

**A 'WITNESS' TO THE HISTORY OF ANTISEMITISM**  
IGOR GOLYAK AND ARLEKIN PLAYERS THEATRE EXPLORE THE MANY TIMES,  
PLACES, AND FORMS OF ANTI-JEWISH BIGOTRY

By **Don Aucoin** Globe Staff, Updated December 15, 2021, 6:56 p.m.

A SCENE FROM "WITNESS," WHICH BLENDS LIVE PERFORMANCE, FILM, AUDIO, AND GREEN-SCREEN  
TECHNOLOGY



ARLEKIN PLAYERS THEATRE

A few months back, director Igor Golyak tackled “The Merchant of Venice,” fashioning Shakespeare’s play into a fierce indictment of antisemitism — the very evil that “Merchant” has often been accused of promulgating — in an Actors’ Shakespeare Project production at the Boston Center for the Arts. Now, Golyak has returned to the realm of virtual theater, a second — or is it now first? — artistic home for him, the milieu where he has emerged as a leading innovator since the pandemic began. In “Witness,” created with more than two dozen actors and presented by his own Arlekin Players Theatre, the topic is again antisemitism, the atmosphere is chilling, and the impact is profound.

This time the scope of Golyak’s investigation extends from the persistence of antisemitism to the history of Jewish migration, the ways in which that migration has been a response to persecution, and the hostility or worse often experienced by immigrants.

That was the case in the shameful episode at the center of “Witness”: When more than 900 Jewish passengers aboard the trans-Atlantic liner called the St. Louis, fleeing Nazi Germany in 1939, were denied entry to the United States as well as Canada and Cuba. Forced to return to Europe, nearly a third of those passengers subsequently died in the Holocaust.

Conceived and directed by Golyak, with a script by Nana Grinstein and additional scripting by Golyak and Blair Cadden, “Witness” is based on more than 90 interviews conducted by members of Arlekin’s resident company or drawn from the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. So “Witness” fits into the broad category of documentary theater.

But structurally “Witness” bears little resemblance to the bare-bones production values found in such verbatim pieces as “The Laramie Project.” Golyak brings his abundant visual imagination to bear on the story of the St. Louis, the implications of that story, and what it might feel like to be yanked out of time and become part of that story.

With its blend of live performance, film, audio, and green-screen technology, “Witness” unfolds in a liminal space that is part history, part nightmare, part hallucination, part “Twilight Zone.” Golyak likes to take audiences into meta territory, and he’s got a gift for generating an ominous mood in a way that knocks you off-balance but seldom feels gratuitous. However aimless a scene might appear at first, however banal or obvious a piece of dialogue might seem, Golyak’s larger goals eventually come into view.

The play is divided into three acts that are wholly different in style. In the first, a cigar-chomping Emcee (Gene Ravvin) presides over a bleak talent show aboard the St. Louis, whose participants recount and enact their experiences with discrimination, aggression, and the horrors of the 1938 Nazi pogroms against Germany’s Jewish population known as Kristallnacht, or The Night of Broken Glass. “My childhood was suddenly brought to an end,” a woman says, recalling how Nazis destroyed her toys, toppled her family’s piano, and hacked their furniture to pieces.

In the second act, the screen goes dark and “Witness” switches to audio-only. We listen as individual passengers learn whether they will be accepted as refugees under a strict numerical quota or will be sent back to a grim fate in Europe. We hear expressions of sympathy (“Let us Americans not send them back to that slaughterhouse,” a young girl says) and anti-immigrant sentiment (a Cuban newscaster warns of “the immediate displacement of our workers”).

In the play’s third act, an increasingly panicky Ravvin finds himself trapped on the St. Louis, unable to disembark as he wanders up and down the ship’s hallways. The doors of passenger cabins open to reveal images and conversations that evoke the Jewish experience of discrimination and persecution.

Meanwhile, seated at a small table in the hallway, Rachel, a rabbi (Anne Gottlieb), Leah (Lauren Elias), and Joseph (Nathan Malin) engage in an impassioned conversation about the forms antisemitism takes today, including in Boston. That’s a conversation to which “Witness” itself makes a valuable contribution.

## **WITNESS**

Presented by Arlekin Players Theatre’s (zero-G) Virtual Theater Lab. Conceived and directed by Igor Golyak. Script by Nana Grinstein. Additional scripting by Blair Cadden and Golyak. Produced by Sara Stackhouse. Tickets \$25 at [zerogravity.art](http://zerogravity.art) or 617-942-0022. Hosted on [zerogravity.art](http://zerogravity.art) through Jan. 23.