

Theatre review

Chaim Potok novel brought skillfully to the stage

By Michael Regenstreif

Ottawa audiences saw a powerful production of playwright Aaron Posner's stage adaptation of Chaim Potok's acclaimed 1972 novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*, when the 9th Hour Theatre Company mounted the play last month at the Arts Court Theatre.

Set in the 1950s, *My Name is Asher Lev* tells the story of a young member of the Ladover Chasidic sect – a fictionalized version of Chabad-Lubavitch – who, from childhood, displayed prodigious artistic skills and was driven to become a great painter, despite the conflict that would bring in his relationships with his parents, his devout community and his own identity as an observant Orthodox Jew.

We meet Asher Lev, the protagonist and narrator as the lights come up. In his early-20s, he is already acclaimed as one of the most promising New York artists of his generation. In a series of flashback scenes, we learn how he got to that point.

The theme of Asher's conflicts between art and his strict, if not sheltered, Chasidic upbringing begins to develop early.

At the age of six, young Asher, who loved to draw, relentlessly begged his mother, Rivkeh, to bring him to an art museum. Afterward, she is shocked to discover her son is quite accurately copying the museum's masterpieces, many of them Christian-themed, at the kitchen table.

As Asher grows up, the conflicts increase. His parents want nothing more for him than to abandon thoughts of an artistic career and follow in the footsteps of his father, Aryeh, who travels the world on behalf of the Ladover rebbe helping to build yeshivas – particularly in the Soviet Union where Jews are persecuted and religion suppressed.

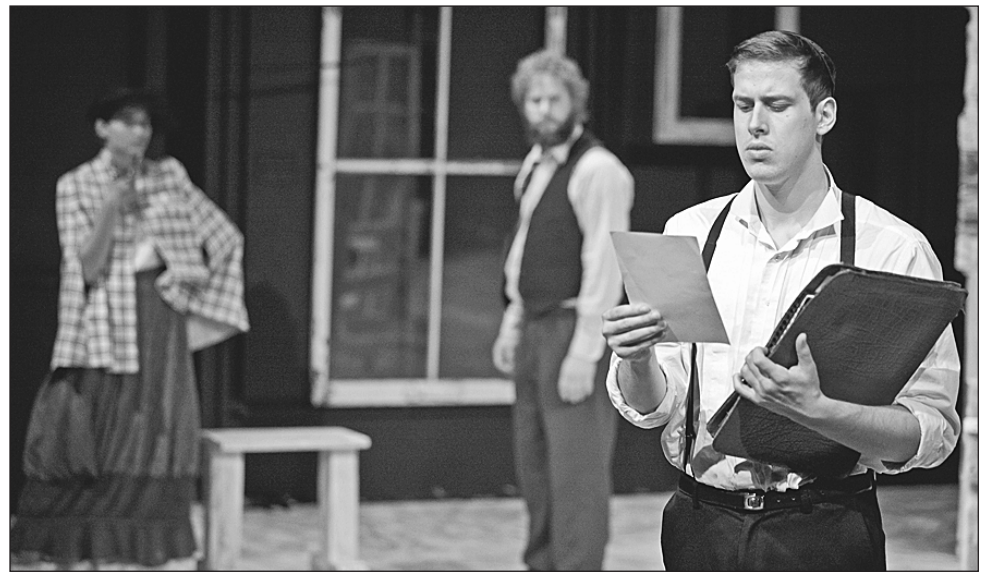
Finally, though, it is the rebbe himself, who understands that Asher must be allowed to go where his art takes him.

The rebbe arranges an apprenticeship for Asher with Jacob Kahn, a successful Jewish artist, a Holocaust survivor, who long ago had given up the strictures of Orthodoxy for secularism.

Kahn takes the teenaged Asher under his wing teaching him both technique and a deep understanding of the artist's need to express himself and introducing him to the New York art world, including the gallery owner who will help launch Asher's star.

Drew Moore played Asher poignantly and with versatility.

The supporting actors – Sarah Gabriella Waisvisz in all of the female roles and David Whiteley in all the



Drew Moore (foreground) as Asher Lev with Sarah Gabriella Waisvisz as art gallery owner Anna Schaeffer and David Whiteley as Jacob Kahn in *My Name is Asher Lev*.

other male roles – were equally versatile and convincing.

The strength of the acting, under Bronwyn Steinberg's deft direction, allowed theatregoers to embrace the actors as multiple characters or ages.

This production deserves to be remounted and seen by a wider audience.



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A meeting of the members
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will be held on

Thursday, November 15, 2012

7:00 pm

Social Hall A

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