

Stage

Extraordinary rendition

David Natale's one-man show depicting Jewish cabaret stars in a Nazi deportation camp is a revelation. The American playwright and actor tells *Mark Smith* about 'Westerbork Serenade' and its unlikely champion, our very own Happy Hooker

In our media-saturated times, it's become a truism that fame brings privilege. With its propensity to propel individuals beyond circumstances of their peers (and oftentimes back again), it no doubt poses myriad moral dilemmas along the way. But it's hard to imagine circumstances more bizarre, more testing, than those endured by the celebrity subjects of David Natale's play.

Every Tuesday between July 1942 and September 1944, a train filled with Jews would leave the Westerbork transit facility in the north-east of the Netherlands, bound for the eastern concentration camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Bergen-Belsen and Theresienstadt. Temporarily, at least, one group of inmates was routinely exempt from onward transit and near-certain death. They happened to be stars of stage and radio.

That's because, along with a hospital, school and shops stocked with goods previously looted from Jewish businesses, Westerbork boasted its own theatre show. SS commandant Konrad Gemmecker's pet project was a weekly cabaret featuring the cream of Jewish entertainers, siphoned from the 'civilians' who entered Westerbork.

Among them were German actor and director Max Ehrlich, actress Camilla Spira and Dutch singing sensations Johnny and Jones, who had enjoyed success in the pre-war years as the first Dutch 'teen idols' (before that, they worked in the packing department of Amsterdam's De Bijenkorf warehouse). Tasked with entertaining the inmates, these individuals' talent and celebrity granted them a temporary reprieve, although ultimately they too would be sent to their deaths, joining the eventual six million.

It is the extraordinary story of those artists that David Natale dramatises in his ambitious, nuanced and meticulously-researched one-man show 'Westerbork Serenade', which incorporates period sketches, songs and harrowing personal accounts, redefining what it means to be performing for one's life.



'Some saw it as the most horrible form of collaboration with the Nazis; others saw it as light relief'

How did you come across this material?

I was studying for my thesis at the Old Globe in San Diego, when I read a book about the Berlin cabaret performers. I was struck by the sense of their extraordinary personalities. Later, I was astonished to hear that there was an actual song, the 'Westerbork Serenade'. It was my first connection to the music of the time and it brought the whole subject to life for me.

There are no costume changes in the show, yet you portray more than 15 distinct characters, often interacting via quick-

fire dialogue. How did you make it work?

It's true that the focus shifts a lot. But I found that if I refined one core physiological gesture for each character, the audience had a non-verbal cue that they could recognise very quickly. My director Gin Hammond has been invaluable in helping me to develop this technique and I love the fact that she's credited the audience with enough intelligence to grasp it.

Was it particularly difficult to portray women without straying into vaudeville territory yourself?

I just kept trying to remember what these women must have been going through. Clearly, a bad Marilyn impersonation wouldn't be appropriate. **Understandably, several of the characters as you portray them are deeply conflicted about their role at the camp.**

Yes, and the attitudes of the prisoners watching these revues would also have been split. Some saw it as the most horrible form of collaboration with the Nazis; others saw it as light relief. Max, the director of the cabaret, takes the view that if he can release the prisoners from their dread for an hour, then he's doing his job.

Your portrayal of the camp's commander Konrad Gemmecker isn't entirely unsympathetic.

He's potentially the most 'charming' character in the play but that's not to say he's dealt with sympathetically. I'm not sure that the script is historically accurate in this regard but you get the sense that he's trying to be the best Nazi that he can be, as odd as that may sound. I'd like to think that it's through him that the shades of grey – the moral ambiguities at play within the camp – are most apparent.

You've found an unlikely ally in producer Xaviera Hollander, whom most people will remember as 'The Happy Hooker'. Describe her involvement with the project.

She's done a lot of the work to get this production off the ground, raising funds and engaging venues. Artistically, I feel that we've developed a trust, that we understand each other. After seeing a video of an earlier version of the show, she requested that I add some of the more upbeat musical material from the period, for example: the swing tunes of Johnny and Jones. So I do a verse or two from their records; I'm eager to bring knowledge of some of this music back to the Netherlands.

Have you spoken to Holocaust survivors about the play?

During my research, yes, but also because several survivors have come to see it. Although they were very young at the time, some remember passing through the camp. I was particularly gratified to hear from one fellow who'd spent a year there. He said, 'It's exactly as I remember it.' My aim with this show was to help create an awareness of the history there and I can only hope that it's received in that spirit.

'Westerbork Serenade', November 13, 19, 20, 21 & 28, various times and venues. See listings for details.