



SORROWFUL CELEBRATION

BY CAROLYN STOKES

St. John's students participate in human rights program and remember the Holocaust.

Close to a dozen enthusiastic students and teachers are clustered together in the Prince of Wales Collegiate rehearsal room. Each person is beaming and practically bursting to tell their story.

CONTROLLED CHAOS

Unprepared for the onslaught, this audience of one is standing in the middle of a whirlwind of anxious voices, and is beginning to feel like the little hand on a clock gone haywire. Even so, the excitement is contagious.

The cause of this chaos?

A total of 35 students and seven teachers are scheduled to travel to Washington, D.C. for four days next month to participate in the final component of The Asper Foundation Holocaust and Human Rights Studies Programme — a nation-

al education program designed to foster awareness in youth about human rights issues — and to represent Newfoundland and Labrador. Today, they're rehearsing for the play *Some Picnic!* which they plan to perform at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum during their visit.

NO PICNIC

"The Asper Foundation doesn't know how much we're putting into this," says PWC teacher Keith Samuelson with a twinkle of determination in his eyes. "Our initiation into this conference will be unforgettable ... we're going to blow them out of the water ... we want them to be absolutely overwhelmed by our performance."

Also in the rehearsal room is one silent soul sitting at the periphery of all the action — where, according to her, she

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— Sherril Gilbert

prefers to be — just watching. Her name is Sherril Gilbert and *Some Picnic!* is the true story of her father, grandmother and grandfather who fled their home in Belgium to escape the Nazis during the Holocaust.

"It's gratifying for me that the story is out in the world for people to see," she says in a soft voice. "The message of the story is to never forget."

Gilbert explains that many years ago her brother interviewed their father, Alex, and grandmother (who's simply called Mother in the play), about their family's continuous travels around the world in an attempt to stay one step ahead of the Nazis. In an effort to protect Alex, who was only eight years old at the time, his parents explained the situation by saying they were all going on a big picnic (hence the sarcasm in the title *Some Picnic!*). Gilbert transcribed the interview, which was captured on cassette, and she later showed it to Terry Rielly, her partner, who was so moved by the story he felt compelled to write the play. Rielly, the music director, also wrote several original songs to be performed during the play which is directed by PWC drama teacher Tolson Barrington.



Somehow, talking to Gilbert makes the story all the more real. Knowing the danger her father and grandparents had survived and how precarious the situation had been, makes one realize that had the scales tipped even slightly, she wouldn't be here to talk about it.

Though the energy levels are running high today, the students haven't lost sight of their purpose or the potency of the story. The lead actors — Mark Day, Josh Ellis, Shelley Feltham and Kerri Steele-Nash — explain that some students were brought to tears during one of their first rehearsals and they use the words "chilling," "heartbreaking," "hard-hitting" and "unimaginable" to describe the play and the emotions it stirs.

This isn't Rielly's first play about picnics. The children's entertainer is best known for his organizing of the *Teddy Bear's Picnic*, a profoundly different creation than *Some Picnic!*.

The students, the play and the trip all merged through chance and good timing.

"It all just fell together," says Day, who plays Alex. "It's like fate."

Once Rielly finished the play, he called Samuelson, who's a recipient of the Prime Minister's Award for Teaching Excellence, to see if there was any school interest.

Around the same time, The Asper Foundation, based in Winnipeg, also contacted Samuelson in search of Newfoundland and Labrador student representatives for the Holocaust and Human Rights Studies Programme, the foundation's major annual initiative now in its fourth year. No local schools have ever participated in the program, but over 1,000 Canadian students from all religious backgrounds have been involved. It was a perfect match.

The group plans to perform *Some Picnic!* in front of a hometown audience April 17 during a Holocaust memorial service at the school. ◀

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