

Spotlight

BY WENDI KAUFMAN

Funny Girl

Laura Zam turned her mother's experience as a Holocaust survivor into a witty and powerful play

Driving one day in DC, playwright Laura Zam, 44, suddenly knew she had to go to Poland, to where her mother, a Holocaust survivor, spent the war. That was three years ago.

"My plan was to apply for a grant and turn the experience into a play," says Zam, a Brooklyn native who lives in DC's Adams Morgan. The grant didn't work out. Financially struggling as an actor and writer, Zam, who is single, paid for the trip with credit cards.

Zam's mother, Harriet, was ten when World War II started; she survived two concentration camps—including Auschwitz—and was evacuated in a death march, sent to sea on a barge, and liberated on the last day of the war in Europe.

Collaterally Damaged is the result of Zam's trip, a powerful and surprisingly funny one-woman play.

"Humor is a survival mechanism," she says. Besides, she

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adds: "Imagine as a teenager hearing, 'What do you mean you can't clean your room? When I was your age I was sewing buttons on Nazi uniforms!'"

Although she has written other plays, this is her first autobiographical work. Barely over five feet tall with curly hair and intense green eyes, Zam transforms herself into 18 characters in the play, ranging in age from 10 to 80, both male and female.

"When I started this, I wasn't sure where it was going," she says. "Now, re-creating these characters, I realize I was trying to connect with my mother."

Her mother died 12 years ago, never to see a performance, but Zam has shared her story with audiences at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and at high schools and youth groups when it debuted last year.

Zam believes writing about hard experiences is healing. "It makes it possible to move on and lets a little light into the darkness." **WI**



In her one-woman show, Zam plays 18 characters, from a ten-year-old boy to an elderly Polish woman.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATTHEW WORDEN