



POPCORN™ Freedom Writers Pens a Poignant Parable

One Popcorn, Poor • Two Popcorns, Fair • Three Popcorns, Good • Four Popcorns, Excellent
By MICHAEL S. GOLDBERGER
3 popcorns

Delving into what is arguably humankind's biggest challenge, filmmaker Richard LaGravenese's *Freedom Writers* teaches a heartfelt and resultantly entertaining lesson in tolerance. Even hardened cynics might chance that it signals hope for the world yet.

Based on the real-life pluckiness and dedication of high-school teacher Erin Gruwell (Hilary Swank) and "The Freedom Writers Diary," the story winningly demonstrates Margaret Mead's optimistic thesis: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

In this example, the neophyte educator is aided and abetted by a ragtag collection of socially disadvantaged kids who've landed at the previously A-list school in Long Beach, Calif., as a result of voluntary integration. Not that the hardened toughs, some of them gun-toting gang members, set out to validate the theory.

To the contrary, they've no intention of making history, or of beating the odds and being the first in their respective families to graduate high school, let alone go on to college. Survival is job one. Respect within the diverse phyla of their street culture is a close second.

Ms. Gruwell? Heck, she's just the new teacher, obviously from a privileged background and apparently without a clue concerning their troubled world. Later for her.

But if you are lucky enough to have ever known a Ms. Gruwell (mine was Mr. Dave Stamelman), you'll recognize the beautiful truth. She simply doesn't know she can't reach these youths...that the odds are just a light year or two beyond impossible.

Jaded fellow teachers who despairingly espy a lost idealism in themselves thanks to Erin's one-teacher crusade quickly inform her of that. The difference is, she's the real deal. Miss Swank, in another sensational thespic stint, hammers that home.

Of course, the genre of the inspirational teacher is familiar. *Goodbye Mr. Chips* (1939) did it with mortarboard in place.

In modern cinema history the progenitor is *Blackboard Jungle* (1955). You'll remember Mr. Dadier (Glenn Ford), whom the inner-city hooligans called Mr. Daddy-O, and certainly FilmDm's first rock 'n' roll score by Bill Haley and the Comets. Sidney Poitier starred as the subliminal leader, the one with the obvious potential.

Mr. Poitier keeps the faith in 1967's *To Sir With Love*, this time as the teacher in London's East End. *Stand and Deliver* told the story in 1988. In 1995's *Dangerous Minds*, ex-marine Louanne Johnson (Michelle Pfeiffer) imparts her variation on educational tough love with a soupcon of kung fu. No decade is without representation. The trappings and slang change. The age-old, universal problem does not.

Freedom Writers takes up the beat with a rap background. In a testament to both LaGravenese and Swank's talented vision, the tale has never seemed fresher.

Watch Miss Swank's young champion at dinner with her Dad (Scott Glenn) when the former '60s activist-turned-middleclass finally endorses his little girl dreaming the impossible

Library Plans Program

On Hansel and Gretel
SCOTCH PLAINS - The Scotch Plains Public Library, located at 1927 Bartle Avenue, will present an interactive introduction to the opera *Hansel and Gretel* on Saturday, January 20, at 10:30 a.m. in its Community Room.

This free program is produced and presented by the Young Artist Program of the Little Opera Company of New Jersey, a division of the New Jersey Workshop for the Arts. Members of the ensemble will perform selections from the full production. The singers range in age from 10 to 18 and come from 16 municipalities and four counties in New Jersey.

The library requests that an adult accompany all children attending. For more information or directions, please call the library at (908) 322-5007.

Celeb. Singers Present

Changing of the Guard

SCOTCH PLAINS - The Celebration Singers of Cranford will present *The Changing of the Guard: A Madrigal Feast* on January 26 and 27 at 8 p.m. at Pantagis Renaissance, located at Park and Mountain Avenues in Scotch Plains.

The program includes a three-course meal and a show set in merry old England. Members of the Celebration Singers will sing, act and engage the audience, as well as wait tables in period costumes.

