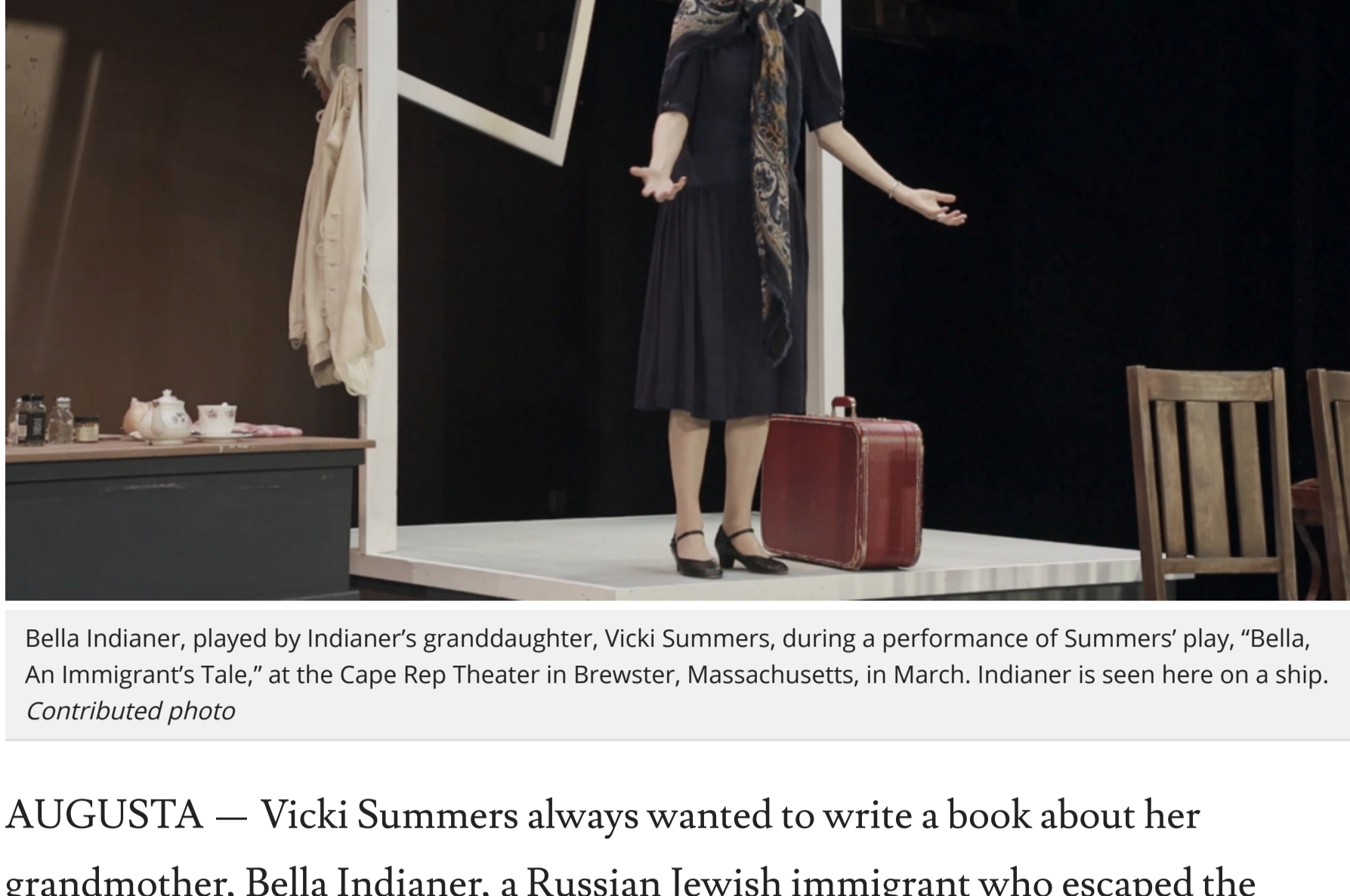


# New England actress brings immigrant grandmother to life in one-person play in Augusta

"Bella, An Immigrant's Tale" covers the life of actor Vicki Summers' grandmother, a Russian Jewish immigrant who escaped the pogroms and started a new life in America.

BY [CHRIS BOUCHARD](#) KENNEBEC JOURNAL

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Bella Indianer, played by Indianer's granddaughter, Vicki Summers, during a performance of Summers' play, "Bella, An Immigrant's Tale," at the Cape Rep Theater in Brewster, Massachusetts, in March. Indianer is seen here on a ship. *Contributed photo*

AUGUSTA — Vicki Summers always wanted to write a book about her grandmother, Bella Indianer, a Russian Jewish immigrant who escaped the pogroms in Russia and came to America in 1920.

