

The Arts

Theater, Books, Music & Visual Arts

The Jewish Blues

Blind Boy Paxton at Iridium.

The Buzz 44



Mounting A Case For A Neighbor

Canada at 150, Jewishly and otherwise.

Travel 46



Our Lives As A Tree

Tu b'Shvat and a phenomenon called inosculcation.

First Person 58



Theater

Stitching Together Past And Present

'The Dressmaker's Secret,' set in '60s Romania, probes the nature of forgiveness in a morally ambiguous world.

Ted Merwin

Special To The Jewish Week

Donald Trump infuriated many last week when he failed to mention either Jews or anti-Semitism in his statement on International Holocaust Re-

membrance Day. The new president might do well to catch a new Off-Broadway play, Sarah Levine Simon and Mihai Grunfeld's "The Dressmaker's Secret," set in Romania in 1963, which opens this week for a month-long run at a theater just around the corner from Trump Tower. While none of the four characters in the play is Jewish, the specters of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust loom so large as to blot out almost everything else in their lives.

Directed by Roger Hendricks Simon, "The Dressmaker's Secret" is the tale of a fatherless 19-year-old Hungarian boy named Robi (Bryan Burton) who lives at home in Cluj, Romania, with his mother, Maria (Tracy Sallows), the dressmaker of the title. Robi chafes under the restrictions of living under the socialist regime of Romania, which, after the Second World War, had taken over the part of Transylvania in which he and his mother live. When his mother's erstwhile lover, an engineer named Robert (Robert S. Gregory) who had escaped to West Germany, comes to visit, the possibility arises of his enabling Robi to defect — a step that is urged by Robert's sister, Irma (Caralyn Kozlowski), who is a former friend of the dressmaker.

But before he can do so, the anguished Robert must atone for his part in the death of another former lover of the dressmaker, Zoli, who was Jewish and whom Robert knew when he was an army officer assigned to the ghetto from which the Hungarian Jews were deported to Auschwitz. The youth is left to try to figure out which one of these men (one of whom may have been responsible for the death of the other) was his father, even as he progressively takes on more and more of Zoli's Jewish rituals.

In an interview, Simon told The Jewish Week that the play is about "having to learn to forgive people we love who

are not as pure as we thought they were." Because the history of the Holocaust was suppressed in Transylvania, Simon said, Robi is learning for the first time about the existence of Zoli and what might have happened to him. Zoli is "such a presence in the play," he said, "that he is almost a character in his own right."

The situation that the dressmaker and her son find themselves in is, he noted, not that different from that in which many people around the globe find themselves today. In Africa, for example, "people are forced to live right next door to the people who killed the members of their family. They have to give up some of their hate and prejudice in order to help themselves and others get on with their lives."

Sarah Levine Simon, who is married to Roger, is an opera singer and playwright; in 2014, her satirical play, "The Portrait," about members of a New York family battling over who will own a portrait of their 18th-century Jewish ancestor, was staged in Manhattan decades after having been broadcast on public radio. Her new play, she said, is about "how life in a totalitarian society drives people into fear and mistrust."

She recalled her own experience living in Romania during the winter of 1964, while she was performing with the Oberlin College Choir. "I remember men in trench coats stopping us from taking pictures of the empty food stalls. People lined up for blocks just to buy an orange. One of the only ways of earning a living without working for a state-owned business." Nevertheless, sartorial splendor could be a priority; as Djurdja Bartlett has written in "FashionEast: The Spectre That Haunted Socialism" (MIT Press, 2010), the fluid nature of fashion was inherently subversive in a repressive society that thrived on uniformity.

Because Hungarians (who call them-



Caralyn Kozlowski, left, and Tracy Sallows (as the dressmaker) in "The Dressmaker's Secret." PHOTOS BY WILLIAM DEAN



The dressmaker Maria, above. Her fatherless son, played by Bryan Burton, below with Koslowski; she plays the sister of Maria's ex-lover.

selves Magyars), although they numbered a million and a half, were second-class citizens in Romania, Robi is, initially, crushed to find he may have Jewish blood. "At first he doesn't want to be Jewish; it's another yoke around his neck," Sarah said. But after reading his late father's journal, Sarah noted, he becomes "fascinated with Judaism, even as he tries to come to terms with a past that will, in many ways, be forever opaque."

Grunfeld, who teaches Spanish and Latin American literature at Vassar College, was born in Cluj in 1949; his parents were both Holocaust survivors. The play is based largely on his extended family's own traumatic experiences. In school, he said, "we weren't taught about the war, and no one spoke about it. The Romanians erased the past."

After the Soviets occupied Hungary, Romania

and Austria in 1945, a pervasive atmosphere of fear continued. "A third of the population were serving as informants to the secret police," Grunfeld, whose memoir is entitled "Leaving: Memories of Romania" (Millrock Writers Collective, 2008), said. "You never knew who could be trusted, and who would betray you. The government was always whipping people up against each other." At the age of 18, he escaped to Czechoslovakia and fled from there to Austria. He ended up living in Israel, Italy, Sweden and Canada before finally coming to the United States in 1978. He never saw his mother again.

Robert Gregory plays the engineer who may or may not have eliminated his rival for the dressmaker's affections. The actor, who is of Armenian descent, grew up listening to stories about the deaths of his father's siblings during a forced march from eastern Turkey. "The Dressmaker's Secret," he opined, is a "rich, complex play in terms of the emotions and moral issues that it presents." His character has what he calls a "morally ambiguous past in which it is unclear if he was motivated by anti-Semitism or by circumstance." But he takes the risk of returning to Transylvania because he is "genuinely contrite and ashamed, seeking redemption for what he did during the war."

The current political climate in this country notwithstanding, Gregory said, he has long "understood and appreciated" the importance of not letting intolerance happen again. In order for ethnic and racial minorities to feel safe, he said, "We need to eliminate hate." ■

"The Dressmaker's Secret" is now in previews at 59E59 Street Theaters, 59 E. 59th St. It opens Feb. 14 and runs through March 5. Performances are Tuesdays through Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday at 8:30 p.m., Saturday afternoons at 2:30 p.m. and Sunday afternoons at 3:30 p.m. For tickets, \$25, call Ticket Central at (212) 279-4200 or visit 59e59.org.



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