

New Play Explores History of Half-Jews Who Served in Hitler's Army

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The Mitzvah ("The Good Deed") is a one-person drama that sheds light on one of the most astonishing stories of World War II: how tens of thousands of German men, classified as "mischlinge" (the derogatory term the Nazis used to describe those descended from one, two or three Jewish grandparents) ended up serving in Hitler's army. A touching and tragic tale, *The Mitzvah* was conceived, co-authored and is being performed by actor, playwright and child of survivor, Roger Grunwald. Broadway veteran, Annie McGreevey, is *The Mitzvah*'s director and co-author.



Roger Grunwald as German half-Jew, Christoph Rosenberg in *The Mitzvah*.

Grunwald recently kicked off a national tour of *The Mitzvah* Project (the play and lecture) in Evanston, IL and the Project will be the centerpiece of a Yom HaShoah commemoration beginning at 7:30pm, Thursday, May 1, 2014 at The Chabad Jewish Center of Northwest Bergen County, 375 Pulis Avenue, Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417. (201) 848-0449

"My hope is to bring *The Mitzvah* Project to Jewish organizations and college level Jewish Studies and History programs throughout the Tri-state area and around the country," says Grunwald... "For many years, my mother — an Auschwitz survivor — spoke in front of groups of students about her experiences during the war. What she and other survivors did — and continue to do — is teach this critical history experientially. My mom died in 2001

and more and more Holocaust survivors are dying every day. As a child of a survivor, a performing artist and a human being — born less than six years after the most murderous decade in the history of the world — I want to use *The Mitzvah* as a vehicle to keep in focus the history that could too easily be forgotten."

To tell the story of *The Mitzvah*, Grunwald portrays an array of characters including Christoph (the "mischling"); Schmuell, a Polish Jew from Bialystok, and the play's Chorus, a Groucho Marx-esque comedian / philosopher who interjects edgy commentary probing the boundary between the absurd and the horrific.

Through Christoph's story, *The Mitzvah* reveals the startling history of tens of thousands of "partial Jews" who served in Hitler's military, most of whom were discharged beginning in April of 1940. Nearly all were sent to forced labor camps — or worse. Shockingly, a few thousand *mischlinge* who had (what the Nazis considered) an "Aryan" appearance and who had distinguished themselves on the field of battle, were exempted from the Nazi race laws. A "Declaration of German Blood" (a *Deutschblütigkeitserklärung*) — signed by Hitler himself — allowed these select few thousand *mischlinge* to fight for the Nazi cause. Most died in battle.

Cindy Rosenthal, Ph.D., Associate Professor Drama and Dance at Hofstra University, said:

"Grunwald's story-telling is riveting, clear and original throughout. I have written previously on Holocaust drama and on memory and performance (NY TIMES; 25 February, 2001) and was delighted to find *The Mitzvah* both unique and on the highest level among these works..."

The Mitzvah adds to the historical narratives about the Jewish experience during The Holocaust and was inspired by the lives of Grunwald's mother and aunt (who survived Bergen-Belsen). Its world premiere was at the Emerging Artists Theatre's "Illuminating Artists: One Man Talking" festival in New York City and has also been presented in Port Washington, NY. In the words of Rabbi Sha-

lom M. Paltiel of the Chabad of Port Washington:

"The Chabad of Port Washington had the unique good fortune to present *The Mitzvah*, Mr. Grunwald's wonderful, wrenching and, at times, absurdly funny short play. I believe *The Mitzvah* is an important piece of cultural discourse as well as a marvelous piece of theater, co-written and acted by a gifted and versatile playwright and performer."

Grunwald's post-performance lecture traces the fateful chronology of Jews in Germany — from Moses Mendelssohn, through the arrival (into Germany in the late 19th and early 20th century) of over a hundred thousand Jews from the Pale of Settlement (so-called *Ost Juden*) — to the rise of Hitler. Grunwald charts two centuries of German Jewish assimilation, intermarriage and conversion — the collective aspiration of generations of German Jews — to find a seat at the table within Germany's dominant Christian culture. After having converted to Christianity in 1825, Heinrich Heine, the renowned German Jewish poet, believed he had "bought an entry ticket to European culture." For hundreds of thousands of German Jews under Hitler, Heine's entry ticket paid their one-way train ride to oblivion.

The play engages several socio/cultural/historical issues: Who decides what culture, race and ethnicity mean? What is identity? What responsibility, if any, do we have to the dead? Does killing another human being have a place in a moral universe? Do human beings have the capacity to learn from history?

The *Mitzvah* Project is fiscally sponsored by the New York Foundation for the Arts (NYFA), a 501(c)(3) public, tax-exempt foundation established by the New York State Council on the Arts in 1971 to work with the arts community to develop and facilitate programs in all disciplines. The *Mitzvah* Project is the recipient of a 2013 NYFA Opportunity Grant.

For more information on The Mitzvah Project, please visit www.themitzvah.org or contact Roger Grunwald at (917) 363-3437.