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Musician, writer stoke artistic alliance

BY ALICIA ZUCKERMAN
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Ten years ago violinist Gil Morgenstern and writer Jonathan Levi joined forces to create a touring stage adaptation of poet Robert Pinsky's translation of Dante's *Inferno*. Speaking at the work's world premiere in New York, Pinsky, then U.S. poet laureate, had referred to Dante's battle with depression by quoting from the Talmud: "The injury others do unto us is as nothing compared to the injury we do unto ourselves."

Although Pinsky could not have guessed it at the time, such juxtaposition of the ancient interpretive writings of Jewish law and customs with an allegorical masterpiece from the Middle Ages foreshadowed the sort of cultural, geographic and historical blending that characterizes Nine Circles Chamber Theatre, which Morgenstern and Levi created in the wake of their Dante collaboration.

The New York-based theater group, named for the *Inferno*'s fearsome circles of you-know-where, will be in South Florida Thursday night to perform a work Morgenstern and Levi call *Sacred Landscapes* at Temple Israel of Greater Miami. Like all Nine Circles productions, it focuses on exploring the intersections between music and words.

"When one thinks of the typical -- valuable, but typical -- programming at synagogues, one thinks, on one end of the spectrum, Jewish folk music, klezmer, to . . . the music of the concentration-camp composers," Morgenstern says, "and then, in between, any piece which was written by a Jewish composer. Of course that's terribly important. It's also been done. There's a larger audience and larger spectrum of programming out there."

Which is why *Sacred Landscapes* pairs a string quartet by the contemporary Chinese-born U.S. composer Zhou Long with text by the 19th century Romantic/Gothic novelist Mary Shelley. It sends excerpts from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* fluttering through movements of Dvorák's



American String Quartet and underscores a newspaper story by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist John F. Burns with a performance of David Wilde's *The Cellist of Sarajevo*. A work by the Shanghai-born composer Bright Sheng finds its place here; so does a composition by Osvaldo Golijov, who grew up in an Eastern European Jewish family in Argentina.

As the program unspools, connections emerge: the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and the erasure of Jewish culture in Sicily link to the ethnic cleansing in Sarajevo in the 1990s and post-9/11 Native American wisdom about the value of life.

Sacred Landscapes is part of Nine Circles' "Reflections" series, which was launched at Temple Israel last spring and will include three more concerts in 2008. The series aspires to broaden the intellectual and emotional horizons of typical synagogue audiences while engaging non-Jewish arts lovers in a sort of cultural commentary.

"There's an old story my parents used to say all the time," Morgenstern says. "The Jewish God says 'You can argue with me. You can disagree with me. You can get angry with me. But just don't ignore me.' The idea of commenting and questioning -- if we take that and apply it to a community larger than just the Jewish community, I think we'll have an entry point for people who would not on another occasion think about stepping into a temple -- Jews as well as non-Jews."

Morgenstern's parents fled Vienna and settled in New York as World War II began. His father, a physician and amateur violinist, enlisted in the U.S. Army and served in Europe as a surgeon during and after the war. When he came home, Morgenstern says, he didn't talk much about the war or the Holocaust, but "there was just no time when it wasn't lurking in the background. I have to say that there's almost nothing that I do in and out of the arts that isn't somehow informed by that experience."

Even though Morgenstern insists that he doesn't consciously gravitate toward Jewish questions, "the traditions and the culture are so tied up together that it ends up being a typical -- in my view -- Jewish scenario, which is that we're always questioning and talking and commenting. There's the one hand, and there's the other hand, and there's always a third hand, which is the nature of Judaism. . . . We're trying to engage an audience to go home and do more than say they heard some pretty playing, hopefully, but to think about context and maybe shed some light on these works of art."

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