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Photo: Augustina Iohan

Dancing into the New Year

by Darcy Grabenstein

With Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, last week and Yom Kippur, the fasting day of atonement this week, the timing was perfect for *L'Shana Tova! A Sweet Assembly*, presented as part of the Philadelphia Fringe Festival by ARTIST HOUSE/Asya Zlatina + Dancers.

“L'Shana Tova” means “Happy New Year” in Hebrew, but director and choreographer Asya Zlatina Nemirovsky does not limit herself to Rosh Hashanah. Instead, she takes the audience — both in person and virtual — on a tour of the Jewish calendar via dance. I chose to attend in person, thrilled that I could finally watch a dance performance in the flesh. However, with temperatures in the mid-80s, I was sweating in my seat on the asphalt parking lot at Northeast Philly's Trent Plaza and second-guessing that decision.

Six dance numbers comprised the performance, each portraying a Jewish holiday or historical event through a distinctive tyle of music and dance interpretation. Dancers Courtney Conigatti, Kat Corbett, Sarah Warren, Ali McBride and Michelle Figueiredo are to be commended for their quickly costume changes in full view of the audience and ability to switch from pensive to somber to celebratory, as the music and meaning dictated. Violinist Michael Shingo's musical interludes featured traditional Yiddish and Klezmer melodies while the dancers prepped “backstage.”

The recorded music accompanying each piece was equally captivating. The selections ranged from Hebrew to Yiddish to Ladino and Mizrahi, reflecting the rich melting pot that makes up Jewish culture. Israeli dance steps were incorporated into the first number, *Nigun Atik* (ancient melody). Other numbers featured shoulder holds, hands in prayer and other motions borrowed from traditional folk dances. *Avinu Malkeini* (our Father, our King) was emotional but lacked the intensity I expected for a piece based on this powerful prayer. The performance closed on an uplifting note with *Fayerlech*, but I had hoped for choreography with a bit more punch. Overall, though, I was impressed how Nemirovsky put a modern twist to traditional music and themes.

Nemirovsky, speaking in both English and Russian, explained that *L'Shana Tova!* is an excerpt of a work in progress slated for a 2022 premiere. I can't wait to mark it in my calendar.

L'Shana Tova! A Sweet Assembly, ARTIST HOUSE/Asya Zlatina + Dancers, Trent Plaza, Philadelphia, PA, Sept. 12, 2021

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