

# 2017 LA STAGE RAW THEATRE AWARD FOR SOLO PERFORMANCE

An American archaeologist is summoned to a dig in **Jaffa**.

(ancient town, southern tip of Tel Aviv)

The **Israelis** have found something –  
something that could **change** everything.

She's the **only one** who can tell them what it is.

And her mother just **died**.

And there's a **lizard** in her bathtub.



## the **DIG**

< death + Genesis + the double helix >  
a play for a woman + a reptile

written + performed by  
**Stacie Chaiken**

directed by  
**Pamela Berlin**

**"Moving & deeply satisfying  
... a seamless piece of work."**  
Neal Weaver, Stage Raw

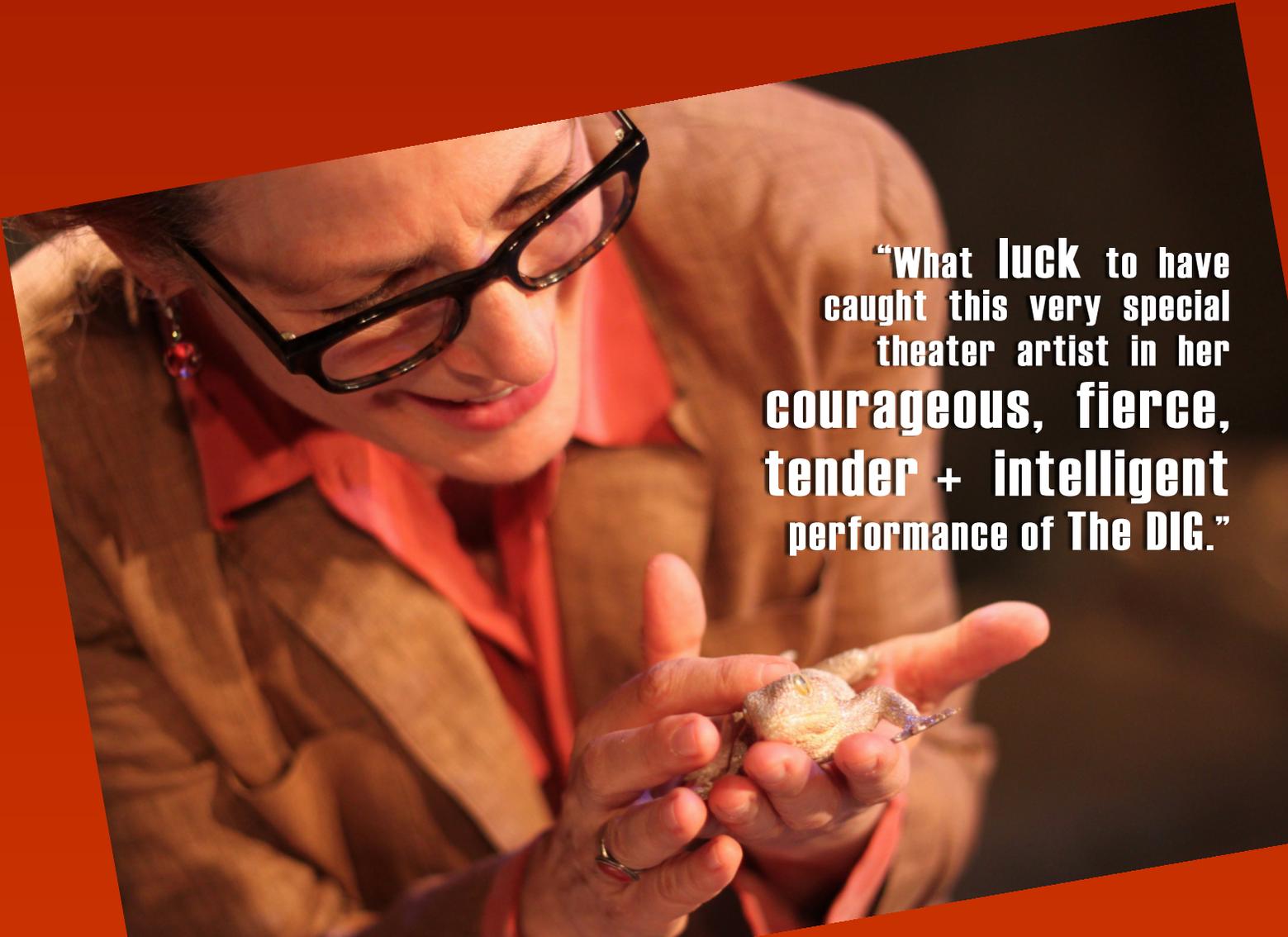


an “unusual and riveting” new play from  
a master storyteller

“... an intricate, multi-layered tale that  
combines archeology, religion, Israeli-  
Palestinian politics and personal issues,  
with each strand of the narrative  
reflecting back on the others.”



