

In a Romanian synagogue, a play has ghosts ‘eavesdrop’ on a town’s Jewish past

Channeling everyday Jewish life before the Holocaust, playwright Sarah Brown’s ‘A Secret About Joy’ has been performed for thousands of Romanians since last year’s premiere

By [MATT LEBOVIC](#)



In a Romanian synagogue, an unusual stage production by playwright Sarah Brown channels the Jews who once lived in the Transylvanian city of Sibiu.

First staged in 2022 as part of Sibiu’s International Theater Festival, “A Secret About Joy” has attracted critical acclaim and audience members including Romania’s first lady. The cast of 27 includes a choir of 10 women, four musicians and 13 actors.

Brown explained recently to The Times of Israel that “A Secret About Joy” is site-specific, with the central Romanian city’s Great Synagogue taking center stage.

“The place you’re doing it in is the lead character,” said Brown, who received a Fulbright Award — her second — to teach and create theater in Romania.

“Everything you do is sourced off the space and you write theater for the space,” Brown told The Times of Israel. In the months ahead, Brown hopes to have the English-language play translated into Romanian, as well as identify additional Romanian synagogues to host the production.



In the Great Synagogue of Sibiu, Romania, playwright Sarah Brown's 'A Secret About Joy' is performed by actors Cristina Ghinies, Ioana Antal, Eva Frățilă, Antonia Dobocan, and Patricia Buraga (courtesy)

“A Secret About Joy” revolves around several Jewish families experiencing life events familiar to people everywhere, said Brown. The action is set in 1927, when [Sibiu was home](#) to 1,300 Jews, including a small Hasidic population.

“I didn’t want to talk about the Holocaust,” said Brown, a theater professor at the University of Memphis.

I knew there had been 700,000 Jews in Romania and they had been invested in life there,” said Brown. “I wanted to experience that. I wanted to uncover stories and be in the heart of it,” said the playwright, whose grandparents were from Romania.



Playwright and recipient of three Fulbright Awards, Sarah Brown, in the Great Synagogue of Sibiu, Romania (courtesy)

Settled by Germans and still heavily German in culture, Sibiu is internationally known for its catchy “eye” window frames embedded into many roofs, making pedestrians feel watched as they pass by.

In 2010, Brown completed her first Fulbright in Israel, where she taught solo performance at the University of Haifa. She also wrote her own solo show and performed it in Haifa, Tel Aviv, Brazil and New York City.

While living in Israel, Brown developed a career creating site-specific theater for international festivals. With “A Secret About Joy,” she hopes to give Romanian audiences a taste of vibrant Jewish life before fascism overtook the country in the late 1920s.

“I wanted the audience to fall a little in love with the characters and to leave the play having had an intimate connection with this lost community — a connection they may never get otherwise,” said Brown.

'Women who broke rules'

Around Sibiu, said Brown, the Great Synagogue is largely known as “a place that is never open,” she said.

The imposing shul, with its neo-Romanesque and Byzantine-style façade, is not in the best condition, said Brown, “but its history and spirit were palpable.”

At the start of her Fulbright in Romania, Brown brought a group of acting graduate students into the synagogue. None of them had ever been inside the building or any synagogue before, she said.



Great Synagogue of Sibiu, Romania (Emmanuel Dyan/Flickr)

“I was quite moved by their curiosity,” said Brown, adding that some of those acting students wound up taking roles in the play.

Brown’s interactions with her students informed the play in many ways, she said. For example, one character was fashioned after a student who said he “did not see any holiness” in the synagogue, she said.

In teaching her theater students, Brown realized they knew very little about Judaism. For example, students did not know the Torah was the Bible written in Hebrew.



In the Great Synagogue of Sibiu, Romania, playwright Sarah Brown's 'A Secret About Joy' is performed by actors Andrei Gilcescu, Ștefan Tunsoiu and Ana Monica Vilcu (courtesy)

With fewer than 50 Jews remaining in Sibiu, Brown knew her play needed to “explain” Judaism and the Torah to her audiences, she said.

“It was important to me that non-Jewish Romanians come into the synagogue and learn that the Torah is simply the first five books of the Bible, the same Bible that Jesus studied — and that Jews come to their places of worship with the same hopes, dreams and struggles that non-Jews bring with them to their churches,” said Brown.

Central to “A Secret About Joy” is the shift experienced by some Jewish women in terms of the roles they could play in life.



Scenes in the play hinge around this transition, such as parents arguing about who their daughter is allowed to marry, or Jewish women demanding to be allowed to pray in the sanctuary, as opposed to concealing themselves behind partitions in the balcony.

The play's emotional crescendo comes when some of Sibiu's Jewish women gather in the sanctuary to sing a "*nigun*" prayer chant, in violation of traditional Jewish Law. While they sing, other women — the ancestral relatives of the women below — appear in the balcony to join the chant and unite the past and present.



In the Great Synagogue of Sibiu, Romania, playwright Sarah Brown's 'A Secret About Joy'

In the "*nigun*" montage and other aspects of the play, Brown hoped to position her audience as "the ghosts of the future eavesdropping on the life of the synagogue in 1927," she said. "Women from the past appear in the balcony and talk to the women below, who know they shouldn't be there," said Brown. "They sing about women who broke rules in the Bible. "The Matriarchs knew when to break a rule at the right time for the right reason," said the playwright.

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