

Review: 'The Pianist of Willesden Lane' a resonant tale of survival

By David C. Nichols



Mona Golabek in the world premiere of "The Pianist of Willesden Lane" at the Geffen Playhouse.
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In "The Pianist of Willesden Lane," keyboard virtuoso Mona Golabek essentially channels her mother, pianist Lisa Jura, and strikes musical and emotional notes that transcend technical display or biographical sentiment. This elegant, heartfelt solo show, which opened at the Geffen Playhouse's intimate Audrey Skirball Kenis Theater on Wednesday, is an arresting, deeply affecting triumph.

Based on Golabek's acclaimed book, "The Children of Willesden Lane," the narrative course reveals itself with almost casual assurance. At the outset, the lights come up on Golabek, her blond hair dyed red, standing calmly before set designers David Buess and Trevor Hay's savvy decor of gilt frames surrounding a concert grand.

For the next hour and a half, Golabek melds her extraordinary talent as a pianist to a sensitive, disciplined performance ethic. With an almost imperceptible change in vocal timbre, Golabek becomes her 14-year-old mother, a burgeoning classical pianist in Vienna, circa 1938.

We immediately learn how young Lisa yearned to play Grieg's towering Piano Concerto—the evening's wildly effective recurring motif—her ambitions encouraged by her loving family, particularly her own piano-playing mother.

But when Lisa's piano instructor grimly declines to continue teaching a Jewish student due to Nazi edicts, a singular, deeply personal scenario emerges. In the wake of the notorious Kristallnacht, Lisa's battered father brings home one ticket for the Kindertransport, taking children to sanctuary in England. Though Mama demurs at having to choose, Lisa ends up on the train for safety.

Adapted and directed by Hershey Felder, who certainly knows his way around a piano-accompanied historical saga, "Willesden Lane" builds in power and resonance as Golabek traces her mother's trek to the title hostel and beyond. Christopher Rynne's refined light plot, Erik Carstensen's omniscient sound design and Greg Sowizdrzal's rich projections seamlessly contribute to the storytelling.

Finally, though, it's all about Golabek, whose selfless desire to recount her mother's remarkable tale of survival is enthralling, just as her gifts at the piano are self-evident. Stylistically shifting from Bach and Debussy to Mozart and Chopin with uncanny technique and phrasing, she differentiates between composers with the same subtlety that her mother, her maternal grandparents and the various entities Lisa encounters register, less enacted than embodied.

That's par for the course of the rarefied ability and captivating story that Golabek shares with us. It makes her unforgettable tribute an undiluted privilege to witness.

"The Pianist of Willesden Lane," Audrey Skirball Kenis Theater at the Geffen Playhouse, 10886 Le Conte Ave., Los Angeles. 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays, 3 and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays; 7:30 p.m. June 7 only. Ends June 24. (310) 208-5454 or www.geffenplayhouse.com. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.