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*Dramatic Publishing*

# Walking Toward America



Drama by Sandra Fenichel Asher

Adapted from the memoirs of Ilga Katais-Paeglis Vise

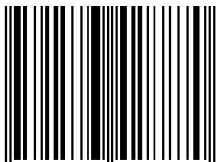
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# Walking Toward America

**Drama.** By Sandra Fenichel Asher. Adapted from the memoirs of Ilga Katais-Paeglis Vise. Cast: 1w. On the eve of a three-generational pilgrimage back to her Latvian homeland, Ilga speaks to her grandchildren about their great-grandparents. Her memories become the action of the play, all seen through her eyes at ages 4, 10 and nearly 17. At the center of her narrative is the winter of 1944–1945, when 10-year-old Ilga and her parents leave Riga, Latvia, to escape the Russian occupation of their city. Soon they are taken into a German forced-labor camp, where they spend a brutal month but fare better than the Jewish prisoners held on the other side of a barbed-wire fence. Eventually, they walk 500 miles across frozen, war-torn northern Germany, survive strafing by Russian planes and find their way to a refugee camp in western Germany. Six years later, they sail through an Atlantic storm to safety and freedom in America. What makes Ilga's event-filled story unique and compelling is that she is a child witness to the devastation of war and the sources of strength that get her family through it. In *Walking Toward America*, one actress plays Ilga from grandmother to carefree 4-year-old to frightened 10-year-old to resilient teenager, plus all the characters that populate her remarkable journey. The result is an intensely personal narrative, laced with warmth, humor, courage and determination, that explores all that it means to be an ordinary family caught up in extraordinary circumstances. *Area staging. Approximate running time: 75 minutes. Code: WG4.*

Cover: *The Open Eye Theater, Margaretville, N.Y. Photo: Jill Ribich of Catskill Images. Cover design: John Sergel.*

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SANDRA FENICHEL ASHER

Adapted from the memoirs of

ILGA KATAIS-PAEGLIS VISE



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(WALKING TOWARD AMERICA)

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## IMPORTANT BILLING AND CREDIT REQUIREMENTS

All producers of the play *must* give credit to Sandra Fenichel Asher as the author of the play and Ilga Katais-Paeglis Vise as the author of the memoirs on which the play is based in all programs distributed in connection with performances of the play and in all instances in which the title of the play appears for purposes of advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the play and/or a production. The names of Sandra Fenichel Asher and Ilga Katais-Paeglis Vise *must* also appear on separate lines, on which no other name appears, immediately following the title, and *must* appear in size of type not less than fifty percent (50%) the size of the title type. Biographical information on Sandra Fenichel Asher and Ilga Katais-Paeglis Vise, if included in the playbook, may be used in all programs. *In all programs this notice must appear:*

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The world premier production of *Walking Toward America* was presented from May 24 to June 3, 2012, at The Open Eye Theater, Margaretville, N.Y.

### CAST

Ilga ..... Patricia Van Tassel

### PRODUCTION STAFF

Director ..... Amie Brockway

Musicians ..... Cedric Taylor, Curtis Taylor

Set and Lighting Designer ..... Adrienne J. Brockway

Stage Manager ..... Gerry Conlon

Technical Director, Light and Sound Operator ..... Erwin Karl

In memory of  
Janis Edgars Katais-Paeglis  
and  
Brona Zenta Vavere Katais-Paeglis  
with admiration and gratitude  
for the gift of Ilga.

And to Ilga Katais-Paeglis Vise,  
with love and gratitude for the gift of her stories.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

*Walking Toward America* began its journey as a script at New York University's New Plays for Young Audiences workshop. A week of development with director David Montgomery, dramaturg Cecily O'Neill, co-artistic director Nancy Swortzell, cast members Natalie Burgess and Evelyn F. Harmer and a talented and dedicated staff culminated in staged readings at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village on June 11 and 12, 2011. Additional staged readings directed by David Montgomery featuring Annie Montgomery followed at the Theater of the Seventh Sister, Lancaster, Pa., and at the Library Center, Springfield, Mo., in January and July of 2012, respectively. The script also benefited from a May 2012 reading directed by Amie Brockway and featuring Patricia Van Tassel as part of the Dramatists Guild Friday Night Footlights series in New York City. Sandra Fenichel Asher gratefully acknowledges the support and encouragement of everyone involved in these events and extends a special thank you to those members of the audience who shared how deeply Ilga Katakis-Paeglis Vise's story resonated with their own.

