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Diary of Anne Frank production up to the task

Director's mother-in-law was young girl in Holland, had to hide from Nazis too

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Correspondent

TORONTO – When considering a stage production of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the question is not whether the story is good, but whether the actors are up to the task of portraying some of the best-known, and most beloved, real-life characters of this era. In the case of the current production by Shakespeare in Action, the answer is a resounding yes.

The skillfully selected ensemble cast brings the members of the Secret Annex to life using the framework of Wendy Kesselman's modern adaptation of the play by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hack-

ett. Before the play even begins, the evocative set, designed by Glenn Davison, leads the imagination up the back staircase and into the cramped attic where Anne Frank, her family and friends spent two years of their lives hiding from the Nazis during World War II.

As brilliant a writer as Anne Frank was, she still perceived and depicted life through her own eyes, whereas the play widens the point of view to provide a more nuanced insight into each person's character. The actors strike the right notes in each scene: their emotions and interactions are genuine and the dialogue is fresh. From start to finish, the audience is moved not just to tears but also to delighted laughter, often prompted by Anne's joyful exuberance, as depicted by the actress Sascha Cole.

In separate interviews with the *Jewish Tribune*, Cole and Michael Kelly, who directs the play and is also artistic director of Shakespeare in Action, spoke movingly

about the play and its main protagonist.

Although Cole had seen the play before, she hadn't read Anne Frank's diary until she was preparing for the role, for fear it would make her too depressed.

"I was so surprised," Cole said. "It's not depressing at all. It's moving, but it's full of joy and life and light and Anne's sense of humour, her curiosity for the world. She's almost insatiable, in a way. So when I prepared for the role, I thought, that's what I want to bring to this: her joy and her endless quest for everything."

Cole said she has developed a process to help herself deal with the grief that comes with the role.

"It's a sad story, but every day when I walk home from rehearsal and I'm feeling kind of down, I look into that sadness and I turn it around. It's really made me thankful for the gifts and blessings that I have, that we all have, to be born in a country where we have all of our rights."

Kelly said the play is an important learning tool for today's younger generation, many of whom are unfamiliar with the facts of the Holocaust and World War II.

Students are being bussed in for the morning show on weekdays. The young audience members have been "extremely attentive, extremely quiet, listening, listening," Kelly said. "To me, that's a real sign of the power of the story and the intention of the cast. They really ignite the story...."

"When Anne says in the play, 'I want to be a writer but I want to be more than that, I want to be useful to people, I want to go on living after my death,' that is so profound. Every time I hear that line, I can barely stay in the theatre now: it



PHOTO: JOEL CHARLEBOIS

This is a delightful scene in which Anne tries to walk while wearing a pair of high-heeled shoes that Miep has just given her as a surprise. Sascha Cole as Anne (forefront) and (from left) Joe Buccini as Peter, Shaun Clarke as Mr. Dussel, Bruce Beaton as Mr. Van Daan, Alexis Koetting as Mrs. Frank, Cindy Block as Miep Gies and Chris Karczmars as Mr. Frank.

breaks my heart.... That's why the story lives on and will continue to be told."

On opening night, the story also resonated with Kelly's mother-in-law, Els Buchli, who, as a young Christian girl in rural Holland during WWII, also had to go into hiding from the Nazis. She was seven years old when the German army invaded The Netherlands and she still remembers it vividly.

She told the *Jewish Tribune* she felt "very emotional" while watching the play.

"You cringe when you hear the planes coming over and all the shouting. We were always afraid. It always happened late at night or early in the morning. They had those heavy boots and you would hear

them coming on the street, and then that heavy knock on the door; they usually would use the butt of their guns."

Buchli's family lived in a rural part of the country, so they had more food and were somewhat safer than people who lived in Amsterdam. Her father was part of the resistance movement and Buchli herself was sometimes enlisted to deliver food for people who were in hiding, including Dutch Jews and Christians, as well as Russians who had been shot down by the Germans.

Before the war, "we had several Jewish friends, but I didn't know they were Jewish; they were (simply) friends."

Her father went into hiding to avoid being taken

away to work for the Nazi war machine. About a year after the Nazis arrived, some officers took over Buchli's house. Her family was allowed to stay in a bomb shelter on their property for awhile but eventually they, along with a few hundred other people, were taken on a forced march to Germany. Some of them managed to escape and make their way to Buchli's uncle's home, where they stayed for a few months.

Recalling the long trek, Buchli said, "It was the same as they say about the Jewish people: 'Why didn't you fight?' We were in the same boat. We were maybe 300-400 people and there were maybe 20-30 Germans but they all had guns.... We were always afraid of the

SS."

Buchli's uncle owned a large malt factory. He had previously had an addition built onto it and a basement dug below. Knowing they wouldn't be safe in the house for very long, the adults sold their jewelry to farmers in exchange for food and stockpiled potatoes, carrots, pickled herring and sauerkraut in the factory's basement. As soon as they could, a group of about 60 people, including Buchli, her mother, father and younger sister, as well as her uncle, aunt and their three children, went into hiding in the windowless cellar.

The German army commandeered the malt factory for use as a field hospital, so the refugees, many of whom were elderly women, slept during the day on mattresses strewn across the floor and stayed awake at night when there was less danger of being heard.

In April 1945, after living in perpetual darkness for six months, the trap door to the basement was thrown open and Buchli and the others streamed onto the street to greet three Canadian soldiers in a tank. Unlike Anne Frank and most of the people who were in hiding with her, everyone who took refuge under the malt factory survived.

The Diary of Anne Frank runs to March 13 at the Central Commerce Theatre at 570 Shaw St. Show times are 10 a.m. Monday to Friday and 2 p.m. on March 13. For more information, call (416) 703-4881.

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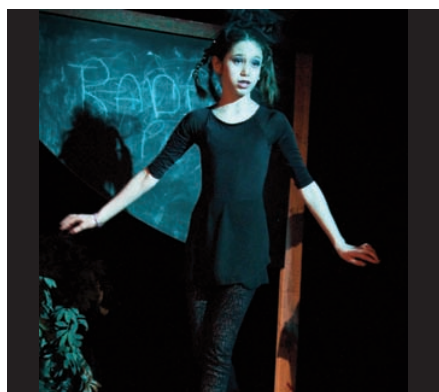
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Associated student stars

Associated Hebrew Day Schools (AHS) student Avery Molly T-K, 12, is Charlotte the spider in the upcoming musical production by Toronto Youth Theatre of *Charlotte's Web*, playing at the Lower Ossington Theatre through March 12.