

Martz, Fraidie and Andrew Wilson. *A Fiery Soul: The Life and Theatrical Times of John Hirsch*. Montreal: Véhicule Press, 2011. 382 pp.

Although neither Fraidie Martz nor Andrew Wilson is a theatre historian or cultural critic, they have together done a wonderful job of recounting the life of John Hirsch and documenting his extraordinary contribution to the development of regional and national English-Canadian theatre. Neither author ever met their subject, but through meticulous research and extensive interviewing they have drawn a very complete and nuanced portrait of the man and his career. Taking a cue from Hirsch's claim that he was "a member of four mafias: Hungarian, Jewish, homosexual and Winnipeg," *A Fiery Soul* explores the importance of these four group identities in molding the man.

Born in 1930 in Siófok, Hungary, Hirsch spent his early years in a cultured and financially comfortable environment, fated to be destroyed by the rise of Nazism. First there was the promulgation of anti-Jewish laws, then the conscription of men for forced labour, and finally the German invasion and the deportation of many Hungarian Jews to death camps. In the spring and early summer of 1944, John's father was arrested and sent to Germany, where he died, and then his mother and younger brother were deported to Auschwitz, where they died. John escaped death because he had been sent back to Budapest, where he had been attending school. The war ended for John with the arrival of the Soviet Army in Budapest in February 1945. He was fourteen years old and living with his few surviving relatives in the family apartment. During the next few years, he left Budapest, spent time in displaced persons camps, considered but then decided against emigrating to Palestine, and ended up in Paris, where he scrounged for food and lodging. After applying to emigrate to several western countries, he was finally accepted as one of the lucky 500 orphans allowed to go to Canada under Privy Council Order 1647 (see Irving Abella and Harold Troper's *None Is Too Many*). He arrived in Canada in

late 1947 and picked Winnipeg as his final destination because he thought being in the centre of the country would be safe. His second stroke of luck was being placed with the Shack family in North Winnipeg. They became his supportive and loving family for the rest of his life. As much as he embraced his adopted country, Hirsch never lost his Hungarian accent, his ties to the Hungarian Jewish diaspora, his love of Hungarian food, or his emotional attachment to his homeland.

Although he arrived in Canada at age seventeen speaking no English, Hirsch quickly learned the language, finished high school, and graduated with honours in English Literature and Philosophy from the University of Manitoba by age twenty-two. During his university years, he joined a circle of Winnipeg intellectuals and artists who would be lifelong friends and collaborators. One friend in particular, Tom Hendry, would be his partner in reviving the Winnipeg theatre scene. Hirsch had developed a love for puppetry and theatre before the war and had engaged in amateur theatrics both during and after the war. He pursued his interest once settled in Winnipeg and within a few years of graduating from university, he was artistic director of the Manitoba Theatre Centre (formed from the merger of Theatre 77 and the Little Theatre). During his distinguished career, he was a leading voice advocating for the creation of regional and national professional theatre in Canada, as well as educational programs.

John was a complete man of the theatre – a gifted director, an occasional dramatist, a tireless promoter and fundraiser, with a well-deserved reputation for being demanding and difficult. His extraordinary career included two stints as artistic director of the Stratford Festival, five years as director of CBC television drama, and successful productions at the Seattle Repertory Theatre, the Shaw Festival, the National Centre for the Arts, and major theatres in Toronto, New York, Los Angeles, and Tel Aviv. In addition, he taught at the National Theatre School in Montreal, Yale Drama School, Southern Methodist University, and the University of California at

San Diego. During his career, he directed a large number of American plays, including many musicals or revues. When it came to European plays, had a penchant for Brecht, Chekhov, Shaw, and (of course) Shakespeare, but he always insisted that the classics were not museum pieces and that they could be re-worked to make them resonate with contemporary audiences. For the most part, the critics applauded his work and he received numerous awards and honours.

His vision of theatre reflected the activist strand of Jewish thought – that is that theatre should have social and spiritual value and it should be a forum for ideas that address essential human questions. While the tragedies of his youth often made him reflect on how different his life would have been had he not been Jewish, he did eventually turn to his Jewish heritage for dramatic inspiration. Perhaps the most poignant example of this was his adaptation of S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk* in the early 1970s. This story of thwarted lovers led Hirsch to a deep reflection on destiny, religious ritual, and moral order. His second attempt at directing a Jewish-themed play was less successful. Brought in to save a troubled Broadway adaptation of Chaim Potok's novel, *The Chosen*, Hirsch was unable to avoid disastrous reviews.

In creating a full and vibrant portrait of the man and his work, Martz and Wilson do not shy away from discussing Hirsch's homosexuality. They give a full account of his sex life, including his occasional relations with women and his long-term but not exclusive relationship with Bryan Trotter. They also describe the promiscuous behaviour that probably led to his death on August 1, 1989 from AIDS-related complications.

Those interested in the career of this theatrical genius will appreciate how Martz and Wilson have drawn a complete portrait of John Hirsch in the context of the Hungarian Jewish community and its diaspora, Winnipeg intellectual circles, the post-war history of English-Canadian theatre, and the social history of homosexuality.

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