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How a photo of Nazis eating blueberries inspired Moisés Kaufman and Amanda Gronich's Holocaust play



Amanda Gronich and Moisés Kaufman authored the documentary play "Here There Are Blueberries" which runs at the Wallis March 13-30. (Justin Jun Lee / For The Times)

By **Charles McNulty**
Theater Critic

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New York — In 2007, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., received an album of photographs documenting the experience of those who worked at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The images provide a unique perspective on the Holocaust, chronicling S.S. officers going about their daily activities in a manner utterly divorced from the reality of the mass murder that was taking place nearby.

The album was donated by a U.S. intelligence officer who had found the cache of photos in Germany shortly after World War II. After the photos were reviewed by the museum, news of the discovery made headlines all over the world. [“In the Shadow of Horror, SS Guardians Relax and Frolic,”](#) the New York Times print headline, starkly captures the dichotomy that made these photos so gripping and disturbing.

“Here There Are Blueberries,” a play by Moisés Kaufman and Amanda Gronich that was a 2024 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for drama, tells the tale of this photo album in a stage production that makes the painstaking work of historical inquiry seem like the greatest detective story ever written. Uncovering the identities of the figures in the photos is a central part of the investigation, but the bigger mystery is what could have allowed ordinary Germans to become part of the bureaucracy of death that resulted in the extermination of approximately 6 million Jews.



The company of “Here There Are Blueberries.” (Tectonic Theater Project)

Kaufman, who conceived and directed the play for his New York-based company, Tectonic Theater Project, was sitting in a Midtown Manhattan office with co-writer Gronich just a couple of days before they left for Los Angeles, where “Here There Are Blueberries” will be performed at the [Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts](#) through March 30 before it heads to Berkeley Rep in April. How did they conceive the idea of making a theater piece around an album of photos?

“I saw the front-page article in the New York Times and was struck by a photo of the Nazis with an accordion,” Kaufman recalled. “Both Amanda’s family and my own are Holocaust survivors. I’ve always wanted to tackle a Holocaust play, but the Holocaust is a singular event in history, and one of the most addressed in literature. What is there new to say? But when I saw these pictures, I saw something we hadn’t seen before. And I thought, how can you eat blueberries and sing a song accompanied by an accordion when your daily job is to kill 1.1. million people?”

Kaufman, a 2015 National Medal of Arts recipient, reached out to Rebecca Erbelding, a young archivist at the museum who was mentioned in the New York Times story. He modestly assumed she wouldn't know who he was, but she told him that "The Laramie Project," the 2000 play he wrote with members of Tectonic Theater Project investigating the killing of Matthew Shepard (and still one of the most produced works in the American theater), had been recently performed at her college. An interview was set up, and Kaufman sensed he was hot on the trail of a new project.

"So I had the hunch, but I thought, 'How do we make a play about this?' " he said. "The mission of Tectonic Theater Project is to explore theatrical languages and theatrical forms. When I got to America, I was so bored with America's fascination with realism and naturalism. I had come from Venezuela and had experienced the work of [Peter Brook](#) and [Pina Bausch](#). There was a really good international theater festival. So I was trained in a rigorous kind of experimental theater. Many people call Tectonic a documentary theater company, and some of our works are based in reality. But we're much more interested in what we do with the art form. What is a theatrical language? What is theatricality? And so the question, the formal question for me was, can you make a play in which the photographs occupy one of the central narrative lines?"



Barbara Pitts, Luke Forbes and Delia Cunningham in "Here There Are Blueberries." (Tectonic Theater Project)

During his interview with Erbelding, Kaufman was struck by how dramatic the work of an archivist could be.

“When Rebecca was telling me the story of the album, I felt that she was so passionate about discovering who everyone was, what they were doing or celebrating,” he said. “As soon as I realized that this was a detective story, I knew how to write the play. So I called Amanda, another member of Tectonic, who’s not only a brilliant writer and creator but also has an incredible amount of knowledge about the Holocaust, and asked if she wanted to join me in this.”

Gronich didn’t need much persuading, but she did have concerns. As she recounted, “When Moisés first talked to me about the idea of making a play about an album of photographs I said, ‘That’s impossible. You can’t make a play about an album of photographs. And you particularly can’t make a play about this album of photographs.’ But then I took a breath and said, ‘Wait a second. If we really think about how to explore this theatrically, there could be something truly extraordinary here. And for me, the opportunity to tell the story through theater was enormously exciting and thrilling and daunting and scary.”

