

The Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir: A Brief History

By Victor Neuman

This year the Peretz Centre's Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir will be celebrating just over 30 years of its existence. Thirty years of rehearsals; thirty years of marvelous choral arranging by Searle Friedman and then David Millard; thirty years of performing at venues all around Vancouver and—on occasion—Victoria, thirty years of bickering over the proper Yiddish pronunciation of words (Is it 'af' or 'oif' 'kayn' or 'kein?'); thirty years of trying to agree on how to spell Hanukka and thirty years of singing the songs of our Jewish heritage.

To put that sweep of time in a little perspective, it was the year 1980 when the choir began. The Solidarity movement was born in Poland, and Iran and Iraq went to war. Among those who passed away that year were Marshall McLuhan, Alfred Hitchcock, John Lennon, Jean-Paul Sartre, Henry Miller and Katherine Anne Porter. On the other side of the ledger, Macaulay Culkin was born, and Ronald Reagan became President of the United States. (Hey, some years balance better than others.)

But balancing things off a little more...the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir was born as well. Searle Friedman had returned to Vancouver after years of study in Berlin and after five years of conducting the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir. He decided that Vancouver needed its own Jewish Folk Choir. The beginnings were modest. The choir consisted of a semi-employed conductor, eight or nine Peretz conscripts, and an accompanist named Wolfgang. But boy could they sing!

Numbers were small initially, but Searle Friedman was one of the most likeable fellows you'd ever want to meet. He was full of energy, enthusiasm, boundless optimism and a love for Yiddish music. It was catching, and the choir grew to over 30 members within a space of two or three years.

For the next ten years, Searle was both the choir's conductor and its spiritual leader. When choir members were in despair of ever learning their songs in time for a major concert, Searle's optimism carried the day and made it all work. He was also the choir's resident stand-up comic, and would come up with lines such as, "Come on peo-



Searle Friedman and the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir at the Orpheum.

ple ... when you sing you have to try to feel each other's parts!"

And no one was more devoted to the choir than Searle. An example of that occurred about a year before he passed away. Searle was in hospital seriously ill with circulatory problems when he was visited by a choir member. Searle was brimming with good spirits. "I've just gotten some very good news from my cardiologist!" The choir member assumed naturally that the good news was of a medical nature. Not so. Searle continued "My cardiologist is in a choir that he doesn't care for, so he may be joining ours—AND HE'S A TENOR!"

Sadly, Searle passed away in 1990, and the baton passed into the able hands of Susan James.

Over the years the choir has always had a family feel to it. And nowhere has this been more in evidence than in the way the baton has been passed on from one conductor to the next. The choir has never had to look beyond its own group for a leader. Susan James, who succeeded Searle as conductor for a number of years, was already the choir's long-time accompanist when she stepped up to the plate and—to carry on the analogy—hit a home run using only a baton. Show me a baseball player that can do that!

She was a wonderful conductor with a wicked ear for musical inaccuracies. The choir's first attempt at taping songs for a CD was a grueling session that took around eight hours to produce two songs that were somewhat to Susan's satisfaction. Songs were thrown out because someone sniffed loudly or turned a page noisily or sang a note that was a little flat.

Although Susan kept the choir's feet to the fire, they loved her dearly and she loved them. In fact when she left, it was on account of too much love. Susan was a devoted Christian and said in her farewell letter that she wished the choir realized how much God loved each and every one of them. As a devout Christian, she was becoming a little

VICTOR NEUMAN has sung in the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir for 30 years. His family has long been involved with the Peretz Centre. Over the years he has served as a member of the choir committee as well as the Peretz Board of Directors.

continued on page 29

THE OUTLOOK ON FILMS

the San Francisco Jewish Community Federation, and the resignation of its Executive Director, Daniel Sokatch.

This division is the launching point for *Between Two Worlds*, which premiered at the TJFF. The film is co-directed by Deborah Kaufman and Alan Snitow. Kaufman was one of the founders of the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, and the film is both personal and political. Snitow and Kaufman tell their family stories as an entrée to examining the issues dividing the American Jewish community. Kaufman's mother, a socialist, was ousted from the American Jewish Congress during the McCarthy era. Her father, a conservative Zionist, supports his daughters as their lives take divergent paths from those of their parents.

Snitow's father served in the U.S. Army and helped liberate Buchenwald concentration camp. *Between Two Worlds* explores a range of issues dividing North American Jewry—including the movement for boycott, divestment and sanctions of

Israel, and the Wiesenthal Center's project to build a Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem on the site of a Muslim cemetery. The film addresses the question of "who speaks for us" vis-à-vis the American Jewish community, and ends with a positive message of openness through the emergence of a new organization, J Street, where the issues underlying the schism in San Francisco are debated in a respectful way. The organization has grown to 120,000 members in just eighteen months.

Sokatch, now CEO of the New Israel Fund (NIF), attended the screening of *Between Two Worlds* and participated in a panel discussion.

Intimate Grammar, based on David Grossman's novel *The Book of Intimate Grammar*, also screened at the TJFF. Directed by Nir Bergman, this coming-of-age story chronicles the life of Aharon, a sensitive boy growing up in Jerusalem, as he approaches his Bar Mitzvah in 1963. An awkward youth, Aharon practices grammar by reviewing present continuous

verbs ("I am running") and coins a new one ("I am Aharoning") which speaks to the title of the film.

Aharon's world revolves around his sister and his parents. His mother, a strict and humourless family matriarch, makes all the major decisions and permits her husband to undertake renovation projects for their neighbor, Mrs. Klum, which interferes with Aharon's voyeuristic peeping into her bedroom. The film ends with the build-up to the Six Day War, as Aharon vies unsuccessfully with his best friend for the affection of a girl, which ends with tragic consequences. *Intimate Grammar* beautifully captures the period, and the transition from childhood to adulthood.

It's a Wrap

Hot Docs and the TJFF both set records for attendance and the number of films in official competition. The number of film festivals has mushroomed in recent years, and both these festivals have become fixtures of the spring season.♦

CHOIR...

Continued from page 23

frustrated at conducting a devoutly secular choir.

After Susan the baton was passed to the current conductor, David Millard who, once again, had already been a long-standing member of the choir's family. David had been a tenor in the baritone section of the choir and became their new conductor. And what a spectacular success he has been in so many ways! Although he is not Jewish, he studied Yiddish so thoroughly over the years that he is now the choir's resident expert on Yiddish linguistics. He still can't carry on a conversation, but he can talk you into the ground about the

proper pronunciation and subtleties of almost any Yiddish word you can come up with. Even his e-mail address reflects his new Jewish personae: "reb-dovidl@yahoo.ca"

He has written choral arrangements that are simply brilliant and have become standards of the choir's repertoire. He conducts with humour and patience (and you need a lot of that with a Jewish choir), a high level of technical accuracy, and a real feel for the special nuances of Jewish music. He also—when the situation makes it necessary—sings tenor, bass, alto and even soprano. David is the Swiss army knife of conductors.

David's crowning moment with the choir was during its

production of *Yam Gazlonim* (*Pirates of Penzance* in Yiddish). David recklessly offered to perform "I am the very Model of a Modern Major General" from *The Pirates of Penzance*. But just to make it more interesting, he conducted the choir at the same time, sang at full throttle, and DID THE ENTIRE SONG IN YIDDISH! David survived that experience, but the choir had paramedics standing by.

Today the Vancouver Jewish Folk Choir is still going strong. It members are carrying on the tradition of celebrating their Jewish musical heritage with songs in English, Ladino, Hebrew and—the language they love above all—Yiddish.♦