

'Festival of Jewish Stories' uneven, but enjoyable

Evanston Review (IL) - Thursday, November 17, 2005

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Other than the fact that they're by Jewish writers and about Jewish characters, the four tales in Piven Theatre's "A Festival of Jewish Stories" really don't have much to do with one another.

That's probably just as well. Some anthology shows strain too hard to connect stories that are really unconnected. A short story collection does not a novel make.

Directed by Joyce Piven, "A Festival of Jewish Stories" makes for an enjoyable evening of storytelling, although like most anthologies, it's uneven.

The opening story, "Tale of the Moon" (adapted by Piven and her late husband, Byrne Piven, from a story by Isaac Loeb Peretz) was almost too ethereal to get a handle on, with three children performing what amounts to a poem rather than a story. It's the sort of thing that might enchant with more elaborate sets and lighting, but fell a little flat with the Piven Theatre's minimalist approach. Its closing image, however, was haunting.

Isaac Bashevis Singer's story "Zlateh the Goat" was charming. In a bit of gender-neutral casting, local eighth-grader Ani Poladian shows natural ease in the role of a boy who gets caught in a snowstorm with his pet goat. Using little more than a white sheet, the cast makes the snow seem believable.

Grace Paley's "The Loudest Voice" is the story of a Jewish girl with a loud voice who's cast in her school's Christmas play. It's cute, but not compelling.

The show closes with the strongest story in the bunch, Bernard Malamud's "The Magic Barrel." (Like the Singer and Paley stories, it was adapted by Stephen Fedo.)

A young rabbi (Michael Stock) seeks the help of a matchmaker (Bernard Beck) in finding a suitable wife. Stock and Beck vividly bring to life all of the emotions and thoughts these characters feel as they maneuver around each other.

Beck, a Northwestern University sociologist, excels once again at playing a character who's crusty but soulful, following up similar performances in Piven Theatre's "Great Expectations" and "Euridice."

Northbrook native Lauren Hirte, who had the title role in Lookingglass Theatre's recent version of "Alice in Wonderland," turns out to be the star of this show. Talk about diverse roles -- she plays the goat, the loud-mouthed little girl and a sensuous woman, whose photo causes the rabbi to fall into infatuation.

Hirte's a lively presence on the stage, making all of these roles seem real, even when she's pretending to be a farm animal by wearing wool and saying "Maaaa." In the wordless role of the woman in "The Magic Barrel," Hirte performs some lovely gymnastic moves, seeming to dance in the air. (Sylvia Hernandez-Distasi of Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, who just won a Jeff Award for her work on "Lookingglass Alice," is this show's aerial consultant.)

It's also a pleasure to see how the other cast members play a variety of roles over the course of the four stories.

And Gentiles needn't worry about brushing up on their Yiddish before taking a trip to the Piven Theatre. While these stories are Jewish, they feel universal.

'A Festival of Jewish Stories'

Piven Theatre, 927 Noyes St., Evanston

Through Dec. 18 at 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, 2:30 p.m. Sundays

\$25, \$23 for students and seniors

(847) 866-8049

www.piventheatre.org

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Record Number: 745835

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