

The Canadian Jewish News



The secret Jewish movie theatre in the VALLEY OF GOLD

How the Kaplan family brought Hollywood to Val d'Or, Quebec

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CANDLE LIGHTING TIMES

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It's wedding season, finally—and couples are eager to tie the knot after many COVID delays

/ Lila Sarick

When Zane and Baden Colt finally stand under the huppah this summer, it will be the fifth date they've set to get married.

The Toronto couple became engaged in 2018 and planned to marry 18 months later in 2020, but several plans were dashed by pandemic restrictions. While they waited and planned, they were married in a small and informal civil ceremony, but they still dreamed of a larger Jewish celebration with their extended family and friends.

"Zane kept a lot of optimism about the process, at least better than I did," Baden said. "After the second date was postponed, I really felt burned out by the process and discouraged."

But as their wedding day finally approaches, they are starting to feel more enthusiastic.

"I'm trying to get in the mindset from 'I can't wait for this to be over' to 'I can't wait for this to happen,'" Zane said. "The whole point was to have this special day and we've waited so long for it to happen, let's not blow past it so quickly."

The wedding industry shares their optimism. After two years of disruptions, weddings are roaring back with plenty of pent-up demand. Even as costs for flowers and meals are soaring and labour shortages are looming, ceremonies and parties are going ahead. Don't bother calling for a last-minute event, planners say—venues and vendors are fully booked.

"We're seeing couples right now jumping at any availability," says Francesca Stevens, a wedding planner in Vancouver with Smitten Events. "Unless they chose a Tuesday or a Wednesday, maybe in September or October or November, we might be able to put them in but we are at capacity."

Ariel Oziel is the founder of the Toronto band Beyachad, which performs mainly at religious weddings and spoke to The CJN as he drove to a wedding. Two months ago, he had just three bookings for early summer, now he has 10.

"I just got off the phone with my sound company and the owner says this is the busiest June he's ever seen in his life."

It's not just Oziel's band, everyone is working this summer. "I have a wedding in two weeks and I couldn't find a saxophone player. I called about eight people and everyone's busy," he said.

But Oziel, and everyone else in the business of helping couples tie the knot, is grateful for the work after two years of disrupted plans due to pandemic restrictions.

When COVID hit in March 2020, weddings came to an immediate stop. Abby Tobias, owner of Sole Power, a Toronto-based event production company, normally does 500 Jewish weddings a year.

"We went from 100 to zero," he said. "My priority was to hold

on to staff and keep staff getting paid. For a company of our size, it was a significant hit."

In Vancouver, wedding planner Stevens had to deal with brides who had planned on getting married in the next few weeks, but now couldn't. "We had weddings that weekend, we had weddings the next weekend. We became your shoulder to cry on, your therapist," she recalled. "Weddings are highly emotional. There were a lot more tears than I ever had in this industry,"

What followed were two years of weddings that were sometimes smaller than had been planned, held outdoors if possible and livestreamed to families and friends who could not attend.

Some couples, like the Colts, opted to do a civil wedding and save the religious rites for later or to have an intimate ceremony and then host a large celebration when COVID restrictions were dropped.

Along the way, there were some rough patches. Stevens saw a wedding where the couple insisted that everyone in the wedding party be vaccinated and the groom's brother refused and did not attend.

Couples who were already engaged and had signed contracts now had sizeable deposits reserving spots at venues they would not be able to use. Initially, some vendors were sympathetic, but as the pandemic dragged on, they could not afford to be, Tobias said.

"I've always operated under the contract... Even at the beginning we were very aggressive when we were dealing with postponements and cancellations because at the end of the day it's a business. I know it's sad and dealing with brides and grooms can be very emotional but I have to feed my family and I have to feed my staffs' family."

Some businesses which were more lenient about cancellations and returning deposits simply didn't survive.

"Someone who's doing a wedding right now, who booked it a year ago... my staff have been very clear. You're booking it during a global pandemic, you are assuming all of the risk, we are assuming zero of the risk," he said.

"I think it was a much more difficult conversation at the beginning when nobody could see it coming."

But after a few difficult years, people are partying as if it's 2019. Many invitations ask their guests to be fully vaccinated and food servers are wearing masks, but that's about the only difference, those in the industry say.

Guests who are worried about COVID are not showing up, or only attending the ceremony, but for everyone else it's business as usual.

