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Leah Napolin, Whose 'Yentl' Adaptation Made Broadway, Dies at 83

By Neil Genzlinger

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Leah Napolin, who with very little experience adapted an Isaac Bashevis Singer story into the play “Yentl,” earning a Broadway run that became a resonant symbol for the second-wave feminist movement in the mid-1970s, died on Sunday at her home in Sea Cliff, N.Y., on Long Island. She was 83.

The cause was breast cancer, her friend Eleanor Pam said.

Ms. Napolin (pronounced NAP-oh-lin) was essentially a playwriting novice when her friend Robert Kalfin, founder of the Chelsea Theater Center, asked her to take a crack at writing a stage adaptation of a Singer short story that had caught his eye called “Yentl the Yeshiva Boy.” It involved a young Jewish woman who disguises herself as a man so that she can be allowed to study the Talmud and enrolls in a yeshiva.

The Chelsea Theater Center production opened at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1974, and in October 1975 it made the leap to Broadway, running for 223 performances.

Second-wave feminism was ascendant at the time, and “Yentl,” a story about a woman taking control of her own life, reflected the moment.

“This dark little gender-bending tale had an impact on many people who identified, as I did, with the heroine’s struggle to reinvent herself, to redefine herself,” Ms. Napolin said in a 2014 interview with the website DC Metro Theater Arts. “Part of the power the second wave women’s movement had was that it gave women permission to do this, to examine the conditions of their lives and redefine who they are and what they wanted to do.”

Yet for all its success, Ms. Napolin’s big breakthrough didn’t make her rich or famous. Instead, the experience was an education for Ms. Napolin in the ways of the theater.

Singer demanded and received equal billing as playwright, although he had only minor input and did none of the writing. When Mr. Kalfin inquired about rights to the story, he found that they had already been purchased by Barbra Streisand, resulting in drawn-out negotiations and financial concessions. (Ms. Streisand’s film musical based on the same source material was released in 1983.)

Ms. Pam, now the president of the Veteran Feminists of America, an organization of women who created feminism's second wave, said Ms. Napolin always felt that she had been shortchanged in relation to "Yentl."

"This injustice was a lifelong painful memory for Leah, who was then inexperienced at navigating the treacherous shoals of the business end of professional theater," Ms. Pam said. "It was also an exemplar of why a women's movement was needed in the first place."

Leah Rose Napolin was born on April 27, 1935, in Brooklyn. Her father, Morris, owned a lamp repair shop, and her mother, Dorothy Alter, was a housewife and artist.

Ms. Napolin attended Alfred University, in western New York State, where she met Mr. Kalfin, a fellow student, in a theatrical club. After graduating in 1956 she acted in summer stock, worked for an anthropological research foundation and taught music in Venezuela. In 1958 she married Bertram Katz, an artist, and for a time they taught at Ohio State University.



John Shea and Tovah Feldshuh in a scene from the Chelsea Theater Center of Brooklyn's 1974 production of Ms. Napolin's play "Yentl."

Thomas Victor, via BAM Hamm Archives

In New York, Ms. Napolin had contributed a few songs to another Kalfin project and collaborated with him on an unfinished children's play when he asked her to write "Yentl." She delivered a script in seven weeks.

In the story, Yentl, disguised as a man, becomes attracted to her male study partner, Avigdor, and the plot appears to be heading toward a simple romance reminiscent of Shakespeare's character-in-disguise works. Ms. Napolin, though, didn't go in that direction.

"Our subject must be love, which transcends categories, which goes beyond gender," she is quoted as saying in "Chelsea on the Edge: The Adventures of an American Theater," a 1991 book about the Chelsea Theater Center by Davi Napoleon.

Singer endorsed her interpretation (he hated Ms. Streisand's), and casting began.

On the first day of auditions, Ms. Napolin wrote in her diary: "It seems there are as many Yentls as there are actresses in New York, as there are aspects of the feminine psyche, as there are shapes and sizes and shadings, and timbres and gaits and carriages."

The lead eventually went to Tovah Feldshuh, who would be nominated for a Tony Award after the play went to Broadway. Ms. Napolin and "Yentl," Ms. Feldshuh said by email, "created the catapult for my career on the New York stage," a career that would bring her three more Tony nominations.

First, though, came the Brooklyn premiere of "Yentl."

"The effect," Clive Barnes summarized in his review of that production in *The New York Times*, "is rather as if a good storyteller had sat down comfortably in an easy chair and proceeded, somewhat garrulously, to tell you about his village back home. It does not add up to a play, but it does not add up to a wasted evening either."

The play was shortened for Broadway, where Mr. Barnes gave it a stronger endorsement.

"There is a gentleness to its storytelling," he wrote, "a certain affectionately nudging quality to its portrayals, and best of all it still retains most of its principal virtue — the pensive quality of a realistic fairy story as full of detail as a genre painting."

Ms. Napolin's rendering of the tale leaves the romantic connections ambiguous — Yentl, still disguised as a man, marries the woman Avigdor loves.

"What we're talking about is the androgyny of the soul," Ms. Napolin, echoing a line from the play, said in 2014, when a remounted version with songs by Jill Sobule had reimagined the work for the age of gender fluidity. "It's not about men and women, men and men, women and women. It's about people."

Ms. Napolin's subsequent plays included "The Dogs of Pripyat," about the pets left behind in the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident in the Soviet Union. The play was adapted into a musical that was included in the 2012 Goodspeed Festival of New Artists in Connecticut. Her book "Split at the Root: A Novel in Three Acts" was published in February, and a memoir, "War Baby 1935-1950" is due later this year.

Ms. Napolin and Mr. Katz divorced in 2000. In 2013 she married Barbara L. Murphy, who survives her, as do two daughters, Margo Katz and Jessica Starke; a sister, Dale Bratter; and three grandchildren.

The opening night of "Yentl" on Broadway drew an impressive collection of feminist leaders, like Phyllis Chesler and Gloria Steinem. But in a 2014 video interview, Ms. Napolin said she had been struck just as much by the many strangers who would seek her out after seeing the play.

"Women would come up to me, women I didn't know, and they'd say, 'How did you know to write a play about me?' " she said, " 'I'm Yentl.' And I realized that what this had touched was a universal chord."