

Out of the ashes

Poet finds bright light in a dark subject

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The late Sister Rose Thering, the indefatigable campaigner for Jewish-Christian understanding, said, "Our greatest hope is to experience through the arts the realities suffered by those who have been the victims of institutionalized ignorance and hate, so that there will be no more victims and no more perpetrators."

Her comment was made in response to work by poet Susanna Rich and artist Jo Jochowitz. The two, both teachers at Kean University in Union, first collaborated in 1994 and are doing so again, this time with Jochowitz's stark drawings of Holocaust images setting the visual tone for Rich's performance of her poems.



Susanna Rich described her show as "a vigil for as well as a celebration of human dignity and love."

Her show, "ashes, ashes: a Poet Responds to the Holocaust," will be offered at the Little Theater at Kean University on April 11, 13, and 14, the week before Passover and two weeks before Yom HaShoa, the commemoration of the Holocaust.

A few weeks ago, Rich invited *NJ Jewish News* to a rehearsal.

With no costume or set, one moment she was a small girl, bright with hope, the next a Nazi guard shutting down his heart, the next simply an English professor, eager to share.

Even in rehearsal, with interruptions every few lines, she drew her audience with her through those contrasts. And that is precisely what she and director Ernest Wiggins are aiming for.

"The subject matter is so grim, you don't want to make it unbearable for the audience," she said, hopping down from the stage to grab a snack and confer with Wiggins.

Neither of them is Jewish, but Rich's husband, fellow academic Morton Rich, is, and she has deep connections to the culture. At one point, she began reciting, "*Ma nishtana halaila hazeh*," the start of the seder's Four Questions — appropriately, given the timing of the show.

Their goal is to make their dark subject meaningful to young people with limited knowledge of World War II, as well as to those familiar with its atrocities. To that end, she was making sure to alternate horrifying images with lighter ones, and even with humor.

Rich, who lives in Blairstown, is a professor of English at Kean, as well as an Emmy-nominated poet. She grew up in a Hungarian family divided by emotional barriers, and — despite prejudice she heard expressed — developed an intense empathy for the suffering of others. As a senior at Pope Pius XII High School in Passaic, she portrayed Anne Frank in a school play and said it established her lifelong commitment to promoting understanding and tolerance.

In 1994, she and Jochowitz opened the art gallery at the Baird Center in South Orange with "ashes, ashes," exhibiting his pictures combined with continuous replays of her videotaped poetry reading. The show went on to Rider University and toured conferences and community centers, and they presented it at high schools through the New Jersey School of the Arts. The April showing is a live,

interactive revisiting of that work.

Giving voice to victims

“What do you think?” Rich asked the people watching her rehearse. “Should I come forward toward the audience or is that too much?” Among them are her husband, and his nephew, Don Fast, who is handling the music for the show, and Kean students helping with technical aspects.

That humility belies the success she has earned. Rich won her Emmy nomination for writing and voicing the text that accompanied Craig Lindvahl’s film *Cobb Field: A Day at the Ballpark*. She is the author of two collections of poetry, *Television Daddy* and *The Drive Home*, was the recipient of the first joint Fulbright and Collegium Budapest fellowship in creative writing, and won both the 20th Century America and 21st Century America Poetry contests of *Sensations Magazine*. She received a Presidential Excellence Award for Distinguished Teaching at Kean.

For the past few years she has been working with Wiggins, himself the winner of a Kennedy Center award, and a teacher in the Theater Department at Kean. This is the third in a series of shows they have crafted — unique, they say, for their dramatized poetry recitation combined with audience interaction. The other two were based on her poetry collections.

In this production, Rich gives voice to Holocaust victims, survivors, and liberators, weaving the past with the present, poetry with art, music, and stagecraft. She described the show as “a vigil for as well as a celebration of human dignity and love.”