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NY CULTURE

With 'East Ramapo,' Writer Mark Judelson Puts Town's Divide on Stage

New Play Focuses on Social Divisions Centered on the Public School District

By



Playwright and arborist Mark Judelson *JASON ANDREW FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

JOSEPH DE AVILA

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RAMAPO, N.Y.—After performances of Mark Judelson's play about a Montana community's response to a spate of hate crimes, discussions inevitably turned to this Rockland County town's own social divisions.

"I'm becoming a hater," Mr. Judelson recalled one audience member asking. "What can I do about it?"

And so, with the encouragement of friends. Mr. Judelson has focused his new play on the East Ramapo public school district, where most of the 9,000 students enrolled are black and Hispanic but that since 2005 has been governed by a school board controlled either by Orthodox or Hasidic Jews. A majority of the remaining 21,000 students who live in the district attend yeshivas.

IN THE NEWS

Mark Judelson

- Playwright, arborist
- Formerly: Director of Arts Council of Rockland; led Spring Valley, N.Y., environmental-education center that taught children about farming

'My job is to say this is the clearest, most honest story I can present.'

school community and the yeshivas," he said. "My hope behind the play is that [the Hasidic characters and public school characters] are able to have a conversation with each other in front of an audience to hear each of their individual stories."

School board leaders, however, have been skeptical.

"From what I have heard, the play isn't designed to facilitate dialogue," said Yehuda Weissmandl, president of the school board, in an email. He hasn't seen the play. "In any event, I don't believe that it has served that function."

In 2012, a group of parents that included more than 300 plaintiffs sued the school board, alleging tax dollars had been steered to the yeshivas in part with unwarranted placements of special-education students. The board denied the claims, and the lawsuit is pending.

With "East Ramapo," the 62-year-old Mr. Judelson says he hopes to get the town talking. "I am not aware of successful dialogues between members of the public

Mr. Judelson grew up in New Haven, Conn. He spent time in Africa with the Peace Corps and has worked as a logger and carpenter. In the 1980s, he became the director of a Spring Valley, N.Y., environmental-education center that taught children about farming. In 1994, he became the director of the Arts Council of Rockland. He left that position last year and now works as an arborist.

Mr. Judelson began writing for the theater in the 1990s. His first play, "The Open Window," depicted the true story of a cellist from the Sarajevo Opera who performed a concert for 22 days in the bomb crater where 22 people were killed during the Bosnian War. Mr. Judelson later wrote plays about New York City in the days following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, slain in 2002 by terrorists in Pakistan.

"He's very good at finding the story in unusual events and sometimes things that seem even pedestrian," said Keith Cornell, former chairman of the Arts Council of Rockland. "He really cares about justice and really is offended by and interested in those situations where there is a lack of justice."

"East Ramapo" tells its story through monologues delivered by characters who represent public school students, community leaders and school administrators. It opens with the characters all speaking at the same time, raising their voices to drown out the others. Eventually, each relents and allows the others time to speak.

Three Hasidic characters—two students and a rabbi—are played by people who aren't Hasidic. They speak about what children learn in yeshivas and explain their religious customs. Mr. Judelson plays a young Hasidic student, a rabbi and a reporter for a Jewish publication.

Kevin Castel, 18, a senior who attends Spring Valley High School, is among several people who portray themselves. He tells of leaving Haiti following the 2010 earthquake to come to Spring Valley, where he had family. In his monologue, he said budget cuts in East Ramapo had resulted in his being assigned four study-hall periods. Mr. Castel and the other public-school student characters say the cuts come at their expense for the benefit of the yeshivas, an echo of real-life allegations voiced at school-board meetings.

Mr. Weissmandl said those claims were unfounded. "There is not a shred of evidence to support a claim of any such diversion of resources," he said.

Mr. Weissmandl said the district's budget problems stemmed from the state's funding formula for school districts and declining state aid. "The problems have nothing to do with who is serving on the board, it has to do with how public education and mandated services are funded by the Legislature," he said.

Also playing himself was Willie Trotman, president of the Spring Valley branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a vocal critic of the school board. He said he wanted others to understand the perspective of families whose children attend the public schools.

Mr. Judelson is "very effective at starting conversations," Mr. Trotman said. Even so, he said "East Ramapo" may not reach as wide an audience as Mr. Judelson had intended. "Is it preaching to the choir, so to speak?"

The play is scheduled to be performed at 7:30 p.m. April 28 at the Louis Kurtz Civic Center in Spring Valley and at 4:30 p.m. May 4 at the Fellowship Community in Chestnut Ridge.

So far, no one from the Hasidic community has seen the play, Mr. Judelson said. He said he was disappointed, but added he understood they may be suspicious of an outsider's attempt to portray them artistically.

"I tried to tell the most honest story that I possibly can," he said.

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