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Jews Dominate Auteurs New Play

JEWISH JOURNAL

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“I am intrigued with all things Jewish,” actor, author, director and filmmaker Henry Jaglom declared. “I must admit that I pick up a book in a library or in a bookstore, and I turn to the table of contents and look up ‘Jews.’”

Although he has included Jewish characters in many of his films and plays, Jaglom has rarely dealt with specifically Jewish subjects, except perhaps for his first movie, “A Safe Place” (1971), in which Orson Welles played a lapsed “wonder rabbi” who was trying to make animals disappear in Central Park, but who had lost his powers.

Now, the auteur is once again tackling a Jewish theme with the play “Just 45 Minutes From Broadway,” which he describes as the story of a third-generation Yiddish theater family that lives in upstate New York and has fallen on hard times. The characters are a collection of eccentrics, including the father (Jack Heller), who long ago made the transition from the Yiddish- to the English-speaking stage; the somewhat ethereal, part-Jewish, part-Italian mother (Diane Salinger), given to reading Tarot cards; and her brother (David Proval of “The Sopranos”), who is a houseguest during his stint in a dinner theater production of “Guys and Dolls.” There is also another actor (Harriet Schock) temporarily boarding with the family.

The couple’s younger daughter (Jaglom protégée Tanna Frederick) loves the show-business life, while her older sister (Julie Davis) resents having been put on stage as a child and has opted for a so-called “normal” existence. When the older daughter brings home her “civilian” fiancé (David Garver), the action takes an unexpected turn.

From Jaglom’s perspective, the play, now running at the Edgemar Center for the Arts in Santa Monica, is about the importance of being true to ourselves no matter how others react to us.

“It’s also a love song to the people who give their emotions, who give their art, who just so freely share their feelings and take the risks to stand up in front of audiences,” the playwright said.

The show is one of several projects Jaglom is juggling at the moment. He has been traveling the country publicizing his film, now in release, called, “Irene in Time,” about the sometimes troubled relationships between fathers and daughters, and he is editing his 17th movie, “Queen of the Lot,” slated to be in theaters early next year.

“Simultaneously, every evening for the past nine years I have been working on my magnum opus,” he said, “a huge project that began simply as a process of transcribing the stories that my father had told me, and that I had obsessively taped while he was telling them over a period of some 35 years, about his privileged life in czarist Russia.”

That effort grew into a book about the formidable family heritage that came down to him from both parents, and then it expanded into a brief history of the Jewish people.

Jaglom’s father came from a wealthy family in Russia whose ventures included banking, real estate, trading and a host of other business interests. Although czarist Russia was rife with anti-Semitism, “they weren’t anti-Semitic when it came to money,” Jaglom observed.

“My father’s family was so respected that the police chief re-routed the traffic so it wouldn’t disturb his grandfather while he slept every day after the big family lunch. So they were in a very rare and privileged situation, and then suddenly came the Russian Revolution, and it was all taken away.”

His father was imprisoned as a capitalist but managed to earn his release by pretending to be slowly converted to communism, whereupon he escaped across the border to Poland and, with his three brothers, launched several business enterprises.

“He ended up becoming the finance minister of the free state of Danzig, created after World War I as a border between Germany and Poland and to give Poland a seaport,” Jaglom said. “My father married my mother, who was from Berlin, and they lived there.”

When the Nazis came to power, they hired Jaglom’s father to run the region’s economy and allowed him, tax-free, to continue operating his own businesses. “He was uncomfortable in the situation because he was flying into Berlin, going to hotels where Jews were no longer allowed to stay, and he was the only Jew in this environment. He decided he couldn’t continue this, so he gave them six months’ notice, and they begged him not to leave. But he said he had to go to England because the situation for Jews was becoming intolerable.”

In an attempt to convince him to stay, the Germans sent to Berlin for orders, and, according to the story, Heinrich Himmler offered to make him an “honorary Aryan.”

But Jaglom’s father reportedly said to his wife, “Listen, when it’s time for them to make you an honorary one of what you’re not, then it’s time to leave.”

In 1937 they left their house, their cars, the business and the employees, and they took a plane to England, where Jaglom was born. In an effort to get his father to return, the Germans continued paying his salary for a year, to no avail. The family crossed the Atlantic in late October 1940, during a German attack on the RMS Empress of Britain, and they ultimately settled in New York in 1941.

The story of Jaglom’s heritage through his mother, who is a direct descendant of Moses Mendelssohn, is also noteworthy. Mendelssohn, born in 1729, translated the Bible into German and other modern European languages, and is considered by many to be the father of Reform Judaism.

“The Jews were very unassimilated at that point,” Jaglom explained. “A lot of them were religiously clinging to this ghetto life, with Yiddish as its language, and there was a lot of resistance to him. But he eventually prevailed. He and his disciples changed the face of European Jewry so that they started participating in all the modern movements. That is called the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. The result of that is Freud and Einstein and all the other incredible Jewish figures who played such a gigantic part in the 19th and 20th centuries.”

Among the notable figures descended from Mendelssohn is the celebrated composer Felix Mendelssohn.

Jaglom began his historical work as a vehicle for letting his two children know about their background, but he said he hopes the book serves to inform a broader public.

“Half of my friends are probably Jews, half are non-Jews, but what they all have in common is that they have some stereotypical idea of Jewish history and a great ignorance of the wonderful, vast scope of these 3,000 years,” he indicated.

“I would like the non-Jews to get an understanding of Jewish history that is different from what they may have read. I want the Jews to come away from reading my book with an appreciation for the beauty and the pain of their history as well as the extraordinary singularity of this history. I want them to understand why it is vitally important for them to retain, in whatever way is meaningful to them, their Jewish identity and their awareness of themselves as Jews.”