The play begins with a greeting by the Jester, followed by the Royal Procession. During the meal, there are three humorous "Changes of the Guard." Following dessert, the Jester enters and again welcomes the audience to "Deep Manor."

The drama that follows begins with a "Pledge of the Audience" and further involves the audience and performers in saving Wanda, a damsel in distress, from the villainous Sheriff of Notting.

Reservations must be made in advance by calling (908) 241-8200. No tickets will be sold at the door since a meal must be selected when the reservation is made. Tickets are \$35 for adults, \$30 for seniors and \$20 for children.

dream. Those big eyes welling up with pride spell nomination.

This subtext, along with the background details of Erin's marriage at risk to Scott (Patrick Dempsey), nicely support the touching account. She works two extra jobs to buy the supplies her school system won't provide. The increasingly disenchanted husband notes that he hadn't signed on for the magnificent obsession.

More vociferously unenthused is Erin's chief detractor. Imelda Staunton is aces as English Department head Margaret Campbell, the jealous fault-finder personified. We groan with her every entrance. What barrel will she next toss before our Erin's knees?

No matter, the intrepid instructor won't be deterred. Two primary epiphanies pave her route. She involves her charges, all well exacted by a solid ensemble cast, by inducing them to keep diaries. She'll read the cathartic tomes, but only if they wish. Most do.

Then there's the true piece of gratifying, humanitarian genius. Gruwell links the bigotry hobbling her kids with the Holocaust. They read "The Diary of Anne Frank," visit a Holocaust museum and hear the horrors firsthand from survivors.

An in-your-face to deniers, the baton pass it represents empowers the kids and validates their membership in the society of man. Enfranchised, they have a mission. Never again. The movie shifts into high gear. Only one of its few flaws raises a question.

Granted, there's a whole process to Miss Gruwell's victory in the classroom. No one thing did it. However, something besides hard work and caring certainly did.

But with no exact moment of watershed delineated or the magic divulged, we're asked to make a trusting jump. Happily, the goodwill and altruism so eloquently inscribed by the "Freedom Writers" make it a leap of faith worth taking.

Freedom Writers, rated PG-13, is a Paramount Pictures release directed by Richard LaGravenese and stars Hilary Swank, April Lee Hernandez and Imelda Staunton. Running time: 123 minutes

Guillotine Donates

To AIDS Foundation

WESTFIELD - The Guillotine Salon and Spa, located in downtown Westfield, will celebrate its 10-year anniversary under current owner Lynne Fitzpatrick. The success of the salon has inspired them to give back some of their fortune to those in need.

To facilitate this, the Guillotine has partnered with Chad Hayduk at Three Custom Color Specialists, which creates exclusive custom-blended cosmetics, to design a signature color lipstick. The shade, "Guilla Girl," is "the perfect shade of universal red that compliments all skin tones."

The Guillotine will donate a portion of all proceeds raised from "Guilla Girl" sales to St. Clare's Home for Children, an AIDS foundation.

On February 16, the Guillotine will host a celebration and Chinese auction from 6 to 8 p.m. and will donate all proceeds from the event to St. Clare's.

For more information, visit guillotinesalonandspa.com, call (908) 654-8686 or visit the Guillotine at 108 Central Avenue in Westfield.

Visit aidsresource.org for more information about St. Clare's Home for Children.

Choral Art Society

Performs *Elijah*

WESTFIELD - The Choral Art Society of New Jersey, Inc., will perform Mendelssohn's *Elijah* on Saturday, January 20, at 8 p.m. at The Presbyterian Church in Westfield, located on Mountain Avenue at East Broad Street.

Considered by many critics Mendelssohn's greatest work, *Elijah* was written a few years before the composer's death in 1847 at the age of 38. Its first performance, with the composer himself conducting, was at the 1846 Birmingham Festival in England.

