

The OUTLOOK on Theatre

KEEPING THE PROMISE

A Story written and performed by
Helen Mintz

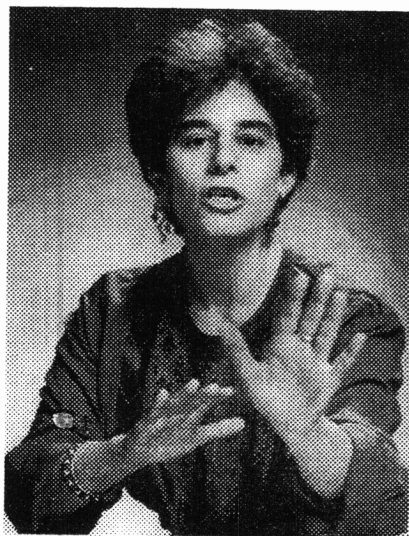
Reviewed by Fraidie Martz

Dressed all in black, a woman enters from the rear of the room taking measured steps and one long breath at a time. She looks at no one, sees nothing. She has the look of someone elderly – small and fragile – although she is young, maybe 40. She is carrying a misshapen, battered brown suitcase tied clumsily with a long frayed length of twine. She places it in the corner of the room with a mixture of relief and reluctance, as though it's painful to carry and equally painful to part from. After a long pause, a pause she needs to gather her courage, she raises her head with effort, as though its weight too is a burden, and facing the audience while looking longingly at the suitcase, she begins: "Where I come from is in this suitcase. Everything I have of my childhood. My life with my family in my town of Rodom in Poland. My life before they were all murdered in the war. This suitcase is my most precious possession."

These are the opening lines of a one-woman, 45-minute performance entitled *Keeping the Promise* written and performed by the accomplished storyteller, Helen Mintz. It was originally written to accompany the exhibition "Open Hearts – Closed Doors" marking the 50th anniversary of 1,123 Jewish war orphans permitted to enter Canada from 1947 to 1949 and organized by the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. In actuality, Mintz's opening words echo the words of only a rare number of the orphans, most of whom arrived in this country with precious few possessions of any kind, least of all photographs of their pre-war lives or perished families; but it served as an excellent vehicle for Paula, the character Mintz created, to tell her story. The youngsters may have arrived in

Canada with few things; what they brought in great abundance were stories – stories that had few listeners.

Storytelling has been a Jewish tradition from earliest times and it remains a defining aspect of Jewish



Helen Mintz

life. Drawing on her longstanding interest in the richness of Jewish narrative art, especially the dramatized Yiddish folktale in European Jewish tradition, Mintz began her work as a theatre artist by setting out to find the stories of her Ashkenazi grandmothers. Later this led her to explore Jewish women's experience in the Holocaust – the pain and loss, also the strength and courage. In writing *Keeping the Promise* Mintz knew that she had also to find the right frame that teens as well as adults could relate to. And this she has achieved with remarkable skill and insight so that no one, whether student or adult, leaves this performance unmoved without new insight and understanding.

After extensive interviews Mintz drew her material primarily from the stories of three child survivors, now in their 60s, living in Vancouver – Robbie W., Celena L. and Regina F. For Mintz, getting to know these three people and collaborating with them closely to synthesize their stories has been an exceptionally enriching experience. Using their words, their experiences and their artifacts, she created a composite character named Paula. A many-layered story of the struggle to survive

the war, followed by the challenges of becoming a self-sufficient Canadian, as told by Paula, is so convincing that the audience perceives Mintz herself as a Holocaust survivor. It is when Paula's teen-aged daughter Candice grumbles about not having birthday gift-bearing uncles like her friends have that Paula is provoked to think aloud about her beloved brother Chaim killed by the Nazis. "He'd be exactly the uncle Candice is after," she says sadly, and adds, "I never told her anything about the war. I never meant to hide it from her." Welded to that thought is the bitter memory of the promise she had made, and not kept, that if she survived she would tell the world what she had seen.

In how many families has this very scenario been wrestled with? Who among all survivors has not undergone these same pangs of – what to name it? turmoil? – of being caught between wanting and not-wanting to tell their children about "it". Of how to talk about it to one's children? And when? In the voice of countless parents, Paula says to her daughter, "I wanted you to have a normal, happy childhood." As Yaffa Eliach, author of *Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust* has written, "the story entrusted was a living witness, a memorial," yet the need to protect one's children from knowledge of such unspeakable evil was also weighty. Added to this unresolvable issue are the children of survivors who wish to protect their parents from having to reveal to them the nightmare of their experiences.

Paula comes to realize that she was wrong not to have talked to Candice about what she had suffered and what she had endured. The contents of the suitcase which were locked away for so many years, item by item, become the lightning rod to her memories that also have been hidden away for so long. She talks about how when she was nine years old the Nazis forced her and her family from their home; separated from her parents she was sent to a labour camp for more than three years. As painful as it is to hear what she had to endure, one feels Paula's relief in finally being able to talk about her life in Europe. Ever since she came to Canada she has

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wished someone would ask her, "Where do you come from? Where were you during the war?" Only then could she have felt, "This is who I am."

