

“Survivors”

By Elad Massuri
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The women behind the play from left to right: Genie Benson, Wendy Kout, Evie Abat.

Their Story is Our Hope

“SURVIVORS” is an acclaimed play enacting the eyewitness accounts of 10 Holocaust survivors. A young and diverse cast gives an impressive and emotional performance that won’t leave a dry eye in the house. Now, Jewish community leaders want this important play to become part of educational curricula throughout the state.

Growing up in Israel, I saw a lot of plays about the Holocaust. I also attended lectures and meetings with Holocaust survivors, memorial evenings, and regularly visited Yad Vashem.

Outside Israel, one is less likely to encounter this topic. In fact, it’s rare to do so outside the Jewish community. In addition, fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors remain alive today. With violence, antisemitism, and hate crimes on the rise all over the globe, the story of the Holocaust and its lessons needs to be told more urgently, especially to the younger generations.

"SURVIVORS" is an excellent play that enacts the eyewitness accounts of ten Holocaust survivors before, during, and after World War II. There are numerous annual national and international productions, and now there is a West Coast touring production with a cast of young and diverse actors.

"SURVIVORS" was written in 2017 by award-winning American writer/producer Wendy Kout, who made her name working on television comedies including "Mork & Mindy" with Robin Williams. Wendy also created the hit ABC series, "Anything But Love," with Jamie Lee Curtis and Richard Lewis, who played Marty Gold, the Jewish romantic lead.

Wendy was commissioned to write the play by CenterStage theater in Rochester, New York. To date, more than 10,000 students and adults have watched the play in theaters and at private events. The Covid-19 pandemic halted its momentum for two years, but with the return to normal, "SURVIVORS" returned to schools and stages in Rochester, NY, Philadelphia, PA and B.C. Canada.



The West Coast tour is produced by Genie Benson and Wendy Kout and their non-profit company, Arts for Change. Genie is the Executive Producer at Teev Events, a full-service production company including galas, conferences and tours for their talented Israeli roster of artists throughout the world. She is also the Executive Director of the Keshet Chaim Dance Ensemble which is celebrating 40 years since it was started by Artistic Director, Eytan Avisar. Genie told me: "I have known Wendy for years. Although we weren't in touch, I saw posts on Facebook describing the great success of "SURVIVORS." I called her and instead of saying hello and catching up, I began the conversation with, "Tell me about "SURVIVORS.""

Genie, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, was determined to bring a new and special production of the play to the West Coast. And so it was.

Jewish, Israeli, Asian, and African-American Actors on One Stage

Holocaust plays, despite their importance, can be long and sometimes boring. On the contrary, "SURVIVORS" is sharp and fast-paced. The play, which is only one hour long—written for generation Z, who are used to the bite-sized entertainment of Tik Tok and social media—presents short dialogues and sharp scene changes. The chronological timeline progresses from pre-war democratic Germany, with the publication of Mein Kampf, to Hitler's rise to power, and

Kristallnacht. From there it continues, dramatically depicting how the Jews lost their rights, jobs, property, freedom, and finally their lives.

“SURVIVORS” is beautifully directed by Evie Abat, a promising director who worked as a psychiatrist before turning to the world of theater. The play is well-balanced, not too heavy or depressing. At times, it even enacts entertaining personal stories (because these too happened during the Holocaust), while continuously moving and gripping the audience. One of the interesting decisions is the carefully considered casting. In contrast to most Holocaust shows, which use Jewish and white casts, “SURVIVORS” includes a varied range of actors and actresses: Israelis, Asians, African Americans, and actors from the LGBTQ+ community. This variety allows a wider range of people to identify and connect with the play. The diverse representation enables the audience to empathize and imagine themselves in the perilous past and to find parallels in the challenging present. The play asks us to look past identity alone and to remember hatred and injustice can lead to violence and genocide. We are reminded: if we don’t pay attention to and battle against injustice, we may find ourselves in a reality where history will repeat itself.

Wendy described working with the cast and creative team, some of whom were not that familiar with the Holocaust. Wendy: “It was important for everyone to know and understand the history. So, Genie and I arranged a private tour of the Holocaust Museum in LA, which is our partner in presenting the play to the West Coast. Our fantastic director, Evie Abat also provided our young and gifted cast with a list of Holocaust films, documentaries, and books to inform their performances. The play was first performed at Calabasas High School where 500 tenth graders were captivated—you could hear a pin drop.”



The West Coast “SURVIVORS” cast

A Play in Memory of Sidonia Lax

While Genie Benson has years of experience producing concerts and events in Los Angeles, when the play was performed in California, at the Adat Ari El synagogue in Valley Village, her excitement was evident. Benson lost her mother, Sidonia Lax, last December. Sidonia’s story as a girl growing up during that chilling period can fill an entire book.

Sidonia was very active in talking about the Holocaust, regularly took part in March of the Living, and gave lectures at schools and memorial evenings. She

went on the March ten years in a row, several times joined by her children and grandchildren. This year her grandsons David and Andrew Benson represented her and told her story.

