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Controlled assault

Reviews: Aylesworth's "The Orphan King"

By Dennis Harvey

GARY AYLESWORTH'S *The Orphan King/Warsaw Is Mine* is the most fully realized effort yet by one of our most original and underappreciated local playwrights. A sort of cheeky mini-Wagner, Aylesworth has a consistent personal vision of total theatre — a demanding juggle of musical, mimetic and dramatic elements all wrapped in high-speed neurotic comedy. His work has always been interesting, but frequently exhausting. His manic verbal-assault style made for texts (like *The Doom Folk* and *I Was a Go-Go Dancer for Gurdjieff*) that often outstripped their performers' capacities.

Orphan King, directed by Naomi Newman in a co-production with A Traveling Jewish Theatre, preserves the careening energy and originality of Aylesworth's work while tightening up its excesses. It's got a great subject — the life of Janusz Korczak, a Polish Jew who trumpeted remarkably ad-

vanced notions about children's rights and psychology before perishing in a Nazi concentration camp. Aylesworth isn't content just to chronicle this rich life; he tosses in and undercuts two caustic parabolic "fairy tales" originally written by Korczak. This multi-leveled frenzy of action takes a while to sort out, but by the time each strand reels toward its climax, you'll be completely engrossed.

Using only the most minimal props, Naomi Newman's cast (and musical director Peter Newman) still manage to produce almost more audiovisual tragicomic stimulus than one can keep up with. Aylesworth himself has grown into a resourcefully funny and concise performer, and in supporting multi-roles Harriet Schiffer and Sharon Omi are up to his dizzy pace. Though frequently hilarious, *The Orphan King* largely avoids compromising the essential pathos and seriousness of the subject. It's a wildly complicated contraption of a play that somehow works just fine.