

old Charlie (Ken James) who returns home from London to attend the funeral of his adoptive father. As he clears up his father's papers, he discovers new insights about his childhood and relationship with his father (James Edmond). Unlike the farcical *Patrick Pearse*, it is autobiographical in nature. Alan Richardson, born in Windsor Ontario, and trained in Ireland at the Dublin Gate Theatre, directed. Like our critically-acclaimed production of *Patrick Pearse*, *Da* was such a box office success that we extended the run for an extra week.



*Da*. L to R: Victor Knight, Ken James

Elie Wiesel is a household name, certainly for Jewish people worldwide. A Holocaust survivor and a famous advocate for human rights, in 1976 he had written over fourteen volumes of fiction and non-fiction. Informed that he had written a play, *Zalmen, or the Madness of God*, and that it was being performed in Washington, D.C., I hastened to see it. Deeply impressed and touched by its content, I felt certain that our audiences would be equally affected. Set in the fifties in the Soviet Union, a Rabbi criticizes the government in the presence of foreign visitors. The authorities retaliate by calling him mad. The play deals with the question of whether one has to possess a “healthy madness” in order to stay human and to believe in God. Elie Wiesel affirms that the “solitude of the victim” is the theme of all his books, and that *Zalmen* is not a political play, “not

an accusation against the Soviet Union, so much as against the indifference and insensitivity of the entire world.”<sup>45</sup>

Wiesel was inspired to write this play in 1965 when in a synagogue in Russia on Yom Kippur eve. He was disturbed by the lifeless and hopeless face and demeanour of the praying Rabbi and began to fantasize that the Rabbi would suddenly burst out of his trance and shout his pain and rage.

...That was when I began to silently implore him. I insisted. I looked only at him, yet I saw nothing but his mask. To me he symbolized the tragic isolation of Russian Jewry humiliated and scarred from the time of the pogroms to the reign of Stalin, enduring a destiny apart, always apart, as though banned from history...I begged the old man: Do something, say something, free yourself tonight and you will enter our people’s legend; let the hushed reality buried inside you for so many years explode; speak out, say what oppresses you – one cry, just one, will be enough to bring down the walls that encircle and crush you. My eyes pleaded with him, prodded him. In vain. For him it was too late. He had suffered too much, endured too many ordeals for too many years. He no longer had the strength to imagine himself free.

During the weeks that followed my visit to the Soviet Union, I could not put my encounter with the Rabbi out of my mind. This defeated, beaten old man obsessed my thoughts. His silence lived inside me, his anguish was my torment. Now he, in turn seemed to be expecting something of me: a gesture, a word, answer. Could it be that he considered me responsible for his weakness, for his distress? That was when the idea occurred to me to offer him another chance to redeem himself and become the accuser. In my play he seized that chance, driven by a beadle nicknamed Zalmen the Madman at last the Rabbi will choose sacrifice...<sup>46</sup>

The huge cast of nineteen characters, mostly middle-aged men, would tax us financially, and challenge us besides, to find actors in that demographic. I thought if I could coax some of the experienced Montreal actors, many of whom were in academia and did not rely on making a living through acting, to play in it for ‘scale,’ we could manage to produce it. Exciting too, was the thought of proving that we had all this talent in Montreal.

Sean Mulcahy had directed a number of large-cast Jewish plays in Toronto, and I believed I could entrust him to understand the nuances and sensitive nature of the play. Sean was highly impressed with the group of seasoned local actors I

assembled, and together we cast them in the various roles. Paul Kligman, Toronto actor, who had played the Rabbi in the John Hirsch production of *The Dybbuk*, engaged to play the Rabbi central to the play, was the exception. Kligman, like Wiesel, was born in Romania, but his parents managed to leave Romania before the Nazi invasion when Kligman was nine months old. By contrast, Wiesel was sixteen years old when his family was deported by the Nazis along with the whole Jewish population of their town. Wiesel survived Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna and Buchenwald, but his parents and younger sister perished.

