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THE BOOK OF RUTH

A Full-length Play

by

DEBORAH LYNN FROCKT



Dramatic Publishing

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(THE BOOK OF RUTH)

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“First commissioned and produced by Seattle Children’s Theatre.”

Author's Note

After my grandparents died I took three things from their house: a picture taken soon after their marriage that I had loved since childhood, a *menorah* for Chanukah and all of my grandmother's recipes. They were scattered in no particular order in two kitchen drawers. They reveal someone who was a cook for life. The recipes aren't even really that. They are more like refreshers for someone far too experienced to ever need formal instruction. To this day, it strikes me that multiplication problems abound on these index cards. Strudel times three; cake times two; tradition times infinity.

My grandmother and grandfather had two *Seders* in their home, every year, until they died. Every spring at Passover, around thirty members of this extended family would gather in their modest home. Many of the relatives had bigger houses where you might think the family would be more comfortable; but this house is where everyone was at home.

Rectangular folding tables would be added to the mahogany dining table, extending it the length of the dining room and living room. Passover tablecloths would be pulled out for their yearly appearance, then sheathed in plastic to protect them from wine, children and people hungry after long prayers. The men always sat at the head of the table in the living room. The older men, the younger men, then near the kitchen, the women; and with the women, the children. My grandmother sat closest to the swinging door which led to the kitchen, but I don't think anyone ever saw her actually sit during a *Seder*.

My grandfather would lead the ceremony, with the help of the other family elders. We'd all participate by sharing in the reading of the *Haggadah*, usually in English. And of course, the youngest child would be called upon to chant in Hebrew the Four Questions.

It would take my grandmother endless weeks to prepare for *Seder* and the week-long festival during which no leavened food was eaten. Her kitchen would be divided, with *homitz* (the leavened food of fifty-one weeks of the year) and *pesadichy* (for Passover) separated. Counters were made *pesadichy* when they were covered with linoleum. Separate dishes for milk and meat, necessary for a kosher kitchen year-round, were stored away; and *pesadichy* milk and meat dishes took their place.

And then she would cook. And cook. And cook. Each *Seder* would consist of chopped liver, matzah bagels, matzah ball soup, gefilte fish, meat blintzes, *kishke*, roast chicken, stuffed cabbage...and was there ever a green vegetable in sight? Not in a southern Jewish home with Russian roots. I've heard that some families have fruit as their *Seder* dessert, since the food is traditionally heavy and the baking choices so restricted. Unheard of at my grandma's house. She made *pesadichy* sponge cakes leavened with only whipped egg whites, then soaked in Manishevitz wine. And jellyrolls. And macaroons. A full sit-down dinner for thirty, two nights in a row—until she was 77.

But cooking for sixty wasn't the end of it. Uncle Harry liked the matzah balls, so he was sent home with a week's worth. Uncle Sam liked the gefilte fish, so likewise for him. Anyone with children went home with something sweet to put in the lunch box alongside the ubiquitous matzah sandwiches.

When I was growing up, I adored my grandmother; but I had my questions. Why did she make everything from scratch? Why were there so many dishes? Why not simplify? Why spend endless hours shopping, cleaning, chopping, boiling, baking, cooking? Why did she want to work in the kitchen until two in the morning after having worked a full day outside of the house? Why did she do all this?

Like my grandma, Hannah is a cook certain in her way of doing things. Like me, Ruth wonders why. In the midst of a prison camp starving nearly to death, why should she learn recipes for strudel, for matzah balls, for anything? Ruth learns her grandmother's lessons in depravation and terror. I am more fortunate; I learned my lessons right over an ordinary kitchen counter.

Now, I am grown up with a family of my own. In the home I make with my husband, there is a son who bears his great-grandfather's name. There is a brother who helps him light the *menorah*. There is a box of recipes from which I cook and learn and feed my family. And now I know why.

