SURVIVORS, SCHOLARS AND PLAYWRIGHTS WRESTLE WITH THE RIGHT TO WRITE HISTORY

By Connor Graham

More than a decade ago, Baltimore-born playwright Jeff Cohen ran an independent “off-off-Broadway” theater in New York’s Tribeca neighborhood. One night after a show, an elderly man approached Cohen and handed him a manila envelope. “You give free tickets to our senior center, which I appreciate. I like what you do here,” said the man. “So read this, and maybe there is something you can do with it.”

Inside was a copy of Moment magazine featuring an article titled “Slippery History” about a Holocaust survivor named Morris Spitzer, the man who handed Cohen the envelope.

Written by Josh Rolnick in June 2000, the story detailed Spitzer’s incessant crusade to convince historians associated with then-recently opened Jewish history museums to include exhibits about a Nazi atrocity that scholars have re-categorized as a myth. Spitzer, with only a photograph and his own testimony, sought to prove that during the Holocaust, Nazis used the corpses of murdered Jews to mass-produce bars of soap.

After a seven-year “gestation process,” Cohen figured out how he wanted to tell Spitzer’s story, and finally wrote what he called “a decent draft.” The finished product, called “The Soap Myth,” had an off-Broadway run in New York in 2012 and over the last three years has been presented as a concert reading in cities across the country.

“If you’re going to write a play about the Holocaust, you have to get everything right. You don’t have the luxury of being sloppy with details,” Cohen said. “Anything associated with the Holocaust becomes a target for Holocaust deniers and anti-Semites.”

A performance this Sunday at the Gordon Center for the Performing Arts on the Rosenbloom Owings Mills JCC campus will feature renowned Broadway and television actors Ed Asner (“The Mary Tyler Moore Show”) and Tovah Feldshuh (“Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,” “Law and Order”) in lead and supporting roles. The readings are directed by Pamela Berlin.

“The Soap Myth” dramatizes a tension between Holocaust survivors and...
Holocaust scholars. Who has the right to write history? Should survivors’ testimonies be considered fact? Could an exhibit without tangible evidence be fodder for Holocaust denial?

Feldshuh plays both Esther Feinman, a strict but even-keeled Holocaust scholar, and Brenda Goodsen, a charming yet pernicious Holocaust denier. In an age where anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial are not phenomena of the past, Feldshuh feels honored to perform in a play that poses complicated moral questions.

“On an artistic level, it’s an important piece, because Holocaust survivors are dying off,” said Feldshuh. “Any play that has to do with moral latitudes is of use to us.”

SKETCHY EVIDENCE

In 1993, Spitzer, living in New York City, received a photograph of a 1946 funeral procession in Sighet, Romania. In the photo, dozens of men clad in hats and black suits march down the street, several of them carrying a casket that Spitzer, an eyewitness, claims was filled with bars of soap made with the fat of murdered Jews. After holding a funeral and burial, the townspeople of Sighet thought little about it; they were trying to rebuild their lives after the Shoah.

Spitzer approached many organizations, including the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem, asking that the photo be displayed as proof of the atrocity.

“What [Spitzer] found, when he began to show the photo around, threatened to shatter what he had assumed was reality: Instead of being impressed with Spitzer’s evidence, Holocaust scholars were suspicious of it,” Josh Rolnick wrote in his 2000 story. “Many survivors believe that the Nazis made soap out of Jews. And by all accounts that is false,” Berenbaum told the JT. “When I say it’s false, you have to understand something. Some people respond to this emotionally and they think that this is a form of Holocaust denial. It is not. That they didn’t turn the Jews into soap doesn’t make the crimes of the Nazis one iota less bad.”

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— Jeff Cohen, “The Soap Myth” playwright
However, Berenbaum said corpses of Jews were used for economic purposes. Teeth were pulled to extract and resell gold, and hair was used for submarine lining and to make fabrics. He said there is evidence that the Nazis tried to make soap out of Jews, but after Polish Jews were ghettoized and starved, the corpses didn’t have enough fat to make mass soap production possible.

“So it’s not because they were nice guys that they didn’t make Jews into soap,” Berenbaum said. “It’s because it was not going to be economically feasible.”

Berenbaum is now the director of the Sigi Ziering Institute: Exploring the Ethical and Religious Implications of the Holocaust at the American Jewish University, and is president of the Berenbaum Group in Los Angeles. The organization specializes in museum design and historical films, and develops approaches to presenting the Jewish experience, especially in regards to persecution and genocide.

He is currently involved with projects at the Memorial Museum to Macedonian Jewry in Skopje, the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum and the Holocaust and Humanity Center in Cincinnati, set to open Jan. 27.