Carl Hare, a talented actor/director, trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, was on sabbatical leave from University and teaching at the National Theatre School in Montreal. I hired him to direct and workshop our Second Stage production of *Voices*, and cast him in the lead role of Zalmen. The others were all seasoned Montreal actors. The three female roles were played by Marushka Stankova as Nina, the Rabbi's daughter, Judy London, and Julie Brown.

One problem remained – the rights had not yet been absolutely confirmed. The letter in my possession had simply stated that the rights were not tied up. Once more I applied for confirmation and heard nothing, until one day I received an irate telephone call from Elie Wiesel's New York lawyer refusing permission to produce the play. When I protested that I should have been informed sooner, that the play was cast, the director and designers had been hired, he turned a deaf ear. He contended that Mr. Wiesel had sold the rights to an American producer who wanted to keep the Canadian rights open. I stressed that Quebec was largely French speaking and that, even if they did decide to tour it in Canada, it was unlikely the producers would risk bringing the show to Montreal. He did not budge. I asked him to explain our situation to Mr. Wiesel. Shortly thereafter I received a telephone call from the same New York lawyer who threatened to close down our production if it took place. The louder he yelled, the quieter I replied until he calmed down.

Something had to be done fast. At the time Danny Newman of the Lyric Theatre was the guru of the "subscription series." Mr. Newman was subsidized by Canada Council to tour the various regional theatres and advise them how to set up and maintain a series. Author of a book called, *Subscribe Now*, he called the individual theatre ticket buyers "the enemy." These were the people who could not be relied on. They waited for reviews, they stayed home if it was too cold, if it was too hot, they stayed away too. The only way a theatre could succeed was through a subscription series. Danny Newman had visited the Saidye Bronfman Theatre

several times, and we had a friendly relationship. Also, he knew everybody, it seemed, in the North American theatre world. I phoned him for advice.

It turned out that Newman knew the American Jewish producer who had bought the rights and he tipped me off on how to handle him. I was to telephone him, explain that the play had already been cast, that tickets had been sold to several Jewish organizations such as Hadassah, Mizrachi, etc., and that it would be a terrible hardship for all concerned if we cancelled. I telephoned the producer as Danny Newman suggested. After re-iterating some of his objections, he listened, and finally said he would leave it up to Elie Wiesel to have the final word.

The New York lawyer phoned with an offer. Mr. Wiesel might consent to let us produce the play if he could be assured that the production would be top quality. I gave him names and credentials of the artists involved, and I offered to come to New York with my director to see Mr. Wiesel at his convenience.

The following week Sean and I flew to New York for our appointment at the Wiesels' apartment. He and his wife, Marion, were polite but aloof. (Incidentally, Marion Wiesel adapted the English version of the play which was originally written in French.) Clearly they were not at all pleased with us, particularly Mrs. Wiesel. Sean turned on his usual charm. He talked about the calibre of the actors in the production, and did not hold back on his own shining reputation which I of course corroborated. He also made sure they knew I was a more than competent producer.

*Zalmen, or the Madness of  
God.* L to R: Carl Hare, Charles  
Rittenhouse

Suddenly Sean and Elie Wiesel were amicably discussing Irish playwrights. I once again apologized profusely for not making certain that the rights had been finalized. In the end, what seemed to clinch the deal was when I said, "Mr. Wiesel, I know I took a chance by going ahead with the production, however,



I felt, and still feel, very strongly that this wonderful and important play must be seen by our audiences.” At that point he mellowed, and gave permission. We invited him to the opening; he was not free but would come to the open dress rehearsal the evening before.