"A lot of people like to pretend it never happened and they're moving on," said Susan Avni, who owns a historic wedding venue in Millbrook, Ont., and a huppah rental business. "The ones who had to get married in masks, having their bridesmaids and groomsmen on either side of them in masks... they'll never forget it."

COVID not only changed the wedding industry, it also pushed some couples to reconsider getting married and what their wedding would look like. David Sklar, an actor and co-host of The CJN's podcast Bonjour Chai, was living with his partner John before the pandemic.

"COVID really put a lot of things in perspective," he said.

“Spending 24 hours a day, seven days a week with someone... We managed to make this very stressful, world-changing event work for us. I think we became closer through the pandemic.”

The couple became engaged 18 months ago and thought that by the time they got married this July, COVID would be a thing of the past. And while mask mandates and vaccination passports are no longer an issue in Calgary, where they are getting married, worries about the pandemic are still lurking, Sklar said.

Despite that, the couple are not planning an outdoor wedding because they are concerned about wildfires and smoke, which were a significant problem in Alberta last summer.

“We’re sticking to our plans, but we have to be quite flexible in case things radically change.”

For couples like the Colts, the long postponement has changed the wedding they originally planned.

Some relatives who they had hoped would have been at the wedding have since died.

They have also made new friends, who are now invited.

Meanwhile, they have been negotiating with vendors over contracts that were signed years ago. Costs since they originally booked have soared. Flowers are up by 20 percent, and food has increased by \$10 a person, they say.

What they once envisioned as a formal sit-down dinner has evolved into a more relaxed cocktail party with food stations.

“We love the idea of finger food and snacking all night long,” Zane said. “We just want people to mingle and socialize all night.”

“We have gotten more comfortable about voicing what we are looking for and what we want, before we were taking a little more direction,” Baden said. “There’s no right or wrong way to do a wedding or to a celebration, it just has to be true to us.” ■

Lila Sarick is news editor of The CJN.

Hatepedia has launched as a new Canadian resource to track and educate about online hatred

/ Alex Rose

UJA Toronto’s Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Centre for Holocaust Education is launching a new online database and resource that is specifically designed to combat the different ways modern hatred can manifest.

Hatepedia.ca is the first initiative created with funds received in the fall of 2020 from the Canadian Government’s Anti-Racism Action Program grant.

So far, the website has three resources:

- Canada’s Hate Symbol List, which is a publicly available list of symbols and meme characters that are commonly used in hateful contexts both online and offline
- Canada’s Hate Meme Database, which is limited to professionals who want to do deeper research on the subject
- Educate Against Hate, which is a set of free lesson plans for schools and community groups who want to teach about online hate

“(Hatepedia) is really built around the fact that not all hate symbols these days are as easily identifiable as a swastika or Confederate flag, and that they’re often shrouded,” said Dan Panneton, manager of the Neuberger Centre’s Online Hate Research and Education Project, which produced Hatepedia.

“We’re hoping to produce resources that help Canadians identify the shrouded and often bizarre manifestations of hatred that these days are inseparable from internet culture.”

Panneton said the centre has been receiving numerous queries from parents and educators about modern versions of hatred, especially through memes and social media. As a Holocaust education centre, they have a responsibility to not just look to the past for examples of hatred, but also to the present and even future to be relevant and effective, he said.

Although Hatepedia is present- and future-focussed and deals with all kinds of hatred, not just antisemitism, Panneton said it nonetheless fulfills an integral part of the Neuberger Centre’s Holocaust education mission.

“Most of the hate material and symbols that we’re finding are rooted in ideologies that both led to the Holocaust and that are inherently linked to either the denial, the distortion, or the celebration of the Holocaust.

“Traditional forms of Holocaust education will always have their value and their place. But we’re acknowledging that it’s only part of the fight and that we also need to be engaging with the manifestations of hatred online, which unfortunately, as we’ve seen during the pandemic, have really exploded.”

For now, the list is Hatepedia’s main resource, and it will be updated monthly to keep up with the ever-shifting nature of online culture. Hate memes and symbols on the list fall into five categories:

- Explicit Hate Symbols
- Contextual Hate Symbols and Slogans
- Meme Characters with Hateful Uses
- Contemporary Canadian Hate Group Symbols
- Historical Canadian Hate Group Symbols

Panneton says Hatepedia’s list of hate symbols is unique in that it is explicitly tailored to how these symbols quickly move and shift through the online space.

