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A touch of sadness and a dollop of sentiment

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By **Melanie Dakin**

Jewish heritage is celebrated in the works of Wolf Mankowitz, and Harrow's Proscenium Theatre Company is preparing to stage not one, but three of his works in its next production at the Compass Theatre.

Director Anne Gerrard from Harrow Weald says she has long been attracted to Jewish culture.

"My husband is Jewish by birth and I grew up in Stamford Hill. Two of the cast are also Jewish so they appreciate and understand the nuances and two are not, so we've had a lot of interesting discussions about details in the text. In some scenes, there's a meeting of different cultures. We've discussed the relevance of having a culture behind you in difficult times."

Anne says she and her husband have been involved in productions with Proscenium since they moved to Harrow Weald 30 years ago, having met on the amateur circuit.

"We were both at Mountview in Crouch End. It's a drama school now but it used to be amateur repertory company. He was in Summer Of Seventeenth Doll and I was prompting and we've been together ever since.

"Both of our daughters are in the acting profession, they didn't stand a chance, poor things. Our youngest is a drama tutor at The Questors Theatre in Ealing, and the other is a singer and an actress and she's just completed a tour out in the Mediterranean."

This is Anne's third stint as a director. Her cast of four players will be taking on all the roles in all three short performances. Anne also links the plays through the use of shared props and repeated physical gestures, but each one is a separate story in its own right.

"The Hebrew Lesson is set in Cork in 1921 when the Black and Tans were very active and it's an exploration of Irish and Jewish culture," says Anne. "It Shouldn't Happen to a Dog is Mankowitz's take on the story of Jonah, and The Bespoke Overcoat is about a warehouse clerk who is suffering from the cold and persuades his friend to make him a new coat but events overtake them. It was also made into a film starring Alfie

Bass and David Kossoff.”

Wolf Mankowitz’s book *A Kid for Two Farthings*, based on the author’s experiences of growing up within a Jewish community in London’s East End, was made into a film by Carol Reed in 1955. Mankowitz wrote the screenplay and had later screenwriting successes with *The Millionairess*, *Casino Royale*, *Black Beauty* and *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*.

His book *Expresso Bongo*, was a success both on stage and film, and led to a promising theatrical career.

“He wrote many plays based on his Jewish heritage, some of which he described as being a typically over-long Jewish joke. His plays are witty and wistful; full of human desires and inadequacies. They make you laugh, but mostly they make you smile, often a little wryly. The plays bring gentle smiles tinged with sadness and a large dollop of sentiment, but there’s nothing wrong with that,” Anne concludes.

Proscenium presents Three Plays by Wolf Mankowitz at the Compass Theatre, Glebe Avenue, Ickenham from March 16-19, 7.45pm. Details 020 8866 7075/01895 673200

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