James Little, musical director of the society, will conduct the evening's performance. Mr. Little has been the director of the Choral Art Society of New Jersey since the spring of 1999. Soloists include Andi Campbell, soprano; Luthian Brackett, alto; Mark Bleeke, tenor, and Dale Livingston, bass, as *Elijah*.

The Choral Art Society Orchestra will accompany the chorus. Admission is \$20, \$15 for seniors and students at the door. Tickets are available at boogiestickets.com.

For information, call (908) 654-5737.



A CUT ABOVE...Rahway's Sarah Palenik, a junior at Union Catholic High School in Scotch Plains, grew her hair for two years and recently donated 10 inches to "Locks of Love."

Morristown - Beethoven

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

pick them up, growing faster and more intense before they started to diminish into hushed accents, new tones and emerging harmonies.

Upper-string double stops moved repetitively - it must have been absolutely exhausting work, but the musicians betrayed no sign of it, playing as vigorously as they had at the start of the 25-minute continuous piece. The string players' performance of "Shaker Loops," written for string septet in 1978 and revised and rescored in 1983, was a feat of stamina that required a completely different type of musicianship than the Beethoven or Tchaikovsky that surrounded it.

"There are three categories of listener when it comes to minimalist music," Manahan had told the audience before the piece. "The first will get it right away, the second will understand that it's an acquired taste, and the third," he paused, "will be completely irritated."

There were, no doubt, some audience members who fell into the third category - the gradually evolving soundscapes of Adams' work are not easily accessible to all listeners - but those not averse to music less defined than that of the classical and romantic eras enjoyed a very vigorous, concerted effort from the NJSO string players.

Though the concert program was not billed as a part of the NJSO's "Russian Romantics" winter series, the romanticism certainly came to life through the violin of the accomplished Jennifer Koh. Among her worldwide appearances last year alone, Koh performed in Geneva, Amsterdam, Mexico City and at the Supreme Court Recital Series in Washington, D.C. Backed by the NJSO, she offered the Morristown audience an inspired performance of Tchaikovsky's Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 35, a hallmark concerto for violin virtuosos, as the capstone of the afternoon's program.

She opened the concerto with a lyrical solo line that the rest of the

UC Student Donates

Hair to 'Locks of Love'

SCOTCH PLAINS - Sarah Palenik, residing in Rahway and a junior at Union Catholic (UC) High School in Scotch Plains, made a decision two years ago that she would grow out her hair and donate 10 inches of her long blonde locks to "Locks of Love," an organization that collects long lengths of hair to make wigs and give them to children in need of them.

Now that she has cut and donated her own hair, Sarah is recruiting other students at UC to do the same. Current UC parent, Patti Kilkenny, donated her time and talent as a hairdresser for Sarah's project. Mrs. Kilkenny is employed at the Nicole Michelle Hair Spa in Cranford, which provided the space for the haircut and also packaged the hair to be sent to "Locks of Love."

SPFHS Theatre Presents

Once Upon a Mattress

SCOTCH PLAINS - Rehearsals are underway for the Friday, March 16, opening of *Once Upon a Mattress*. The musical comedy is a humorous retelling of the fairy tale "The Princess and the Pea."

In the musical, written in the late 1950s, comic complications ensue from the fact that, by edict, no one in the kingdom is allowed to marry until Prince Dauntless the Drab finds a bride for himself.

These prospects are discouraging, as his overbearing mother, Queen Aggravain, does her best to prevent this. Fortunately, Princess Winnifred the Woebegone, a strong and optimistic character, rises to the occasion, and after passing the "impos-

sible" sensitivity test, order and happiness are restored to the kingdom.

Leading the cast will be seniors Ally Rome as Princess Winnifred, Kristen Barry as Lady Larkin, Martine Baruch as Prince Dauntless and juniors Liz Minski as Queen Aggravain and Justin Berger as Sir Harry.

Tickets will be available for purchase beginning February 1. They can be ordered via spf12.org/musicboosters (preferred method) or at the high school. Ticket pickup is on Mondays and Wednesdays from 7 to 8 p.m. beginning Monday February 5. Performances are March 16, 17, 18, and 22, 23 and 24. All performances will be at 8 p.m., except for Sunday, March 18, which will be held at 3 p.m.

