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Art Meets Life in A New Moscow Production

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This is not a review of, but a reaction to, Mindaugas Karbauskis' production of "A Stalemate Lasts But a Moment," which opened last week at the National Youth Theater. I have never written an article about a production that I have not yet reviewed. But I have reason to this time.

"Stalemate" will not play again until the end of March. As such, I will hold off running my review until then. However, this show, based on the wrenching novel by Icchokas Meras about life in the Vilnius ghetto during WWII, affected me so deeply that I was compelled to step out from behind the detached gaze of a critic and offer a personal response now.

Meras, a young Jew growing up in the town of Kelme in northern Lithuania, survived the Holocaust by a miracle. As he told it, he was taken to be shot when he was seven years old but someone changed their mind and he ended up in the care of "people who valued the life of a seven year-old child." Meras' family was murdered by the Nazis, but he was sheltered

and raised by a Lithuanian couple who became his new parents.

In "Stalemate," Meras weaves parts of his biography into the harrowing story of Avraam Lipman, whose four children are murdered one by one in the Vilna ghetto. An extraordinary turning point in the story &mdash though hardly the only one and not the last &mdash occurs when a Lithuanian couple is executed for attempting to shelter Avraam's youngest daughter. That daughter is executed, too, although the couple's own infant is spared. This baby falls into the hands of Avraam, and he ensures that it is fed and sheltered even in the impossible conditions of the ghetto.

For me, a postwar child of the Mojave Desert in the southwestern United States, tales like this were "history" or "literature" until I met Kama Ginkas. Ginkas calls himself a "Russian director from Lithuania with a Jewish accent." Born seven years after Meras in the Lithuanian town of Kovno, or Kaunas as we know it now, he also miraculously survived death at the hands of the Nazis.

Karbauskis, incidentally, is a Lithuanian who studied directing in Russia in the late 1990s. But that is just an aside.

Shortly after the Germans occupied Lithuania, Ginkas' family was herded into the Kovno ghetto some 58 miles from where Meras was located. Ginkas was then six weeks old. Two years later, when rumors ran rampant that the Nazis were planning to execute all the children left in the ghetto, Kama's parents engineered a daring escape. For most of the next year until the Soviet army liberated Lithuania they lived in various places of hiding, while their baby boy Kama was passed from one pair of good hands to another to keep him from being discovered by the SS.

For the record, Wikipedia informs us that of the approximately 40,000 people held in the Kovno ghetto only 500 escaped, as did Kama with his parents. Of the 37,000 Jews who lived in Kovno before the war, some 3,000 survived.

I did not merely learn the details of this story when I co-wrote a book called "Provoking Theater" with Ginkas seven years ago. The story of the director's early life in some eerie way entered the story of mine. Kama's story is obviously not my story &mdash not in any way, shape or form. But I can no longer imagine my story existing without his.

Recently, Ginkas and I relived the tale anew and in even more detail when he was asked to contribute a chapter to an English-language book of memoirs of the few survivors of the Kovno ghetto. Once again, the American desert rat met over a period of time with the Lithuanian Jew to listen to an extraordinary, improbable, tragic and heroic tale narrated in Russian, but which would be recorded for posterity in English.

Once again, Kama's story came alive inside me.

As I sat fourth row center in the National Youth Theater last week at the opener of "A Stalemate Lasts But a Moment," I felt something stirring inside me. Stirring at first; later it began churning.

In Meras' tale, the German guard's name is Schoger; in Kama's, it is Gekke. In Meras' tale, it is

Avraam's daughter Inna who leaves the ghetto and hides the yellow star that she is bound to wear in the "free world;" in Kama's, it was his father Miron. In Meras' tale, it was Avraam's youngest son Isaac who repeatedly is caught and beaten for sneaking flowers into the ghetto; in Kama's, it was his uncle, Lev.

Here is how Kama tells one of the anecdotes about his uncle.

"Whenever he would come back through the gates, the guards would always find what he had hidden. They would take it away from him and beat him. Always."

That's not all. Kama talks of his uncle as the smartest of the family's brothers, "a brilliant mathematician and chess player." In Meras' novel, Isaac is a chess master tempting fate as he is locked in a deadly end game with the German guard Schoger.

The fictional Isaac and the real Lev come to similar ends. To find out what happens to Isaac, you'll have to see Karbauskis' show or read Meras' novel. As for Kama's uncle Lev, his tale never ceases to give me pause. Lev tempted fate in his own way.

When others sought to escape the Kovno ghetto, Lev put his trust in God and stayed. When almost everyone in the ghetto had been shot and the only ones left alive were those burning the corpses, he burned the corpses. When the ghetto was evacuated, Lev was not shot, but deported.

On the way to Germany, as Kama tells it, "a couple of Jews fled the train. In retaliation, the Germans stopped the train and removed one or two people from each train car and shot them. My uncle was one. He was shot."

As Meras' characters came to life in the theater last week, I saw reflections or shadows of Ginkas' life flashing before me. I would like to think that my professional tools of perception remained intact and that I responded honestly to whatever might have been "good or bad," just as I would at any show. In a month or so I'll publish my review and you can judge for yourself how successful I was.

But I must add this.

Halfway through the performance of "A Stalemate Lasts But a Moment," I heard a man behind me whisper in a despairing voice, "Oh God!" Shortly after that, a woman in front of me pulled out a handkerchief and began wiping her cheeks. A female critic to my right followed suit as did the one to my left, who kept wiping her nose. I heard a man behind me fighting back sobs. I leaned forward in order to press my elbows into my knees, this giving me something to think about other than the tears welling up in my eyes.

Come to think of it, don't judge me too hard when that review comes out next month.

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