# Walking Toward America

## CHARACTERS

ILGA KATAIS (ILL-guh KUHT-ice): depicted at the ages of 4, 10, nearly 17 and as a grandmother. Blond or light brown hair, pretty. Bright, energetic, affectionate, outgoing and good-humored, with a touch of mischief often evident in the twinkle of her eyes.

JANIS (YAHN-iss): aka Jani (YAHN-eh), Papa (puh-pah). Late 30s to early 40s. Ilga's father. Intelligent, tough, kind-hearted, resourceful and determined. Also given to moments of humor touched with mischief.

ZENTA (ZENT-ah): aka Mama (muh-mah). Late 30s to early 40s. Ilga's mother. Gentle, loving, good-natured and protective, with a deep inner store of courage, faith and calm.

MR. KRAUKLIS (KRAHW-kliiss): mid-30s. Refugee and friend. Handsome and good-humored.

MRS. KRAUKLIS: early 30s. His wife. Pretty and good-humored.

SHIP'S CAPTAIN

WOMEN ABOARD SHIP (2)

GRANDFATHER: kindly, soft-spoken and shy.

GRANDMOTHER: stooped and cranky.

GAIDA (GUY-dah): Ilga's 12-year-old cousin.

UNCLE ALFONS (AHL-fahnz)

STONY-FACED GERMAN SOLDIER

COMMANDANT

OLD MAN

SOLDIER

HARBOR SOLDIER

MR. LACIS (LAHTS-iss): high-strung and stressed.

ZAIGA (ZIE-gah, rhymes with “eye”): Mr. Lacis’ 5- to 7-year-old daughter.

MARIJA (MAH-ree-ah): Mr. Lacis’ twin sister. Sensible and gentle.

REFUGEES (2)

KITCHEN LADY

FARMER

DRIVER

S.S. OFFICER

KINDLY OFFICER

FRIENDLY COMMANDANT

DOCTOR

SOLDIER AT BRIDGE

CHURCH WORLD SERVICE LADY

HOT DOG VENDOR

## CHARACTER NOTES

The actress playing Ilga also plays all of the other roles, using a distinctive change in voice, stance and/or gesture for each of them. Zenta, for instance, might be identified by her gentle voice and a hand held over her heart and Janis by an assertive voice and wave of his pointed finger. No attempt should be made to speak English with a foreign accent. The characters are either speaking in their native language or fluent in the language they're using. Instead, as there are no contractions in either Latvian or German, they've been eliminated here to give a foreign flavor, rhythm and inflection to the dialogue. Ilga narrates much of her story in the present tense, as it is happening. With each change of scene, the actress should take a breath to look around and register the unexpected situation in which Ilga finds herself.

## TIME

From 1938 to 1952 and the present.

## SETTING

All settings are indicated by simple pieces moved as needed by the actress playing Ilga. Props should be mimed. Slides might be used to indicate settings, but the emphasis should be on lighting, sound effects as noted and appropriate music. Latvian folksongs, such as "Ligo! Ligo!" (LEE-gwuh) should be in the traditional style rather than modern interpretations. The action moves fluidly through various times and locations: at home in America; aboard a ship on the Atlantic; at a farm in Latvia (LAHT-vee-ah); in a forced labor camp in Germany; on various roads crossing Germany; in a doorway; back on board the ship; dockside in New York Harbor; in a train station; and once again at home in America.

## Walking Toward America

AT RISE: *MUSIC: a Latvian theme. The stage is dark, except for a spotlight on the adult ILGA, seated UC, thoughtfully regarding a blanket in her hands, crocheted in a delicate granny square pattern. She looks up and smiles. It is the present. MUSIC fades.*

ILGA (*speaking to her preteen grandchildren*). So. Tomorrow we will all be in Latvia. Three generations! (*Beat.*) Papa always thought the Russians would leave Latvia, and he and Mama and I would go back to our home in Riga. All the while he guided us westward across Poland and Germany. Even in refugee camp, he went on hoping, while I watched American soldiers raise their flag every morning and wondered about their country across the sea, “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” (*Beat. Indicates the blanket.*) Long, long before you were born, Mama made blankets for you, the great-grandchildren she knew she would never meet. Papa saw all that had gone wrong in Latvia and urged us forward. Mama looked forward—toward you—and carried all that was good about Latvia with her. (*Beat.*) And you and I? We are Americans! (*Beat.*) But I grew up in their story.

