

In 'Bubby's Kitchen' with Shira Ginsburg

By Jeff
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Shira Ginsburg in 'Bubby's Kitchen.' Photo courtesy of the artist.

Shira Ginsburg is an ordained Cantor who just celebrated her 10th anniversary of service at East End Temple in Manhattan. A graduate of Syracuse University's Drama and Musical Theatre program, Shira spent a number of years in New York working as a professional actress, singer, and songwriter before being invested as Cantor from Hebrew Union College. Shira has performed on stages in Israel, England and all over the United States, and has been thrilled to most recently bring her show *Bubby's Kitchen* to communities across the nation.

Despite the demands on her time as she prepares the show for a run in New York City, she talked with NYTheatreGuide.com about the production and her family, which is the core of the show.

NYTG: When did you decide to turn your grandmother's story into a performance piece? Did anything special happen that got you to put pen to paper, or was this an idea that just happened?

SG: I initially wrote *Bubby's Kitchen* in partial fulfillment of my Masters thesis and ordination for Cantorial School at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion. My grandparent's stories of survival have been perpetually churning inside of me as far back as I can remember, but only when challenged with this thesis did I finally find the courage of voice to take ownership of their legacy in this way. Once I started writing it, the stories came pouring out of me, and the script basically wrote itself.

NYTG: In the opening number, there is a terrifying line "hide and seek was never just a game," but you also sing of

words unspoken. At what point in your life did you learn, for want of a better term, "the whole story?" How did it affect you?

SG: Stories were always told in fragmented ways in my grandparent's home, and because the stories were often so painful for my Bubby and Zayde to tell, when they spoke, we just listened and didn't ask very many questions if any at all. We never wanted to cause them pain by bringing the subject up, so we would wait for them to initiate. Just as in any conversation, there are stops and starts, interruptions and tangents. Once you had heard a particular story told a dozen or more times in its various iterations, you could piece together the whole story like a puzzle. I had a very good grasp of the whole picture by high school, and in college, I began to really question what this legacy meant for me. Life as a child or grandchild of Holocaust survivors is ultimately a tremendous balance between obligation and desire; a constant checking of one's personal wants against the needs and expectations of the family. To be honest, I am still learning stories and at 91, my Bubby is still revealing details and incredible stories to us that we've never heard before.

NYTG: How supportive was your grandmother in your pursuit of a BFA? The rest of the family? I ask because that generation had, by necessity, a pragmatic streak and the arts were often considered frivolous.

SG: My grandparents have always been incredibly supportive of me at every phase of my life and career path. My Bubby especially is a very liberal thinker, a woman always ahead of her time. She has guided me since I can remember to choose what I love, but to choose that love wisely. She instinctively understands the need to nurture one's passions, and always encouraged me to go out in the world and try things, which never by the way, obviated her from worrying about me. She was proud of me when I was an actress, a waitress, a knife saleswoman, and now as a Cantor. As long as I work hard, work honestly, and work morally, she is always proud.

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NYTG: Where did you train to become cantor? What did the family think of that?

SG: I studied and trained at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, the Reform movement's seminary for Rabbis and Cantors. The day I was accepted into Cantorial school was the third proudest my family has ever been of me, topped only by the day I was ordained Cantor, and the first time I performed *Bubby's Kitchen*.

NYTG: To survive as partisans, your grandparents had to have a very tough aspect to their characters. How much of that did you see?

SG: My Bubby and Zayde are my heroes and always have been. Neither of them ever feared anything, which as a child always made me feel incredibly safe and well taken care of. From the youngest age, I can remember knowing that there was nothing they couldn't handle or take care of, and there was no problem too big for them to be able to fix, solve or help me with. Their strength and resilience was a constant in my life. It is important to tell you that as heroic and brave as they were, they never ever boasted of their accomplishments, never saw themselves as heroes, and certainly never viewed themselves as better than anyone in any way.

NYTG: Was there a reason they settled in America instead of Israel?

SG: They had family that sponsored them here in America, and after four years in Ferensvald, a displaced persons camp in Germany, their papers finally came through and they were able to come here.

NYTG: How much has the show evolved since you first performed it?

SG: The show has evolved in so many ways since the first performance seven years ago. It now features all original music composed primarily by Jonathan Comisar with whom I co-wrote the lyrics. More and more stories have been added over the years grounding the show in a profoundly new way, and, I have been blessed to put together and work with one of the most wonderful Artistic teams I could ever dream of.

NYTG: What sorts of stories did you leave out of the show?

SG: Ha – You'll have to see the sequel . . . *Bubby's Living Room*.

NYTG: Has Bubby seen the show? What did she think of it?

SG: Thankfully, Bubby is very much still with us, but Zayde passed away 11 years ago, I miss him every day. But Bubby is always busy dancing at simchas, making vegetable soup special just for me, and of course, doling out expert advice over rugalach and tea at her kitchen table. She has seen the show many times and is incredibly proud not only of the work that I have done both artistically and on the production end, but also that I have chosen to take on our family legacy, and her story in particular in this way. It is always very emotional for her when she watches the show, especially the scenes in which I become her on stage in the most devastating and difficult moments of her life. She relishes in the love that pours out towards her from so many people, and kvells in disbelief when I tell her that she is now an inspiration to so many people whom she has never met her.

NYTG: Have you any other stage projects in the works?

SG: I am currently working on a screenplay adaptation of *Bubby's Kitchen* and also have one other project in the works.

NYTG: Cantor Ginburg, this has been a genuine pleasure. You've been more than generous with your time and insights, and the readers of New York Theatre Guide thank you.

You can see Shira Ginsburg perform *Bubby's Kitchen*, April 28-30, 2016, at Jewish Community Center, 334 Amsterdam Ave, New York, NY 10023. For more information and tickets, click [here](#).

