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WORLD OF OUR FATHERS

Harcourt Brace Jovanovich

New York and London



1976

The Yiddish Theatre

The public is always and everywhere the same: intelligent and foolish, cordial and pitiless. . . . You are outraged because it laughs uproariously at flat jokes and applauds resounding phrases, but then it is none other than that same foolish public that fills the house when *Othello* is put on and, when it listens to the opera *Érgerie Onégin*, weeps as Tatyana writes that letter of hers.

—CHEKHOV

IN THE Yiddish theatre as it began to appear during the early 1880's the East Side found its first major outlet for communal emotion. This was a theatre of vivid trash and raw talent, innocent of art, skipping rapidly past the problems of immigrant life, and appealing to rich new appetites for spectacle, declamation, and high gesture. To the gray fatigue of Jewish life it brought the gaudy colors of Yiddish melodrama. It was a theatre superbly alive and full of claptrap, close to the nerve of folk sentiment and outrageous in its pretensions to serious culture.

The writers and actors of this early Yiddish theatre understood instinctively that their audiences, seemingly lost forever in the darkness of the sweatshop, wanted most of all the consolations of glamour. They wanted spectacles of Jewish heroism, tableaux of ancient and eloquent kings, prophets, and warriors; music, song, dance, foolery (*a bis! freylakhs*, a bit of fun) evoking memories of old-country ways; actors of a majesty and actresses of a fierceness beyond their own reach. In exploiting these desires, the writers and actors betrayed a mixture of shrewdness and innocence that would often characterize Yiddish theatre in its later, more imposing days.

Contempt for "Moshe," the ill-lettered immigrant, soon began to be heard around the Yiddish theatres, and actors who were themselves greenhorns with little theatrical or any other culture started to assume aristocratic poses. Yet in spirit and mind they were still very close to "Moshe"—that was a good part of their strength as performers.

In the opening years of the Yiddish theatre, hardly a glimmer of serious realism could break through. Realism seldom attracts uncultivated audiences: it is a sophisticated genre resting on the idea that a controlled exposure to a drab reality will yield pleasure. To the masses of early Jewish immigrants, most of whom had never before seen a professional stage production, realism seemed dry, redundant, without savor. What stirred their hearts was a glimpse of something that might transcend the wretchedness of the week: a theatre bringing a touch of the Sabbath, even if a debased or vulgarized Sabbath.

In the experience of the east European Jews, Yiddish theatre had deep roots but only a brief history. Among the Jews in the Diaspora theatricality had long been suspect as a threat to social discipline, yet it had all sorts of oblique ways of creeping into their culture: through "the high-church impressiveness of the reading of the Torah," the virtuoso performances of cantors and preachers, "the protocol of the Passover feasts, with the theatricality of suspense in the opening of the door for the invisible prophet Elijah." During the Purim festival, when moral constraints were relaxed and drinking and practical jokes tolerated, it became customary for comic-heroic performances to be improvised. By the early nineteenth century the *purim-shpil*, composed in homely Yiddish, was a regular feature of that holiday. But there were really no professional Yiddish actors until the middle of the nineteenth century, when groups of minstrels, acrobats, and singers began to wander from *shetl* to *shetl*, half-welcomed and half-scorned as ragamuffins of the culture. One such group, the popular Broder Zinger (folk singers from Brody, a Galician town), introduced a few strands of dialogue as continuity between songs. They were then persuaded by Abraham Goldfaden, a writer of Yiddish songs, to do a simple performance of a play he had composed; this performance, which took place in 1876 at Jassy, Romania, in a wine cellar, marks a formative point in the history of Yiddish theatre. Goldfaden wrote a good many other plays rich in folk motifs and enlivened with charming songs, some of which like "Rozhinkes mit mandlen" ("Raisins and Almonds"), became in effect folk songs. A few theatrical troupes, harassed by czarist officials and disdained by the rabbinate, were formed, soon forced to break up, and sometimes formed again; but in truth, the birth of Yiddish theatre occurred almost simultaneously in eastern Europe and the United States, with many of the more ambitious actors opting for the freedom and supposed riches of the new world.

