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Mentschn

Festival of Jewish Theater and Ideas

reviewed by **Nicole Bournas-Ney**

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Sometimes a piece of theatre is more of a political/social commentary or argument and less of an artistic expression. The newly translated one-act *Mentschn* by Sholem Aleichem is just such a play. As a result, director/designer Marc Geller is here faced with all the challenges inherent in this kind of work, namely, that plot and character have been pushed aside to a certain degree to give Aleichem's message—"Servants are people too!"—the spotlight. On top of this, the team has the challenge of retaining the feeling and humor of the original Yiddish in this first English language translation and production. In light of the difficulties presented by this play, Geller and a talented cast have certainly done an admirable job of bringing this Aleichem work to the stage.

Playwright Aleichem is not actually known for his plays, but rather for his short stories and some novels. He is perhaps most famous for his stories of Tevye the Milkman, which later were adapted into the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. One of only a small number of plays that Aleichem wrote, *Mentschn* is a 40-minute one-act that examines a slice of life in the downstairs servants' area of Madame Gold's house. In the play Aleichem seeks to point out that while servants are often treated inhumanely, they are, in fact, people—just like everyone else. The nine-person cast is, for the most part, strong, with the standouts being Elizabeth Bove as the motherly Irish serving woman, Rikl; Stuart Luth as the restless, flirtatious Hertz; and Andrew Dawson as the supervisor, Daniel. The simple but very effective set, employing nothing more than a table, some silverware, and a teapot, quickly and deftly sets the location as a kind of servants' "dressing room" that we are allowed to peek into.

While the acting and set are both effective, there is a difficulty presented by one of Geller's major directorial choices. The characters, who all sport Yiddish names, speak in accents ranging from Eastern European to Irish to Midwestern supposedly in order to give a sense of universality to the proceedings and to underscore that the sort of dehumanization that the servants experience happens to people of all nationalities. However, it does not come across

that way in the actual performance—it feels as if perhaps the actors have chosen accents at random. Also, in doing this, the director actually pushes the production in the opposite direction. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, it was actually the specificity of the entire production, especially of ethnicity and religion, that created a musical that was taken to heart in nearly every country it toured in. Perhaps if Geller had stuck with keeping the play Russian-Jewish throughout, the audience would have forged more of a connection to the play's message and characters.

By sheer luck, the night I attended *Mentschn* the performance was followed by a talkback/panel that included the director and translator; the discussion immeasurably helped my understanding of what the play, but even more what the production was trying to accomplish. The panelists' explanations made many elements of the production clear, including, for example, the ending Geller and the adaptors added to the text. Aleichem is known for failing to create "real" endings for his works, so Geller and the adaptors added one that they felt underscored the idea put forth in the play. They provided an ending that shifts the power balance more clearly toward the servants. Simply watching the scene in the production was not enough for me to understand what the intent of this new ending was. Though there is clearly a disjoint between what Geller set out to do and what the audience gleans from the brief one-act, I am honestly not sure how the production itself could have imparted this information to us, but I think that a director's note (and maybe more program notes) would have been incredibly useful.

Author: Sholem Aleichem
Adapted By: Ellen Perecman & Clay McLeod Chapman
Director: Marc Geller

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