If Cows Could Fly

at
Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre
Ottawa
February 21 to March 9, 2008

Artword Cultural Projects
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How Cows Came to Fly

By Ronald Weihs, Artistic Director, Artword Theatre

*If Cows Could Fly* is a beautiful and intricate play by Allan Merovitz, a universal story of an immigrant family coming to Canada and gradually making it their home.

The play chronicles the history of the Merovitz’s and the Waxmans, showing what led them to finally settle in Smiths Falls, in the Ottawa Valley. The family saga includes many colourful characters:

- *Zaide*, whose family were the only Jews in Canso, a small fishing village in Nova Scotia
- the Montreal *Bubbe* (grandmother) who feeds the neighbourhood children with money from her gambling den,
- Leonard Applebaum, an Ottawa Valley dairy farmer who runs a pirate country radio station
- “Scotty” Cohen, the horse expert, who speaks Yiddish with a Scottish accent.

As Allan grows up, he struggles to come to terms with a dual identity: heir to a tradition that spans millenia and a modern Canadian kid. In particular, he struggles to come to terms with his father, a pool-shark, a misfit in rural Ontario and the black sheep of his family. Allan learns to respect his father, at the same time as he rejects his father's cynicism: things will get better “if cows could fly”. He learns that nothing is impossible, and sometime cows do fly after all.

*If Cows Could Fly* is moving, inspiring – and quite often funny. And we haven't said anything yet about the music! Allan Merovitz has an international reputation as one of the finest interpreters of Yiddish songs and Klezmer. A former lead singer of the Flyer Bulger Klezmer Ensemble, his now leads his own band, *Klezmerovitz*.

And there is another side to Allan’s music. He grew up in the Ottawa valley with the sound of the country fiddle in his blood. These two musical strains – Klezmer and Country – symbolize the two strands running through *If Cows Could Fly*.

In many respects, *If Cows Could Fly* is Allan Merovitz’s life’s work. He began working on it in the early 1980’s as an anti-war statement (which underlies the work to this day). At that time, he began interviewing his family and friends in Smiths Falls, Montreal and elsewhere, capturing their stories on tape. He developed a show called *Zaide Didn’t Want to be a Soldier*, beginning with his grandfather’s secret flight from Riga to escape conscription into the Russian army. Later there is a confrontation between Zaide and his son Hy, who enlisted in the British Army to fight the Nazis and became a war hero.

There are many other stories of Allan’s quirky and colourful family. A master storyteller and clown, Allan adapted the content of *Zaide* to circumstances, adding and removing stories depending on the audience and the circumstances. The stories became honed and polished in this way.

In 1999, Allan approached me to work with him on the script and direct the play. Out of a shoebox full of tales, we selected those that really belonged to the arc of the story. At this time, also, we poured through Allan’s songbooks to build the musical through line. In February, 2000, and Artword Theatre presented a full production of *If Cows Could Fly* to critical and popular success. It was remounted in 2001.

In the fall of 2006, Allan was approached by Barry Karp of the Jewish Historical Society in Ottawa (an experienced theatre director and educator) to bring *Cows* to Ottawa. Barry approached the Great Canadian Theatre Company, who agreed to make their new theatre available from February 18 to March 9, 2008.

All this is very exciting to Allan, because the Ottawa Valley is his home. This is where *If Cows Could Fly* belongs.
Artword Theatre

Artword Theatre has a long history. It was started and operated by Ronald Weihs, a theatrical playwright and director, and Judith Sandiford, a visual artist and theatre designer. From 1993-1998, Artword operated a modest alternative venue at 81 Portland. In 1999, Weihs and Sandiford renovated a garment factory at 75 Portland Street into a handsome facility with two theatre spaces (150 seats and 60 seats) and an art gallery.

From 1999 to 2006, Artword provided a home for 372 theatre, dance and music productions, including 110 full theatre productions (not including workshops or festivals), 113 concerts, 37 dance programs, 13 festivals (including the Fringe and Summerworks), and 24 art exhibitions. Most of Artword’s own productions at Artword Theatre were produced without public funding, as an extended experiment to determine whether the combination of rental income and ongoing access to facilities could replace external support.

In March, 2006, the building at 75 Portland Street was sold to make way for a condominium development. Artword is currently looking for new premises.

Ronald Weihs and his partner Judith Sandiford are among the unsung heroes of the Toronto theatre scene. Co-founders of Artword Theatre in 1993, they offer an affordable, welcoming venue for theatre artists.

Robert Crew (Toronto Star, June 13, 2002)

There's no one else like them in Toronto theatre. They add another dimension. Before they came along, there were the subsidized theatres that do shows that don't necessarily have to appeal to great numbers of people and the big commercial guys who produce spectacles and musicals that attract mass audiences. Ron and Judith provide a bridge between the two.

