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‘Obligation’ a Worthy Holocaust Remembrance

By Jean Schiffman

Roger Grunwald’s one-actor, multi-character “The Obligation” is the latest addition to the local lineup of Jewish-themed plays currently running (the others are Debórah Eliezer’s luminous “(dis)Place[d]” at foolsFURY and Daniel Handler’s funny and touching “Imaginary Comforts” at Berkeley Rep).

As an unsparing, at times agonizing, Holocaust remembrance, “The Obligation” (the title refers to the commitment to remember, and to retell the story) is a worthy addition.

It’s flawlessly performed by Grunwald and elegantly directed by Nancy Carlin, complete with black and white archival projections of Eastern Europe and with video and stirring sound effects (both designed by Theodore J.H. Hulsker).

The central character in the fictional piece (which is based on fact and influenced by Grunwald’s background as the son of an Auschwitz survivor) is Schmuël, a Polish Jew.

We see him as a wonderfully awkward schoolboy in Bialystok (enamored of a classmate named Lola, who reappears later in the story) and as the elderly narrator of this painful tale.

He starts the play by describing his arrival in New York harbor post-Auschwitz: “Now I have a second life.”

Grunwald also weaves in other characters, who mostly, like

Schmuël, address the audience directly.

They include an iconic and ironic Jewish-American comedian, cigar in hand, who wisecracks about the

other European Jews.

In a particularly touching moment, Schmuël parts ways at a crowded subway station with an old friend who, says Schmuël, “died in Ausch-



Roger Grunwald wrote and performs in “The Obligation.” (Courtesy mellophoto.com)

Holocaust (if Grunwald actually meant this character to provide comic relief, the opening night audience certainly was not in the mood to laugh), and a nasty, sloppy-drunk Nazi officer, who’d been in charge of the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto (“I’m dead now,” he says), swaggering about in undershirt and suspenders, and the only character in the play whose monologue goes on too long.

There’s also a half-Jewish German Nazi (such mischlings did in fact exist in the German army) who received a special dispensation from Hitler but ultimately faces the same fate as most

witz in 1965 in New York.”

An accomplished actor, Grunwald effortlessly speaks in German and Yiddish and a variety of accents in English. He’s equally effortless in creating different personas for different characters with nothing more than a swift change of jacket and posture.

If there’s nothing new here — although you may not have known about the mischlings in Hitler’s army — **the “obligation” should surely exist in perpetuity, and, in this play, Grunwald beautifully fulfills his.**