

# Like Huck Finn, little Mottel lures audiences into adventure

By Robert Collins

**Y**iddish author Sholom Aleichem is, of course, no stranger to American theater audiences. After all, "Fiddler on the Roof," based on Aleichem's stories about Tevye the milkman and his marriageable daughters, ranks among the finest and most popular musicals of the American stage.

"The Adventures of Mottel," which premieres Friday night at the Children's Theatre, may not be as familiar to audiences as the Tevye stories, but the setting is the same 19th century Russian shtetl (village) society we know so well, not only through Aleichem's writings but also through the paintings of Marc Chagall.

But as Children's Theatre Artistic Director Jon Cranney notes, Aleichem's world encompasses far more than Czarist Russia. His stories have a universal appeal that knows no territorial or temporal boundaries. In this regard, Cranney likens Aleichem to Mark Twain and another humorist who has become well known recently for his own fictitious village society.

"I compare Aleichem's world to Garrison Keillor's," Cranney said. "Aleichem invented

## "ADVENTURES OF MOTTEL"

- **When:** Friday through Feb. 9
- **Where:** Children's Theatre  
2400 Third Ave. S., Minneapolis
- **Tickets:** \$13.95-\$7.95 (adults)  
\$10.75-\$5.75 (children)
- **Phone:** 874-0400

this community called Kasrilevka, in the Minsk area of Russia, and peopled it with characters representing all the various kinds of personalities that make a community. Just as people who live in England or France can understand Garrison Keillor, Sholom Aleichem is very universal. It's very human."

Of course, any comparison with Keillor is limited to the author's storytelling abilities. Lake Wobegonians, after all, never had to cope with the harsh realities of Czarist Russia, with its intermittent pogroms and continual harassment of Jews.

"The Adventures of Mottel," like all Aleichem tales, sets a poignant and often humorous story against a dark political backdrop. "Mottel" is the tale of a young boy and his brother who scheme to make a living

after the death of their father. Eventually, the boys escape from Russia and immigrate to America, the promised land.

Mottel's story is the story of countless other immigrants — Jews and gentiles — which is part of the reason that Cranney was attracted to it, but there's more.

"The basic reason is that Sholom Aleichem is a major figure in world literature and is a spokesman for a culture, a life, a people that have in a sense disappeared, a tradition which is really important, and I think that kids should know about it," Cranney said.

"Most kids with any degree of sophistication can tell you about the Holocaust, but what do they know about the richness of Jewish life that goes back hundreds and hundreds of years? That particular culture had an incredible impact on our own culture, on our intellectual life, on our artistic life," Cranney said.

"I felt it was really important that young people saw this world," he said.

"The Adventures of Mottel" is a sprawling tale that needed a good deal of paring down to fit comfortably onto the stage. Aleichem's book not only follows Mottel to America but details his numerous escapades in his new homeland. Please see **Mottel/2D**

## Mottel/ Millions could tell story

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The play, adapted by Thomas W. Olson and Judith Luck Sher, ends with Mottel's arrival in the New World. Cranney jokingly refers to "Mottel II," a sequel that will complete the action of Aleichem's book.

"It was a book that Aleichem worked on a long time," Cranney said. "He started it once and then dropped it. And he was still working on it when he died. We've been fairly free with the book in order to make a stage version, but we've been true to the characters.

"Mottel's a kind of Jewish Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn. It's not a direct analogy, but there's some comparison there. There's something wonderfully human and rich with a wonderful humor and a kind of feeling that Mark Twain has."

The Yiddish society that Aleichem detailed flourished in the late 1800s but had pretty much

disappeared by 1920. Political persecution and repression spelled doom for these simple Russian villagers.

"Millions of people emigrated," Cranney said. "Millions of people died. We talk about the Holocaust, but millions of people died in the pogroms and millions of people emigrated all over the world.

"In his travels as he emigrates, Mottel meets two other kids," Cranney said. "He runs into a little girl who was left behind by her parents because she has an eye disease. One of the big fears of immigrants was that they would have a contagious disease. Immigration officials would not even allow them onto the boat.

"And he meets another little boy who lost his parents somewhere in the shuffle. The play ends with Mottel on Ellis Island celebrating Yom Kippur."

The story of young Mottel, an optimistic

survivor despite the terrible odds against him, ends up being the story of all those who washed up on America's shores in search of freedom and opportunity. To them, at least, the gold that paved the streets of America was far more than a figure of speech.

"For somebody who had nothing to eat in Russia and could get a job delivering groceries on the Lower East Side in America, the streets were gold," Cranney said.

Whether the streets still are paved with gold is a question that needs to be asked, Cranney said. "I don't think this play has anything to do with bringing up or answering such questions, though. My purpose is to reveal this world. The thing is full of wonderful humor and poignancy. I think it's going to be a really fun evening in the theater."

Collins is a Twin Cities free-lance writer.