

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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ANNE, A NEW PLAY



Photo by Michael Lamont

Museum of Tolerance

The U.S. premiere of *Anne, a New Play* at the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance begins with a fantasy that, in a fair world, one could only wish were true, as a perfectly healthy Anne Frank sits in a quaint little Paris bistro after the end of World War II sipping wine and discussing the publication of her diaries with an eagerly interested book publisher.

Unfortunately, our world is anything but fair—something that's even more clear than ever as this dramatic reminder of the inequities of our existence points out.

First performed in Amsterdam in 2014, Jessica Durlacher and Leon de Winter's retelling of Frank's familiar story was translated from Dutch into English by Susan Massotty, then adapted for American audiences by Nick Blaemire, who was hired not only to restore the lyricism and rhythms of the original but bring it in line with the current horrors of racism and anti-Semitism that have exploded with the reign of our own resident "presidential" dictator.

At the beginning, as Anne's father Otto (Rob Brownstein) poses the question to those gathered why we should still be examining the Frank family's tragic story, the fictitious publisher (Timothy P. Brown) answers from a seat in the audience: "Because they could be us."

As the production celebrates what would have been Anne Frank's 90th birthday last week, the message becomes severely more chilling as it coincides with our Traitor-Tot-in-Chief's statement over the weekend that his supporters might "demand" he serve more than two terms in office while suggesting the issue might cause them to storm the Bastille, so to speak, if he's forced to leave the White House.

With an appreciative nod to director Eve Brandstein's bold and highly welcomed colorblind casting, UCLA School of Theatre, Film and Television student Ava Lalezarzadeh makes a lovely LA stage debut in the title role, leading a highly committed and earnest supporting cast, with particular mention to the sweetly heartfelt performances of Kevin Matsumoto as her fellow captive Peter and Marnina Schon as her sister Margot.

Yet it is Brownstein at her gentle and long-suffering father, who in life would become the only Frank family survivor of the Holocaust, and Mary Gordon Murray in the dual roles Mrs. Van Pels, another brutalized member of the "Secret Annex" painfully stripped of her lifestyle and her dignity, and as Miep Gies, the Dutch heroine who risked her own life to keep the group hidden from the Nazis, who elevate this presentation beyond its limitations.

Brandstein works diligently staging *Anne* on Desma Murphy's intentionally rather static set overpowered by Derek Christiansen's projections of the city and the war, yet it's obvious that the play was meant to be a more immersive and audience-interactive piece than was Francis Goodrich and Albert Hackett's well-known 1955 Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

On the wide and shallow stage of museum's austere 300-seat Peltz Theatre, however, the production is hampered by its rather austere environment surely designed for film showings, awards nights, and speech-giving. This was especially apparent on opening night when most of the audience was seated seven or eight rows from the front of the house. In a more intimate space, there is no doubt *Anne* would be infinitely more effective.

The import of *Anne, a New Play* is still haunting, made even more terrifying in our current political climate where all the deplorables in our country's midsection have been encouraged to crawl out from under their rocks. In their horrifyingly dismal attic prison before the Franks and their reluctant roommates are taken away to be tortured and killed, Peter says to Anne about all the good Christians who let this atrocity happen, "If they are the 'chosen' people, I wish for once they'd be chosen for something good."

I, for one, could not agree more.

THROUGH JULY 22: Museum of Tolerance, 9786 W. Pico Blvd., LA. 310.772.2505 or www.museumoftolerance.com