

# Hana's Suitcase gently introduces holocaust horrors

## theatre review

### Hana's Suitcase

Runs until 15 November

Directed by Stewart Arnott

Starring Ginger Ruriko Busch, Dale Yim, Ella Chan, and Jessica Greenberg

PAUL BLINOV

Arts & Entertainment Editor

"We hope to encourage children to think about the devastating effects of the Holocaust and of ways to ensure that such a tragedy does not happen again," reads the playbill of *Hana's Suitcase*, and it brings up a curious point: at a time when WWII is a distant memory that fewer and fewer know first hand, *Hana's Suitcase* seems almost too late to be preaching education as the best defense. But fortunately, it does so in an engrossing way—even if it's a little ham-fisted.

The play—an adaptation of a book and radioplay of the same name—covers the true story of a suitcase that appeared at the Tokyo Holocaust Education Centre, with "Hana—Orphan," scrawled on one side.

The suitcase was empty, but the mystery behind it enthralled Akira (Dale Yim) and Makio (Ella Chan), two children at the Centre. They began questioning and prodding curator Fumiko Ishioka (Ginger Ruriko Busch) to find out more, so she began writing to other Holocaust museums to try and figure out who Hana was.

The first half is mostly this modern-day story, with Hana (Jessica Greenberg) appearing only as an apparition of the past, scootering or



walking through the background. After discovering that Hana's brother, George Brady, is still alive in Canada and making contact with him, the play turns to George's recollection of his sister's life, from the happiest early days through the downward slope of Nazi takeover to the final moments arriving at Auschwitz.

*Hana's Suitcase* touches lightly on the darker crimes of the Holocaust, but it also does so honestly—it's not so much sugar-coating the truth as it's ending the story a little early. We're not exposed to

horrific images that jolt us into anger; we're given a sad tale of Hana, a Jewish girl who had to try and live through one of the most trying times in history.

Taking place on an impressive double-level stage, the play uses multimedia projected onto parts of the stage to create shape-shifting visuals of Hana's drawings and photos from the past. Cleverly designed to keep children focused on the stage, the set gives the show an unusual amount of immersive force.

But while the stage is impressive,

some of the acting is much less so: Yim in particular hams up his performance. Although it may be effective for children, a few of his moments were cringe-worthy for anyone over the age of twelve. A few problems also arose when the script tried to dumb down its message too much. As a play geared for ages twelve and up, it could afford to tell the story without stating the message slowly and plainly at the end.

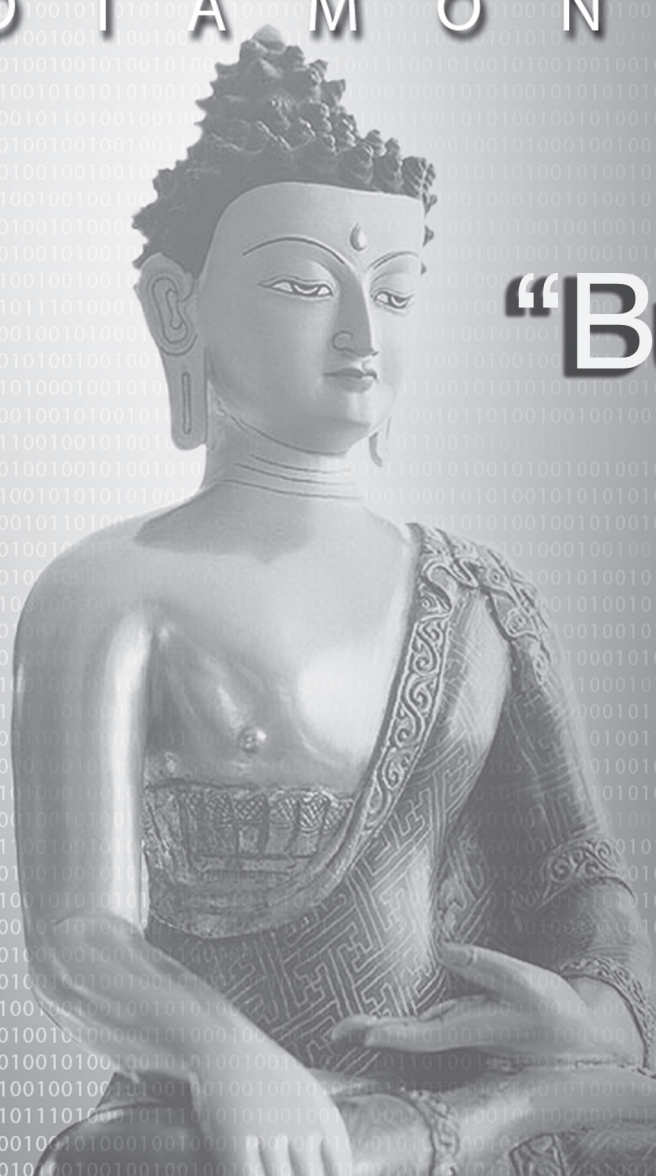
But ultimately, such a show comes down to how its target audience—

kids—take to it. Immediately following the performance, a few of the actors came out to do a brief Q & A with the audience, and it was the children who were raising their hands, trying to learn more. They saw Hana and want to keep her memory—and message—alive in their minds.

Despite some over-simplified storytelling and hammy acting, *Hana's Suitcase* is a success that lightly introduces the concept of the Holocaust to those who haven't heard it all before.

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