The first Yiddish stage production in New York was held on August 12, 1882, at Turn Hall on East Fourth Street between Second and Third ave-

nues. A troupe of six men and two women, supported by local musicians and a choir from a nearby synagogue, put on Goldfaden's *The Sorceress*, "an operetta in 5 acts and 9 tableaux." Since no one in New York had a text of the play, it was patched together, like the choreography of a ballet, from the performers' memories of a European production. One of the actors, a plump sixteen-year-old named Boris Thomashefsky, would soon become a matinee idol, and in the memoirs he wrote many years later he tells a vivid story about hordes of Orthodox Jews angrily protesting the very idea of a stage production; the prima donna, Madame Sarah Krantzfeld, being pressured to drop out entirely; and he, Thomashefsky, racing to her apartment a few minutes before the show was to start and begging her to appear: "We will starve, they'll lynch us." The prima donna's husband, according to Thomashefsky, then explained: "They promised me a candy store and even a few hundred dollars if my wife leaves the play." Who "they" were is not clear: apparently German Jews or Orthodox east European Jews grouped around the newspaper the *Yiddishe Gazett*. An even greater bribe, continues Thomashefsky, persuaded Madame to come to Turn Hall. But by then it was quite late, the musicians had left, Madame refused to sing without them, and the audience hissed. A few weeks later Thomashefsky had to lead his fellow artists to employment in a cigarette factory.

The historian of Yiddish theatre, B. Gorin, concluded some time later that Thomashefsky's account had been exaggerated: there were neither crowds nor riots nor intimidations, and as for Madame Krantzfeld, she had simply been inconvenienced by a cold. Yet Thomashefsky's version, if weak on facts, touched a certain truth. For there was opposition from Orthodox Jews, who looked upon theatre as a shameful trifling, and from German Jews, who feared that the coarse downtown brethren might embarrass them. One of the early Yiddish companies, reports Gorin, "behaved badly behind the scenes," becoming known as a "hangout for loose women," so that "respectable people kept away from the theatre as if it were a plague."

They could not keep away for long. From start to finish, the theatre would be their great cultural passion. In a few months a regular Yiddish company began to perform on weekends at the Bowery Garden, with the puffy young Thomashefsky delighting audiences through renditions of women's parts. (Actresses were still scarce: respectable fathers forbade their daughters to go on stage.) The repertory of this little company consisted mainly of comedies by Goldfaden, the most popular Yiddish playwright in eastern Europe but never, once in America, able to adapt himself to the rough conditions of New York theatre. Battering on the whole of European drama and opera, taking his tunes impartially from Offenbach and synagogue chants,* Goldfaden wrote genre pieces that shrewdly sketched the

* "Almost all the music in the early Yiddish theatre," writes Joseph Rumshinsky, the veteran Jewish composer, "was based on cantorial compositions. . . . Abraham Goldfaden was not a professional musician; he played his melodies with one finger,

major east European Jewish character types. Among his plays of these early years were *The Capricious Bride*, *The Fanatic*, *The Sorceress*, and, a particular success, *Shtendrik*, an amusing folk comedy featuring a hapless nanny who would become a stock presence in Yiddish farce. Soon there were two, sometimes three, competing companies at the Bowery Garden and the National and Thalia theatres. Most of the actors shuttled between shop and stage, according to where they could earn their bread.

In May 1884 there arrived in New York the Russian-Jewish Opera Company, led by Max Karp and Morris Silberman, the first more or less professional group to perform in Yiddish; its nine members had had some training with Goldfaden in Russia and among them was a "company dramatist," Joseph Lateiner, who had an acquaintance with European languages and a facility for twisting European plots to Jewish ends. The actors took themselves with a certain seriousness, announcing that Madame Sonya Heine would play feminine leads, Madame Esther Silberman supporting "soubrettes," Lateiner "serious youths to old men," and that Morris Heine would be "chief comic." The East Side was captivated, and even the stodgy *Yiddishe Gazett* acknowledged some delight.

The Vital Hacks

For the next decade or so, the Yiddish theater was dominated by two rival companies led by their dramatists, Joseph Lateiner at the Oriental Theatre and "Professor" Morris Horowitz* at the Romanian Opera House. Indefatigable hacks, Lateiner and Horowitz turned out more than two hundred plays, usually naive mixtures of historical pageantry, topical reference,** family melodrama, and musical comedy. Because the audience for

but he had a natural sense of rhythm. He surrounded himself with cantors and singers, but his chief collaborators were two musicians, Michael Finkelstein and Arnold Perlmuter, who had been choirboys and later violin players in orchestras. Thus they knew both liturgical and secular music, mainly German and French operettas. They introduced German and French marches and waltzes into the historical plays of Goldfaden, Horowitz, and Lateiner. This created a conglomeration of cantorial prayers, secular marches and waltzes, with occasional original numbers by Goldfaden."

