

Canada Post Publication Agreement: No. 44086082

## Shabbat Ceilidh: An Unforgettable Production by The Winnipeg Jewish Theatre in Partnership with The Asper Foundation



By Maxa Sawyer

What do you get when you mix Shabbat with Winnipeg Jewish Theatre and Highland dress? When the blessing over a challah is recited alongside a dramatic rendition of Robert Burns's Address to a Haggis? When Manischewitz wine is chased with two types of scotch?

The answer, of course, is Winnipeg Jewish Theatre's Shabbat Ceilidh in partnership with The Asper Foundation's Community Shabbat Program. On Friday, February 21, 2025, Winnipeg Jewish Theatre's Artistic Director Dan Petrenko, with his staff and volunteers, filled the Berney Theatre with laughter and farce, culture and community, through the magic of Shabbat and theatre.

Upon entering the atrium of the Berney Theatre for the Shabbat Ceilidh, I was pulled aside by Kevin McIntyre, who was wearing his Highland dress kilt and a kippah, and asked if I knew if there was a specific blessing for scotch.

The dinner was prepared by Shmoozers Community Café, which is operated by the Shaarey Zedek Synagogue. Throughout the meal, the crowd of Scottish and Jewish guests learned about the history of each other's community. Both groups of people have struggled to keep their traditions alive amid pressures of assimilation and discrimination. Out of these struggles emerged a culture of storytelling.

Following the main course, the guests were invited into the Berney Theatre itself. Gaelyn McGregor, who serves on the Board of the Winnipeg Jewish Theatre and is a Highland dance teacher at the Manitoba Highland Dancer Association, introduced four of her talented dancers. The dances they performed required that their upper body remain still while their legs moved with speed and agility. Kevin McIntyre accompanied the dancers on the bagpipes.

McIntyre, a fixture in both the Jewish and Scottish communities, had seen these traditional Highland dances more times than he could count; nevertheless, that night he learned something new. Because the dancers were performing to a Jewish and Scottish audience, McGregor took the opportunity to verbally tell the story behind each dance. After her explanation about the last dance, McIntyre proclaimed, "I didn't know that - I just thought it was the shaky leg dance!"

Julia Kroft sang a beautiful rendition of the iconic song "When You Believe" from the Broadway production of Steven Spielberg's The Prince of Egypt. Then McIntyre joined her on stage to sing a duet of "Shalom" from the musical production Milk and Honey. The two performers will be back on the Berney Theatre stage to star in Winnipeg Jewish Theatre's



Kevin McIntyre



Dr. James Christie



Julia Kroft

production of The Band's Visit which runs from May 1 to 11.

Perhaps the standout star of the night was Dr. James Christie, whose kippah matched his kilt. Dr. Christie told childhood stories of growing up in a Winnipeg Scottish neighbourhood. He began in a Scottish accent, leading those who did not recognize him to think he was born and raised in Scotland; he was in fact born and raised in Winnipeg. His colourful storytelling had the crowd laughing to the point of tears. When he performed Robert Burns's "Address to a Haggis", he did so with a theatrical intensity that captured the full attention and participation of his audience.

Anita Wortzman, Executive Director of The Asper Foundation explained that the idea of the Foundation's Community Shabbat Program arose when she experienced the power of Shabbat at the Simkin Centre. The weekly Shabbat observance there is made possible because of an Asper Foundation initiative. She shared that non-Jewish Simkin residents have told her that Shabbat had become a meaningful point of connection that they looked forward to each week. Wortzman realized the relationship-building potential of an inter-community Shabbat dinner.

Winnipeg Jewish Theatre's one-night-only production of Shabbat Ceilidh provided the Scottish and Jewish communities with an opportunity to learn, dance and break bread (and slice haggis) together in a way that its Scottish and Jewish guests will always remember. Slàinte Mhath! L'Chaim!



Dancers from Manitoba Highland Dancer Association