

Humorous musical takes a serious turn or two

Biblical character inspires political action

BY SUE MERRELL

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GRAND RAPIDS — Esther is the original Jewish drama queen.

For hundreds of years, Jewish congregations have celebrated the annual festival of Purim by creating “spiels” or skits about Esther, who helped save the Jewish people from annihilation in about 479 B.C.

“The spiels are really the beginning of Jewish theater,” said Len Robinson, who directs “Esther: The Musical” for Jewish Theatre Grand Rapids.

“Troupes started out doing the story of Esther, and then they began doing other stories. Over the years, they added a bit of shtick. It influenced vaudeville; it influenced American theater. Really the grandma of it all is the Purim spiel.”

“Spiel,” a German/Yiddish word that has been incorporated into American slang, is more like a ridiculous melodrama than a serious Bible pageant.

“People boo and hiss Haman (the villain),” said Lori Jacobs, president of Jewish Theatre Grand Rapids.

A native of Detroit who has lived in Grand Rapids for about eight years, Jacobs was a full-time singer and songwriter in the 1970s and '80s who recorded “Free,” an album for Capitol Records, in 1973. Now a retired attorney, she wrote three original songs for Temple Emanuel’s Purim spiel last year. Jewish Theatre managing director Cheryl Currier suggested turning it into a full-length musical.

“It became the year of Esther,” Jacobs said, sitting on the deck of her Grand Rapids home.

For the past year, Jacobs studied, talked and dreamed about Esther. She looked at maps of ancient Persia and listened to a CD on the topic from a Southern Christian minister.

In the story, Esther is a



PRESS PHOTO/ADAM BIRD

Celebrating Esther: The cast includes, from left, Darla Wurtley, as Hegai; Katherine d'Arcy-Van Wesep as Vashti; Rich Liberatore as Haman; Amy Frank Ostrow as Esther; and, in front, Jeff Frank as King Ahasuerus.

IF YOU GO

‘Esther: The Musical’

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays, Saturdays and 3 p.m.

Sundays through June 25

Where: Spectrum Theater, 160 Fountain St. NE

Tickets: \$15, \$10 students and senior citizens, at the box office, 234-3946

young Jewish orphan being raised by her uncle Mordecai. The King of Persia selects her to be queen, and Mordecai convinces her she must petition the King to save the Jewish people from his advisor Haman, who has plotted to kill them all.

“I always wondered why we are instructed to celebrate Esther. Why not Daniel or Ruth or Jonah and the whale?” Jacobs said.

“Then it really dawned on me that this is about genocide. It’s pertinent to us today, to every generation, every life. There will be someone — Hitler, Rwanda, the Shiites and the Sunnis. We have to understand that this can happen today.”

So Jacobs wrote a 20-song, two-act musical with lots of melodrama and corny shtick,

but it has a serious side, too.

“At one point, I hope the audience members get sick to their stomachs,” Robinson said.

To broaden the impact, Robinson has recruited actors from the African-American and Latino communities, as well as singers from the Jewish community who’ve never been in a play before.

Amy Frank Ostrow portrays the title role with her father, Jeffery Frank, as the King, Rich Liberatore as Haman and Bill Marfinc as Mordecai. Others include Katherine D’Arcy Van Wesep, Darla Wortley and Gina Dawe, as well as a large chorus.

Robinson said the play already has affected him. He was driving one day thinking about how to stage one of the songs where Esther ponders, “What Will You Do?”

“There comes a time in every life when you have to choose. What will you do?”

His route was blocked by marchers protesting the immigration bill. As he thought about the words of the song, he decided to get out of his car and march along, even though it meant taking a bus back to get his car.

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