

Doing Huebener

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EVERYONE IS INSECURE IN SOME WAY. But only a schizophrenic or a Theatre Person would alleviate that insecurity by becoming someone else. As a Theatre Person I had been a queen, a bitch, an unwed mother, a murder victim, and a nun. This time, I was the mother of Helmuth Huebener.

But of course, *Huebener* was not a typical play. It was based on the life of a seventeen-year-old Latter-day Saint German boy who had circulated anti-Nazi pamphlets and was consequently beheaded by Hitler's "government." Tom Rogers had used real transcripts from a real trial to research and write his play. Essentially what we were doing — the cast; Ivan Crosland, the director; and Tom Rogers — was an act of resurrection. We each did our "part" to bring Huebener back, to make his life significant and his death movingly poignant.

We met, that first day of rehearsal, and got acquainted. Most of us were young — only slightly older than Huebener had been when the Nazis executed him — and marriageable. I don't know about anyone else, but I was checking out the cast for possibilities. The lead, Russ Card, was the best looking, a quarterbackish kid with dark, wavy hair and blue eyes. He was an accounting major, not a Theatre Person, which was a good sign. Bill Darley, who would play one of the judges, looked like John Denver. He was an English major, had won the Mayhew short story award, and was in the ROTC. Chris Peterson and Rob Martell, who played Nazi soldiers, were both a little grim and desperate looking. Mike Evenden and Mimi Bean (Mr. and Mrs. Sudrow, Huebener's grandparents) were in love with each other but wouldn't admit it. Corey Sprague, who had the role of Karl-Heinz Schnibbe (one of Huebener's closest friends and co-conspirators), was cute and funny. Paul Nibley, my husband in the play, was a tease. Scott Wilkinson (*Bruder* Zoellner, the branch president who had excommunicated Huebener for not being loyal to the gov-

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ernment) came off as a semi-snob. He was married to Hollywood actor Bob Cummings' daughter at the time and seemed to think he was hot stuff.

Rehearsal was intense. Rehearsal is always intense. I enjoyed it, though, because I enjoyed acting and because the script called for the mother to embrace her imprisoned son. Russ got better looking with each day of practice.

When I wasn't on stage, I was practicing my feminine mystique. I told Chris Peterson he was cute. He gave me a stunned, timid smile and took to watching me wherever I went — onstage and off. Rob Martell talked to me about his woeful love life. Paul Nibley insisted he was going to kiss me opening night, because a husband should be affectionate with his wife, shouldn't he?

Crosland had decided we should use German accents, so much of the time when I wasn't flirting I was figuring out how to do that and still be understandable. Then I had to make sure I had the correct balance in my lines between emotion and restraint. I had to be heartbroken, but I couldn't gush, for heaven's sake.

The prison scene required me to "break down." I puckered up for the great cry at the first rehearsal, on cue. Crosland said I had to fight the tears more. People fight their tears, he said. "Try to smile."

Try to smile. That was a big order. I saw little motivation in the scene for a smile. The mother is conversing with the son, trying not to show how frightened she is for him, how upset, trying not to let him know how much damage his actions have caused the family, how deep the consequences of his honor have gone.

"But tell me," she asks. "When is your trial?"

"Not before August. It's still months away. They'll try us, I've heard, in Berlin."

"So."

And there it was — the place for my smile. "You're that important to them." A congratulation. Something almost cheery. My son has attained significance. Smile. Then cry.

Oh, I wanted to cry. Russ's cupped hands were under my face when I bowed my head. I wanted to fill those hands with tears. I wanted to charge this scene with such power, such gut feeling that the audience would tremble on the spot. But I couldn't manufacture the moisture. I could not cry on cue. I hoped that by opening night, if I did things like read *The Diary of Anne Frank*, I would have ready tears. For now, I just kept practicing. All of us kept practicing, getting ready for the run. Theatre People take their shows seriously.

The set was simple. Backstage was strung with wide metal strips that gave an appropriately cold, hard feeling to the stark furnishings. Our costumes were simple too. Crosland had toyed with the idea of making the judges surrealistic — doing up their faces as skulls. (The publicity pictures of the judges were, in fact, cadaverous.) Finally, he left their faces undone but draped the men in long, red robes. My own costumes were simple and frankly hideous. One was a forest-green suit that looked like a box with shoulder pads; the other was a polka dotted polyester creation with huge pleats extending from the waist. I looked like "Madame Hips" in it.

