

Terry Nicholetti plays Bessie Bluefeld in the JMM's newest living history production.

Bessie Makes History

Jewish Museum introduces Bessie Bluefeld, its newest living history character

By Simone Ellin | Photo by David Stuck

ON TUESDAY, APRIL 30, when Jewish Museum of Maryland Director of Education Ilene Dackman-Alon introduced the museum's new living history character, Bessie Bluefeld, many in the audience already knew her, or at least knew of her. Among the 100 guests who came to the JMM for a reception and one-woman show were Bluefeld's real-live grandchildren, great-grandchildren and even great-great grandchildren. Also in attendance were many Baltimoreans who remembered celebrating *smachot* catered by Bluefeld's Catering. Bessie and husband Charles built Bluefeld's from the ground up after immigrating to Baltimore to escape the pogroms in the Volhynia region

of Eastern Europe.

Bessie Bluefeld is the third historical character brought to life by the museum's Leo V. Berger Immigrant's Trunk Program. Marvin Pinkert, the JMM's executive director, said that the Immigrant's Trunk is one of the museum's most successful programs.

"Part of what we do at the museum is bring history to life," said Pinkert. "We add a dimension that you just can't get from a book or a website."

Bessie's character was conceived during preparation for the JMM's original exhibition, "Chosen Food: Cuisine, Culture and American Jewish Identity" (which ended in December).

"Bessie's name and Bluefeld's Catering were very prominent in the exhibition, and we realized they remained important even after the exhibition closed," Pinkert said.

So the museum contracted author Jonathan Scott Fuqua to write a script, Harriet Lynn of Heritage Theatre Artists' Consortium to direct the production and actress Terry Nicholetti to perform the role of Bessie.

As Bessie Bluefeld, Nicholetti had the incredibly challenging task of memorizing 20 pages of script.

"A friend suggested I put on music and chant the lines to it. So I got a record by a *klezmer* group from Brooklyn and chanted the script.



It took me about one-and-a-half hours per page,” said Nicholetti, a former teacher and marketing consultant who is also the author of two one-woman shows, “Dance with Me” (2006) and “Father John Says a Hail Mary” (2011).

Nicholetti’s effort paid off. Her portrayal of Bessie was riveting.

veyed the struggles unique to the immigrant experience. She credited Lynn for helping her get the details of Bessie’s character just right.

“Harriet took my raw material and she was my sculptor,” said the actress.

Nicholetti was also grateful for the opportunity: “I prayed to Bessie.

“I PRAYED TO BESSIE. ‘PLEASE, LET ME TELL YOUR STORY.’”

— Terry Nicholetti

Bessie’s story begins in Russia, where the young bride anxiously awaits the return of her husband, who has traveled to America to scope out opportunities for their future. In the next segment, Bessie describes her long and difficult journey to America and shares her hopes for the future, as well as concerns for her parents who remain in Russia.

Her story continues in 1912, as she convinces Charles to open a grocery store on Bethel Street in Baltimore. In subsequent scenes, the play traces the growth of the family’s business from the store to food stands in Lexington Market and on the beach in Atlantic City to the blossoming of the Bluefeld Catering business.

Bessie was front and center in the business from 1937 to 1941, when she died suddenly from a brain aneurism. After her death, Charles and their children maintained the kosher catering business for decades.

Bluefeld Catering was known for its elegance and quality and for a “special something” that Bessie described as “the orchid touch.”

Nicholetti did an admirable job of playing Bessie at all stages of her life and creating a character who was charming, loveable and humorous and who con-

veyed the struggles unique to the immigrant experience. She credited Lynn for helping her get the details of Bessie’s character just right.

While the audience was moved by her performance, Bessie’s descendants were especially emotional about the program. Those who remembered her, such as Gertrude Friedman, Bessie’s firstborn granddaughter, found her depiction true to life. Those too young to have known her, such as granddaughter Honey Litman and Litman’s daughter, Erika, were thrilled to “make her acquaintance.”

“It was extraordinary; sensational,” said Honey Litman. “I never knew her, but my father, Bessie’s son Phil Bluefeld, worshipped the ground she walked on. All the kids did. He always said I reminded him of her. I knew it had to be a compliment. We learned all about her from the show. It was marvelous.”

To arrange for a performance of Bessie Bluefeld’s story for your synagogue, senior center, high school, college or Jewish communal group, contact Ilene Dackman-Alon at 410-732-4200, ext. 214, or ilene@jewishmuseummd.org. Learn more about the JMM and its programs at jewishmuseummd.org. JT

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