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Unapologetically Jewish New Plays | by Makayla Hoppe

The 32nd Lipinsky Family San Diego Jewish Arts Festival—or JFEST—kicked off in early April with *The Whole Megillah*, a collection of developing works telling Jewish stories of past and present. The new play festival was conceived in 2019 when Producing Director Becca Myers worked alongside Artistic Director Todd Salovey to take on a new project within JFEST.

“Todd and I were sitting together, and we were trying to imagine what my goals were for my future as a producer,” Becca said. “I had been at the San Diego Rep as the NNPN [National New Play Network] Producer in residence, so I was just getting my ground, getting my feet under me in terms of figuring out how to produce. And Todd kind of looked at me, and he said, ‘All right, well, what’s the project that you want to do?’”

Becca took on the task of discovering and working on new plays by both up-and-coming and established playwrights focusing on Jewish stories. The plays would be workshopped for a week before being given a reading in front of an audience.

“We need to hear the playwright and we need to hear the words in the actors’ mouths. They need to figure out what’s not quite working yet and resolve those problems so they can get it to a full production shortly after we’ve done the development process,” Becca said. “The idea is to really shepherd in a new contemporary wave of Jewish plays.”

The *Whole Megillah*’s lineup for 2025 featured three new works: “*The Treehouse*” by Gwydion Suilebhan, “*Chagall*” by Yale Strom and Todd Salovey and “*Variations of Crossing the Alps*” by Deborah Yarchun. The staged readings

played April 2-6 at The Old Globe’s Sheryl and Harvey White Theatre.

“I get a lot of new plays that come to me from other theaters, from agents and from playwrights directly,” Becca said. “So, every year, I read an immense amount of new Jewish plays...and it’s always exciting when something completely new comes across my desk.”

The Treehouse

By Gwydion Suilebhan

Directed by Doug Oliphant

Four childhood friends come together as men to sit shiva for a father’s passing. Family and friendship drama come to the surface when secrets are revealed, issues are addressed and old wounds are healed. Grief helps the men discuss what they have been holding on to all this time.

“I’ve been curious how my grandmother survived World War II...she was a midwife and she was in the woods, and those two things never made sense.”
— playwright Deborah Yarchun



Photos courtesy of JFest.

“It was partly inspired by my own childhood, my own life,” said playwright Gwydion Suilebhan. “The four characters are me and three of my friends filtered heavily through the lens of fiction, so there are significant distortions. But the play was born out of my impulse to tell a story that depicted men working their way out of toxic masculinity. It’s a path that’s not easily walked; I wanted to show it. I wanted to see how it can be done.”

Chagall

By Yale Strom & Todd Salovey
Original music & lyrics by Yale Strom
Directed by Todd Salovey

This new musical celebrates the life and art of Marc and Bella Chagall through original music and visuals based on the artists’ work. It tells the story of their journey from Vitebsk and Gordes to America.

“Even though it’s getting tense, they don’t want to leave,” said playwright and composer Yale Strom. “They don’t think it will be as bad—they have been through other difficult times. They love the [European] culture, and everything about America doesn’t really excite them. And to leave, like other artists, it’s not always so easy to pick up; they drag their feet. So, I created a fictionalized story around that.”

The show features 15 original songs that span a range of genres from Jewish Orient to Sondheim and classical.

“‘Chagall’ has been workshopped through The Whole Megillah before, so I was familiar with it,” Becca added. “It’s exciting to talk about the history of a famous painter and to have a new musical with new songs. It’s a cool thing. I think this story is important. This idea of being a refugee is really relevant right now, so I was excited to explore that a little bit.”

Variations of Crossing the Alps

By Deborah Yarchun
Directed by Becks Redman

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rachel immerses herself in her family’s history throughout World War II. During a time with an unknown future, she is displaced from her home and sees the parallels to her grandmother’s state of wandering and searching amidst the Holocaust.

“I’ve been really curious since childhood how my grandmother survived World War II because all she said is that she was a midwife and that she was in the woods, and those two things never made sense,” said playwright Deborah Yarchun. “My grandparents didn’t really talk about their story like a lot of people in their generation who went through that trauma. And as a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, I’m wondering, ‘What was the story?’”

The play flips between the two different time periods and shows Rachel’s life interspersed with her grandmother’s escape to Russia.

“It has all of the same elements that a lot of people, I think, feel connected to, and to place it against the landscape of COVID felt really sort of current and brought the story into a modern light of coming to terms with family history,” Becca added.

“A lot of the plays that we develop in The Whole Megillah have gone on to have rich lives beyond, and that’s in part due to helping, developing and providing support,” said Becca. “But there’s something that Todd and I are really excited about that we first talked about six years ago, which is, how do we expand? So, in five years, I hope that The Whole Megillah will be producing a full production of a new play that has been developed through our workshop.” ☆