

NEW LIGHT THEATER PROJECT's



H*tlers' tasters

A PLAY BY MICHELLE KHOLOS BROOKS

DIRECTED BY SARAH NORRIS



*H*tlr's Tasters* is an award-winning play by Michelle Kholos Brooks. Directed by Sarah Norris, the production includes a cast of four women and boasts an entirely female-identifying creative & design team.

Enclosed is information about the people behind the project, background of the play, various marketing materials from its three-year journey, and a range of media features, including rave reviews.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	About the Play
3-4	History of Production
5-6	Playwright Statement: Why Now?
7-8	Lead Creatives
9-10	Producing Companies
11-13	Select Reviews
14-32	Select Features
33	Other Team Bios

"One of the best evenings I've spent in the theater in a long time.
It was interesting, entertaining, upsetting and made you think."

SUSAN STROMAN
LEGENDARY DIRECTOR & CHOREOGRAPHER

ABOUT THE PLAY

*H*tlers Tasters* is a unique theatrical event that is a fictional retelling of a largely unknown story of the German young women conscripted to taste Adolf Hitler's food for poison. This dark comedy explores the timeless dangers of complacency against the backdrop of the Third Reich. Using an anachronistic retelling of a historical footnote, *H*tlers Tasters* considers what girls discuss as they wait to see if they will survive another meal. The 85-minute piece is enhanced by dance and a captivating soundtrack.

*H*tlers Tasters* was inspired by a 2014 interview with 94-year-old Margot Wölk who, for the first time, revealed her harrowing past as one of Adolf Hitler's food tasters. Margot, a German secretary at the time, was among fifteen young women selected for this "honor" at Hitler's Wolf's Lair.



HISTORY OF THE PRODUCTION

- In 2016 the first staged reading of *H*tler's Tasters* was featured in Pacific Resident Theatre's Fall Fruit Series (Los Angeles). The following year, prominent readings were held at Boston Court Theatre's New Play Festival (Pasadena) and Wordsymth Theatre (Houston).
- The play was the 2017 finalist and winner of Centenary Stage's Susan Glaspell Award. Brooks was partnered with Norris to present a staged reading in competition with five other plays. *H*tler's Tasters* was declared the winner by a distinguished panel of donors and tastemakers along with an enthusiastic audience. A monetary award was given along with a commitment to a full production at Centenary Stage in 2018.
- In the spring of 2018, Brooks and Norris collaborated to bring *H*tler's Tasters* to life at Centenary Stage. The success of this initial production, coupled with the passion and praise from audiences, critics and artists alike, led Norris to program the play in New Light Theater Project's following season.
- Incorporating new ideas and discoveries from the Centenary production, Norris assembled a fresh team of female-identifying theater-makers to bring the show to life at IRT Theater in the West Village in the fall of 2018. The production was a hit, gaining rave reviews and selling out houses.
- Building off the momentum, the team launched a campaign to raise funds to bring the production to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Along the way, the show was invited to the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts (Chicago) for a 2-week run, followed by a sold-out limited run at the E2E Festival (NYC) hosted by 59E59 Theaters in the summer of 2019.



- *H*tlr's Tasters* made its international debut at the 2019 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The production ran for the entire month of August at Greenside Venues (Infirmary Street) boasting a sold-out run and collecting rave reviews and coveted multi-star ratings for

the entire team. The cast of four became Fringe celebrities. The play was named as one of the Best of Fringe by The Stage (UK).

- In March 2020, the production was invited for a month-long run at the Electric Lodge (Los Angeles). After only three performances, the show was obliged to close prematurely due to Covid-19.
- During the year-long shutdown, Brooks and the cast were featured in multiple digital events including Moment Magazine (along with prominent Holocaust historian Gavriel Rosenfeld), the Teatron Jewish Theatre Festival, a retrospective moderated by Nan Barnett, Executive Director of National New Play Network, and The Kilroys List.
- In the summer of 2021, the team was reunited for two in-person live productions: the renowned Guild Hall (East Hampton) and the historic Pendragon Theatre (Adirondacks). The play was also invited to a digital return to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival at the Pleasance Theatre.
- In 2022, *H*tlr's Tasters* made its Off-Broadway debut at Theatre Row, in Times Square, New York City. The production was hailed as "the toast of Broadway" (London Times) and named a TimeOutNY Critics Pick and Best Bet by Theatre is Easy.

PLAYWRIGHT STATEMENT: WHY NOW?

I understand that some people are triggered by the name, Hitler. I am too. However, as a Jew, I am more terrified by what I'm currently seeing in the world around me than I am by a name—albeit the worst name.

*H*tler's Tasters* is a play about many things but, most importantly, it is a play about the dangers of complacency.

The girls in *H*tler's Tasters* are the girls whose families didn't resist the tide of tyranny. They didn't catch the signs, or, worse, they accepted the "inevitable" and looked the other way when the "others" lost their homes, their businesses, and their lives. What they failed to realize is that madmen first come for the "other," but when there is no one left, he turns on his own. Hitler was willing to sacrifice young, German women; the future of the Reich, the potential bearer of German sons, to taste his food for poison. The tyrant is insatiable and, because power makes him even more paranoid, there is no amount of privilege—be it race, economic, social, or even family status that protects us when the tyrant turns his gaze in our direction.

Right this very minute, bad actors in government are working to undermine our country. They are once again trying to control the ability for women to have autonomy over their bodies. They are surgically and deftly slicing away at our democracy with tiny, barely noticeable cuts. However, as with the Nazi's, these small fissures, paired with outrageous lies about immigrants, Blacks, Asians, Jews, The LGBTQ+ community, Hispanics, Afghans, or any number of "others" are conspiring to create a chasm into which we're all in danger of falling. It is devastating to think that our children's children could look back and wonder why we didn't pay attention when the signs were so glaring.

