

Jewish Ensemble Theatre celebrates its bar mitzvah

BY LINDA ANN CHOMIN
STAFF WRITER

So what's a Catholic boy from Warren doing directing a spoof on a bar mitzvah party?

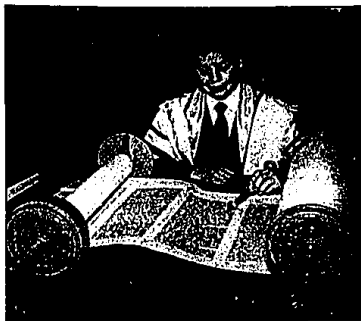
Greg Trzakoma is having a laugh while helping to raise funds for the Jewish Ensemble Theatre, a nonprofit professional theater company dedicated to making a difference. The theater professor from Wayne State University is always looking for a good time. Jeffrey Eric Tischler's Bar Mitzvah at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield Sunday, Nov. 3 is no exception — and probably more enjoyable than his last role as the rotund letter O in the Detroit Pistons commercial. The bar mitzvah production after all does celebrate the theater turning 13. Jeffrey Eric Tischler is really JET in disguise.

"It's going to be fun," said Trzakoma. It's not a serious affair but there will be some serious moments when we honor people who've been instrumental in keeping JET alive through the years. The biggest thing was for me to learn about bar mitzvah — a ceremony and party held when a young girl or boy turns 13 and becomes an adult in the eyes of the community and with that comes responsibility.

"But I had good teachers. I earned my union card at the Jewish Ensemble Theatre. Half the people who meet me on the street think I'm Jewish. I've learned a lot about being Jewish just being around JET and directing the children's theater camp at the Jewish Community Center."

It's obvious that guests don't have to be Jewish or an actor to have fun participating in the interactive dinner theater production put on by the Jewish Ensemble Theatre of West Bloomfield. Jonathan Frank, an attorney from Bloomfield Township, is just enjoying the process of creating the production. He wrote the original script before joining forces with Trzakoma who spent 18 months on the road with the national touring company of Second City.

"After a bar mitzvah or bat



Bradley Gonik plays Jeffrey Eric Tischler in a spoof on a bar mitzvah party. Jeffrey Eric Tischler's Bar Mitzvah Nov. 3 at Temple Israel also will raise funds for the theater.

mitzvah there's typically a party," said Frank, JET board president. "There will be hors d'oeuvres in the lobby of Temple Israel, dinner and toasts in the Social Hall. It's a spoof of a bar mitzvah party, not a service. It's like Tony n' Tina's Wedding with a group of actors playing family, the boy, Star Trax is providing the DJ, dancers and light. It's interactive improvisational with scripted stuff. The father has gone over budget and as a result is obsessed with keeping costs down. Someone takes a plate of hors d'oeuvres and he wants to make sure they eat them all or give them to someone who will. One grandfather is a gambler and has a hard time focusing on the festivities. The other grandparents are arguing. This is the way they've been living for the last 50 years. The bar mitzvah boy (played by Bradley Gonik who performed in JET's *Conversations With My Father*) is mortified his parents have forgotten to invite his friends and his father has bought him a suit way too big so he can grow into it.

"What's not a spoof is honoring people who've been instru-

mental. The challenge is to get people to understand about the Dorfman Foundation Youth Education Services Program. We're not just theater. That's half of what we do. We reached 50,000 kids last year, 10,000 with a production of *The Diary of Anne Frank* at Masonic Temple.

Evelyn Orbach is especially proud of the outreach program and the theater she originally conceived the idea for some 15 years ago. YES, JET's Youth Education Services presents stimulating theater programs that focus on the end results of hate, bullying and name calling. Orbach stars in *Dear Esther*, a story about one of the survivors of the escape from Sobibor, a Nazi death camp.

"In the Jewish community this is a momentous occasion when a child reaches 13," said Orbach. "We thought about how are we going to celebrate this. We're not a child. We're a theater. Jonathan had the idea of a spoof and it was only natural to turn it into theater. He started to write a script and Greg said it would be more fun if we did it Second City style. It's our major fund-raiser of

the year, half of the more than \$600,000 budget goes to outreach programs. We gave 115 performances in schools last year plus Anne Frank. This fall we're doing 73 performances in schools. People don't understand how much that costs."

JET BAR MITZVAH

What: Jewish Ensemble Theatre presents a spoof on Jeffrey Eric Tischler's (JET's) Bar Mitzvah party all to benefit the professional theater

When: 6:30 p.m. curtain Sunday, Nov. 3

Where: Temple Israel, West Bloomfield

Tickets: \$100 to join Jeffrey's inner circle of friends, or up to \$2,500 to be designated a mom or dad. Call (248) 788-2900

Orbach doesn't want to take all the credit for the youth theater program or presenting thought provoking theater such as last season's *The Laramie Project* about the murder of a young gay man or the production continuing to Nov. 3, *Tommy J & Sally*, Mark Medoff's play about an African American man struggling with issues of race, religion and personal identity. That kind of programming won the theater several awards last year but Orbach couldn't pull it off alone. She had to have help not only putting on the productions but starting a Stop Hate Campaign and partnering with organizations such as the NAACP last year. The program includes workshops designed by Plymouth actress/director Gillian Eaton as a way to provide diversity and sensitivity training for businesses, community-based organizations and schools.

On more of an entertaining note, this year the theater began a guest artist series featuring a production of *Shylock* by Royal Shakespearean alumnus Gareth Armstrong Nov. 6-24 and a play loosely based on a work by Aristophanes by Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit April 5-6. The series

opened with a panel discussion on the mystery of creativity with author Elmore "Dutch" Leonard, percussionist Efe Bes, and JET and Performance Network set designer Monika Essen who also is properties designer for Michigan Opera Theatre.

"I couldn't move step one without kindred spirits," said Orbach, JET's artistic director. "It took 2 1/2 years of people to gather and meet once a week for breakfast to create machinery to roll into production and incorporate in March 1989. There are any number of people who've been instrumental, the Dorfman Foundation Family Youth Theater to start the outreach program."

"I want JET not to be seen as an organization but a resource that continues to help. There's a real need for it. It's a tool for change and progress. Theater is an instrument in the community for exploring ideas, observing and participating — a place to have things said and thought about in a non-threatening situation. It's taken a lot of people to get it to this place. Now we need people to come in and fill those seats. Tell them to come."

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