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Local poet explores aging, loss in new book

by Maya Rajamani

Sarah Stern was 11 years old when her middle school, Salanter Akiba Riverdale (SAR) Academy, asked each student to write “something literary” for the yearbook.

“My mother said, well, let’s write a poem,” she recalled. “And I haven’t stopped since.”

Ms. Stern’s latest book of poems, “But Today Is Different,” is a tribute to the woman who helped her write her first one. It is Ms. Stern’s first full-length book, featuring 50 poems, and deals with the heavy experiences she has dealt since the release of her last poetry collection, in 2011.

Those few years saw the loss of both Ms. Stern’s parents, both of whom inspired her writing.

Her mother was a refugee from Germany who raised seven children in a place that was foreign to her.

“Her voice is in so many of these poems,” Ms. Stern said. “A lot of the things she said were just found poems. Things that just struck me, that I would think God, I have to write this down.”

The years between books were tumultuous in other ways for Ms. Stern, who had to fend for a job anew after losing a job during the recession.

“I experienced [the recession] as a middle-aged person, looking for work, and I think that people who weren’t looking for work at that time had no idea how difficult it was,” she said. “I really wanted to write about what that was like.”

Her poems delve into the notion of women and aging amid the glorification of youth.

“I think women have a hard time thinking... that their experiences and their vision of the world matter,” she said. “As I’m getting older, I realize how important it is for women to tell their stories. And that it has as much validity as any other story.”

Her experiences are reflected in poems like “Lipstick:”

*Tell me once and for all
that I’m beautiful—
that’s what I heard her say
as she looked in the mirror at
the Union Square location
at lunch time.
We are all art
Of some form but we don’t last.*

*That’s the thing, ephemeral,
mortal,
Wonderful English-major words
That we don’t use enough.
I want to use them in sentences
as often as possible.*

Recent years have brought Ms. Stern triumphs along with challenges. The publication of her 2011 book came after years of receiving rejection letters, though she had had poems published individually in journals and magazines.

She is also a four-time winner of the Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) award for poetry, awarded by the Bronx Council on the Arts.

Ms. Stern is scheduled to read from her book on Wednesday, Nov. 19 at the Poets House in Manhattan. She hopes readers will find humor interspersed amongst the poems, despite the heavy themes that influenced them.

“I think despite all the horror and savagery there is in the world, the world can be very funny,” she said. “I hope that people come away feeling that, and I hope that they come away with a new place of deep feeling.”

“I thought it was delightful,” Ms. Reinhold said of the award. “I didn’t necessarily expect that I would win, because there’s so many talented people.”

In her winning submission, she plays the fluttering first violin in Haydn’s Quartet No. 40. She made the recording at an annual chamber music conference in Bennington, Vermont that she religiously attends.

Inviting atmosphere

Back home, Ms. Reinhold has introduced hundreds of listeners to the subtle joys of the string quartet since 2009. She aims to make the somewhat forbidding art form as accessible as possible, starting with the accoutrements.

“A number of people were shocked when I said there was going to be beer,” she said. “It’s not staid; it’s not white-gloves. You just come and listen.”

Refreshments are not allowed inside the concerts themselves, since those take place in CSAIR’s sanctuary. But Ms. Reinhold said intermissions with food and drink — the Bronx Brewery is donating beverages to the Saturday, Nov. 1 performance — make the atmosphere relaxed.

However, the violinist emphasized that for her and the other world-class performers on stage, the experience is anything but.

“When you play for a small audience or a very involved audience — as in Bennington, as in here, as I’ve played at other concerts — the audience sees you sweat,” Ms. Reinhold said. “And that’s the most exciting thing.

Discussing her favorite genre kicked up the tempo of her usual joie de vivre.

“What draws me and my colleagues the most is that connection... completing that circle,” she said. “We play with each other — and it’s a wider circle of everyone listening to us. This is what people have done for centuries with chamber music. It was in a chamber; it was in a room; it was for people to play.”

A combination of top-notch performers and a carefully chosen repertoire make “Intimate Voices” a hidden gem of the city’s classical music scene. One highlight of their schedule this year is a somber composition by a Jewish Czech composer killed during the Holocaust. Ms. Reinhold explained that Hans Krasa wrote his Passacaglia and Fugue while interned at the Terezin, or Theresienstadt, concentration camp — conditions which made for an emotionally wrenching work.

In addition to their three concerts at CSAIR, Ms. Reinhold’s group will continue their tradition of performing at nursing homes and the James J. Peters VA Medical Center in Kingsbridge. The process has made them a fixture of the northwest Bronx.

“We feel that we’re becoming a kind of community,” Ms. Reinhold said.

For “Intimate Voices” schedule, ticket prices and other details, visit www.csair.org/chambermusic.