

'Behold Her' Explores Female Jewish Beauty

Joshua Needelman



Playwright Arden Kass, center, with members of the Behold Her crew; the show premieres Sept. 7 as part of the 2018 Fringe Festival. | Photo provided

Michaela Shuchman had long desired to create a production that felt personal to her — to explore Jewish female identity. Then she met Arden Kass.

Two weeks before the premiere of [Behold Her](#), which will run Sept. 7-23 as part of the 2018 Fringe Festival at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), Shuchman and Kass sat side by side in the sunny green room of the Adrienne Theater in Center City, recounting the story of how they met.

“We were sitting next to each other,” Kass said.

Shuchman smiled: “The story is, we were at the opening night of *[The Diary of] Anne Frank*.”

During intermission of the production at People’s Light in Malvern, Kass was returning to her seat when she overheard Shuchman chatting with a friend. “Excuse me, young actor people,” Kass said.

Despite their differences in age — Shuchman is 24, the same age as Kass’s daughter — the two clicked. They got coffee and almond croissants a few weeks later and bounced ideas off one another. The result was the creation of *Behold Her*, a product that

explores the essence of Jewish beauty and how perceptions have evolved over time. It's a vaudeville-style full-length play telling the stories of various Jewish women.

Kass is the playwright, while Shuchman is the producer and lead actress. Tori Mittelman is the director and Marcia Saunders acts alongside Shuchman. Of the 10 people involved in the production, eight are women. Shuchman, for her part, is particularly excited to share the religious side of her upbringing.

"Instead of sitting around and waiting for someone to give me that opportunity, I thought, 'I'm going to make this opportunity for myself,'" Shuchman said. "Then [I] just found an incredible person to make it with."

Shuchman and Kass laughed when asked why *Behold Her* is relevant. "We seem to be having a little bit of a conversation about immigrants and what they bring to our country," Kass said.

As a Jewish-American woman, Kass sympathizes with the plight of immigrants in America looking to "flower in unfamiliar soil."

Shuchman finished her thought: "And finding beauty within yourself, even if you're not looking around and feeling like you fit the mold."

In creating the production, Kass and Shuchman investigated the merits of conventional Jewish beauty. They touched on stereotypes about Jewish women's looks, relishing the opportunity to define what that meant for themselves. It goes beyond the "male gaze."

"It's about self-determination and saying, 'This is who we are,' instead of other people saying, 'This is who we think you are,'" Kass said.

The production touches heavily on Kass' personal experiences, in addition to a host of other women found in textbooks. There are also women who don't exist in the public sphere, like Shuchman's grandma. There's questions about the Torah, and why some women made it into the texts and others didn't.

Shuchman revealed that one of the songs in the show is based on the prayer "Eishet Chayil," which translates to "Woman of Valor."

"This ancient prayer sort of says what a woman of valor should be. But isn't a woman of valor everyone?" Shuchman said.

Early in the production's creation, Shuchman, Kass and Mittelman met at Plenty Cafe for coffee and croissants. Looking around the table, a thought popped into Kass' head: "Oh, this is Jewish beauty right here."

"If you have to come up with an ideal definition of Jewish women, do they look a particular way? No, but they are beautiful," Kass said. "Do they all sound the same? No, but they are so passionate and invested and creative, and they take ownership of things — and get them done."

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