



A YIDDISH VAUDEVILLE

The National Yiddish Theatre: The Folksbiene at the JCC

Given the ethnic makeup of our early tunesmiths, you might expect this vaudeville to be not much different from the better-known American variety. And yet, as Bruce Adler explains in this engaging revue, which begins, appropriately, with the strains of Tin Pan Alley giant Irving Berlin, the flavorsome language makes all the difference.

The mostly unfamiliar songs that follow, sentimental and comic, plus several sketches with unabashedly hoary jokes, are given a delightful resurrection by Adler (who directed in tandem with Dan Siretta) and four talented cohorts: Mitch Smolkin, Joanne Borts, Dani Marcus, and Allen Lewis Rickman.

The songs, under the flavorsome musical direction of Zalmen Mlotek, run the musical gamut. Borts, for instance, has a lively Charleston early on and then returns for an infectious gypsy number. Smolkin and Marcus share a young lovers' counterpoint duet that might have come from a Jerome Kern show, and Adler's "Kalmen the Kosher Kowboy" could—well, up to a point—have been sung by Roy Rogers. I'm not quite sure what "Glitter and Be Gay" is doing here, even in Yiddish, but Marcus gets laughs and gamely essays the coloratura.

As for comedy, some of the jokes are lame, but Rickman's "Getsel at the Baseball Game," about a confused fellow who thinks he's going to see a cantor at "Yankl Stadium," is very funny. Similarly, "10 Cents a Bagel," a riotous skit of lunch counter one-upmanship, also scores.

Vicki Davis' set and Gail Cooper-Hecht's costumes simply but effectively evoke the era. Voices are satisfyingly miked in Elizabeth Rhodes' sound design.

Adler has the style down pat, and his deep affection for the material imbues not only his touching tribute to Menasha Skulnik but the entire evening.

The bilingual presentation is enhanced by sharp green (English) and red (Russian) supertitles.

Presented by the National Yiddish Theatre: The Folksbiene at the JCC, 334 Amsterdam Ave., NYC.

Dec. 3–17. Wed. and Thu., 2 and 8 p.m.; Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 and 6 p.m. (Performance Sun., Dec. 17, 1 p.m. only.) (212) 279-4200 or www.ticketcentral.com.

Reviewed by Harry Forbes

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