“Hate is changing so fast these days.... But social media, and particularly websites like 4chan, are just churning out new variations on meme culture that express pretty consistently bigoted views. And so for parents, educators, really, any members of the public, they’ll need resources like these to help identify things, because often as soon as a meme becomes known, they move on to new ones. So we need resources that basically play catch up with that.”

The website also focusses on online culture and the role that context plays.

“A lot of hate symbol lists don’t take into account symbols that include plausible deniability and irony poisoning. So those are

two things that we really highlight in our resource.”

In this context, plausible deniability means turning an existing symbol or gesture into a hate symbol. People who use it maliciously can claim they only intended its innocent meaning while still communicating with each other in code.

Irony poisoning is when someone says their hateful statement is just a joke so it shouldn't be judged or taken seriously, and is often used with Holocaust denial. By claiming these statements are jokes, they may be allowed to propagate and inform the worldviews of people who hear them enough times.

Although Panneton knows Hatepedia won't be a silver bullet that solves racism and bigotry, he is hopeful that it can be part of the eventual solution.

“We're excited to be revealing the resources to the world,” he said. “This will be a living resource, so we'll be working on it continually. And we hope that it's something that Canadians find useful.” ■

Alex Rose is a Toronto-based news reporter for The CJN.

Museum of Jewish Montreal finds a new home after two-year pandemic hiatus'

/ Janice Arnold

In June 2020 the future of the Museum of Jewish Montreal (MJM) looked bleak: shuttered since March due to the pandemic, it now had been evicted by a new landlord.

Executive director Zev Moses, who founded MJM 10 years earlier, admits things were at a nadir for this centre of Jewish creativity in the heart of the old Jewish neighbourhood. He put up a brave front, vowing MJM would find another location.

Two years later Moses can barely contain his excitement describing what will be the MJM's home “for a very long time.”

MJM has signed a lease for an historic building at 5220 St. Laurent Blvd., which was a trendy 24-hour restaurant/bar/cultural venue called Le Lux from 1984 to 1996. Built in 1914, this Mile End landmark originally housed a furniture store and garment factories upstairs, and in the 1920s, was home to a synagogue and Talmud Torah.

At 10,000-square-feet, the building is almost 10 times the size of MJM's former premises at 4040 St. Laurent, which will permit a vast expansion of programming, including more space for exhibitions and performances, workshops and education.

From the outside the building, near Fairmount Avenue, is an unremarkable three-storey storefront. The interior, however, is breathtaking. Completely made over during the Lux era, the airy space is capped by a glass dome surrounded by mirrors that refract natural light down to the ground floor. Dramatic elliptical staircases with gleaming steel balustrades connect the

high-ceilinged levels.

The upper floors will be renovated starting this winter and a grand opening is planned for later next year, said Moses, but the new MJM will hold special events starting in July, including a contemporary art exhibition in October.

This location has “the potential to become a hub for grassroots Jewish cultural life in Montreal where emerging and established artists, chefs, musicians, researchers, workshop leaders, young adults and partner organizations can create together,” said Moses.

How this gem fell into the hands of MJM is truly *bashert*. After carrying on online (even its Jewish heritage walking tours went virtual), MJM announced last August that a former bar/apartment a few blocks north at 4281 St. Laurent, about four times the size of 4040, had been found.

This followed MJM's first fundraiser (virtual) a month earlier featuring renowned American food writer Ruth Reichl. MJM had made a name as a foodie destination through its eatery that served updated Jewish fare and food-related programming.

Architectural plans were still being worked on when the owner of that property suggested this latest site, which he had recently acquired, would be better—not only larger but designed for what MJM was looking for.

Indeed, “it was just too good to pass up,” said Moses.

MJM is reconnecting the building to its Jewish roots. It's also in the midst of the Jewish present; 5220 is close to such icons as Fairmount Bagel and Wilensky's diner. Mile End is home to a younger Jewish generation, and, of course, the Hasidic community is nearby, Moses pointed out.

The building has been inaccessible to the public since Le Lux folded. Most recently, a film production company had offices there.

“We're excited to breathe new life into a space that has a long legacy of creativity and gathering,” he said.

While 5220 needs considerable work, the landlord, a Jewish community member who wishes to be unnamed, is assuming the bulk of the cost, said Moses.

Moses, 38, a rabbi's son who studied urban planning at the University of Pennsylvania, was influenced by the ROI Community, an international effort to nurture young social entrepreneurs motivated by Jewish values.

