

PROGRAMME

The Empty Suitcase

Programme · 2026 edition

The Empty Suitcase
Culturas em Movimento · culturasemmovimento.com

October 2026

The play

What do we carry when we leave everything behind?

Inspired by the true story of the Jedwab family, *The Empty Suitcase* originated from the discovery of documents hidden inside an old suitcase left untouched for decades. At the centre of the narrative lies a question: what remains inside a family when certain stories are no longer told? The suitcase becomes more than an object: a symbolic archive carrying absences, secrets and experiences that resisted time.

Combining theatre, original music, projections and visual storytelling, the production creates a poetic, emotionally charged experience where personal memory and collective history intersect. Rooted in Jewish diaspora and Holocaust memory, it reaches the universal: belonging, migration, survival, and the invisible legacies passed from one generation to the next.

The play runs 80 minutes with no interval. It is performed in Portuguese, with English and Simplified Chinese surtitles.

A condensed 2026 edition of the premiere-season programme; the creators' texts date from 2024. The full premiere-season programme, in Portuguese, is at culturasemmovimento.com.

The story

São Paulo, 2005, the eve of Passover. Esther Warshawski, 92, born in Breslau, Germany, lives with Ruth, her caregiver. Esther's memory is beginning to fail: the present blurs into a past she has never told anyone.

Her grandson Samuel, a journalist who covered wars for twenty years, has just left his profession. He returns to Brazil after twenty years away, five years after the death of his father, Franz. Franz comes back in Esther's memories and in the old amateur-radio conversations between father and son, a dialogue that was never easy.

In a back room there is a leather suitcase, locked with a padlock. The house rule is an old one: as long as Grandmother is alive, no one opens the suitcase. Esther keeps the key, and the silence. Samuel has come back with questions about his father that no one has ever answered.

The play is a work of fiction inspired by the true story of the Jedwab family. Between a locked suitcase and a fading memory, three generations discover what they inherited without knowing it.

Characters

- **Esther Warshawski**: the grandmother, born in Breslau. She keeps the suitcase and the key.
- **Ruth**: Esther's caregiver, the only character who is not part of the family.
- **Samuel (Sami)**: the grandson, a journalist, back in Brazil.
- **Franz**: Esther's son and Samuel's father, present in their memories and in the radio conversations.

On tour, 2026: Dinah Feldman, Noemi Marinho, Fábio Herford and Marcos Suchara.

Words from the play

- **Breslau**: the German name of Wrocław, today in Poland. Esther's city, and the Jedwab family's.
- **Pesach**: the Jewish Passover, which celebrates the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. The play takes place on its eve.
- **Seder**: the ritual meal of Pesach, with symbolic foods. Around the table, the story of liberation passes from one generation to the next.

From the creator

Written for the premiere programme, 2024. Excerpts.

"This story would make a play!" "Shall we do it?"

That lively conversation with William Jedwab, back in 2021, was the starting point: the first "yes" to this theatre project. [...]

Theatre is an art that cannot be made alone; it only flourishes in a collective. [...]

The plot, based on the true story of the Jedwab family, was skilfully woven by the playwright Nanna de Castro, the first to come on board. She turned a devastating

experience into a universal story. A story that invites us to look through an open door and witness a family gathered around its memories and shadows.

Making art is always a risk, and there are many people to thank. But without Marcela Horta, who took on the production when there was nothing there yet, we would not have come this far. And with the sensitivity and guidance of Kiko Marques, we are ready for the crossing.

As the curtain rises, we invite you to join us in *The Empty Suitcase*. Here, between the stage and the audience, the magic of theatre happens: stories intertwine and touch our hearts.

Being a mother, an artist and a producer means embracing the mystery of creating both life and art. And it takes a village. [...]

Dinah Feldman, creator, actress and general coordinator of the project

From the playwright

Written for the premiere programme, 2024. Excerpts.

[...] In this case, I was invited by the actress and producer Dinah Feldman and by William Jedwab to take on the challenge of turning into a play the story of Kaethe Jedwab's escape, with her husband and son, from the Nazi Holocaust to China. The first question that came to me arose from the fact that I do not carry a Jewish history myself: how could I in any way be a voice for events that are foreign to my culture? [...] I asked myself how and where the Jedwab family's drama touched me, because in order to write I need to feel an inner direction that moves me emotionally.

After hearing the original story and getting to know the research material provided by William, I proposed that the narrative should focus on the repercussions of the family's escape to Shanghai on the relationship between a father and a son, many decades later. I was very interested in looking at this drama from a universal point of view, in which Jews and non-Jews could see themselves: the power of family relationships, and the wars they can plant inside us.

