



LETTERS TO SALA

BY ARLENE HUTTON



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LETTERS TO SALA
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LETTERS TO SALA
by Arlene Hutton
originally conceived by Lawrence Sacharow
based on the book *Sala's Gift* by Ann Kirschner

In addition, the following acknowledgment must appear on the title page in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play:

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SPECIAL NOTE ON IMAGES

A CD containing images for projection for this Play is required for production. The cost is \$35.00, plus shipping and handling.

*For Lawrence Sacharow,
for Ann and her daughters
and, especially, for Sala.*

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A NOTE FROM SALA'S DAUGHTER

Hundreds of labor camps were created in the early years of the war, usually attached to construction projects or factories that belonged to German businesses. Conditions varied, but in Sala's camps, the Jews wore whatever clothes they had brought from home, and numbers were not tattooed on their arms. They were meant to survive, at least to finish the day's work.

They had been torn from their loved ones, they were hungry, they worked impossible hours under unimaginable conditions, they slept in overcrowded wooden barracks without heat or ventilation, and they lived in constant terror — but the Nazis delivered their mail. Letters and packages were allowed, even encouraged, as if they were first-time campers away from home and the Nazis were eager to reassure anxious parents that all was well.

Sala was one of about 50,000 slaves, young and healthy Jewish men and women from western Poland. They were the valuable property of Organization Schmelt, an SS division that was set up soon after the Nazi invasion of Poland. Relatively little has been written about the partnership between Nazi leaders, German businessmen, and Jewish politicians that spirited away tens of thousands of people from the Upper Silesian region of Poland. The very existence of labor camps where Jews received mail is hardly known, and their names are all but forgotten — except by those who were imprisoned there. This is not surprising: to write about these places, which were constructed on the outer circles of hell, not its very core, might have appeared to compromise the agonizing reality of Auschwitz.

Because the conditions in the death camps were so much worse, a certain competitiveness sometimes creeps in, even with survivors. “Oh, your mother was in the labor camps,” one survivor told me, waving her arms for emphasis. I had been showing her some of the letters. “I was in Auschwitz,” she declared. “We could never have had such letters in Auschwitz.” She had remained at home in Hungary until late in 1944. How long had she been in Auschwitz, I asked? “Four days,” she said, her tone flat.

Four days in Auschwitz ... five years in seven different labor camps.
She and my mother had lost their parents, sisters and brothers,
their place in the world. I do not want to compare.

Some threshold of suffering defies measurement.

—Ann Kirschner
Sala's Gift

LETTERS TO SALA was presented at the Emmett Robinson Theatre at the College of Charleston in South Carolina on April 14, 2012. It was directed by Eric Nightengale; the set design was by Charlie Calvert; the costume design was by Janine Marie McCabe; the lighting design was by Paul Collins; the sound design was by Eric Nightengale; the choreography was by Gretchen McLaine; the assistant director was Jess Dick; the dramaturg was Cara Beth Heath; and the stage manager was Corinne Williams. The cast was as follows:

SALA	.....Haley Barfield
ANN	.....Ryan Gunning
CAROLINE	.....Allison Wilde
ELISABETH	.....Allie Burrier
YOUNG SALA	.....Kaitlin Lieck
CHANA	.....Jordana McMahan
RAIZEL	.....Celeste Riddle
BLIMA	.....Lauren Lonergan
LAYA DINA	.....Ashley Gennarelli
ROZIA	.....Kacie Friedman
BELA	.....Ruchi Mistry
FRYMKA	.....Rachel Epting
SARA	.....Diana Biffi
REGINA	.....Keanu Thompson
ALA GERTNER	.....Charnel Kennedy
CHAIM KAUFMAN	.....Anthony Massarotto
HARRY HAUBENSTOCK	.....Young Stowe
ELFRIEDE PACHE	.....Sarah-Kate Calcutt
HERBERT PACHE	.....Christian Persico
LUCIA	.....Lucy McNerney
GUZIA	.....Jesslyn Rollins
ZUSI	.....Marguerite Conroy
RACHEL	.....Hannah Strickland
GLIKA	.....Anna Stephenson
NAZI OFFICER	.....Edward Precht
YOUNG NAZI SOLDIER	.....Brennen Reeves
NAZI GUARDS	.....Dave Beckett, Steven Moskos, Alex Sauer
EMMA MACH	.....Brenna McNamara
SIDNEY KIRSCHNER	.....Benjamin Fetterolf