**HOLOCAUST PLAYS AS DOCUMENTS**

“I will never ever consider myself a New Yorker,” said Cohen, though he could be forgiven for doing so. With the exception of a five-year stint in Los Angeles, he’s lived in New York since 1976, when he began studying at New York University.

Still, Cohen’s Baltimore loyalty can be heard when he expresses his love for the Orioles, fond memories of growing up in Reservoir Hill and Mount Washington and attending High Holiday services at “the beautiful Shaarei Tfiloh on Liberty Heights Avenue.”

Even after Cohen had been a long time New York resident, he wrote a play based in Baltimore called “Men of Clay” about his father, Stan Cohen, and “the contingent of Jewish tennis players at the old Druid Hill Park red clay tennis courts.” The play was read over two nights at Creative Alliance in 2005.

Regarding “The Soap Myth,” the upcoming concert reading will be the first Baltimore performance of Cohen’s final script. (Creative Alliance hosted a reading of “The Soap Myth” before the play had informal workshop performances in New York in 2009. Cohen rewrote his script one last time and sent it to a friend from the theater industry, Arnold Mittelman.)

Mittelman had recently created the National Jewish Theater Foundation, serving as its president and producing artistic director. The foundation is home to several initiatives including the Holocaust Theater Catalog and the Holocaust Theater International Initiative. Research, education and production are the foundation’s three principle components. Given its subject matter, Mittelman thought “The Soap Myth” was a perfect play for the company to produce.

“I was fascinated by the fact that this play not only dealt with survivors, but it dealt with scholars,” said Mittelman. “I thought it had enormous potential for examining the interaction, if you
will, between the people sworn to protect the Holocaust through scholarship, and those who are victimized by it as survivors.”

Mittelman took the reins as the production’s director, and insisted that Cohen use a Holocaust scholar as a script consultant. On the board of The National Jewish Theater Foundation was none other than Berenbaum.

“I said, ‘Michael, I want you to read this and tell me what you find wonderful and what you find not so wonderful,’ and he was very candid,” said Mittelman. “Then you take a deep breath and say, ‘Well let’s see what the playwright makes of that,’ and Jeff couldn’t have been more responsive.”

Berenbaum isn’t a character in the play, but his name is mentioned more than once by the characters who share his sentiments. Berenbaum said he gave Cohen permission to use his name.

“What Michael brought to the table was dramatizing the tension between historians of the Holocaust and witnesses of the Holocaust,” said Cohen. “He became one of the greatest champions of the play.”

‘SOAP MYTH’ PRODUCTIONS
By 2012, the National Jewish Theater Foundation raised enough funds to produce a run of the play at the Roundabout Theatre Company’s Harold & Mimi Steinberg Center for Theatre in New York. A filmed version of this production has aired on PBS, and is available to be streamed through the London-based website Digital Theatre.

“It’s important that the actors and the playwright were willing to allow us to film the play. A lot of the time playwrights are covetous of what could happen to the future of their play and aren’t willing to have it filmed,” said Mittelman. “In Jeff’s case he was so enamored of the notion that we might memorialize this experience and have something that can be used and seen in colleges and universities.”

And it wasn’t long until institutions began to request the film. As part of a 2015 Holocaust commemoration, the Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts asked Cohen to either screen the recorded “Soap Myth” play, or have live actors read the script aloud to an audience. The latter option piqued Cohen’s interest, as he knew exactly who he wanted to play Saltzman.

“One of my favorite actors of all time, the actor who the character Milton Saltzman was modeled on, is Ed Asner,” said Cohen. “So I took a chance and reached out to him and got him to read the script.”

Asner not only agreed, but has played Milton Saltzman in all productions of “The Soap Myth” in the three years since. Though Asner was a muse of sorts for Cohen while writing the play, the actor views being cast in a more practical way.

“I’m known as the old Jew in the trade. If you need an old Jew you come to me,” said Asner, adding that he enjoys playing Saltzman because of “the way people are affected by it. They may be American-born, they may not even be Jews, but they cannot deny that this play is a lesson for all people to learn by.”

The recent touring performances of “The Soap Myth” — as concert readings, not full stage and set productions — allow Asner, who turned 89 in November, to give masterful performances, without the mental and physical taxation of memorizing lines and pacing around the stage.

“The drama is definitely not lost,” said Feldshuh. “These are masterful readings. We’re not getting in front of you without having ever read the play. The actor has his bearings, but is not off book.”

Feldshuh, who joined the “The Soap Myth” last year on a short West Coast tour, relishes in the singularity of the one-off performances.

“There’s a oneness about it. In a longer run you have to really work at keeping it really reborn and fresh,” said Feldshuh. “It’s the only time we’re going to be in Baltimore in 2019, on this very date, let’s bat it out of the park.”

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