



PHOTO POSTCARD OF THE *MS ST. LOUIS*

# WITNESS

ARLEKIN PLAYERS THEATRE | ZERO GRAVITY (ZERO-G)  
A VIRTUAL INTERACTIVE PLAY

## EDUCATIONAL GUIDE

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# THE PLAY OVERVIEW

WITNESS is a three act play that weaves together real stories with modern technology to create a dramatic documentary. The play is inspired by the stories of Jewish immigrants from the MS St. Louis ship (1939) and stories of immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The play is focused on the experience of Jewish immigration and the timeless questions of “Where do I belong?” “Who will accept me?” And “Where will I fit in?” as they manifest in contemporary settings.

Act 1 presents a talent show on the deck of the MS St. Louis ship during the ship’s 1943 journey from Hamburg to Havana, Cuba. Onboard the ship are over 900 Jewish people.

Act 2 is an audio only re-creation of the ship’s immigrants’ experience in Havana, Cuba.

Act 3 is a timeless experience of Jews crowded together on the MS St Louis ship. During this act the play focuses the audience on the questions of Jewish belonging and antisemitism in contemporary time.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE PLAY

### QUESTIONS FOR ACT 1

- WHICH PERFORMANCE DID YOU LIKE THE MOST DURING THE TALENT SHOW? WHY?
- IN THE END OF THE ACT, THE PLAY PRESENTS THE IDEA THAT ALL JEWS, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE ARE IMMIGRANTS. WHERE HAVE YOU HEARD THIS STORY BEFORE AND WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT IT?

### QUESTIONS FOR ACT 2

- DESCRIBE YOUR REACTION TO THE AUDIO ONLY PERFORMANCE. WHAT QUESTIONS DO YOU HAVE FOR THE IMMIGRANTS STUCK ON THE SHIP?

### QUESTIONS FOR ACT 3

- WHAT ARE THE APPROACHES FOR ADDRESSING THE CONTEMPORARY ANTI-SEMITISM YOU FIND IN ACT 3?
- HOW DOES ISRAEL RELATE TO THE CONVERSATION ABOUT THE ANTI-SEMITISM IN ACT 3 ?

## WHO'S WHO IN WITNESS: MEET THE CHARACTERS



GROUP PHOTO OF PASSENGERS ON BOARD THE MS ST. LOUIS

### NOTE:

All of the characters in WITNESS are based on real people. Some are passengers of the MS St. Louis, who we learned through researching the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Others we met through the 90+ interviews conducted by the Arlekin Players acting company.

All of the words these characters say are their own, taken from interviews or from historical documents like journals and letters. Some characters, like those you will meet in Act 3 of our play, are composite characters, created by combining the words and ideas of multiple real-life people we interviewed. Their names are fictional, but their words were all actually spoken by our interviewees.

The one exception is the character of the Emcee, who is a fictional creation. However, even though he was created by our playwright to serve as the “host” for the talent show in Act 1, many of the ideas, thoughts, and questions he expresses were also inspired by our interviewees and members of our own company.

## ACT 1 - THE TALENT SHOW

LIESL JOSEPH | PASSENGER ON THE ST.  
LOUIS | AGE 10



Liesl was born in 1928 in Rheydt, Rhineland, Germany. She emigrated on board the MS St. Louis with her parents after their home was destroyed during Kristallnacht. Her father, Josef Joseph, became the head of the ship's Passenger Committee, helping work with Captain Schroeder and the JDC to find a place for the passengers when they were denied entry into Cuba. Liesl and her parents disembarked in Great Britain, then moved to New York on September 10, 1940.

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GISELA KLEPL | PASSENGER ON THE ST.  
LOUIS | AGE 16



Gisela was born in 1923 in Berlin, Germany. During Kristallnacht, her father was deported to Poland. She emigrated on board the St. Louis with her mother and sister; her father was unable to leave Poland in time to join them. Gisela disembarked in Belgium and went to Great Britain on June 20, 1939. Her father was killed in the Holocaust.

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FRITZ BUFF | PASSENGER ON THE ST.  
LOUIS | AGE 17



Fritz Buff was born in 1921 in Krumbach in Bavaria, Germany. He traveled alone on the MS St. Louis and kept a detailed journal of his experiences on board. He disembarked in Belgium, where he stayed for a while with other young passengers from the ship. He eventually immigrated to New York in 1940.

FIRA K. | IMMIGRANT FROM THE FORMER  
USSR | AGE 37



IMAGE OF ACTRESS JULIA SHIKH PLAYING  
FIRA K.

Fira immigrated from Leningrad, USSR, to Boston, Massachusetts in 1988. She came as a very young child with her family. In the play, she describes her uncle's realization that he could no longer live under the oppressive rules of the USSR, which prompted his decision to emigrate. She now works as a life coach.

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MARIK L. | IMMIGRANT FROM THE  
FORMER USSR | AGE 60



IMAGE OF ACTOR MISHA TYUTYUNIK  
PLAYING MARIK L.

Marik (also known as Mark) immigrated from Lithuania to Israel in 1990. In the play, he tells a story of encountering antisemitism as a young boy. Today, he works as a photographer.

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ANNA F. | IMMIGRANT FROM THE  
FORMER USSR | AGE 48



IMAGE OF ACTRESS ANNA F. PLAYING  
HERSELF

Anna emigrated from St. Petersburg, Russia as a teenager in 1991. She and her family moved to Tel Aviv, Israel. Later, they moved to Boston, Massachusetts where Anna now works as an Alexander Technique teacher. In Act 1, Anna tells the story of an encounter with an antisemitic classmate. She also appears in Act 3, where she describes her experience of living in Israel.