The Book of Ruth was commissioned and premiered by Seattle Children's Theatre, with the support of AT&T On-Stage[®], a project of the AT&T Foundation.

The Book Of Ruth was originally produced by Seattle Children's Theatre on February 26, 1999. It was directed by Steven E. Alter. Liz Engleman and Tobin A. Maheras were the dramaturgs. Renee Roub* and Lisa Schaible* were the stage managers. The cast was:

David JACOB FISHEL
Avram GENE FREEDMAN*
Ruth/Young Hannah JENNIFER SUE JOHNSON*
Hannah/Old Ruth MARJORIE NELSON*
Mr. Stein/Cook R. HAMILTON WRIGHT* and
RANDY HOFFMEYER*

Understudies were: SHARVA MAYNARD,*
DAVID SILVERMAN,* REBECCA OSMAN, ORION TARABAN

* Members of Actors' Equity Association, the union for stage professionals.

THE BOOK OF RUTH

A Full-length Play
For 3 Men and 2 Women

CHARACTERS

RUTH Jewish girl, early teens
Doubles as Young Hannah (Ruth's granddaughter)
in the final scene

HANNAH Ruth's grandmother, 60s
Doubles as Old Ruth in the final scene

DAVID Jewish boy, early teens

AVRAM Jewish man, 60s

MR. STEIN/COOK Jewish man, 30s or 40s

TIME and PLACE: The spring of 1944 in Terezín and, briefly,
the present in America.

The play has been performed successfully with and without
an intermission. Those desiring an intermission should take
one on p. 44 between the Ruth/Hannah scene and the Ruth/
Cook scene.

A score was composed for the Seattle Children's Theatre
premiere and is available from the composer, David Pascal:
P.O. Box 16505, Seattle, WA 98116; (206) 932-5336;
davip@mindspring.com.

THE BOOK OF RUTH

AT RISE: *In a very tight pool of light, an old woman and a young woman are together. They are HANNAH and RUTH. Objects that might be kitchen utensils surround them.*

HANNAH. Do we have everything? (*RUTH does not respond.*) Do we have everything?

RUTH. Why do we have to/

HANNAH. Let's check before we start.

RUTH. We have everything.

HANNAH. What did I tell you about stopping in the middle?

RUTH. Don't.

HANNAH. Flour, baking powder, salt, eggs and... (*Urging RUTH.*) and...

RUTH (*grudgingly*). Oil.

HANNAH. Now I can show you. I can show you how to make Bubbe's strudel. You like Bubbe's strudel, don't you?

RUTH. Everyone likes your strudel.

HANNAH. It's good?

RUTH. The best.

HANNAH. Then let me show you. You crack the eggs. (*RUTH does nothing.*) Go on. (*RUTH cracks an egg.*) Be careful. Make sure no shell goes in. Now the salt.

RUTH. With the eggs?

HANNAH. That's right.

RUTH. Why does everything take salt—even the sweet things?

HANNAH. Because a little salt brings out the sweet and makes it all the sweeter. Are the eggs well mixed?

RUTH. They're mixed.

HANNAH. Well mixed?

RUTH. My arm gets tired.

HANNAH. It's not easy, but it's worth it.

RUTH (*overlapping with HANNAH*). —but it's worth it.

HANNAH. That's right. Now you mix the eggs with the flour and you get a nice dough.

RUTH. Nice?

HANNAH. You don't want it too wet and you don't want it too dry.

RUTH. How can you tell?

HANNAH. Experience.

RUTH. I don't have any.

HANNAH. But we're working together so you have the benefit of my experience. Mix it together well. (*HANNAH pats her hands in the bowl.*)

RUTH. With our hands?

HANNAH. Get messy. It tastes better. When it's good and mixed, you roll it out. Go on. (*RUTH starts to roll out the dough.*) Make a rectangle because after you fill it, you're going to want to roll it like a jellyroll.

RUTH. I've never rolled a jellyroll.