*H*tlers Tasters* is also very much about the treatment of young women - the way society exploits and then discards them is a story as old as time. It's disproportionately true for poor women and women of color, but there is not a woman in the world who has not felt the fear brought on by an unhinged male with power—be that at work or walking down the street. In *H*tlers Tasters* we see the way young women, raised with Hitler as their father figure, have been indoctrinated. We have the heartbreaking experience of watching them submit to their fate.

We have a dictator in our midst right now and we are watching his lies, manipulation, and destruction in real time. We see his supporters believe they can trust this powerful male figure to do what is right. My people are from Ukraine. My great-grandparents escaped during the pogroms. Putin is calling Zelensky a Nazi when Zelensky is a Jew. These are dangerous times.

For all these reasons, *H*tlers Tasters* feels more relevant today than when I conceived of it a few years ago. I wish it wasn't. I wish I had written a story that was trapped in the amber of history. But the young women of *H*tlers Tasters* are powerful reminders of what can happen when a society indulges in complacency and fails to notice that what affects some of us, eventually affects all of us.

Thank you for getting past the H-word and experiencing the show for yourself. I think you will see why so many Jewish publications, organizations, even a Holocaust survivor has supported this play. I promise it is so much more than the name of a tyrant.

Yours in peace and solidarity,

Michelle Kholos Brooks

The cast of *H*tlers Tasters* on FaceTime with Marion Wiesel, Holocaust survivor, activist and wife of Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel; assisted by daughter-in-law Lynn Bartner-Wiesel.



LEAD CREATIVES



MICHELLE KHOLOS BROOKS is an award-winning playwright with productions staged internationally and a Playwright-in-Residence at NewYorkRep. Awards and distinctions include the Susan Glaspell Award for *H*tler's Tasters*, the Reva Shiner Comedy Award for *Kalamazoo*, co-written by Kelly Younger. *H*tler's Tasters* was also named Best of Fringe at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival by

The Stage (UK). *Hostage* was a finalist for the Woodward/Newman Drama Award, The Fratti-Newman Political Play Contest and a Showcase finalist for the National New Play Network. *Chair* received second place in the Firehouse Theatre Festival of New American Plays.

Plays have been produced and/or developed at the Skylight Theatre (World Premiere, *Hostage*), Centenary Stage (World Premiere, *H*tler's Tasters*), Pacific Resident Theatre, Adirondack Theatre Festival, Bloomington Playwright's Project (Rolling World Premiere, *Kalamazoo*), The Colony Theatre (World Premiere, *Family Planning*), Florida Repertory Theatre, Boston Court Theatre, The Road Theatre Company, Wordsmyth Theatre, The Barrow Group, Bay Street Theatre, Venue 9 Theatre, Wings Theatre, Laurel Grove Theatre Company, Drama West, Vox Humana Theatre Ensemble, iTheatre Collaborative, New Light Theater Project, 59E59 Theaters, Olive Theatre Greenside Venue at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the Adobe Rose Theatre, Pendragon Theater, Guild Hall and Theatre Row.

Brooks' play, *War Words* is scheduled for a world premiere in New York in the fall of 2023.

Publications include Dramatists Play Service, Room Literary Magazine and The Daily Beast. Brooks earned a B.A. from Emerson College and an M.F.A. in Fiction from Otis College of Art and Design. She is a member of The Dramatists Guild of America, The Playwright's Center and Pacific Resident Theatre. In addition, she is a Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security.



SARAH NORRIS is the founding Artistic Director of New Light Theater Project. Her work has been seen around the country including NYC, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Minneapolis, and around the world in Scotland, Australia, England and Ireland.

Select producer and production credits include: Playwrights Horizons (*I Am My Own Wife* off-Broadway and Tony Winning Broadway transfer), Disney Theatrical Productions, Bisno Productions (*Hughie* on Broadway w/ Forest Whitaker; *My Report to the World* w/ David Strathairn).

Select New Light credits and acclaim: *H*tlers Tasters* (TimeOut NY Critics Pick), *The American Tradition* (TimeOut NY Critics Pick; Best of Theater - Slant Magazine; "The gleefully anachronistic show...has a rambunctious punk-rock energy that's all too rare on our increasingly sanitized stages!" - The New Yorker), *Imagining Madoff* (This Week in Arts - NY Times; "Engrossing and philosophically lively" - The New Yorker), *Breeders* ("Both ridiculously and strangely moving!" - Jesse Green, NY Times; TimeOut NY Critics Pick; "An unexpected marvelous new comedy!" - Huffington Post).

Select directing credits include: *Everything is Super Great* (TimeOut NY Critics Pick), *This Wrestling Place* (w/ Executive Producer Ben Folds), *Picture Ourselves in Latvia* (Best of Theater, The L Magazine), *Hitler's Tasters* (Best of the Edinburgh Fringe; featured in the Chicago Tribune, LA Times and the BBC).



michael sheen  
@michaelsheen

Highly recommend [#HitlersTasters](#) at [#EdFringe](#). I saw it in NYC last year. Fascinating story, funny, disturbing, great performances all round. If you're at the Festival go see it!

