

For Immediate Release

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World premiere musical glows with optimism amid historical tragedy

The Doll Maker's Gift sheds light, love and kindness at The Rose Theater

(OMAHA, Nebr.) A new play at The Rose Theater sheds light on a dark period in history in the world premiere of *The Doll Maker's Gift*, playing February 22 – March 10, 2019.

The musical is the result of a multi-year endeavor that started when local theater enthusiast Deborah Denenberg shared a child's picture book with local director Fran Sillau. Sillau admits that the piece came to him at a time when he was struggling with his own spirituality and his choice of theater as a career.

"I show up at Shabbat dinner, and after the blessing of the candles, Debbie handed me a book and said that we had to turn it into a play," says Fran, who not only helped create the script, but is also serving as director for The Rose's production. "After Shabbat, I read the book in 10 minutes and said, 'I have to do this play. I found my purpose.'"

Denenberg (who is one of the producers of the Rose production) explains how *The Doll Maker's Gift* first came to her attention. "I study the Torah. My teacher gave the book to me and said, 'Read this book. I have always imagined it on stage with music.' I read it and gave it to Fran, and it was the best decision I have ever made."

Sillau immediately reached out to the book publisher, not expecting a reply for months, if ever. To his surprise, he heard back the next morning at 8 am; by that afternoon, he was communicating with the book's author Sashi Fridman in St. Petersburg.

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“Somehow the heavenly beings gave me the words to talk to this woman, who is Orthodox, who maybe hasn’t been to the theater, and doesn’t know what I want to do with her story. And then we were off and going. Seven years later, here we are,” says Sillau.

The result is ***The Doll Maker's Gift***: a production that has reached across the globe in order to come to The Rose stage. From the author in Russia, to the small publishing house in New York City, to artists working collaboratively in New York City and Omaha, the show has become a labor of love for everyone who has become involved with its creation.

“I think it is exciting that an Orthodox publishing company in Brooklyn, New York, would take a chance on a couple of people in Omaha, Nebraska, on their first theatrical license,” says Sillau. “I would call them every day for seven years. Every morning at 7 am, we would have a meeting about the show.”

The Doll Maker's Gift shares the story of Nora, a young Jewish girl living in Russia at the turn of the century (played by Maddie Smith). Nora’s family is threatened by pogroms in Eastern Europe, organized mobs terrorizing and killing Jews across the countryside.

“Pogrom” is a Russian word meaning “to wreak havoc, to demolish violently.” The term refers to violent attacks by local non-Jewish populations on Jews in the Russian Empire and in other countries. The perpetrators of pogroms organized locally, murdering and raping their Jewish victims, and looting their property, at times with government and police encouragement.

“In our first read-through, we talked about the historical context with this piece, which is really dark and laden with anti-Semitism,” says Denenberg. “But the Jewish people don’t spend a lot of our thought and energy focused on the dark side. In fact, what has kept us alive for thousands of years is really a strong sense of optimism.”

Despite the script’s dark and horrific background, ***The Doll Maker's Gift*** is actually a story filled with hope and light, embodying optimism in the face of danger. “One of the very first things I was taught as a musical theater writer was that musical theater essentially is about optimism in the face of horrible circumstances,” says lyricist Sammy Buck, a visiting artist from New York City. “In our discussion of how relevant the show is, and how dark the times are that we are living in, the fact that we have music and song to help us find that light and the power of the imagination, the ebullience of survival, and using the music as a metaphor for being able to find that part of Nora’s imagination and cleverness.”

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As the plot progresses, Nora's father (Steve Hydeen) escapes to America with the hope of raising enough money for the family to join him. Unfortunately, by the time he has acquired the money, ticket prices have increased and the family can only afford passage for the mother (Abby Gerdts) and one of the two daughters. Reluctantly, they decide to entrust Nora to a doll maker in town who is their friend, who will care for her until they can afford for her to join them in America (played by Patrick Wolfe).

