VILNA

Written by Ira Fuchs
Directed by Joseph Discher
Cast of Characters (performer alphabetic order)

Young Motke Zeidel
Rector Jackowicki/Sergeant Weiss
Joseph Glazman/J. Ciuberskis
Naiomi Zeidel
Professor Kridl/Wilhelm Fuchs/Dirgela
Chayele Rosenthal/Mother
Rosa Szabad/Fania Lewando
Jacob Gens
The Ghost of Motke Zeidel
Rabbi Halperin/Shop Owner/Rojas
Yudi Hirschmann
Professor Ehrenkreutz/
Achamer Piffrader/Lithuanian Police Officer
Abba Kovner/Pietr
Bruno Kittel/Second Boy/Soldier
Nowicki/Alperovich/Dressler
Jospeh Zeidel/Lutoslawski

Ari Brand*
Brian Cade*
Tristan Colton*
Anne Marie Cusson*
Mark H. Dold*
Lauriel Friedman*
Eileen Glenn*
Nathan Kaufman*
Jeremy Lawrence*
David Mandelbaum
Seamus Mulcahy*

* Denotes Member of Actors’ Equity Association
Production Staff for VILNA

Denise Cardarelli – Stage Manager
Lizzie Engelberth – Assistant to the Director/Stage Directions
Brad Stoller – Technician

Special Thanks to:

Jean Citarella – For your belief in the play and me, and your encouragement to make it happen.

Jamie Discher – On behalf of Ira for being supportive of Joe, who is a great Director.

Olga Sakhno – For her enthusiastic help with the Russian lyrics and lines.

Arthur Jacobs and John Burleigh – for going the extra ten miles in support of getting VILNA produced.

Rosina Abramson – For her excellent suggestions and being a great booster.

Michelle Mantione – For her assistance with the staged reading at Hunter College.

Sean Hudock – For his recommendation of cast members.
A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR:

Perhaps the most profound experience of my career was directing the stage version of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. I had an incredibly talented cast and creative team, with the words and spirit of Anne Frank guiding us. The most moving experience for all of us during the rehearsal process was our visit from Maud Dahme, a Holocaust survivor who was hidden by her parents on a farm outside of Amsterdam.

One issue that came up during her conversation with the cast was the difficulty to conceive of the scope of the tragedy that was the Holocaust; trying wrap one’s mind around a number like six million, and how an actor might bear witness to and honor such an important story. Ms. Dahme’s answer was pithy and eloquent. It stuck with all of us. She replied: “Think of one.” Her contribution made the play more personal, more meaningful, more powerful.

Now, with Vilna, comes a play that has the potential to be equally as powerful; it also pulls directly from historical figures and events. It is crucial to tell this story, because “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” As Vilna’s protagonist Motke tells us, “You need to know.” Indeed, the warning Motke Zeidel gives us is as relevant as can be.

I am grateful for this opportunity. One of the things that attracted me to Vilnius is that it depicts the epic scope of events while keeping us connected to the individual, the “one” in such a way that allows the experience to be real and personal for the audience. Each actor tonight has the name of one Vilnius Jew who died in the Vilna ghetto or in Ponar Forest. Our work tonight is dedicated to those whose existence and whose end inspired this play.

They are not forgotten.
IRA FUCHS – AUTHOR, is a lifelong resident of New York City. He graduated with a BA in English from Queens College of CUNY in 1974. While in college he started writing plays that were staged at the original Playwrights Horizons, founded by Bob Moss in a YWCA on Eighth Avenue.

After graduating he spent 45 years as an entrepreneur working with computer technology from mainframes to microcomputers. He has consulted for and with companies such for AT&T and Microsoft. He is the author and publisher of two books on Microsoft’s SharePoint platform and was a frequent presenter of workshops at SharePoint industry events.

In 2016 he returned to writing plays and enrolled in a six week play writing workshop at Hollins University where Bob Moss is a faculty member.

He lives in Forest Hills, NY with his wife Jean Citarella, to whom he has been happily married for over twenty-nine years. He can be reached at irahfuchs@gmail.com

JOSEPH DISCHER – DIRECTOR is honored to be a part of the development of VILNA. The New York Times has called his work “devastatingly effective,” “enchanting,” “beautiful,” and “sensitively directed”. Most recently, he directed the off-Broadway world premiere of The Violin starring Robert LuPone at 59E59. Mr. Discher also directed the NYC premiere of Ben Butler at 59E59, as well as regional productions at Barrington Stage Company, Majestic Theater, and the world premiere at New Jersey Repertory Company.

