

JET's 'An Evening of Schisgal,' worthwhile, memorable

Performances of the Jewish Ensemble Theatre production of "An Evening of Schisgal" continue through May 24 at the Aaron DeRoy Theatre at the Jewish Community Center in West Bloomfield. For tickets, call JET at 788-2900.



Barbara Michals

Murray Schisgal's "A Need for Brussels Sprouts" and "74 Georgia Avenue" are two very disparate one-act plays paired under the boring title "An Evening of Schisgal" at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre.

As a playwright Schisgal is best known for "Luv" and as a screenwriter for co-authoring "Twister," but his name is not a household word. So "An Evening with Schisgal" gives little hint of what to expect.

"Brussels Sprouts" is an urban romantic comedy. Rodney King and the madness in Los Angeles was on a lot of people's minds, including actor, producer Michael Tolan.

The former Detroit was at the Jewish Ensemble when it happened, directing "74 Georgia Avenue," one of two Murray Schisgal plays being presented there.

"It's important to try to bring people together in non-confrontational ways to share their common humanity," he said.

"One way we can do that is through theater. This play is a healing play about relationships between two people who happen to be black and white."

In "74 Georgia Avenue," a successful middle-aged Jewish man from Brooklyn goes back to his old neighborhood on a personal soul-searching mission. He finds a black photo.

The play had its original stage Jewish Ensemble Theatre is presenting the first theatrical production.

Tolan, who now lives in New York, has appeared in leading roles in many Broadway plays including "A Hatful of Rain," "Rumors" and "Juliet," and "A Majority of One," reading in New York in 1988. The

section of Brooklyn that was once a Jewish neighborhood. Marty Robbins (Paul Hopper) has come back to the spot where he was born and raised in a vague effort to find himself by renewing his roots.

His sudden appearance, suitcase in hand, seems a heavy imposition to current occupant Joseph Watson (Harold Hogan), but the later soon warms to his strange visitor.

As a youth, Watson hung around the old neighborhood synagogue a lot because his father was the janitor there. When Robbins and Watson, reminiscence about acquaintances from the past, Watson shows some old clothes and prayer books he rescued when the synagogue was torn down.

Whenever Watson dons the clothes of the old Jew he is mystically transformed into one of them. Demonstrating, Watson uses his assumed personage as a refuge from the pain of losing his beloved wife, while the transformation enables Robbins to relive conversations from his youth, and come to grips with a lot of his suppressed anger. Man, says Schisgal, has to have something strong to fall back on in order to survive the harsh buffeting of life.

As Watson, Hogan gives an extraordinary, moving performance both as the warm, sensitive husband devoted to his dying wife, and as Robbins' aged, crutch-carrying grandfather.

Hopper convincingly portrays Robbins as a man adrift and confused, but he's trying to be a pastrami sandwich on white bread. The Jewish Ensemble Theatre has had many excellent ethnic characterizations by non-Jewish actors, but Hopper seems miscast.

While "An Evening of Schisgal" is uneven in many ways, Hogan and director Michael Tolan make "74 Georgia Avenue" a very worthwhile and memorable stage experience.

Film work has included roles in Bob Fosse's "All That Jazz," and "Presumed Innocent."

A leading actor in television, he co-starred in "The Doctors" and "The Nurses" and "The Senator." He has also guest starred in many prime

time dramatic and comedy series, including "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "Mission Impossible."

Tolan said he is very familiar with Schisgal's plays. Schisgal is a friend of his, and read "74 Georgia Avenue" two years ago.

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