

"THE IMMIGRANT" BLENDS STORY, DIALOGUE, CHARACTERS WITH STYLE

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Body

* New Jewish Theatre mounts sensitive, effective production that provokes a rich sense of time and place

Are accurate accents important in a theatrical production? For the New Jewish Theatre's rewarding production of Mark Harelik's play, "***The Immigrant***," the answer is yes and no.

For the title ***character*** and his wife, the accents are essential. When he first appears, Haskell Harelik is a recent Jewish immigrant from Russia whose native language is Yiddish.

The time is 1909, and the place is Hamilton, Texas, population 1,200. Haskell's English appears to be limited to the one phrase he needs to scrape out a living as an itinerant peddler, "Bananas, penny apiece."

At the start of the play, being foreign is the essential quality of the hard-pressed but determined immigrant, and Devin Baker's depiction is right on target.

Baker's accent is convincing, even when his lines are almost entirely in Yiddish.

His distinctive posture is equally persuasive.

Like many immigrants of his generation, Haskell came to this country before his wife and saved religiously to bring her over as quickly as possible.

Judy Guzzy portrays Leah Harelik with an accent and a demeanor that are as just as believable as Baker's.

The scene in which Leah tries to stave off bad luck is particularly enjoyable because Guzzy performs the superstitious ritual with conviction rather than parody.

Being the only Jews in their community is more daunting to Leah than Haskell.

Their conflict over this issue has genuine resonance in this production.

Haskell's success in his new country is due, in large part, to the help of Milton and Ima Perry.

Resisting the natural tendency to shrink from a stranger, they give Haskell shelter when he barely has the words to ask for it.

This act of kindness leads to a 30-year relationship that does not always take the expected turns.

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As Milton and Ima, Jack Hake and Jan Meyer do not speak like Texans, but the absence of accents takes nothing away from excellent performances that are filled with warmth and humanity (and occasional prickliness, in Hake's case).

In fact, another set of distinctive regional speech patterns might well diminish the impact of the immigrants' accents.

Carolyn Hood's direction draws unusual cohesiveness from the cast of four.

The designs are by MT Schmidt (set), Elizabeth Krausnick (costumes) and LD Lawson (lighting).

"***The Immigrant***" will continue at 7:30 tonight and Sunday, 8 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday in the Sarah and Abraham Wolfson Studio Theatre of the Jewish Community Center, 2 Millstone Campus Drive.

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