He launched the nonprofit MJM when new media offered novel possibilities for connection. MJM began as an interactive platform that encouraged young people to delve into Montreal's Jewish history and culture.

In 2016 MJM extended its reach into the physical, renting a small street-level space, not to become a conventional museum, rather to provide a focal point for young Jewish adults who might not be interested in other community offerings.

Despite being physically apart the past two years, Moses said the MJM “ecosystem” has actually grown through its virtual activities.

MJM encourages young people to come up with projects exploring their Jewish identity. A micro-grant program for those aged 18-35 has been particularly successful in supporting emerging creators in spheres from visual arts and music to graphic novels and cuisine.

MJM also tries to make the public more aware of the Jewish community, its contributions to the city and its diversity.

The pandemic shutdown hit MJM hard financially: the tours and rental of its premises were major revenue generators. Federal pandemic relief programs allowed it to maintain staff, said Moses, and tours resumed this spring, but sales are about 75 per cent of what they were pre-pandemic, he said.

The rest of MJM's budget comes from government grants and private donations. An endowment fund established last year has reached over a million dollars.

"Sometimes I thought I was crazy to keep going, and then an opportunity like this comes along. But this is not a one-man show," Moses stressed. "Our staff, volunteers and board have kept us afloat."

"We have all worked hard to make this day a reality and we're excited to further develop and grow as an arts and cultural space in Montreal," said Elana Ludman, MJM board president. "This home allows us to realize that dream." ■

Vancouver's Jewish Community Centre makeover promises more room for day care, an expanded high school and affordable housing

/ Jan Lee

They're gearing up for the remake of a lifetime at the Jewish Community Centre in Vancouver.

The current facility, built in 1961 in Vancouver's bustling Oakridge community, is being replaced with a new, 230,000-square-foot complex that aims to redefine what a JCC is all about.

The redevelopment project, called JWest, is due to be finished in about a decade. It will not only offer expanded athletic facilities, a new Holocaust education centre, child care facilities, affordable housing, more seniors programs and room for an expanded high school, but the complex will be big enough to house more than 20 Jewish agencies all under one roof.

Eldad Goldfarb, CEO of the Jewish Community Centre of Greater Vancouver (JCCGV), said the decision to redevelop the property was spurred by the centre's aging infrastructure and an increasing demand for community amenities.

"We don't have enough space for many of our programs. [We have] no room for expansion," Goldfarb said.

The JCC's new layout would allow more room for sports, classes and other popular programs. It would also allow King David High School (KDHS), currently located across the street from the centre, to move next door to the JCC and expand.

A second gym would be reserved exclusively for school meets and classes. The school currently doesn't have a gym on its

site.

Russ Klein, KDHS head of school, said the high school has seen an unprecedented growth in recent years, and is now at capacity.

"We are one of the lucky Jewish day schools in North America. Over the last 10 years, our school population has continued to increase," he said. "We were below 140 students about 12 years ago and now we're up around 250 students," with zero room for expansion.

The lack of a gym has a significant impact on curriculum and schedules since gym is a requirement for students from grades 8 through 10.

"This will allow us to have PE at all times of the day, besides being a huge indoor space for all sorts of other school activities."

The redevelopment would allow more Jewish organizations to move to the JCC.

The centre currently houses about 15 agencies, including the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, Isaac Waldman Library and the Jewish Federation of Vancouver.

Organizations that had opted to move out of the JCC due to space limitations and expanding needs, may be able to return. Jewish Family Services, which operates a food bank and provides access to housing, financial aid and counseling services, could move back as could the Jewish Historical Society.

The new design will also make room for newcomers. The highly popular Vancouver Jewish Film Festival Society will have an office at the site and the Vancouver Police Department may have a community policing centre onsite. Discussions are currently ongoing with the VPD.

Like many cities throughout Canada, Vancouver faces an acute affordable housing shortage. Vancouver had the highest rents in the country, according to Rentals.ca, an online rental agency. In June 2022, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment was \$2,377.

The new development is expected to create 500 to 600 new affordable housing units. The proposal offers not only an innovative way to create more housing, but to create access to programs and services for seniors, lower-income families and individuals with disabilities.

The apartments, which will be built in Phase II of the redevelopment, will be located in towers above the high school.

Goldfarb said the redevelopment will also help to address another challenge that Vancouver families are facing: affordable child care.

"There's a huge waiting list all over the city including [at] our facility, for families that are looking for child care solutions," he said, noting that the expanded facilities would almost double the JCC's child care services.

