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By F. KATHLEEN FOLEY APR 12, 2019 | 6:00 AM



Matt Wolpe, left, and Adrian Sparks in front with Jeremy Kahn in the back seat in the Ensemble Theatre Company production of 'Everything Is Illuminated,' Simon Block's adaptation of the Jonathan Safran Foer novel. (David Bazemore)

ETC's 'Everything Is Illuminated'

The essentials: Accompanied by an overly enthusiastic Ukrainian tour guide, his elderly anti-Semitic grandfather and a deranged border collie, American author Jonathan Safran Foer searches the ruins of Jewish shtetls for the elderly woman who reportedly saved his grandfather during the Holocaust. The Ensemble Theatre Company production vaults surreally in time, but the initial wacky tone eventually segues into the dire, as the grandfather's secret is revealed.

Why this? The word "meta" could have been coined for Foer's loosely autobiographical 2002 book, which was adapted into a 2005 film before its London stage premiere in 2006. Foer's yarn has been heralded for an offbeat blend of autobiography, Holocaust history, magical realism and farce that could have been lifted from a Hope-Crosby "Road" movie. Simon Block's bucking bronco of an adaptation could daunt any theater company, but ETC Artistic Director Jonathan Fox, who directs this production, should be well-equipped to wrangle the juxtaposition of the humorous with the dark.

ETC's 'Everything Is Illuminated'

Stage Adaptation Explores Aftereffects of WWII

As the generation that lived through World War II slowly ages out of existence, memories of the conflict that killed millions of soldiers, civilians, and war prisoners, including those lost to the Holocaust, are more frequently rendered as artistic representations rather than firsthand accounts. The war affected so many people all over the world that stories of the era offer points of view as varied as the people who survived to tell their story. One such example is Ensemble Theatre Company's upcoming production of *Everything Is Illuminated*, a stage adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer's acclaimed novel of the same name, directed by Jonathan Fox.

This play follows a young writer, Jonathan (Jeremy Kahn), on a pilgrimage through Ukraine to return to Trochenbrod, a long-ago *shtetl* that was converted into a ghetto during Nazi occupation. Jonathan's grandfather was housed there and subsequently saved from annihilation by a woman lost to time. Their Ukrainian guide, Alex (Matt Wolpe), provides a dramatically different worldview (and comic foil) to Jonathan's American college student and is accompanied on the road trip by his own grandfather (Adrian Sparks). "It's very funny in some parts, and very dark and gripping in some parts," said Fox, who describes Act I as a bizarre road trip through the Ukraine, and Act II as the reckoning with the ghosts of the past.

"There are moments where characters recount the horrors they experienced during the Holocaust," said Fox, "but at one point, Alex says to Jonathan, 'You think you guys are the only ones who have suffered; there are people suffering today.' ... The story is larger than the Holocaust." Similarly, Kahn encourages audiences to think of *Everything Is Illuminated* as more than a play about the Jewish experience: "It's not just a Jewish story," he said. "It's about how everyone has the right to live, and the right to live in the way that they do without having to apologize for it."

Foer's novel, which follows the stories of Jonathan and Alex as they experience this tour through history, also shows glimpses of the war era of the 1940s and the original Jewish community that

existed on the land in the 1800s. “It’s an incredibly complex feat to adapt such a novel and make the story dramatic for the stage,” explained Fox. A fan of Foer’s work, Fox described this adaptation (by Simon Block) as capturing the novel’s “acerbic, ironic wit and tone.” Kahn described the show as a “sprawling journey across the Ukrainian countryside” complemented by the intimacy of the three men in the car.

Beyond the challenge of balancing comedy and pathos, there’s the varied linguistics across eras and characters to contend with. “Every character uses language in a different kind of way,” said Kahn. “My character has a very flowery way of speaking and often examines his own language as he’s using it; Alex has a more ‘creative’ use of the English language. The grandfather uses words sparingly, and the characters from centuries past have their own way of speaking. That tonal shift is a challenge in acting, and it can be jarring for an audience to experience that shift.”