“Chaiken has researched her subject deeply and  
meticulously, and performs her material with a brisk,  
humorous, no-nonsense attitude that compels belief. I had to  
keep reminding myself that this is a work of fiction ... though  
the science is apparently real ... the gradual unravelling of  
the DNA evidence is rendered almost magical ...”



**“What luck to have  
caught this very special  
theater artist in her  
courageous, fierce,  
tender + intelligent  
performance of The DIG.”**

## THE DIG synopsis



Los Angeles-based archaeologist Sally Jenkins is world-renowned for her groundbreaking work in the analysis of ancient DNA. She loves bones, knows everything about bones, knows everything about everything—except how to get along with other people.

Sally's mother dies after a long illness. Moments later, she gets a call from Jerusalem—Israeli Antiquities. The Israelis found something buried under a monastery in Jaffa. They have a ticket for her on the next flight out, and they're willing to pay a small fortune to get her there. Sally happily skips her mom's funeral and flies.

Sally's arrival is cloaked in secrecy. No one, they tell her, must know why you are here.

There's a lizard in the bathtub in her five-star hotel. Male or female? Hard to tell. She names it Mo—for Mom—and goes to work with her Israeli wrangler David (Daveed) and his mysterious Palestinian partner Rashid, in an underground tomb in the ancient city.

They've discovered a stone sarcophagus—unheard of in Israel. The three of them lift the lid to reveal an extraordinary 4000-year-old burial. The Israelis have reason to believe this find might prove the validity of ancient texts, and challenge already fragile boundaries in this shaking world.

Sally's innovation—based on real cutting-edge science—is a methodology for cleaning away eons of dust and dirt, and isolating the genetic material necessary for identification of ancient bones. Her analysis of the DNA in the Israeli corpse is suggestive, but inconclusive, and Sally finds herself in a situation where the mess of history—her own history and that of the land where she is working—cannot be so easily cleaned away.

A decision must be made. Sally and her colleagues Rashid and David come to an astonishing meeting of minds, and hearts. And David—ever master of global machinations—figures out a way for Sally to sneak her new best friend Mo straight past Customs, and home with her to LA.

Our intent is to entertain and invite audiences into a world they've never seen.

While the backdrop of the play may be Israel, the issues raised in *The DIG* are universal. Producers have invited a broad range of experts to respond to the play and moderate lively post-play conversations. They've included faith and interfaith leaders, human rights activists, historians, archaeologists and experts in trauma.

Topics have included genetics; Biblical text; archaeology; epigenetics (inherited trauma); generational violence; mother-daughter dynamics; Muslim-Jewish dynamics; the meaning of the lizard.

An earlier workshop of *The DIG* was preceded by a series of lectures: Biblical Artifact and Ancient Text; Political Ramifications of Archaeological Findings; Conflict Resolution; and Scientific Ethics.

Sally is a world-renown scientist, at the top of her field; she and her colleagues make a choice at the end of the play that can be ethically challenging to some audiences.

**an opportunity  
for conversation**



## press

### **The Dig at Los Angeles Theatre Center Reviewed by Neal Weaver for STAGE RAW**

In her intriguing solo-drama, writer-performer Stacie Chaiken plays archeologist Sally Jenkins, who specializes in the study of ancient DNA. As she says, “It’s easy to extract the whole gene from soft tissue, but there is never soft tissue in ancient burials. I’ve managed to replicate the material I need from infinitesimal bits of really old bone.”

Sally has just been summoned back to Pittsburgh and the bedside of her dying mother, who was a close-mouthed Holocaust survivor. Mother-daughter relations are, to put it mildly, strained. But 20 minutes after the death of her mother, Sally receives a call from Israel Antiquities summoning her to a dig in Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv, to examine the bones of some 4,000 year old horses. Initially, she turns down the request, but it’s sweetened with promises of large cash rewards, a suite in a luxury hotel, and a chauffeured Mercedes. So she sets out for Israel.

