***A SHAYNA MAIDEL***

By BARBARA LEBOW

The setting of the play is the stylish Manhattan apartment of Rose Weiss, the time 1946.

Although born in Poland, Rose, now in her 20’s, came to the United States with her father,

Mordechai, at the age of 4. She is now completely “Amercianized”. The plan had been for Rose’s mother and older sister Lusia to come with them. However, shortly before departure, Lusia fell ill with scarlet fever, the mother stayed behind to care for her, and eventually the rise of the Nazis cut off their escape. Their ordeal in the concentration camps, which only Lusia survived, has brought a burden of guilt to the aging Mordechai. He has deeply mixed feelings as he awaits Lusia’s arrival, who has, at last, found her way to America. With her halting English and Old World ways, Lusia is a striking contrast to Rose, who is somewhat embarrassed by her rediscovered sister’s presence, and fearful that it will threaten her own hard won independence. Distraught, and concerned that she may never be reunited with her young husband, Lusia embraces a series of memories and fantasies which recreate the real joys and horrors of her life before the war. When Mordechai gives Rose a letter from her mother—a letter left many years earlier with a non-Jewish Polish friend—a “proof” of family is somehow restored. Old barriers and griefs give way to a renewed sense of hope and mutual dependence, and the conviction that a better future may yet arise from the bitter ashes of the troubled past.

**DIRECTOR’S NOTE**

Except for Rose, all the characters have a Yiddish accent when they are speaking in English. However, in the “memory” or “fantasy” scenes, where these characters are assumed to be speaking Yiddish, the actors should shift into unaccented English. The character of Lusia has halting speech and a very strong accent, as she has had little exposure to proper English. Mordechai has lived in the U.S. for many years. Although he still has an accent and his skills are far from perfect, he has had the time and experience necessary to sound more confident when speaking English. Some Yiddish is used in the play, and a glossary is provided of words and phrases not otherwise translated in the text to assist those working on, or reading the play. In performance, most of the Yiddish dialogue will be understood by a non-Yiddish speaking audience, as long as the actors know what they are saying. Spoken, many of the Yiddish words resemble their English translations. Gesture and intonation will help clarify meaning, and the words give no important new information. The Yiddish flavor is what matters. Dialogue coaching for Yiddish speech, as well as Yiddish/English accents will be provided.

**CHARACTERS**

**ROSE WEISS:** (Early 20’s) Born in Poland, Rose has lived in New York City since age 4. She is a “hip” (1946) New York City young woman. While modernizing and assimilating, she is neither ashamed of, nor hiding, her heritage. She does, however, change her name from Rayzel Weiss to Rose White. She does so without ever telling her father. She tells Lusia “I changed it, but not really. It is an exact translation. I did it just to sound like everyone else.” Rose has always been troubled by Mordechai’s inability to fully express fatherly love to her. Her older sister Lusia’s sudden “return from the dead” is a mixed blessing. Rose no longer remembers this sister from a “different lifetime”, and now suffers guilt for being neither able to give her sister an honest, heartfelt welcome, nor immediate feelings of love. As with her father and sister, Rose must come to terms with both past and present.

**MORDECHAI WEISS:** (Almost 70) Mordechai’s character has been shaped by Jewish tradition, world affairs, circumstances, seemingly innocent choices, and ultimately, the tragic results of the Holocaust. He believes a choice he made so many years before caused the death of his wife and (so he thinks) his elder daughter, Lusia. Although he is a good man, the guilt he feels from his choices has left Mordechai without the ability to demonstrate complete love to his surviving daughter Rose. It is impossible for Mordechai to forgive himself for his mistake. He is, however, the hub of the family wheel. The play’s strength depends on the actor’s ability to repress any emotions which would betray weakness or vulnerability. This is what makes the play’s final emotional release effective.

**LUSIA (LOO’-SHUH) WEISS PECHENIK:** (Late 20’s, Appears younger in memory scenes) Although a concentration camp survivor, Lusia is NOT self-pitying, and does not EVER perceive herself as a victim. Lusia has been through horrors we can only imagine. Regardless of this, she maintains a quiet strength. She will never have the concentration camp tattoo removed from her left arm, as she needs to always remember what must never happen again. Lusia’s speech is broken and stilted. Her Polish/Yiddish accent is strong, but must remain completely understandable to the audience. It is important to Lusia to maintain her identity—to be HERSELF—while also working hard to acclimate to the customs and language of her “new country”. Lusia can see that her sister does not fully welcome her return; that she is loved, but also seen as an imposition. Lusia married Duvid Pechenik at the outset of the war, but does not know if he has survived the hardships of a concentration camp. Lusia always clings to the belief that he is alive and

seeking to find her.