Jessica Fraser, Executive Director, Toronto Theatre Alliance (in article by John Karastamatis, National Post, May 20, 2002)

Toronto's small theatre scene has acted as an incubator for English-Canadian theatre, but directors wonder how the next generation will rise if it simply can’t find the little black boxes in which its predecessors always created their work. “We are looking at the closings of really vital theatres,” says Jacoba Knappen, executive director of the Toronto Alliance for the Performing Arts, which represents 162 theatre, dance and opera troupes in the city. ‘The health of the independent theatre community is at risk.

Kate Taylor (Globe and Mail, Jan. 21, 2006, article on the closing of Artword and other theatres)

For Weihs and Sandiford, the concept of interacting with creative spirits in a free environment meant more than actual bricks or mortar.”

Richard Ouzounian (Toronto Star, Jan. 26, 2006)
Creating *If Cows Could Fly*

by Allan Merovitz

My family told stories. They would all tell each other what happened during the day and invariably the day’s events would be intertwined with other events that had happened to someone in Europe. In other words their fertile imaginations made weird and wonderful connections. For longer than I can remember I too have also carried this trait of telling what happened to me and adding my own particular take on the world and events.

When I was a child my Zaide told me how he was forced to leave Poland and begin his journey to Canada. Well, I wrote it down and I became inspired to go to all my older relatives and get them to tell me the wonderful tales and stories which I had as vague memories.

I went around with my tape recorder and asked all the relatives I could find to tell me their stories. They were all so generous. During this process I came to realize what a record I had in my possession and how important this was for my children. Then something really interesting happened - I started to tell these stories to anyone who would listen - they cried, they laughed, they listened, they remembered stories from their own lives and families and started to tell me their own family stories. It was magical, I loved it. This took place over many years.

When high school teacher and neo-Nazi Jim Keegstra was re-writing Jewish history for his students in Alberta I thought, once again, there were supposedly no concentration camps in Europe and no Jews had perished under Nazi rule - even though my brother-in-law carried a number on his arm and many of our family members did not survive the Shoah. It was literally at this moment that I decided on to create the show because I wanted to bring these stories to a larger public.

It has been some journey having my relatives live through me every night as I speak their words, remember their memories, walk around in their shoes. What a pleasure - no a privilege - to do this work.
Credits

Allan Merovitz is a singer, actor, clown, storyteller and Badchan(Jewish Wedding Host). For many years the lead singer with the Flying Bulgar Klezmer Band, Allan can be heard on their first two CD's. As an actor, Allan has performed from coast to coast in Canada including the Caravan Stage Company, 25th Street Theatre, the Edmonton Fringe and Mulgrave Road Co-op, and in Toronto with Kensington Karnival, and Ground Zero as well as television and film roles. He has appeared in two plays by Ronald Weihs, Hands Up! (The Bill Miner Story) and Highball! Most recently, Allan has been touring and performing with his own musical shows, reflecting his knowledge and interest in Yiddish repertoire and Jewish tradition. The Wedding Project creates a traditional Jewish wedding, hosted by the character of the Badchan with an accompanying Klezmer band. It has toured extensively in Ontario and Europe and especially Holland and Switzerland. Allan has also created a Chunnukah show, with storytelling, to accompany a Dutch CD launch tour of Festival of Light with the Dutch Klezmer group Ot Azoj.

Allan has sung with a number of Klezmer bands such as Chutzpah, Hou Tsa Tsa, Hot Latkes and Beyond the Pale, and The Simcha Klezmer Ensemble. He currently performs with his own ensemble, Klezmerovitz, which has recently released a CD.


Judith Sandiford (Managing Director) is the designer for the new version of If Cows Could Fly. With partner Ronald Weihs she founded Artword Theatre in 1993. From 1993 to 2006 she was managing director of Artword Theatre and curator of Artword Gallery and worked on all productions, concerts and events produced by Artword Theatre in that period. She has functioned as producer, designer of lighting, set and costumes, graphic artist, technician, scenic painter and stage manager. As designer, she has done set and lighting design for Market of Tales (Nov 2005), Fate of a Cockroach (April 2005) The Full Nelson (February 2005), Death and the Kings Horseman (2004), Sur (2003), the musical Toronto The Good (2002), Cu’Fu? (1996-2002), Mangiacake! (2001-2002), Whoever You Are (1998), Echo and Narcissus (1997), Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde (1996), and me2 (1995). She has also designed Fire, Air, Earth, Water (2002 and 2004) and Onibaba (2002), two collaborations with choreographer/dancer Meiko Ando, which used innovative projections integrated with the choreography. She and Ando recently completed a 5-minute dance video Onibaba’s Cave, shot on location near Peterborough and premiered at Pleasure Dome (Oct 2006). She designed two works for choreographer Michael DuMaresq, “and in this room” (2002), and Dancing Barefoot with Patti. She wrote the libretto for the opera Heloise (based on the 12th C. text The Letters of Abelard and Heloise), with music composed by William Beauvais. As a visual artist, Judith Sandiford was actively involved in running Workscene Gallery from 1988 to 1995, and had a number of solo shows there, at Open Studio and at Blackwood Gallery and since 1995 various exhibitions at Artword Gallery. She was founding editor of Artword, a magazine for and by artists, and edited and wrote for the magazine’s 23 issues from 1989 to 1996. She has curated all exhibitions in Artword Gallery from 1993 to 2006.
Synopsis of If Cows Could Fly