NON-PROFIT PRODUCING ORGANIZATION



New Light Theater Project (NLTP) - Led by Artistic Director Sarah Norris and Producing Director Michael Aguirre, NLTP nurtures a Collective of artist-practitioners through the presentation of compelling stories across theatrical genres. NLTP believes in the strength of ensemble-work and is committed to fostering our Collective composed of writers, actors, directors,

stage managers, and designers from diverse backgrounds. Since 2013, NLTP has mounted over 30 productions which have received critical praise including a Sold Out Run and 'Best of EdFringe 2019' (The Stage for Hitler's Tasters), Best of 2019 (Slant Magazine for The American Tradition), Best of Theater 2014 (The L Magazine for Picture Ourselves in Latvia), TimeOut NY Critics' Pick (Everything is Super Great, The American Tradition, Breeders, and Bubba), current Co Op Resident Company of 59E59 Theaters & recipients of Covid Relief Grant (Ink'dWell), residencies with Theatre Row, The Flea Theater, Woodstock Byrdcliffe Residency Fellowship, Chicago Dramatists, and the Access Theater Residency Program. New Light is a 501(c)3 organization.

For more info: NewLightTheaterProject.com.

"The gleefully anachronistic show...has a rambunctious punk-rock energy that's all too rare on our increasingly sanitized stages."

The New Yorker | THE AMERICAN TRADITION

"So engrossing and philosophically lively...exquisite!"

The New Yorker | IMAGINING MADOFF

PRODUCER



NewYorkRep develops and produces new plays and musicals that inspire and compel social change by telling stories that expose our

our humanity. By illuminating social and ethical questions through art, we strive to create provocative theater that promotes empathy, compassion, and inclusion. In order to increase access to the stories we tell, NewYorkRep, produces content across artistic mediums. NewYorkRep's productions have been staged across the country as well as in London, where it won multiple awards, and Sydney. Our work has been a Critic's Pick of The New York Times, praised in The Los Angeles Times, and often noted in The Huffington Post. NewYorkRep is a 501(c)(3) organization.

For more info: NewYorkRep.org

"H*tlers Tasters shines a light on the dangers of an authoritarian government in a new and thought-provoking way. This relevant and lively play is both compelling and innovative in content and form, reminding us how vital it is to avoid repeating history."

Jeremy Aluma

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR |
ALLIANCE FOR JEWISH THEATRE**



SELECT REVIEWS



"Hitler's taste testers are the toast of Broadway."
THE TIMES OF LONDON

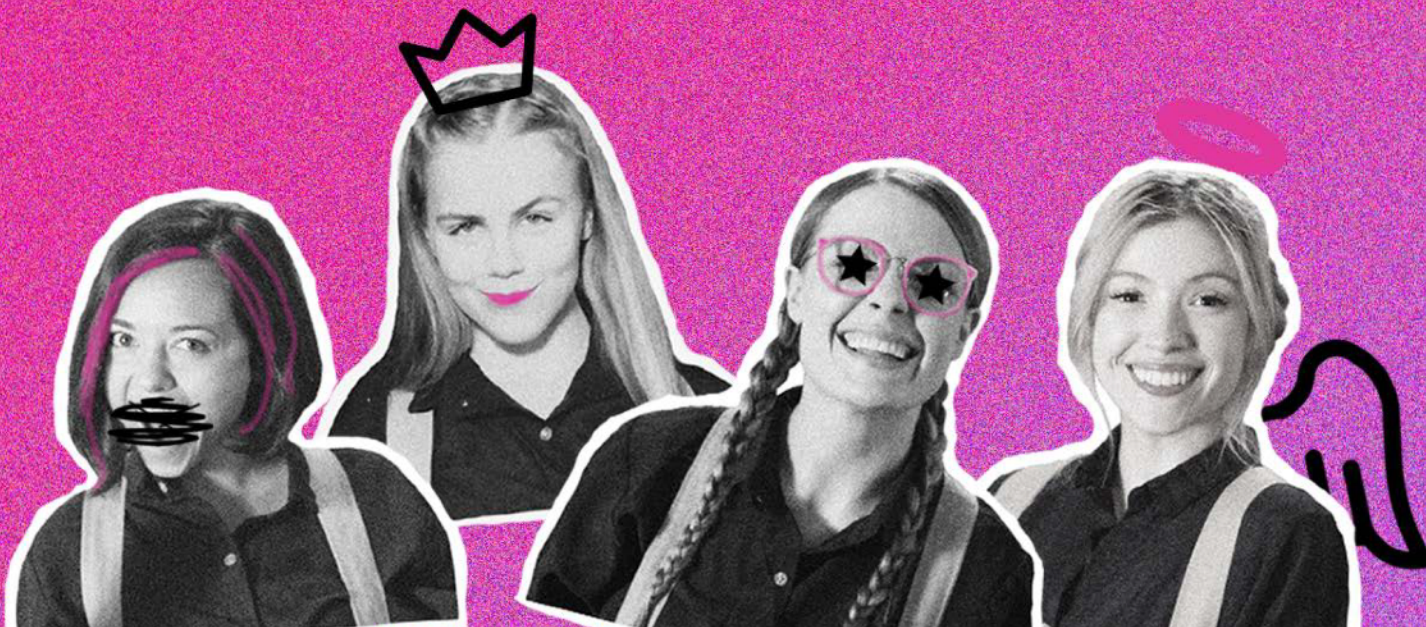
"Critics' pick. [One of the] best musicals and plays in New York right now.... A sly and disturbing meditation on the seductiveness of evil...
As history and headlines prove alike, tyranny is timeless."
TIMEOUT NEW YORK

"One of the most vibrant, hilarious, thought -provoking plays I have ever seen... There's a music to the dialogue. I hope it runs forever.
I love it so much."
JOSE SOLIS, TOKEN THEATRE FRIENDS

"A play that is both hilarious and terrifying... Clever concept, smart dialogue...proving both her point and the necessity of plays like *H*tlers Tasters* - we can never forget the dangers of complacency."
THEATER IS EASY

"A powerful 90-minute play. This latest production has been fine-tuned and boasts a pitch perfect cast."
TALKIN' BROADWAY

"Playwright Michelle Kholos Brooks has brilliantly adapted the true story... they reflect that what happened then could happen now and is happening now... the relevance needs no explication."
OFF OFF ONLINE



"Michelle Kholos Brooks' bold new play, *H*tlers Tasters*, was one of the hottest tickets in town. ...Packed with dangerous charm... A modern Fringe classic, providing a strong message for our times."

