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Sandra Laub rehearses "Picking Up Stones: An American Jew Wakes to a Nightmare" at the Dragon's Egg studio in Ledyard. (Mya Card)

A plea for peace: Pawcatuck artist brings show about Israeli-Palestinian conflict to New London and then the U.N.

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On Sunday, Sandra Laub will perform her one-woman play “Picking Up Stones: An American Jew Wakes to a Nightmare” in New London, at the Garde Arts Center.

The following day, she will present the piece at a conference at the United Nations in New York City.

And then, this summer, she brings it to the famed Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland.

“I’m really thrilled,” said Laub, who lives in Pawcatuck. “This really has built. I have been working on (the play) for a few years now.”

“Picking Up Stones” reflects on the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The play has morphed over time as Laub has been moved by and has thought deeply about events, from when she started playing Golda Meir in the one-woman show “Golda’s Balcony” more than a dozen years ago to when she visited Israel in 2014 to everything that happened during and after the Hamas attacks on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

Laub rewrote the play after Oct. 7, and in its current form, “Picking Up Stones” serves as her reaction to the Israel-Hamas war from Day 1 through Day 30. It deals with such questions as whether the world can understand and sympathize with two opposing groups of people and how both sides can start to heal from their traumas.

“This confluence of ideas have been roiling in me for years now, ever since performing Golda Meir, and really finally coalesced into this 70-minute solo show,” she said.

Laub said that “Picking Up Stones” is a plea for peace. It acknowledges what she said are the very valid points of view from both sides, and she tried to create something nuanced and human as she wove the elements together.

Laub recounts stories from her life, but she also portrays a number of characters. Some of the words she uses are from recordings she has made or from writings from friends in Israel that they gave her permission to use.

Laub said the play has always had this kernel: “We must have empathy. We must not dehumanize or ‘other’ anyone — anyone. Because as a self-proclaimed liberal person — liberal Zionist, even — I feel that it’s our duty to call truth to power.”

While much has happened after the first 30 days of the war, Laub believes the seeds of everything — the Gaza war, the hostages, the division of people in Israel and in the U.S., the antisemitism, the Islamophobia — “all of it reared up between Day 1 and Day 30 in that first month, and it’s still reverberating now, only intensifying.”

Experiences of life

Laub began writing what became “Picking Up Stones” in 2022, when she was working as an English teacher at Chariho High School in Rhode Island. This is a very personal play for Laub, and it comes out of her background as a reformed/conservative Jew.

She grew up in New Rochelle, N.Y., and then lived in New York City.

“I was surrounded by like-minded Jewish people in a multicultural city, then moved here to the area, to (Hopkinton) Rhode Island first,” she said.

Laub’s daughter was about 3 at the time, and Laub and her husband were looking for Jewish congregations but found nothing in their area, she recalled, for miles north to Providence and south to New London and Waterford.

Her daughter ended up attending the Solomon Schechter Academy, a Jewish day school that was housed on Ocean Avenue in New London at the time.

Laub's journey

Laub became especially interested in what was happening in Israel when she was in the William Gibson-penned play “Golda’s Balcony.” She had always admired Meir as a powerful political woman figure but hadn’t known the history of the Palestinian side of things.

Another vital experience: Laub and her husband traveled to Israel in 2014, during that year’s Gaza war. She saw soldiers dancing in their uniforms at the Western Wall. She saw checkpoints. She saw poverty in sections of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, but she also saw people of various religions living in peace together in Jerusalem.

“It was a really strange feeling to be in a country where the majority was like me, Jewish and wearing, proudly, a Jewish star or a yarmulke. Because I had moved from New York and was now a minority up here in Connecticut and Rhode Island, that was a beautiful feeling to me. I really felt a part of the country,” she said.

Then, in 2022, Laub was profoundly affected by the death of Palestinian American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh. (Laub said journalists are her heroes.) Abu Akleh was shot while covering a raid by the Israeli military at the Jenin refugee camp. The Israeli military said the shooting was a mistake. But Laub wondered how it could be, since the journalist was wearing a vest labeled “PRESS” and the soldier who killed her reportedly had a telescopic sight.

That same year, Laub joined a live webinar and made friends with the head of the Palestine Museum US, in Woodbridge, Conn. She said she learned a lot and saw documentaries that had a very different point of view “about Israeli subjugation and dehumanization of Palestinians.”

Then came Oct. 7, 2023, and the Hamas killings and kidnappings of so many Israeli civilians. She went to that webinar in reaction, and the director of the Palestine Museum US; his co-host, who was an Arabic studies professor; a Palestinian guest; and the global online audience

“were celebrating. Their attitude was quite positive, that this had been an opportunity for Palestinians to resist, and I was shocked,” Laub said.

She saw protests that seemed to support Hamas, which she found incomprehensible.

Laub began rewriting her play that afternoon.

In the days afterward, she followed the news of the revving up of the ground invasion in Gaza and “the daily pummeling of Gaza,” she said. She desperately hoped that the hostages would be released.

She also saw the divisive politics intensify. People in her own family didn’t understand why Laub would present the idea that Palestinians deserved anything other than revenge and retribution for what Hamas did on Oct. 7. “There are many Jews in America and in Israel who feel that way. At the same time, there are many Diaspora Jews and Jewish Israelis who are highly critical of the current Israeli government,” she said.

As she wrote “Picking Up Stones,” she asked herself why she hadn’t questioned things.

“Why don’t I open my mouth, for example, when a fellow Jew, let’s say, has deep roots in Israel and vehemently denies accusations of apartheid or any criticism of Israel — why don’t I open my mouth to say: ‘Hey, there’s another side of this that keeps everyone in that region locked in a conflict that is killing both sides. And it’s got to stop. It’s got to stop,’” she said.

Beyond the region

In New York City on Monday, Laub will perform “Picking Up Stones” at the NGO CSW Forum; CSW is the Commission on the Status of Women, a commission of the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

“I’m thrilled people from all over the world will be seeing this play, and I’m hoping to make some connections and bring it wherever people want it. The other thing I want to accomplish is a conversation after the piece,” she said, noting that people usually want to talk after seeing the play.

Laub is currently the president of the League of Women Voters of Southeastern Connecticut, which is a sponsoring organization of the Commission on the Status of Women. Others from the League who had attended the forum before suggested Laub might perform “Picking Up Stones” there. She applied and was accepted.

Laub also applied to various venues that are involved with the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and was accepted by theSpaceUK, which had presented last year a version of David Hare’s play “Via Dolorosa,” which was also about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Another goal for Laub is to present “Picking Up Stones” in Israel, and she will do some fundraising at the Garde performance toward that end.

“I believe it’s so important to be part of that conversation (in Israel) — I’m hoping that that’s going to happen,” she said.

Picking up stones

As for the title “Picking Up Stones,” Laub has a bag of stones in the play. In her real life, she likes to pick up stones, seeing them as symbols of a permanency and a power in nature that you can put in your pocket.

She said stones “also of course can be thrown, as in the first intifada, or can be used to build, as used to build Abraham’s tomb by his two sons, Isaac the Jew and Ishmael the non-Jew.”

Her stones are a jumble during the play, as Laub tries to arrange them and to build with them — but they keep getting knocked down.

Ultimately, she said, “I try to make this through line of me coming to terms with the idea of empathy, of the intrinsic connection and interbeing of all people, and how do we maintain that? Well, we maintain that by holding at least two thoughts at one time up to the light.”