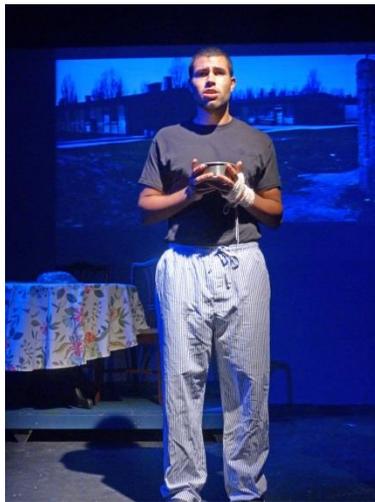




## Review: Under The Poplar Trees

Reviews August 14, 2014

[Amanda N. Gunther](#)



Karim Zelenka (Young Meyer.) Photo Bill Toohey

Children are history moving forward. History is but words on a page. A brilliant and poignant message layered into the finely honed theatrical drama written by Baltimore area playwright [Rosemary Frisino Toohey](#), *Under the Poplar Trees* makes its Baltimore debut as a part of the [Baltimore Playwrights' Festival 2014](#) at the [Fells Point Corner Theatre](#). An intensely compelling and evocative tale of life focused through the lens of struggling to survive in Dachau—the first Nazi concentration camp—this play is a startling gem; a true testament that engaging ideas are still being produced in the world of theatre. Balanced with levity and hope against enormous sorrow and agony, Toohey has written the perfect play; a masterpiece with vision.

Director Miriam Bazensky approaches the piece with a myopic focus on the story; a necessary means to drawing forth the poignancy and emotional depth from the exceptional writing put forth by Toohey. Bazensky keeps the set simplistic, allowing for scenes of memory, scenes of dream, and scenes of reality to drift in and out without pause or overburdened set changes. This enables the actors to focus on the story they tell; a truly raw and evocative tale that stirs intense oceans emotions to the surface of the audiences' conscious.

Playwright Rosemary Frisino Toohey is gifted in the art of dramatic tension. The play is laid out in such a fashion that each scene—be it in the present, the past, or the dreamlike limbo that Josef experiences—works to build the show as a whole. Her writing is the epitome of a finished jigsaw puzzle, all the pieces coming into place to create a breathtaking masterpiece. Toohey's ability to subtly infuse dramatic tension into the fleeting moments of hope in this production is exceptional; the second act of the play being one emotional burst of intensity after another. The work is stunning and its performance under the talented direction of Bazensky does the tale being told a world of justice.

The acting is as impressive as the play itself; a rarity in new works of theatre. Each person fits their part, understands the layered meanings worked into the depth of the script, and executes their roles with determination and dedication. Even the smaller parts like that of Desiree (Beth

Amann) and Clara (Annette Mooney Wasno) find a divine fit into this production. Amann serves as an ephemeral foil of sorts to Josef; existing only in a dreamlike limbo that leaves her existence open for conjecture. Her mild but teasing nature flows naturally and makes the scenes between her character and Josef's character intriguing with just the faintest hint of titillation.

Wasno's character runs the risk of becoming an overly dramatic caricature, but her keen sense of balance prevents that from happening with the Jewish grandma. Wasno's approach to the character's accent creates an authenticity within her; the pauses and inflections in her voice when needling at Aaron to eat more, the way she nags lovingly at her husband Meyer; all representing the positive minutia of a stereotypical bubbe.

Aaron (Max Lanocha) gives a well-grounded performance as the catalyst to the protagonist. It is Meyer, though ultimately Josef's story, but it gets underway with the prodding and sparks from Lanocha's character. Lanocha also doubles as a concentration camp prisoner in the second act; a riveting performance that really draws sharp attention to his performing abilities.



Meyer (L- Jeff Murray) and Aaron (R- Max Lanocha) in Photo: Bill Toohey

Young Meyer (Karim Zelenka) and Josef (Justin Johnson) are where the true harrowing moments of the play strike through in force. Toohey's crafting of these two characters could not be more dynamically opposite. Johnson is entrusted with being a ray of hope shining through the dreary dirge that has become life inside the camp fence while Zelenka is fitted with a pessimistically focused case of realism.



Meyer (L- Jeff Murray) and Clara (R- Annette Mooney Wasno)  
Photo: Bill Toohey

Johnson's performance is sensational. Their moments together during the roll-call scene are harrowing and chill you to the core to witness. But it is Johnson's effervescence that resonates through his entire performance that continues to illuminate his internal optimism. Johnson is a radiant beam of luminescent spirit that shines with reflective hope until the very end; a thoroughly stunning and awe-inspiring performance.

As for Meyer (Jeff Murray) the story becomes complex. Murray takes to task the role of

surviving Dachau. His accent and vocal inflection as well as his speech patterns are nearly flawless and from the moment he totters onto the stage there is no doubt that he is embodying a



Josef (Justin Johnson and Desiree (Beth Amman)

91-year old Jewish grandpa. Murray creates perfection in juxtaposing his internalized struggles against his external rigidity. He falls easily into the notion of his character's resistance, his mind not letting him see what his heart feels. There is a desperate vulnerability deep inside of this character that Murray clings to; fleeting glimpses of which break free in the perpetual skirmish of remaining quiet about everything that was endured while coping with survivor's guilt. A truly remarkable performance that goes beyond compare or words; both Murray and Johnson give phenomenal moments of reality in this play that bring tears to the eyes.

The play has a brief run and should not be missed; it's the most evocative work that has been presented as a part of the BPF in quite some time.

**Running Time:** Approximately 2 hours with one intermission

Desiree (Beth Amann) and Josef (Justin Johnson) Photo: Bill Toohey