

Nutty about orphans

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A fable-istic saga about a Polish Jew

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EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

PEOPLE AT WAR with themselves are more dramatic than those at peace with themselves. Though saints may make great neighbors, they usually make for dull plays.

By the criteria most faiths apply, Janusz Korczak — a Polish Jew who devoted his life to caring for orphans, runaways and abused children, and who wound up a Holocaust victim — probably qualifies for sainthood. Local writer/performer Gary Aylesworth has managed to create an exciting play about Korczak, nonetheless, by painting his saintly hero as a trifle nuts — certifiable as well as canonizable.

Given the subject, "The Orphan King/Warsaw is Mine" — which opened Saturday at the New Performance Gallery, a coproduction of Aylesworth's New Plays Construction Crew and A Traveling Jewish Theatre — miraculously avoids both the deadening solemnity and the absolutist certainty of devotional drama. It's alive and kicking and, like its protagonist, sometimes a little bit crazed.

You can tell that Aylesworth and his collaborators — director Naomi Newman (of A Traveling Jewish Theatre), musician Peter Newton, and actors Harriet Schiffer and Sharon Omi — are up to something strange and perhaps silly from the start. They present Korczak's saga through fables, songs, scenes and games delivered in a sort of pidgin Polish — English with a variety of Polish and Yiddish suffixes ("icki," "ski," "owich" and the like) tacked on.

It's a weird device, sometimes evocative and sometimes annoying. At the beginning, as Aylesworth, Schiffer and Omi fire off rapid barrages of fragmentary narration, it's more distracting than anything else.

"The Orphan King" sometimes overdoes its infantilism, but by the end of the 100-minute show, the



Harriet Schiffer, top, Gary Aylesworth, Sharon Omi in "The Orphan King"

strategy achieves its goal. In the context of what adults were doing in Central Europe as the '30s advanced toward the Holocaust, Korczak comes to look heroic for defending, and even partaking of, the innocent inanity of his children.

Like such previous Aylesworth shows as "The Doom Folk" and "I Was a Go-Go Dancer for Gurdjieff," "The Orphan King" is a sequence of frantically fired-off, overlapping stories. There are the lessons in child-rearing offered by Korczak's radio persona, "The Old Doctor"; the homespun tales told by kids in the Korczak orphanage; Korczak's epic saga of "King Matt," the mythical orphan-king ruling over a principality that resembles Poland (it's always being attacked by three enemies at once); and a sadistic fable from the Brothers Grimm, "The Jew in the Thorn-Bush," illustrating the encroachment of German and Polish anti-Semitism.

THANKS TO the impressively energetic and finely detailed performances, with each of the three actors taking on multiple roles, the "Orphan King" has a headlong power and a cumulative impact. If in its first half-hour it leaves you puzzled about just what's going on, by its last half-hour it has you totally immersed in the widening implications of its breathless cross-cutting. And it maintains its wide-eyed, mischievous innocence throughout — dumping a teeming bundle of tales at our feet like an enterprising child returning home with a precious offering of lizards.

In his recent works, Aylesworth has explored the dark side of religious extremism, from Jehovah's Witness millenarianism to cultist exploitation. In "The Orphan King" he finds a more positive kind of fanatical faith in Korczak's selfless dedication to the cause of children — and their right not just

to be fed and clothed but to be free from physical and psychological restraint.

Aylesworth shapes a captivatingly antic portrait of Korczak from his first entrance as "The Old Doctor," doing a hypnotic scarecrow dance, to his final exit as a sort of cosmic mad scientist, broadcasting a message of hope from "the invisible zone." With his humanitarian interest in the study of child development, his sense of charitable mission and his marginally deranged childishness, this character is unique — like a Yiddish hybrid of Robert Coles, St. Francis and Mister Rogers.

"The Orphan King" gains momentum from the sheer exertions of the performers as they whip from one story and persona to another. No single, overarching plot ever develops; instead, cross-references accumulate as the several tales speed to their deathly conclusions.

AYLESWORTH, Schiffer and Omi share a telegraphic gestural style that's both comical and efficient: When, say, Aylesworth's King Matt decides to arrest his minister, Schiffer's minister simply raises her arms over her head and crosses her wrists, a look of apprehension in her eyes.

Each element of the production enhances its speedy progress — from designer Nancy McNally's beautifully painted linen backdrop and pastel costumes to lighting designer David Welle's cunningly shaped transitions to Newton's polka-packed keyboard-and-percussion score.

While never descending into the rhetorical trenches, "The Orphan King" finds intelligent ways to suggest how questions relating to Jewish assimilation, Zionism and socialism dogged Korczak's life.

The show manages to provide an evening of inspiring fun without being false to its material's depressing dimensions. Korczak — who in "The Orphan King" tries to cheer his kids on the train to Treblinka by telling them it's an adventure — might have appreciated the achievement.