In Jaffa Sally soon learns that it’s not horses she’s called upon to examine, but a 4,000 year old sealed sarcophagus, of a kind never before seen in Israel. Because Jewish orthodox laws forbid conducting scientific tests on human remains, there’s a necessary pretense that the case involves animals rather than humans. And when the sarcophagus is unsealed and opened, it contains a 4,000 year-old, perfectly preserved woman.

Sally’s work is slowed by the urgent necessity of taking steps to preserve the remains, now that they have been exposed to air. The crypt must be sealed in plastic, and its temperature reduced to below freezing. After enduring the heat of Jaffa, she must now work in sub-zero temperatures while wearing a parka.

Gradually Sally’s co-workers — David, an Israeli colonel and Rashid, her Arab-Israeli driver — reveal the real nature of her task. It seems that, based on various pieces of evidence, this may or may not be the tomb of Sarah, the wife of the Biblical patriarch Abraham and the mother of Isaac. Sally becomes increasingly intrigued with the Biblical accounts of Sarah’s life, and begins to feel a personal kinship with the ancient corpse. She herself is half-Jewish and her middle name is Sarah. Her work and her personal life become inextricably entwined, leading her to personal insights and a greater understanding of her thorny, unforgiving mother.

Sally’s next task is to determine whether there is a genetic match between the corpse and the bones in Abraham’s tomb. This provides an even greater challenge, since the bones are revered by both Jews and Palestinians and must not be tampered with. Sally must analyze them by examining and testing only the dust of the decaying bones, not the bones themselves..

Chaiken has created an intricate, multi-layered tale that combines archeology, religion, Israeli-Palestinian politics and personal issues, with each strand of the narrative reflecting back on the others. Her play deals with the complexities of Israel during the Second Intifada, her relations with her co-workers David and Rashid, and her growing relationship with the lizard she found in the bathtub of her luxury hotel: She names him/her Mo, and adopts the critter as a pet, who must be smuggled — with the help of her Israeli colleagues — back to her home in Los Angeles.

Chaiken has researched her subject deeply and meticulously, and performs her material with a brisk, humorous, no-nonsense attitude that compels belief. I had to keep reminding myself that this is a work of fiction, not a factual account, though the science is apparently real. The complicated genetics involved are not only made clear, but dramatic as well; the gradual



unravelling of the DNA evidence is rendered almost magical, while the underlying emotional issues make the narrative both moving and deeply satisfying.

Director Pamela Berlin has skillfully shaped the tale, weaving together seemingly unrelated elements and working closely with Chaiken and the design and technical crew to produce a seamless piece of work. Set designer Yael Pardess has utilized the architectural features of the intimate theatre deep in the bowels of the Los Angeles Theatre Center (which are augmented with huge simulated stone arches) to create a credible and beautiful underground vault.

Matthew Johns' lighting design, combined with projection designs by Dmitri Kmelnitsky and Hsuan-Kuang Hsieh, and the intricate sound design by Tim Labor, all combine to produce both a rich mood and a vivid picture of the genetic information.

## **The Dig Review**

### **Dark Secrets of the Heart**

**By Elaine L. Mura**

Playwright and actor Stacie Chaiken stars in this unusual and riveting one-woman play about genetics, archaeology, and how the past affects the present — and even the future. Chaiken began work on this piece in 2003, when she made her first trip to Israel and became intrigued by the findings of archaeologists who were digging everywhere in the country attempting to link DNA and history. What made the process even more challenging was that, rather than the soft tissue normally used when studying genes, geneticists were forced to trace DNA from mere bone fragments found in ancient sites.

*The Dig* tells the story of Sarah Jenkins (who changed her name to Sally after she left home), an American archaeologist who specializes in ancient DNA. Just after her mother's death, Sally is summoned by the Israeli government to become part of a top secret project. Even though she is struggling with the death of her mother from cancer only days before — and dealing with her mother's obvious disapproval of her isolated

lifestyle — the offer is one which she cannot refuse. So off she goes to Israel — the land of equal-opportunity massacres over the millennia — where she is thrown into the company of rigid Jewish government coordinator David and Arab-Israeli scientist Rashid. The trio arrives in Jaffa and goes deep through tunnels hidden underground until they are confronted with a room empty except for a huge stone sarcophagus — in the style of an Egyptian burial but not with the traditional mummy inside. The burial is easily at least 4,000 years old. Who can this be? And why is the burial such a secret?

