

## ARTS &amp; THEATRE

# CELEBRATE PASSOVER WITH EASTLINE THEATRE'S "YENTL"

BY CINDI SANSONE-BRAFF

EastLine Theatre, in collaboration with the Babylon Citizens Council on the Arts, presents *Yentl* by **Leah Napolin** and **Isaac Bashevis Singer**. Based on Singer's 12-page short story, *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy*, this full-length play explores themes of love, gender, and identity.

Singer was a renowned Polish-American Jewish author of the 20th century whose distinguished career spanned nearly seven decades. A learned scholar and award-winning writer, Singer is best known for his vivid depictions of Jewish life.

Although he wrote in Yiddish, he translated his works into English with the assistance of collaborators and editors. Singer, a master storyteller, infused his narratives with poetic imagery, mysticism, psychic phenomena, and demonology.

Touted as a feminist play, *Yentl* opened on Broadway on October 23, 1975, at the *Eugene O'Neill Theatre*, with **Gloria Steinem** and **Phyllis Chesler** in attendance. The production featured **Tovah Feldshuh** in the titular role, for which she received a Tony Award nomination for Best Actress in a Play due to her outstanding performance. Napolin, a novice playwright, collaborated with Singer, although she claimed that his input was marginal since he did none of the actual writing. Nonetheless, the two made their Broadway debut with *Yentl*.

In 2013, Napolin revised the script and wanted to add what she affectionately called "a Greek Yiddish chorus." That's when singer-songwriter **Jill Sobule**, who wrote and performed the MTV hit *I Kissed a Girl*, stepped in and contributed an eclectic blend of songs, including klezmer, bluegrass, folk, and rock.

One of the most famous adaptations of Singer's tale is the 1983 romantic musical film *Yentl*, starring **Barbra Streisand**. Singer was quite critical of Streisand's film adaptation, believing it was overly musical. He also felt that the script did not capture the essence of his story.

This two-act play, set in 19th-century Poland, centers on a headstrong young woman who defies tradition and studies the Torah with her rabbi father. After his death, Yentl flees to another town, disguising herself as



**Josh Saffran Sedacca as Avigdor, Rook Mogavero as Yentl/Anshel, and Kendra Foster McBride as Hadass in Eastline Theatre's production of "Yentl," which runs from April 11-27, at BACCA Arts Center.**

a yeshiva boy to continue her Talmudic studies. The plot intensifies when she becomes embroiled in a romantic triangle. Napolin's stage adaptation stays true to Singer's signature style of wry humor intertwined with darker themes unfolding in a mystical

context. The presence of a dybbuk introduces a touch of Jewish lore to the play, and the esoteric tradition of Kabbalah, with its deeper spiritual dimensions of Judaism, is woven throughout the performance.

"The story of Yentl unfolds in such

a delightfully surprising way," said director Nicole Savin in expressing her beliefs about the timeless appeal of this 20th-century play. "Although Leah Napolin's play is from 1975, and Isaac Bashevis Singer's story was written in 1962, it feels like it could have been written here and now. The subversive comedy and the authentic relationships between the characters feel fresh and biting even fifty-plus years after the fact."

The stellar ensemble includes **Jacob Lesko, Jen LoPresti, Josh Saffran Sedacca, Kendra Foster McBride, Lisa Wang, Michelle Osojnak, Rachel Max, Rook Mogavero, Stacey Weber, Steve Horowitz, and Victoria Kay.**

Rook Mogavero is cast as the intelligent, courageous, and defiant protagonist.

"As a nonbinary Jewish performer, I am thrilled to be playing the role of Yentl," said Mogavero. "The show tackles questions that I think a lot of people can relate to, like 'How do you balance your faith and your identity?' and 'How do you navigate a world that wasn't made for you?'"

Josh Saffran Sedacca plays Yentl's best friend, Avigdor, and was eager to share his thoughts about the show.

"My mother ensured I watched the film *Yentl* from an early age, so it's truly an honor to share a story and play a character that is so iconic to me," Sedacca said. "Being part of this play has deepened my understanding and love for *Yentl*, and I hope our audiences feel the same. It's especially important to tell this story in the current climate because, at its core, *Yentl* is about how no one should be denied equal rights based on their circumstances at birth. Also, if anyone knows Mandy Patinkin, tell him his ticket is on me."

*EastLine Theatre strives to produce performances in unconventional venues while re-evaluating traditional works, exploring contemporary plays, and highlighting original pieces for the community.*

*Yentl is being performed at the BACCA Arts Center, located at 149 N. Wellwood Avenue, Lindenhurst, 11757, and will run from April 11 through April 27, 2025. Tickets are priced at \$25 and can be purchased at [eastlinetheatre.org](http://eastlinetheatre.org) or call 516-749-5047.*