

Beautiful treasure inside Suitcase

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By Kevin Prokosh

OF the six million Jews who perished in the Holocaust, 1.5 million were children like Hana Brady.

The world would surely never have heard of the 13-year-old Czech girl if not for curious Japanese schoolkids. Six years ago, the students badgered the co-ordinator of the Tokyo Holocaust Centre to research the name painted on an old brown suitcase from the Auschwitz death camp.

Now millions know the astonishing story of how the girl was identified thanks to *Hana's Suitcase*, both a best-selling book by Karen Levine and a compelling children's play by fellow Torontonian Emil Sher.

The stirring two-act drama, which opened Thursday at Manitoba Theatre for Young People, juggles the sequence of events laid out in the book to create a detective story following museum official Fumiko Ishioka on her search. The trail ends at the Auschwitz gas chamber where Hana died in 1944, but begins anew with the discovery that her brother George survived and lives in Toronto.

Sher has penned a contemporary Holocaust story that continually crosses paths with the tragic past. The 90-minute drama opens with one of the Japanese children, Akira, sneaking onto the stage to inspect the Auschwitz artifact. When he opens the suitcase, Hana glides across the stage on her scooter as if her spirit has been freed.

Akira, the ever inquisitive kid, and his wide-eyed friend Maiko are warned that the quest might come to a truly terrible end. "I'm not afraid of sad endings," he says, speaking for most of the children in the audience at a school performance this week.

Late in the first act, Ishioka comes face to face with George's former bunkmate, Kurt Kotouc from the Theresienstadt concentration camp. After he hands over George's Canadian address, a puzzled Kotouc asks her why has she gone to all this trouble for someone she never knew. "For the children," she replies promptly. He repeats it, nodding. She is referring to her students while he is thinking about all the innocent young people wiped out by Hitler's Final Solution.

Director Allen MacInnis, former Prairie Theatre Exchange artistic director, overcomes some of the fact-heavy narrative with effective use of archival footage projected over an Asian sliding screen, which doubles for the doors of railway cars transporting the doomed.

To balance the fresh faces of so many children on stage, Sher marches out disturbing, ghost-like characters outfitted with expressionless masks featuring hollowed out eyes.

Only in the second act does the audience get to meet Hana and her family in the late 1930s, before the authorities began restricting their activities. Her mother was the first to be deported to a German concentration camp. In her only letter to her family, Hana's mother sent her daughter a birthday present of a heart made of bread.

The storytelling is so captivating that one often forgets these are actors on stage. The cast is strong, but it is Dale Yim as Akira, Ella Chan as Maiko and Jo Chim as Ishioka who together ensure the audience cares about their pursuit of Hana's background. As the title character, Jessica Greenberg makes the loss of an average girl heartbreaking.

History dictates the brutal ending for Hana and her parents. But Sher rescues the story by planting hope for a better future. Akira vows "to find a way out of the sadness" and tell all Japanese children about Hana through a play. That sets the stage for an inspiring parting image of Maiko pretending to be the Jewish girl, riding her scooter just as Hana did at the beginning.

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