

NYS Theatre Institute Study Guide

Better Don't Talk!



Written and Performed by Naava Piatka

2006-2007 Season Study Guides are made possible in part by funding provided by First Niagara Bank.

education services

INSERVICE / TEACHER PREVIEW

Come to the Inservice for *Better Don't Talk* at the Schacht Fine Arts Center, Russell Sage College, Troy, New York on **Tuesday, October 3, 2006 4-6PM.**

Meet the creative team. Look behind the scenes...walk the set. Observe a segment of rehearsal. Gather ideas and exercises for your classroom. It's **free** - just call **(518) 274-3286** or **e-mail cbs@nysti.org** before **Wednesday, September 27, 2006 to RSVP.**

Teachers bringing classes to a performance are invited to return at 7:30 PM to watch a dress rehearsal.

PRE-SHOW INTRO / CLASSROOM PREPARATION

Right in your classroom! Engage your students in the play before attending the performance. Presented by an Institute educator, the program traces the creation of the production, introduces characters, and explores the responsibilities of audience members through an interactive Power Point presentation. Easy to arrange: call **(518) 274-3286** or **e-mail cbs@nysti.org**. There is a nominal travel fee for this program.

programs

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Residency Programs:

Classes at NYSTI following a 10:00AM performance.

Internships and Educators-in-Residence

Theatre Arts School

SummerStage and Summer Theatre Institute

For additional information regarding availability and cost visit the Educators' Greenroom at:

www.nysti.org/greenroom.shtm

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Patricia Di Benedetto Snyder, Producing Artistic Director

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Dear Colleague,

*At NYSTI, we appreciate your efforts to provide students with interdisciplinary learning experiences. To assist you in planning activities to accompany your theatre experience, we have suggested how the activities and discussion topics created for Better Don't Talk! connect with the **NYS Education Department Learning Standards for The Arts.***

Standard #1: Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts (dance, music, theatre and visual arts) and participate in various roles in the arts.

- Use an improvisation to explore the concept of superstition.*
- Write a scene between a mother and daughter that reveals a secret.*

Standard #2: Students will be knowledgeable about and make use of the materials and resources available for participation in the arts in various roles.

- Attend residency classes with NYSTI's teacher/technicians and teacher/actors.*
- Arrange a Pre-Show Intro/Classroom Preparation on the creation of the production.*

Standard #3: Students will respond critically to a variety of works in the arts, connecting the individual work to other works and to other aspects of human endeavor and thought.

- Use the At the Performance section of the guide to discuss individual interpretations and evaluation of the creative team's work.*
- Write a review of the NYSTI production of Better Don't Talk!*

Standard #4: Students will develop an understanding of the personal and cultural forces that shape artistic communication and how the arts in turn shape the diverse cultures of past and present society.

- Read other plays about the Holocaust.*
- Research the art that has been created by survivors of the ghetto.*

...before the performance

OVERVIEW

Chayela. *The great Chayela Rosenthal, the “Wunderkind of the Vilna Ghetto,” is now the bridge champion of Sea Point, Cape Town.*

Naava Piatka grew up in South Africa, the daughter of Holocaust Survivors. Her immigrant parents spoke English with heavy accents and were unfamiliar with the customs of their adopted country. She had no immediate uncles or aunts or grandparents. In comparing herself to her schoolmates and friends, their extended families and their activities, Naava experienced the shame and embarrassment of being different with her ‘unusual’ family whose special history was tinged with suffering.

As a child growing up in the 1950s, Naava vaguely knew that something terrible had happened to her parents and their family in a far off country somewhere in Europe. The past, she imagined, was a taboo subject. Her parents never spoke to her directly about what had happened to them during the war. Naava’s knowledge was limited to tidbits of information from “sound bites” or one-liners from them regarding their mysterious, obviously disturbing, past. Respecting her parents’ need for silence, Naava didn’t dare ask questions for fear of getting her already emotional parents more upset.