An earlier version of LETTERS TO SALA was produced at the Annie Russell Theatre at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, opening on February 11, 2011. It was directed by Eric Nightengale; the set design was by Nicole Bianco; the costume design was by Emily Smith; the lighting design was by Kevin Griffin; the sound design was by Eric Nightengale; and the stage manager was Lyndsey Goode. The cast was as follows:

SALA	Shannon Singley
ANN	Shayla Alamino
CAROLINE	Isabella Miyares
ELISABETH	Brittany Rubino
YOUNG SALA	Alexa Gordon
CHANA, ELFRIEDE	Jennifer Stull
RAIZEL	Kaitlin Baxter
BLIMA, ROZIA	Michelle Rogers
LAYA DINA, RACHEL, SARA	Katy Polimeno
BELA, ZUSI	Samantha Jackson
GUZIA, FRYMKA	Melissa Cooper
ALA GERTNER	Kaitlyn Schinard
CHAIM KAUFMAN	Kevin Scarlet
HARRY HAUBENSTOCK	Brian Hatch
HERBERT PACHE	Travis Ray
NAZI GUARDS	Ryan Bathurst, Jonathan Perry, Chris Sutter
SIDNEY KIRSCHNER	Colby Loetz

LETTERS TO SALA also received development at The Invisible Theatre of Tucson (directed by Susan Claassen); Orlando Playfest (WPI producer, directed by Laura Lippman); The Barrow Group (directed by Lee Brock); StageDoor Manor (directed by Eric Nightengale); James Madison University (directed by Roger Hall); and Sewanee: The University of the South (directed by Beth Lincks).

CHARACTERS

In New York City:

SALA GARNCARZ, an older woman who survived the
Holocaust

ANN, her daughter

CAROLINE and ELISABETH, her granddaughters

In Sosnowiec, in the camps, after the liberation:

YOUNG SALA, 16 years old at the beginning of the play

In Sosnowiec:

CHANA, her mother

RAIZEL, her sister

BLIMA, LAYA DINA, her other sisters

ROZIA, her cousin

BELA, FRYMKA, SARA, REGINA, friends from home

In the camps:

ALA GERTNER

CHAIM KAUFMAN

HARRY HAUBENSTOCK

ELFRIEDE PACHE

HERBERT PACHE

LUCIA, GUCIA, ZUSI, RACHEL, GLIKA

NAZI OFFICER, YOUNG NAZI SOLDIER, NAZI GUARDS

After the liberation:

SIDNEY KIRSCHNER, an American soldier

SETTING

New York City, 2005.
Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, 1940s.

SET AND VISUAL ELEMENTS

A mostly bare stage. Or lots of wood. Benches. To one side downstage is a table and chairs, representing the Garncarz home in Sosnowiec. Letters from home are read from this playing area. On the other side downstage is another table with chairs, representing New York City in 2005. All the scenes with Ann and Caroline and the older Sala use this playing area. The rest of the action — the train station, the camps, etc. — takes place center stage.

Perhaps there is lots of clothing. Maybe the actors change costumes. Maybe they don't. It is possible that there is a growing pile of clothing, hundreds of coats and jackets, that becomes a mountain by the end of the play.

The physical letters themselves are an integral part of the play and should be shown whenever possible. Images of the actual letters and cards may be projected on a screen or wall, as well as places and dates. Actors reading the letters may hand them to Sala. She might bury them under the mound of clothing or in hiding places on the set, pass them off to her friends or even make members of the audience co-conspirators in her need to hide and keep her mail. Young Sala can see the writers when they are reading, but her eyes follow the letters as they are “mailed,” i.e., as the actors hold them out for her to grab or drop them on the floor for her to find.

It is essential that historic photos of the letters and Sala's friends and family be shown to the audience, as projections or in the program or as a lobby display. Sala risked her life to keep these and it is important they be seen. The images may be obtained from Dramatists Play Service.

NOTES

There are no blackouts between scenes. The changes are fluid, with the scenes overlapping and interrupting each other when possible, as the actors switch from the past to the present. We may not even know sometimes if it is then or now, if the story is being acted out or if a memory is being told. The actors in one scene should never freeze while a scene is occurring on another part of the stage, but, in the shadows, go about their business.

The play could be performed by as few as five women and one man, but the preferred casting would be at least six to ten women and two or more men. A school production could be done with a much larger cast, twelve to eighteen or even up to thirty or more. In a small cast version, the actresses playing Sala, Ann, Elisabeth and Caroline would double as Chana, Raizel, Blima and Young Sala, but preferably the actress playing Young Sala does not double. One actor can play all the named male characters, since they never appear onstage together, but the addition of a second actor gives the opportunity for more soldiers. The Nazi dialogue in German can be trimmed or eliminated to accommodate the needs of the production. Running time is about ninety-five minutes.