*(Lights dim as ILGA stands, leaving the blanket on the chair, and prepares to enter a new scene. Lights come up and play over the space like sunlight reflecting on the ocean. SOUND: a ship’s horn. ILGA enters the scene, shuffling along in a slow-moving line. She mimes carrying a bundle and suitcase and gazes out over the audience at a huge transport ship. She wears second-hand winter cloth-*

*ing, layered for ease of transportation as well as warmth: a dress, a sweater, socks and/or leggings, sturdy shoes, a woolen headscarf and a coat with pockets that are stuffed with other items. It is mid-March, 1951. She is almost 17 years old.)*

ILGA. What a huge ship! *(To MR. KRAUKLIS, just ahead of her in line.)* Mr. Krauklis, did you ever imagine it would be so big? *(Puts down her bundle and suitcase. Reading, mispronouncing Sturgis as “Stoor-giss” with a hard “g.”)* “U.S.S. General S.D. . . . STOOR . . . giss.

MR. KRAUKLIS *(laughs gently and pronounces Sturgis as “STIR-jiss”)*. Sturgis. United States Ship General Samuel Davis Sturgis. It carried American troops in the war. Now it has been relegated to refugee transport.

ILGA *(to audience, grinning)*. Somehow, Mr. Krauklis already knows all the facts about our ship. He is so smart—an architect!—and very handsome.

*(Beat. ILGA’s crush on MR. KRAUKLIS is obvious.)*

ILGA *(cont’d)*. For our last two years in the United Nations refugee camp, Papa, Mama and I have shared one room with Mr. and Mrs. Krauklis and their little girl, Kora. Dividing that room, only a bed sheet hanging between our two families. Not much privacy—*(Grinning and rolling her eyes.)*—but we were grateful to be safe and warm and well-fed, and we all got along fine. *(Beat.)* After the war, we could not return to our homes in Latvia. It took Papa a long time to accept this, but it is no longer our country. It is a Soviet Socialist Republic.

*(SOUND: a ship’s horn blowing mournfully. ILGA picks up her bundle and suitcase and glances back.)*

ILGA (*cont'd*). Mama, keep up!

ZENTA. I am right here, Ilga. Do not worry. I am with you.

ILGA (*to audience*). Up the gangplank we move, more than 800 refugees. A joke is told among us that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a refugee to enter the United States of America. (*Beat.*) We hope that it is only a joke.

(*ILGA makes her way down to low level quarters as lights dim.*)

ILGA (*cont'd*). Aboard the ship, men and women are assigned to separate quarters. Papa and Mr. Krauklis go to Deck C. I follow Mama down a steep and narrow ladder to the very lowest level. Paint is peeling off the walls. (*Puts down her bundle and suitcase, concerned but ready for adventure.*) We are now a cabin of “K” women—Katais, Krauklis and others. Our bunk beds are stacked three and four high. This is no luxury liner. We are sardines—in a rusty can.

ZENTA. Ilga, what are these straps for?

ILGA. Look, Mama. They will keep you in your bed if the ship starts rolling and pitching.

ZENTA (*groans and rolls her eyes heavenward, pronouncing “ne,” or “no,” as “NAY-eh”*). *Ne!* Ten days of this!

MRS. KRAUKLIS (*brightly*). Come, Zenta. Let us all choose our bunks and then you and I will go find our husbands.

ILGA (*to audience*). Mrs. Krauklis is kind to Mama, who has suffered from motion sickness all her life and is dreading this voyage. (*Beat.*) Mrs. Krauklis is ... very pretty. She laughs at me because I have a crush on Mr. Krauklis. She says, (*Imitating MRS. KRAUKLIS.*) “I do not blame you!” (*Beat.*) As our families stroll the deck together, the ship slowly moves from its berth. (*Looking out over the audience.*) Suddenly, everyone is quiet. We are leaving the

place where we were born, somewhere far away on that continent. *(Raises a hand, waving tentatively.)* There are no relatives or friends to see us off, yet we wave until the last strip of land shrinks into the horizon. Papa wipes his eyes.

JANIS. Say goodbye to old Europe!