Ezra Shanken, CEO of the Federation of Greater Vancouver, said the redevelopment not only targets many of the problems families are facing in Vancouver right now, but aligns with goals set by the provincial and federal governments.

The province has announced a commitment of \$25 million toward the construction of Phase 1, which comprises the JCC and the child care expansion, Shanken said. The federal government has also publicly promised support for the project, although the amount has not yet been announced.

"There's a lot in this building [project] that speaks to govern-

ment. That's a great thing," Shanken said. "We're very lucky about that. But it also says that we really are doing the right things. It's not that we're synched up government by coincidence. We're synched up with government because we're doing the right things. We're helping where help is needed. That's why [the governments are] helping us. They want to partner because we're helping people across the region."

If all goes according to plan, construction of Phase I will break ground next year. But there's still much to do to complete the two stages of construction, which is estimated by current costs to total around \$450 million. "We are in the midst of working on our capital campaign and working toward achieving our fundraising goals," Goldfarb said.

When Phase 1 breaks ground, the centre's current parking lot will be excavated and a new, multi-storey community centre and athletic complex will take its place.

Once the first phase is completed, the affordable housing and the high school will be built. The entire redevelopment is expected to take about seven years.

In the meantime, KDHS has secured a grant from the Diamond Foundation to construct additional classrooms at its present site while it waits for Phase II to be completed.

Klein said it is to the school's advantage to have the community centre completed first.

"We want it done because we need the gym," Klein said. "Just having such a vibrant community centre right next door to us and then being part of it, is just going to be huge I think, for the whole Vancouver community."

Shanken said completing the new state-of-the-art complex will signify an important step for the growing Vancouver Jewish community.

"The greatest gift that this project gives to this community is the belief and the understanding that we can do big things here. We are changing the public consciousness here from 'we can't,' to 'we can.' And there are more and more people stepping up and believing in their hearts that we can accomplish this." ■

Jan Lee is a freelance writer based in Vancouver.

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Remembering the Jewish dad who brought a taste of Tinseltown to the golden valley of Quebec

/ Ellin Bessner

If the vintage popcorn machine at Val d'Or's historic Capitol Theatre could talk, the stories it might tell would be more Jewish than you think.

That's because the multiplex, which opened in 1937 as a bijou with 662 seats, was built by Abraham Kaplan, a member of one of the pioneering Jewish families in the northern Quebec community.

It was 85 years later, on June 10, when his three children returned to Val d'Or for a municipal ceremony paying tribute to the multicultural founders of the mining district.

The Kaplans also donated a specially framed picture of their father standing outside the Capitol on opening day, complete with an inscription about the family's contribution to the fabric of the community. The photo and plaque will be displayed inside the cinema that their father went on to run for nearly half a century, until he moved to Toronto upon retirement in 1986.

"It's hugely important to me," said Cheryl Kaplan Hughes, 77, a retired Toronto teacher. "It brings closure to my life."

Cheryl and her older sister Judy Wineberg, 83—who also lives in Toronto—were raised in an apartment above the theatre, along with their baby brother, Stephen Kaplan, now 73. (He lives in London, Ont.)

Abraham "Kappy" Kaplan was a Jewish immigrant from Lithuania who came to Canada with his family when he was a teenager. And they settled in Kirkland Lake, Ont.

Abe's father Hyman went into business with a brother-in-law, opening up a shop to provide picks and shovels and supplies to eager prospectors trying their luck in the Kirkland Lake region's gold rush.

As the story goes, one of their customers, Sir Harry Oakes, usually bought things on credit. But he struck it rich in 1912 after he discovered what would become the Lakeshore Mine.

And, to repay the Kaplans for their kindness, Oakes offered to finance the construction of a local movie theatre called the Strand.

From those humble beginnings in Kirkland Lake, the Kaplans built a cinema chain in Northern Ontario. Abraham was given his own to run in nearby Bourlamaque, now part of the municipality of Val d'Or, Que, called the Capitol.

Cheryl explains that her dad was happy to move to Quebec—as a way of independently establishing himself in business, in this less crowded town.

The Capitol was built by architect Herbert George Duerr, who designed many striking movie houses across Ontario, including the Hollywood in Toronto and the Regent in Sudbury. It had an orchestra pit along with change rooms for touring per-

formers who included Maria von Trapp and Oscar Peterson.

