

Holocaust play teaches students lessons for today

By Jennifer Solis

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WEST NEWBURY — The audience's spontaneous cheering felt jarring and out of place, following, as it did, an act of violence. It came at a critical juncture in the play, when a 17-year-old boy — repeatedly bullied by a smaller, but crueler 15-year-old girl — literally strikes back, knocking her to the floor.

During the post-play discussion of Anna Smulowitz's "Terezin: Children of the Holocaust," the director and playwright asks the theater full of Pentucket eighth-graders to probe deeper into what motivated the response.

"Why did we all cheer?" Smulowitz asked. The crowd fed back a range of answers: "because we like fighting"; "because we're American"; "because she deserved it"; "because it wasn't fair what she was doing to him."

When faced with the inexplicable atrocity of man's cruelty to man, the impulse to get even is strong, Smulowitz agreed. Yet, there is a better, more empowering choice, she told them. Intervene on behalf of the victim when you can and bear witness to make sure it never happens again.

The play, which was first performed in 1982 and has won international acclaim, chronicles two days in the lives of six children just before they are shipped off to Auschwitz. Set in Theresienstadt, a Jewish concentration camp 30 miles south of Prague in what was, at one time, a holiday resort for Czech high society, it explores prejudice, intolerance, harassment and a longing for justice — themes as relevant to kids today as they were 70 years ago.

Principal Debra Lay and her middle school teachers partnered with the nonprofit Pentucket Fine and Performing Arts Foundation to bring the play to the school stage last Thursday.

In the weeks leading up to the production, the eighth-grade classes were busy reading "The Diary of Anne Frank" and "I Promised I Would Tell," written by Sonia Schreiber Weitz, a local Holocaust survivor who died in 2010.

Mary Kiley, a Legacy Partner from The Holocaust Center, Boston North Inc. in Danvers, was invited to visit the classrooms, and students filled the lobby outside the auditorium with collages and other creative expressions connected to lessons their teachers were trying to impart.

The theatrical performance marked the culmination of the interdisciplinary unit and allowed students to connect emotionally with the devastating historical tragedy they were studying about, as well as with the challenges they face as pre-adolescents, said Lay. "Whether bystanders or upstanders, we all learned about the shattering effects of standing by without speaking up," she said.

"Highlighting bullying behavior and how it is copied by the younger characters was a good example of how easy it is for that behavior to rub off on others," said Shawn MacDonald, the school's science, technology, engineering and mathematics teacher. "And now we have the Internet and Facebook to add fuel to the personal fires already burning within many teens — and adults."

Kathy Ells, an 8-Green team teacher, said the play and subsequent discussion gave students permission to get in touch with the very human feelings of rage and revenge "but challenged them to find better alternatives. Students were actually discussing the play as they left the auditorium — one even initiated a conversation with me," Ells reported.

Several teachers planned to continue the conversation back in the classrooms and find ways to help students view banding together against bullies as the "cool" thing to do.

"How haunting and powerful to see the Holocaust through the eyes of children," said visual arts teacher Aris Moore. She felt the portrayal of "gray areas" between good/evil and victim/perpetrator within the play were shifts that happen at middle school all the time.

While it was "painful listening to the students clap" when the victim turned violent on stage, Moore believes it was also realistic. "Compassion can be overruled by fear," she said, adding that adults need to help children understand that "we are not just responsible for ourselves, but for each other."

Ultimately, the play's focus is not just about the grim reality that awaits the children of Terezin, but also depicts a triumph of spirit through human relationships and art.

As the discussion wound down, Smulowitz, who was born in a concentration camp and based the play on experiences her own parents had as prisoners of Terezin, had one final question for the audience. Why isn't the victim Aaron's violent response the most powerful way for him to handle Corrinne, the bully, Smulowitz wanted to know.

At last, a small voice rose above the others in the crowd. "Because it brings him down to her level."

Smulowitz beamed at the girl and threw her arms open with a flourish, as if putting an exclamation point on the statement. "Exactly," she said.