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STEAL A PENCIL FOR ME

OPERA BASED ON LIVES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS JAAP & INA POLAK
Semi-Staged Concert Performances in New York on April 28 & 30
of a new opera in two acts by Gerald Cohen and Deborah Brevoort



Based on the book of the same title by Jaap Polak and Ina Soep Polak, *STEAL A PENCIL FOR ME*, a new opera with music by Gerald Cohen and libretto by Deborah Brevoort, will have its premiere in Scarsdale and New York City, NY in late April, 2013. *STEAL A PENCIL FOR ME* is a love story set in two concentration camps during World War II. It is based on the true story of Jaap and Ina Polak, whom the composer has known for the last 25 years, and who just celebrated their 100th and 90th birthdays.

The Polaks, who live in Eastchester, NY, will be in attendance at each performance. In 2007, *STEAL A PENCIL FOR ME* was made into a compelling and award-winning

documentary feature film by Academy Award® nominee Michèle Ohayon. The Polaks have dedicated their lives to teaching about the Holocaust and fighting prejudice. Jaap was one of the founders of the Anne Frank Center USA, and now serves as Chairman Emeritus.

These semi-staged concert opera performances will take place on **Sunday April 28, 2 p.m. at Shaarei Tikvah Congregation, Scarsdale NY**; and on **Tuesday April 30, 7 p.m. at Feinberg Auditorium, Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, NY**. **Shaarei Tikvah Congregation** is located at 46 Fox Meadow Road, Scarsdale NY. Individual tickets are \$30 at the door; \$25 in advance; \$15 for seniors and \$10 for students. Please contact (914) 472-2013 or office@shaareitikvah.org. **Jewish Theological Seminary** is located at 3080 Broadway (at 122nd st.), New York, NY. Tickets, available at www.jtsa.edu/stealapencil, are \$25 in advance, \$30 at the door; \$15 for seniors; free for students with valid ID.

New York-based composer Gerald Cohen (www.GeraldCohenMusic.com) is equally at home in the composition of chamber music, choral music, opera, and liturgical music, for all of which he has won awards and praise, and for which *Gramophone Magazine* noted his “linguistic fluidity and melodic gift”. His operas *Sarah and Hagar*, a two-act opera based on the story from the book of Genesis, and *Seed*, a one-act opera about love and choices for a post-apocalyptic Adam and Eve, have been performed in concert form. Cohen received a B.A in music from Yale University and a D.M.A in composition from Columbia University.

New York-based librettist Deborah Brevoort (www.DeborahBrevoort.com) is formerly from Alaska. An award-winning playwright and librettist, she moves easily between the worlds of theatre, musical theatre and opera. Her plays and musicals are produced regularly to enthusiastic reviews, including Time Out London who noted her “gift for high poetry.” Deborah holds a B.A. from Kent State University and MFA’s from Brown University and NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts.

More biographical information about the composer and librettist is at the end of this release.

The action of the opera takes place in Amsterdam, at Westerbork Transit camp, and at Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp between the years of 1943-1945. Thirty-year old Jaap Polak is unhappily married to Manja, a social butterfly with a sharp tongue. He falls in love with twenty-year old Ina Soep, whose boyfriend, Rudi Acohen, has been seized and deported to Poland by the Nazis. When the husband, his wife, and his new girlfriend are deported to Westerbork, they actually find themselves living in the same barracks. Jaap’s wife objects to the relationship and Jaap and Ina resort to writing secret love letters, which sustain them throughout the horrible circumstances of the war. As Jaap says: “I’m a very special Holocaust survivor. I was in the camps with my wife and my girlfriend; and believe me, it wasn’t easy.”

Although friends and relatives of theirs, including Rudi, perished in the camps, Jaap

and Ina survived the Holocaust. They have been married for over 65 years and now live in Eastchester, NY. A distinguishing feature of their book of letters is how they allowed the story to unfold; unedited; their shortcomings and faults are just as easy to see as their nobility, and their honesty makes the story compelling and real. ***The Village Voice* wrote that their story “offers a corrective to the sentimental prevailing notion that the Shoah only happened to saints.”**

The cast and a small instrumental ensemble will be **conducted by Ari Pelto** and with **stage direction by Beth Greenberg**. This production will star Ilana Davidson and Robert Balonek as Ina and Jaap, and the cast will also include vocal soloists Toby Newman, Nils Neubert, Cherry Duke, Ricardo Rivera, Matthew Singer, Miloslav Antonov, and Enrico Lagasca. Cori Ellison serves as dramaturg and artistic consultant.

Composer Gerald Cohen's recent honors in composition include an Artist Residency in American Lyric Theater's Composer Librettist Development Program, the 2008 Borromeo String Quartet Award of the Aaron Copland House, a 2007 Aaron Copland Award, the Westchester Prize for New Work, the American Composers Forum Faith Partners residency, and the Cantors Assembly's Max Wohlberg Award for distinguished achievement in the field of Jewish composition. Cohen has received commissioning grants from Meet the Composer/National Endowment for the Arts and from the New York State Council on the Arts/Westchester Arts Council; residencies at The MacDowell Colony, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Yaddo; as well as Yale University's Sudler Prize for outstanding achievement in the creative arts. He is Cantor at Shaarei Tikvah Congregation in Scarsdale, N.Y. and is on the faculty of the H.L. Miller Cantorial School of The Jewish Theological Seminary.

Librettist Deborah Brevoort is best known for *The Women of Lockerbie*, which is performed throughout the US and internationally after winning the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays award and the silver medal in the Onassis International playwriting competition. She wrote the opera libretto for *Embedded* with Patrick Soluri, which will be presented in the Ft. Worth Opera's Frontiers Festival. She is a two-time winner of the Frederick Loewe Award in musical theatre for *King Island Christmas* with David Friedman and *Coyote Goes Salmon Fishing*, with Scott Richards. Other works include: *Crossing Over*, an Amish hip hop musical with Stephanie Salzman; *Blue Moon Over Memphis*, a Noh drama about Elvis; *The Poetry of Pizza*, a comedy about love; *The Comfort Team*, about military spouses, *The Blue-Sky Boys* about NASA's Apollo mission. She teaches at Goddard College, Columbia University and NYU.

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