

Baltimore GUIDE

Canton resident pens perfect play

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In attending the very first performance of, “Under the Poplar Trees,” a play written by Canton resident Rosemary Frisino Toohey, the Baltimore Guide believes that it may have been privileged to witness a significant event in theatrical history.

The play was that good.

“Under the Poplar Trees”—showing at the Fell’s Point Corner Theatre, Thursdays through Sundays, through the end of the month—is the tale of two men affected very differently by the same experience.



1Josef (right, portrayed by Justin Johnson) helps Meyer (Karim Zelenka) find something to smile about at Dachau, of all places. – Photo by Bill Toohey

It happens to deal with the Holocaust, and evokes strong and real emotion, but not the kind that would drag you down for days or hours. It’s more akin to what we would hope an elderly person feels, looking back at the family they have loved with joy, sadness and laughter.

“It’s a play about life; it’s not a play about death,” says Toohey.

“Under the Poplar Trees” is the story of Meyer and Josef, two men imprisoned at Dachau—a concentration camp outside of Munich—toward the end of World War II. The setting moves from that time and place to Meyer’s present-day life as a soon-to-be great-grandfather in New York. Unknown to Meyer, his old friend his watching over him from the afterlife, when not consorting with the woman of his dreams in his own personal heaven.

Toohey says that she drew on two sources of inspiration for “Under the Poplar Trees.”

One was a trip she took with her husband, Bill, about five years ago.

“We traveled to Munich. It was a charming city, just very lovely with a great big plaza,” she says. “It’s just charming as all get-out. And a half-hour away, maybe 25 minutes, you take the train and you’re in Dachau.”

Her visit got her to thinking, as did her writer’s habit of collecting obituaries. She began reading the stories of Holocaust survivors, who, she notes, are growing fewer and fewer.

“What fascinates me is two people can go through the same—well, let’s say horrific—experience and come out of it different,” she says, remembering the obituary of one survivor that noted his appetite for living and attempts to pick up women in bars into his old age.



2The older Meyer (Jeff Murray) shares a laugh with his wife Clara (Annette Mooney Wasno). – Photo by Bill Toohey

“I was very amused by that, cheered by that,” Toohey says. “Others, their life is so fixed on that...they just can’t get past it. It’s like this shadow over the rest of their lives.”

Meyer the Holocaust survivor is 91 years old and has led, by most accounts, an outstanding life. Yet the shadow is there. His friend Josef, “a man of such strength, such talent,” has seen something in Meyer and has chosen him as a pupil of sorts, the recipient of his knowledge of life’s beauty.

Josef’s devotion to his friend remains after his own death, even to the very slight annoyance of Desiree, his siren-like companion in the afterlife.

Perhaps because of its contrast with the richness of his post-Dachau life, Meyer’s shadow is painfully evident to his loved ones—including his wife, gracefully portrayed by Annette Mooney Wasno, and Aaron, his newspaperman son, played by Max Lanocha.

Toohey says she was wowed by the acting and direction of her play, and the Baltimore Guide agrees. Jeff Murray put in a particularly strong performance as the 91-year-old Meyer; the audience feels his joy and pain, and the soft sadness of an old man at an unexpected turn of events.

“Under the Poplar Trees” contains at least one device that literary wonks will appreciate. In Dachau, Josef and Meyer speak plainly and without accents, but fast-forward to present-day Brooklyn and the older Meyer speaks with a (nicely rendered) Jewish accent.

The program explains:

“The camp prisoners would actually be speaking Yiddish. But Meyer, after his immigration to America, speaks English with a heavy accent.”

Toohey began writing plays about 15 years ago, when she realized she enjoyed writing the dialog of novels but not necessarily the prose. Since then, her plays have been featured in over 180 productions around the world.

“Under the Poplar Trees” is one of five finalists for the Julie Harris Playwright Awards. It is also part of the Baltimore Playwrights Festival, which presented “Under the Poplar Trees” in conjunction with the Fell’s Point Corner Theatre.

For more information on the Baltimore Playwrights Festival, visit baltplayfest.org. For more on the Fell’s Point Corner Theatre, visit fpct.org. For more information on Toohey, go to frisinotoohey.com.



by Erik Zygmunt
editor@baltimoreguide.com

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