The band plays a Reg Hill fiddle tune from the Ottawa Valley. Allan enters through the audience, step dances, and tells us “I grew up with music like that”. He recalls playing with a boy in the neighbourhood, who suddenly calls him “a dirty Jew”. He runs to his mother, asking “Farvos?” (Why?).

His Zaide (grandfather) tells how he ran away from Ozeroff Poland to escape conscription into the army. In Riga, his Bubbe (grandmother) Frume appeals to a rabbi for an annulment (get) of her marriage to an abusive husband. Her mother’s ghost tells her where there is money hidden to go to London. In London, Frume meets Zaide and they observe Pesach together. They marry, and embark on a ship for Canada.

In Halifax, Zaide receives a new name, Willy Waxman, and a job in Canso as a shoemaker. At first they are shy and keep to themselves, but at a local celebration are made to feel welcome.

The family makes its way to Montreal. Zaide finds a job, but quits when they insist that he work on the Sabbath. He goes into business for himself, selling second-hand goods. There, they meet the Merovitz’s, from Bessarabia, refugees from the Kishinev pogrom. Allan sings a powerful song about the massacre.

When the depression comes the Merovitz’s have money and the Waxmans hardly any. In a silent-film sequence, the story is told how a starving man is given food by Bubbe Oudel Merovitz, who is running a gambling den in her living room. That’s how she makes her dire gelt (rent money). Soon the Waxmans are helping out, and young Ruben Merovitz is courting Willy’s and Frume’s daughter, Edith. The parents consider him a trombonik (troublemaker), but the young couple marry anyhow.

The Waxmans move to Smiths Falls with their whole extended family, including Ruben and Edith. Ruben is not made for country life, however, and spends more and more time in the pool hall. Act I ends.

Act II is set in Smiths Falls. War has come, and Allan’s Uncle wants to enlist, but Zaide insists that “Jews shouldn’t make wars”. Hy joins a special demolition and blows up a dam near a huge munitions factory. He dances in triumph to Arum dem Feyer.

To the tune of an Ottawa Valley fiddle tune, we return to Smiths Falls. Young Allan visits his uncle “Scotty” Cohen, who introduces him to “the smartest horse in the world”.

Allan’s teacher ridicules him for “writing Jewish backwards”. Allan skips school and goes fishing. Zaide, in his shoeshop, tells him “She is just an anti-semite. In her class, you must be the teacher.”

A neighbour puts up a sign “No Jews Allowed on this Private Road”. His uncle Hy, the demolition expert, gets Allan to help him build their own road that anyone is free to use. Even the neighbour.

Allan’s Aunt Nellie runs the best shoe store in Perth. We see her throw out a henpecked customer whose wife insists on trying to buy shoes that are too small for him.

Another uncle, Leonard Applebaum, runs a pirate radio station in his barn, playing country and western music for his neighbours and his cows. An inspector from the CBC tries to shut him down. All his neighbours come in their tractors to show their support.

When the Smiths Falls Junior A hockey team loses the series, Allan’s father arranges to have the Montreal Canadiens play an exhibition game with the team to restore the town’s spirits.

Allan becomes obsessed with pool. He wants to beat his dad at his game. His father mocks him with his favorite expression — Allan will beat him “when cows fly”. They have a showdown match, which Allan wins. His father pretends that he threw the game, robbing Allan of his victory. In the course of describing the game, Allan tells of the last time he saw his father, in the hospital dying of lung cancer.

After his father’s death, Allan’s Uncle Leonard consoles him by telling him his dream of flying to Nashville on a cow and singing at the Grand Ole Opry with Dolly Parton. Cows do fly, at least in dreams.

Allan visits the graveyard in Montreal where his father is buried, but cannot find the grave. He puts the stone that he wanted to leave on the grave inside the gate instead.