

'RAGS' TO REALITY YOUNG ACTORS LEARN STORIES OF THEIR OWN FAMILIES AS THEY RESEARCH PLAY ON IMMIGRATION STUDENTS DEPICT STORY OF RUSSIAN JEWS IN N.Y.

San Jose Mercury News (California)

MARCH 7, 1996 Thursday MORNING FINAL EDITION

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Section: LOCAL; Pg. 1B

Length: 554 words

Byline: PHUONG LE, Mercury News Staff Writer

Body

The school play opens with hope and anticipation: New York, circa early 1900s.

The actors - Saratoga High School students - play European immigrants who eye Ellis Island from their ship's deck and dream of possibilities in America, unaware of the struggles ahead.

For many of these teen-age thespians, rehearsing Joseph Stein's "Rags" - a musical about immigration at the turn of the century - has become more than a theatrical venture. Many are realizing that it's the story of their own families.

To get into their roles, the students interviewed several recent immigrants to the U.S. and watched documentaries about sweatshop conditions for immigrant women in the early years of this century.

Sonya Slutsker, who came here in 1989 from the Ukraine, shared her story with the cast and crew at a recent all-day retreat. Slutsker, who has since become a U.S. citizen, is studying English at Jewish Family Service in Los Gatos.

Helen Shmolvsky, an immigrant from Moldavia who came here in 1990, also talked to the students about her experience with past and current political persecution.

"I think it brings it to life, being able to not only hear the story from the lips of the people who lived those stories but ask questions," said Roberta Bernstein, a Saratoga High parent who arranged for Slutsker and Shmolvsky to talk with the students.

Two other immigrants, from Canada and England, were also part of the panel discussion that drama director Danielle Igra arranged to prepare the student cast and crew.

The students also watched a documentary on the "Triangle Shirt Factory Fire" where young women, most of them immigrants, were trapped and burned alive in a textile factory.

Though born in the U.S., 10th-grader Mandy Monousos said she connects with moments in the musical - such as when an immigration official changes one character's last name from "Hershkowitz" to "Harris" to make it easier to pronounce. During rehearsals, she said, she discovered from her father that their family name had been changed when her grandfather came through Ellis Island from Crete.

"I didn't really think about my history until we started doing this," said Mandy, 16, who plays a middle-aged widow.

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"**Rags**" tells the story of Russian Jews who settle on the Lower East Side of New York and how they adjust to living in a new world. Among them are young women who find low-paying jobs in the sweatshops.

"You have to think about how to portray to the audience the seriousness of it," Mandy said, "and make them see how tough life was for these immigrants."

Tenth-grader Avik Maitra appreciates the historical lessons of "**Rags**." He plays an affluent job recruiter who bribes, harasses and taunts immigrant workers, particularly the women in the sweatshops.

"I hadn't realized that people were so cruel to these immigrants," said Avik, 14. "People think America is this great land without problems. And they come here and it's a slap in the face. There's poverty, discrimination, a hard life in the sweatshops."

Avik, whose parents came from India to study at Stanford University in the 1970s, said the musical has made him think more about how America became such a "mixing pot."

"I don't think they got the same opportunity they expected, but that was the price they paid for freedom," he said.

Notes

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

Show dates are March 21-23 and 29-30 at 8 p.m. at Los Gatos High School's Prentiss Brown Auditorium. Reserved seats are \$8. Contact Janice Torczyner at (408) 867-1280 or call Saratoga High School at (408) 867-3411 extension 203.

Graphic

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Saratoga High students Keri Klayko, Ari Rossen and Mandy Kemp rehearse at Los Gatos High's auditorium; the play runs March 21-23, 29-30.

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PHOTO: PAT WEST - MERCURY NEWS

Students rehearse a scene of immigrants arriving at New York.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); STUDENTS & STUDENT LIFE (90%); GARMENT WORKERS (89%); WOMEN (88%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (88%); THEATER (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); HIGH SCHOOLS (78%); FAMILY (75%); DOCUMENTARY FILMS (74%); FACTORY FIRES (74%); SWEATSHOPS (74%); CITIZENSHIP (73%); JEWS & JUDAISM (67%)

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Industry: **ACTORS** & ACTRESSES (90%); GARMENT WORKERS (89%); MANUFACTURING FACILITIES (88%);
HIGH SCHOOLS (78%); FACTORY FIRES (74%); APPAREL MFG (69%); TEXTILE MFG (63%); TEXTILE MILLS
(63%)

Geographic: **NEW YORK**, NY, USA (79%); **NEW YORK**, USA (90%); UNITED STATES (93%); ENGLAND (78%);
CANADA (77%); MOLDOVA, REPUBLIC OF (73%); UKRAINE (71%)

Load-Date: October 23, 2002

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