The cast and creators of ***The Doll Maker's Gift*** have noted similarities – sometimes unexpected ones – from history to today. EllaRose Chary, the script's book writer notes that in one of the early readings, one of the participants who was a mother started crying when the family was separated from each other, noting that she had just watched news footage earlier in the day about parents from Mexico being separated from their children at the southern border of the United States. "This play is even more important than I thought it was," says Chary. "This piece is not just about a moment in Jewish history. This piece is about our community right now, in Omaha, in New York City, in the United States. What is really exciting to me is how this all connects to what is very present for people right now. For us to be part of that conversation today is the reason we make theater."

The devoted doll maker shows that good friends are priceless and that all obstacles can be overcome when there is a true desire to help another. He and Nora come up with a creative solution to keep their family safe and together.

"I think ***The Doll Maker's Gift*** is a story about how children are survivors," says scenic designer Jamie Bullins. "It's a story about how you cope with the darkness. Children have fantastic imaginations that help them survive even the darkest events."

"For me, this is a story about immigration, but it is also about faith, friendship, the power of community and imagination. To take something that is so horrible that you can't even think of words to describe it...it is just gut-wrenching," says Sillau. "It's a brave thing to tell. I can't say I'm the first, but I haven't seen anything like it in Theater for Young Audiences before."

The relevance of the show's topic is not lost on its creators. "This is a very unique immigration story," says Rose Artistic Director Matthew Gutschick. "This project is really about our willingness to accept people from other countries, to understand why people want to come to our country, and to put that into focus for children in a way that they can understand."

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However the show is received by audiences, it is a magnum opus for Sillau. "For me, this is the crossroads of my creative life. There is before ***Doll Maker*** and there is after. No matter how this turns out, I will not be the same person," he says.

Due to its content, ***The Doll Maker's Gift*** is recommended for children age 8 and up. The show runs approximately 75 minutes without an intermission.

The Doll Maker's Gift runs February 22 through March 10, 2019, with performances on Fridays at 7 p.m., Saturdays at 2 p.m. and 5 p.m., and Sundays at 2 p.m. Interpretation for audience members who are deaf or hard of hearing will be offered at the 2 p.m. show on Saturday, March 2. Audio description services for audiences who are blind or have low vision will also be available at this performance. A sensory-friendly performance will be presented at the 5 pm performance on Saturday, March 2.

Tickets for ***The Doll Maker's Gift*** are available for \$20 by calling The Rose Box Office at (402) 345-4849 or online at www.rosetheater.org. Rose members receive four free tickets to the production.

The Doll Maker's Gift is sponsored by Children's Hospital & Medical Center, Nebraska Furniture Mart, Kiewit Corporation, Omaha Public Schools Foundation, the Nebraska Arts Council, and the Nebraska Cultural Endowment.

About The Rose

The Rose Theater is one of the largest and most accomplished children's theaters in the nation, with a reputation for enriching the lives of children and families through top-quality professional productions and arts education.

In 2016, American Theatre magazine named The Rose one of the 20 top children's theaters in the United States.

The Rose is committed to making the arts accessible to all children, providing opportunities for thousands of children throughout the community to attend shows and participate in classes each year. Over the course of a year, approximately 70,000 people attend the public performances held at the theater, and nearly 30,000 students attend field trip shows annually.

The theater strives to introduce young people to a mix of both traditional favorites and ground-breaking original productions. A number of plays and musicals have made their world premiere on The Rose stage, including *Van Gogh & Me*, *The Meaning of Maggie*, *Pete the Cat: The Musical*, *Sherlock Holmes & the First Baker Street Irregular*, *Zen Ties*, *Leo Lionni's Frederick*, *A Palette of Possibility*, *Thumbelina*, *Buffalo Bill's Cowboy Band*, and *The Grocer's Goblin & The Little Mermaid*.

We take pride knowing that The Rose is the place where children of all ages experience theater for the first time, and we are dedicated to helping them appreciate theater for a lifetime.

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