**DUVID PECHENIK:** (Age 30; Younger in Memory Scenes) Duvid is the childhood sweetheart, and later husband, of Lusia Weiss. They have always been soul mates. Duvid was arrested by the Nazis in 1940, and interned in a concentration camp. He survives the Holocaust, in large part because of the strength and hope he derives from his love for Lusia. He appears in Lusia’s memory as a teenager in 1932, and again as a young man in 1939. He ultimately returns to Lusia in NYC in 1946. Before the war, Lusia and Duvid had a baby daughter Sprinze, who was tragically lost in the Holocaust. Like Lusia, Duvid must remain strong and a survivor.

**HANNA:** (Age 14; Again in her late 20’s) Hanna appears in Lusia’s memory scene of 1932, when they were young teens. She also appears as a current (1946) fantasy of Lusia’s imagination. She is Lusia’s best childhood friend. In the words of Mama regarding Hanna and Lusia, “You might as well be sisters!” In a flashback, we see how that friendship brought happiness to Lusia in those troubling times. They talk honestly, freely, and with humor as well as compassion with one another. The memories of Hanna helped keep Lusia alive in the concentration camp. Shortly after beginning her new life in America, Lusia experiences an imaginary conversation with Hanna. At first, it is “teenage” talk filled with fun memories, much as would have occurred in their adolescence. The conversation then turns poignant and adult in nature. We can see that the fantasy of Hanna and Lusia being together again really represents both sides of the deep conflicts within Lusia’s subconscious. They are the past and the present. Lusia must let go of the past, and her final “conversation” with Hanna helps her to do so.

**MAMA (MRS. WEISS):** (Mid 30’s; Again in her late 40’s) We first briefly meet Mama in a memory scene of Chernov, Poland, 1932. Several lines allow us to quickly observe that she was a giving, caring, loving mother. Hanna remarks to Lusia, “I love your mother. Only I wish she wasn’t so sad. Even when she’s joking, like now, I can see she’s sad underneath.” Lusia replies, “She misses my sister, and Papa, I think. But mostly my sister.” Mama does indeed live for family, especially for her children. Mama is a fatalist, believing all that happens to her family is “God’s will”. In her words, she is “not a learned person”. She is, however, capable of great love and great sacrifice. Mama later appears in the present (1946) as a fantasy in Lusia’s imagination. She now looks late 40’s, the age she would have been had she not died at Nazi hands. In a powerful scene, we learn she had a chance to escape to safety, but would not leave her daughter and granddaughter. She maintains her beliefs, telling Lusia “If God wanted us to be in America, you would never have caught scarlet fever. Your father would not have had such business troubles.”

**ENSEMBLE**

**DIRECTOR’S NOTE:**

These characters appear only in Act I, Scene 1. This short scene reenacts the birth of Mordechai in 1876, in a Polish shtetl (village). This sets the stage for what troubles the future holds, and why Mordechai ultimately seeks to relocate his family to America. Although this scene is merely one page long, and each character has only a few words or lines to say, quality acting and dedication to these roles are expected.

**MIDWIFE:** (Adult female of any age) The midwife is present to deliver baby Mordechai. She must appear at all times to be concerned with just that.

**MOTHER:** (Grandmother to Mordechai; Age 40-55) As her daughter gives birth to Mordechai, a violent pogram begins outside their home. The mother seeks to calm her daughter in response to the noise outside.

**DAUGHTER** (Mother to Mordechai; Age 18-30) Wife of Rabbi Itzak Weiss, is seen and heard giving birth to her son, Mordechai during this short scene. Her heavy breathing and muffled cries continue through the birth process.

**MAN** (Rabbi Itzak Weiss, Father to Mordechai; Age 25-45) The father-to-be stands to the side, repeating a Hebrew prayer until his son is born. He then announces “We shall call him Mordechai.”