The playwright encourages the use of nontraditional casting. There were some 60,000 Africans living in Germany at the time of the Holocaust, in addition to Roma and other ethnic groups; many of them ended up in the camps.

LETTERS TO SALA

ACT ONE

The play begins like a movie. Music plays. On a projection screen we see the words “Letters to Sala.” Credits and the cast list appear: “by Arlene Hutton”; “directed by,” etc. Perhaps some of the photos that appear later flash on the screen, in between the credits.

Then the projection screen reads: “New York City, 2005, and Sosnowiec, Poland, 1941.”

The past and near present scenes happen simultaneously and overlap. Note: If the roles are double-cast, the simultaneous historical and contemporary scenes can be split into separate scenes at the director’s discretion.

Lights up on Ann’s modern-day New York City apartment, represented by a table and three chairs. Sala enters with a Spill and Spell children’s game box circa 1966. She stares at the scene on the other side of the stage, remembering her past as Ann, Caroline, and Elisabeth enter with a small suitcase and some items of clothing.

On the other side of the stage, representing the Garncarz home, a tenement in 1940s Poland, is a table and a few chairs. Lights up on Chana, an older Jewish woman, and her daughters Raizel, a frail-looking young woman with glasses, and Blima, also frail. Chana holds an official-looking letter in her hand. There is a sense of urgency as the family packs clothing for Raizel’s journey; the lines often overlap. The older Sala watches from the New York City side of the stage

as Young Sala enters the Poland scene with a small wrapped package of bread.

ANN. (*As she enters.*) Mother! Mother, it's time to go.

YOUNG SALA. (*Running in with a small package.*) Mother! Mother! I found some bread.

RAIZEL. (*To Blima.*) I'll write you every day.

YOUNG SALA. Mother!

BLIMA. (*To Young Sala.*) Sala, Hush.

CAROLINE. Bubby! I wrote you a letter to read at the hospital.

ANN. I've got all your paperwork.

YOUNG SALA. Mother!

RAIZEL. Sala, be quiet.

CAROLINE. Here! I'll put it in your suitcase.

ELISABETH. (*Seeing the box.*) Are you going to play Spill and Spell at the hospital?

ANN. I haven't seen that game in years. I thought it was lost.

CHANA. (*Looking at the letter in her hand.*) What if the letter had been lost in the mail?

CAROLINE. I want to play.

ELISABETH. (*To Caroline.*) You'll be at summer camp.

YOUNG SALA. Mother, let me go.

RAIZEL. It wasn't lost in the mail. It came. The letter came. It wasn't lost.

ANN. Mother. I'm packing your blue sweater. Your room might be chilly.

CHANA. (*Looking into the suitcase.*) This sweater won't keep you warm.

BLIMA. Take my blue wool.

YOUNG SALA. I could go in your place, Raizel.

RAIZEL. (*To Chana, dismissing or ignoring Young Sala.*) The brown sweater's good enough.

ELISABETH. I'll miss you, Bubby.

ANN. Is your grandfather ready?

ELISABETH. Poppa's in the car.

BLIMA. (*To Young Sala.*) Sala, did you find some bread?

YOUNG SALA. Yes.

BLIMA. Good girl. (*To Raizel.*) How's your stomach?

ANN. (*Looking through the suitcase.*) Mother, I'm packing your

medicines. Just in case. They should have it on your chart, but just in case. I'll be with you most of the time, anyway.

ELISABETH. (*To Sala.*) How long will you be gone?

CAROLINE. (*To Sala.*) I'll write you letters while I'm gone for the summer.

ANN. (*To Sala.*) Would you rather have your brown sweater?

CHANA. You translated the letter wrong. Isn't it in German? Maybe you misunderstood.

RAIZEL. No, Mother, I didn't. The letter says that I have to go to the labor camp.

CAROLINE. You'll be here when I get back from the summer, won't you?

BLIMA. (*To Raizel.*) Did you pack your medicine?

CHANA. But you're a teacher. Doesn't it say you're a teacher? Don't they know you're a teacher?

RAIZEL. Mother, the schools are closed.

CHANA. You're not strong. Don't they know you're not strong? Neither you nor Blima are strong.

YOUNG SALA. I'm strong.

RAIZEL. Sala.

BLIMA. (*Looking in the suitcase.*) I can't find your medicine.

RAIZEL. There's none left.

ELISABETH. (*To Ann.*) How long will Bubby be in the hospital?

SALA. (*To Elisabeth.*) That depends.

CAROLINE. On what?

SALA. (*Teasing.*) On how hard you pray for me.

