

LISA FINDS LOST SCRIPTS FROM THERESIENSTADT



BY ZOE COHEN

THE discovery of 11 scripts from Theresienstadt concentration camp prisoners has led an American playwright to bring them to life on stage.

Producer Dr Lisa Peschel has transformed the lost scripts into Theatre in the Theresienstadt Ghetto: Newly Discovered Works which will be staged at London's Bloomsbury Theatre on February 7 and 8.

The theatre production, acted by University College London and York University students, will give a unique insight into the experiences of those imprisoned in the camp, which was also known as the Theresienstadt Ghetto.

"The first script came into light in 2005 when I was doing a PhD in play-writing at the University of Minnesota," Lisa explained. "When I was doing interviews with survivors, something completely unexpected happened.

"I found scripts that had been written by prisoners in the ghetto. I knew I had to find a way for these to be back on stage as they could still work dramatically."

The scripts are divided into two acts, opening with UCL students performing extracts of songs and scenes from a full-length cabaret, with a selection of other comic works, directed by UCL student Leo Doulton.

These reveal how theatrical techniques were used to normalise conditions of the ghetto.

The second act, The Smoke of Home, is performed by York University students and directed by recent graduate Joseph Lichtenstein.

It is a one-act historical drama set in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) that confronts the question, 'If we survive, will we be able to return to the home we knew?'

Lisa - a lecturer in the department of theatre, film and television at York - will introduce the performances alongside professor of modern Jewish history at UCL, Michael Berkowitz.

Lisa explained: "The second act is about four soldiers in prison discussing things they missed and what they look forward to at the end of the war.

"But one of them knows the area they are all from has been destroyed in one of the battles and doesn't tell them."

Lisa first started writing about the Theresienstadt Ghetto during her studies at the University of Texas.

In 1992/93, she taught English in the Czech Republic and toured the Jewish quarter in Prague, where she interviewed Theresienstadt survivors.

She recalled: "I was at a yearly survivor meeting and asked if anyone had any scripts or songs they wanted to show. Two sisters approached me.

"The elder of the two had been a dancer in the ghetto and had a script from a cabaret. Another survivor told me about two friends who wrote a script together.

"One died during the war, but the other survived and moved to America before dying five years ago.

"I called his widow and she found it in his safe, among his most important papers."

Lisa found two things unusual during her research.

She said: "For historical reasons, the conditions were less brutal than other camps.

"The camp was only 40 miles north-west of Prague, so it was impossible to completely seal it off from the outside world.

"Due to this, conditions were slightly better to keep the Jews who were deported there from staging an uprising against the transport.

"The Nazis also lied about the destination of the transport that left the ghetto.

"Most of the transportation went to Auschwitz, but the prisoners were told they were either going to build another ghetto or had to go to a work camp."

The prisoners were also relatively healthy in comparison to those starving at Auschwitz.

The comedy element may seem difficult to many, but Lisa said: "A survivor once told me the best thing they could do was try to find a way to make their life in the ghetto bearable.

"To take gruesome things and transform them into humour so that for a few hours they felt like they controlled it, instead of it oppressing them."

She hopes people will try to put themselves in the prisoners place and conceive their needs for the humour.

Lisa added: "It is more difficult for audiences today to understand how people could laugh in the ghetto. The common reaction is to laugh and feel ashamed of it.

"But I hope for people to consider what humour meant for them and join them in that laughter as a way to celebrate it and how they coped in the ghetto."

Lisa is also editor of the anthology *Performing Captivity, Performing Escape: Cabarets and Plays from the Terezín/Theresienstadt Ghetto* (Seagull Press 2014).

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