Kaufman and Gronich met at NYU, and when he was founding Tectonic Theater Project she became a “proud early charter member.” Gronich has extensive experience as a writer of nonfiction television but said she never worked on anything about World War II. “Because of my family history, [working on ‘Here There Are Blueberries’] was deeply personal for me,” she said. “But echoing Moisés, I wondered how to tell the story in the 21st century in a way that feels new and explores the vocabulary of how we engage an audience.”



Jeanne Sakata in "Here There Are Blueberries." (Tectonic Theater Project)

The play, which [premiered](#) at La Jolla Playhouse in 2022, brings audiences viscerally into the gumshoe work of archivists and researchers who authenticate, clarify and preserve artifacts of history. If this sounds dry, I can't remember when I experienced such intense focus on the part of theatergoers. The enthralled hush at the La Jolla Playhouse matinee I attended was engulfing. What exactly did these frolicking SS officers and support staff understand about their work? How did they manage their ignorance or justify their knowledge? These questions don't ever feel remote. "Here There Are Blueberries" implicates the present and the future as much as it does the past.

At a time of rising antisemitism and Holocaust denialism, when salient political and cultural figures are flirting with Nazi identification, the play sounds an alarm from history. What happened in Europe in the 1930s and '40s can happen here. Demonization and dehumanization are tried and true tactics of demagogues in every era. Genocide, as one of the experts brought forth in the play points out, "starts with *words*."

"The desire to distance yourself from things that you perceive as evil is very human," Kaufman said. "We all want to say, 'I'm not like that.' And with the Holocaust specifically, we have spent decades saying the Nazis were monsters, as opposed to the Nazis were humans who did monstrous things."

He pointed to a photograph of a group of women, secretaries and auxiliary workers, enjoying blueberries as an accordion player serenades them on the deck of a recreational resort that was a reward for the German camp staff of Auschwitz.

“They are eating blueberries,” Kaufman said. “I like blueberries. It’s lovely when you have an accordion player at a party. Seeing the quotidian nature of their daily lives prevents the audience from distancing themselves. We bring you, the audience, into the room to look at this together, to entice your curiosity, to see these people playing with their pets, talking to their children.”

The point isn’t to normalize but to interrogate with clear eyes.

“The play unwraps and unravels an artifact of history,” Gronich said. “There is literal, irrefutable evidence onstage.”

The story of history, she continued, is dependent on what history leaves behind. But it’s also contingent on our willingness to confront what is uncovered with courage and honesty.



The Company of “Here There Are Blueberries.” (Tectonic Theater Project)

It turns out that the photo album was the personal property of a top administrator of the camp who had risen from the lowly ranks of a bank teller and was proud of his elevated status. Loyalty was prized over merit by the Nazis, and these photos are what Gronich calls “the selfies of an SS officer.”

“When we look at the pictures, what we’re seeing are the people who believed they were going to be the victors,” she said. “You see the world that they can’t wait to inhabit. It’s this performative celebratory energy in those pictures, and what they’re reveling in is their vision of the thousand-year Reich, and that is a world free of all of the so-called undesirables. And so there are these young women flirting with these men in this bucolic setting. Meanwhile outside the frame, 1.1. million people are being sent to their deaths.”

Reaction to “Here There Are Blueberries” has changed as the political landscape has shifted since the play had its premiere less than three years ago. It’s been a tumultuous time in America and the world, to say the least. A pandemic, wars in Europe and the Middle East, frenetic technological developments, soaring economic inequality, oligarchic shamelessness and elections that have empowered aspiring authoritarians. Kaufman sees theater as an invitation to audiences to bring into the venue what’s happening outside of it. In plays such as “[Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde](#),” “[The Laramie Project](#)” and “[33 Variations](#),” Kaufman has been intent on creating structures that allow the past and present to interact in the public forum of the theater.

Gronich doesn’t believe this is the time to shy away from difficult dialogue.

“Everyone, the working class and the professional class, doctors, lawyers, journalists, business people and the clergy, had to participate to facilitate [the Holocaust]. This mentality, the hatred that has to be in place, is a cancer in society, but then what do you do? What position do you take? The play looks at this continuum of culpability, complacency and complicity, and examines where all these people fall in that continuum.”

“You can look at anybody in the world and we all fall within that continuum,” Kaufman reflected with somber acceptance.

Kaufman and his collaborators don’t remove themselves from scrutiny. “Here There Are Blueberries” convenes us to peer collectively through the filter of history at something frighteningly close to home — human nature.