street.

"What really is touching to me about her," director Anita Khanzadian remarked, "is her saying, 'I was fine. Nothing much happened to me.' And it's true — she couldn't remember anything. And there's that little section toward the end where she says, 'Now that I have a granddaughter, 4 years old, and I think of her being taken away, I know something must have happened to me.'"

Khanzadian said she relates intensely to themes of genocide and the Holocaust because of her Armenian background.

"I can identify with just being a child in a war zone," she said. "My mother was a survivor of the Armenian genocide, and she was an orphan. I've heard stories from my mother that were so similar to those in the play. She and her younger brother were the only ones from her family to survive.

"She was in an orphanage, and I used to ask her what she remembers from before that. So she would tell me some stories. The last time she saw her mother was when her mother put her into the American College with her brother, who was younger. They were taking children but not grownups."

Khanzadian also said she was particularly struck by the incredible ability to survive that is illuminated through the work, along with the incredible life force that is not easily extinguished.

"Every one of these women had that. And the other thing that makes me like this piece is expressed in the line toward the end that I tell Stephanie is so important: 'People have to hear about this. They have to know that they didn't kill all of us. We're still here.' That was the attempt — to get rid of all of them. And they can't do that. And they won't do that. And I think it's important."

Khanzadian would like audiences to come away from the play having learned something they may not have known before meeting these women.

And Satie wants her audiences to understand that what happened to these women could happen to anyone.

"I would like them to leave with a sense that it really did happen, as there are more and more loud voices of denial, and that these people may not be around to tell their stories that much longer, and we need to hear them. We need to hear everyone's story so we're not distanced from catastrophic events, so we realize that they happen to people — they don't just happen to nebulous countries far away on maps that we don't even recognize. Catastrophic events happen to people."

***Silent Witnesses***. 7 p.m. Sept. 20. Free. South Pasadena Public Library, Community Room, 1115 El Centro St., South Pasadena. (626) 403-7340.