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Creating 'Kaddish'

Stage adaption of acclaimed Holocaust novel debuts at Theatre Project next week.

By Amy Landsman

Courtesy of the Center for Biomedical Theatre Development

Is it possible for a Hungarian novel about the Holocaust to be both challenging and dense, and poetic and light at the same time?

Director Barbara Lanciers believes so passionately that it can be so that she championed adapting Nobel Prize-winning writer Imre Kertesz's 2004 novel "Kaddish For An Unborn Child" (Vintage) for the stage.

Now simply called "Kaddish," the work will premiere at Baltimore's Theatre Project next Thursday, May 3.

"Imre Kertesz is a [Jewish] Holocaust survivor, and a lot of his work is about the Holocaust, which is why it seems like the prose is so heavy and dense. At the same time, I think his writing is so light and beautiful, and the prose is just gorgeous and almost poetic," said Lanciers, speaking by phone from her home in Brooklyn, N.Y. "It's so human that it's relatable to everyone."

Lanciers and Jake Goodman, a Jewish educator, performer and activist, co-adapted "Kaddish."

"Each thought is very long and it goes off in many directions, but if you do the work of following it, it's really clear and beautiful," said Goodman, who also lives in Brooklyn. "I think what Barbara and my job is to make that train of thought clear to people and help them to follow it."

Lanciers calls the stage adaption a "true dual effort in all aspects of creating the piece."

"Kaddish" centers on the character's mourning the absence of the child he never fathered during his failed marriage. He believes he could never bring a child into a world where events like the Holocaust occur.

"'Kaddish' is a series of ruminations. It reads like a long monologue, his musings on why he decided not to have a child," Lanciers said.

Kertesz, 82, is currently in poor health. As Lanciers was putting the wheels in motion for the stage adaptation, she exchanged emails with his wife, who gave her support.

"She said he and she are always excited when there's a new piece of his brought to life, to bring the text to new audiences who otherwise might not be familiar with his work, particularly in the English-speaking world," Lanciers said.

From the moment she read "Kaddish" eight years ago, Lanciers said she knew she really wanted to see the novel staged. She admits she faced skepticism from friends and colleagues about whether such a complicated and arduous work could be wrestled into something more manageable.

"It's a very, very, very long Nile River of a monologue, where he touches on his relationship with his ex-wife, and at times he's musing on political leaders and the dangers of dictatorship, and at the same time he's saying these really lovely things about love," she said.

Theater-goers don't have to fear that they will be sitting all night. The words are all Kertesz's but the piece has been trimmed to 55 minutes, and Lanciers said Goodman's "lovely and vulnerable" personality really shines through. The staging is done without any bells and whistles.

"Jake is performing on a 10-foot-by-10-foot square of dirt, and the audience sits really right at the edge. We only have 25 audience members in each performance," Lanciers said.

Last February, "Kaddish" had a short workshop staging at New York's 14th Street Y. Opening here in Baltimore is a natural fit for Lanciers, who multi-tasks as a director, choreographer and activist. She earned her master's of fine arts degree in theater from Towson University, and in 2007 her original performance piece, "Leaves With A Name," based on her grandmother's 1944 escape from Hungary, premiered at Baltimore's Peabody Institute.

Furthering the local connection is that the producer of "Kaddish" is Philip Arnoult, who was Lanciers' mentor at Towson. Arnoult founded Baltimore's Theatre Project back in 1971 and was its director for more than 20 years.

"This year is the 40th anniversary of the Theatre Project, so it's a really natural fit," said Arnoult.

Lanciers is of Hungarian descent, and although not Jewish, she said her family never freely talked about the past so she suspects she may have Jewish ancestors. Goodman is Jewish, and Lanciers said his deep knowledge of Jewish ritual adds an additional layer of depth to the work.

After the Baltimore premiere, the future for "Kaddish" is still up in the air. As a simply staged, one-man show, it would be easy to move the production to different venues in different cities, and Lanciers and Arnoult are hopeful that's exactly what will happen.

"We'd like to keep it around," said Arnoult. "It will probably be seen in New York again. I hope it can have a long life."

Goodman believes one of the messages of the play is that "we have a role in history and when tyrants come to rule and when lunatics and crazy people and buffoons come into power, we have a role and a responsibility in that." JT

"Kaddish" will be performed at the Theatre Project, 45 W. Preston St. in Mount Vernon, from May 3 to May 5 at 7 and 9 p.m., and on Sunday, May 6, at 3 and 5 p.m. Only 25 tickets are available for each performance.

In celebration of the Theatre Project's 40th anniversary, tickets for "Kaddish" are free, but they must be reserved in advance. A pass-the-hat donation of $10 is suggested.

For information, call 410-752-8558 or visit theatreproject.org .

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