

Silent Witnesses

Reviewed by Paul Birchall
Odyssey Theatre
Through Feb. 1

RECOMMENDED:



Photo by Rick Friesen

Playwright-actor Stephanie Satie's solo show uses the format of a group therapy session to depict the oral histories told by survivors of the Holocaust survivors who were children when the German Nazi concentration camps were functioning. These are women who survived either because they were hidden by parents and friends, or by using wiles to make it through the death camps unscathed. The material is intrinsically powerful, and Satie's wonderfully intimate and heartfelt performance creates the sense that we're actually in the presence of the women whose lives she's describing.

Satie's script, based on interviews and formidable research, is set in modern Los Angeles. Therapist Dana, herself a Holocaust survivor from the Polish city of Lodz, welcomes several other women, who all arrive with their own memories of the Nazi era. Paula experienced the Polish ghetto, tried to hide in the woods but nevertheless wound up in Auschwitz, surviving only by her wits and an unexpected talent. Hannah was shuttled from home to home, and watched her parents taken away. Amelie, a shy Belgian girl, is hidden in the home of some family friends, forbidden from even looking out the window lest Nazis spot her. These tales are interspersed with Dana's own memories of losing her father after she was forced to pretend to be a Catholic to avoid death.

It's true that many of the play's characters are archetypal — and this suggests that the play will probably have more emotional impact on young audiences less familiar with Holocaust history, as well as the worthy, but well-mined themes seen in movies like *Shoah* or *Schindler's List*. However, Satie's astute writing, in director Anita Khandazian's unintrusive, yet elegiac staging, is full of wisdom, from the observation of the unjust luck that allowed certain children to survive and not others, to the description of these women as being "ghosts bearing ghosts." The play's unspoken idea is that it is really not possible to actually "understand" the past: The best we can do is interpret it through the prism of contemporary attitudes and prejudices.

Satie limns the characters with sympathy and nuance. Her portrayal of the ferociously vital Paula is particularly vivid: It's artful how the performer captures the sense of a steely woman in her golden years, who has seen so much, she has no time for either sentimentality or vulnerability.

One might wish that the play better connected its stories to the burgeoning anti-Semitism of the present -- but as a collection of character portraits, the piece is both moving and engaging.

Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., W.L.A.; Sun., 2 p.m.; through Feb 1. (310) 477-2055,
www.refugeestheplay.com.