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'General and the Jew,' Part Folk Tale,

By ALVIN KLEIN

TAKING chances is one of the things a living theater has to be about and nothing is chancier than putting on a new play, and a serious one at that. Arena Players is presenting (through Nov. 25) "The General and the Jew," by Arthur Schwartz — a first dramatic effort by a Plainview playwright whose previous credits have been in comedy; both as a writer and as a performer.

Mr. Schwartz's play is part didacticism, part folk tale, part melodrama — a curious misalliance. It is set in Czarist Russia, in 1910, when the oppressed Jewish people hoped for a new life in America. The production is inspired by the stories that Mr. Schwartz was told about his ancestors. He has called it a "heritage play."

When the playwright tunes into homespun language, the characters become people — warm and alive. But a true ear has not been transmitted into a distinctive voice.

"The General and the Jew" is essentially a work of moral concerns and issues — it is about individual versus collective responsibility and conflicting priorities — here the play buckles under the weight of pompous platitude-dramatizing. For a fillip, there are melodramatic flourishes to generate a little excitement and to wrap up the plot.

Mayer Schindel, a young lieutenant in the Czar's army, returns to his Jewish family from which he was kid-

napped as a child. To the townspeople, he is the returning hero, and heroes are expected to be miracle workers.

Mayer is soon put to the test. When a poor neighbor is arrested and savagely beaten for disobeying an ordinance against peddling in an area restricted to Jews, he negotiates with Captain Ivanov, a Cossack, for the prisoner's freedom and for a few hundred townspeople to leave the country.

For Mayer's part, he agrees to leave himself to no longer threaten the captain's vicious authority.

What, you are asking, gives the good lieutenant bargaining power over the evil captain? Easy. Mayer's mentor,

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benefactor and father figure is a Christian, Gen. Alexis Tarkov — a most influential and handy name to drop.

From here on, in a second act that spans two weeks, Mayer is confronted with more moral conflicts than anyone deserves to face in a lifetime. They are spelled out on cue, usually in the form of heavy-handed maxims.

When it is revealed that Mayer may have to choose to be by the ailing general's side, rather than honor his agreement with the captain, the doctor tells him: "This may very well present you with a moral dilemma!" This may very well be how to program a play, not develop one.

Soon everyone is mixing in, telling

Mayer what he must do. A rabbi beseeches him to get more emigration papers for the rest of the townspeople. His family insists he cannot take responsibility for everyone. Mayer himself argues that "determination is stronger than tyranny" and that the rest of the townspeople must remain and defend their faith.

In the rabbi's resigned response — "Merely do your best, no less," at once advice and command — there is more power and irony than in the whole play. For the rabbi's gentle pacifist philosophy is enormously guilt-inducing. And Mayer's idealism does not preclude a violent streak. There are subtle shadings in these ideological antagonists.

The captain and the lieutenants are opponents of other colors — all red and white; the former is decked out like a Russian devil. Committing clichés ("The big fish eats the little fish") is not the least of his crimes.

Should the lieutenant have bargained for those few hundred papers in the first place? Will the Czar avenge himself on the Jews who remain? Who is responsible for whom? Don't ask.

It gets convoluted and contrived. "The General and the Jew" is a play of loose beginnings and unrealized possibilities. Mayer's childhood abduction is a convenient set-up; his relationship with the general is overly general — suggestive rather than explored. Nothing is made of the intriguing notion that he was raised by a Christian.

Where Mr. Schwartz is at his best, in the family scenes, the production de-

tails serve him sympathetically. There's an inviting and authentic ethnicity here — the straw-strewn floor, the wood-burning stove, a creaky wooden door stuffed with paper to cover the holes. And the performances ring true.

Lillian Richards and Michael J. DiSalvo are very dear as Mayer's old parents. As his fiancée, Pam Pugliese is radiant. John Monteleone is a many-faceted Mayer — almost childish pedulance with the general, all romantic ardor with his fiancée, defiance with the captain, acknowledging his own strengths while he is testing it.

James Davies is bombastic and humorous as the general — the most interesting character. And George Anderson (Captain Ivanov) is better than good at being worse than bad. Where he is allowed some leeway, as when the captain projects his own evils onto the system ("I'm an administrator!" he declares), Mr. Anderson proves that he can establish the character as well as reinforce a stereotype.

Frederic DeFels gets considerable crackle from a final confrontation scene and throughout has directed a problematical play with more attention to its possibilities than its problems. The heavy musical underscoring is, however, a bit much.

In this staging, "The General and the Jew" has been dealt a loving hand. But this is an unsatisfying work. The playwright's weaknesses are all the more glaring because he has not trusted his own simple strengths.