

Group of plays performed in Toronto's oldest hotel

By JOSEPH SERGE, Arts Editor, Canadian Jewish News

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Playwright Julie Tepperman with her Zaida Harry at Baycrest

The Gladstone Variations is a site-specific theatrical work that groups together four half-hour plays set in Toronto's oldest hotel.

A critical favourite at last year's Toronto Fringe Festival, *The Gladstone Variations* returns to the Gladstone Hotel this month.

Audiences can see two of the plays at a time and, if they wish, return later for the other two. What is unique is that the audience gets to move around the hotel following the plays' actions.

"The plays were written for the hotel, and the audience follows the actors through rooms, stairwells and various hidden passageways around the hotel," says Julie Tepperman, co-founder with Aaron Willis, of Convergence Theatre, and the writer of one of the plays.

"There was a huge demand for the play at the Fringe last summer and people lined up for hours," she said. (Due to the natural restrictions of the venue, and moving the audience around, capacity is limited to 72 people.) "The hotel really was happy to have us back again. I felt it would be a shame to just let it die," Tepperman said.

As the audience moves around the hotel, guided by "wranglers," sometimes they unwittingly become part of another play as the other audience sees them walking through their "stage" as ghosts in their own play.

This naturally takes a lot of experimentation with stage management and timing as the plays converge with one another. This was honed over the 11 performances at the Fringe last year.

“It’s a lot more polished now,” Tepperman says. “It’s an imperfect piece of theatre that has the potential to be more perfect each time.”

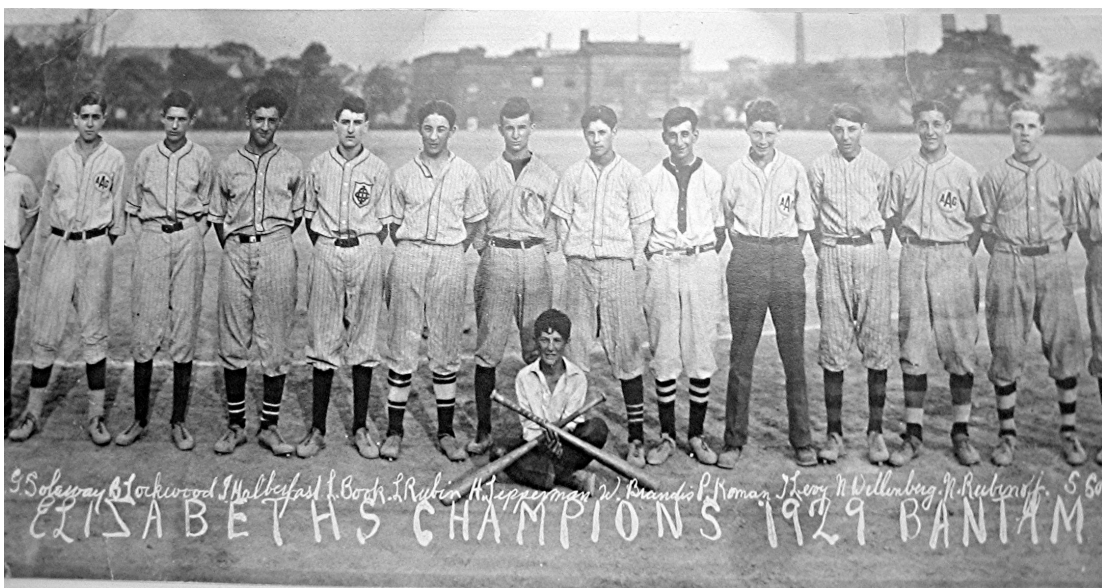
The four plays, by different writers, are inspired by the historic building on Queen Street West, and all of them deal in different ways with old ghosts and how the past and present collide.

Tepperman says the hotel gives off an eerie vibe that influenced the plays’ themes. “It’s creepy. You sit in the Melody Bar and see people there who’ve never really left. It’s the merging of two worlds, past and present,” she says.

In Tepperman’s play *I Grow Old*, the main character, Harry Kraft, returns to the Gladstone Hotel 60 years after he and his baseball team, the Lizzies, went dancing there one evening in 1925. He requests his old room and struggles to hold on to the last strands of his memory and face the ghosts of his past.

I Grow Old was inspired by an event in the life of her grandfather, Harry Tepperman, who died of Alzheimer’s recently at Baycrest, just shy of his 94th birthday.

As a teenager, Harry used to play baseball for the Lizzies, a team out of Central Technical (High) School. One Saturday, Harry and his friends snuck out of shul to drive to a game in Peterborough. On the way there, he switched his window seat with his best friend, Ben Wetstein, in return for a stick of gum.



Harry Tepperman, age 15 (eighth person from the right, just to the left of the bat boy)

“Not long after, they were in a tragic car accident where Ben was killed,” Tepperman says. “Growing up, I found it sad and eerie. Had he not traded seats for a stick of gum, it would have been he who was killed and I wouldn’t exist.

“I always sensed this accident had a tremendous impact on his life and wondered if secretly he blamed himself for the accident as a result of driving on Shabbat – he never rode in a car on Shabbat again.”

This isn’t the first time Convergence Theatre has been involved in site-specific plays. In 2006, Convergence produced AutoShow, in which seven plays were performed simultaneously in seven cars in a parking lot, where the audience moved from car to car.

“There’s something very exciting when an audience can choose their own perspective,” she says. “The idea of being part of it creates adrenalin you don’t get from sitting in your seat.”

The Gladstone Variations runs at the Gladstone Hotel, 1214 Queen St. W., July 14 to Aug. 3 at 7 p.m. Monday matinée on July 21 and 28 at 1:30 p.m. No shows on Saturday. Tickets for each of the two variations are available from 416-504-7259 or www.artsboxoffice.ca. Limited tickets are available at the door, one hour before showtime. The venue is non-wheelchair accessible and audience members have to climb stairs and stand.