

Holocaust memorial performance hits hard

Roald Hoffman's tribute at the Isabel Bader strikes universal themes

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- [Victoria Gibson](#)



A dramatic reading of Roald Hoffman's *Something That Belongs to You* at the Isabel Bader Centre for Performing Arts.

Photo: [Kendra Pierroz](#)

In January 1943, a five-year-old boy destined to win a Nobel Prize hid quietly in an attic above a Polish schoolhouse.

Seventy-two years later, Nobel Laureate Roald Hoffman is speaking out about the horrors of the Holocaust through theatre.

On Monday, *Something That Belongs to You*, Hoffman's fictionalized memoir, was performed as a dramatic reading with musical accompaniment at the Isabel Bader Centre for the Performing Arts.

Several campus groups, including the School of Drama and Music, the Department of Jewish Studies, Queen's Hillel and the Harry and Sylvia Rosen Memorial Symposium, organized the performance.

The date — November 9 — holds great significance. The day marks the 77th anniversary of Kristallnacht, also called "The Night of Broken Glass", when approximately 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Many did not return.

The performance takes on a somber tone, delving into themes of hatred, forgiveness and the strength of family ties. It explores the lasting repercussions of war on the mind as it moves between memories of a mother, Frieda, and her child in the attic in 1943 and events in the 1990s.

Hoffman's characters grapple with the moral conscience of the Holocaust. In a talk back session after the performance — an informal question and answer session — Hoffman said God leaves only one thing undecided for individuals: the ability to choose between good and evil.

"That is the choice that remains for every human being to make. It's not an easy choice in these difficult times," he said.

Each actor offered nuanced and comprehensive performances of Hoffman's work. None conveyed as much sincerity as Carolyn Hetherington, however, who played the elder Frieda.

Hetherington's character was based on Hoffman's real mother, for whom he chose to include pieces written by Frédéric Chopin. The composer's pieces were played intermittently throughout the scenes.

After hiding him in an attic for almost a year and a half, his mother always had something to keep her son happy, Hoffman said.

"There were endless games my mother came up with. They were the same games, some of them, that you'd play with your children," he said with a smile. "There was hangman, and battleship."

Although Hoffman has since dedicated a large portion of his life to theoretical chemistry, for which he was awarded the 1981 Nobel Prize, he spoke about his lifelong love for the arts.

"I fell in love with theatre maybe before I did with science. I didn't decide to be a chemist until three quarters of my way through a PhD in chemistry," he said.

During Hoffman's time as an undergraduate at Columbia University, he said he'd only just realized he didn't wish to be a doctor — as his parents wanted — when he discovered theatre.

“As I was working my way through that, and taking pre-med courses, the world was opening up to me in the arts and in literature.”

He said the first play that moved him was Garcia Lorca’s Blood Wedding, which he attended in his first year.

Some of Hoffman’s other dramatic works tackle scientific themes, which combine his two worlds. The play Should’ve, for example, addresses the social responsibility of scientists and artists.

To Hoffman, theatre presents an opportunity for “incredible magic”.

“I love what you can do with a little bit of music. You can go back 40 years. Or the lights can go down, and the actors throw a scarf around their neck, and you’re there with them.”

Tears sprung to Hoffman’s eyes after the show’s talk-back session, as he thanked director Craig Walker and the rest of the cast.

“It was beautifully done. Thank you all for the effort and all the emotion. It makes me cry again, which is just testimony to how well [you] did it.”