

The Alef Beys—The Alphabet

(A fantastical play in two acts)

Characters:

Dvorele

Her mother

The alef beys personified

Costume directions:

The costumes can be made from white muslin. The costume must give the illusion of a leaf from a book. Therefore, it should not appear fashioned or seamed. Two straight lines to the knee, not too wide. Sew the seam wide on the right side. Above it, leave open a space for the hands to go through. Leave an equal-sized slit for the head to go through.

Paint the letter that the costume represents on it prominently, in lively colors. In front, the printed letter; on the back, the cursive. To keep the costume from folding, sew stiff paper under the left side.

The hat can be made from paper, formed as a pyramid in front and back. Paint the letter on the pyramid, very decoratively, adorned with gold. The hat gives the illusion of a fantastic crown.

Act One

A child's room. Dvorele sits with a Yiddish textbook in her hand. She is very interested in it. A record is playing in the next room: "The Dance of the Flutes" from Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite.

Mama's voice: Dvorele! You didn't finish your milk and your egg. Come, eat up! and finish eating!

Dvorele: Mama, come see how I can already read. (*She sings the “Dance of the Flutes”.*)

Mama’s voice: I’m warning you, come and eat!

Dvorele: (*Doesn’t listen, picks up her chalkboard and chalk, writes and calls out*)
An alef! A beys! A gimel! A dalet!

Mama’s voice: Dvorele, come and eat! Come right now!

Dvorele: I won’t drink the milk and I won’t eat the egg! I won’t! (*Sings and writes*)

Mama’s voice: Dvorele! Don’t give me a hard time, come in here!

Dvorele: (*Doesn’t listen, speaks to herself*) A yud is just a little thing, I call him little yud. Yudele kopudele—little yud with a little head. (*Mama enters, angrily*)

Mama: A seven year-old girl, and she can’t put down her toys!

Dvorele: (*Insulted*) But I wasn’t playing with toys. I’m teaching myself how to read and write on a chalkboard. (*She is near tears. Mama sees the chalkboard, calms down*)

Mama: Did you write this?

Dvorele: (*Whimpering*) Yes. I can write all the letters and I can read (*breaks into a sob*) and I hate milk!

Mama: Okay, okay, it’s alright. You won’t drink milk today. Show me how you write.

Dvorele: (*Doesn’t let up, still crying as she writes*) This is a lamed. A lamed is tall and beautiful. And this is a mem.

Mama: Very nice, my child. You're really learning to write. You'll be able to write a letter to Grandma, and she'll send you a pretty present.

Dvorele: (*Forgets to cry, cheers up*) What kind of present will she send?

Mama: I don't know, but she'll be so delighted. I'm sure she'll send you a present, a *matone*.

Dvorele: Mama, present is such a pretty word. Let me write it for you. (*she writes*) *Ma-ton-e*.

Mama: My child, *matone* is a Hebrew word. Here's how to write it. (*she writes it*)

Dvorele: That's not right, Mama. You forgot a pasekh alef, a komets alef and an ayin.

Mama: This is how it's written in Hebrew. It's an old language. But, put down the writing now and practice piano. It's getting late. Your friends will be here soon for your birthday party. You still have to put on your party dress.

Dvorele: But Mama, I don't want to practice piano. I hate it.

Mama: Please don't argue! Go sit down at the piano.

Dvorele: (*begins to cry*) I don't want to practice. The hands on the clock move so slowly. I won't!

Mama: Fine, don't. I'll call your friends and tell them not to come today. You won't have a party, and I won't take you to the theater on Sunday.

(She exits. Dvorele sits and cries with the chalkboard at her breast and the chalk in her hand. The recording of "The Dance of the Flutes" plays again. Dvorele loses the urge to cry. It tires her out. She falls asleep under the spell of the music and the chalkboard falls from her breast and the chalk from her hand)

Act Two

The setting is the same as the first act, only larger. In the background something is covered with a colorful curtain. Dvorele sits and sleeps as she did at the end of the first act.

