

Actress brings story of growing up amidst the pogroms to Norwood

By Max Bowen

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Vicki Summers knows how important it is to preserve family tales.

Growing up, she knew of her grandmother, Bella Indianer, and her early years in Russia in the 1920s. Bella grew up amidst the pogroms, a term is usually applied to anti-Jewish violence in the Russian Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Her grandmother and her family escaped this horrific time and made their way to America. Years later, Summers sought to preserve that history, and decided to do so through a play she wrote herself—“Bella, An Immigrant’s Tale.”

“My main mission is to get everyone to tell their stories,” she said prior to a performance at the Morrill Memorial Library on Tuesday. “It’s a shame to lose those precious stories.”

Summers wrote this one-woman play late last year, and in it, tells her grandmother’s story through a first-person viewpoint, taking the audience on a tale of escaping the Cossacks, seeing loved ones perish, and even being shot in the leg.

“I can’t remember a time in Russia when I wasn’t afraid,” she said in her grandmother’s persona.

Later, the story goes to Ellis Island, a life in Detroit, meeting Joseph Indianer, and falling in love. The audience learns about the photography business her grandparents started, and their eventual relocation to Miami Beach, where they lived just down the street from infamous gangster Al Capone.

She takes on another 10 or so roles, including her mother as a young child, her grandfather, and even a surly man working at an immigration receiving station, who refused to help because he couldn’t understand Bella.

“I always wanted to write a book about her because her life is fascinating,” said Summers. “And I had interviewed her, she didn’t want to talk about her past.”

Summers supplemented what she learned from her grandmother through other family members, and over the time the show has been performed, it's been tweaked a bit. Following a recent performance, an uncle told her that her grandparents didn't say "cheese" when they took a photo, they said "applesauce." When it came to connecting with the feelings her grandmother experienced—particularly the pogroms—Summers said she's experienced Anti-Semitism herself, growing up in the south.

"I was educated through my parents on the Holocaust and pogroms," she said. "In some ways it's part of you, it's happened to you."

Summers' performance is incredibly passionate, with each role distinct in its voice and mannerisms. During the show she interacts with the audience through her storytelling, even taking a photo of them with the telltale "applesauce." She's been an actress for many years, working with the Cape Rep Theater in Brewster, though this was her first time writing her own show. She said the story flowed through her and the writing process wasn't that hard.

"It is her story," said Summers of Bella. "Absolutely."