

A PEAK INTO 'ISSAC'S WINDOW'



PHOTOS BY SAED HINDASH/THE STAR-LEDGER

Above, actors in the musical, "Isaac's Window," rehearse yesterday for upcoming performances at Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel in South Orange. Below, Marci Elyn Schein, who plays Barbie Weiner in the production, practices her part with direction from playwright Michael Ficocelli. The musical is based on a true 1993 story about holiday vandalism and a community uniting against it in Billings, Mont.

Chanukah play pulls good out of an ugly event

BY PAULA SAHA
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

*Try to explain to a child
Why he's not safe in his bed
Try to explain
The cracked window pane
Shattered all over his
spread
Try to explain to a child
Without ever raising his
fear
That someone out there
Is angry that he is here
— From "Isaac's Window,"
by Michael Ficocelli*

In 1993, someone threw a chunk of cinder block through the bedroom window of a 5-year-old Montana boy named Isaac. The boy was Jewish, it was Chanukah and a menorah graced the pane.

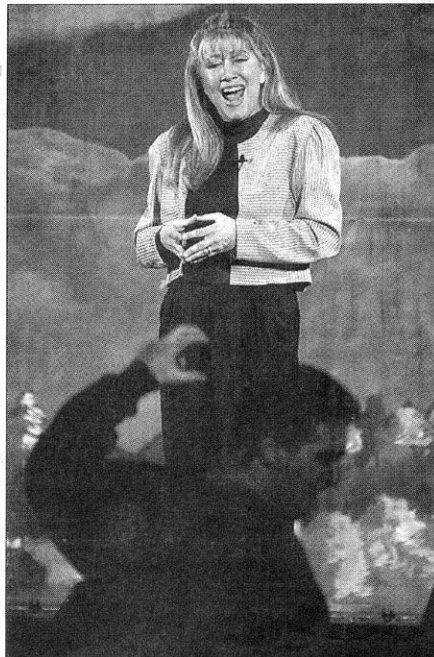
It is not known who threw that rock, but Billings, Mont., was a place with few Jewish

families. There had been a growing number of anti-Semitic acts in town and the family believed skinheads tossed that rock. They notified the police and the media.

As a result, families of all faiths put menorahs in their windows in a show of unity that made headlines across the nation. Later, the story became a children's book and a television movie.

Tomorrow, a new incarnation of that story — an original, full-length musical titled, "Isaac's Window" — will make its debut in the sanctuary of the Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel in South Orange.

"This piece is exceptional because it's based on real-life events," said the show's composer, Michael Ficocelli, a [See **MUSICAL**, Page 44]



MUSICAL

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 41

46-year-old resident of Pomona, N.Y., and a music teacher in Glen Rock. "How do you make something about skinheads sing and dance? That was the challenge."

But there were elements to the story that made it ripe for musical theater. There are compelling images and sounds — a crash and a shattered window, a mother's fears for her child, a town united against bigotry. There was drama, there was hope, there was enlightenment.

Ficocelli's production began as a seed in 1997, when the Schnitzer family of Montana came to the Temple Sharey Teflo-Israel to tell their story. Cantor Theodore Aronson heard them speak and knew, right away, that it was the perfect premise for a musical.

Aronson has always supported using music in the synagogue to reach people. To that end, he had commissioned two musicals from Ficocelli already — one observing the Holocaust and another celebrating the statehood of Israel.

"Music unites people, and when you unite people, and together we give a message to the community, it's very powerful," Aronson said.

The themes of tolerance and community in the story made it all the more appropriate as a show for the synagogue, Aronson said.

Aronson asked Tammie Schnitzer, the boy's mother, how she'd feel if they tried to do a musical about her family's story. She loved the idea, Aronson said.

So Ficocelli traveled to Mon-



Susan Wovsaniker of West Orange helps her 9-year-old son, Evan, get dressed backstage during a rehearsal for "Isaac's Window."

SAED HINDASH/THE STARLEDGER

tana and spent several days with the Schnitzers. He wanted to meet the actors in that drama, understand their experiences. In the end, he fictionalized some parts of the story and characters, but the experience, he said, was key to his inspiration.

Musicals, Ficocelli said, "have to jump off the stage," he said. "What's bigger and better than the beautiful sky of Montana?"

Schnitzer gave him reams of papers to read, primarily media accounts of the events. One of them quoted Schnitzer as saying, "How do you explain this to a child?"

What a great name for a song, Ficocelli thought to himself. He jotted it down. It turned into one of his favorite songs in the play, with a melody almost like a nursery rhyme in its simplicity, one conveying the emotions that any parent could understand.

For Ficocelli, a Roman Catholic married to a Jewish woman, the story's themes were particularly resonant. He found himself having to strike a delicate balance, not to offend any particular group. At one point, he said, one of the actresses in the play dropped out because she thought it was "Christian bashing."

Ficocelli was floored. A devout Catholic himself, he was troubled at the idea that anyone could see it that way.

"If anything," he said, "it tries to paint the true message of Jesus, which is not different from the teachings of other religions . . . love of your neighbor . . . tolerance . . . some kind of moral code."

It will be interesting, he said, to see how the story is perceived.

"I didn't want this to just be for a Jewish audience," Ficocelli said. After all, he said, the lesson of the story was a universal one. He is hopeful that his production will someday reach an audience even wider than the South Orange synagogue, and go on to some commercial success.

Other musicals based on real-life events have enjoyed such success, said Richard Engquist, a moderator of the BMI Lehman Engel Musical Theater Workshop in Manhattan, where Ficocelli is a second-year student. "Titanic" and "Ragtime" are two hits that come immediately to mind, he said.

And though Ficocelli didn't know it when he started working on "Isaac's Window," he isn't the first writer to have attempted a musical of the Schnitzer story.

"This is a story that has fascinated writers," Engquist said, adding that at least four of his students at the workshop through the years have tried to turn this story into a show. "People just loved the idea of it. It was so bizarre, out in the middle of nowhere, to have this kind of event take place."

Whether or not "Isaac's Window" succeeds as a musical "remains to be seen," Engquist said, but it is a good idea for a story, he noted. "For once, something good happened. Something good came out of something ugly."

"Isaac's Window" will show at 7:30 p.m. tomorrow and 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday. Tickets are \$18 for adults and \$9 for students. For reservations, call (973) 763-4116.

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