JEWISH CHRONICLE

"Compelling Play... a show that packs lots of punches... brilliant ensemble work!"

JANICE FORSYTH, BBC SCOTLAND

"Directed with real style and feeling, the play features impressive performances."

JOYCE MCMILLAN, THE SCOTSMAN

"A great essay on the banality of evil and how people sign up to do evil as long as it serves their purpose.

And I also found myself to be extremely entertained."

AMERICAN THEATRE MAGAZINE


"A refreshing interpretation of World War II and its ties to modern day, masterfully blending charm with danger.

This is a play that will grip you to the end."

NEW YORK THEATRE REVIEW

"I left the room utterly gobsmacked at the level of talent that I had just had the pleasure of watching."

THEATRE WEEKLY



"Tightly performed and directed work...
the humour cuts like barbed wire."

EDINBURGH GUIDE

"You will stumble out at the end completely bowled over
by the power of this play."

THE FRINGE REVIEW UK

"CAUTION: This tale may cause a rash of thoughts about ignorance and
complacency. Its side effects may include uncomfortable connections.

Without a doubt, its long-term effects include opened eyes."

CHICAGO SPLASH MAGAZINE

"What the playwright, Michelle Kholos Brooks has successfully done is
meld that past horror with the current political climate in America."

NEW YORK THEATER PIZZAZZ

"One of the hits of the season...nothing could be more relevant
or more perfectly presented."

A YOUNGER THEATRE

"This one is an original and it is loaded from stem to stern
with fresh new talents."

LIGHTING AND SOUND AMERICA

"Touts an unlikely subject for comedy, and yet it succeeds – brilliantly."

MIRO MAGAZINE

"Disturbingly entertaining piece of work...
a show that will linger in your mind."

WOMAN AROUND TOWN

"Incredibly clever... completely different to anything
I have seen at this year's Fringe!"

WITHIN HER WORDS

"The Mean Girls/Third Reich crossover we never knew we needed. It's
enthraling, unbelievable, and inescapably relevant."

THE SPY IN THE STALLS

FEATURED IN

The New York Times **Los Angeles Times**

TimeOut
NEW YORK

Forbes

NEW YORK POST

Chicago Tribune

THE  **TIMES**

BBC

**AMERICAN
THEATRE**

**THE
JC**
THE JEWISH CHRONICLE

THE NEW YORK JEWISH WEEK

THE STAGE

"In an era of political deceit, post-truth, and mass gullibility, Michelle Kholos Brooks' *H*tlers Tasters* provocatively examines why people cease to think for themselves and willingly obey authority. It offers an especially timely message for present-day American life."

GAVRIEL ROSENFELD
NOTABLE HOLOCAUST SCHOLAR

SELECT FEATURES

BBC

CULTURE

THEATRE

The women who tasted Hitler's food



By Holly Williams 13th August 2019

(Image credit: Getty Images)

Unknown until 2013, a team of around 15 women were employed to taste the Führer's food to check if it was poisoned. A new play at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival tells their story.

I

Imagine knowing every plate of food you eat could be your last. That breakfast, lunch and dinner are potentially deadly. And you have to eat them anyway.

For a group of young women in the Third Reich, this was their daily reality: they tested Hitler's food during the last two-and-a-half years of World War Two. The Führer demanded young women of good German stock sample each of the meals made for him, in case the Allies, or one of his own, were trying to poison him. Such a role was seen as a kind of honour – a way to serve.

The astonishing story of these young women's experiences only came to light in 2013, when the then 95-year-old Margot Wölk revealed her former role to the German magazine **Der Spiegel**. Now, *Hitler's Tasters*, a play by Michelle Kholos Brooks freely imagines what risking your life, fork by fork, was really like.

The show has been seen in various theatres across the US, but now comes to the Edinburgh Fringe – the world's biggest arts festival – for a month. Performed by an all-female cast, it focuses on four young women (in reality, about 15 were used on rotation) who lived in a schoolhouse next to **Wolf's Lair**, Hitler's Eastern Front headquarters in East Prussia (now Poland).



The Wolf's Lair was where Margot Wölk, whose story the play is imagined from, lived as a taster (Credit: Getty Images)

Brooks heard about Hitler's tasters quite by accident – a writing partner mentioned the story in passing when they were killing time before a flight. "I said 'are you going to write that? Because if you're not, I'm going to write that,'" she recalls. As a story, it seemed instantly and obviously thematically rich to Brooks. "It just hits every button of things that I think about and worry about: how young women are treated, how children are used in fields of war, how hard it is to be an adolescent woman, political manipulation..."

I didn't want these characters to be sepia-toned people in history, I wanted them to feel very, very present – Michelle Kholos Brooks

All of which sounds heavy-going, but the play is actually a comedy – albeit a black one. And Brooks sets it in its historical moment while also imagining these trapped young women as contemporary teenagers. The girls dance to pop music and pose for selfies, but gossip about fancying Frank Sinatra, Clark Gable and – queasily – Hitler himself; they speak like Californian valley girls, calling each other "girlfriend" or "loser", but then spout hatred for Jewish people.

