

Ethiopian Exodus, Told on a Human Scale

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Byline: By ANDY WEBSTER

Body

Israel has no shortage of immigration stories, but many Americans are unaware of the **Ethiopian** Jews who in the late 1970s and 1980s braved a trek through the Sudanese desert to reach it. Yossi Vassa, an actor-playwright who survived that journey, has written, with Shai Ben Attar (who directs), a semiautobiographical account, "One of a Kind," now at the New Victory Theater. The 65-minute production, for audiences 10 and older, manages to infuse its potentially harrowing tale with a childlike vigor, wonder and sense of humor, spiced with exuberant African music and dance.

Like many immigrant stories, this one, performed by Mr. Vassa and the **Ethiopian**-Israeli Nephesh Theater of Tel Aviv, revolves around a family, vividly drawn: AndArgay (Mr. Vassa), a precocious young artist; his flinty grandmother (Tehitina Assefa); his mother and father (Mahareta Baruch and Shai Fredo); his sister, Yeshitu (Sky Gete); and her suitor, Isaac (Roy Zaddok). When Isaac's family joins their village in making the **exodus**, AndArgay's father resists joining in, knowing the perils involved. But largely at the insistence of the grandmother -- "Our redemption has arrived!" she cries -- he relents.

After their arduous journey across the desert, the family arrives at a crowded refugee camp, where months waiting for a plane -- part of Operation Moses, the covert airlift of **Ethiopian** Jews into Israel -- turn into years. AndArgay, thanks to a woman who has hired him as household help, eventually enables his family to make the trip. But it comes at a heavy cost.

"One of a Kind" has much to offer. Mr. Vassa's effervescence is the central attraction, but other elements also enliven the proceedings: charming animation by Adi Katz, exhilarating choreography by Iddi Saaka to Idan Zilbershtein's reggaelike songs, Ms. Assefa's tough but tender grandmother. Inspirational as the show is, many Ethiopians have had a hard struggle in Israel, a continuing plight Mr. Vassa plans to examine in a coming work. Bring it on.

"One of a Kind" continues through Sunday at the New Victory Theater, 209 West 42nd Street, Manhattan; (646) 223-3010, newvictory.org.

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