In her hotel suite, Sally encounters a mysterious gecko which has taken up residence — even though the luxury hotel is notoriously bug-free. Tradition has it that geckos are good luck and sought after — and so Sally and a hotel employee secretly feed the little bugger and nurture him (or is it her? — hard to tell with a lizard). This cold-blooded little reptile may be the key to Sally's frozen heart. Especially after Sally follows Jewish tradition and names the minuscule gecko after her mother.

Director Pamela Berlin helms a brilliant performance by Stacie Chaiken, who is onstage every moment in this solo production. Yael Pardess's set design makes the most of the oddly shaped space, and Dmitry Kmelnitsky's video and projection expand the small area into an arena. The entire production team does a creative job of simulating a dig deep in the earth. *The Dig* is a little gem and will both enlighten and entertain audiences.



## the team



Writer-performer STACIE CHAIKEN is the creator of the acclaimed solo plays *LOOKING FOR LOUIE*, about immigrant family secrets, and *WHAT SHE LEFT*, about a women fighter in the Polish forest during World War II. As a performer, she has appeared in her own plays and plays written by other people on and off-Broadway, regionally, and in Los Angeles.

[staciechaiken.com](http://staciechaiken.com)

New York-based director PAMELA BERLIN has worked extensively in the development of new plays and is a renowned director in New York, regional theatre, and opera. *STEEL MAGNOLIAS*, which she developed, ran for three years off-Broadway. Full bio: [theDIGplay.com](http://theDIGplay.com)



Production designer YAEL PARDESS started her theatre design career in Israel, and worked in all the major theatres there. She now lives in Los Angeles. Her designs have been seen on Broadway, London West End stages, and at the Mark Taper Forum, The Guthrie, American Conservatory Theatre, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, American Repertory Theatre, Hartford Stage and many more. [yaelpardessdesigns.com](http://yaelpardessdesigns.com)

## 3 NOMINATIONS FOR LA STAGE RAW AWARDS: SOUND, PROJECTIONS, SOLO PERFORMANCE



Video/Projection Design  
DMITRY KMELNITSKY  
[lustrecreative.com](http://lustrecreative.com)



Sound Design  
TIM LABOR  
[timlabor.com](http://timlabor.com)



Lighting Design  
MATT JOHNS  
[mattjohns.com](http://mattjohns.com)



Projection Designer  
HSUAN-KUANG HSIEH  
[hsuankuang.com](http://hsuankuang.com)

The Los Angeles premiere of *The DIG* was produced by **Jose Luis Valenzuela** and the **Latino Theater Company** at Los Angeles Theatre Center, April 2016

The DIG can be presented powerfully in venues ranging from the intimacy of a living room — with a woman, a book and a bug — to theatres holding upwards of four hundred spectators.

**Fully staged** with a designed environment, mapped projections, and sound score

**EQUIPMENT:** The full production requires two video projectors; a dedicated computer running Millumin (which offers a fully operative downloadable 30-day trial for both Mac and Windows); a dedicated computer for the sound score, which was built in QLab.

**PERSONNEL:** Put-in for the full production, with lights, projections and sound, requires a projection or video specialist who can map, sound technician, and a lighting designer. Running crew: three operators, which may or may not include the production stage manager, depending on available personnel and the layout of your facility.

**Black-box** with projections and sound score

**EQUIPMENT:** Black-box presentation requires two video projectors, and a dedicated computer, running Millumin; and a dedicated computer for the sound score, which was built in QLab.

**PERSONNEL:** Put-in for the black box production, with lights, projections and sound, requires a projection or video specialist, sound technician, and a lighting designer. The projections need not be mapped. Running crew: three operators (see above).

### **Studio**

We provide the woman, the book, and the bug.

**FOR DETAILS AND SCHEDULE OF FEES:** [info@theDIGplay.com](mailto:info@theDIGplay.com)

THE DIG's creator Stacie Chaiken is an acclaimed teacher in the field of performance and story. Formerly on the faculty of the University of Southern California School of Dramatic Art, she is a Fulbright Senior Specialist, and the founder of the Los Angeles-based [What's the Story?](#) workshop, for writers and performers who want to create compelling stories based on personal experience.

As an adjunct to performances of The DIG, Stacie is eager to work with students or artists in your community.

She can facilitate group-process writing workshops for people working in any genre. She can also offer performance workshops and Master Classes for students who are creating — or want to create — solo plays.

Workshops can be customized for writers and performers at any level of training or craft, working in a broad range of genres, from prose memoir, to autobiographical verse, to songwriting and solo performance.

**technical  
requirements**

**writing +  
performance  
workshops/  
residencies**



theDIGplay.com

