

## St. Louis Eats and Drinks With Joe and Ann Pollack

Joe and Ann Pollack, St. Louis' most experienced food writers, lead a tour of restaurants, wines, shops and other interesting places. When we travel, you will travel with us. When we eat, drink, cook, entertain or read, when we go to the movies or theater, we'll share our knowledge and opinions. Come along for the ride!! Copyright 2010 Joe Pollack and Ann Lemons Pollack

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### The Chosen

In a community with three Jews there are four synagogues--one for the divergent faiths held by each, and a fourth one to provide the space where none of them would be caught dead. These attitudes, harder than pressed steel or a jilted lover's heart, are on display in "The Chosen," a powerful, passionate adaptation of Chaim Potok's novel by the Mustard Seed Theatre at Fontbonne University.

The searing drama, adapted for the stage by Aaron Posner, opened last night and will run through Nov. 7. "My Name is Asher Lev," also based on a Potok novel, is in its final weekend by the New Jewish Theatre, and Adena Potok, the author's widow, spoke last night at Fontbonne and will repeat tonight at the Jewish Community Center. Nothing in the history of the world divides people more or creates more turmoil than religion, and Potok (who also was a rabbi) shows it beautifully in a Brooklyn neighborhood during and shortly after World War II. Deanna Jent's direction is perfectly on target and Courtney Sanzaro's gorgeous set provides the proper aura for the evening. The home of David Malter (Jim Leibrecht), a liberal activist and Zionist, working toward a Jewish state, is cluttered with books and papers, all of them obviously read and loved. In contrast, the study of Reb Saunders, leader of the ultra-conservative Hasidim, has tall, elegant, austere bookshelves with hundreds of books that are dusted but never read. Saunders reads, and lives by, the Torah and the Talmud. The former comprises the first five books of the Bible; the latter explains the former in lengthy essays. In the end they deliver God's messages to Saunders, and he passes them on to his congregation. No one disagrees. No one deviates.

Saunders, a ringing, powerful performance by Richard Lewis, treats his son the same way. Danny (David Chandler) will be a Hasidic rabbi, a successor to his father, but the boy is not sure. He lives in a world of silence; father and son rarely speak, and never about anything important. Danny's world begins to open on a baseball diamond when his yeshiva plays baseball against young Reuven Malter's yeshiva, and Saunders hits a line drive that pitcher Malter takes in the right eye.

In an interesting approach, two actors portray Reuven Malter and there is occasionally a little confusion. Adam Moskal is Reuven for the time-span of the play and he's very good, with chubby pink cheeks that add a perfect glow. Justin Ivan Brown is a fine older Reuven, looking back through time (maybe 20 years) to explain, narrate and occasionally portray another person. It's a difficult part, and Brown handles it extremely well, though it sometimes took me aback when they both were speaking, practically a dialogue.

Reuven and Danny become friends, with the eventual blessing of both fathers, and the Rebbe, when he discovers that Reuven is about as smart as his own son, uses him as a conduit to send information to Danny, and to seek information as well. At one point, when the Rebbe discovers Malter's strong Zionism, he breaks off the friendship

between Danny and Reuven, and the scene is directed as a brilliant understatement. The acting is solid throughout the cast, and the play also benefits from Michael Sullivan's sparkling lighting design. Sullivan lit Hot City's "Equus" recently, and did it to glorious effect. It's a strong, impressive production. And as the lights went down for the final time, Mrs. Potok, who was sitting behind me, whispered the last word. "Bravo," she said. This critic agrees.

**The Chosen, a production of Mustard Seed Theatre, opened last night at Fontbonne University, and will play through Nov. 7**

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