

Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield, MA
The Happiest Man on Earth by Mark St. Germain.
Directed by Ron Lagomarsino.
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“This is not a story. . .”

This is the second play in a week dealing with the aftermath of a survivor of Auschwitz, the Polish death camp operated by the Nazis in World War II. This one strikes so close to a family story of my cousin Rae that, for me, it was hard to listen to at times. However, Mark St. Germain’s script is so finely worked that it is impossible to pull away from it for even a moment. Kenneth Tigar’s performance is so compelling that he transforms into his character, Eddie Jaku, from his first entrance. Ron Lagomarsino’s direction is cleverly intimate making the audience part of the theatrical package from the moment Tigar enters the theatre until well after the curtain call.



Kenneth Tigar on James Noone’s set; Photo: Daniel Rader

Pathos is not always a playable motivation, but with this true story of a man’s survival in Germany, Poland and other European countries in the hostile 1940s, St. Germain has crafted, out of a memoir by Eddie Jaku, a brilliant 90 minute mono-drama that cannot miss moving every audience member whether they have heard of the holocaust or not. All too often in recent years young people have told me that the Holocaust is a movie plot and not a reality, that six million Jews were not really slaughtered by the Nazis and that the Nazi Party only existed in fiction, stories written to entertain. They should all be compelled to see this play, to experience one man’s reality of life in those times. This is that good, that important.

If you have never felt the passion of loneliness and persecution, Tigar brings it to you

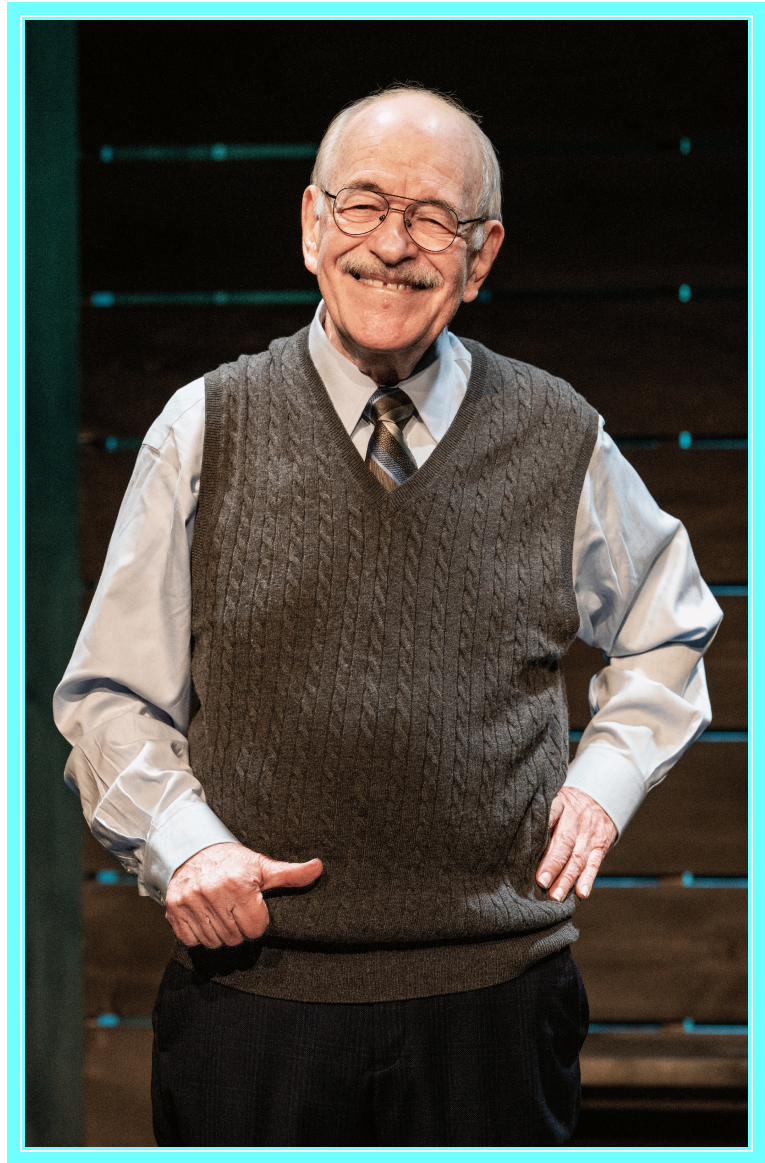
with his voice and his body. He interprets St. Germain's (and probably Jaku's) words with an intense sensitivity. Not once did he overdo, over-express, over-play the situations he describes and brings to life under Lagomarsino's brilliant direction. Not once did he deliberately drag his audience into his life, but instead he kept us, the listeners and taught us how to feel, how to react to what Eddie goes through. He brings us the utter joy of friendship, the beauty of first love, the alienation of help and support and the misery of persecution.

On a fascinating set designed by James Noone and spectacularly lit by Maria-Cristina Fusté Tigar lives the story of Eddie Jaku. He is costumed by Johanna Pan in a simple suit which Lagomarsino and Tigar manage to make disappear as the story progresses. Sound design by Brendan Aanes completes the narrative portrait of a man and his times perfectly.

If you plan on seeing this play in its World Premiere production I suggest you look up the time in which it is set, view a few photos, perhaps watch Roman Polanski's film "The Pianist" and come to the theatre well prepared to cry a bit, hold your breath a lot and enjoy what "The Happiest Man on Earth" can bring into your life. You most certainly won't regret the time spend with Eddie Jaku.

+ 05/28/2023 +

The Happiest Man on Earth plays on the St. Germain Stage at the Sydelle and Lee Blatt Center for the Arts, a Barrington Stage Company theater, at 36 Linden Street, Pittsfield, MA through June 17. For information and tickets call 413-236-8888 or go to barringtonstageco.org.



Kenneth Tigar; Photo: Daniel Rader