The music plays the melody of Warshawsky's "Oyfn Pripetchik". The curtain opens and shows a textbook, as big as a door. The music changes to song number two from Lazar Saminsky's book, Ten Jewish Songs. The alef dances out of the book to the first melody, sings a verse to the second melody, dances to the third. The same thing happens with all the letters. Each time a letter dances after its verse, all the other letters on the stage dance with it. The letters go around one after the other in the order of the alef-beys. They stand around in a half-circle. They come out singing and dancing with their hands spread apart. They scarcely move their feet or their heads. They hold themselves in a mechanical way, like dancing marionettes.

When all of them have appeared and finished singing and dancing, they drop hands, become more human, dance together to the fourth melody from the song and then to the whole song.

After dancing, they stand again in a half-circle. Following the order of the alef-beys, each letter stands up, says its words, and remains standing.

Alef: We're all good letters, except for bad boy beys.

Beys: Yes, I'm the beys, but I won't be a bother.

Gimel: No one can write "good" without me.

Dalet: There once was a girl who drew me so badly, all the girls in the class laughed at her madly.

Everyone: Khakhakhakhakha!

Hey: Louder! Louder!

Everyone: (*louder*) Khakhakhakhakha!

Zayin: I am a zayin, I help you say zoom. I must zay something, they zay me through the teeth: zzzzz!

Vov: Vere? Vat? Ven? Vere does this happen?

Khes: The Khayes, Khaims, and Khanas. If I didn't exist, they would need other names.

Tes: Don't be so snobby. If you didn't exist, they would write their names with a khof.

Yud: Yes, yes, yes, but what would happen if I didn't exist?

Khof: Khakhakhakhakha! Khakhakhakhakha! It would be really bad if we didn't exist.

Lamed: I am the proudest, the lamed, which we need for "life".

Mem: Moses, our leader, put me first in his name, and now other Moseses all do the same.

Nun: And the Mollys, and the Mayas and the Mindls and the Maxes and the Matthews and the Michaels and the Miryams?

Mem: Them too.

Samekh: I have a riddle for you. What is this? I stand in front, behind me stands "emele"?

Everyone: A kind of dance, a semele!

Ayin: And who's there in that dance three times?

Everyone: You, the ayin. Let's all yell: ayin, ayin, ayin!

Fey: I am a pey and a fey. I work for two.

Tsadik: Without me no one can count to two.

Kuf: Without me no one can do anything.

Reysh: Children, think! I am a reysh but not an r, you understand?

Shin: Is peace a beautiful word?

Everyone: A very beautiful word.

Shin: Well, I am the first letter in sholem, peace.

Sof: Like the fey, I am two, a tof and a sof. I always come late, at the very end.

Everyone: Dalet, Dalet, Dalet!

(The dalet comes forward and stands in the foreground)

Everyone: Beys, Beys, Beys!

(The beys stands next to the dalet)

Oy, Oy, Oy!

(The vov next to the beys)

Reysh, Reysh, Reysh!

(The reysh next to the vov)

Lamed, Lamed, Lamed!

(The lamed next to the hey)

Ayin, Ayin, Ayin!

(The ayin next to the hey)

Everyone: Dvorele! Dvorele! Dvorele!

The music plays “The Dance of the Flutes”. The letters in the word “Dvorele” dance.

After the dance, Babes in Toyland by Victor Herbert plays. The seven letters march one after another into their place in the alef beys, which have remained open for them.

Everyone joins hands, becomes robotic, marches to the music in a beautiful, winding march. The music stops in the middle of a phrase. The letters remain standing, dropping their hands.

Dvorele stirs, half asleep, half awake. She goes to the book.

Dvorele: The whole book is blank. There’s nothing to learn.

Letters: *(some abruptly, monotonous and robotic)* We will return to the book. You will learn our names.

Dvorele: But I already know you well.

Letters: We’ll bring you great wisdom. You’ll learn a lot.

Dvorele: But I don’t like wisdom.

Letters: Do you like foolishness?

Dvorele: No.

Letters: Then you must choose, foolishness or wisdom.

Dvorele: (*thinks awhile*) I would rather have wisdom.

Letters: Then we'll go back to the book and we'll bring you wisdom.

Dvorele: In that textbook? I don't want it. That's the first book. I want the second and the third and the fourth.

Letters: That's great! You'll find us in all Jewish books.