"I was watching these young women taking selfies, seeing their deep commitment to getting the right selfie, and it hit me that these are the same girls. There is no difference except for time," says Brooks on her decision to have this double perspective. "I didn't want these characters to be sepia-toned people in history, I wanted them to feel very, very present."

The play uses this strange chapter of World War Two history as a way to examine the universal experience of being an adolescent woman – albeit in an extraordinarily high-stakes environment. But the thing about life for the tasters was that while each mouthful was fraught with peril, it was also an incredibly banal and boring existence.

Compared to many people's experiences in the war, they had it easy on one level – by 1944, many people were going very hungry in Germany, and they were getting three square meals a day. Of course, they were vegetarian meals – Hitler famously eschewed meat – and Wölk described a diet of vegetables, rice, pasta, noodles and exotic fruits, a real rarity at the time. But although the food "was good – very good" she added that they couldn't enjoy it.

The SS would serve the food, wait an hour to see if the girls keeled over, and if they didn't, the food would be taken to Hitler

"Some of the girls started to shed tears as they began eating because they were so afraid," she said in an interview in 2013. "We had to eat it all up. Then we had to wait an hour, and every time we were frightened that we were going to be ill. We used to cry like dogs because we were so glad to have survived."

Members of the SS would serve the food, wait the hour to see if the girls keeled over, and if they didn't, the food would be taken to Hitler. But in between each meal, the young

As far as we know, none of the real girls were ever actually poisoned by the food. But their story is barely documented – if it hadn't been for Wölk's account, it would never have been known. It seems that she was the only of Hitler's tasters who survived: as Russian forces advanced, a lieutenant sneaked her out on Joseph Goebbels's train, heading to Berlin. It's thought that all the other girls who remained were shot by Soviet soldiers.

Making comedy from such a situation can be "a funny line to walk" she acknowledges – and she has had people ask her if it's okay to laugh at the play, or even refuse to see the show. "Some people have said they don't want to see it because we're laughing about something awful – but if you saw the show you would know [we're not]. We're not in cahoots with Hitler, we actually don't like him!" jokes Brooks, a little incredulous that such a thing needs spelling out. *Hitler's Tasters* is about laughing *with* these young, essentially innocent women – and acknowledging that laughing *at* melomaniac fascists is one way to diminish their power.

Hitler's Tasters is playing at Greenside @ Infirmary Street, Edinburgh until 24 August 2019.



From Fringe Festival to Venice: A socially distanced ‘Hitler’s Tasters’ comes to L.A.



Playwright Michelle Kholos Brooks' "Hitler's Tasters" is moving forward with its West Coast premiere. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

BY STUART MILLER

MARCH 13, 2020 12:42 PM PT

Adolf Hitler was afraid of being poisoned, but he didn't use prisoners to taste his food. Instead he made it an honor, of sorts, for select teenage German girls.

This historical tidbit inspired Michelle Kholos Brooks to write “Hitler’s Tasters,” a risky drama that asks audiences to empathize with Nazi protagonists. The production by the New Light Theater Project earned acclaim in New York and at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and despite coronavirus-related theater closures in Los Angeles County, it is proceeding with its run through March 30 at the Electric Lodge in Venice. (A spokeswoman for the production said the venue has instituted extra cleaning precautions before and after shows and is capping the audience at 50 people to follow Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations for social distancing.)

“I’m so excited that it’s finally in my backyard,” said Brooks, a public radio journalist turned playwright who lives in Venice with son Henry and husband Max, who wrote the novel [“World War Z.”](#) Her father-in-law is [Mel Brooks](#), who knows a little something about pushing boundaries with Hitler (and, well, everything else).

The play, which has an all-female artistic team led by director Sarah Norris, takes place entirely in the room where the girls await their food, hoping to serve the cause and to please their leader — and to survive. Questioning why they are there can be as dangerous as any potential poison. Mostly, however, the girls blindly and loyally submit to their leader’s whims, never really thinking about how his immoral policies are also terrible for them.

But Brooks understands that girls will also be girls, forming friendships, bickering, gossiping and dreaming. Breaking traditional narrative rules, Brooks gives the girls cellphones. They take selfies and dance to Madonna, an anachronistic twist that drives home the relevance to modern America. The playwright spoke to The Times about the inspiration and response to the work.

What drew you to the story?

I'm very concerned about girls and the way they get treated, and all the issues that were speaking to me as a woman have been mirrored in our country. But initially, I just couldn't believe he used young German women. I remember thinking, "Isn't adolescence hard enough?"

The way young women relate to each other is complicated; it's not a time I'd like to go back to in my history. There was an inherent darkness in the story, shoving girls together in one room and seeing what they do to each other with the stakes being so high.

How much research did you do, and how difficult was it to find the tone, balancing the dark humor with the tension?

The tone emerged organically. When I had the idea, my husband got super excited, saying, "We get to watch World War II movies." He bought me all these books, "Hitler's Last Days" and "He Was My Chief" and books of protocol for how to behave on Hitler's birthday.

I decided I was going to read everything, but then I was part of a 48-hour playwriting challenge. You could only go forward, you could never rewrite. I said, "I'm not going to write this play for it," but I did. It was just living inside me in a profound way. That was the first draft. Then I found opportunities when I went back to hone it. There's so much humor that comes out of these tense awful situations, sometimes there's no choice.

What made you give the girls cellphones and have them dance to pop music?

