

THEATER REVIEW

A quiet love greets grim tales

CHARLES McNULTY
THEATER CRITIC

“Silent Witnesses,” a modest and compassionate solo work written and performed by Stephanie Satie at the Odyssey Theatre, is based on interviews and conversations with child survivors of the Holocaust.

On a darkened and mostly bare stage, Satie portrays a group of women whose peaceful childhoods were transformed into living nightmares. The setting is a support group, in which the women are encouraged to share their stories with those who know that the unimaginable can come to pass.

Dana, the group’s therapist and a survivor herself, recalls picking a daisy when the bombs came and her world changed. Hannah remembers being taken away for her own safety on a bicycle in the middle of the night. Amelie records her memories but worries that they read like fiction. Paula confesses that she routinely awakens in terror, with a sensation of choking.

Testimony is challenged by the gaps in what can be remembered, by the empty spaces left by traumatic events that overwhelmed a child’s capacity for language and understanding. Compounding the silence is the relatively low rung occupied by childhood survivors “in the hierarchy of suffering.”

“They had never told their stories to anyone,” explains Dana. “Neither had I. No one wanted to hear. Even the camp survivors thought, ‘They were kids; they were hidden; nothing really happened to them.’”

But their lives have been warped by what they saw and what they’ve been forced to surmise. As Hannah, who’d rather not dredge up the horror, says, “We’re all a little broken. We grow around the break.”

Satie, differentiating her characters by their various European accents and slightly exaggerated demeanors, doesn’t bring these women to life much beyond their childhood tales. But the respectful way she communicates what



RICK FRIESEN

STEPHANIE SATIE in
“Silent Witnesses”

they lived through is perfectly measured. Sentimental flourishes are banished in Anita Khanzadian’s simple and direct staging. These witnesses are witnessed with quiet love.

As their stories are drawn out, one can’t help thinking of youngsters today in Syria, Nigeria and the other global trouble spots, where hatred and havoc are holding sway. What unenviable fund of memories are they acquiring as you read this? Who will listen when it is their turn to speak?

charles.mcnnulty
@latimes.com