

MAYNE MENTSHN WEAVES A TALE OF OUR JOYFUL SPIRIT

By Karyn D. Collins

If choreographer Carolyn Dorfman had decided not to add on to "The Klezmer Sketch," her wonderful celebration of her family, who could have blamed her. Though announced as the first part of a work in progress called "Mayne Mentshn (My People)," the accolades last season from critics and audiences surely made completing the project a daunting task.

But "Mayne Mentshn" is a work of the heart and soul and in maintaining that honesty, Dorfman has successfully completed the journey – both for her and for us. The completed work was premiered in a series of performances presented last Thursday through Sunday at the New Jersey Shakespeare Festival's F.M. Kirby Theatre on the Drew University campus in Madison.

With the debut of "American Dream," the companion piece to "Klezmer," we see what happens to the family who when last seen in "Klezmer" suddenly saw the joyous rhythms of their lives interrupted by the blast of a shofar – a warning blast of the war and the Holocaust to come.

Dorfman now takes us from the wrenching pain and confusion of the Holocaust to the bewilderment and fascinated interest of immigrants encountering the snappy rhythms of American life to humorous as well as painful attempts at assimilation while simultaneously struggling to hold onto the culture and rhythms from the life left behind.

Woven through all of this like a skein of unbreakable thread is the image of Dorfman's

father, a dapper figure in a trench coat and hat (danced by Wendee Rogerson).

In "Klezmer" his brief appearance as the piece opened was a symbol of steadfast joyfulness as he returned again to his private little dance, hands slowly lifting above his head as he moved.

In "American Dream" the trench-coated figure repeatedly appears, hovering from a scaffold over various scenes like a guardian angel. Though the figure reaches a comforting hand out to the troubled and suffering, he returns again and again to his dance.

When the angel and an immigrant man (Noel MacDuffie) shadow each other as they move to the rhythms of the trench coated spirit, there is a realization that this joyful spirit lives on in each of these people, trudging through their daily struggles.

And in showing a steady procession of people doing the little dance of joy – from the hip Americans to the violent bigots to the immigrant family – Dorfman shows that this joyful spirit lives in each of us, too. Yes, "Mayne Mentshn" is about Dorfman's family's experiences as Holocaust survivors and immigrants, but the magic is that this is also a work about all of us.

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