

Interfaith Intersections: *Talking with Angels*

BY MARIA PICCININNI

THE HOLOCAUST. A time of undeniable evil, juxtaposed with countless tales of human kindness, faith, and sacrifice. Gitta Mallasz was one such survivor whose true tale of friendship and survival is brought to the stage in *Talking with Angels*, Shelley Mitchell's one-woman show playing at Project Artaud Theatre.

Billed as "a true story of faith that transcends faiths," Gitta Mallasz's tale is an interfaith message of friendship and triumph. In trying to save her friends, she stumbles upon heroism by rescuing almost 100 women and children in occupied Hungary. The inspiration? The close-knit circle of four find guidance through miraculous conversations with angels – visits they themselves cannot at first believe but ones that nevertheless chart their destiny. The play never subscribes to one religion over another. Rather, the work shows every human being's need for faith to sustain them and that it often manifests itself in the most unorthodox forms and people.

Mitchell begins the tale with Gitta as an old woman lecturing about her Holocaust experience. She then expertly weaves in flashbacks, beginning with the angels' first visits, through the set-up of a government sanctioned factory where she kept many women and children from the horrors of prison camp, and ending with her tale of how this incredible story was eventually shared with the rest of the world. Mitchell expertly weaves in and out of characters, using body movement, vocal inflection – even sentence structure – to easily enchant the audience along this incredible journey. Minimalist staging keeps the canvas open to audience imagination, as Mitchell dances through time and place throughout her narrative. Her acting is pure and precise. Nothing overdone, nothing extraneous.

Candlelight and poignant music serve to complete the effect without clutter. You truly become lost in the experience of these friends, trying desperately to survive, while still trying to make sense of these ethereal visits. The amazing aspect is that the characters do indeed come from different organized faiths, thus further underscoring the theme of faith as "religion-agnostic." That whatever form you choose to exercise that faith within, it still is part of the same human experience. As stated in the play: "Belief is the bridge. And faith is the act." Mitchell feels even Gitta herself



Shelley Mitchell in
Talking With Angels.

never quite grasped the starkness of the angels' message, but the compass still pointed her to her destiny.

The audience was left moved, inspired and in awe of this amazing story. And the themes linger long after Mitchell takes her final bow: Faith, friendship, survival, sacrifice.

Mitchell, who first adapted the work for the 1999 San Francisco Fringe Theater Festival — winning "Best of the Fringe" — created a new version that was performed at San Francisco's Magic Theater in 2000. Since then, she has performed the piece over 100 times at venues on both the East and West Coasts. "Each time is different," she says, "and I go to a new place with each audience. This is not an entertainment piece, but one that touches a raw nerve that many want to be touched." This freshness is what fuels her to share Gitta's story.

Talking with Angels reflects so many stories of Holocaust survival that were never preserved. Gitta Mallasz kept detailed documentation of these other-worldly conversations, as well as an account of their experiences during that time.

If you are looking for a play to move you and force you to question the very pillars of human faith in adversity, then *Talking with Angels* is a true gift. Even the most skeptical audience member will contemplate the miraculous, due to the historical context. As Mitchell eloquently states, "Those who already believe will feel validated, and skeptics will at least contemplate it."

Transforming the world through personal contemplation of the miraculous, rather than religious obedience, is Mitchell's goal in sharing Gitta's tale. And she is fulfilling that quest – one performance at a time.

Performances are November 10-December 5 at Project Artaud Theatre (450 Florida). For tickets, call 392-4400 (www.cityboxoffice.com). ■

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