Review: If Cows Could Fly

Patrick Langston
The Ottawa Citizen

Saturday, February 23, 2008

A young Ottawa Valley lad couldn't have wished for a more fascinating older cousin than Leonard Applebaum. A dairy farmer, Leonard not only operated a country music radio station out of his barn, yodeling in Yiddish before morning chores, but once rode a flying Holstein named Rosie to Nashville. At least, that's the way Allan Merovitz relates it in If Cows Could Fly, the revival of his gentle and uplifting one-man musical play that just opened at the Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre.

Merovitz's big-hearted show is about growing up Jewish 50 years ago in Smiths Falls, the actor/musician's hometown. It's also about family, community and hope, things we increasingly hunger for even as we seem to grow ever more skilled at banishing them from our lives.

At over two hours, this Artword Theatre/Barry Karp production is a little too long for a one-person show. But you can understand Merovitz's difficulty: where to cut a family history so rich with life?

With little more in the way of set and props than a wooden chair, a hat and a yarmulke, and a small desk, Merovitz takes us from the turn of the twentieth century to the early 1980s, when he wrote If Cows Could Fly. We journey with his working class grandparents and their children as they flee oppression in Eastern Europe, settle in a Nova Scotia fishing village, and, like many Jews, eventually wind up with their expanding family in a tightly knit community in the Ottawa Valley.

Nimble and electric with energy, Merovitz plays a dizzying array of characters, from his own beloved zaide (grandfather) to a crusty customs official, family member Scotty Cohen whose horse can explain the meaning of life, and, of course, himself, both as a small boy in a small town and as a grown man looking back on his family's story.

Merovitz also sings wonderfully, whether a plaintive Yiddish tune or a country number (this is, after all, the Ottawa Valley). An agile Klezmer trio, including the show's director Ronald Weihs on fiddle, accompanies the songs and dances.

There are a couple of shaky transitions in Merovitz's show, and the intermittent vintage photos on the stage's rear-wall screen can be distracting, but you're quick to forgive the missteps.

Don't miss this show. Buoyed by goodwill and renewed belief in possibility, you'll leave the theatre glancing to the sky for that flying cow.

If Cows Could Fly continues on the Irving Greenberg Theatre Centre's mainstage until March 9. Tickets & times, 613-236-5196.

CLOSE WINDOW