Tom Rogers came to almost every rehearsal, often frantically rewriting a scene when it just didn't click. At the last minute he deleted a prayer where Helmuth says to God, "I know you have called me to do this thing, though I don't understand why." I never knew if this deletion was theatrically or politically motivated. Some critics of *Fires of the Mind* had insisted that prayers on stage appear awkward and contrived. But there were deeper controversies than that surrounding the prayer scene. Could it be that the director — or whoever — wished to avoid suggesting Huebener had actually been inspired to resist the Nazi miasma?

After about five weeks of rehearsal, we were ready for opening night. I had read Anne's diary and had indeed been moved. Tuning in to Tchaikovsky and Pachelbel as I read had made my experience with the doomed girl's thoughts even more emotional. I had also read the awful scenes of tormented children in Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov* to get me ready. But even with my adrenalin flowing as I faced the audience, I could not cry.

So I faked it. A few movements of the shoulders, a finger under the eye, heaved breaths. The audience didn't know the difference.

I found that just as difficult as crying was serving the cranberry juice in the first scene without spilling it. In that scene, I leaned over, cup in hand, to say my line to Paul and doused his lap. I never meant it to happen, but it did — practically every night.

A week into the run he threatened me: "Tonight's the night," he said. "I'm kissing you in the first scene."

I begged him not to. (I don't kiss without rehearsal.) "If you won't kiss me," I promised, "I won't spill the cranberry juice on your lap." We shook on it.

That night I poured half the glass on him. I stared down at my accident — it was too big to be ignored; even the audience must have noticed — and Paul smiled tenderly at me, leaned across the sofa, and kissed me. I remember restraining a giggle, telling myself over and over that this was the real show. I couldn't crack up and say, "I'm sorry. I'm in a weird mood. Let's go back to the beginning." This was serious stuff here. I thought about the day my Aunt Carolyn died. I tried to recall how sad I had been and to mimic that image of myself at the funeral. It didn't work. I grinned through most of the scene. I tossed off lines like "The less we talk about it the better" as though they were jokes.

Spilled juice was only one fiasco, and a pretty minor one at that. There were others; our show was not miraculously protected. One night the prop girl forgot to put the cranberry juice out and Mimi said, "Oh, I thought I had it here, but perhaps it's in the cellar." She left the rest of us on stage to improvise conversation while she hunted it down. There were missed entrances and misplaced props. And the red curtain that draped the "execution chamber" kept falling down before the last act, when Russ was supposed to pull it over his head. There were tiny fiascos and little catastrophes, but the snow worked beautifully for the most part, and as a cast we became tightly bonded.

We had fun too. I remember Corey joking about how we could handle intermission: "Unt now, for your half-time entertainment, ve vill take three

of you from the audience, unt SHOOT you. You, you, unt you! Upstage NOW!" Still, when the play was over each night, there was a lingering reality that I hadn't often felt in the theatre department. Huebener's ghost was ubiquitous. This was probably because nearly every audience included German immigrants who had known him.

The real Karl-Heinz Schnibbe came three times. Word circulated through the cast that he had been in a Siberian prison camp and had weighed ninety-eight pounds when the Red Cross rescued him. You'd never know; now he was stereotypically tall, dark, and handsome.

He spoke to me in German after the first show he attended. I told him it was just the accent I had worked on; I couldn't understand the real thing. The other two nights he came, he embraced me after the show and called me "Mother Huebener."

Ruddi Wobbe, another co-conspirator and friend of Huebener's, came one night also. And other nameless Germans compared our acting to the truth they had known. "Yes, the judges were like that — but scarier. They wore red robes. Oh, I will never forget. Blood-red robes." "Ach, dat is yust how he was, dat Helmuth. But he cocked his head to the side all de time, like dis. During Sunday School, he vud do dis all de time." "Oh, yes, he looked so much like my Helmuth, but my Helmuth was smaller really."

We had scratched at truth, and we felt it. Somehow, all of us with our various insecurities and hidden agendas had done something significant and controversial. *Huebener* was a BYU "event."

We were invited to take the show to California, and Thomas S. Monson came to see it for approval. But after Brother Monson's visit, the Church said California was off limits. Crosland announced the decision before our penultimate show, encouraging us not to let it bother us, but to go out in a blaze of glory. The play, Crosland reported, would apparently summon too many memories in the German members and perhaps awaken old resentments. There could be problems. So our show was branded "verboten."

Tom Rogers was pretty subdued about the decision; at least he didn't make any public denunciations of the Church or Brother Monson. But we Theatre People were theatrically livid and energized.

