

## COMMUNITY NEWS &amp; FEATURES

# BUTTERFLIES IN AUSTIN

## AJRT Partners With Local Organizations to Mount Nearly-Lost Musical Based on Children's Poems from Terezin

When former Shalom Austin Board Chair Susan Broockman sat down with Austin Jewish Repertory Theater Artistic Director Adam Roberts two years ago, she had a special project in mind.



Credit: April Hudson

Cast member Kristen Gooch in rehearsal for *As Butterflies*

Across the table, she passed to Roberts the script of a musical that hadn't seen the stage in over twenty years: *As Butterflies*, based on the poems from the renowned *I Never Saw Another Butterfly*. This month, thanks to Broockman's passion for the show – in addition to that of her daughter, Lindsay Palazuelos, a cast member in that first production – AJRT is partnering with TILT Performance Group and

Congregation Beth Israel to mount a new production of *As Butterflies* following on the heels of *Yom HaShoah*.

The musical draws on poetry written by children interned in the Theresienstadt ghetto and Terezin concentration camp. Hal Hudson, a North Carolina-based theatre educator and director, and Jim Crew (a fellow North Carolinian and composer) adapted the children's words into a musical

in the early nineties. It was subsequently produced to great success, but Hudson's health was failing. He passed soon after the production was mounted, his dying wish to the children he loved being that of bringing *Butterflies* back to the stage one day. Enter Broockman and Palazuelos who, knowing of the Austin Jewish Repertory Theater's fondness for developing new works, approached Roberts with the idea to produce the work again, this time in Austin.

Broockman recounts that original production – and its implications for both community and playwright – with vivid recollection. "Hal was passionate about this project. It was a serious topic – and his first effort as a playwright," she explains. "He was directing a young cast. And he was in a hurry. It was only following that original production of *As Butterflies* at Duke University in 1993 that the families involved learned – with a mixture of denial and anguish – that Hal was not only looking exhausted from the pace of production, but was also HIV positive, and actually in rapid decline from full-blown AIDS. We only then realized how strongly Hal had identified with the children of the Shoah, whose lives were cut short so unfairly. He died six months later, at the age of 31."

She remembers with particular vividness the pact that was made between Hudson and the families he touched. "Hal was a

beloved and inspiring force, and as families gathered at his bedside, he asked us all to work to have the play produced again. We all agreed to try. Over the next twenty years, I approached several people with theater expertise, showing them a poor-quality 1993 home video of the original production. Adam Roberts was the first to take a real interest and has championed the project. It took someone with humanitarian vision and will to see the creative potential and implications of this work."

Broockman will attend the opening performance of the 2016 *As Butterflies* with daughter Palazuelos, who looks forward to the evening with equaled passion. "Seeing *As Butterflies* onstage again will be the realization of a long held dream," the latter says, remembering her mentor and the impact the show held for her at a young age. "Hal was a transformational teacher who shaped my life and those of many other young people," she recalls. "I've always felt that he was uniquely able to channel the hopes and voices of the children whose poems form the core of *As Butterflies* because he understood viscerally the desire to live and to create against all odds. Joining the cast of *As Butterflies* as a child helped me to grapple with the Holocaust and its legacy, including its impact on my own family."

From the beginning workings-through of the musical's local incarnation, Roberts knew he wanted to represent to the extent possible the varied populations that were targets of the Nazis. He called his colleagues at TILT Performance Group, Gail Dalrymple and Robert Pierson, to gauge their interest in partnering on the production. TILT, a theatre company dedicated to uniquely-abled actors, seemed the perfect

*Continued on Page 66*



Production team member Jared Slack films cast member Ella Rutman in preparation for *As Butterflies*.

fit as a way to showcase the differently-abled who were targets of Hitler's regime. The production also includes a boy who is played by a female actress, bringing into focus those who were persecuted for identities of gender and sexual orientation.

Dalrymple, TILT's Executive Director and associate director of the production, couldn't be happier with how the process is shaping up. "TILT is honored to be partnering with AJRT on this important historical production," she says emphatically. "It has been wonderful for our TILT actors to work with the talented youth of AJRT, and it is particularly moving to be performing the piece at Congregation Beth Israel." Echoes Roberts: "The atmosphere of Beth Israel's sanctuary provides the ideal environment for the telling of this story, and we couldn't be happier to partner with their dedicated leadership to make this production happen."

Most excited of all, perhaps, is JCC Austin Executive Director Shelly Prant. "I was present at the very first meeting between Susan and Adam, and I knew then that this project would be something very special. Adam's intense passion for the show sealed the deal. We feel that Austin is the time and place to present this new version of *As Butterflies*, and we're both humbled and exceedingly proud to share these performances with both our community and the larger city of Austin. From the first meeting, I knew that I had to do everything possible to support Susan and Adam's efforts to bring this important project to fruition."

All involved agree that the events depicted in *As Butterflies* are as sobering and relevant today as ever. "I think it will be a bracing reminder that some of the vital lessons of

the Holocaust – as we continue to confront loud calls for xenophobia and exclusion – are just as relevant today as twenty years ago," says Palazuelos.

Broockman thinks so, too. "In our world today," she reflects, "we see that freedom is precious and fragile. Children are precious and fragile. The arts are vital; theater, music and poetry manifest within our hearts and in our deepest truths. It is a miraculous peak-life experience for me to be able to attend a live performance of the new *As Butterflies*. I will sit with my grown daughter Lindsay who, now a mother herself, was in the original production. She was then ten years old, singing the title song, honoring the life of Jana Hellerova who was murdered at age six."

And what does she anticipate she'll experience? "Through his efforts, with the support of Shalom Austin, and in collaboration with Congregation Beth Israel, TILT and others, Adam is infusing new life into this beautiful, original musical. The significance is profound. I see and feel Hal and Adam working together to bring the yearnings of the children of Theresienstadt into the present. The talents and efforts of today's young cast honors those lost children, as well as the devoted original cast of 23 years ago. The existence of this new production will weave time and place, tragedy and hope, from generation to generation."

*As Butterflies* features the talents of cast members Toby Al-Tralbulsi, Kristen Gooch, Ryan Honza, Megan Hudson, Madisyn Moreno, Ella Rutman, Jarrett Suhr, and Liliana Sweeten.

**For tickets – in addition to more information about performance dates and times – visit [www.shalomaustin.org/butterflies](http://www.shalomaustin.org/butterflies).**