With William's agreement, I set off on an important journey: interviews with family members and friends, and visits and research in the archives of the Memory Centre of the Jewish Museum of São Paulo, above all into similar stories of families who took the same route to escape Nazism. I also looked for information online, especially from the Shanghai

Jewish Refugees Museum, where important records are kept. [...] A dear consultant was Zuza Blanc, who helped me with amateur radio, which the story uses as a metaphor for the vital importance of communication, between people and with our own ghosts, in resolving conflicts.

I hope I have managed to create a contemporary narrative that reminds us how situations born of intolerance and a lack of empathy still persist in human life today, and how important it is to welcome others and their differences. At one point in the play, the central character warns us that the seed that gave rise to Nazism still lies dormant in the shadow of every human being, and that we must look at it. I hope this text helps in that vigil.

Nanna de Castro, playwright and screenwriter

From the director

Written for the premiere programme, 2024. Excerpts.

I increasingly believe that theatre is, and will remain, one of the most necessary forms of art: a way for human beings to speak about human beings, to meet themselves, their ancestry and what is to come; to reconnect. [...]

Above all, we wanted to tell a story. A particular story. The story of a family: Esther Warshawski, her son Franz and her grandson Sami; and also of Ruth, Esther's caregiver. But we also wanted to tell the story of a suitcase: a kind of safe, prison or coffin in which Esther tried to lock away the ghosts of a past that bursts the limits of any suitcase meant to hold it, and that turns her particular story, these unique lives, into millions of similar lives, sister lives, born of the same void of humanity, of the same horror.

A particular story. The story of all of us. One life matters.

To create this story, written more than two years ago, our team spent three months in rehearsals, discussions and creation in every area. All so that the many layers of the show are revealed when the curtain opens, inviting you to visit our play, our story, and at the same time to become part of it, with your understanding, your ability to make connections and your way of seeing the world around us.

Moving forward. With our eyes on what came before. Everyone is welcome! The house is yours!

Kiko Marques, director

Other voices from the company

> *It is always desert. / It is always a crossing. / From slavery to freedom. / From the text to the stage, from the stage to the audience. / Companions recognise each other and reveal themselves in the rhythm of the steps of this crossing. / To reveal is to take out of each suitcase everything that is not empty. / To reveal is to lift the veil. / Here the guardian of memory is, symptomatically, losing her own.*
>
> Noemi Marinho · 2024

Gregory Slivar, on the music (premiere programme, 2024; excerpts):

The music and sound of the show are meant to work in the realm of the characters' memory. [...] I studied the musical form called nigun: songs without words, usually improvised on a few syllables, meant to evoke states of mind such as laments, prayers, memories or joys. Many of these songs came from anthologies and historical recordings, including two nigunim from the region of Breslau, the same place the family in our story comes from. [...] The score moves through the inner world of these characters: their search for a place to belong, their flight from trauma and their rites of healing.

From Shanghai to Brazil

In 1939, Wilhelm and Kaethe Jedwab left Breslau, Germany, with their son Marcel, one year old. They arrived in Shanghai on 8 April 1939 and lived at 24/9 Ward Road, Hongkou. Shanghai did not just let this family survive. It took them in.

The family lived through the war in Shanghai for nine years. Wilhelm died in China in 1948. In 1949, Kaethe and Marcel sailed from Shanghai to Santos, Brazil, on a Royal Interocean Lines ship. The suitcase travelled with them.

Decades later, William Jedwab, Dinah Feldman's cousin, opened his grandmother Kaethe's old suitcase. Documents in German and Chinese revealed secrets the family had never told. He donated the suitcase and the documents to the Jewish Museum of São Paulo. *The Empty Suitcase* was born from this story.

Today the Jedwab name is on the Wall of Names at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum. On 21 October 2025, Dinah Feldman presented the project at the museum, which published the story on 28 October 2025.

Credits of the original production (SESI-SP, 2024)

Concept and creation	Dinah Feldman
Playwright	Nanna de Castro
Director	Kiko Marques
Assistant director	Matilde Mateus Menezes
Cast	Dinah Feldman, Emílio de Mello, Fábio Herford, Noemi Marinho
Music and sound design	Gregory Slivar
Lighting design	Wagner Pinto
Set design	Márcio Medina
Costume design	João Pimenta
Hair and make-up design	Louise Helène
Image direction and videomapping	André Grynwask, Pri Argoud (Um Cafofo)
Graphic design	Murilo Thaveira
Filming of the play	Bruno Favery / Favo Produções Cinematográficas
Photography	João Caldas
Lighting production	Carina Tavares
Lighting assistants	Gabriel Greghi, Gabriela Cezario
Lighting operator	Gabriel Greghi
Sound operator	Edézio Aragão
Programme	Debora Barmak
Chinese language consultants	Verona Iris, Escola Ni Hao
Hebrew consultant	Rachel Reichhardt
German consultant	Wolfgang Gloeckner