The idea hit me out of the blue. It felt relevant and important.

I had watched young women spend an hour taking selfies and I was fascinated. Looking at yourself all the time seems like it can't lead to anything good. At some point it hit me that these would have been the same girls; they're still girls, they still preen and dance and braid each other's hair and fight and compete. At the time if they had cellphones I'm sure they'd be taking selfies.

When it hit me, it scared me because I knew then that I was telling a story that felt very present and I knew some people would be very uncomfortable with it and would bristle at it.

Did you talk to Mel about the play before you wrote it?

I didn't have a conversation with him about it beforehand, but he has really encouraged me to be brave: Go for what you know you want to say. If you're going to walk up to the bell, ring it.

And just by knowing him for so long and watching how hard he still works, he worked on me by example and osmosis. If I think something's funny, even if it's inappropriate, go for it. He has done pretty well with that.

Has there been pushback?

A journalist was sent a press release and she said, "Why would anybody use the name Hitler in a play? I hate him and I would never write a review about this play."

I thought, "I hate him too. I hear you, girlfriend." [Laughs.] But maybe it's worth digging a little deeper. To have that kind of attitude — pretending bad things don't exist — seems like a dangerous game to me.

A theater in Connecticut canceled the play. They were going to bring in middle school groups, and they would talk about World War II. It was around the midterm elections and it was a wealthy community, and they wrote to the producer and said, “We’ve changed our mind, this is too political. We’re a red area in a blue state, and we think this might upset some patrons.”

Of course, there are parallels drawn to what is happening now, but Trump’s name is never invoked. In the end it’s about Hitler. And also it’s theater. If you’re going to make those comparisons between Trump and Hitler and then cancel the play, that’s worrisome. Theater is supposed to be a place for conversation, not just a place where you come out humming a happy song.

'Hitler's Tasters'

Where: Electric Lodge, 1416 Electric Ave.,
Venice

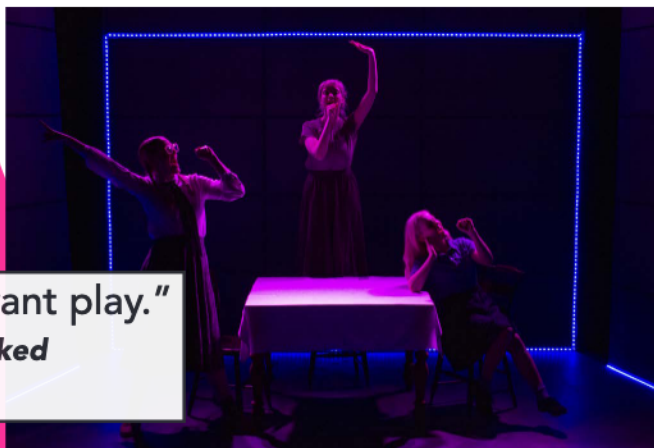
When: 8 p.m. Saturdays and Mondays, 3 p.m.
Sundays, through March 30; additional
performance 8 p.m. March 27

Tickets: \$25-\$35

Info: hitlers-tasters-tickets.eventbrite.com

"A wonderful, fascinating and deeply relevant play."

WINNIE HOLZMAN, Tony Award-winner, *Wicked*



THEATER

Age 28, going on 12: How adult actors pull off playing children onstage

By STUART MILLER
APR 01, 2019 AT 8:30 AM

REPORTING FROM NEW YORK — When does 28 equal 12? Or 41 equal 8? And how is it even possible that 22, 25 and 35 could all equal 11?

The answer: When you are casting grown-ups to play kids onstage. Sure, boys will still sometimes be boys and girls will sometimes be girls, but frequently it's men and women tackling these youthful roles. Not acting your age is a time-honored tradition, from "Romeo and Juliet" and "A View From the Bridge" to "History Boys" and "This Is Our Youth," as well as more recent plays like "The Wolves," "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time" and "Choir Boy."

Sometimes adults play children's roles for absurd effect as in "Pen15," the Hulu series whose two 31-year creators portray 13-year-olds navigating the treacherous world of middle school, or Celebration Theatre's "Born to Win," an L.A. production with an adult playing an 8-year-old children's beauty pageant contestant. But the bigger challenge is pulling off realism, creating the illusion that the adults onstage are plausible as the much-younger characters — a feat accomplished by two of Broadway's biggest hits, ["Harry Potter and the Cursed Child"](#) and ["To Kill a Mockingbird."](#)

Hallie Griffin, 30, costarred in Michelle Kholos Brooks' "Hitler's Tasters," which New Light Theater Project produced at IRT Theater in the fall. Griffin played one of three Aryan teens who must taste Hitler's food daily to make sure it isn't poisoned.

"If I were really 16, I would just be nerdy and awkward," she said, adding that visiting the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam and spending time in Germany were among the life experiences that helped inform her performance.

Brooks said the play's second reading used real teens, including a 13-year-old.

"I learned a lot from hearing young actors, but it was not a good fit," the director said, adding that "I was super uncomfortable with it, especially with the speech about being raped. I wonder how a young actor accesses that."

Her director, Sarah Norris, added that small, low-budget productions that rehearse during the day can't realistically cast students. Other than Griffin, she looked to recent college graduates. At auditions she asked actresses to sing and dance together. "I looked for the ones who would go for it without hesitation, who had the playfulness needed," she said. She eliminated some talented actresses lacking that "youthful spirit."

The word "innocence" repeatedly popped up in casting conversations. Carnahan said it matters more than physical looks, though it's harder to find in younger people now.