Only when she had emigrated to the USA and was herself a mother of three children, did the questions begin to rise in her mind. Her mother had died unexpectedly before the birth of Naava’s first child. Years



Naava Piatka in a performance of *Better Dont Talk!*.

later, she began questioning her father about his life in Europe before and during the war. From her father, Naava learned about her mother, Chayela Rosenthal's role as beloved teenage singing star who entertained the imprisoned and displaced Jews in the Vilna Ghetto Theatre. Through others' testimonies, she heard how others regarded her mother as a hero, whose singing gave hope and courage to many around her in times of dark despair. She learned more about her mother's brother, Leyb Rosenthal, who had composed many famous songs in the ghetto, some still sung today in Europe.

Breaking the silence of the past, Naava celebrates her

mother's triumph of song over sadness, laughter over loss and devastation. In uncovering the rich heritage of her uncle's songs, Naava finally understood her mother's reluctance to talk about her past. "Better Don't Talk!" is a line from "Yisroilik", her uncle Leyb Rosenthal's song about a typical little ghetto boy, an orphan, who decides it's better not to focus on one's misery and sorrow, but rather on creating a new tomorrow. In gathering testimony, researching and retelling the story in her mother's voice, Naava embraces with pride her family's legacy, and considers it an honor to tell the stories, sing the songs and give voice to those whose voices were silenced too soon.

VOCABULARY

Knowing the meaning of the following underlined words will increase the student's appreciation and comprehension.

Naava. ... *my mother was the ultimate, quintessential Yiddishe mama.*

Naava. *The next thing she lifts her hand and she gives me a frask, a chlamei ibn ponim.. slaps me across my face and shouts: Mazeltov! Mazeltov!*

Naava. *My mother, the Bourgeois, playing at wife./Stuffing the fridge, as she stuffed down her strife.*

Chayela. *I get the sun here every afternoon, it's a mechaya!*

Chayela. *I came in a big boat across the Atlantic Ocean and I found me a ganse, whole new life . . . At last, a bissl paradise.*

Chayela. *That was my brother's song. He wrote it in the ghetto.*

Chayela. *What is this? Two families, three, four in one small farshtunkeneh room.*

Chayela. *In the middle of this meshugas, this terrible madness, a theatre meant we could come together, sit like a mentsh, a human being, not an animal hurrying, scurrying, here there . . . for a moment we have a chance to escape to another world.*

Chayela. *Lolek was coming with me, as my apotropus.*

Chayela. *People talking to go to the forest to join the Partisans.*

TIME LINE

June 26, 1941 - The city of Vilnius, capital of Soviet Lithuania, falls to the German Army.

July, 1941 - Jews living in Vilnius are ordered to wear the yellow Star of David.

September 1, 1941 - The streets of the old Jewish Quarter of the Lithuanian city of Vilnius are sealed off to create two ghettos.

September 6, 1941 - All Jews in Vilnius are ordered to leave their homes and move to the ghettos.

October, 1941 - Work certificates, *schayen*, are distributed by the Nazis to the workers living in the ghettos.

October 29-31, 1941 - Ghetto # 2 is liquidated.

January 18, 1942 - Vilna Ghetto Theatre holds its first performance. Chayela debuts.

June 15, 1943 - Chayela performs in a musical revue



Naava Piatka in a performance of *Better Dont Talk!*.

written by Leyb Rosenthal in the Vilna Ghetto. Her uncle's song, "Bayrn getoyer" (By the Ghetto Gate) became a folk song.

September 23, 1943 - Occupants of Vilna Ghetto are relocated in Labor Camps. Chayela's brother, Leyb is sent to Klooga Labor Camp.

September 27, 1944 - Chayela's brother, Leyb is killed.

September 28, 1944 - Liberation of Klooga Labor Camp by the Red Army.

1946 - Chayela writes all her brother's songs in a book. She travels all over Poland performing in the refugee camps.

1948 - Chayela performs with Lower Silesia Jewish Theatre and in Paris at the Place Pignalle.

