

Israeli theatre troupe brings its act to Toronto

SHLOMO KAPUSTIN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

A theatre without a home will bring its first shows to Toronto's Jewish community next month.

"A 'wandering theatre' means we don't have our venue," said Joseph Fackenheim, artistic director of Aspaklaria Jewish Repertory Theatre.

"We'll go to anywhere with a stage, and it doesn't even have to have a stage... Synagogues, community centres, various organizations, as long as they have a venue for us to perform. The way that we're built, we cater to these audiences, to travel, to be adaptable to various places."

The season will begin at Shaarei Shomayim Congregation on Nov. 14, with *Dead End*, which analyzes intergenerational communication via the story of a runaway girl.

Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto in Thornhill has also committed to a show, probably later next month and probably featuring the same play.

Founded in Israel 15 years ago, Aspaklaria is Israel's only repertory or government-supported theatre company exclusively dedicated to Jewish themes and culture. It has produced more than 40 plays over its 15-year history and boasts over 300 performances per year.

In Toronto, it will join a theatre scene that already has the Harold Green Jewish Theatre Company and the Teatron Toronto Jewish Theatre, which plans to return for the 2016-2017 season after a one-year hiatus. But Aspaklaria's leadership sees its touring model complementing, not threatening, the established players.



Joseph Fackenheim



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Talks are underway for performances in other Canadian cities - Montreal and Vancouver are top of mind - and U.S. dates could follow.

For Fackenheim, who has performed

with the group for the past six years, the project represents a kind of homecoming. His father, Emil Fackenheim, was the rabbi at Holy Blossom Temple and a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto. When Joseph was three, the family moved to Israel.

Years later, the family name has triggered memories and opened doors, as Joseph launches Aspaklaria's North America beachhead.

"I had a phone call today from a shul that's interested," he recalled last week. "Fackenheim' - that name rings a bell. You're not related by any chance to Prof. Emil Fackenheim?"

The theatre aims to bring to North America the Jewish arts mélange that it has developed in Israel.

"There are a lot of Jewish theatre groups in North America," he said, "but a lot of them aren't doing what we do - original plays. They're not so much doing the laboratory aspect of trying to see what happens when you put Jewish culture together with theatre."

Fackenheim also plans to stage *Torn*, about the young son of a prominent Conservative rabbi. Grappling with questions of faith, he ventures downtown one Friday night, and the play follows his journey into the night.

In addition, he said, the theatre will commission new work - on the BDS movement, for example, which advocates boycott, divestment and sanctions against Israel.

Aspaklaria's "laboratory" nature also means that it observes Jewish law.

"We looked into the halachic implications," he said, "and we found out that it

is okay to learn lines on Shabbat but it's not okay to rehearse, to do anything that involves work. And even me - I don't keep Shabbat, but I don't do anything to do with the theatre on Shabbat, because I respect that. I believe that my word is my bond in this case."

The company's adherence to Jewish law has allowed it to penetrate markets in Israel that rarely experience theatre. Some Orthodox communities, for example, observe a range of restrictions regarding female actors. Aspaklaria addresses this concern by featuring only male performers or, in female-only productions, allowing only women in the audience.

"More liberal streams are also accepting," Fackenheim said, "because the way that we investigate these things, and the new ways to approach old tenets of belief, are very interesting to other streams as well."

He first developed a passion for the arts as a teenager, seeing in them a vehicle to explore life's deepest questions.

"I have a complicated relationship with [Jewish tradition] personally," he said, "and I think the best way for me to examine my connection with my beliefs, my culture, is through this, on stage with other artists and my audience."

About 50 years ago, his father became famous by formulating the so-called 614th commandment: not to hand Hitler "post-humous victories" by abandoning Jewish heritage.

Asked if Aspaklaria satisfies his father's dictate, Fackenheim fils gave a long, knowing laugh: "I believe so, it is fair to say that." ■

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