Hallie Griffin, 30, played a teenager in New Light Theater Project's "Hitler's Tasters" at IRT Theater. (Hunter Canning)

“Not everyone can play someone so young,” Gardiner said. It took four months to cast “If Pretty Hurts. “Many of us have grown out of or forgotten how to tap into that part of themselves. There's real art to it.”

The director talked to her actresses about how physical teens are.

“When I was that age we'd lean on each other and laugh so hard we'd fall on the ground,” Gardiner said.

Each day in her rehearsals for “Hitler's Tasters,” director Norris had her actresses discuss a different memory — family pet, first crush, painful high school moment. The goal: bring them back to adolescence.

Virtual Theater: Michelle Kholos Brooks' 'Hitler's Tasters' Offers Food for Thought

'Hitler's Tasters' is a compelling dark comedy that turns a historical footnote into a provocative social study/



Gerri
Miller

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Hitler's Tasters Hallie Griffin, MaryKathryn Kopp, Kaitlin Paige Longoria; Photo by Hunter Canner

A trio of young women is at a dining table, gossiping about movie stars and taking selfies. But it's 1943 in Germany, and the matinee idols are Marlene Dietrich and Frank Sinatra. These mädchen are Hitler's guinea pigs, chosen to taste his food — and if it's poisoned, die agonizing deaths for their Führer.

"Hitler's Tasters" is a compelling dark comedy that turns a historical footnote into a provocative social study. Its run at the Electric Lodge Theater in Venice cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic is streaming online through May 21.

Playwright Michelle Kholos Brooks learned of the story four years ago on a visit to a World War II museum that displayed an article about the last living taster, Margot Woelk. Intrigued, Kholos Brooks delved into research, aided by her enthusiastic husband, writer and World War II-obsessive Max Brooks, who presented her with a pile of books and movies. She wrote the first draft as part of a 48-hour play challenge, workshopped it in 2017, and has since seen it performed around the United States and in Edinburgh, Scotland, where it was a winner at the Fringe Festival.

**“BEING A YOUNG WOMAN IS HARD ENOUGH AS IT IS —
THE WAY THEY’RE TREATED IN CULTURE AND HOW THEY
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ANY MOMENT.”**

“This story pushed my buttons,” Kholos Brooks told the Journal. “Being a young woman is hard enough as it is — the way they’re treated in culture and how they treat each other as a result — and these girls are trapped together and could be poisoned at any moment,” she said. Although he’s talked about constantly, Hitler never appears in the play. The focus is on the girls’ blind allegiance to their abuser and their forced captivity.

“There are eerie parallels [to today],” Kholos Brooks said. “The girls are stuck in this room and forced to deal with each other, like we are with our families right now. There’s the issue of food safety: Should you get takeout? Who has touched it? Everything that’s supposed to nourish you is suspect. Our leaders aren’t taking care of us or protecting us. We feel abandoned. Our actresses said that the play felt so much closer to them than ever in the context of all this.”

Kholos Brooks also found parallels while she was writing it around the time of the 2106 election. “The rhetoric that I was hearing was terrifying to me,” she said. “That made its way into it, too.” Audiences have been rather quiet after the performances, she noted, but during the New York run in 2018, a theatergoer stood up at the end and exclaimed, “We all have to vote!” Kholos Brooks recalled. Her reaction? “Mission accomplished.”



Michelle Brooks; Photo by Kevin Salter

As for the idea behind the anachronistic selfies, Kholos Brooks explained she “wanted these girls to feel very present. For young people right now, World War II is very much in the rearview mirror. I wanted young people to relate to it and understand, ‘That could have been me.’ ”

She used humor as “a release from the darkness” of the subject, and left room for directors to show the passage of time between meals with time-killing activities such as dancing and hair braiding. The choreography may seem joyous, “but then you see they’re wearing underwear with swastikas on it,” Kholos Brooks noted.

A Los Angeles native, Kholos Brooks always loved writing and became a journalist. While working for a public radio station in Maine, she wrote her first play and loved seeing it come to life on stage. The granddaughter of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, she didn’t grow up in a religious family, and celebrated her bat mitzvah at home, not in shul.

“[I HOPE PEOPLE] COME AWAY WITH A VISCERAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE DANGERS OF COMPLACENCY. TO PRETEND THAT THINGS ARE OK IS NOT OK. TO THINK THAT YOU’RE SAFE FROM MADMEN LIKE THIS IS LIVING IN DELUSION. THERE’S NO SAFETY.” — MICHELLE KHOLOS BROOKS

“But I never thought of myself as anything but Jewish,” she said. “I feel like there’s something bigger at work, something bigger than me. I always have. I have trust in that, but at the same time, I am very much responsible for the way I behave.” She and her family are congregants at the Open Temple near their Venice home, where their son Henry, now 15, had his bar mitzvah.

She met her husband, son of Mel Brooks and the late Anne Bancroft, through a mutual friend at a party. “We had a connection, but we kept trying not to date. We both dated other people. But when he came back to L.A from graduate school, we finally got together. He says, ‘I wooed you with my Italian side but I kept you with my Jewish side.’ ” They wrote their love story for the “Tasty Words” podcast a few years ago. Its title was “How Neurotic Jews Fall in Love.”

“Max and I are such different writers,” Kholos Brooks, who now is working on a new play that tells stories of people who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, said. “Our processes and topics are different, so we can support each other and be each other’s sounding board.” She also received valuable feedback from her father-in-law, who has championed the play since its first reading. Initially, she didn’t want its title to spoil what would happen, but Mel advised her to tell the audience outright what to expect, and she’s glad she listened to him.

