



review / 'General and the Jew'

By Leo Seligson

"The General and the Jew," which had its premiere last night at the Arena Players Theater in East Farmingdale, is set in "Fiddler on the Roof" country, a 1910 *shtetl* (small village) in Czarist Russia where Jews live in constant fear of pogroms and continual hope of emigration to America. There the similarity ends. "Fiddler" was a musical. "The General and the Jew" is a libretto. With its epic portrayal of good and evil, magical overtones and background interludes of Russian and Jewish music, the evening is soon awash in melodramatic posturing worthy of an opera.

The plot has a storybook simplicity. Mayer Schindel, a Jew in his 20s, has returned to his family after spending most of his life in the Czar's Army, which conscripted him as a child. His close freindship with a Russian general comes in handy when a malicious cossack, newly appointed to head the police in the area, throws young Vulf Brodsky, one of the townspeople, into jail for disobeying a minor, long-unenforced ordinance barring Jews from peddling at the fair in Minsk. Enlisting the clout of his friend, the general, Schindel gets the man freed and also gets hold of 250 black-market emigration papers that will enable his townspeople to leave for America. He is a hero. But Ivan Ivanov, the villainous cossack, is furious and vows vengeance upon courageous Mayer Schindel, once his protector, the old, terminally ill general, dies.

If this sounds like pretty heavy going, it is. But it is to playwright Arthur Schwartz' credit that he displays an ear for dialogue and an eye for the dramatic which breathes life into his otherwise bigger-than-life, cardboard charac-

ters. Some of the lines which caught my fancy: Schindel's mother, mocking some of his inflated plans, says: "Listen to him. From the air he makes knishes." Or in the realm of epithets, which abound: Schindel says: No tyranny is stronger than determination; no coercion is stronger than will. Ivanov, always constumed in some shade of devil red, wastes few words. "A law is a law," he says.

The play's biggest trouble is that its most interesting aspect gets short shrift. That is the relationship between the old general, Alexis Tarkov, who is a Christian, and Schindel, who has served him as an adjutant. It is made clear that that a strong father-son relationship developed but why and how is a mystery. The general's own family, if he has one, is never explained and the general emerges merely as a handy plot device. However, he is potentially one of the play's most interesting characters. As it is, Schwartz, has partially developed him into a three-dimensional character who offers the evening's only comic relief. He needles his doctor, saying he carries the smell of death with him; and, as a man who prides himself as having always done things on schedule, he is offended by talk that he may live longer than expected.

But, like Schindel; the rabbi, Reb Zofsky, and a few other characters, the general often goes on talking long after he has anything to say. Under the direction of Frederic DeFeis, the play attains tension and excitement in its later scenes. The cast is uniformly good. Leathery old James Daviies is well cast as the general, despite a faint shakiness with his lines last night. His booming bass projects conviviality as well as command. John Monteleone is an engaging Mayer Schindel and George Anderson a hiss-worthy Ivanov. "The General and the Jew" runs through Nov. 25. /■