"SURVIVORS" came at a special time. Genie worked on the new production while her mother was still alive, but due to Sidonia's advanced age, she was unable to recall as much as she once could. This led Genie to set out on a journey to speak with people her mother knew, worked with, and impacted.

Genie: "It was surprising and heartwarming to discover how everyone not only loved her but also knew a lot about her life. They knew her. Everywhere I heard the same thing: You're Genie, Sidonia Lax's daughter. They filled in all the details I was missing and told me everything I wanted to know about my mother and her story. Today, I look at the play and I feel that my mother is whispering in my ear: 'I started and now you need to continue.' That's how it is. I feel that I am continuing her mission."

"I had a lot of conversations with my mother, and I watched a lot of materials about her. She was one of the first survivors to give her testimony to the Shoah Foundation. Her father was a fighter, he was part of a partisan group. My mother was in Auschwitz-Birkenau. One of the stories that I always remember is how as a young girl they put her on the train, right before the end of the war. While this was happening, they received intelligence that the Nazis were going to blow up the train. And that's what happened. The train went up in flames and my mother jumped off, on fire, rolled in the mud, and somehow managed to survive. She later found a cousin in a DP camp. He went to Israel and she came to the United States where she had an Uncle to sponsor her."

Wendy told me about her first encounter with antisemitism: "After moving to the bay area of California, I started the seventh grade and made many friends. I thought. After missing school on Rosh Hashanah, I return to find "KIKE" (a hateful name used to humiliate Jews) written on my locker. I had never heard that word and was confused. I opened my locker and was shocked to find it filled with little notes with the words: 'Go home, Jew,' 'Dirty Jew,' and 'We hate Jews.' I went from popular to hated in one Jewish holiday."

"Stunned and scared, I went to the principal's office and showed him the unsigned hate notes. He asked who wrote them and I said I didn't know. But I knew it was my "friends". They knew which was my locker. I asked the principal to call home. My mother provided immediate clarity and comfort. On the phone without hesitation, she explained to me for the first time about antisemitism. She then promised that we would move as soon as possible, and I would attend a school with lots of Jewish kids like me. That's why we moved to Los Angeles."

Wendy may have written "SURVIVORS" in the footsteps of the Holocaust, but she told me she was inspired by that first personal encounter with antisemitism and also by more current events: "A month after being commissioned to write this play, neo-Nazis marched with tiki torches in Charlotte chanting, "The Jews will not replace us. It was then I realized I wasn't just writing a history play. I was writing a warning play, and it needed to teach tolerance and how to stand

up to all hatred and hate crimes. I was writing a play my seventh grade 'friends' needed to see."

The Holocaust through Ten Personal Stories

Wendy: "I'm a playwright, not a historian. I don't find historical dates or facts compelling unless they are told through personal stories. I want to know how history affected people and the human side of events. So, the goal of "SURVIVORS" was to teach the history of the Holocaust through a personal prism. The structure of the play is the chronological timeline of the Shoah from democracy before Hitler, to fascism, to the expansion Nazism, the systematic extermination of Jews and "undesirables", to the end of war and immigration to America. I chose ten Holocaust survivors because this is a holy number in Judaism. Ten is a prayer quorum, a minyan. So, we have six actors portraying the ten survivors enacting their eyewitness account of history: Kindertransport, immigrating to China and Africa, hiding in cities and on farms, deportation to labor and killing camps, being chosen to work by Dr. Mengele, and pretending to be Christian or dead in order to stay alive."

The special texture of the play's writing and the range of characters enables her to impart a wide range of stories in one play that is only one hour long. "SURVIVORS" also has a powerful visual component. It integrates projections of historical photographs of people and events that intensify the sense of realism, and responds to Holocaust deniers who cast doubt on the facts. Wendy: "We are portraying the eyewitness accounts of ten survivors, and therefore we integrated documentary evidence."

The performance was attended by journalists, family members, and educators. Among them was State Senator Henry Stern, a great supporter of the project. Stern is also the joint chair of a collaborative project initiated by Governor of California Gavin Newsom that seeks to mandate Holocaust and Genocide education into the public schools in California. There is no doubt that "SURVIVORS" should be an integral part of the education system in all schools in the State of California. In addition, "SURVIVORS" will be performing at the Museum of Tolerance this September and the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library this October.

"SURVIVORS" is an exceptional play with a young and talented cast. It grips you and doesn't let go. Well written, fast-paced, and refreshing; it's something anyone can connect with. The chemistry between the actors is excellent and they successfully move between characters. The play tells the stories of people who lived during a dark period of human history, people who, with great courage, managed to survive. Their story from the past should inspire hope in the battle against today's antisemitism and hatred as well as a call to action for everyone who sees it.

- The public premiere of "SURVIVORS" in Los Angeles will be on September 10th at the Museum of Tolerance. Tickets can be purchased [here](#).