

PLAYBILL®

HIS-STORY

Jake Ehrenreich distills a lifetime of experience into his one-man show at the Lamb's, *A Jew Grows in Brooklyn*

by Jerry Tallmer

They don't play much baseball in Wloclawek, Poland; at least they didn't when Avram Jojne Ehrenreich was a young man there, back before Hitler, before the war. Around a quarter of a century later, Abraham Jonah Ehrenreich (same fellow), having survived the Holocaust via work camps in Siberia, was at home in Brooklyn, watching a Mets game on television at the urging of his eight-year-old son. "About the fifth or sixth inning," says that son—says it from the stage of the Lamb's Theatre—"no score, a real pitchers' duel, my father turns to me and says, 'What kind of game is this baseball, two people play and eight people watch?'"

And in that simple question, you have all the difference between generations, languages, Americanizations and cultures.

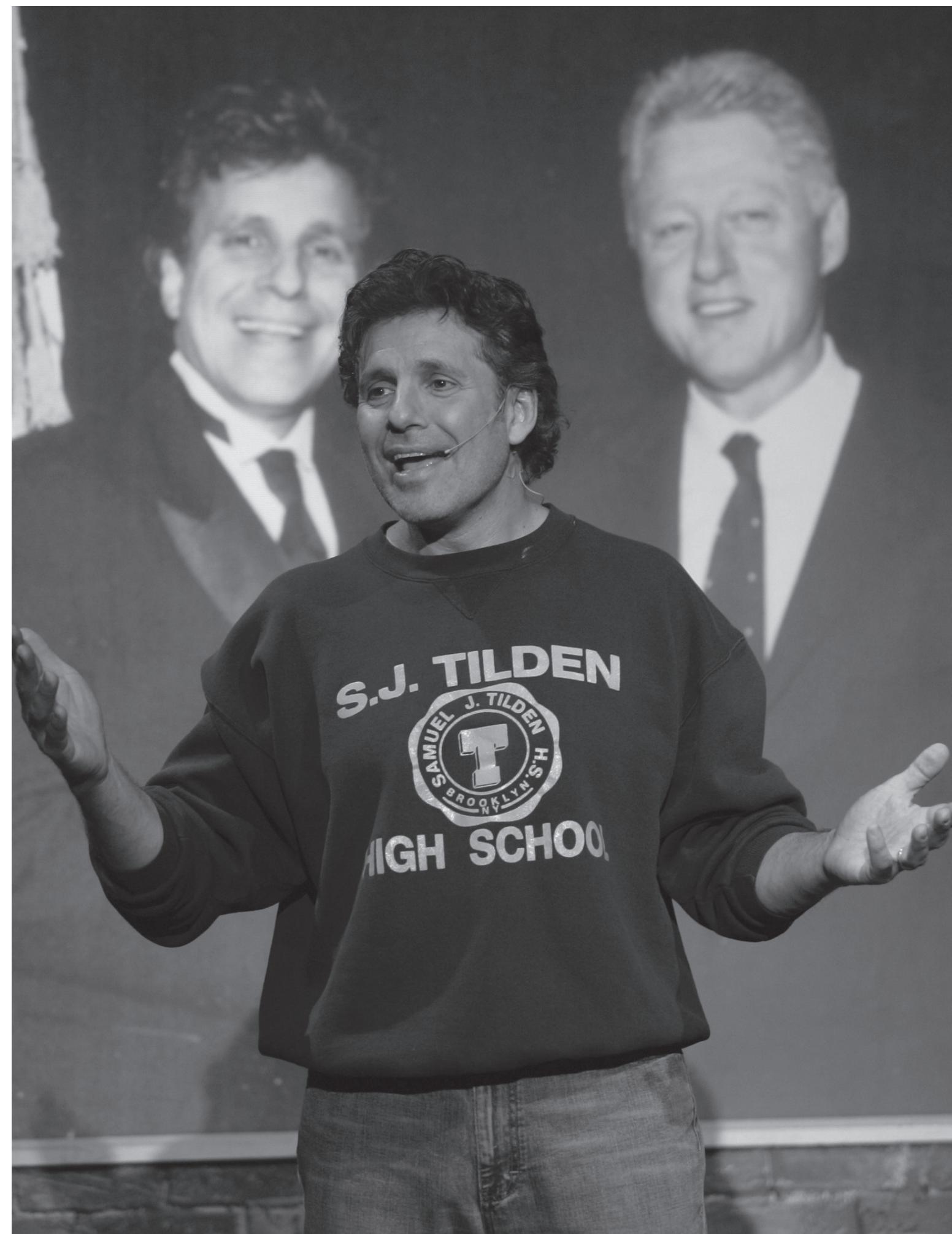
Eight-year-old Yankle Yitzchok Ehrenreich—Jake Ehrenreich to you and to himself—would grow up to write and perform *A Jew Grows in Brooklyn*, which spreads out from a set representing 603 East 91st Street, East Flatbush, circa 1964, to baseball to high school to the Holocaust to the Catskills to Ringo Starr to love and marriage and Jake's own eight-year-old son, and back again, complete with song, slide projections, gag lines, griefs, memories and plenty of energy. "You think I could make this stuff up?" says Ehrenreich.

He didn't even have to make it up that he was in the same class at Tilden High as Al Sharpton; was not only in the same class but on the same team at Tilden as Willie Randolph, today's manager of the New York Mets. Jake's baseball career ended when his curveball went wacko; his career as a drummer ("I was banging on desks all my life") continues to this day and show; it has included a hitch "singing as Ringo, playing as Ringo, moving as Ringo" in the international tour of *Beatlemania*.

It was while Ehrenreich was also starring, years ago, in *The Golden Land*—a musical

about the 1940's Jewish hegira—that "what dawned on me, and frustrated me, was this was my parents' story, not my story at all. I started to ask myself: What is my story?"

Earlier drafts of *A Jew Grows in Brooklyn* left out some essential details: a mother, now dead, who developed Alzheimer's at age 50; Jake's two sisters, one now dead, also victims of Alzheimer's in their fifties. "I could have written the saddest show in the world



Jake Ehrenreich in *A Jew Grows in Brooklyn*

but my father, though frail, is alive at 87. I see him every day. I have a lovely wife, Lisa, who helped me write this show; a fine son, Dovy; a wonderful life. A friend said, 'Look, it's all part of the story, put it in.' So I did."

What has most impressed Ringo Jake? "The 19-year-old kids who come to the show because they want to hear their parents' music." He gives it to them. He even gives them "Sing Sing Sing"—à la Krupa, not Starr.