

# Interfaith couple makes beautiful music together

POMONA — When last we met up with Michael and Marci Ficocelli, 364 days ago, they were preparing the premiere performance of Michael's "From Death to Hope."

The multimedia theater presentation, with music, lyrics and libretto by the 43-year-old music teacher and performer, commemorating the victims of the Holocaust and celebrating the lives of the survivors was staged at Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel in South Orange, N.J.

That work was commissioned by the temple, and the congregation was so moved by Ficocelli's work the members commissioned another work.

Now, a year later, a cast of 40 performers, including soloists and adult and youth choirs, is rehearsing "Medinah, a Dream Fulfilled," Ficocelli's musical reliving the birth of the state of Israel. The performance will be premiered at 8 p.m. Saturday at the temple.

"Medinah" follows the lives of two brothers who emigrate from Eastern Europe to Palestine in the late 19th century. The musical retells the glory and hardship of founding an independent Jewish state.

Cantor Theodore Aronson of Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel said, "Medinah" is a marvelous celebration of Israel's independence. In producing this full musical theater piece, our synagogue is once again a leader in adding to the repertoire of 20th-century Jewish music.

"Michael's outstanding talent as he collaborates with his wife is a remarkable gift to everyone who loves music. We are delighted that our congregation will celebrate this important Jewish milestone through another of Michael's works."

Michael Ficocelli, raised in



**RICHARD GUTWILLIG**

East Haven, Conn., received his bachelor's degree in philosophy from Boston University in 1977 and a master's in music education from the University of Bridgeport in 1982.

He met Marci in 1980 in a Bridgeport practice room while she was working on her degree ('81) in music and voice.

Marci (Schein), 38, grew up in Rockland and graduated from Ramapo High School in 1977. The couple married in 1982 and moved to Pomona six years ago. They have two children, Barbra, 11, and Eric, 8.

Barbra is being raised in the Jewish faith and she worships at Sharey Tefilo-Israel. Eric is following his father's Roman Catholic upbringing and worships with his father at St. Boniface Roman Catholic Church in Monsey. Both youngsters attend East Ramapo school district elementary schools.

Michael has taught music for 16 years, the last 11 in the middle school in Glen Rock, N.J. Marci teaches Hebrew school and music at Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel, conducts the choirs and recently began teaching music four days a week in three East Ramapo elementary schools.

The couple has performed on Saturday nights at the Woodcliff Lake Hilton for the last 12

years.

"I thought 'From Death to Hope' was very good and the people enjoyed my father's work," Barbra said. "There were tears in some parts of the audience."

Michael said both he and the temple received numerous telephone calls about that musical and "there was extremely positive feedback. I think that was why they asked me to create another work."

In addition to the two musicals, Michael has also created "Come Let Us Sing," a series of 19 original musical pieces created for a typical Shabbat (Sabbath) service.

