

HOW DOES THEATRE SPEAK?

A conversation between *Here There Are Blueberries*' co-author/conceiver/director Moisés Kaufman, co-author Amanda Gronich, dramaturg/associate director/devisor Amy Marie Seidel, and the Playhouse's director of artistic development Gabriel Greene.



GG: It's been fifteen years since the photo album at the center of *Here There Are Blueberries* was donated to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and made international news. How did you first become aware of this album, and at what point did it become a play in your minds?

MK: I read the article in the *New York Times* [in 2007] and I saw the photographs, and they immediately captured my imagination. I didn't think at that moment, "I'm going to write a play about this," but I kept coming back to it and I decided...I want to write a play about this. I went to the USHMM and I interviewed Dr. Rebecca Erbelding, the woman who [led the team working on] the album. That's how this whole thing started.

AG: I am one of the original members of Tectonic Theater Project and have been with the company for – I won't do the math; many decades. I took a career detour and for ten years I was a non-fiction television writer. I've written about just about every subject under the sun, except I had never ever worked on anything about the Nazis. There's this question that we ask at Tectonic, which is, "How can theatre tell this story in a way that no other medium can?" As a Jewish writer, I was

deeply moved by the prospect of getting a chance to work on a play about the Holocaust. It became a passion project for me, and the chance to work so closely with Moisés again was a thrill.

AMS: The first time I ever went to the USHMM was in 2007 on a middle school class trip, and I now realize they would have been just getting to work on the album right around that time. But I didn't know about the photo album until Moisés and Amanda came to me with this project. That was my introduction to it, and I haven't stopped diving into research rabbit holes ever since.

GG: What was the process for creating this play?

MK: When I first went to the USHMM, I didn't know if there was a play there. The conversation with Dr. Erbelding started with me asking her to tell me everything she knew about the album. But instead of walking me through the facts, she walked me through how she got to the facts: how she identified people, the level of research that went into it. And all of a sudden I realized this was a forensic detective story. I understood that this play's not just about the album, it's about a woman who has to struggle to decipher this artifact and get all of this information out of it. I interviewed a couple of

other historians, and then I asked Amanda to join as a co-writer. A lot of the people in the album are dead, so we couldn't interview any of them, but we could interview their children. We went to Poland, we went to Auschwitz, and then we went to Germany and we interviewed some of the descendants.

AG: One of the dramatic arcs of the play is, how much do these descendants want to make themselves and their family history known? And that's very much part of what we wrestle with when we look at the photographs in the album: how is this history going to be told? There's a moment near the end of the play that talks about us being at the end of the Holocaust survivor generation. We're at that moment in history. So how do you begin looking at the perpetrators' stories? And to be clear: we are not exonerating, we are not excusing, we are not forgiving. We are saying, "these acts were committed by human beings." And the carriers of that legacy are the descendants, so engaging in conversation with them about this material was very powerful.

AMS: There was a period of deep exploration into all of the identifications of descendants that historians had already made. Going deep into the Internet to find

anybody with the same last names who had spoken to an oral history website. We'd see people like Rainer Höss and Peter Wirths, who had already spoken about these things, and we thought maybe they'd be willing to speak with us as well. Peter was very interesting, because he had done a couple of oral history interviews, but when we were interviewing him, it really felt like he was still actively grappling with his family history; we were able to watch him do that in front of us.

GG: How do you take the raw material of these interviews and assemble a play?

AMS: Moisés and Amanda are incredibly brilliant playwrights and dramaturgs, and so they found the dramatic arc that would be most interesting for us to create the play around. Then, between myself as well as the whole team of devisors, we dove into the raw material – the history books, the transcripts of the interviews – and found the chunks that support the way that Moisés and Amanda want to tell the story.

AG: We also need to give a big shout-out to Matt Joslyn, Tectonic's Executive Director and the Creative Producer of *Blueberries*. Matt has been an integral part of this; he not only spearheaded the process of the production each step of the way, including its many, many stages of development, but he also kept an eye on the creative process and helped guide discoveries in our storytelling.

MK: He's also a super mensch.

AG: What's extraordinary about crafting non-fiction material for the stage is, as Amy said, you're looking for the dramatic arc, but you're also telling an oral history in real time. The actors will carry these stories on their backs, so it becomes a theatrical event that the audience shares in. And in this case, one of the characters is the photographs. They're literally a scene partner for the actors. So we were not only looking through interview transcripts and extensive research, but also looking at the

theatrical event of what happens when those elements interact with a photographic story.

AMS: For example, we knew that Peter Wirths and Tilman Taube had spoken to each other about being descendants of Nazis, and then we were looking at the album and saw this one picture where Peter's father and Tilman's grandfather are having a conversation in the background. The photographs themselves can tell these stories in support of what we're doing.

MK: Dr. Erbeling said that when she delved into this artifact of 116 photos, one of the first things she did was try to figure out who the album belonged to. Who took the photographs? Why was the album made? If you go with your family to a vacation on the beach, you make a family album. But if you're in a concentration camp, why would you make an album of photos? What was the purpose of it? Through her detective work, she figured out that the person who created the album was the assistant to the head of the camp. She learned to know him from the photos: how he sits, how he moves, how he smiles. There's an intimacy that developed between her and the images in the album, specifically the images of the owner of the album. I want the audience to have that experience; I want them to get to know these people in the photographs as humans, because the terrifying thing about the Nazis is not that they were monsters, but that they were human.

GG: A core tenet of how Tectonic Theater Project creates its shows is Moment Work. Can you elaborate on that process?

MK: The impetus behind creating Tectonic was a desire to really explore what a theatrical language is. How does theatre speak? How can we use theatricality to tell the stories we want to tell? And so Moment Work is the process we created so we could explore the theatricality of dramatic stories. It's a process where a group of actors

comes into a rehearsal space and begins to create narratives and tell stories using the elements of the stage. We don't write the play first and then go into rehearsal. We get information, we get ideas, and then we come into the space and, through a series of improvisations called Moment Work, we strive to create not only dramatic narratives, but theatrical narratives.

GG: How has the show evolved in the first two weeks of rehearsal?

MK: The challenge in creating a play like this in rehearsal is, as we said, half of the story happens with the actors and half of it happens with the images. In order to create it, we need the projections team in the rehearsal room; in order to be able to see the projections, we need the lighting team in the rehearsal room; and in order to bring the photos to life, we need the sound team. And it's such a luxury to be here at La Jolla Playhouse and to be able to work with all of these elements in the rehearsal room.

AG: It allows the designers to work as co-creators. They're entering the conversation of how we tell this story in the most activated, creatively open way. It's an invitation for all of these mindsets and perspectives to be brought into the storytelling all at once.

AMS: The designers, the actors, the creative team – every single person in the room at this point has created a moment and shared it with the whole group.

MK: The rehearsal room really does feel like we're in a long tech process. There are consoles for light, consoles for sound, consoles for video. It's an exhilarating experience to be able to give the actors the tools to really tell the story, not only with their voices and their bodies, but also using the projections as an integral part of the storytelling. ■