HANNAH. I'll show you. Don't worry. (*She adjusts RUTH's style.*) Now, the filling. Apples, cherries, nuts. (*RUTH is still.*) You spread it on, and roll it up.

RUTH. This is the hard part.

HANNAH. No. You can't think it's hard. If you think that, you'll be nervous. And if you're nervous, then the nerves at the tips of your fingers will stand on end. And if the nerves are standing on end, you'll be shaky and you won't be able to roll straight. And then you won't have strudel. So, you relax and enjoy and you roll.

RUTH. Relax and enjoy?

HANNAH. And roll.

(HANNAH moves RUTH's arms to roll strudel, and RUTH begins.)

RUTH. I'm rolling. I'm rolling. I'm rolling.

HANNAH. There you go.

RUTH. I'm rolling. I'm almost done. I'm rolling. I'm done.

HANNAH. You did it.

RUTH. I rolled strudel. *(Unsure of herself.)* It looks/

HANNAH. Like Bubbe's strudel.

RUTH. You think so?

HANNAH. You did it *mamala*. You did the hard part.

RUTH. You said it wasn't hard.

HANNAH. I said you can't *think* it's hard, or you'll never make it. A little cinnamon, a little sugar and into a hot oven/

RUTH. And into my stomach!

(A harsh German voice interrupts them.)

GERMAN VOICE. *Raus! Raus! Alle Kinder zu den Kinderbaracken. Alle zuruck zu den eigenen Baracken. Ausgeh Verbot gielt absofort.* [Raus, raus! Children to the

kinderholm. Everyone to his own barracks. Curfew will begin immediately.]

(The lights expand to reveal that RUTH and HANNAH are in the women's barracks in Terezín and not their comfortable kitchen. We now see that all the ingredients, utensils and most importantly the strudel, were either fiction or makeshift mockeries of the real items.)

RUTH. Never even a taste.

HANNAH. Next time, we'll be faster. We'll smell the apples and sweet dough. Next time, Ruthala. You'll get three pieces at least.

(The announcement comes through again, and HANNAH helps RUTH put her coat on, revealing a Jewish star.)

Lights up on MR. STEIN. He addresses the audience.)

MR. STEIN. At last. At last. The weapons have arrived. Blades of steel that will strike at the heart of our enemy. Swords that will cut to the quick. Sabers to rattle. Sabers that cut. Sabers that I entrust to each of you.

(RUTH and DAVID enter. MR. STEIN is a teacher of sorts and this is the Terezín "school." MR. STEIN pauses and reveals a pair of scissors with one hand. With the other he pulls out paper. Through the following, he is cutting the paper.)

MR. STEIN. Some of you are skeptical, but you needn't be. In the right hands, this weapon is as deadly as guns

on the battlefield, tanks in the trenches, or bombs from the sky. And these are not all. Pencils today. Paper today. Fight with these. And voila... *(He puts down a row of paper cut-out dolls.)* an army! *(MR. STEIN hands RUTH paper with a great flourish. He finds a nub of a pencil for her. She sits down alone to work. MR. STEIN then goes to DAVID.)* David, try these.

DAVID. No thank you.

MR. STEIN. You don't know yet what a scarce commodity these are. I can't remember when we last saw scissors.

DAVID. Thank you, but I'm not artistic.

MR. STEIN. What does that matter? David, listen to me. Here, there are rules for everything. Rules even prohibiting teaching of children.

DAVID. I understand.

MR. STEIN. I don't think you do. People are risking things, David. For you to be educated, for you to learn, the community takes enormous risks. Imprisonment. Deportation. Execution. People risk these things for the future. For you. *(He hands paper and scissors to DAVID.)* Try.

(MR. STEIN exits. RUTH is engrossed in her drawing. DAVID helplessly considers his tools. He goes to RUTH.)

DAVID. What are you making? *(RUTH doesn't look up.)* I said, "What are you making?"

RUTH *(without looking up)*. I heard you.