ILGA *(to audience)*. It is March 16, 1951. In only a few weeks, I will be 17 years old. I have celebrated six birthdays in refugee camp. I will celebrate the next ... in *America!* *(Beat, a deep breath, exuberant.)* Mmmmmm! I love the salty ocean air ... and the constant motion of the ship.

JANIS. Ilga! I have found a choice office job for you.

ILGA. Coming, Papa. *(To audience.)* The General Sturgis has only a skeleton crew. The new immigrants are assigned many chores. No complaints from us. We are headed for the land of Cadillacs and oil wells. We will do whatever it takes to get there.

*(ILGA approaches JANIS eagerly—and her face falls.)*

ILGA *(cont'd)*. The tiny cubicle, squeezed next to a kitchen, holds a built-in shelf with a typewriter bolted to it. *(To JANIS.)* Papa, it is like an oven in here! There are no windows! I will suffocate!

JANIS. You will gain a useful skill! You will learn to type!

ILGA. I cannot sit in this box for 10 days! I will puke in here!

*(Beat. ILGA removes her coat and scarf and dons, or mimes donning, an apron, picks up a tray and begins serving and clearing tables.)*

ILGA *(cont'd, to audience)*. Papa secures a new assignment for me, serving meals in one of the dining rooms. The food is plentiful and good. A stream of customers makes one



meal merge into the next. (*Approaching a table, smiling brightly.*) To amuse myself, I learn a single phrase in Polish, Hungarian, Czech and Estonian: “What would you like to eat?”

(NOTE: In *The Open Eye Theater* production, ILGA moved from “table” to “table” asking her question in each language:

*Polish:* Co chcesz zjeść?

*Hungarian:* Mit szeretne enni?

*Czech:* Co byste chtěli jíst?

*Estonian:* Mida tahaksid süüa?

*Listen to the phrases at <http://www.translate.google.com>. They are a charming touch, but optional. Learning the phrases from native speakers is strongly advised.)*

ILGA (*cont'd, nodding and smiling at customers while speaking to audience*). I pretend to listen to every request, then bring out whatever is dished up in the kitchen. (*Beat. Surveys the diners, eyes twinkling.*) The diners look confused, point to their plates and try to explain that this is not what they ordered. I do not understand a word they are saying. I smile—and then rush off to serve others.

*(Though aware of wind and the ship's unsteadiness, ILGA experiences no motion sickness and enjoys the excitement of the storm. It's an adventure!)*

ILGA (*cont'd*). On our fifth day out, the wind picks up. The ship climbs watery mountains and drops into deep valleys. In the dining room, dishes slide off tables and crash to the floor. Servers fly across the room as if on roller skates. Trays of food smash into chairs, tables, walls. I quickly learn to use my tray as a shield. Or I dive under a table and hang onto the bolted-down leg.

SHIP'S CAPTAIN. Attention, passengers. Motion sickness pills will be dispensed to everyone. Receptacles have been placed in bathrooms, hallways and sleeping quarters. Please make use of them.

ILGA. The dining room is soon empty. No one comes to eat. They are occupied with the receptacles, hugging them and doing disgusting things—(*Demonstrates seasick passenger's stance.*)—including my poor Mama.

*(Beat. ILGA's excitement grows with the danger. She removes apron, puts on her coat and scarf and makes her way to the back of the ship, where she braces herself against the rail.)*

ILGA (*cont'd*). By our seventh day out, the storm is savage. I sneak along the deck and watch from the back of the ship. Waves lift the stern far above the horizon. The propellers whine, an ugly sound. With a deafening noise, the stern falls and crashes onto the ocean surface. Deeper and deeper we go, until I can no longer see the sky, only walls of green water, churning all around me.

SHIP'S CAPTAIN. Everyone to your assigned quarters. Secure the port holes and all emergency locks!

ILGA. Holding tight to the rail, I inch toward the lower deck. The ship rolls and pitches at incredible angles.

*(Beat. ILGA removes her wet scarf and coat and hangs them on a peg.)*

ILGA (*cont'd*). In our cabin, Mama lies exhausted. Mrs. Krauklis and Kora cling together, strapped in their bunk. Suddenly, a thundering tremor shakes the ship. The engines shriek—and then stop.

*(Lights dim abruptly.)*

ILGA (*cont'd*). Around me, in the dark, women are screaming. In a panic, they rush toward the ladder.

WOMAN ABOARD SHIP 1. They have locked the doors!

WOMAN ABOARD SHIP 2. God help us! We are trapped down here!