PLACES

The following places are referred to in *Better Don't Talk!*
Estonia - Poland - Lithuania - Israel - Cape Town, South
Africa - Paris, France - Moscow - Wroclaw, Poland.

CULTURAL REFERENCES

Chayela. *When I arrived in ghetto, already there is talk of a theater, Jacob Gens, the ghetto leader, is organizing for the ghetto population.* Appointed by the Germans, Gens headed the Judenrat, a Jewish Council in the Vilna Ghetto and was in charge of the Jewish police. He originated the idea of creating performances in the ghetto by choruses and symphonies.



Chayela. *A theatre meant that we actors, writers, composers could get the yellow shein, the work paper.* Schaynen, work certificates, meant survival for many in the ghetto. Yellow certificates allowed the holder to leave the ghetto to go to work.

Chayela. *Here I am in front of the **Billy Rose Theatre** in New York.* William Samuel Rosenberg was a theatre producer in New York City in the late 1930s through 1966. This theatre is now known as the Nederlander Theater.

Chayela. *It was in Paris where a woman named **Sarah Sylvia** found me.* Sarah Sylvia was the stage name for Serke Goldstein, a leading lady in the Yiddish theatre who performed in South Africa.

Naava. *She told me she had met Leyb in **Klooga**, the same labor camp in Estonia that she was in right at the end of the war.* Built in September 1943 in Estonia, this labor camp held up to 3,000 prisoners. The majority had been relocated from the Vilna Ghetto.

Chayela. *My mazel, who should be touring the camps exactly the same time I'm playing Zinna, but **Molly Picon**.* Ms. Picon, an American born comedienne, was devoted to the Yiddish language, the care of Jewish refugees and the State of Israel.

Chayela. *We arrive to Warsaw. We meet the great **Sol Hurok**.* Born in Russia, Mr. Hurok moved to the US in 1906. He was a famous performing arts agent.

TEACHER PREVIEW

NYSTI invites you to the Inservice/Teacher Preview for *Better Don't Talk!* at the Schacht Fine Arts Center, Russell Sage College, Troy, New York on **Tuesday, October 17, 4-6PM**. This program provides

teachers with an opportunity to meet the creative team, look behind the scenes, walk the set, and observe a segment of rehearsal. It's **free** - just call **(518) 274-3286** or e-mail **cbs@nysti.org** before **Wednesday, October 11, 2006** to **RSVP**. Teachers bringing classes to a performance are invited to return at 7:30 PM to watch a dress rehearsal.

**PLEASE NOTE:
THE PERFORMANCE
WILL RUN FOR
85 MINUTES.**

THERE IS NO INTERMISSION.

...*at the
performance*

THINGS TO OBSERVE AND LISTEN FOR

Setting

Chayela. *I love it here. It's the best spot in the whole house.*

Richard Finkelstein, set designer, has created a set for *Better Don't Talk!* which will support the actress and allow her to suggest a variety of locations as she relates her story as well as that of her mother. How has the designer used shape, texture, and color to accentuate

the style of the production? Note the use of a raked stage.

Costumes

Naava. *Newspapers, books, broken chairs, suitcases, bags of old clothes, my father's old clothes...*

Robert Anton, costume supervisor has helped Ms. Piatka suggest the timeframe through the silhouette of her apparel. What aspects of the clothing help support the transitions from mother to daughter?

Lighting

And then the lights go on, I am back where I belong.

Lighting designer John McLain will help to focus the attention of the audience on specific areas of the set. Can you see a predominant color in the lighting? How will the lights indicate the change from Naava to her mother, Chayela?

Music

Chayela. *When I was sixteen, he wrote for me a song specially for the Folksong Competition.*

Listen to the music and the songs. Listen to how the melodies define the characters and the situation.

Sound Design

Naava. *Only when she heard the shots from far away, did she understand: this was the end for us.*

Sound designer 100% Sound will be responsible for sound effects which will heighten the drama on the stage. Listen to hear how the voice of the actress and the sound effects are amplified during the performance.