DAVID. I'm not good at drawing.

RUTH. Then make a collage.

DAVID. Not very good at cutting or pasting either. Sketching. Painting. Etching, shaping, coloring. You name an artistic technique and chances are, I can't do it.

RUTH. Everyone has something they're good at.

DAVID. Oh, I have lots of things I'm good at. But none of them are art things.

RUTH. Fortunately for you, we rarely get supplies. *(She continues to draw.)*

DAVID. If you won't show me what you're making, tell me.

RUTH. Tell you about my picture?

DAVID. You look like you must be good at drawing.
Drawing, coloring, cutting/

RUTH. And pasting. Yes. I do all of those things.

DAVID. If you won't tell me everything in detail, give me an idea of its theme. Is it historical, futuristic, realistic/

RUTH. I can't work with you watching and talking.

(He picks up the scissors and paper, contemplates using them, puts them down.)

DAVID. I have a secret.

RUTH. There are no secrets in Terezin. There's no place to keep them.

DAVID. Maybe I have news about the war. Maybe I'm really an American spy watching the Germans' every move. Perhaps I have a stash of gold, or I'm really the son of a king or a movie star or/

RUTH *(to stop him)*. What is your secret?

DAVID. If you can't trust me with your picture, I can't trust you with my secret. *(RUTH turns back to her picture.)* I'll tell you just this much. I know a place.

RUTH. You know a place?

DAVID. Yes.

RUTH. I know a place too. In fact, I know several: the courtyard, the barracks. The morgue.

DAVID. A *secret* place.

RUTH. A secret place? (*DAVID nods.*) A secret place in the camp?

DAVID. That's what I said.

RUTH. Here? Where we sleep one hundred to a room?

DAVID. You don't believe me.

RUTH. No.

(MR. STEIN reenters. He picks up the unused scissors and paper and addresses DAVID.)

MR. STEIN. Luxuries are rare and necessities are even rarer.

Time for work detail. (*DAVID exits. RUTH starts to go, but MR. STEIN stops her.*) May I see what you've made?

RUTH. It's not finished yet.

MR. STEIN. Then let me see a work-in-progress.

RUTH. It doesn't look right.

MR. STEIN (*gently takes the picture*). A magical place.

RUTH. I suppose.

MR. STEIN. Do you have a favorite place, Ruth?

RUTH. Here?

MR. STEIN. Here? That hardly seems possible. No. At home.

RUTH. No.

MR. STEIN. Think about it.

RUTH. If I ever did have one, how would I remember it after all this time?

MR. STEIN. Mine was Wencelas Square. Anyone could go there and everyone did. A place for all the people. A place to be a Czech, first and always.

RUTH. My bubbe and zeyde's flat.

MR. STEIN. Some place private.

RUTH. It had a smell ...

MR. STEIN. Sweet?

RUTH. Sometimes. Other times onions. But it always smelled... warm.

MR. STEIN. You know, I'm not a teacher by training. I've learned on my feet—as we all have. I never imagined I'd be with children all day—and like it. We—my wife and I—we never had any. I wonder if we might have one day. *(He considers the picture again. He takes a sketching pencil/chalk from his pocket.)* This seems the simplest thing in the world, doesn't it? An implement. A means to an end. Not even the thing itself. It shouldn't be of any value, but how precious it has become. *(He gives her the pencil.)*

RUTH. To keep?

MR. STEIN. Just between us. So you can finish your picture.

(MR. STEIN exits. RUTH stashes the pencil in her clothes.)

Shift to HANNAH mending a stack of well-worn German uniforms. This is her work detail. When she is sure no one is looking, HANNAH tears the inner pocket of one of the uniforms and pockets the cloth. After a moment, RUTH comes stealthily in and stands before HANNAH.)

HANNAH. *Got in himmel, Ruth!* Get under! *(indicating the uniforms.)* Under here! If the shop elder sees you, God help us! *(RUTH gets down, partially camouflaged by the clothes. HANNAH continues her darning.)* You know the rules. In the barracks, only during family hours. Not while we work. You put yourself in harm's way!