ELISABETH. Bubby!

CAROLINE. (*Overlapping.*) Bubby!

YOUNG SALA. (*Calling off.*) Poppa!

CHANA. Shush!

BLIMA. He's praying.

SALA. However long God wills me to be in the hospital, that's how long I'll be in the hospital.

ANN. Mother! (*Looking around.*) Where's my jacket? (*She exits.*)

ELISABETH. I'll pray for you.

CAROLINE. I love you, Bubby.

ELISABETH. I love you, too.

SALA. And I love my granddaughters. My greatest joys. The greatest joys of my life. Don't worry. Don't worry about Bubby. Whatever happens, it will all turn out fine. You have your mother

and your father and your aunts and uncles and your sister. And your Grandpoppa. You have your family.

YOUNG SALA. (*To Blima.*) Blima, I could go.

RAIZEL. (*To Young Sala.*) You're a child.

BLIMA. (*To Young Sala.*) No. (*To Raizel.*) This isn't much bread.

YOUNG SALA. It's all I could find.

BLIMA. (*To Young Sala.*) Go find some writing paper.

YOUNG SALA. (*To Raizel.*) I could go instead of you.

RAIZEL. The letter has my name on it. (*Young Sala picks up the letter and reads.*)

YOUNG SALA. "By order of the Jewish Council of the Elders, Raizel Garncarz will report on October 28, 1940, for six weeks of work at a labor camp ... "

CHANA. (*To Raizel.*) Do you have enough medicine for six weeks?

YOUNG SALA. I could work in a labor camp.

BLIMA. (*To Young Sala.*) Find some paper. And pencils.

YOUNG SALA. Let me go in Raizel's place.

CHANA. You're too young.

RAIZEL. The letter came for me.

YOUNG SALA. Will I get a letter?

CHANA. (*Quickly.*) No.

BLIMA. (*Quickly.*) No.

RAIZEL. (*Quickly.*) No.

YOUNG SALA. I could go instead of you.

CHANA. You don't know what you're saying.

YOUNG SALA. You have a better answer?

RAIZEL. Don't speak to your mother like that.

YOUNG SALA. Your stomach gets upset when you travel. I can eat almost anything. (*A beat. No one disagrees with her.*) The letter says they're going to pay.

CHANA. Does it really say that?

BLIMA. Yes.

RAIZEL. The letter says they will pay for the work.

YOUNG SALA. I can work. I can work as well as Raizel can. I can. (*To Raizel.*) I can work better than you. (*To Chana.*) Nothing else makes sense but for me to go.

CHANA. Nothing makes sense.

RAIZEL. My stomach hurts.

YOUNG SALA. See.

BLIMA. What can we do?

LETTERS TO SALA

by Arlene Hutton

4M, 12W (doubling, flexible casting up to 5M, 21W)

Adapted from the book *Sala's Gift* by Ann Kirschner and based on a true account, LETTERS TO SALA is a remarkable story of a young girl's survival during wartime Germany. Five years. Seven Nazi labor camps. Over 350 hidden letters. Sala Garnarcz Kirschner kept her secret for over fifty years, concealing her incredibly painful history in a Spill and Spell box. Everything changes when Sala reveals the cache to her grown daughter, Ann. LETTERS TO SALA draws from the emotional journeys that begin for both Ann and Sala when the letters resurface. Through scholarly research, Ann discovers that her mother has made a historically significant impact on Holocaust documentation. As Ann processes her own reaction to her mother's story, her daughters, Caroline and Elisabeth, also realize for the first time the weight of their Jewish heritage. Simultaneously, Ann's study of the letters throws Sala into the past again. She relives her youth, recalling her naïve desire for adventure, the disillusionment of her life in the work camps, and her loss of communication with the outside world as the war progressed around her. Playwright Arlene Hutton drives the two stories to a single question: What is to be done with these letters? If Sala risked her life to hold on to them as a young woman imprisoned in a work camp, are they merely the emotionally rich relics of her past life? Or are they worthy and important historical documents that demand to be shared with the public? Three generations of Kirschner women must work together to sift through the past and come to terms with the true gravity of Sala's letters. LETTERS TO SALA has a flexible cast size and flexible staging. Images of the actual letters and photos of the real people are available online for projections, programs and displays. Sala's letters, which were displayed in a special exhibition at the New York Public Library in 2006, are an important addition to Holocaust research, called, as one journalist noted, "the greatest find since Anne Frank's diary."

Also by Arlene Hutton

AS IT IS IN HEAVEN
GULF VIEW DRIVE
RUNNING
SEE ROCK CITY
and others

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