CONCEPTS TO CONSIDER

THE VALUE OF THE ARTS

Chayela. *When you don't have theater, that's when you die.*

The revue programs that were created by Chayela's brother along with Kasriel Broydo provided the roots for the Ghetto folklore.

"The songs in them reflected everyday troubles, hopes, and problems of life in the Ghetto. They became especially popular and were sung by everybody. Sima Skurkovitz, the young charming actress from Maydim, wrote; The plays and songs were an expression of what was in our hearts, what we were experiencing - the killings, the horror of Ponar, our sorrow, our pain . . . they gave us the hope to survive.

from Spiritual Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto by Rachel Konstantian-Danzig.

CLASSROOM PREPARATION

Presented by an Institute educator, the program traces the creation of the production, introduces characters, and explores the responsibilities of audience members through an interactive Power Point presentation. To arrange: call **(518) 274-3286** or e-mail **cbs@nysti.org**. There is a nominal travel fee for this program.

...after the performance

WRITING AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Teachers may select one of the following excerpts from *Better Don't Talk!* to begin a class discussion or prompt a writing exercise.

•

Naava. *We [my mother and I] were there for each other . . . in undeclared war!*

•

Chayela. *Here I am Bridge Champion of Sea Point, Cape Town. I can tell you who played what to whom after each game, but when it comes time to tell my own daughter about the past, so help me God, I don't have the words.*

•

Chayela. *If it's one thing we Jews know, it's how to make from our misery a joke, a song.*

•

Naava. *Bad things were always kept secret in our house.*

•

Naava. *Maybe it's because she was from Poland, a world full of superstitions.*

•

Why is the title particularly ironic? Why is the other title of this piece - *Memories, Songs, and Laughter from the Star of the Vilna Ghetto Theatre* - so appropriate?

•

How does creating art provide a path of healing pain and discrimination?

•

Select a role model from your life who has had to overcome extreme hardships. How has your role model made an impact on you and on others?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

•

Naava. *The sun still poured in through the blinds. Her dressing table was still there, with all the photographs under the glass.* Photographs can freeze a moment of time, an event, and capsule a memory. What five images would you put under glass to remind you of important people and events in the history of your family?

•

Chayela. *We packed a little suitcase with all that we possess,* Imagine that you barely have one hour to pack a suitcase with those things that mean the most to you. What would you choose to take along? Why?

•

Chayela. *Our new home? What is this? Two families, three, four in one small farstunkenah room.* It is reported that the average living space in the Vilna Ghetto was one and one half to two square meters. Tape out a square on the classroom floor. Allow students to explore how much space that is and what could possibly fit within the space to serve those who had to live in these cramped quarters.

USING THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE TO MAKE INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS

Here's a list of activities connecting *Better Don't Talk!* to **NYS Education Department Learning Standards** for that particular curriculum.

SOCIAL STUDIES

- Research the history of the Vilna Ghetto. **(Standard # 2)**
- Investigate other stories from survivors of the Holocaust. **(Standard # 2)**
- Compare the experiences and histories of the various ghettos established by the Nazis. **(Standard # 2)**

HEALTH, PHYSICAL EDUCATION AND HOME ECONOMICS

- Chayela. *The great Chayela Rosenthal is now the bridge champion of Sea Point, Cape Town.* Research this card game. Investigate the various ways to play solitaire. **(Standard # 1)**

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

- Examine the literature of the Vilna ghetto. Shmaryahu Kaczerginski was a Jewish poet who was very active in the cultural life of the Vilna Ghetto. **(Standard # 1)**
- Read Fania Fenelon's book, *Playing for Time*, about her existence in Auschwitz as a member of a women's orchestra. **(Standard # 1)**
- Kasriel Broydo directed theatre revues and concerts in the Vilna ghetto. Research his life. **(Standard # 4)**

THE ARTS

- Research the art work of the artists of the ghettos. These artists include: Yitzhok Brauner, Roman Kramsztyk, Bruno Schulz and Gela Seksztajn. **(Standard # 3)**

- Investigate the music of the partisans. Hirsh Glick's partisan song, "Zog Nit Kainmol" became the hymn of the underground organization. **(Standard # 2)**

- Listen to the children's opera, *Brundibar*, *The Organ Grinder*. Why was it performed for Terezin inmates? **(Standard # 1)**

CHARACTER EDUCATION CONNECTION

Superstitions and beliefs can influence people in terms of their expectations of behavior on the part of others. Generalizations, stereotypes and prejudice were the tools of the Third Reich as it called for the establishment of the "pure race."

