

A ‘completely crazy’ tribute to Westerbork’s cabaret performers

‘Total Verrückt!’ will recall talented Holocaust victims during a pair of shows next weekend in Charlestown

By Ian Thal, Advocate Staff

A suitcase carries a symbolic meaning in “Total Verrückt!” The show remembers cabaret performers killed during the Holocaust. In a video of her first performance of “Total Verrückt!” at the 2011 Toronto Fringe Festival Joanna Caplan climbs onto the stage in a blue dress, carrying a suitcase, and begins to recite Etty Hillesum’s fairytale of Westerbork, a parable of the trains that took Jews from the Dutch transit camp to Auschwitz- Birkeneau and Bergen-Belsen.

As she narrates, Caplan uses two simple wooden props to evoke both the wooden slats of the cattle cars and the tracks that carried the prisoners to their fates .

Hillesum was a Dutch Jewish diarist who was employed by the Dutch Jewish Council, or Judenrat, that attempted to oversee the well-being of Dutch Jews under German occupation. (In hindsight, the Judenräte are often seen as an instrument in Germany’s attempt to destroy European Jewry.) Her writings, little known before 1981, are collected in English under the title “An Interrupted Life.” Included in the collection are two letters which described conditions in the Westerbork Transit camp that were clandestinely published by the Dutch resistance.

“I love Etty,” Caplan, who brings the performance to Charlestown on May 24 and 25, told The Advocate via email. “Her diaries inhabit the mind of a woman who thinks about the things that young women think about: men, love, her future, as well as the deep suffering of her people and the resilience of the human spirit. There are times when I read her work and think, ‘this could be me,’ and other times when her writing elevates my thinking and opens me up to the possibility of [her] deep and extraordinary compassion.”

Interrupting Hillesum’s descriptions of Westerbork is a cabaret.

“Every Tuesday at Westerbork there were transports that deported [approximately] 3,000 Jews to ‘the East,’” explained Caplan, using a euphemism for the extermination camps. “The cabarets took place immediately following these transports. This is something I think about a lot: this juxtaposition of death and life or creation, art in the face of extermination.”

The Netherlands had been the destination for numerous Jewish cabaret performers. Some, such as Max Ehrlich, Willy Rosen and Dora Gerson, had been stars during the Weimar Republic – but after the rise of Nazism, they were unable to find work. Their new careers on Dutch stages were cut short when the Netherlands came under German occupation, and like other Jews, they found themselves interned at Westerbork. All three were later murdered at Auschwitz.

“They [fought] with their words, jokes and music; they [provided] hope and joy to their people,” wrote Caplan, describing her own work as a type of experiential remembrance. “I want to make sure their work and spirit live on, and do not become words on a page or a plaque in some museum.”

“Total Verrückt!” – which translates roughly as “completely crazy!” – is named for the final cabaret staged by the Camp Westerbork Theatre Group. The troupe of actors, dancers and musicians existed for 18 months under Ehrlich’s direction until his deportation on Sept. 4, 1944, on the last transport out of Westerbork.

“I have come across a list of scenes or acts, the names of the players, the poster, some photos, but as this was the final performance for the Westerbork Theatre Group, very little archival material remains,” wrote Caplan.

Westerbork was liberated on April 12, 1945, by the Canadian 2nd Infantry Division. Only two members of the Theatre Group had survived.

Much as the cabaret acts interrupt Hillesum’s descriptions of life at the camp, the environment of the camp interrupts the show. When Caplan dances a parody of Salome’s “Dance of the Seven Veils” (itself believed by some to be a burlesque on the Assyrian myth of Ishtar’s visit to the underworld) the piercing whistle of a camp guard, causes her to stumble in fear, resulting in a scene that is simultaneously comic and horrific.

For Caplan, that ambiguity is based in the cabaret form: “German cabaret performances were characterized by their use of satire and gallows humor, which treats unpleasant, painful, horrible situations in a silly or light manner, and is usually made by the victim of said situation, not the perpetrator. While we may now think of cabaret as light, dinner theater, its roots are very political and subversive.”

Caplan, though she calls Toronto home, has been an artist in residence at Double Edge Theatre’s farm in Ashfield for two years. Double Edge was founded by Stacey Klein in 1982 while she was at Tufts University, and the company relocated from Boston to the Pioneer Valley in 1994.

Caplan began her residency at Double Edge having already written an early draft of the script, based on her research into the camp, the cabaret performers, as well as her readings of Hillesum’s diaries. While training with the ensemble,

which is noted for a very physical approach to theater as well as its use of found objects, masks and puppets, she also worked in one of the farm's attics to develop the script into a performance under the direction of Matthew Glassman, an ensemble member.

"Total Verrückt!" is a still-evolving piece, as befitting a play inspired by both the spiritual questing and naturalistic observation of Hillesum, and the broad yet ironic humor of Ehrlich's cabaret. "I see this piece as a giant puzzle," wrote Caplan. "All the pieces are scattered inside and around me and slowly, slowly are fitting together."

Two pieces of that puzzle can be found at the end, as Hillesum's own dread of what awaits her when she finally boards the train is fit with Ehrlich's ironic farewell to Westerbork: "My Westerbork, you plagued me a lot and yet you had a sex appeal all your own ... they're about to send me on the old iron. ...If you ask me, I think it's pretty nasty, but I don't want your pity, nor good advice. I'll make it all right; I'm an old front soldier. I'll pack everything; leave nothing."

Joanna Caplan performs "Total Verrückt!" at the Charlestown Working Theater in Charlestown at 8 p.m. on May 24 and 25. Ticket information is available at www.charlestownworkingtheater.org. For more information about Caplan's work, visit www.joannacaplan.ca.