Russian-American Jews find their past – onstage

‘Doroga’ helps cast, audience reconnect with roots
By Alexandra Lapkin
Advocate Staff

“Doroga,” a theatrical production about immigration from the former Soviet Union, is not just a play. It is a project in which young Russian-American Jews investigate their family history and reconnect with their Jewish roots.

Produced by Anna Zicer, directed by Ben Sargent and co-created by the cast, “Doroga” is composed of a series of vignettes about the actors’ personal family stories with a focus on immigration. Brandeis Genesis Institute will stage the presentation at the Carl J. Shapiro Theater in Waltham on Dec. 8.

“Moving from place to place is such a Jewish concept. People who've immigrated always have that immigrant inside them. That’s why we use suitcases throughout the performance, to show that we carry that experience with us wherever we go,” said Zicer.

Zicer founded The Lost & Found Project, an experimental theater troupe, with sponsorship from the Council of Jewish Émigré Community Organizations (COJECO) when she realized that a wide gap exists between the American and Russian Jewish communities. She decided to bridge that gap with the theater performances.

“Theater is my passion and I realized that it is the best tool to investigate and make changes in this community,” she said. In addition to working as a Jewish community educator, Zicer, who graduated from the American Academy of the Dramatic Arts, is an actor and drama instructor.

Zicer came to New York City from Israel five years ago, as an emissary of the Taglit Birthright Israel: NEXT program, to engage with the immigrant community from the Former Soviet Union (FSU).

“I realized that Russian Jews do not have the kind of a connection to Judaism that American Jews do. Instead, Russians tend to relate to their roots through family stories and culture,” said Zicer. She noticed that the two communities were segregated, with the majority of Russian-speaking immigrants living in South Brooklyn, an area known as “Little Russia.”

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Zicer said Jews from the former Soviet Union, who did not have exposure to Judaism, have difficulty relating to Judaic customs and traditions.

"Jewish means going to the synagogue and Russians don’t connect to that. The cool thing about Russian immigrants – they don’t want to be told to do anything," she said.

Russian-speaking Jews created their own assimilated culture while living in the FSU. According to Zicer, "Although I don’t want to put the whole community in a box, every family is different, but when a Russian-Jewish kid has a bar mitzvah, it’s about going to a restaurant with his family. We put Christmas trees up next to Hannukiah."

Zicer, whose family immigrated to Israel from Russia when she was 2, said all Israeli children research their family history as part of the school curriculum. When Zicer learned that many Russian-speaking immigrants in their 20s and 30s did not know much about their heritage, "I wanted to introduce young Russian Jews to their own Jewish past," she explained. "This was a theatrical lab. The cast spoke with their parents and grandparents, really dug deep. All of us have those black-and-white photographs. Our job was to bring color and meaning to them."

Through that process, one actor found out that his great-grandfather was a rabbi, and two cast members learned their greatgrandparents come from the same shtetl.

When Zicer began to put together the cast of Lost & Found, she auditioned Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, born in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of them did not have professional acting experience, but "they were so good and dedicated, we decided to take that risk," she said.

At the outset, neither the cast nor the audience had high expectations. "This is not a Broadway production. This is ‘samodeyatelnost’ [a term once used in the Soviet Union for amateur performing arts]. We simply wanted to put the truth on stage. At the end of each performance, people came up to us because they were surprised and amazed. The actors’ parents would say, ‘We had no idea you remember so much about immigration, you were so young.’ It’s wonderful that we brought out all these emotions," Zicer said.

Lost & Found first performed "Doroga" at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan to show the production to a more diverse audience.

“I wanted to bring this play out of Brooklyn into Manhattan. Americans who came to our performances afterward told us that they understood Russian immigrants better,” Zicer said.

After a row of sold-out shows, Zicer upgraded to the smallest venue in Manhattan she could find: the Gene Frankel Theatre in SoHo. The word about "Doroga," she said, spread quickly: "More people kept coming to see us and we had to add chairs to accommodate a growing audience."

The National Yiddish Theater- Folksbiene discovered "Doroga" and decided to take on the affiliate role, with Bryna Wasserman providing artistic direction.

Zicer said she likes the fact that "Doroga" gives audience members an opportunity to ask questions and investigate their own family history.

"Life is always going to change, whether we are ready for it or not," she said. "We have to know where we come from and pass it on to the next generation."

Visit www.brandeis.edu for more information about next week’s show.