

'Eight Nights' at Detroit Public Theatre is Holocaust survivor's story

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FULL TEXT

At its best, theater holds a mirror up to our own lives, exposing deep truths about ourselves and those around us. Detroit Public Theatre's current production of playwright Jennifer Maisel's "Eight Nights" goes a step beyond that by asking hard questions about the status of the world around us while honoring faithful traditions.

The play presents eight different nights of Hanukkah in one woman's life over a period of years from 1949 to 2016. Rebecca, a 19-year-old Holocaust survivor, arrives rather terrified in the United States to begin a new life, but finds she can neither escape nor confront the horrors of her past. Over time, across decades of holiday seasons and candle lighting in the same small apartment, the audience grows with her, through motherhood and beyond, closing with Rebecca in her 80s with her granddaughter helping her out.

It's a clever concept, handily pulled off by DPT and the one-two punch of Rivka Borek and Sarah Winkler as the younger and older Rebecca. When Winkler steps into the lead role, Borek then portrays Rebecca's daughter and, eventually, her granddaughter. It's quite a turn, with Borek carving out three distinctly different characters and drawing every spectrum of emotion from the audience. Winkler is a force of nature in the play's second half. Her Rebecca grapples into old age with the terror she endured as a girl.

The two co-leads are supported by a terrific ensemble of actors including Eric Gutman (providing Tony Shalhoub-like energy as Rebecca's father in early scenes), Michael Lopetrone and the warm and fun duo of Henri Franklin and Janai Lashon. **The dynamic Kurt Kanazawa gets a real scene-stealing moment during the show that draws applause.** Director Marya Mazor makes the most of her talented cast without letting the performances get in the way of the story and gaining great mileage from small moments.

Sarah Pearlina's set, which subtly changes with the passage of time, is highly evocative of a bygone era but gradually fills with the feeling of love.

"Eight Days" is a play that gets under your skin and into your soul. At a performance a couple of weekends ago, audience members broke into belly laughs and spontaneous applause and then uttered a collective gasp when a gut-punch twist was revealed late in the show. By the final scenes, many were openly weeping in their seats. At an especially sensitive time for Jewish people, and when discussions of the maltreatment and erasure of Middle Eastern, Black and Asian American people are taking center stage as well, "Eight Nights" has much to say about where we come from and who we want to be. And where it's possible for us to go—but, of course, we can only get there if we first confront the past.

"Eight Nights" runs through Nov. 5 at Detroit Public Theatre, 3960 Third Ave. The show is 90 minutes in length with no intermission. Every Saturday and Sunday matinee is followed by a postshow talk-back session. Tickets are \$47. For tickets and info, visit www.detroitpublictheatre.org.

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DETAILS

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