How can you, as an individual, combat stereotypes and prejudice in your school and community? What character traits are necessary?

Please note that this study guide
may be downloaded from
the NYSTI web site.

www.nysti.org

SUGGESTED READING AND RESOURCES

Web sites to visit:

[ghetto.actiweb.com / vilnaghetto.html](http://ghetto.actiweb.com/vilnaghetto.html)

[www.deathcamps.org / reinhard / timeline / index.html](http://www.deathcamps.org/reinhard/timeline/index.html)

[http://roarfamil.com / vilnaghetto.html](http://roarfamil.com/vilnaghetto.html)

Michael Good www.searchformajorplagge.com

For more information:

Atlas of The Holocaust by Martin Gilbert.

The Holocaust by Martin Gilbert.

The Holocaust in Lithuania by Dina Porat.

The Final Solution -Origins and Implementation by David
Cesarani.

The War Against The Jews by Lucy S. Dawidowicz.

The Good Old Days - The Holocaust as Seen by Its

Perpetrators and Bystanders by Ernst Klee, Willi Dressen
and Volker Riess.

The Destruction of the European Jews by Raul Hilberg.

Ghetto in Flames by Yitzhak Arad.

Judenrat. The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe Under Nazi
Occupation by Isaiah Trunk.

Encyclopedia of the Holocaust - Israel Gutman (Editor).

Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka - The Operation Reinhard Camps -
by Yitzhak Arad.

Documents on the Holocaust - Yitzhak Arad, Israel
Gutman, and Abraham Margalio (Eds).

Other stories about people of the Holocaust:

A Daughter's Gift of Love; A Holocaust Memoir by Trudy Birger and Jeffrey M. Green.

Upon The Head of a Goat: A Childhood in Hungary, 1939-1944 by Aranka Siegal.

The Night Trilogy by Elie Wiesel.

Milkweed by Jerry Spinelli.

Children in the Holocaust and World War II: Their Secret Diaries edited by Laurel Holliday.

My Secret Camera by Frank Dabba Smith Photographed by Mendel Grossman.

An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork by Effie Hillesum.

Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl.

...preparing for the theatre

BEFORE YOU ATTEND:

1. Define and discuss the terms: actor, costume, set, properties, lights, playwright, character, plot, act, and scene, director, production, cast, intermission, and stage manager.
2. Review the play's circumstances, including details of the action, time, and place.
3. Familiarize yourself with production background information in this study guide.

DURING THE PERFORMANCE:

1. As an audience member, you accept the responsibility of a special agreement. That agreement includes believing what you see is real. It is happening before your eyes.
2. You are the audience. In theatre, the audience has an important role in the experience. *Listen carefully and quietly.* Let the drama unfold and capture you.
3. A rapport between the actors and audience is established during a performance. The actors are aware of your presence. Your responses can stimulate or stifle the show. When the lights go down, a performance especially for you begins, an opportunity that only live theatre provides.

AFTER YOU ATTEND:

1. What was your reaction to the play? Did you learn anything about people and human behavior? How did you feel about the play's conclusion?
2. How was the action executed? What were some of the dramatic conventions used? Were the actors believable? Did the technical aspects move the show along?
3. Explore the following through discussion, a writing assignment, or perhaps an acting workshop:
 - A. Imagine yourself as a character in the show.
 - B. Continue the play action, creating the next scene.
 - C. Design your own production.



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We take pride in our support for programs that introduce the arts to the young people of our communities. The arts unlock doors to creativity and create new opportunities for learning.

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