Abe went on to build two smaller area movie theatres: the Marcel and the Strand. Both of these have since closed, but the Capitol is still operating as a five-screen multiplex—the only public places to see a movie in Val d’Or.

Judy Wineberg worked in the ticket booth of her dad’s flagship. She loved the job, even though it caused a big controversy when Abe raised the price of a ticket by a nickel, to 50 cents.

“You got to see everybody,” she explained, “because that was the gathering place.”

Living above the theatre had many advantages, including being able to pop in and out of her favourite shows as many times as she liked. On a signal from the ushers, Judy and her mother Belle would fly down the stairs from their apartment just to hear “The Anniversary Waltz” play during the 1946 run of *The Jolson Story*.

“Oh, how we danced, on the night, we were wed,” Judy sang. “She and I were absolutely addicted to it.”

Stephen Kaplan also worked for his father, starting with selling Polar ice cream bars for a dime during intermission. (His commission was 2 cents.)

Eventually, he graduated to ticket taker—but being allowed to manage the theatre remained out of reach before he left for university.

“At 16, I just couldn’t convince my father to retire,” he said with a laugh, adding that Abe Kaplan ran the Capitol for almost 50 years.

It was only due to failing health that he sold it to some local business people when he did.

While the two daughters were sent to live in Toronto with relatives when they reached marriageable age, Stephen Kaplan went to high school in Val d’Or and made life-long friends. He experienced what he called mild antisemitism but chalked it up to “kids will be kids.”

Despite over 500 kilometres of distance between Val d’Or and Montreal, the Kaplans also grew up as observant Jews. Their mother kept a kosher home and would order meat in bulk.

But as the siblings recall, refrigeration techniques of the era rendered many of the parcels fit only for immediate cook-outs when the parcels arrived—if they didn’t end up being thrown away.

Moreover, they relied upon the movie theatre’s freezer to store the meat, which led Belle to be mortified when an employee helpfully informed her the latest delivery was stashed between the ice cream bars.

Val d’Or had its own synagogue for a very short time—it lasted two years, according to Judy Wineberg’s estimation.

It was hard to find a minyan on holidays because the six Jewish families in the community often left town to visit relatives living in more robust Jewish communities in Timmins and Kirkland Lake, if not Toronto and Montreal.

And while her girls were born during the summer in Toronto, Belle Kaplan couldn’t travel south for Stephen’s birth in the dead of winter. The roads were treacherous, and yet somehow Abe managed to have the ritual circumcision ceremony performed right in Val d’Or.

“Don’t ask!” said Judy Wineberg, with a laugh, but then went on to describe in detail how her father convinced the late Rabbi Samuel Cass of Montreal to appear as the mohel—and bring some kosher food with him to celebrate the bris.

When they visited their hometown last Friday for the tribute, the siblings also got to see their late parents honoured on an adjacent sidewalk of memorial bricks, known as Pointe des Nations.

Later that day, the trio paid a visit to the current owners of the theatre, Louiselle Blais and Michel Veillette. The owners handed out popcorn from the vintage cooker—which works as well as ever. And then they promised to display the Kaplans’ plaque in the candy bar, where modern customers can stock up before watching the current blockbusters including sequels to *Top Gun* and *Jurassic Park*.

Blais says while she never got to meet the original owner, her husband remembers Abe Kaplan as a very kind person who smiled a lot.

As the Kaplan children reminisced about how they struggled to maintain their yiddishkeit while bringing Tinseltown to a place whose name translates as “Valley of Gold,” they also recalled how much they learned about Hollywood movies along the way.

Cheryl admits to “crying hysterically” during *Imitation of Life* with Lana Turner in 1959, but Stephen recalls another film that same year which interested their father and his friends even more: *Anatomy of a Murder*, which featured some provocative posing from actress Lee Remick.

“It was like a two-second clip,” he recalls. “And yet, my dad would bring in three or four cronies just to see that one scene.” ■

Ellin Bessner is chief correspondent of *The CJN Daily*.

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'The Sages of Chelm' is Montreal's fresh take on a classic play from the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre

/ Janice Arnold

The hilarious tales of the foolish dwellers of the Polish shtetl of Chelm are among the most popular of Eastern European Jewish folklore.

The musical play *The Sages of Chelm* is among the most beloved of Montreal's Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre's (DWYT) repertoire since it premiered in 1970. It was written by Abraham Shulman, a humour columnist for *The Forward*, with a score by Montreal's Eli Rubinstein, who was from Romania.

