

THE AUSTRALIAN

From Holocaust to Bondi: The Violin with a Century of Tales to Tell



Seventy-six-year-old Israeli violin maker Amnon Weinstein holds a violin that survived the Second World War bearing German writing and a Nazi Swastika sign at his workshop in Tel Aviv. Picture: AFP

By: Jane Cornwell JANE CORNWELL
8:00PM MAY 18, 2023

Joyce Vanderveen was 13 years old, on her way back from a violin lesson near her home in Amsterdam, when a shopkeeper she knew rushed out of his door and told her to turn and run away, fast. This was 1940. The Nazis had invaded The Netherlands. Jews were being rounded up and shot in the next street.

“My mother was half-Jewish so therefore not as much at risk,” says Rachelle Blaine, Vanderveen’s daughter. “It was actually fear of starvation that led her to flee Amsterdam with my aunt and grandmother on two bicycles with no tyres to a village in the north of Holland, where they were hidden by some poor farming families. There was little food and no hygiene. The one thing my mother took with her was her violin.”

Fast-forward to now and that same instrument is making its professional debut in *Stories from the Violins of Hope*, a new stage play based on the powerful true stories of violins played during the Holocaust, and making its world premiere in Sydney.

Written by Los Angeles-based playwright Ronda Spinak, founder of The Braid, the largest independent Jewish theatre company in the US, with Lisa Pearl Rosenbaum, the piece is a theatrical presentation, with music, of the *Violins of Hope* project.

This acclaimed concert series and its attendant exhibitions and projects (including a 2016 documentary narrated by Oscar winner Adrien Brody) began in the early Noughties; the instruments continue to celebrate the power of music and the resilience of the human spirit.



Joyce Vanderveen

They help to ensure that the memory of the Holocaust, Nazi Germany's deliberate murder of six million European Jews, is kept alive.

"Genocide is still a universal story of human struggle," says Spinak. "So much of Holocaust education is about the images. But this is a different entry point. You hear the stories. You hear the music."

The violin is closely associated with the Jewish tradition, used in klezmer folk music, in classical concertos, in times of both celebration and sadness.

"In the days before World War II you could tell how many boys were in a house by the number of violins hanging on a wall," says Spinak. "The Jews were nomadic people. If you were suddenly asked to leave you'd grab your candlesticks and instruments and go."

In the play four of five actors play multiple roles, telling authentic truths. Telling stories of the boy who hid his ethnicity and used his instrument case to smuggle in explosives that blew up a Nazi base. Of the French railway worker who was passed a violin through a window hatch from a cattle car bound for Auschwitz. Of a prisoner in an orchestra forced to play upbeat tunes as fellow prisoners were marched into gas chambers. "When that violin was opened for repair they found ashes inside," Spinak says.

The linchpin of the play, and the catalyst for the project, is Israeli luthier Amnon Weinstein, whose violinist father Moshe (who lost his entire 400-member extended family in the Holocaust) had bought 70 violins formerly played in ghettos, forest hideouts and concentration camps from noted Polish violinist Bronislaw Huberman. Nicknamed the "Oskar Schindler of musicians", Huberman had convinced many prominent Jewish musicians to leave their German orchestras and join him in Palestine. Weinstein Sr stashed the violins in his loft; after his death, and against his father's wishes ("A conceit we explore in the play"), Amnon set about restoring the violins with his son Avshalom.

Then he put them in the hands of professional musicians so a new generation could hear them.



Rachelle Blaine and Avshi Weinstein with Blaine's mother Joyce Vanderveen's violin

Concerts subsequently took place everywhere from Jerusalem to Monaco, Rome to Madrid; the violins starred in a Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra show conducted by Simon Rattle.

Their fame grew; Spinak was told of the phenomenon by Noreen Green, a member of the board of The Braid and founder of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony Orchestra. Together they created a piece of storytelling with music that went online during the pandemic, a film version of which has been seen in 30 countries. Sydney-based director-producer Moira Blumenthal saw it and asked if they might create a stage play.

“We needed a more traditional arc for the work so Lisa [Pearl Rosenbaum] went back to Amnon with specific questions,” says Spinak. “There’s a universality in the stories relayed onstage. We can connect the dots of Amnon’s story and relate it to our own.

“For example, what is inherited pain? How does the trauma of your parents manifest in your life? What decisions do you make, consciously or unconsciously, that are driven by people you loved, and those you didn’t know? What is the truth you need to follow?”

Such questions were faced head-on by Blaine, whose mother’s violin remained under her bed until several years after her death in 2008.

“I saw my mother play piano but never her violin, whose history I knew nothing about,” says Blaine, who happened to mention the instrument to her old acquaintance, Green, at their 2020 high school reunion.



Joyce Vanderveen with Rock Hudson

“My mother had been a child prodigy, and at the age of nine was conducting the children’s orchestra and dancing and playing violin in local festivals, dressed in traditional outfits. But after the war she decided to pursue her great love of ballet.

“She became a star of the Royal Netherlands Ballet, then joined the Monte Carlo Ballet, and toured 19 countries before a member of the Kennedy family arranged for her to come to America on a special artist’s visa.”

The violin went with her, locked in its case until – after Vanderveen landed an acting contract with Universal Pictures, and met and married Louis Blaine, the studio’s head of publicity – she retired, content to train young dancers in her community. When a 12-year-old Russian emigre named Ilya wanted to learn violin, she lent him hers, which he returned some years later:

“It went back under the bed until that school reunion,” says Blaine. “I tracked down Ilya, who is now a doctor in Cambridge, who praised her joy and energy. The violin, we think, reminded her too much of those awful war years.”

She holds up an image of Vanderveen as a child, smiling in a headscarf and peasant dress after dancing in a local festival – a photograph that for many years was better known as “the mystery girl on the wall” above the bed of Anne Frank, famously the German-born Jewish girl who documented life in hiding in Amsterdam under Nazi persecution. “In 1997 my mother received a call from a childhood friend, a journalist, who’d visited the Anne Frank Museum and recognised the picture immediately.

“My mother was astonished. She said, ‘I want everyone in the world to go but I don’t need to. I lived it.’ ”

And her violin – the same instrument about to play Sydney – lived it with her.

Stories from the Violins of Hope runs at the Bondi Pavilion, Sydney, from May 31 to June 18.