Dvorele: (*joyous*) All of them?

Letters: All of them.

Dvorele: And you'll sing and dance and dress up?

Letters: We don't sing and dance. We speak quietly and we dress in dark colors. But you'll love us anyway.

Dvorele: Why will I love you?

Letters: Because the more people know us, the more they love us.

The Remaining Letters: Of course! Of course!

Dvorele: I will love you. I love you already. Don't go away. Stay here with me.

Letters: We can't stay the way we appear to you now. We have to go back into the book. But you'll see us whenever you open a book.

Dvorele: Maybe you can stay for my birthday party? My friends don't want to know about you. They think you're not nice. Let them see how beautiful you are.

Letters: They can't see us.

Dvorele: Why not?

Letters: Because they don't read like Jews.

Dvorele: How do you read like a Jew?

Letters: If you feel Jewish in your heart, you read like a Jew.

Dvorele: But you read with your eyes, not with your heart.

Letters: You read with both.

Dvorele: I didn't know that. But, stay for my birthday party. My mama says there won't be a party, but there will be.

Letters: How do you know?

Dvorele: Because my mama says a lot of things and then she doesn't do them. Anyway, she already baked a cake and bought treats. For sure, there'll be a party. Stay, please! It'll be fun!

Letters: We can't stay. Goodbye, Dvorele. Have a happy birthday, and many happy returns! Look for us in books, with love.

Dvorele: Yes, I love you. I'll look for you in all the Jewish books.

(Babes in Toyland begins to play. They drop hands, become stiff and robotic and march into the book. Dvorele watches them and waves to them.)

Curtain

The verses that the alef beys sing:

Alef: I am the first
Of the letters to stand.

Without me, alef beys
Can't be a band.

(dances)

Beys: They call me bad boy
And I don't know why
My heart's a small dot
I'm a good-letter guy.

(dances)

Gimel: Gimel's the letter
Whose name has no rhyme.
I searched the whole world
Now, to heaven I'll climb.

(dances)

Daled: Daled's my name
In English, that's D
It stands for Dvoyra
In Hebrew, that's "bee".

Hey: We need to have hey
For "have" and for "hear"
I love to be hey
I'm glad, is that clear?

(dances)

Vov: I'm thin as a stick
A puny-sized bird
If they don't draw me curved
I stand straight in a word.

(dances)

Zayin: They have to have me
 To be and to see
 Without me the letters
 Would zayin-less be.

(dances)

Khet: I am a proud person
 From times long ago
 Don't change me to khof
 To that I say, "no".

(dances)

Tes: Inside the theater
 I stand for the show
 I cannot sit down
 I cannot just go.

(dances)

Yud: I never drank milk
 And so, I stayed tiny
 But alef beys needs me
 The letters stay by me.

Khof My name is khof
 It's not easy to say
 When I wear a dot
 I sound like a K.

(dances)

Lamed: I am the lamed
In cursive I'm spare
It's my habit to rotate
To here and to there.

(dances)

Mem: I've come from Egypt
I fill major space
My final mem brother
In words, takes last place.

(dances)

Nun: I'm a scribble to write
I'm a little bit curved
But at a word's ending
I stand straight, no swerve.

(dances)

Samekh: People need me
For the language of Jews-s-s
With the Litvaker s-s-s-set
I get lots-s-s-s of us-s-s-se.

(dances)

Ayin: I am an ayin
And that is my name.
It's really an old one
It's mine, just the same.

(dances)

Fey: From frost and from fire
 I'm known as a fey.
 If I wear a small dot
 Then I am a pey.

(dances)

Tsadik: They call me tsadik
 And I don't know why
 I'm not so religious
 I don't pray and cry.

(dances)

Kuf: You need me to consider
 Kuf is my name.
 Alone I am nothing
 No head on my frame.

(dances)

Reysh: I hate to dress up,
 I'm just reysh, so plain
 If you don't draw me right
 You'll fill me with pain.

(dances)

Shin: I'm a proud, lovely shin
 A thing of great beauty
 With three clever heads

Thinking's my duty.

(dances)

Tof: In our alef beys
I stand at the end.
But I begin Torah
The tof, Torah's friend.

(dances)