"The Twenty-Seventh Man" premieres at The Old Globe

BY PAT LAUNER
H e first heard the story when he was 19. It lodged into his head and his heart, and it wouldn’t let go. Acclaimed novelist/short story writer Nathan Englander couldn’t believe that no one had publicized this hair-raising tale.

The event, sometimes referred to as “The Night of the Murdered Poets,” occurred in 1952. It was a literary tragedy that seemed to have faded into history. Stalin rounded up all the last great Yiddish writers, 26 in total, and executed them all on the same night.

As a fifth-generation American (he calls his family “Mayflower Jews”), Englander, 44, grew up in an Orthodox community in West Hempstead, Long Island, attending a yeshiva where he was steeped in the rhythms and cadences of Yiddish (even if he didn’t truly speak the language. As he humorously puts it, “I know the same three curses and four foods everyone else knows.”)

Yet, he reports, one of his professors at the University of Iowa told Englander that he was “writing all of my sentences in transliterated Yiddish. My mom’s from Boston and my dad’s from Brooklyn, but I hear everything in a Yiddish rhythm.”

So when he learned that grisly bit of history, it gnawed at his very core.

“It’s a story I’ve been writing my whole life,” says the affable and garrulous Englander, from his home in Brooklyn.

When he spent his junior year in Jerusalem, one of his teachers was married to a Russia expert, and that’s how he learned about these Yiddish writers who were being obliterated, putting an end to a Yiddish literary and artistic culture unequaled in the world.

“It was crazy,” Englander says. “Russia was the first country to recognize the state of Israel. But someone as evil as Stalin shouldn’t win in the long run, shouldn’t succeed in erasing these people. Someone needed to give them a story.”

As he says in his short story, “The Twenty-Seventh Man” (published in 1999 in his internationally best-selling first collection, “For the Relief of Unbearable Urges”), “the greatest stories of their lives were taken from them.”

“I thought a real writer should write their story,” Englander continues. “I waited for years. I did research everywhere I could, looking for something. But there was nothing. Finally, I wrote a draft, and ten years later, I found transcripts of a book from Yale about the incident.”

In Englander’s fable-like version (now a 90-minute stage play, to be performed at The Old Globe, 2/14-3/15), three acclaimed writers, trapped in an airless, windowless cell, stand in for the 26. The 27th is a fictional creation, Pinchas, an unknown, unpublished writer (“a Zelig among immortals,” theater critic Mel Gussow called him), the only one who writes a story during the incarceration; in the face of death, he finally finds an audience.

Fictionalizing the facts – and finding support

Englander made up the names and the characters of the writers.

“They were my younger self’s ideas of iconic forms of writers. Like the Four Sons at the Seder. They’re complete amalgamations.

“It was exciting to embody these Yiddishists, to see them live again, these writers Stalin wanted to forget. I feel touched and inspired by them.”

He wasn’t the only one who was inspired by the stories. Since his first collection was published, Englander has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, the PEN/Malamud Award and the Bard Fiction Prize. His second collection, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank,” won the 2012 Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. The New Yorker named Englander one of “20 Writers for the 21 Century.”

There were more personal advocates, too, what Englander calls “the three life-changing people in my life.”

Deborah Brody, a children’s book editor, and the mother of his closest friend in New York, was curious to read something Englander had written. He chose “The Twenty-Seventh Man.”

“She read the story and said, ‘There’s a story buried in here and a writer somewhere in you.’”

Englander reports. “Out of the goodness of her heart, she worked with me for months. She forced me to go to grad school, taught me what it was to re-write – and to find the story in the story. Five years later, it was published.”

Englander’s second advocate was the late writer/producer/director Nora Ephron. After reading his story, she knew it would make an excellent stage play. Englander was thrilled by the idea, but wanted to finish his novel first (“The Ministry of Special Cases,” published in 2007). Once he was ready, Ephron effectively became his mentor. For two years, they developed the drama together.

His third champion was Barry Edelstein. When Ephron brought the play to New York’s prestigious Public Theatre (she was on the board), it was put in Edelstein’s hands.

Edelstein, then director of the Shakespeare Initiative at The Public, is now the artistic director at The Old Globe. “All I was doing was Shakespeare. I always wanted to try something else,” he says.

Edelstein and Englander spent two years developing the piece. “We drafted it endlessly,” recalls Edelstein. “One of the great sadnesses, though, is that Nora died only a few months before the play premiered.”

“It was such a glorious time,” says Englander of the development process. “Barry was so dedicated to this project. He just has this menschlichkeit (humanity). The main thing I loved was working with other people, on a team project. As a novelist, I’m always by myself, with the blinds drawn, no phone or wi-fi. In bringing my stories to life, I do everything, including build the costumes and the set. It was exciting to have different minds working on the project.

“Here’s how I describe my transition to theater,” Englander says, sarcastically. “I thought, ‘It’s too easy to survive on literary fiction. What could be even harder, even worse, where you even earn less? Ah, theater!’”

The Old Globe production of “The Twenty-Seventh Man,” its West coast premiere, is the play’s second production, staged in the Sheryl and Harvey White Theatre, an arena stage.