Kholos Brooks hopes that those who stream “Hitler’s Tasters” will be inspired to see it again when it eventually returns to theaters. She suggests settling in with a glass of wine and dimming the lights to simulate the live-theater experience. More importantly, she hopes viewers will “come away with a visceral understanding of the dangers of complacency. To pretend that things are OK is not OK. To think that you’re safe from madmen like this is living in delusion. There’s no safety. We have to look out for each other a little bit more.”

“Hitler’s Tasters” is streaming through May 21 [here](#), along with information about the production and a downloadable vegetarian cookbook put together by the cast and crew. Cost: \$15.

Snowflakes, lizards and baseball caps: Edinburgh Fringe round-up

There was a wide range of Jewish talent on show at this year's Edinburgh fringe, says Jane Prinsley



Hitler's Tasters - a fringe hit

Jewish playwrights found success and Michelle Kholos Brooks' bold new play, *Hitler's Tasters*, was one of the hottest tickets in town. 'Would you rather sleep with the Führer or Frank Sinatra?' asks one of the three adolescent girls who tested Hitler's food for poison. Romance, frustration and an overwhelming sense of their own mortality made the girls likeable whilst contemporary direction and the use of indie-pop songs, iPhones and bullyish boy talk made them completely plausible as a gaggle of high school girls. Indeed, this might be a historical story, but it was the freshest drama I saw all Fringe. Kholos Brooks' play is a dark comedy that pushes for shock factor, but *Hitler's Tasters* was more than a game of boundaries; it was packed with dangerous charm. With its nuanced portrayal of radicalisation, idolatry and the banality of evil, perhaps it will become a modern Fringe classic, providing a strong message for our times.

OTHER TEAM BIOS

HALLIE GRIFFIN (*Liesel*) is a New York based actor, singer, social media maven & content creator. Select Theater: *Folk City: The Musical* (Broadway World Regional Awards: Best Actress), *In The Soundless Awe*, and [title of show]. TV/Film: *Cafe Society*. Select NLTP credits: *Metropolis*, *Jackson C. Frank* (Film Editor), *This Wrestling Place*, *REX*.

MARYKATHRYN KOPP (*Hilda*) is an actor, writer and film producer based in Nashville and New York. Select Theater: *The Christians*; *Salome*; *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Film: *Slip*; *It's Not You, It's Her*; *Potion Masters*. Sarah Lawrence College (Class of 2018); Moscow Art Theatre School; Prague Film School.

KAITLIN PAIGE LONGORIA (*Anna*) is a Texas born and raised actress and mixed media painter. William Esper and Bruce McCarty alum. Select credits: *Pastel Color Ripples* (Creative Producer), *Invincible Ones* (Director), *Promesa Promesota* (Director).

HANNAH MAE STURGES (*Margot*) is a California native with a BFA Acting degree from CSU Fullerton. NY credits: *Miss Mitchell*, *Validation* (Ensemble Studio Theatre). Select credits include: Gulfshore Playhouse, *Hermia* in '*Midsummer Night's Dream: A rock musical*' in Memphis, and premeiered multiple West Coast shows with The Road Theatre Co. in North Hollywood. Shakespeare training: British American Drama Academy.

AN-LIN DAUBER (*Scenic Designer*) is a collaborative, curious, compassionate, experimental set and costume designer. Select Credits: *Seven Guitars* (Yale Repertory Theatre), *An Acorn* (Brown/Trinity Rep), *Displaced: A Response to Qurban* (Boston Conservatory at Berklee), *Measure for Measure* (EPIC Theatre Ensemble), *You Can't Kiss A Movie* (HERE Art Center), *Othello* (Yale School of Drama). MFA Yale School of Drama.

ASHLEE WASMUND (*Choreographer*) currently hails from North Carolina where she is the Program Director for Musical Theatre and Dance at Western Carolina University's School of Stage & Screen while working professionally as an actor, choreographer, and director. Recent projects include *Murder for Two* at Merrimack Repertory Theatre, *Unto these Hills* with the Cherokee Historical Association, & a new full-length dance piece titled *Light Chasers* to the album of the same name by Cloud Cult.

ASHLEIGH POTEAT (*Costume Designer*) has designed scenery, costumes, and properties around the country. BA from University of North Carolina at Asheville; MFA University of Nevada-Las Vegas. NLTP: *Less Than 50%* (Scenic), *Time Stands Still* (Costume), *Still Dance the Stars* (Scenic & Costume), *Sight Unseen* (Costume), and *A Burial Place* (Scenic).

CARSEN JOENK (*Sound Design*) is a co-founder of Rat Queen Theatre Co. Select Directing: *EST/Youngblood*, *Secret Theatre*, *Dixon Place*, *La MaMa ETC*, *Fresh Ground Pepper*, *Exquisite Corpse Co*. Select Sound: *New Group*, *Spicy Witch*, *Clubbed Thumb*.

CHRISTINA TANG (*Lighting Designer*) is a lighting designer based in NYC. She is a frequent collaborator on new works for theater and dance. Select design credits include: *The Maid's Tragedy* (Pocket Universe), *Hair* (York College), *Assembled Identity* (HERE Arts Center), & *skin flick city* (Columbia Stages).

FRANCIS RAMOS (*Fight Choreographer*) proud Boricua. Started her theatre studies at the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras, graduate of Circle in the Square Theatre School (2016). Select credits: *Broken Pieces* (Happily Bohemian), *Little Shop of Horrors* (9 to 5), *Godspell* (What Dreams May Co.), *Much Ado About Nothing* (CITSTS), *Uncommon Women and Others* (CITSTS), *Sweet Charity* and *Legally Blonde* (Dramadanza).