Sean and I decided we would tell only the production manager, Chuck Childs, that Wiesel and his wife would be present at the open dress because we felt the cast might be intimidated. The night of the open dress came. The performance was scheduled to commence at 7:30 p.m. At 7:30 the Wiesels had not yet arrived. We checked with the airline. The plane from New York had been delayed but it would arrive any moment. Chuck was eager to get started. He thought the actors were getting anxious. I told him to say that there were problems with the lighting board, and, as soon as it was fixed, we would start. We told the audience the same thing. At 8 p.m. they had still not arrived. Reluctantly, I agreed that we would start at 8:15. At 8:14 they walked in the door, were ushered to their seats, and the play began.

When the performance was over, and the audience had filed out of the theatre, the actors were called on stage for the customary director’s notes. When they were assembled, there was an announcement. There is a surprise for you, and at that moment Elie Wiesel walked onto the stage. The actors, realizing who he was, were overwhelmed. He turned to them and declaimed, “I have seen my play performed in Israel, I have seen my play performed in Washington, in New York and in Europe, and this is the best production of my play that I have ever seen. Congratulations, Mr. Mulcahy, you have done a marvellous job. You, Mr. Kligman, were the best Rabbi, you, Mr. Hare, were the best Zalmen, you, Mr. Massey, were the best Inspector,” and so on. From the audience Marion Wiesel’s voice was now heard. “Let us not forget the woman producer who was responsible for the play being shown here.” And she graciously inscribed my copy of the play, “For Muriel Gold – who is now vindicated: [signed] Marion and Elie Wiesel, Feb 5, 1976.”

Wiesel took Sean aside and offered an important note. He explained that, in the tender scene between the Rabbi and his daughter, she should not touch her father, not on Yom Kippur, when he is a sacred person. The evening was magical and it was difficult for any of us to settle down after they left. We were all floating on a cloud, and congregated later at Walter Massey’s house to unwind. Galloway’s review echoed Wiesel’s praises. “Exquisite writing and a magnificently effective production...an engrossing theatrical experience,” were some of the superlatives in his review.<sup>47</sup>

Carl Hare relates his personal experience from the actor’s perspective.

As *Zalmen*, I played a slightly mad character in a Soviet synagogue who faithfully supported the Rabbi, played by Paul Kligman. During the rehearsal period Paul and I had learned to respect each other's acting and had developed a rapport on stage. In the first act of the play the Rabbi conducts a service and gives an impassioned address. Each night, as I stood below him and to his side as he conducted the service, I felt in the rapt audience the power of three thousand years of belief; and when he finished his great speech and the act ended, we would both leave the stage together and accept the Kleenex offered by the assistant stage manager to wipe away our tears.<sup>48</sup>

The U.S. version travelled to Toronto, and opened at the Royal Alexandra two weeks after the opening of our production and Herbert Whittaker saw both productions. According to him, it suffered by comparison. "The U.S. version was given the old, hard-edged Broadway try but failed to become much more of a play" ...He called Sean's direction "strong" and "comprehensive" and praised us for gathering "a valuable cast"<sup>49</sup> Sean recalls that following the opening night performance, a man came over to him and said, "My brain is on fire."

Our Canadian play for that season, *Flytrap*, a world première, was written by David Freeman, author of the successful *Creeps*, *Battering Ram* and the less popular *You're Gonna Be All Right Jamie Boy*. Robert Robinson, director of *Flytrap*, worked diligently along with Freeman throughout rehearsals to finetune the written work. As with most new plays, it was touch and go until opening night. The next day, Galloway, in *The Star*, was ecstatic. He wanted "to turn handsprings in the street" not because he had seen the perfect Canadian play, but because "a Canadian had written a straightforward, well-crafted, entertaining, unpretentious commercial play and a professional Canadian theatre company had enough faith in its merit to produce it." He called the direction "flawless", and lauded the three actors, Mignon Elkins, Walter Massey, and Tom Rack for their performances.<sup>50</sup> Maskoulis, however, considered it "lightweight" compared to Freeman's other plays She stated that "in trying to write about very 'ordinary' people, the play travels a tightrope and runs the risk of becoming a very ordinary play."<sup>51</sup>