ILGA (*quietly, determined*). No, no, I will not be part of that. (*climbs into the bunk and mimes strapping herself in.*) I pull the strap tight around me and turn to the wall.

*(Lights fade. Silence. Then SOUND: a steam engine speeding along tracks. It's late June, 1938. ILGA removes outerwear, revealing a simple summer dress. She is 4 years old.)*

ILGA (*cont'd*). The train takes us out of Riga and into the countryside.

ZENTA. And what day is today, Ilga?

ILGA. Janis's Day, Mama.

ZENTA. Yes. The longest day of the year. And a special day for everyone named Janis—

ILGA. Like Papa!

ZENTA. Like your Papa. And all the other Janises. Family and friends come to Grandfather's farm from everywhere, do you remember? We tell stories and laugh and eat and drink and light fires and sing beautiful songs!

*(SOUND: a train whistle blowing and a train coming to a stop.)*

ILGA. Papa hurries to find Grandfather at the station. Sometimes, Mama tells me stories about an old man who is magic and gives people special gifts for being good. I think Grandfather is that old man!

GRANDFATHER (*shyly, pronouncing "labdien," or "good day," as "lahb-DEE-en"*). *Labdien!* Welcome, children.

(*Pronouncing "KAHR-leen."*) Karline will be glad you arrived early, Zenta. She could use your help with the preparations. Come, the buggy is waiting.

ILGA. Grandfather holds the reins, and the horse trots over the dusty road. I want it to go faster!

ZENTA. Look, Ilga, how the pretty birch trees bend in the breeze. Oh, my, that sun feels good.

ILGA. At last, one more turn ... and then ... a thatched roof ... and then ... Grandfather's log house snuggled beside the stream!

GRANDMOTHER (*harshly*). You are here! Finally! Zenta, come! I need you to help me in the kitchen!

ZENTA (*unruffled*). Yes, of course, Karline. As soon as we unload the buggy.

ILGA. Papa tells me stories about old women who are witches. I think Grandmother is one of them. (*Beat. Pronouncing "lūdzu," or "please," as "LOOD-zoo."*) Mama! Look! There are kittens! *Lūdzu*, Grandmother, may I give them some milk?

GRANDMOTHER. Milk? Where is that old potato sack? We will drown them in the river.

ILGA. *Ne!* (*Runs away, shooing kittens.*) Run, kittens! Run away! (*Beat.*) The kittens help me find my cousin, Gaida. She is 12. I am only 4, but we are good friends. (*To GAIDA, pronouncing "zveiks," or "hi," as "zvayks."*) *Zveiks*, Gaida! (*To audience as she spins herself around.*) She picks me up in a big hug and swings me around.

GAIDA. *Zveiks*, Ilga! Come and see the new piglets!

ILGA. She pulls me across the yard to a wooden fence. A giant hog—a sow—is stretched out in the mud. One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight piglets suck and smack beside her. Papa and Uncle Alfons are looking, too. They drink ale from big steins.

UNCLE AFRONS. Pony size, she is. Someone could almost ride her.

JANIS. Ha! I bet Ilga could!

ILGA (*both thrilled and scared*). Papa puts me on top of the sow! She stands up! I grab her hairy bristles and hang on tight. Mud splatters everywhere. The piglets squeal and try to get out of the way. Papa runs along beside us, laughing. (*Beat.*) Then Grandfather comes—

GRANDFATHER (*in his quiet way, with humor*). Jani, get the child off the hog!

(*GRANDFATHER smiles at ILGA, shaking his head in sympathy at the silliness of it all.*)

ILGA (*shyly*). I smile at Grandfather. He smiles at me. (*Beat.*) Papa and Uncle Alfons drink their ale.

UNCLE AFRONS. Tell us the news from the city, Jani. What is the situation in the West?

JANIS. Hitler is rattling his sword. German nationals are heading back to the “fatherland.”

UNCLE AFRONS (*pronouncing “kāpēc,” or “why,” as “kah-payk”*). *Kāpēc?* Germans have been in Latvia for generations. Why would they suddenly leave?

JANIS. There is talk of Russians setting up naval bases here.

UNCLE AFRONS (*nodding, ominously*). The Russian bear is hungry. (*Spits on the ground in disdain.*)

ILGA. Papa and Uncle Alfons grow quiet.

(*ILGA, too, grows quiet, sensing the danger. A beat.*)