

Homegrown theatre company stages first production

Arts Scene

by Heather Solomon

Claudia Litvak-Polachek and Pearl Rothenberg are ready to ring up the curtain on their first play on Nov. 15 and 16 at Théâtre Outremont in Outremont, Que. It was through their shul, The Chevra, that they gleaned the idea for *Queen of Chesed*.

The queen in question is Faige Jacobson (fictionalized as Faigie in the play), the mother of Rabbi Asher Jacobson, the synagogue's spiritual leader, a woman he has spoken to his congregants about numerous times over the years.

This exceptional woman is a model of giving, having devoted more than 40 years of her life to the homeless, sheltering them in her own Crown Heights home with her husband and, until they left the populous nest, nine children.

"When Faige's husband passed away, my husband flew to New York for the shiva," says Litvak-Polachek. "When he came back, he said to me, 'Do you remember the rabbi's stories about Zalman and Charlie the Button Man? They're real! These people exist! I met them!' That's when Pearl and I looked at each other and said, 'This story has to be written.'" Zalman and Charlie are just two of the many homeless people who came to the family's makeshift shelter and stayed, some of them for years.

Rothenberg, a retired psychologist, was fascinated by the relationships that developed between the family and their guests. "The daughter, Sarah, is the closest to me. She lives in her mother's shadow, but there's a whole other life going on inside of her," says Rothenberg.

Litvak-Polachek holds a degree in creative writing with a specialty in playwriting from Concordia University, and she founded Akiva Players. She agreed to coach Rothenberg, who is a fountain of ideas and has a keen eye and ear for human behaviour, on how to write for the stage.

The two formed a partnership that morphed into Labyrinth Stage Productions. Rothenberg knew how to start a business, having been instrumental in helping her husband launch his wealth-management firm, Rothenberg and Rothenberg.

Formalizing the theatre company came from the need to be registered, since the ornate Théâtre Outremont, their venue of choice, would not rent to individuals.

Casting the play led to another raising of the bar. "I'd seen Ellen David at the Segal Centre, as the mother in *My Name is Asher Lev*, and she was sensational. The role of Faigie is similar, a Jewish religious woman, so we asked her and she loved the script," says Litvak-Polachek, who enlisted playwright Alexandria Haber to polish it.

David is also directing and with her expertise comes a full professional crew,



Labyrinth Stage Productions executive director Pearl Rothenberg, left, and artistic director Claudia Litvak-Polachek launch their new company with the dramatic comedy, *Queen of Chesed*, directed by Ellen David.

HEATHER SOLOMON PHOTO

including designers.

The partners chose Sam Stein to play Faigie's husband, Tatti, another Yiddish theatre denizen, Fishel Goldig, for the role of Charlie, Bill Fletcher as Zalman the Shicker and Evy Solomon as a colourful Ethel Merman-type character.

The Chevra provided the 11-person cast with rehearsal space, after Rabbi Jacobson and his wife, Lieba, approved the script.

More plays are in the pipeline, including *Daughters of Mile End*, which is about the children of Holocaust survivors, of which Rothenberg is one. The company plans to produce new plays, including ones written by other local writers.

Naming the company was serendipitous. "I was listening to something on CBC about labyrinths and I said, 'Life is a labyrinth that people have to traverse. It's never a straight line. The idea is that when you come out, it's with some sort of transformation having taken place. That should be our company!'" says Rothenberg.

"The difference between a maze and a labyrinth is that a maze is where you go to get lost and a labyrinth is where you go to find yourself," adds Litvak-Polachek.

With *Queen of Chesed*, the two women have become queens of self-determination. ■

Tickets are available by calling 514-495-9944 ext. 1, or visiting labyrinthstageproductions.ca.

Correction

In Heather Solomon's column last week, "Wagschal exhibit now on at the Battat," an editing error implied incorrectly that the man in the *Hexe* painting was her spouse. *The CJN* regrets this error. ■

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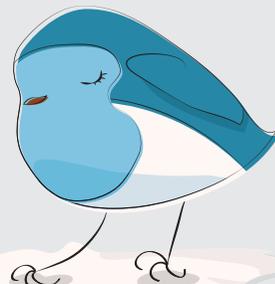
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Victor and Ron Buenavida, Isaac Savdie and Lydia Khalifa extend their sincere gratitude for the outpouring of support after the horrific passing of

Irene (Rena) Buenavida Z'L

Our thanks to family and friends and especially the Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue and affiliated organizations.

Her memory will always be inscribed in our hearts.

Baruch Dayan Ha'Emet.