

Daughters of survivors reveal secrets in new play

Arts Scene

by Heather Solomon

It's the perfect climate for three women to tell their stories about being daughters of survivors.

Floods of immigrants are making the news and playwrights Pearl Lottner Rothenberg and Claudia Litvak Polachek, who were ready to reveal their own stories, found director Rachele Glait, who could relate to their script.

Daughters of Mile End, which is playing at the D.B. Clarke Theatre in Concordia University's Hall building, runs from April 3-6. It is the second world premiere for the two-year-old Labyrinth Stage Productions, which was founded by Rothenberg and Polachek.

Last year's successful *Queen of Chesed* – which was based on the story of big-hearted New Yorker Faige Jacobson, who took in the homeless – gave the nascent company a solid base from which to build. This year, the playwrights turn their lens upon themselves.

"My mother was a survivor of Auschwitz

and Bergen-Belsen. She was 19 when the war started and 25 when it ended, the only survivor of her family. My father was a partisan in the woods and when he came back to Lvov, no relative was left. Even though my parents never talked about it and kept so many secrets, I grew up knowing that things weren't quite right," says Rothenberg, who had a career as a psychologist before retirement brought her to theatre.

Polachek's parents fled to Chile, before the Nazi chokehold tightened. "We moved to Montreal when I was four. My father was feeling the immigrant experience throughout my entire life," she says.

Glait's parents met while self-exiled in Uzbekistan. But her father, the youngest of 14 children and one of only two to survive, was almost mortally wounded in the Kielce pogrom when he returned to Poland to find his siblings.

"The Poles were not happy that the Jews were coming back and smashed him on the head. A doctor examining the bodies on a wagon saw he was still breathing and sent him to hospital," says Glait. "Eventually, he made his way to Montreal and found work in a factory. He was there at 7 a.m. and came home at 7 at night. We had no relationship, but when he died, I found



From left, Pearl Lottner Rothenberg, Rachele Glait and Claudia Litvak Polachek prepare to stage *Daughters of Mile End* at the D.B. Clarke Theatre. HEATHER SOLOMON PHOTO

a shoebox with every review of every play that I'd ever been in."

The trauma affected their parents' child-rearing skills, making them either neglectful or overly protective. They struggled for social acceptance in Canada, particularly among native-born Jews, who proved to be the most hurtful.

"One of my new friends called the house and my mother answered. She thought my mother was the cleaning lady," says Glait. "I was the child of an outsider, so I was an outsider."

Polachek added that, "My father used to

say, 'Just because I speak with an accent doesn't mean I think with an accent.' It comes up as a line in the dialogue."

In the play, the women tell their stories and amalgamate those of other children of survivors. This is told through four 12-year-old friends growing up in the Esplanade Street area of Montreal in the 1950s. The play follows them over the years, seeing them again when they are 30 and, later, in their 60s. The older cast members also play the mothers of the children.

John Dinning's set, Mike Sinnott's lighting and Louise Bourret's costumes conjure the three different eras as the characters age. And in the time it takes to tell their stories, the words of the playwrights expose their secrets and lead to an understanding that can heal relationships between parents and children, friends and community.

"It's an emotional investment," says Rothenberg, of both the personal sharing that took place in writing the play, and the close teamwork of all those involved. ■

Tickets can be purchased by calling 1-800-838-3006, or visiting brownpapertickets.com/event/4048627.

Woman relives her assault onstage in candid show

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Even in this #MeToo era, the word "rape" is often avoided, in favour of the less discomfiting term "sexual assault," or even "sexual misconduct." But Adina Katz does not shy away from calling such an attack by its ugly name, and she does so on stage. She's not talking about any rape, but the one she endured.

In her new one-woman show, *Be a Good Girl*, she recalls the crime in frank detail, reliving the trauma without shame, but with blame for a society that still minimizes the physical and psychological violence endured by its victims, and a system that continues to protect the perpetrators.

Be a Good Girl, which she performed five times at the Segal Centre for Performing Arts this month, is not conventional theatre.

Restricted to audiences age 17 and over, the multimedia show brings together Katz's talents as a playwright, actor, singer, songwriter, musician, video artist, puppet designer and comedian. Humour, sometimes bawdy and always zany, relieves this otherwise unsettling autobiographical story of disillusionment, self-doubt and violation.



Adina Katz wrote, produced and performs in the one-woman show, *Be a Good Girl*.

Katz has the courage to acknowledge that victims are often interested in the person who attacked them, before the rape takes place. In her case, it was a man she was very attracted to after years of dating disappointment.

They went out, they drank and she invited him back to her place. The sex began consensually, until it was forced and she said no – repeatedly.

He laughed off her resistance. The petite Katz was no match against her 90-kilo-

gram assailant. In the immediate aftermath, she tried to act like everything was normal. She wondered if she was at fault. After all, she had been conditioned from birth to be "a good girl."

Katz later went to the police, who dissuaded her from pressing charges, leaving the impression that she would be victimizing him. She now understands why so few rape victims report what has happened, let alone seek justice.

At 41, Katz says she has "got my power back" since the rape that happened when she was in her 30s and living in New York, but she will never be "over it."

Therapy has helped, she tells the audience, as well as support from friends and family (her mother and twin brother were in the front row of this performance). She credits her Aunt Mary with encouraging her to "find my voice" and do "this crazy thing," a project that began in 2014.

The title refers to the message Katz received as a child, like other girls then and even now, to be nice and look pretty – all those dos and don'ts that will make them pleasing to men. She was fed the Cinderella dream of finding her Prince Charming and living happily ever after.

Creating *Be a Good Girl*, which in an

earlier version premiered at the Toronto Fringe Festival last summer, has been part of her healing.

But this is not a fairy tale – there is no happy ending. *Be a Good Girl* is, first of all, a work of art – and a laudable one at that. Katz hopes it will also contribute to the conversation about sexual assault and harassment. Each one-hour show was followed by a question-and-answer session, and a counsellor was on hand in the lobby for anyone who needed to talk privately about the issues that were raised.

Katz would like to use *Be a Good Girl* in some form, perhaps online, as an educational tool, or a "reality checky-poo," as she terms it in the mock video in the show.

In the show, Katz describes coming from a privileged background ("a nice Jewish home") and being perhaps too sheltered. She wants young women today to be unafraid to speak up for themselves, for young men to understand consent and everyone else to stop hiding the truth.

After working in New York and Chicago for some years, Katz recently returned to Montreal and founded Wandering Well Productions, which intends to create more works that are entertaining, while advocating for social change. ■