Mr. Discher has numerous other directing credits. Mr. Discher is an associate artist at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, where he spent twenty years on staff as Associate Artistic Director and Casting Director. He is also a violinist, professional tenor and audiobook narrator. In his spare time, he is a professional coach for actors in NYC and NJ. He is a member of SDC and AEA and a graduate of Drew University. Visit www.joedischer.com/portfolio/ for more information about Mr. Discher’ s work.
The Origins of the Play

While enrolled in a play writing workshop during the summer of 2016 I had to write a full length play, in three days, based on a news article found that day. In the NY Times was a story about the discovery of an escape tunnel in the Ponar death pits outside of Vilna. In February 2017 I began to do the research for the play in earnest at which time I made a number of discoveries about the extraordinary city of Vilna, the Eastern European city in which the play takes place.

Jews lived and thrived in Vilna since the tenth century. In the 18th century Vilna was the center of Jewish learning in Europe. Napoleon called it the “Jerusalem of the North”. In 1916, of 148,000 inhabitants, 61,000 were Jews, over 41% of the population! Never, before or since, has there been any place in the diaspora world with this Jewish demographic density.

Beyond this unique Jewish demographic, Vilna was further distinguished by being a highly evolved center of economic, cultural, educational, and charitable activity. Vilna was the antithesis of the stereotypical shtetl enclaves of Eastern Europe.

The civil infrastructure of the city was second to none in the world: It was the railroad transit hub for merchandise traveling between Russia and Germany. It had a telegraph system in 1838 and a telephone network by 1886. A municipal sewage system was built in 1899 (consider that London built its renowned sewer system in 1870). An electric power-generating station and wiring grid were in place by 1901.

By the late 1800s Vilna had dozens of synagogues, libraries, schools, theaters, museums, medical facilities, scientific institutions, newspapers, periodicals, journals and book publishing houses. The YIVO Institute was founded in Vilna in 1925. Renowned scientists, teachers, writers, sculptors, and musicians made their homes there. Yiddish was its lingua franca. At the beginning of the 20th century, Vilna had hundreds of Jewish educational institutions in which 13,000 children studied.
Vilna was renamed Wilno in 1921 when Poland was reconstituted, and the Jewish community fell into decline under constant Polish persecution. The Nazis completely eradicated the Vilna Jews between 1941 and 1944, and the city was renamed Vilnius after World War Two when it became part of Lithuania.

Most of the characters in the play are real people and while the scenes depicted are fictional, they align with actual chronological events. Herding Jews into ghettos, where there were negligible supplies of food, water, or sanitation facilities was a standard Nazi eradication method. Hundreds of thousands died in ghettos from starvation and disease.

Of the twenty to thirty thousand Jews crammed into the Vilna ghetto, practically no one died from starvation or disease due to the initiatives of the ghetto governing authority (the Judenrat). Health professionals prevented outbreaks of Cholera, Typhus and other diseases by implementing rigorously enforced health and hygienic procedures. These procedures are cited as best practices for preventing the outbreak of disease in disastrous situations: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4318312/. Public baths were set up and people would not receive food rations unless they presented their bathing records. Within four months the ghetto was a fully functioning society providing not only food, housing, and sanitation, but an entire spectrum of educational, cultural and competitive sports activities.

Eighty thousand Jews and others were shot and their bodies piled into pits, but not burned, in order to shroud the killing activity. Towards the end of the war approximately 80 Jews exhumed and burned these bodies to hide evidence of genocide. A small number escaped by digging a tunnel. Proof of this heroic escape could not be corroborated until 2016 when a team of international researchers used Electric Resistivity Tomography to detect and excavate the tunnel: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/29/science/holocaust-ponar-tunnel-lithuania.html. A documentary about this discovery was made and aired by PBS in 2016.
Importance and Value of the Play

Because the world is three generations removed from the Holocaust there are few survivors left to bear witness. As a result our collective remembrance rituals are becoming historically remote and less personally tangible. To the world at large the Holocaust is becoming a faint or non-existent event of small significance, while culpable Sovereign entities make concerted efforts to deny or distance themselves from their historic responsibility. It is our obligation to keep it from becoming a frail memory.

In lieu of first person testimony theater is the most effective proxy for conveying the emotional and intellectual incomprehensibility of the Holocaust. It is the most powerful and effective ways to portray and reinforce its monumental truth, and make it abhorrently tangible again. VILNA accomplishes this by telling the story of the actual people who sustained the civilized fabric of the remarkable Vilna Jewish community in Eastern Europe during its degradation in the Interwar years and complete destruction in World War Two. It is also a warning of what can happen right now, in our own country.

The production of VILNA will profoundly inform and affect 6,000 people during its five-week Off-Broadway run that coincides with the Yom HaShoah commemoration period during March and April, 2019. Approximately 1,200 of those people will experience VILNA at no cost and another 1,200 will attend the play at a significantly reduced ticket price through charitable subsidies. The producing company feels strongly that it is important to make this experience accessible to people who typically cannot afford to attend the theater. This will be facilitated by an extensive audience outreach initiative through educational and cultural organizations, synagogue communities, professional associations, and other relevant groups in the Tristate area. For more information on this audience outreach please contact Ira Fuchs at irahfuchs@gmail.com.