

## AMERICAN THEATRE MAGAZINE

### **X Marks the Spot**

by Marie Kohler

"I see Yiddish theatre as a newly discovered ancestor of our company," remarks John Schneider, director, actor, playwright and visionary. He's talking about Milwaukee's Theater X, an outfit that's a little in the ancestor line in itself, boasting a 30-year history of internationally recognized avant-garde productions that have made it a veritable granddaddy of American experimental theatre. Now, in line with its time-honored mission of creating original works, the company is staging its Wisconsin heritage with **TO LIFT OURSELVES UP: A HISTORY OF YIDDISH THEATRE IN MILWAUKEE**. The play will be featured in the annual Milwaukee International Arts Festival, Feb. 18-March 12.

Written and directed by Schneider, the play is the third in a recent series of Theater X productions about the city's past. As with the 1997 **GHOST STORIES** (a survey of ethnic experience) and the 1998 **JAZZ** (about the lives and art of African Americans), **TO LIFT OURSELVES UP** focuses on a tiny area of Milwaukee: the intersection of 8th and Walnut Streets, an area settled in turn by Native Americans, Germans, Jews and African-Americans before it succumbed to 1960s urban renewal. Weaving together sections of vintage plays and project-generated interviews, Schneider's script illuminates this little-known local history in the context of larger social and aesthetic movements, focusing particularly on a once-thriving local Yiddish troupe: the Perhifft Players.

"Perhifft presented plays for the Eastern European Jews in Milwaukee that examined where they'd come from, where they were, what they'd lost, what they'd gained, where they appeared to be heading, and how they might preserve their integrity and honor," Schneider says. He views the Yiddish company as a forerunner of Theater X, which these days mounts a mix of productions—from original works to late night presentations to, occasionally, mainstream plays.

"I see Perhifft as a group that tilled the soil in Milwaukee," Schneider notes appreciatively, "so that a theatre as stubbornly noncommercial as ours could survive as long as it has."

February 2000