RUTH. I needed to see you, Bubbe.

HANNAH. Are you sick?

RUTH. No/

HANNAH (*referring to the presence of the shop elder*).

When she turns the corner, you go. When they're looking for another transport, when they're making the next list for the East, all they need is to see a little girl sneaking around, distracting others from orders. That's all they need.

RUTH. I was very careful to make sure no one noticed.

HANNAH. You can't draw attention to yourself.

RUTH. I said I was careful.

HANNAH (*about the shop elder*). There she goes past Frieda. Careful means nothing.

RUTH. Maybe I'm special.

HANNAH. What?

RUTH. Maybe I'm special. Special so they won't see me.

HANNAH. You're not special. No one is. (*About the elder.*) There. Past Margot. Now Sophie.

RUTH. They shouldn't be making you do all this hard work.

HANNAH. This is old lady's work.

RUTH. You're not an old lady.

HANNAH. An old lady who sticks herself with the needle.

RUTH. Because they've taken your glasses. Because there's no light.

HANNAH. She's about to turn the corner.

RUTH. Bubbe, I needed to see you because/

HANNAH. Ruth. Pay attention.

RUTH. I wanted to show you/

(As HANNAH interrupts her, RUTH starts to take out the picture. RUTH and HANNAH overlap as they hurry to speak.)

HANNAH. We have only a minute before she turns back this way.

RUTH. In class/

HANNAH. Walk quickly, but don't run.

RUTH. Bubbe, today/

HANNAH. Look as if you are supposed to be here. Like someone sent you.

RUTH. I drew this picture.

HANNAH. Go now! Now, Ruth!

(HANNAH shoves the picture back into RUTH's hands, then pushes RUTH out of the space, and returns to her work, surreptitiously watching to see that RUTH exits safely.)

Shift to the next day in class. DAVID sits struggling with an art project. RUTH sits and begins drawing again. After a moment ...)

RUTH. You decided to make something today?

DAVID. It's awful.

RUTH. I'm sure it's not. *(DAVID shows her the picture.)* It is awful. *(Pause.)* When did you get here?

DAVID. One week ago. How long have you been here?

RUTH. Long enough to know there are no secret places.

DAVID. Mr. Stein just told me this was... provocative. That's how he said it. As if he had to look hard for the word. *(Pause.)* I do know a secret place.

RUTH. Where is this place?

DAVID. You don't get something for nothing. I've learned that much already. Let me see your picture. *(RUTH con-*

siders carefully, decides to risk it and show him the picture.) What is it?

RUTH. Where's the place?

DAVID. Information for information.

RUTH (*pause*). This is a castle.

DAVID. That's not enough.

RUTH (*pause*). This is a castle in the sky.

DAVID. Mine's a real place. Not just a picture. You have to tell me more.

RUTH. If this is some trick/

DAVID. It's not.

RUTH (*considers carefully*). This is a castle in the sky. But it's not an ordinary castle. Instead of a king or a queen or even a lord or a duke, bakers live here. Hundreds of bakers and bakers' helpers. And on each turret, there is a chimney, because in each turret, there is an oven for baking the most delicious creations of the entire world... and beyond. In some ovens, bakers are baking bread—dark, rich, hearty bread from Bohemia. And some of the bread is fluffy and white—from Paris. And in other parts of the castle, there are dozens of master bakers making kuchen or apple pastry or strudel. And some make tea-cakes and some make coffeecake and some make little cookies that only the smallest people are allowed to eat. And all of this baking, this extraordinary, wonderful-smelling fresh baking isn't for the bakers to eat and it isn't for the people on Earth. No. This castle baking is for the angels. They come from all over the heavens to do their shopping every day. And the angels love this baking so much that they sing the bakers' praises throughout the heavens and the earth.