

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

'The Ballad of Monish' a tour de force for Marty Green

Jewish Winniepegger brings Peretz ballad to life in his own unique way

A one-man musical play written and performed by Marty Green

Berney Theatre, November 21st, 2 p.m. & 8 p.m.

Reviewed by HAROLD BUCHWALD

“That was brilliant! The guy’s a genius!”

These were the enthusiastic comments of a very successful Winnipeg Jewish business executive who is steeped in and loves the Yiddish language and culture. What was brilliant was the just-concluded Sunday afternoon November 21st world premiere performance of “The Ballad of Monish”.

The genius he was referring to is Marty Green, conceiver, translator, author, composer, musician/performer, singer, narrator, teacher, producer, director and star of his virtually one-man, two-hour musical at the Berney Theatre.

“The Ballad of Monish” is billed as “...a kind of Yiddish/English comic operetta based on a classic poem by I.L. Peretz”. It is certainly that and much, much more. What starts out as a Jewish retelling of the classical Faust legend quickly turns into a rollicking, satirical look at traditional Jewish attitudes towards religion, sex, and the non-Jewish world.

The promotional literature for the production reads: “Marty Green has taken this epic ballad and adapted it to a lively, jazz-klezmer setting, interleaving his own razor-sharp English translations with the original Yiddish lyrics.”

But he has done much more than that. While remaining faithful to the Peretz poem, he coaxes his translations and interpretations upon the audience with pedagogy and musical artistry.

The Peretz lines he is interpreting are projected on the screen for all to read, while Green explains them in advance, and then sings them in English. His two hours on stage are interspersed with many interesting and humorous images projected on the screen.

He has created and performs eight original songs, putting music to Peretz’ translated words. Preceding and interspersed are other musical numbers from his fairly extensive repertoire of jazz, cowboy, country and western, folk, klezmer and other musical genres.

And throughout, Green engages the audience in continual dialogue on not just the Monish themes he is presenting, but a myriad of other topics and vignettes, sharing insights into the musical structures of items about to be performed, sharing anecdotes, recycling items from his former “Math With Marty” television program, and otherwise displaying a wide-ranging and eclectic scope of intellect, wit and whimsy.

He opens his first act on a darkened Berney stage at the grand piano in a tuxedo, ready to present a formal concert. After laying the foundation for what lies ahead, he presses his sister Sharon into action, briefly, and she lends her lovely voice and beautiful presence to a couple of songs. Several familiar songs and themes by Green, again solo, find expression before the first of his original Peretz-translated songs is introduced.

Four Monish songs appear before intermission, and the remaining four after.

The second act starts with Green in casual dress, entering the theatre from the rear of the auditorium at the top of the steps that lead through the audience to the stage, playing the accordion and singing one of his favorite cowboy songs (“hurtin’ music”).

The second act develops much like the first, with the remaining four original Peretz-translat-



MARTY GREEN in character: He puts music to Peretz’s translated words in musical numbers, adding songs in jazz, country and western and other musical genres.

ed songs delivered amongst more Marty wit and whimsy.

Noted, particularly, is the good use he makes of popular themes. For example, he adapts American comedian Alan Sherman’s very popular “Hello Mudda, Hello Fadda”, which, he points out, was, in turn, an adaptation by Sherman of Ponchielli’s “La Gioconda”. The audience is exposed to a variety of styles and moods, from Barbra Streisand to Gordon Lightfoot and many, many others in between.

It is reliably estimated that 40 per cent of his audience (a total of 360 paid between the afternoons and evening performances) were not Jewish - a fascinating cross-cultural event. From the standing ovations received, those in attendance thoroughly enjoyed Green’s Monish and assorted offerings and shtick.

One certainly didn’t have to be Jewish to be well-entertained, and appreciate the magnitude of what he has accomplished with his creation and with his ultra-sophisticated presentation.

Clearly, audience members were impressed with both the music and what one describes as “the amazing commentary”.

Another found Green’s “endless teachings within [his] humor and charming entertainment blew [him] away”. Yet another remarked that the manner in which he interspersed the Yiddish with the English translation and “...the way [he was] able to keep the wonderful rhyming timbre and inject the humor into the English translation was fascinating and nothing short of remarkable.”

The performance was not without its flaws. While Green’s musicianship is certainly very good, his singing voice tends, at times, to be thin and reedy. And he has a disconcerting habit of deep-bending his knees as he accompanies himself, giving the impression he is bouncing up and down too often.

Some felt he engaged in too much banter with the audience, a technique more appropriate to a nightclub act rather than a stage presentation, a view not shared by this reviewer.

Marty Green first appeared on the Yiddish scene about four years ago, with the publication of *On Foreign Soil*, his masterful translation of

the memoirs of Falk Zolf (the legendary Peretz School teacher), with a twist: The translation starts in English and gradually turns more and more into Yiddish as it is being read.

This was followed in 2003 with his first CD, “A Boy Named Sureh”. With “The Ballad of Monish”, Green says he hopes to introduce the humor, charm and poetry of Yiddish to a wider audience with no previous knowledge of the language.

In many respects he has succeeded. But he needs and deserves much greater exposure, not just in Winnipeg, but in other centres as well. Aficionados of mommaloshen, the mother tongue, should embrace this remarkable initiative wholeheartedly, and recognize it as a refreshing and creative effort to breathe life into their diminishing quest to preserve the Yiddish language and culture.

Monish is, indeed, a personal tour de force for Marty Green. We are very much in his debt for bringing to life for so many of us non-Yiddish readers the great Peretz ballad in such a meaningful and effective manner.

Harold Buchwald is a Winnipeg lawyer.



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