JCC's Jewish Book Festival Presents Rachel Kadish

By MARYLOU MORANO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS - Boston writer Rachel Kadish, the author of numerous pieces of short fiction, essays, and two novels, recently visited the Jewish Community Center of Central New Jersey (JCC) to discuss her most recent book, "Tolstoy Lied: A Love Story."

Ms. Kadish's appearance is part of the JCC's Jewish Book Festival of Speakers and Events, a series of presentations by authors whose works are centered on Jewish themes.

The title of Ms. Kadish's new book comes from a line in the beginning of Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina," in which he refers to happy and unhappy families. In her book, Ms. Kadish's protagonist, English professor Tracy Farber, takes issue with Tolstoy's point of view and sets out to define happiness on her own terms, and against a backdrop of academia.

The 2005 Koret Writer in Residence at Stanford University, Ms. Kadish has also been a National Endowment for the Arts fellow, and a Massachusetts Cultural Council fellow.

Ms. Kadish holds a bachelor's degree from Princeton University and a master of arts degree in creative writing from Harvard University.

Plainfield Symphony Names WF's James Chu Finalist

WESTFIELD - The Plainfield Symphony has announced its six New Jersey finalists for their Young Performer Competition to be held on Sunday, January 21, at 4 p.m. at the Crescent Avenue Presbyterian Church, located at 716 Watchung Avenue and East 7th Street in Plainfield.

The finalists range in age from 15 to 18 and will perform one movement from a concerto of their choice. The winner of this competition will perform with the Plainfield Symphony on April 15.

The finalists include James Chu of Westfield (Mozart - Clarinet Con-

certo).

Coffee With Conscience Presents Amer. Songwriters

WESTFIELD - The Coffee With Conscience Concert Series continues its seventh season by presenting Roots/Americana singer/songwriters, Jonathan Byrd and Karen Mal, in concert at the First United Methodist Church of Westfield, located at 1 East Broad Street (corner of North Avenue) on Saturday, January 20.

Doors will open at 7:30 p.m., and the concert begins at 8. Admission is \$15. All net proceeds from this evening's concert will be donated to the Eric Johnson House in Morristown.

Mr. Byrd is a native of Chapel Hill, N.C. He grew up singing in the Southern Baptist church, where his father preached and his mother played pi-

Her first novel, "In a Sealed Room," the fictional story of three women shortly after the Gulf War, was called "an intense and ambitious story" in a *New York Times Book Review*.

Other writings by Ms. Kadish have appeared in the anthologies, "Who We Are: On Being (And Not Being) a Jewish Writer in America," "Lost Tribe: New Jewish Fiction from the Edge," and "The Modern Jewish Girl's Guide to Guilt."

In addition to writing, Ms. Kadish has taught fiction and creative nonfiction at Harvard University Summer School, Boston College, and Lesley University's Master of Fine Arts program.

The author is currently working on an anthology of her own short stories, as well as a nonfiction book about Holocaust reparations.

The next authors to appear at the JCC's Jewish Book Festival of Speakers and Events are Barbara Wasser and Risé Routenberg, who will speak about their cookbook, "Divine Kosher Cuisine" tonight, January 18, at 7 p.m.

For more information on this presentation, contact Susan Lernerman, JCC's director of Cultural Arts & Education, by phone at (908) 889-8800 or e-mail at slemerman@jccnj.org

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James began his musical studies on the piano at age 5 at the New Jersey Workshop for the Arts. During the fifth grade he began studying clarinet under Janet Lyman.

At the end of eighth grade he continued his studies with Andrew Lamy. Since then, he has been accepted into the All-State Orchestra and the New York Youth Symphony Orchestra. James is currently a sophomore at Westfield High School.

Tickets may be purchased at the door: adults are \$25, seniors/students are \$15 and children under 12 are free.

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