Other challenges include a canine character and the road-trip vehicle onstage. “We’re not looking at it as realism, but as hints of realism,” Fox said. “It’s a landscape littered with representation: stacks of books, piles of shoes, that sort of thing.”

This is an important piece for Fox, who, as the artistic director of Ensemble Theatre Company and a fan of Foer’s work, is pleased to present the Southern California premiere of this show. Fox hopes *Everything Is Illuminated* will inspire connection between the audience and their own personal history, as well as with the experiences of those around them in realization of the grander tapestry of human history across the world — much in the way that Jonathan discovers his own history, one that is intertwined with the histories of Alex, a man from the other side of the world, and his grandfather, a man from a different time.

ON STAGE: Forward into the Past

Jonathan Safran Foer's popular novel comes to Ensemble in a stage adaptation

By Ted Mills, News-Press Correspondent
April 12, 2019 9:37 PM

EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED

In 2002 "Everything Is Illuminated" catapulted the then-unknown writer Jonathan Safran Foer into the best-seller list and the literary public's consciousness. Book clubs read it; well-thumbed copies made their way onto bookshelves.

"It was exciting to hear a new young literary voice," recalls Ensemble's Jonathan Fox, who is bringing Simon Block's stage adaptation to the New Vic this week. "It is this odd combination of a specific kind of humor and an inventiveness in the storytelling technique." On top of that, the narrative about returning to the old country in search of personal history is always a popular one.

Then came the movie version with Elijah Wood in 2005, which, Hollywood being Hollywood, streamlined the narratives of the novel into one that focused on its bankable star. Fox believes the play serves as a corrective.

"The novel has three different narrative strings intertwining, and the stage adaptation manages to capture all of them."

In the novel, Jonathan (the autobiographical stand-in for the author, here played by Jeremy Kahn) travels to Ukraine to find the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis--basically the woman to whom he owes his existence. Knowing nothing of the Ukraine, he hires a young man, Alex (Matt Wolpe, last seen in *The Liar*) and his grandfather (Adrian Sparks), along with a flatulent dog named Sammy Davis Jr. to be his guide. Foer's novel also steps away from the road-trip narrative to provide the backstory of the region and the labor camps during the war, narrated by Alex.

While Anne Gee Byrd plays the important role of the grandmother, it is Emily Goglia, who last appeared in Ensemble's *Husbands and Wives*, who takes on the majority of the female roles. In playing people from the present and past, Goglia helps cement the ties between Jonathan's journey and his grandfather's.

For the role of Jonathan, Fox turned to Jeremy Kahn, who he had seen already play the role in a production at Aurora Theater in Berkeley last year.

"Even though we are approaching the play in a different way than they did, he was very open to revisiting the character and production," Fox says. "Plus he really looks like Jonathan Foer."

"It's been really interesting to revisit a character with a different cast and production," Kahn says. "(The play) was still fresh in my mind and body. And I still have these latent impulses to replicate things from that production that I realize were very specific to that room and aren't useful to me here. There's been a little bit of rewiring to my brain."

Like Fox, Kahn stresses that he is not necessarily the central character.

"In truth he's one of three heroes in the book," he says, "And Foer even says about the character, I start as the hero and end up the fool. And that Alex starts off as the fool and ends up the hero. Foer is spot on about that."

Select Reviews

Los Angeles Times

Review: In 'Everything Is Illuminated,' family skeletons in the stage spotlight

By PHILIP BRANDES APR 19, 2019 | 12:20 PM



Matt Wolpe is the Ukrainian tour guide, left, and Jeremy Kahn is a Jewish American digging into family history in Ensemble Theatre Company's "Everything Is Illuminated." (David Bazemore)

What begins as a comic road trip of ancestral rediscovery takes a hairpin turn into tragic history as "Everything Is Illuminated"

makes its Southern Californian stage debut courtesy of Santa Barbara's Ensemble Theatre Company.

As in the Jonathan Safran Foer semi-autobiographical novel on which it's based, this 2006 adaptation by playwright Simon Block chronicles the parallel family skeletons unearthed by its two principal characters.