A fresh interpretation of this classic has been undertaken by 31-year-old Trevor Barrette who is not a Yiddish speaker or even Jewish. He is director of the DWYT's latest *The Sages of Chelm* at the Segal Centre for Performing Arts main stage from June 19-26.

With only a slight tweak of the original text, Barrette promises an iteration that will please both the DWYT's traditional audience and those who have never heard of the Chelm stories.

"This is going to be an homage to tradition, as well as an introduction for those who are brand new to it," said Barrette. "It's a *Chelm* those who know it will remember, with a few surprises." Most of all, he hopes people will just have fun watching these eccentric characters who mistake their *narishkeit* for wisdom.

The action-packed show runs about two hours, including intermission. "Audiences will need a breather, and a drink," joked Barrette, who is also choreographing.

Making the old new again has been helped by the happy coincidence that British actor Sacha Baron Cohen is developing and will narrate an animated special *Chelm: The Smartest Place on Earth* for HBO Max. The creator of the ultimate village idiot Borat has an open invitation to take in a DWYT performance.

The Sages of Chelm was to have closed the Segal's 2019-2020 season, but of course was a casualty of the pandemic lockdown. When the director of that production was no longer available, the DWYT turned to Barrette who is no stranger to the Segal.

The John Abbott College professional theatre program graduate has directed three of the Segal's amateur *You Be the Star* musical fundraisers and teaches at the Segal Academy for kids.

The Sages of Chelm is a romantic comedy about star-crossed lovers: Shoshane (Jeanne Motulsky) who has a crush on Menakhem, an outsider who comes to town with different ideas, despite her being betrothed to someone else.

"What excited me was how current the story still is," said Barrette.

The multigenerational cast of volunteer performers, who

range in age from 12 to almost 80, is emblematic of blending past and present. They include DWYT veterans and *griners* who are learning the *mama loshen* on the job, under the tutelage of six Yiddish coaches, just as Barrette is doing.

Stan Unger, who was Menakhem (now played by newcomer Jake Cohen) in the 1980s and '90s, now plays Reb Yoysef Loksh. Perennial DWYT favourite Sam Stein, who was the rabbi in the DWYT 2008 50th anniversary production, is back as Shakhne Getsl.

Musical director Nick Burgess, incidentally, played Menakhem in 2008.

The cast also has different generations of families: Rabba Rachel Kohl Finegold and daughter Kinneret; and DWYT co-president Jodi Lackman, a past *Chelm* chorus member, and son Bram.

Although *The Sages of Chelm* will have English and French supertitles, Barrette thinks the beat of the acting, singing and dancing will allow everyone to follow the narrative thread most of the time without them.

Rabba Finegold plays Shoshe Dobe, the mother of the bride, and 12-year-old Kinneret is Blima, younger sister of Raizel the Florist. They were in the DWYT's last big production, *A Bintel Brief*, in 2018-2019.

Rabba Finegold acknowledges her daughter's Yiddish is better than hers; Kinneret has played in YAYA, DWYT's young people's troupe. Her mother heard the language spoken by her grandparents and parents, but never became fluent herself. Active in theatre in high school and college, Rabba Finegold has put her stagecraft to use, in a practical sense, as a member of the clergy.

The New York native is familiar with the Chelm tales. "Growing up, my grandparents used to get *The Jewish Press*. I would run and get the middle section where different stories were run each week."

Rabba Finegold appreciates how this *The Sages of Chelm* deals with "the question of balancing modernity with (Jewish) tradition, something I do every day in my work." Director of education and spiritual enrichment at Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, she was one of the first women ordained in the Orthodox movement.

She lauds Barrette's deft hand. "How do you take something that is canonical and beloved and make sure it does not become stale and ossified... The play itself asks how do we move forward, and each *Chelm* has been a little different over the years. (Barrette) has been very respectful in finding that balance."

Her daughter's participation speaks to generational progression.

The Grade 7 Hebrew Academy student describes Blima as "a smart, tough girl who is softer on the inside." She modestly says she understands Yiddish better than speaks it, but is looking ahead confidently to being in the spotlight for a few moments.

"I think the play will definitely interest young people," said Kinneret, the youngest in the cast by several years. "It's been pulled into the 21st century—it's something like a rom-com, but people who saw it 30 years ago can still enjoy it." ■

Janice Arnold has been reporting for The CJA from Montreal since 1976.

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