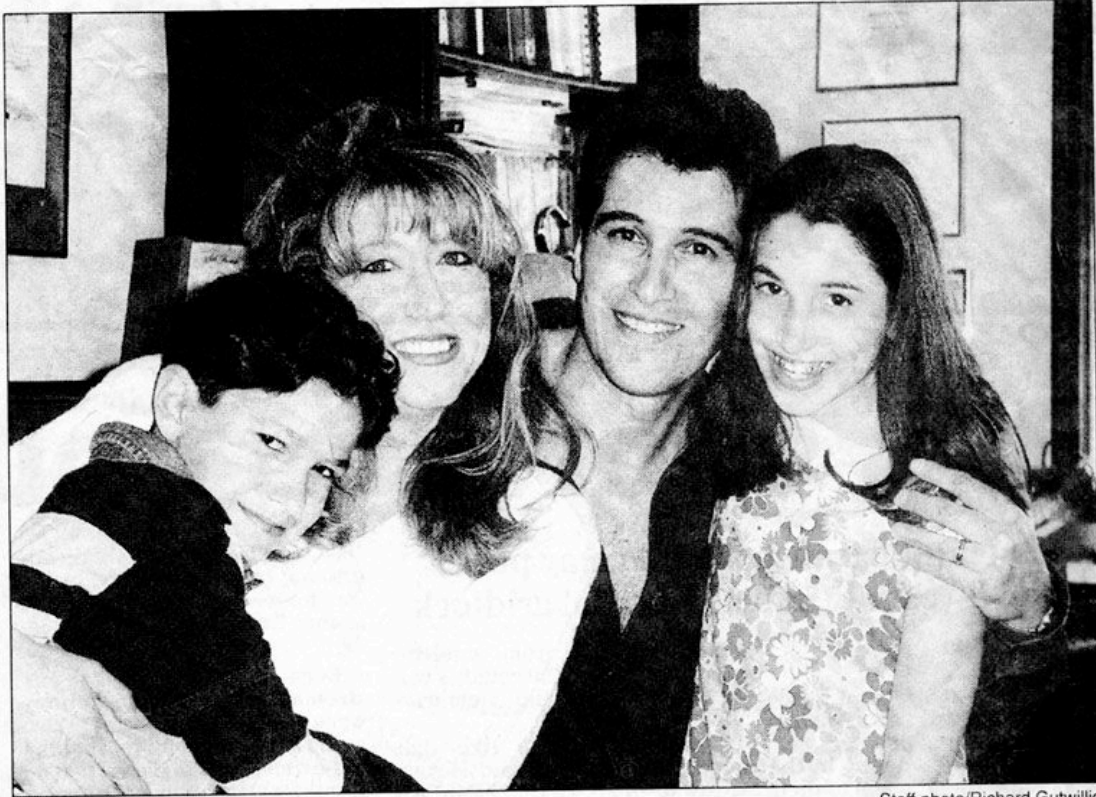
Michael began research on "Medinah" last summer, poring over material given him by Cantor Aronson, and finding other works at the Finkelstein Memorial Library in Spring Valley and at bookstores in Monsey.

Marci, in addition to playing one of the lead roles, is serving as director and choreographer of the musical.

"For Michael, this is the first time he's written this big a piece," Marci said. "Everything flows beautifully. I think 'Medinah' would make a wonderful movie. It's challenging for the actors because the story goes from 1890 to 1948 and they have to age appropriately."

Asked how he would describe his composition, Michael sat at his synthesizer, noodled a tune, then said, "It is a romance about a place, a land, a small state dreaming big, the Zionist desire to acquire a homeland. It's a very passionate piece."

"Medinah" took Michael more than twice the amount of time for research as his previous work. It has also been a "work in progress," with rehearsals taking place as scenes



Staff photo/Richard Gutwillig

Marci and Michael Ficocelli with their children, Eric, 8, and Barbra, 11. The couple have collaborated to create "Medinah, a Dream Fulfilled," a musical that relives the birth of the state of Israel.

and songs were completed. Full rehearsals of the completed piece began two weeks ago.

"It was difficult rehearsing that way, trying to hold the attention of the cast," said Marci. "They loved each piece, but it didn't have a flow or sequence until recently. Now, they are glowing because they see the whole picture."

Michael's research for his works have taken him inside the Jewish faith. It has been a learning experience, one he says had

made it impossible for him to separate himself from the songs and what he feels inside.

"I didn't know much about Israel until I started working on this piece," he said. "I don't know where some of the music and lyrics came from, but I feel captured by the spirit of the people, by my awareness of what they went through to create their state."

In writing his music, Michael said, "I don't think in terms of Jewish music, because my core

is people with no ethnicity, no separation. I want to get beyond ethnicity to a real feeling that everyone can identify with."

Michael said raising their children in different faiths is "a great way to teach tolerance in the home. If two adults can do this, why not two children. We have the greatest discussions at the dinner table. The temple takes us for our talents, as a functional family open to different situations. We feel enriched by the temple's understanding."

*Tickets for "Medinah" are \$18 for adults and \$9 for children. The temple's telephone number is 201-763-4116.*

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