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Bikel brings *Laughter through Tears* to Segal

North America both disappointed and attracted Sholom Aleichem, and Theodore Bikel reveals why in a one-man show playing at the Segal Centre until July 22.

"In *Sholom Aleichem: Laughter through Tears*, I become Sholom Aleichem writing his will and looking back at his own life, at what he wrote and why he left eastern Europe to come to America, where he wasn't entirely comfortable.

"Even the poorest Jews in eastern Europe had a hunger for knowledge. In the New World, Jews developed a hunger for possessions," said Bikel in a phone interview from his Los Angeles home.

"Still, in New York at the time, people spoke his language and read his stories. There were five Yiddish theatres. It was a more fertile ground than Czarist Russia, where there were 5-1/2 million Jews who spoke Yiddish, yet the government allowed

only one Yiddish publication and no Yiddish theatre."

Although Yiddish has shrunk considerably since its American heyday, Bikel has found fertile ground here for his production, which mourns the shrinkage of Jewish culture and relives the shtetl tribulations that held it together.

It's not hard for him to spread his message that we should treasure our past. Audiences have long loved this star's performances on stage and radio, as well as in film, television, folk-song concerts, recordings and symphony narrations.

"I'm not a Johnny One Note," he said.

Bikel discovered Sholom Aleichem at his father's table, where, after dinner, the elder Bikel would read aloud the great writer's monologues, short stories and plays.

He bequeathed his collection to the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., and

the actor accessed them to help create this script. The show premiered in 2008 and toured to Washington, Florida, Toronto, San Francisco and to the national Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene in New York.

"It isn't just a recitation of Sholom Aleichem's writing. I play some 20-odd characters - old men, old women, young boys, grandfathers, coachmen. I put on a pair of glasses or gloves and become a different person. This is not really about costumes. It's about attitude," said Bikel. A number of Sholom Aleichem's stories brought to life in the show "are darker than those about Teyve's daughters in *Fiddler on the Roof*," the Broadway musical in which Bikel starred for more than 2,000 performances.

Even though he's taken similar roles in a 1997 production of *Greetings...Sholom Aleichem Lives!*, Bikel says that keeping the material fresh is "part of my responsibility as an actor and a performer".

The text is in English, sprinkled with Yiddishisms, but the songs are in Yiddish, including such tear-inducing favourites as *Oyfn Pripitchik* by one of Sholom Aleichem's preferred composers, Mark Warshavsky.

For the show's tour, Juilliard-trained choral conductor, arranger and pianist Tamara Brooks had been accompanying Bikel, her husband. Tragedy struck on May 19 when Bikel lost his 70-year-old wife to a heart attack.

Devastated, he wondered how he would go on without her, but he has enlisted the talents of Montreal's Josh "Socalled" Dolgin to play piano, along with accordionist Meima Kljuco.

"I've worked with Josh at the Krakow [Jewish cultural] festival in Poland," said Bikel. "We've been good together before and we will be again."

Following his Montreal appearance,



Heather Solomon



Theodore Bikel takes on one of 20 characters in his solo tribute to Sholom Aleichem, at the Segal Centre until July 22. [Stan Barough photo, courtesy of Theatre J]

Bikel has plans to make a film based on the show. "We are actively engaged in raising the funds, and we're almost there. We'll probably do the film sometime this year."

Derek Goldman directs the stage play, which is lit by Jody Burkholder. Robbie Hayes' Chagall-like backdrops front the set's minimal furnishings, including a reproduction of the lectern at which Sholom Aleichem habitually wrote, standing up.

Zachary Borovay has designed a series of projections taken from pre-Holocaust shtetl life to complement the stories.

Bikel still keeps a fairly gruelling concert and theatre touring schedule. "I am 88. I don't really feel it, but it is a fact," he said. "I love doing this play, and it is, in a sense, my legacy. I want to be remembered for it. But as Sholom Aleichem once wrote, you have to survive, even if it kills you. My plan is surviving."

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