Summers eventually realized, however, her grandmother's story was better suited to a play.

The Holocaust and Human Rights Center of Maine hosted that play, "Bella, An Immigrant's Tale," at the Michael Klahr Center in Augusta on Sunday afternoon.

Sara Lennon, the center's marketing and communications director, said Summers reached out to the center just a month ago in April to ask about performing the play.

Lennon said she and Executive Director Tam Huynh were thrilled to welcome Summers to the venue and felt the play would be a great fit.

The play begins with Summers, portraying Bella, preparing a Shabbat dinner. As she describes the meal, she begins to talk about her early life, leading into the biographical play. Throughout the 50 minute performance, Summers balances harrowing, heartbreaking moments, such as being pursued during the pogroms, with lighthearted and humorous portrayals of Bella's life, such as the first time she met her husband in America.

Summers, who lives in Portland and Cape Cod, took a course in 2017 at the Cape Rep Theatre in Brewster, Massachusetts, that taught actors how to write their own stories and adapt them into plays, which ultimately inspired the play.

"I knew I had to write this play," she said. "The words fell out of me almost instantly, almost like she channeled me. It was an incredible experience."

Since writing the play, Summers said she has performed it between 20 and 25 times, and that the audience response so far has been "wonderful."

Summers said Bella not only came out of the Russian hospital alive, but with her legs intact. At 50, she had heart failure but managed to live through it.

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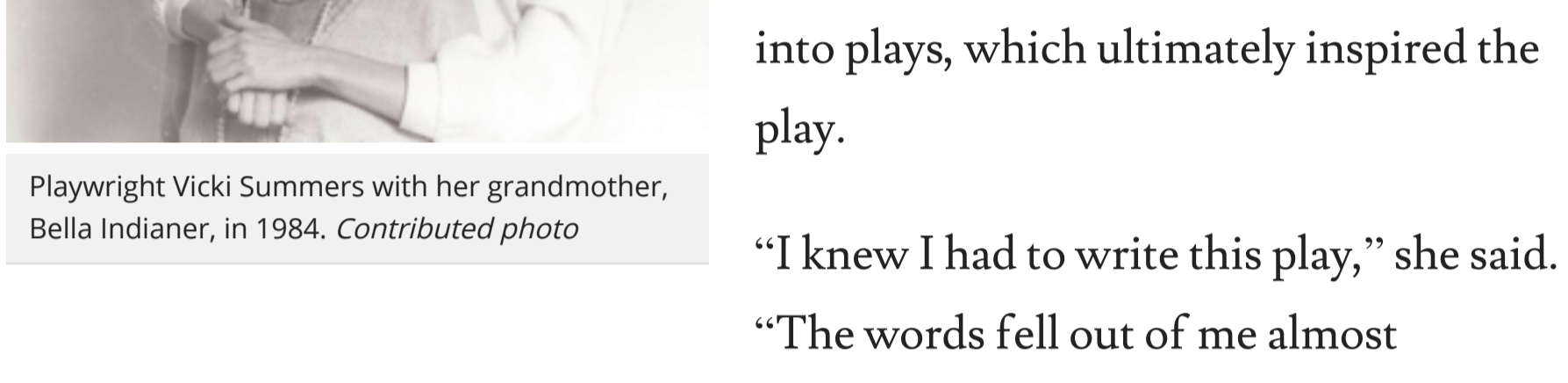
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Playwright Vicki Summers with her grandmother, Bella Indianer, in 1984. *Contributed photo*

"That was incredible," said Huynh after the play. "I felt like I was there."

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The HHRC asked guests to make a donation to UNICEF to help with efforts in Ukraine in lieu of purchasing tickets. Summers said the current crisis in Ukraine has created a stark parallel with her grandmother's younger life. After the performance, Huynh shared that they were able to raise \$800.



Bella Indianer, played by Indianer's granddaughter, Vicki Summers, during a performance of Summers' play, "Bella, An Immigrant's Tale," at the Cape Rep Theater in Brewster, Massachusetts, in March. Indianer is preparing chicken soup at a counter. *Contributed photo*

"My grandmother was a child when she went through this," said Summers. "It's so eerie, and it hit me recently, how what's going on in Ukraine right now is almost exactly what my grandmother had to go through a little over 100 years ago, and in the same region, because her village was in what is now current day Ukraine."

Summers hopes to do more shows in the future and said the experience of playing her grandmother on the stage brings her to life in a way that a book couldn't accomplish.

"The whole family, everybody adored my grandmother, just adored her," Summers said. "So how could I not write a play? I think that's why I never wrote the book, because this was meant to be a play."

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