

UC SANTA BARBARA

# THE *Current*

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## Life in Wartime

From 1941 to 1945, more than 20,000 European Jews were crammed into a one-mile area of Shanghai with some 100,000 poor Chinese residents. Known as the Shanghai Ghetto, it was a haven of sorts for Jewish refugees turned away from the U.S., Canada, Australia and elsewhere.

Overseen by the Japanese Imperial Army, the ghetto is one of the lesser-known chapters of World War II. A new play, “Shanghai,” written by [Linda Alper](#) and produced by UC Santa Barbara’s [LAUNCH PAD](#) program, tells the story of a girl from Berlin who comes of age in the squalid city.

[“Shanghai”](#) premieres via Zoom Wednesday, May 19, at 7 p.m. Additional performances will be Friday and Saturday, May 20 and 21, at 7 p.m. and a Saturday matinee at 1 p.m.

[Risa Brainin](#), professor of theater and dance and artistic director of LAUNCH PAD, had admired Alper’s work as an actress at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival since the 1990s. “Shanghai” was originally commissioned by Artists Repertory Theatre in Portland, where it was workshopped, and when Brainin read it, she knew she wanted to develop it further at LAUNCH PAD.

“I am always attracted to family stories set against the backdrop of historical events,” Brainin said.

“I think it’s important to remember these historical stories and share them,” Alper said. “And what’s really topical about this story is the way two cultures came

together to help one another survive — which seems pretty apt today.”

Started before the pandemic, “Shanghai” was not written for Zoom. Given the limits of the medium, adapting the play posed challenges — acting remotely and a lack of audience feedback can be a bit weird, and syncing sound isn’t a sure thing, for starters. Fortunately, Theater and Dance has been a leader in Zoom performances.

“What Risa is doing with LAUNCH PAD is just an incredible opportunity for a writer,” Alper said. “And I don’t know that it exists in other places.”

Alper also credited the director, [Sara Rademacher](#), with bringing a sense of innovation to the production. A UCSB alum, Rademacher is a freelance director whose work has spanned genres in productions across the country.

“Sara has been so inventive about finding ways to tell the story on Zoom and finding ways to take the ideas that she would have had, or did have doing it in a theater and translating them on to Zoom,” Alper said. “So I’m very grateful for her leadership.”

Brainin, who’d seen Rademacher’s potential up close, knew she was the right person for the job.

“Sara was one of our top students when she was an undergraduate,” Brainin recalled. “Her talent as a director was obvious even at that young age. She started a wonderful company here in Santa Barbara, Elements Theatre Collective, and I found her work as a director exciting.

“In 2013,” she continued, “she assisted me on a professional production in Minneapolis. She then went on to several apprenticeships at professional theaters followed by graduate school at Columbia. While she was studying in NY, I snagged her to work with me while President of the National Theatre Conference. I’m a big fan. Sara is so smart — I knew she’d be the perfect person to direct this piece, and *love* that she has returned home to us all these years later.”

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## **About UC Santa Barbara**

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society.

All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.