

# 'The Adventures of Mottel' strikes an emotional chord with New Americans

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Ten Russian Jews, recent immigrants to America, were among those in the nearly packed house at a recent seniors' matinee performance of "The Adventures of Mottel" at the Children's Theatre Company (CTC).

Based on an unfinished work by Yiddish author Sholom Aleichem, the story of struggling Jews in Kasrilevke, a *shtetl* in Czarist Russia, who flee persecution for a new start in America struck a responsive chord with these New Americans.

While Mottel and his *mishpacha* left Russia around the turn of the century, these Jews retraced their journey nearly a century later. The New Americans, all volunteers at the Resettlement Connection, a store in St. Paul's Sibley Plaza that helps new immigrants set up housekeeping, praised the quality of the theatrical production.

During a post-performance discussion, Ella Baskina, who left Belarus two years ago, told director Jon Cranney, playwright Judith Luck Sher, and several cast members: "I am so amazed and so fascinated by your great job because it is so close (to our experience)."

Baskina said that the play is "important for Jewish people, important for everybody here" in making it "possible to know Jewish people and their traditions."

"It is very gratifying to hear comments like that, because we try very hard...to perform the play in an authentic way," responded Cranney, who explained that the non-Jewish cast of players went through a "crash



A discussion following a matinee performance of "The Adventures of Mottel" allowed actors and audience members to exchange impressions of the show. Listening to Rosa Kanavetsky (right, with microphone) are actors (l to r) Gerald Drake ("Dr. Menashe") and Andy Weiland ("Eli"), and Ella Baskina, formerly of Belarus.

course" in Judaism and Jewish history in preparation for "Mottel."

For some of the New Americans, going to "Mottel" was their first opportunity to see a theater piece based on a Jewish theme — under Soviet rule expressions of Jewish religion and culture were largely suppressed.

Luda Viizelman, who came to the U.S. six years ago, had never seen *Yiddishkeit* portrayed on stage, and she commented that it was a "very good play."

In an informal conversation with the AJW in the theater lobby following the matinee performance, she became emotional recounting family stories of pogroms in Ukraine during the 1920s, where her uncle was shot and her grandmother killed.

Rosa Kanavetsky, who said that

she "read a lot of Sholom Aleichem, he is very familiar to us," remarked that her "relatives speak about (the events portrayed in 'Mottel') — it is so emotional to us."

Cranney — who directed "Mottel" at the CTC in 1986 and is directing the current production which finishes its run this weekend — has said that the job of a theater artist is to take an audience "somewhere they've never been before...into someone else's world, so they can experience that world."

In a variation on that theme, "The Adventures of Mottel" took several Russian Jews back six decades, to half-forgotten memories of their youth before the events of World War II forever changed the face of Jewish Europe.

Leonid Nishchi, who came to the U.S. from Kiev in 1991, recalled Kopagorut, a *shtetl* of 2,500 Jews in the Vinitsa area of Ukraine. For him, "Mottel" evoked that time and place.

"It gives me the possibility to be in my childhood for two hours," Nishchi said of the play.