

Imaginative premise misses flight at Meadow Brook

By FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

fprovenzan@oe.homedomain.net

It's painfully clear that the weakness of many plays is the lack of a compelling story. That's hardly the problem with Chagall's *Arabian Nights* at Meadow Brook Theatre.

On the contrary, shortly after it's been made clear the play will deal with the spiritual transformation of Marc Chagall, one of the 20th century's greatest artists, the promise of a noble tale elevates expectations.

What transpires, however, is several simultaneous narratives told amid a tangled web of oral

What: Premiere of "Chagall's Arabian Nights," a love story inspired by the art of Marc Chagall, by Meadow Brook Theatre Playwright-in-Residence Karim Alrawi
When: Matinee and evening shows through Sunday, April 9.
Where: Meadow Brook Theatre on the campus of Oakland University in Rochester Hills
Tickets: \$19.50-35. Call (248) 377-3300.

storytelling.

Although there are special moments of mermaids, genies, talking trees and flying horses, don't expect the high adventure of a magic carpet ride, the bravado of Sinbad the Sailor or a death-defying knife fight among thieves.

While Chagall's *Arabian Nights* offers an imaginative

premise, it loses its way in the fog and never quite takes flight.

Basically, the surrealistic play is the ambitious story of the famous painter who lost his spiritual connection to the lyrical world of lush color.

Struggling with his identity as a Jew and his loneliness since his wife's death, Chagall finds solace in the company of his for-

mer housekeeper-turned-lover, Virginia.

To inspire him, Virginia reads the famous Arabian tales. What unfolds, however, is far from inspiring.

A rotating stage and a minimal set hardly evoke imaginary flights to 15th-century Arabia. And there are few clues as to how the ancient tales transformed Chagall's vision, reinvigorated his artistry and rekindled his capacity to love.

Only the energy and occasional wit of Robert Morgan (Young Marc, Badr) resuscitates the play from a generally dispassionate performance. (Probably the result of portraying characters that are more like cut-outs than

three-dimensional human beings.)

In the languishing first act, for instance, long passages of exposition are employed to tell of Chagall's insecurities, including his fear of being discounted merely as a painter of angels.

Only the entrance of life-size puppets offers a reprieve. But their muffled voices do little to enhance the illusion, and only draw attention to the production clichés.

The second act is an improvement, only to be undermined by an abrupt, maudlin ending delivered with a neat bow and ribbon.

The play won the 1998 USA Plays Today Playwriting Award

in the category of best script suitable for family presentation.

But beyond the surprise appearance of the puppets and modest special effects, it hardly seems that most children — used to seeing *Star Wars* magic on the screen — would find engaging the unimpressive on-stage wizardry.

Perhaps something was lost when playwright Karim Alrawi adapted his award-winning play to the Meadow Brook stage.

In the end, "Chagall's Arabian Nights" doesn't deliver on the promise of the play's expectations, leaving only the hollow hope of "imaginative" special effects promoted in the pre-opening publicity.

Courage, passion, and love inspire great stories

BACKSTAGE
PASS



ANN
DELISI

There was a time, not so long ago, that great achievements did not necessarily stand the test of time. Without today's glut of media attention that surrounds even minor events, the most noteworthy individuals often had to rely on the retelling of a great story through the arts.

As a deluge of publicity accompanies the opening of Comerica Park in April, a new film that tells the heroic story of Tiger legend Hank Greenberg is set for a weekend series at the DIA's Detroit Film Theatre.

Baseball film

"The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg" should generate plenty of interest in the Detroit area. Obviously, baseball fans will love this account of one of the greatest sluggers ever to play the game. Local history buffs will appreciate the wealth of archival footage of Detroit in the 1930s and 1940s. The film also showcases a number of well-known local folks, from Tiger broadcaster Ernie Harwell to politicians Carl and Sander Levin. But the most inspiring aspect of the film is Hammerin' Hank's demonstration of dignity

■ **Through the ages, inspiring people have been immortalized by artists, playwrights, composers, and filmmakers.**

and grace in light of the pervasive anti-Semitism of his heyday. "Hank Greenberg was an articulate, smart and wonderful man who was very upfront about being Jewish. His ability to navigate the waters during the tensions of the time establishes him as a hero, not just for his accomplishments on the field, but in the area of civil rights," says Elliot Wilhelm, curator of the Detroit Film Theatre.

The film makes its local premiere Friday, March 31 through Sunday, April 2, and will be the subject of a featured segment on Detroit Public TV's BACKSTAGE PASS, airing 7:30 p.m. Sunday, March 26.

