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'Adventures of Mottel' honors immigrants' journey from shtetl to America

By MORDECAI SPEKTOR
Staff Writer

The Children's Theatre Company's (CTC) production of "The Adventures of Mottel" will transport audiences to Kasrilevke, a place described by a character in the play as a "little nothing of a shtetl" in Czarist Russia.

Kasrilevke is the home of poor Jews. As another character states, "Someone once said to the great millionaire Rothschild, 'You want

to live forever? Then move to Kasrilevke — no rich man has ever died there.'"

Based on an unfinished work by Yiddish author Sholom Aleichem, "The Adventures of Mottel, the Cantor's Son," the CTC's stage play will begin preview showings on Feb. 18, and will formally open on Feb. 23.

"Mottel," a tale of Jewish life at the turn of the century in the Pale of Settlement, was first produced by the CTC in 1986. The book was

brought to the theater's attention by Judith Luck Sher, who, along with CTC playwright-in-residence Thomas W. Olson, adapted the story to the stage.

During a recent conversation at the Children's Theatre, Sher, CTC Artistic Director Jon Cranney, and Karl Baker Olson, who plays Mottel, shared their thoughts about the play with the AJW.

Sher commented that the "Mottel" story reflects the Old Country world of her parents, aunts and uncles. She drew on family stories to flesh out the work of Aleichem, who lived in the same area of Russia as her parents and was her father's favorite author. (In the opening scene of the play, an immigration officer at Ellis Island calls out the name of Sher's father.)

"There's no pogrom in the book at all," Sher offered as an example of how the original work was enhanced. To round out the world of Mottel and his family, the violent repression of Russian Jews is portrayed in a scene where Russians disrupt a wedding and ransack the house.

In the face of poverty and pogroms, Mottel and his brother Eli devise various schemes to make money. As the noose tightens on the Jews, the family begins a perilous journey to a new home in the "golden land" of America. The story is told in flashback, with scenes set at Ellis Island serving as bookends for the plot.

Cranney — who directed "Mottel" in 1986 and is directing the current production — said that as a "theater artist, what you're about is taking the people in the audience somewhere they've never been before ... into someone else's world, so they

can experience that world."

The imaginary voyage to Kasrilevke opens viewers to an old country way of life "that has disappeared, a country of the heart which all young people should have the opportunity to experience," according to Cranney. "With his sense of supreme optimism and ability to 'laugh through the tears,' Mottel is the perfect person to introduce young people into that tradition."

The exploits and philosophy of 9-year-old Mottel Rabinovich are brought to life by 11-year-old Karl Baker Olson of St. Paul. In his first role with the CTC, the charismatic

young actor is winning high praise from the adult professionals in the show.

Olson, who is in the 5th grade at St. Paul Academy, has acted in several productions at SteppingStone Theatre and was in the Great American History Theatre's "To Kill a Mockingbird." He said that he enjoys the character of Mottel.

"He's optimistic, he likes to do anything — he's very adventurous, always looking for something different and strange to do. He's al-

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Dr. Menashe (Gerald Drake) offers young Mottel (Karl Baker Olson) a rare treat, a fresh peach, in The Children's Theatre Company's production of "The Adventures of Mottel," which was adapted from an unfinished work by Yiddish writer Sholom Aleichem.

Scholars will meet for 'Confronting the Holocaust' conference in Mpls.

Scholars from 18 countries and more than 30 states will meet to discuss the theme, "Confronting the Holocaust: A Mandate for the 21st Century," at the 26th annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches.

The event, scheduled for March 3-5 at the Minneapolis Marriott City Center Hotel, is sponsored by the University of St. Thomas Center for Jewish-Christian Learning.

In addition to scholarly papers, panel discussions and a workshop on teaching the Holocaust, three conference events are free and open to the public:

- The keynote address, "The Trauma of the Holocaust: Some Historical Components," will be given at 8 p.m. Sunday, March 3, by Yehuda Bauer, one of the world's most esteemed Holocaust scholars. His most recent book, "Jews for Sale," details the little-known negotiations of a handful of Jewish leaders

to ransom Jews from Nazi terror.

- Dr. Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University, a world-known scholar and lecturer on the pseudo-historians that deny or downplay the Holocaust, will deliver a lecture at 9 a.m. Monday, March 4. Lipstadt will discuss "Holocaust Denial and the Media: Misunderstanding the Nature of Truth."

- A memorial concert at 8:30 p.m. Monday, March 4, will feature pianist Michael Shapiro, music consultant to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., and renowned soprano Rosa Lamoreaux. The concert will be produced by Gottfried Wagner, grandson of Richard Wagner (whose music and philosophy were employed in the Nazis' master race propaganda). Gottfried Wagner's confrontation with his family's racist past has led to family and public controversy. Shapiro and Wagner will give a pre-concert presentation at 7:30 p.m.

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ways doing things for his brother," Olson remarked.

The lead role involves a heavy rehearsal schedule for Olson — five or six hours a day, six days a week for five weeks — but the energetic youngster is undaunted. He said he enjoys acting "a lot" and wouldn't mind a career stretching to Broadway, or just being "like a local-type actor."

When his father dies in the play, Mottel chants the Mourner's Kaddish. Olson allowed that it was a challenge learning Hebrew and the Yiddish expressions sprinkled through the dialogue.

"It was hard in the beginning, because when we were studying the songs I didn't know where we were or I couldn't pronounce any of the words," Olson recalled, but added that the foreign languages eventually "kind of sank in and I got it."

Cranney characterized Olson and the other children in the cast as "very bright, energetic, focused, and pretty self-possessed."

Sher added, "They're really outstanding kids, especially Karl."

The set for "The Adventures of Mottel" was designed by Jim Waters, and is based on Marc Chagall's paintings of shtetl life.

Sher noted that "Mottel" is the only "Jewish play" ever produced by the Children's Theatre.

"Every element of the production is a loving celebration of the warmth and dreams of a vanished world, populated by people who still have so much to teach us all," she explained.

("The Adventures of Mottel" will run from Feb. 18-April 6 at The Children's Theatre Company, 2400 3rd Ave. So., Minneapolis.)