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## Play depicts prison life of girl condemned by Nazis

Michael Szymanski, 2008-02-20

**Saturday, February 16, 2008. The Piast Institute, in conjunction with the University of Detroit – Mercy Theater Department, presented a performance of the play “I am First a Human Being,” based on uncensored prison letters from Krystyna Wituska, a 23 year old girl who was arrested by the Gestapo for her activity with the Polish resistance during WWII. Krystyna was sentenced to death and was beheaded.**

While in prison, she carried on correspondence with her family and with a German girl she befriended. Her letters were sent through a sympathetic guard, allowing her to avoid censorship. After the war, her letters were discovered and preserved, allowing their adaptation to the theater by Irene Tomaszewski.

The story of this particular production began with the presentation of another play last year by the UD-M Theater Department, a controversial play called “Polish Joke” that depicted the relationship between a Polish American father and son against a background of, you guessed it, Polish jokes and stereotypes. Some found the jokes and stereotypes offensive, while others found an uplifting message of overcoming stereotypes and prejudices. After an ongoing dialogue with leaders of the Polish American community, spearheaded by the Piast Institute, the Theater Department agreed to collaborate in the presentation of “I am First a Human Being.” The play was directed by Courtney Birkett and produced by Yolanda Fleischer. Krystyna Wituska was played by Marissa Thorndyke.

The stark but effective production was a one woman show. Thorndyke, wearing a ragged sweater, acted out her moods as she recited her letters, sometimes weary, sometimes joyful, at times full of hope and at times in tears. In a discussion session held after the play, Thorndyke said the performance was the most authentic acting of her career because she was so moved by reading the letters that were the basis of the play. It was, indeed, an outstanding performance. The audience was mesmerized, the applause was intense, and every one stayed for the post – play discussion led by Dr. Thaddeus Radzilowski, President of the Piast Institute. A number of general questions were taken from the audience, but the most poignant came from a little girl who said, “Why did they have that war?” Good question.

Apparently there is some chance that the production will be repeated, perhaps in Chicago or Cincinnati, among other places, and there is some interest in recording the play.

Sponsors of the play included the following:

Organizations: Polish American Congress, Friends of Polish Art, Priests’ Conference for Polish Affairs, Polish Century Club, Polish National Alliance - National Office, Polish National Alliance - Council 122, Polish Roman Catholic Union of America - Society 87

Individuals and Businesses: Waldek and Annette Raczkowski, Msgr. Stanley Milewski, P.A., Banka’s Collision, Richard and Theresa Mazur, Andrew and Zofia Ladak, Virginia Skrzyaniarz, Dr. Thaddeus Radzilowski

Media: Polish Varieties Radio Program, BiM Radio, Polish Weekly, Polish Times, Hamtramck Citizen.

For further information, the Piast Institute can be contacted at [www.piastinstitute.org](http://www.piastinstitute.org) or by phone at 313 664 0321.

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