Voices of Light

Through the ages, inspiring people have been immortalized by artists, playwrights, composers, and filmmakers. A new production bridges today's music with a silent film from the 1920s, "The Passion of Joan of Arc." Nearly 70 years after Carl Dreyer released his film, composer Richard Einhorn created an origi-

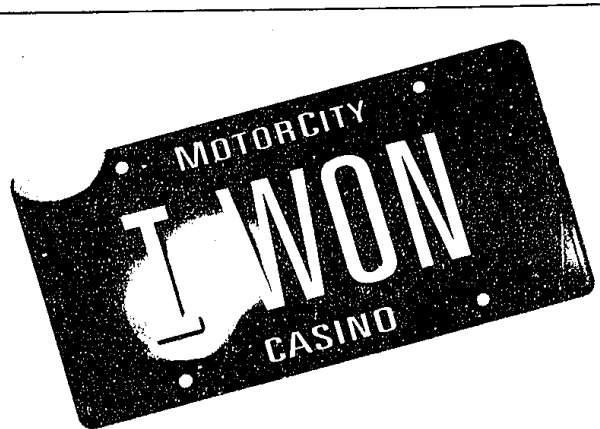
nal oratorio to the movie called "Voices of Light," which has been hailed as "a great masterpiece of contemporary music."

The film and oratorio with the Hackham Symphony Chorus make a Detroit premiere Sunday, April 2, at the State Theatre. BACKSTAGE PASS classical music host Dave Wagner offers a preview in the March 26 program.

Love story

Sometimes, artists themselves become the subjects of other creative works, as in the case of the Meadow Brook Theatre production of "Chagall's Arabian Nights," which runs through April 9. At the root of playwright Karim Alrawi's latest work is a love story. While grieving the death of his wife Bella in the 1940s, artist Marc Chagall fell in love with his housekeeper, Virginia. It was Virginia's retelling of the classic "Arabian Nights" tales that helped inspire Chagall's striking illustrations. The artist's drawings are the origin for one of the most visually stimulating productions you'll ever see, with Alrawi's use of larger-than-life puppets to portray flying horses, genies and mermaids.

Courage, passion, and love may be recurring themes in the arts, but it is the endless variations in how the great stories are told that keep the arts fresh, and the audiences entertained.



You Could Be Next.

Someone just won a new Cadillac Eldorado at MotorCity Casino. Our hot machines are now ready to reward a lucky player with a new Corvette Convertible. Only MotorCity Casino offers the Thrill Ride of your life.

Play Today!



For more information, visit us at www.motorcitycasino.com or call 1-877-777-0711.

If you bet more than you can afford to lose, you've got a problem. Call 1-800-270-7111 for confidential help.

Michigan Department of Community Affairs
NDCI

MotorCity Casino and the MotorCity Casino logo are trademarks of Detroit Entertainment, L.L.C. © 2000 Detroit Entertainment, L.L.C. All rights reserved.

Latin and Argentine Tango Club of Detroit proudly present Live from Argentina

TANGO and FOLKLORE ARGENTINO

Three Performances in the Detroit & Windsor Area Reserve Your Seat Today!

Malambo and Boleadoras "The Obsession!"
12 Dancers and Musicians on Stage

Friday, April 28th 8 PM to 10 PM
Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti
Phone (734) 487-2282
General Admission: \$40 Students w/ID \$25
www.tickets.com

Saturday, April 29th 7 PM to 9 PM
Royal Oak Music Theatre
General Admission: \$40 V.I.P.: \$50
Ticket Master (248) 546-6410
RoyalOakTheatre.com or purchase at theatre

Sunday, April 30th 3 PM to 5 PM
Capitol Theatre and Arts Center, Windsor
General Admission: \$40 (US) (\$50 Canadian)
V.I.P.: \$50 (US) (\$70 Canadian) Includes Afterglow
Ticket Office: (519) 253-7729
For more info call (313) 561-3236 or (313) 565-3329
AmyRayMedia.com

STARTS TOMORROW!
NOVI EXPO CENTER
BACKYARD POOL & SPA SHOW
MARCH 24-26, 2000

TURN YOUR BACKYARD SPACE INTO YOUR SUMMER PLACE
WIN POOLS & HOT TUB! FROM VISCONTI

The Backyard Pool & Spa Show at the Novi Expo Center, I-96 & Novi Rd.
• In ground pools • Above ground pools • Hot tubs/Spas • Outdoor furniture
• Family recreation & entertainment • Buy it all now for less

NOVI EXPO CENTER
BACKYARD POOL & SPA SHOW
MARCH 24-26, 2000
\$100 OFF

SHOW HOURS:
Regular admission: \$10
Children 6-14: \$5
Adults 15 and over: \$10
Fri. 11:00 am - 6:00 pm
Sat. 11:00 am - 6:00 pm
Sun. 11:00 am - 6:00 pm
We're serious! Tickets available at www.backyardpool.com