

Jewish Tale of Emigrants: A Children's Theatre First

By KATE MORGAN
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Most people who have an idea or a dream are never able to make it come true. Judy Sher has her dream opening tonight at The Children's Theatre.

Through persuasion, hard work and a lot of love, "The Adventures of Mottel" by Sholem Aleichem, was turned from a children's story into a play about "the amazing experiences these loving people have, working with the best they have to offer," said Sher.

Part of the reason that Sher feels so strongly for little Mottel and his family is that her parents were born in Russia not far from Aleichem's home, and he was her father's favorite author. In her father's honor, his name is called out in the opening scene at Ellis Island.

The story begins with a poor family whose cantor father is dying. The son is to marry the baker's daughter, who will bring money to the family. During the wedding, their house is ruined in a pogrom, and the family decides to immigrate to America. As they arrive at Ellis Island, the family learns that their village has been destroyed in a pogrom, and all their friends and family left behind have perished.

"This is only alluded to in the book," Sher admitted, "and we hope the kids will miss this, but we wanted to include it and tell what happened to these Russian shtetls. My relatives who were left were all put in a pit and buried alive." Sher felt that her family and Aleichem would have wanted the play to deal with this tragedy.

In remembrance of her family, the character of Mama was named for Sher's aunt, who was killed in the Holocaust.

Sher has worked as assistant to

the playwright-in-residence at the theater, Tom Olson, for three years, and always wanted to work on a Jewish play. Her mother had to mail her a copy of the book from Milwaukee, since it is out of print.

"The theater took a big risk," Sher said, "since the Jewish community is not gigantic here. The play had to appeal to a lot of other people. This season is particularly important because of the problems they have had. So they were very courageous."

Some changes had to be made to make the story more theatrical; Aleichem's style of "writing between the lines" had to be dealt with. "Pogroms were only slightly mentioned," Sher explained, "so

we had to bring them out. The book doesn't deal with persecution, since the Jews already knew about it. We had to bring it out for the rest of the audience."

Not only was Sher involved in writing, she also helped with ideas for the set, the score and the actors' characterizations. The director, Jon Cranney, asked her to describe Jewish life. "These people were Russian Jews from a small town at the turn of the century," Sher said. "They were 'straight from the shoulder' people, with no hidden emotions." This made a big impression on the actors, as it was so different from the typical American behavior.

Sher advised that the set be based on the work of Mark Chagall, who had lived near Aleichem, to show the influence of Russian life. "His (Chagall's) theory was that any work of art has to be done so that

you feel loving and caring about it," Sher explained. "I hope the audience will sense that is how we feel about the play."

The play's writers and directors also attended services at Adath Jeshurun. "It was so moving," Sher said. "They asked such wonderful questions and really soaked up the Jewish atmosphere."

The score was written by Alan Shorter — "no Jew could have written more Jewishly," Sher said. "It is such a joy." Part of the score uses an arrangement by Adath Jeshurun's Cantor Morton Kula and the wedding scene uses music that Sher's family has chosen for their weddings.

There are only three Jews involved in "The Adventures of Mottel": Sher, Leah Gelpe, who plays a major character, and Molly Rosen, who is in the cast. The boy Mottel is played by Michael Gallagher, who had been Tiny Tim in the Guthrie

Theater's "A Christmas Carol." "He is so talented, charming, lovable and bright," Sher laughed. "He's more than we dreamed of."

"The play is basically funny," Sher added. "It's laughter through tears and the themes of the play show it. 'You must carry your own lantern if you want to endure the dark and love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Sher is married to eye surgeon Neal Sher and they have two daughters, Melissa, age 11 and Cindy, age 8. Cindy accurately told her mother that "Mottel takes as much time as a little brother."

This "little brother" has had the cast, the director and Sher in tears.

"The Adventures of Mottel" plays Thursdays through Sundays until Feb. 9. Ticket prices are for adults, \$13.95, 10.95 and 7.95; for children, senior citizens and students \$10.75, 8.75 and 5.75.



The cast of "The Adventures of Mottel" includes (l to r) Randy Latimer as Fat Pesche; Buck Busfield as Eli; Suzanne Koepplinger as Mama and Michael Gallagher as Mottel. The play runs through Feb. 9.