A Prison Cell in the round

“Of course you can’t have four walls on a stage,” Englander acknowledges. “On a traditional stage, you can have three walls. I loved the New York set, but I also love the idea of this new challenge, in the round. I’m almost giddy to see what they come up with. A lot of the same design team will be in San Diego.”

For Edelstein, this will be “a completely different production, completely re-thought. The cell in New York only had a low ceiling and a back wall. There was a feeling of claustrophobia, the sense of the Sword of Damocles looming. In the round, it will feel more intimate. And there’s a different bunch of crazy Jews playing the roles.”

“But of course, the story itself is heavy and sad. The emotion in the rehearsal room: the waiting,
They’re so wild and funny and warm-hearted. “Yiddish is, of course, very important to the story,” Edelstein continues. “One of my great regrets is that I don’t speak Yiddish. How supple and nuanced it is! One of the great literary languages on earth. It has tremendous depth and wit and invention. The soul of European Jewry that’s very close to extinction. These Soviet writers were creating the greatest Yiddish writing. This miraculous language was essentially wiped out.

“For a while in the Soviet Union, Yiddish flourished, in schools, newspapers, theaters and literary journals. Then Stalin got the idea that Yiddish writers could help in the fight against the Nazis, and he sent them all over the world. They raised a ton of money for the Red Army. Stalin later used that to accuse them of being Western spies. It was complete insanity. In 1948, he started rounding them up.”

The writers were murdered by firing squad at Lubyanka prison in Moscow, adjacent to KGB headquarters. For decades, according to Edelstein, Jews in the West wanted to mourn them as martyrs. But during the Cold War, they knew they’d be branded as Communists.

“In Nathan’s version,” Edelstein explains, “these writers died knowing that Stalin was a fraud and Communism a failure. But in fact, some went to their deaths as loyalists, true believers. Historians are still in dispute over this.

“There has been virtually no mention of these writers. There’s a documentary about them, including interviews with their children. There’s a tiny little plaque in Jerusalem. The information didn’t get out until the Iron Curtain came down in the 1990s.”

Englander actually wrote his story before the information was even released.

“He began imagining who they were,” Edelstein says. “The great thing about writers is, sometimes what they imagine is remarkably close to the truth. Some of the things he has them say in the story, they actually said. It’s amazing. That’s the reason he’s one of the great American fiction writers.

“And he’s such fun to be with, such a hilariously, kibbityz guy. This experience is so great for me, since I spend most of my time with a great writer who’s dead. It sure is nice to be with one who isn’t.”

The New York-to-San Diego express

When “The Twenty-Seventh Man” premiered at The Public in 2012, Time Out listed it as one of the Ten Best Plays of the Year.

Christopher Isherwood of the New York Times thought it “captures the clammy sense of entrapment that finds the men slowly pecking away at each other’s foibles to pass the long hours.”

The three older writers are of varied levels of renown. The booze-soaked Bretsky taunts the loyalist Korinsky, who insists that his lifelong support of the Soviet regime will ensure his release. The most revered of the three is the oldest, Zunser, played by veteran actor (and octogenarian) Hal Linden, a Tony and Emmy Award-winning stage and screen star most fondly remembered for his long TV stint as “Barney Miller.”

Though music was his first love (he was a singer and Big Band clarinetist), Linden has been in “ten thousand plays,” as he humorously recalls it. His favorite part of the process is rehearsals.

“That’s where the actor is most creative,” he says. “I’m very excited about this play and what we’ll discover in working on it,” he says from his second home in the Palm Springs area (he primarily resides in L.A.), a few weeks before rehearsals began at the Globe.

“There are so many questions raised in the script. To me, this man, Zunser, has already decided he’s dead. He stopped writing after the war, in 1946. Now it’s 1952. He hasn’t been seen or heard from. He’s resigned to his death, but he can face that with humor.”

Having grown up in the Bronx, Linden knows “some Yiddish.” But he hadn’t known anything about this story.

“I think we’ll wrestle some guts with this play. It will really be a voyage of discovery for me.”

The voyage, the process, is what intrigues the playwright, too.

“I love to learn,” says Englander, who describes himself as “basically a deeply religious person trying to be an atheist.”

His first taste of theater has given Englander the bite of the drama bug. He’s now working with Lincoln Centre Theatre on adapting his story, “What We Talk about When We Talk about Anne Frank” and, he confesses, “I’m secretly fiddling with an original play.”

Now all three of these creative artists are gearing up for “The Twenty-Seventh Man” at the Globe.

“I think it’s a major play,” says Edelstein, “with important ideas about art and storytelling.” ☬

“The Twenty-Seventh Man” runs Feb. 14-March 15, in the Sheryl and Harvey White Theatre of The Old Globe. Tickets (starting at $29) are available at 619-234-5623; theoldglobe.org.

Barry Edelstein in Conversation with Nathan Englander, sponsored by the Judaic Studies Program of UCSD and Congregation Beth El, will take place on Wednesday, Feb. 18 at 6 p.m. on the Old Globe stage.

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