Jonathan (Jeremy Kahn) is an assimilated American Jew whose obsession with his lost family heritage kicks into overdrive after learning that his Ukrainian immigrant grandfather escaped the occupying Nazis with the help of a local woman who might still be living.

Embarking on a quest to find her, Jonathan enlists a gregarious but decidedly underqualified, English-mangling tour guide, Alex (Matt Wolpe). Roughly the same age but polar opposites in every way, the two are forced to bridge their cultural schisms as they search for the lost village of Jonathan's family origins against a stunning rural Ukrainian landscape by scenic designer François-Pierre Couture.

With Alex's supposedly blind grandfather (Adrian Sparks) behind the wheel of their beat-up vehicle, the first act plays like a present-day Road comedy, with Alex and Jonathan as the Bob Hope-Bing Crosby team. Versatile Emily Goglia appears as multiple characters they encounter along the way.

The second act's radical tonal shift into Holocaust legacy poses the play's biggest challenge, and director Jonathan Fox adroitly navigates it with maximum impact. The pivot point is the introduction of luminous Anne Gee Byrd as the village's sole survivor, resolutely preserving artifacts of the exterminated townspeople. Her life-changing revelations connect the threads not only of Jonathan's family but of Alex and his grandfather's as well.

The performers deliver an emotional wallop, but the show suffers the same problem inherent in adapting any literary work in which the manner of the telling is as integral as the story itself. Foer's sprawling, distinctively stylized novel employed Alex and Jonathan as dual narrators. A streamlined 2005 film version by Liev Schreiber limited the focus to Alex's point of view.

To its credit, Block's play illuminates more of Jonathan's internal journey, but that proves double-edged. In particular, his imagined lives of his distant ancestors and meditations on writing itself are steeped in literary eloquence — they read beautifully on the page but in live presentation remain stubbornly closer to recital than dramatic performance.

Review: Ensemble Theatre's 'Everything Is Illuminated' Shines Light on Tragedy, Mystery



Matt Wolpe, left, Jeremy Kahn and Adrian Sparks star in Ensemble Theatre Co.'s production of "Everything Is Illuminated." (David Bazemore photo)

By Judith Smith-Meyer, Noozhawk Contributor | April 18, 2019 | 9:25 p.m.

[Ensemble Theatre Co.'s](#) 40th season continues to reward local audiences with the Southern California premiere of *Everything Is Illuminated*, [Simon Block's](#) adaptation of the best-selling novel by [Jonathan Safran Foer](#).

The story of a young Jewish American writer who journeys to Ukraine to find the woman who saved his grandfather from the Nazis, the play features wit and irony, tenderness and brutality, comedy and, naturally, deep, personal and sweeping tragedy.

ETC's broadly visionary artistic director, Jonathan Fox, directs five equity actors who portray a host of characters. They're part of the action we watch, the history of several families, a village legend, and a writer's characters who force their destinies out of him, whether he likes it or not.

As the earnest author, Jeremy Kahn adeptly straddles the comic and tragic aspects of a young writer in the grip of his creative process while exploring a seminal family legacy. (Literary types will find myriad ways to get their geek on with this play.) But he

spoke as if he wasn't miked — sometimes more than necessary for an attentive Santa Barbara audience in a small house.

Matt Wolpe appears in his fifth ETC production, driving the plot as both Foer's Ukrainian travel guide and the narrator. I'd see anything Wolpe performs in. He's deft, sharp and believable. At the center of the comic parts of the play, his performance also captures dysfunctional family loyalty and subtle, affecting transformation.

Wolpe alternates seamlessly between Ukrainian-accented English as the narrator and Foer's guide/translator and blue collar East Coast American English when he's speaking in his native tongue. It's as if the dialogue between Ukrainians has been dubbed.



Adrian Sparks, left, Jeremy Kahn and Emily Goglia in "Everything Is Illuminated," running through April 28. (David Bazemore photo)

Clever staging features a fleshy dog, an onstage car and train tracks that convey set pieces and host invisible trains that come to life thanks to atmospheric lighting and sound design.

