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by Heather Solomon

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Yiddish is a musical magnet for Magillah

They're all coming to Yiddish from different directions, but music links their efforts.

Button accordionist and musical arranger-producer Henri Oppenheim was raised secularly in France. He wanted to "move toward [his] roots" as his grandmother's generation began to wane.

Violinist Julie Triquet, originally from Quebec City, fell in love with klezmer when Oppenheim and his earlier klezmer band, Kleztory, came to play and record in an unusual collaboration with the chamber orchestra I Musici, of which she is a member.

Vocalist Michelle Heisler, born in Ste. Foy, Que., and arriving in Montreal as a teenager, had little Jewish education until she joined the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre (DWYT), which has her speaking and singing in the mamaloshen.

The three of them, and two French-

Québécois musicians, Mathieu Deschenaux and Éric Breton, are playing some of the hottest klezmer in town, with Yiddish as their language of choice for song selection.

Under Oppenheim's musical direction, the Yiddish/klezmer band Magillah has already won the Radio-Canada Étoiles-Galaxie Prize in 2009 and is currently touring Montreal's Maisons de la culture and other



Arts Scene

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public halls, bringing Jewish *ix'am* to the unlikelyst corners of the city. Feb. 19 is their next concert, at the Théâtre du Grand Sault (Centre Culturel Henri-Lemieux), 7644 Édouard St., LaSalle.

An offshoot of Oppenheim's experiences with Kleztory, which he headed from 2002 to 2006, Magillah had its seeds planted in his Montreal Klezmer Trio.

In 2007, the accordionist then linked up with master storyteller and Yiddish singer Allan Merovitz for The Merovitz Project, renaming it Magillah in late 2010 when the two amicably parted ways. "I will never be able to give him back what he gave me in terms of inspiration," says Oppenheim.

Heisler took over as lead singer in November, a brilliant choice, since she already has followers from her charismatic performances with the DWYT in such plays as *The Pirates of Penzance* (in Yiddish) and *On Second Avenue*.

"I met Henri when he played accordion for YAYA (Young Actors for Young Audiences) and I was directing *No More Raizins, No More Almonds*. I didn't start out in musicals. My training is in classical theatre, but when I came home from studying in New York, I got the lead in *Evita* at Centaur Theatre, and the work just kept coming, all in musicals.

"Once I joined the DWYT, I started to feel, 'This is where I come from. This is who I am.'" That intensified with Magillah.

Oppenheim plans to introduce more theatre into the band's shows and has hired director and dramaturge Melanie Delisle, which has already begun with he and Heisler engaging in bilingual serio-comic patter between numbers.

Still, the concerts soar on the band's strongest point: musical virtuosity. The soulful accordion complements the human-sounding violin. Triquet, who trained under Aaron Rosand at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, turns from her classical persona into a dervish when she switches to klezmer. The per-



From left, Henri Oppenheim, Mathieu Deschenaux, Michelle Heisler, Éric Breton and Julie Triquet are the Yiddish/klezmer band Magillah. (Heather Solomon photo)

ussionist, often on hand drums, and the bass player take off on flights of fancy, coming down to earth for even more heavenly sounds with the others. It all makes for an exquisite listening experience.

"I always played folk music for my pleasure - Irish, French-Canadian and Gypsy," Triquet says. "When Kleztory played with I Musici, we came offstage, and I started playing by ear with Henri and we connected musically. He gave me a lot of klezmer recordings, and I picked it up. You don't have to be Jewish to feel the emotions."

Heisler, tambourine in hand, delights with such numbers as the energetic *Abi Gezunt* and the heart-wrenching *Mayn Ruhe Platz*, which was inspired by the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911.

Oppenheim has built a following among francophone Québécois who have taken to klezmer. "Now I look forward to bringing this show to a more Jewish audience."

He'll do so March 27, when Magillah plays the Dollard des Ormeaux Civic Centre and, in between other appearances, they'll be at the Eleanor London Côté St. Luc Public Library May 19. For details, call 272-8635 or visit www.magillah.com.

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