Mintz's lines telling Paula's

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you've heard lots of stories, but you can't know. You can imagine, but you can't be there to see the fright in people's eyes when the banks close and they don't know where the food will come from. You don't know the way a mother puts her arms tight around all her children when they're out in the street with all their furniture, as if she wants to shut out the terrible thing from their sight and thoughts, and her own.

No. I can only be there to see homeless people lying on steps without furniture.

When Shmuel saw the Depression and what it was doing to people, he went a little crazy. Before the Depression, he was a very happy man – he loved to mix, to talk to people, to strum the mandolin, to play baseball. But the Depression made him angry in a way I couldn't believe.

He started organizing anti-eviction squads. When the landlords would throw families out on the street, in ten minutes, we'd be there, putting them right back in. A few of the landlords, ours was one of them, really did feel bad, and they let the families go three, four, five months sometimes without paying, but then they'd evict, too. They'd evict; we'd put the family back. They'd evict them again, and there we'd be, putting them right back in again.

Then there were people around to form anti-eviction squads. Now the homeless just leave – quietly.

Shmuel was working on the *Times* then, and his writing kept going further to the left. Finally they told him that either he had to stop his organizing and political work, or he'd lose his job. He told them that since he didn't plan to stop organizing, he would have to stop working for them.

At least they gave him a choice.

wartime and immigrant story is in itself a history lesson. They leave the audience thinking about many questions long after it ends. Genocide and religious wars, and a rising tide of displaced persons, have become a defining feature of our times. More than half of the world's refugees are children.

When *Keeping the Promise* was

Companies don't do that, these days.

Oy, Evaleh, can you imagine? Right in the middle of the Depression, a man with a family yet, a man with a good secure job loses it on principle. I didn't yell, I didn't get angry, I told him we'd find a way. What that meant, finding a way, was that for three months, I bought on credit from all the stores. There I'd be, my heart in my mouth, wondering if today was the day when they'd finally say, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Odinov, we can't give you any more credit until you pay."

But they never did. They knew me so well, Pelham Parkway knew me so well, that they trusted me completely. And none of them lost by it. As soon as Shmuel got another job, three months later – which was very lucky! – I paid them off, every single one.

I've heard about that, how people used to be able to buy on credit before credit cards. I've also heard that there are actually places where people can still do that. On the other hand, I've also heard that there are places where dinosaurs walk again.

His next job was on the *Bronx Home News*. Can you believe it, once upon a time the Bronx had its own newspaper? Well, it's true. And it was an excellent paper. Most of the reporters went on to the big New York papers later, when it folded. Those were the years when I kept telling your mother, "Shh! Be quiet. Daddy's sleeping!" because he was the Night Managing Editor.

Were those also the years when you told her you couldn't join the PTA, even though all the other parents belonged?

I never forgot how kind Pelham Parkway was to us when we needed help. I know it sounds strange – even coming from a Memory! But a place can be kind or unkind, just like people can be. There was a song you used to play on that little radio we bought for you – what was it called again, that's right, transistor – about a town without pity. And

performed in a number of Vancouver secondary schools many students in the audience had themselves experienced danger and dislocation before emigrating to Canada. Reading their letters of appreciation to the playwright, it is clear that Paula's story of trials and triumphs – even with a touch of well-placed humour – had an especially powerful impact. ♦

you know something? I can understand that. Some towns have no pity. But Pelham Parkway always did.

What I see around us more and more now aren't towns without pity or city neighborhoods with it, but suburbs devoid of any feeling – pity, hope, love, hate, nobility.

But worst of all, they have no history, no memory, Nana. As for your remembering the Gene Pitney song on my transistor, I guess I shouldn't be amazed – although I am. But then again, you're a Memory. Although I think that you remembered almost as much when you were still in your body.

How about the other Gene Pitney song I used to listen to, Nana – "It Hurts To Be In Love"?

Before you and your mother and father moved out to the Island, Shmuel went to Washington to testify before the HUAC, the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Yes, I still remember what the initials stand for, thank you.

There were so many Jews, old Socialists, old Communists, testifying. That whole Committee, they hated the Jews and they hated Franklin Roosevelt, they hated the New Deal, and they hated that we fought the Nazis in World War Two.

We saw him that day on television. Yes. Grandpa Shmuel, a TV star! But he didn't look like one. He was pale and sick, as if he couldn't believe that after we finally won against the Nazis, even though so many Jews perished in the Camps, we had to fight so many reactionaries and almost-fascists here, at home, in America. But he kept his head high and he didn't give them one single name. We were so proud of him, Evaleh. He told me afterwards that when he got back to his hotel, he was sick in the bathroom, mostly because he kept wondering if they were going to send any of the others to prison. And they did. Some of our friends, they sent to prison for months. One of them, he used to be an actor, he