

Jewish soldiers in Hitler's army inspire one-man play

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In his one-man play “The Mitzvah Project,” actor-playwright Roger Grunwald portrays three characters.

Or make that four: Lead character Christoph Rosenberg is somewhat of a split personality. He is a loyal soldier in Hitler’s army — a loyal Jewish soldier.

Though fictitious, Christoph represents a little-known phenomenon of the Third Reich, in which several thousand Germans of Jewish ancestry served in the Wehrmacht. They were derisively known as *mischlings*, or people of mixed blood. But Hitler himself gave them special dispensation to serve.

That and several other surprises await in “The Mitzvah Project,” which has its Bay Area premiere Jan. 26-31. Each of the three performances will be followed by a lecture and Q&A discussion.

This is a homecoming for the New York-based Grunwald 64, who grew up in San Francisco the son of a Holocaust survivor mother, had his bar mitzvah at Congregation Emanu-El and attended Lick-Wilmerding High School.

But the world he re-creates in his play resides in the heart of Nazi-occupied Poland, far from the Bay Area. What the “mitzvah” of the title refers to, Grunwald won’t say.

“Mitzvah is one of those words that could mean good deed or obligation,” Grunwald says. “It refers to two events in the play, actions that transpire in the

darkest days of the Holocaust, when cruelty was the norm.”

In addition to his tormented Jewish German soldier, Grunwald also plays Schmuell, a Jewish handyman caught in a roundup of Jews during the Nazi invasion. Balancing out the two is a character who serves as a kind of comical commenting chorus, though he’s more Groucho than Greek.

The plot thickens when Christoph stands in the killing fields of Bialystok, where he witnesses an atrocity and has an epiphany. Says Grunwald, “He starts to realize the blood in that field may also be coursing through his veins.”

Co-written with Annie McGreevey, who also directed the play, “The Mitzvah Project” was long in the making. Grunwald grew up hearing his mother’s stories of her girlhood in Frankfurt, the swift fall of Jewish fortunes with the advent of Hitler, and her ultimate deportation to Auschwitz. His mother survived, married a Holocaust refugee and remained committed to educating younger generations about the Holocaust.

She died in 2001, by which time Grunwald had become a successful actor on the London and New York stages. He wanted to honor his mother with a theatrical piece of some kind.

Once he met McGreevey at a 2009 solo performance workshop, he had his partner. And once he read Bryan Mark Rigg’s book “Hitler’s Jewish Soldiers,” about the secret history of Jews and Germans of partial Jewish ancestry serving openly in the Wehrmacht as late as 1940, he had his topic.

Years after Jews had been barred from nearly all professions, “Hitler and minions promulgated a decree which basically said all half and quarter Jews need to be removed from the Wehrmacht,” he recounts. “It was not enforced stringently, although many thousands were sent to forced labor camps. If a case was made that a soldier or officer was valuable to the war effort, they could make a formal appli-

cation that would go up to Hitler’s desk to be exempted from the decree. According to the book, there were as many as 2,000 of these soldiers. Only Hitler had the power to make or unmake an Aryan.”

As for the Groucho-like character, Grunwald says he and McGreevey felt the play needed some comic leavening; otherwise it would have been too depressing. He pondered several possible characters, including Woody Allen, but settled on the famous Marx Brother in-



stead, performed sans mustache and glasses (the cigar, however, remains).

“He wasn’t just a Jewish comedian,” Grunwald says of Groucho. “He was a social critic, a sage. In the play he directs the audience how to feel and helps them digest the material.”

Grunwald hopes audiences will appreciate “The Mitzvah Project” as a piece of theater, but more important, he wants them to more deeply appreciate the enduring lessons of the Holocaust.

“Do human beings have the capacity to learn from history?” he wonders. “Now that we learned the DNA of human beings is so intermixed, there is no pure Aryan or Nordic. We’re all *mischlings*. There is no ‘other.’ The ‘other’ is us.”

Roger Grunwald in “The Mitzvah Project,” 7 p.m. Monday, Jan. 26, at Stanford University (jewishstudies.stanford.edu), 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 28 at Temple Sinai in Oakland (<http://www.oaklandsinai.org>) and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 31 at Congregation Kol Shofar in Tiburon (<http://www.kolshofar.org>)