Had we simply done too good a job bringing Helmuth Huebener back? Were people too ashamed to face his excommunicated ghost (for his posthumous reinstatement in the Church was only a sentence in the program)? And who had the right to censor us? What excuse could a government or a church possibly concoct to rationalize its silencing of a truth seeker? Were Tom Rogers and Helmuth Huebener — and everyone who had worked on this play — less important than those nameless German immigrants whom the Church claimed to be protecting?

We all said brave things. "They can't do this to us." "This story needs to be told!" Dave Sterego, who played the prosecutor, said he would write his own play about Huebener then if the Church wouldn't let this version go where it needed to. We were all of us like Karl-Heinz Schnibbe in that great court scene where the judges ask him if he has any questions. Schnibbe says

he does, then repeats the title of one of the fliers he and Huebener had circulated: "Where is Rudolph Hess?" (It was a great scene. The audience would still be tittering as the guard — Tom Nibley — slapped Corey who then bit a "blood" capsule and let the red juice slip down the side of his mouth.) We were like Karl-Heinz, confronting the Church bureaucracy, answering a faceless ecclesiastical judge with the bold, "Where is Helmuth Huebener?"

But, alas, the blood in our mouths was as fake as the capsule of juice in Corey's. We were just kids, after all, who had been playing around and had stumbled inadvertently upon this can of worms. The truth is, we were insecure and cowardly. We were impotent actors making impotent theatrical speeches. We had never intended to be more than actors. And when it came right down to it, we weren't. None of us lost our heads. But we did become more dedicated to the play. Closing night found us vigorous and defiant in the comfort of our roles.

We toasted Huebener in the last scene of the last night, closed the show, struck the set, took off our make-up, had a party, and went back to being our regular selves.

That was ten years ago.

Several of us have been divorced since then; some have gone through excommunications of their own; all have had to come to grips with the hard realities of life. (When Scott Wilkinson's wife left him, a friend told me, Scott looked like "a lost puppy.") I kept in contact with several of the cast members, and so I know some of the trials they have faced since closing night. We have all starred in our own tragicomedies.

My big trial was a divorce, something I had not even considered possible in my youth. I remember coming home from Venezuela, where I had been living with my now ex-husband, and sitting on Tom Rogers' living room couch trying very hard not to cry (oh, that delicate balance between emotion and restraint!) as he said so gently, "I want to tell you, I feel that this terrible thing is not your fault." How I loved Tom, that sweet, empathetic author of controversial plays!

And the play Tom had created — the play that had, for a couple of weeks, resurrected Helmuth Huebener — has stayed with me more than any play I have ever worked in.

For me, Huebener is more a reality today than he was ten years ago. I have grown up, married, divorced, remarried. I have seen more wickedness than I ever imagined I would. I have seen it even in my own nature. I look at the world now with mature eyes — a mother's eyes — no longer innocent, no longer insecure. I watch my mischievous, willful son and wonder what awaits him, where he will go, what he will do, what he will stand for. I wonder the same, often, about myself. I have scripted some of my own answers to the questions, but scripts can be changed when they don't work or when the world demands other answers.

I have thought a lot, too, about why the Church closed us down. I finally understood the decision (though I still didn't agree with it) through the ex-

communication of a friend who had seen the show and had said to me afterwards, "This play means more to me than anything. You can't understand how much it means. Someday, you will."

I do understand now. My friend's cause was polygamy, not, in my opinion, as heroic as anti-Naziism, especially since I know his wife and six children and have seen how, intoxicated by his cause, he has betrayed them and deceived himself. But I can see how he and other on-the-fringe Mormons might find justification for their costly decisions through Huebener's story and by Huebener's posthumous reinstatement and heroification. It was more than tormented Germans the Church was protecting. But how I wish Huebener could be honored here as he is in his homeland. Honored, even, by the Church he loved.

My husband went to Berlin last year and visited the chamber where Helmut Huebener was beheaded. He brought me a pamphlet describing the victims of Naziism who had lost their lives in that dark room. "Helmut Huebener," says the pamphlet, "was a member of the American cult, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." There was a picture of the boy beside this epitaph.

I read those words several times and looked at Helmut's picture (this was the first time I had seen what he really looked like.) I felt I knew him. A young kid — half my age — who had cocked his head "like dis" during Sunday School, had flirted with girls, maybe thought about getting married, certainly thought about doing something important with his life. An insecure kid whose mother had been divorced and whose world was often gloomy and despairing. A quarterbackish kid with dark, wavy hair, light eyes, and dreams. Youth itself at the brink of possibility, full of innocence and purpose.

I think if I could do that prison scene again, I would hold on to the boy even tighter than before. And this time, I know I could cry.