At one point on the road trip, Alex and his grandfather (played potently by Adrian Sparks) are in one bed talking before sleep and

Foer is in another when two characters from his in-progress novel climb into bed with him to discuss literary outcomes.

The beds are upright as if we are viewing the scene from the ceiling. It's funny, because the actors are all standing up under the covers.

Dim lighting, an abstract set with wheat clusters, piles of shoes, stacked books and earth, and a discomfiting soundscape accompany a nighttime hunt for a lost village as well as risky treks through a menacing field for a woman in Foer's fiction.

Production values parallel the dual nature of the narrative, and the audience seemed unable to decide how to react. Humor coincides with atrocity. It felt bad to laugh with the Holocaust pervading the story.

Emily Goglia adroitly inhabits no fewer than six characters, and Anne Gee Byrd's understated performance as the Woman weaves together divergent storylines even as she spawns more mystery.

Described as "hilarious" and possessing undeniable comic elements, make no mistake, this play unflinchingly presents individual tragedies, both expected and unexpected, and the haunting effects of events that took place generations ago.

If you need a trigger warning of almost any kind, consider yourself warned. The play includes, by depiction or description, multiple painful events.

Not everything is illuminated. We left the theater with plenty of unresolved mystery to reflect on for days afterward. Powerful theater, again, thanks to ETC.

The play runs through Sunday, April 28. Pre-show talks with ETC's dramaturg are always illuminating.

MONTE ITO

MISCELLANY

by Richard Mineards



Illuminated Impresses

Ensemble Theatre Company debuted the fourth show of its 40th anniversary season, the southern California premiere of **Jonathan Safran Foer's** *Everything Is Illuminated*, based on his *New York Times* best-selling novel and directed by **Jonathan Fox**. The play centers on the Jewish-American writer, who travels to Ukraine to seek out the woman who may have saved his grandfather from the Nazis. He hires a young local tour guide, who takes him on a hilarious road trip in search of the woman's village, Trachimbrod. Along the way they confront haunting memories as both their characters histories become entwined. **Jeremy Kahn**, in his ETC debut, is perfect for the role of Jonathan, as is **Matt Wolpe**, in his fifth show with the company, as the highly amusing translator with his sublimely butchered English. Award-winning **Adrian Sparks**, in the dual role of an irascible grandfather and historical relative is superb, with **Anne Gee Byrd** and **Emily Goglia** rounding out the cast. Kudos also goes to **Francois-Pierre Couture** for wonderful rural scenic design and **Pablo Santiago** for his very effective lighting.



Theater Review: EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED (Ensemble Theatre Company in Santa Barbara)

by TONY FRANKEL on APRIL 16, 2019
in THEATER-LOS ANGELES, THEATER-REGIONAL

SOME, NOT ALL, IS ILLUMINATED

Sadly, not everything is illuminated in British playwright Simon Block's fascinating but problematic adaptation of Jonathan Safran Foer's best-selling novel about a young American writer who hires a Ukrainian translator to take him to the town where a woman named Augustine saved his grandfather's life in WWII. Or so Jonathan thinks. All he has to go on is a photo. The real-life Foer came up empty-handed on his real-life trip and fictionalized what

may have happened in the real-life shtetl of Trachimbrod since its beginnings in 1791 up to its destruction by Nazis in 1942. Since Foer's dad and granddad came from this exclusively Jewish town, Foer was obsessed and ended up writing a narrative — published in 2002 — that involves time shifts, different narrative voices, and a melding of fantasy and reality, dovetailing in topics including the Holocaust, sex, guilt, memory, and cultural identity.



That's a lot to take on in a play, yet Block attempts just that in two acts. He compresses Foer's sprawling novel into the Jewish-American author's actual and metaphorical search for Augustine. There is wry, whimsical, charming cross-cultural humor and delicious details in this stage version, but the urgency behind Jonathan's voyage, let alone any sense of its success, is never felt, while the second act is almost too harsh to process — one actor is given the task of telling a long, horrifying tale of a Nazi atrocity, but it's unearned and too jolting for us. Missing is the middle act which would have bridged us from the humorous to the heavy; the first act definitely needs to be more foreshadowing.

