



Sukkot *Embodied*

Immersive theater experience will provide a new way of connecting to the holiday.

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It won't be in a sukkah, but the surroundings will give the sense of being in one with indoor-outdoor access.

It won't serve home-cooked holiday foods, but the catered dinner menu will offer variety and the essence of special tastes. And it won't focus on familiar traditions, but there will be a dramatic presence to take participants into what has been a storied tradition.

Ultimately, it will introduce a brand-new Sukkot-centered happening to young adults attending an innovative theater experience created by The Well in collaboration with The In[heir]itance Project, based in New York.

It's called *Embodied: Séance-Kabbalah-Sukkah* and invites young adults to join imaginative festivities in any one of three sessions scheduled Thursday-Saturday, Sept. 27-29, and divided between Temple Israel in West Bloomfield and the Next Space Gallery in Ferndale.

"I'm hoping participants will connect with the holiday of Sukkot in a different way using a medium that we don't see all that frequently in Metro Detroit — an immersive theater experience," says Rabbi Dan Horwitz, founding director of The Well, who is developing ways to build a sense of community among people in their 20s and 30s.

"Jon Adam Ross and Chantal Pavageaux, who are creating this event, are part of an avant-garde theater company, and they have received significant national recognition for their work. They push boundaries and facilitate conversations," Horwitz says. "The theater company is featured as one of the 50 most innovative and impactful Jewish organizations in the country, alongside The Well, in the 2018 *Slingshot Guide*."

While Slingshot initiatives have to do

with nurturing the talents of young adult members of the Jewish community, The In[heir]itance Project works with communities beyond those that are Jewish.

"Our organization got started in 2015, although Chantal and I had been working together for about 15 years doing work



TOP: The In[heir]itance Project performance of the Sarah-Hagar story from *Genesis* in Kanas City. ABOVE: Jon Adam Ross with a group of kids in Austin, Texas.

that engages communities by devising theater in different ways," explains Ross, managing director and founding artist.

"We have received a very generous grant from the [New York City-based] Covenant Foundation [which supports innovative programming for Jewish education] to create a national theater series of plays inspired by the Book of *Genesis*."

"From the start to the end of 2017, we devised plays in five different cities exploring stories from *Genesis* and putting those stories in conversation with the experiences of the people in the communities where we were making theater."

In Kansas, for example, where there were white supremacist shootings in the

Jewish and Muslim communities, the troupe explored with both of those communities their own inherited versions of the story of Sarah and Hagar, Abraham's wives, one the mother of Isaac and one the mother of Ishmael.

"In each community we go to, we do a similar process of pairing a sacred text with the narrative of what's happening or has happened in that community," Ross says. "We also do projects that are not biblical. "We have a broad definition of sacred texts. They do not have to be religious, but each has to be sacred to the community involved. When we engage in smaller projects, like the one in Detroit, sacred texts can be traditions of a holiday that we turn into experiences for that community."

For *Embodied*, the tradition at the center of the presentation is Ushpizin.

"Ushpizin, a Jewish mystical tradition, is the closest thing the Jewish tradition has to a séance, where we welcome back deceased ancestors among our honored guests in the sukkah," explains Horwitz, who suggests the concept could involve speaking about someone represented by an empty chair or using costumed characters engaged in bibliodrama techniques.

Local actors will be featured in the presentation with contributions from volunteering participants attending the events.

"In this instance, we started with research into the ritual of the holiday overall," says Pavageaux, artistic director and founding artist. "Next, we go through a process of absorption and classification,

looking for patterns in the research.

"Also, in this instance, it became breaking down the pattern of the way ancestors are called upon and breaking down the patterns of the dinner party to find connections. We shape the material to be more linear or more narrative depending on what the piece calls for in shaping the material," she adds.

"The final stages usually are design and presentation, finding ways to tell the story through the other activities happening in the room. It's a little more immersive because there's more than what's just happening [among the actors]. We like to think of it as being responsive. The works that we make acknowledge that it's happening in this moment in this room."

Horwitz commissioned the New York company and has been working with Ross since the two met at a Connecticut retreat hosted months ago by the Kenissa Network, which aims to bring innovative approaches to Jewish life.

"One goal of The Well is to create experiences easily replicable in other Jewish communities around the country," says Horwitz, who has been successful in achieving this goal with the development of a Passover-inspired escape room.

"We're excited to do research and development in Detroit that is then exported nationally." ♦

Details

Embodied: Séance-Kabbalah-Sukkah will be presented 6:30-8:30 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 27, at Temple Israel in West Bloomfield and 8:30-10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, Sept. 28-29, at the Next Space Gallery in Ferndale. \$34. Visit thewellembodied.eventbrite.com.