Voices on the soundtrack	Elis Feldman Harari Kouyate, Mário Sevílio, Polly Gutman
Set construction	Sasso Campanaro
Backdrop sewing	Alessandro Vaz
Scenic painting	Luisa Almeida
Scenic painting team	Ana Valim, Beatriz Souza, Carolina Carrasco, Victoria Elme
Props maker	Lídia Yogui
Stagehand	Guilherme Felipe
Dresser	Angela Lima
Project coordination	Dinah Feldman
Head of production	Marcela Horta
Produced by	SESI-SP · Culturas em Movimento

Premiered on 21 March 2024 at Teatro do SESI-SP, São Paulo, with Emílio de Mello as Samuel. Marcelo Várzea played the role in 2025; Marcos Suchara plays it today.

Creative team and cast

Dinah Feldman · concept, actress, project coordination. Actress, storyteller, cultural producer and arts educator, with a degree in journalism from PUC-SP. She founded Culturas em Movimento in 2005, and is a descendant of Jewish refugees who lived in Shanghai.

Nanna de Castro · playwright. Writer, playwright and screenwriter, trained in performing arts at Fundação Clóvis Salgado and in psychology at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG). Her plays have been staged in Brazil and Portugal. For *The Empty Suitcase* she received the APCA Award and the Bibi Ferreira Award for playwriting.

Kiko Marques · director. Director, playwright, actor and theatre educator, he graduated from the Martins Penna Theatre School (Rio de Janeiro) in 1988. In 2003 he founded Velha Companhia, where he explores the links between intimate memory, historical events and

family structures. His works include *Cais ou da Indiferença das Embarcações*, *Sínthia* and *Casa Submersa*.

Noemi Marinho · actress. Actress, playwright and author, trained at the School of Dramatic Arts of the University of São Paulo (EAD-USP). Her career began in the 1970s, in theatre, film and television. For *The Empty Suitcase* she received the Bibi Ferreira Award for Best Actress and a Shell Award nomination.

Fábio Herford · actor. Actor in theatre, film and television, working professionally since 1996, with more than sixty productions. He has worked with directors such as Jô Soares, Celso Frateschi and Elias Andreatto, in plays such as *Richard III* and *Uncle Vanya*.

Marcos Suchara · actor. Actor, director and theatre educator with more than 30 years in theatre, film and television. He has a long association with Shakespeare, with roles such as Laertes in *Hamlet* and Banquo in *Macbeth*.

Gregory Slivar · original music and sound design. Composer, sound designer and musician, with a degree in composition from Unicamp and a master's in music (sonology) from the University of São Paulo. In 2025 he composed and played live in Tokyo for *HINOTORI*, directed by Hiroshi Koike.

Wagner Pinto · lighting design. Lighting designer and technical lighting director, active since the 1980s in theatre, opera, dance, music and large events. He has worked with artists such as Gerald Thomas, Denise Weinberg and Daniela Thomas.

Márcio Medina · set design. Architect, set and costume designer and art director, working since 1976. He became a collaborator of the theatre research centre in Pontedera, Italy, linked to the legacy of Jerzy Grotowski. He has represented Brazil at the Prague Quadrennial.

André Grynwask and Pri Argoud · image direction and videomapping. A multimedia artist, André Grynwask runs the collective Um Cafofo with Pri Argoud, creating videomapping, projections and installations for theatre, dance and exhibitions.

João Pimenta · costume design. Fashion designer with his own label. For *The Empty Suitcase* he created costumes in shades of grey, with modern cuts and vintage and baroque details.

Marcela Horta · executive producer. Cultural producer and production director since 2012, in theatre, music, film and touring. She has worked with Kiko Marques, Helena Ignez, Ulysses Cruz, Clara Carvalho and Denise Weinberg.

Track record and awards

Premiered on 21 March 2024 at Teatro do SESI-SP, São Paulo, as an original production of SESI-SP. Selected for the Festival 2024 em Cena.

Performances	102
Spectators	40,000+
Cities	7 (six in one theatre network)
Awards	6, plus a Shell Award nomination

- **Bibi Ferreira Award** (3): Best Play · Best Original Playwriting (Nanna de Castro) · Best Actress (Noemi Marinho)
- **APCA Award**: Playwriting (Nanna de Castro)
- **CENYM Award** (2): Artistic Quality · Set Design
- **Shell Award**, nomination: Best Actress (Noemi Marinho)

> *The Empty Suitcase achieves such a successful result thanks to a cast capable of giving the play a whole new dimension.*
>
> Dirceu Alves Jr. · InfoTeatro

Available for international touring: a company of ten on tour, four actors on stage.

Contact

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