Played against François-Pierre Couture's delightful, gorgeous set complete with train tracks and stacks of books mixed in among the wheat stalks, the story moves high-strung Jonathan (Jeremy Kahn, fresh on the heels of playing the role at Berkeley's Aurora Theatre) from Prague to Kiev to rural and xenophobic Ukraine where Americans, like all strangers, are distrusted, envied and fleeced. Jonathan entrusts himself to the very conditional care of his dweebish young translator Alex (Matt Wolpe, amusing and endearing in his convoluted English and utterly unearned self-confidence) and their driver, Alex's half-blind, crusty grandfather (a threateningly funny Adrian Sparks in what proves to be a Sisyphean role). Any slightly attentive playgoer will notice from

grandpa's defensiveness that he has secrets (apparently Ukraine's greatest natural resource).

Along with flashbacks to 1791 and 1804, where Jonathan discovers the pleasant and painful truths about his ancestors Brod (Emily Goglia) and Yankel (Mr. Sparks), Foer and Block indulge in some "fish out of water" fun over Jonathan's ignorance of Eastern European mores, grandfather's stinky and relentlessly pestering dog named Sammy Davis Jr. Jr., the boredom endless vistas of flat fields, and the astonishment that Jonathan won't eat meat — with quite a few entertaining results.

Less palpable in the play is what drives Jonathan's identity quest, as well as gains from what he learns. His final valedictory speech — a glowing description of how sexual intercourse illuminates the earth into outer space and how people persist through that lasting light — seems too radiantly consolatory given the unspeakable horrors that precede it. Whatever "second chances" Jonathan Foer achieved by returning to his roots remain achingly elusive.



Mr. Kahn is very much the Assertive New York Jew, but he feels better-suited for Neil Simon. Yeah, Jonathan's obsessive and nerdy, but it may have helped to bring him down; instead, this feels too much like a play about Jonathan, not Alex — it's Jonathan's quest but Alex's story. Seeing events through Alex's head is one of the book's crowning achievements and the initiator for many types of enthralling uncertainties. As he does in the book, Alex addresses us directly, but it doesn't *feel* like his story here — when it should.

It may have helped if Jonathan Fox's direction had hurled the situation into the audience somehow; even grandpa's amazing rust-and-hay-covered car simply goes side to side on a mini-

turntable upstage left, when it desperately needs to be down center in our faces (but, man, are those dog bits ever funny). Also on the set were unused train tracks in every scene that go across the length of the stage; it's uncertain what they represent other than Jonathan's arrival.

Pablo Santiago's saturated golden lighting on their adventure is unspeakably beautiful, and Dianne K. Graebner's black, Adidas slippers and track outfit for Alex is hilarious. Ms. Goglia is lovely when portraying a long-dead relative, but her other characterizations are almost corny, which only highlights the script's imbalance. As always, Anne Gee Byrd is radiant, even more so than usual because she doesn't project looniness as the woman lost in memory at the heart of Foer's mystery, here known simply as Old Woman.

There's no equivocation about the love put into Ensemble Theatre Company's sumptuous production with some truly wonderful moments involving accents, character, expressiveness, and more. Wonkily told, it's still a great story, one that casts its light on a vast and unforgivable darkness.

Links:

[Ensemble Theatre Co Premieres Everything is Illuminated](#) — BroadwayWorld

[Everything is Illuminated to Light Stage at Ensemble Theatre Company](#) —Noozhawk

[BWW PREVIEW: EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED at New Vic](#) — BroadwayWorld

[ETC's 'Everything is Illuminated'](#) —SB Independent

[L.A. theater: 'Everything Is Illuminated'](#) —L.A. Times

[Review: In 'Everything Is Illuminated,' family skeletons in the stage spotlight](#) —L.A. Times

[Review: Ensemble Theatre's 'Everything Is Illuminated' Shines Light on Tragedy, Mystery](#) —Noozhawk

[Theater Review: EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED](#) —Stage and Cinema