OLGA A. | IMMIGRANT FROM THE  
FORMER USSR



IMAGE OF ACTRESS OLGA A. PLAYING  
HERSELF

Olga emigrated from St. Petersburg, Russia to Boston, Massachusetts in 1993. Today, she works as a Software Developer. In the play, she tells the story of an encounter with an antisemitic classmate as a young girl.

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VIKA K. | IMMIGRANT FROM THE  
FORMER USSR | AGE 56



IMAGE OF ACTRESS VIKA K. PLAYING  
HERSELF

Vika emigrated from Ivov, Ukraine to Boston Massachusetts in 1990. Today, she works as a director of finance. In Act 1, Vika tells a story about confronting an antisemite as a young woman. She also appears in Act 3, where she recounts the story of her wedding day.

## ACT 2 - THE AUDIO EXPERIENCE

In the audio-only second act of WITNESS, many voices can be heard as they re-create the experience of the passengers trapped on the MS St. Louis in the Cuban harbor, awaiting news of their fate: Would they have to return to Germany? Would they be accepted into the United States? Would some other country admit them?

The text you hear includes quotations from:

- **Passengers** of the MS St. Louis (from journals, letters, and telegrams)
- **Gustav Schroeder**, Captain of the MS St. Louis
- **Alfred Jaretski** of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)
- Cuban news reports on the St. Louis incident
- Letters and telegrams written to President and Mrs. Roosevelt by concerned American citizens

...and many others

## ACT 3 - JEWISH EXPERIENCE, HERE, NOW, UNCHANGING...

### The Emcee | Russian-American Jewish Actor | 40s

### QUOTES FROM THE PLAY:

The Emcee is a Jewish actor who immigrated to the United States from Russia. He had expected that America would be a place he and his family could be safe from antisemitism. Throughout the play, he encounters three American Jews whose stories make him realize that may not be the case, after all.

*"I belong here, do you hear me? I belong here. I don't belong here on this ship, but I belong in America. Do you understand? I belong in America."*

*"I came to this country, I came to America, because I thought you guys had it figured out! I really did. We came to this country, we were going to assimilate, and my children, and my children's children—They were supposed to be fine. They were supposed to be fine."*

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### Leah | American Jewish Stage Manager | 30s

### QUOTES FROM THE PLAY:

Leah is an American Jew who works as a stage manager in the Boston theater community. She is a Zionist, but fears that openly expressing these beliefs would jeopardize her career.

*"You're not wrong, because I don't trust my own country. I don't trust America to protect us... And you know what? Fine. F\*\*\* you, I have dual loyalty. And I would really love to not. I would give anything... to not feel like I have to vote in this country to protect the interests of a completely separate country. Because that sucks."*

*"You know, there are social justice warriors nowadays, and whatever their cause du jour is, save the whales, or stop the pipeline, or hug a tree, I don't know. And most of them are very good causes, don't get me wrong. But the thing is, it will never be cool to stand up against antisemitism. It just feels like standing up for Jews and standing against antisemitism is never going to be the cool thing to do."*

Joseph | American Jewish Actor | 20s

QUOTES FROM THE PLAY:

Joseph is an American Jew who works as an actor in the Boston theater community. Although his political opinions differ from Leah's, he has had many similar experiences of antisemitism.

*"Yeah. In the cafeteria in high school, kids who I would spend a lot of time with—my friends, really—they would bully me a lot about it. And I think the worst it ever got was they would dangle money in front of my face, and I'm pretty sure one time we were talking about chemistry class or something, and one of them asked me what the boiling point of a Jew is."*

*"No, and we did not leave on our own accord. We were conquered multiple times by oppressors, right? ... It's like I was saying this to someone recently, I was like: Why do you think the Jews ended up in Eastern Europe and Russia and Poland and Lithuania and Germany and Needham, and Cuba? And other parts of South America. It wasn't because we threw a dart at the wall, like you said. It was because people kept trying to kick us out, either trying to annihilate us or like inquisition, you know, turn Catholic or leave."*

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Rachel | American Rabbi | 50s

QUOTES FROM THE PLAY:

Rachel is a progressive American Rabbi. Throughout the play, she shares her own experiences with antisemitism as well as her hopes for how it might be possible to combat that hatred with love and unity.

*"You know, what I think would protect us more than machine guns? It would be to stand with our Christian brothers and sisters. And so I just wish, after there was an incident at a mosque, that there was a coming together—I do wish this. That there was a coming-together of Jews, and Christians, and Muslims, and they would stand and circle a mosque while people were in prayer. And it's essentially saying, You gotta get through all of us. We don't stand with you. We do stand with these people. And I think when the minorities in this country can say, 'Your lot is my lot,' then we will be more protected."*

## ACT 3 - ENSEMBLE

Many other characters appear in Act 3, including...

**A young German girl** who is a passenger of the MS St. Louis. She mistakes the Emcee for the Captain of the ship and asks repeatedly, “Where are you taking us?”

**A wedding party** made up of Russian Jewish immigrants. **The Bride** describes all the unfamiliar religious traditions she participated in during the ceremony.

**A family** experiencing a bomb siren in Israel.

**Fira**, now standing in line at US Customs.

**Anna**, who describes experiences from her time in Israel.

**A young Israeli soldier**, who explains the significance of the Yom HaShoah siren.

### LINKS TO ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [“THE VOYAGE OF THE ST. LOUIS” – US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM ENCYCLOPEDIA](#)
- [ST. LOUIS PASSENGER LIST – US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM](#)
- [“ANTISEMITISM TODAY” \(FILM\) – US HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM](#)