* A self-bestowed title that would work wonders in gaining the respect of Jewish audiences. Other "Professors" soon appeared. As late as 1937, when Zalme Zilber-zweig published his bilingual *Album of the Yiddish Theatre*, he still referred to Horowitz as "Professor."

** In the forgotten novel *Joseph Zalmoneh* (1893), Edward King describes a Yiddish play called *Judith and Holofermus*. The complicated plot has a noble Jewess slipping into the camp of the evil king in order to destroy him; at one point Holofermus's eunuch Mufri—"bulbous beard, parchment face sown with comical wrinkles, puffy lips"—"came forward to the footlights, and, stepping out of the historical

Yiddish theatre was still small, lengthy runs were impossible and each company needed a large repertoire—though what it billed as different plays would often be no more than a new title, a few twists of action, and a fresh song or two tacked onto the same old plot. Lateiner and Horowitz could produce a play in a few days, Horowitz boasting he could write one in a single night—he would sketch the central situation and speeches, and his actors could easily fill in the rest. Lateiner leaned toward the “romantic” play, usually an adaptation from Russian or German nineteenth-century drama sprinkled with homely Jewish touches, while Horowitz specialized in bombastic and wildly inaccurate renderings of Jewish history. Writing about figures like the Biblical Joseph, King Solomon, Judas Maccabeus, and Bar Kokhba, Horowitz perfected a Yiddish subgenre he called the “historical opera.” When business was bad, competition between the two companies grew murderous. Placards smeared rival managers, actors were stolen away, and titles were pilfered. In 1887 Lateiner’s company produced *King Solomon’s Judgment*, an immediate success that ran for two weeks; a month later Horowitz countered with *King Solomon, or the Love of the Song of Songs*, which ran for four weeks. When Horowitz’s company produced *Don Isaac Abravanel*, “an Oriental opera in four acts” that had nothing to do with the historical figure after whom it was named, Lateiner’s company countered with *Don Joseph Abravanel*, reputedly authentic.

Performances tended to be long, usually lasting until midnight. Jewish audiences relished the details, often demanded that songs be repeated, took special amusement from couplets denouncing rival companies, shouted denunciations of villains, and showed no displeasure with the mixture of tragedy and vaudeville, pagant and farce—nor even with the intrusion of personal affairs in the midst of performances (“occasionally an actor would invite the public to his wedding, or inform his audience about his relations with his wife”). Remembering how hard it had been to earn their few pennies, the audiences liked to feel they were getting a “full” evening. For lovers of Yiddish, the language of these plays was excruciating: Lateiner and Horowitz gave their “high” characters speeches in *daytshmerish*, a heavily Germanized and pompous version of Yiddish, while reserving what Horowitz called *kuglsprakh* (“pudding language,” demotic Yiddish) for the “low” characters. When Jacob Gordin introduced realistic motifs into the Yiddish theatre during the 1890’s, Horowitz complained that he used the same language on the stage as in daily life: “If Gordin were to produce *Hamlet* he would let him talk Hester Street language! Did you ever hear a prince talking Yiddish? A prince must talk German.”

When one of his scripts was not quite ready, Horowitz would dress up

play, sang, now in guttural tones, now in highly pitched key, a ‘topical song’ which discussed everyday occurrences in East Broadway . . . the roar of applause which loud and prolonged.” King’s description suggests he may have had in mind the gifted comic Zelig Mogulesco.

as King Solomon or Maimonides, step out at the end of the third act, deliver a speech for three quarters of an hour on the plight of the Jews, somehow tie it all in with his play, and top the evening with the massed company singing a Hebrew hymn or Yiddish tune.

It was the actors who ruled this theatre, enthroning themselves as aristocrats of the immigrant world. “Once, in the summer of 1888,” recalled Abraham Cahan, he saw the actor Jacob Adler “strolling along East Broadway—tall, wearing a high hat and long coat and carrying a fancy cane in his hand. I had to stop and watch—not Adler but the people who followed him, their faces shining with adoration and enchantment and awe.” Most of the plays were little more than occasions for display by the actors. Leon Kobrin, whose realistic plays would be produced somewhat later, found the early Yiddish stage a place in which “clowns and comedians with glued-on beards and earlocks, sometimes in long coats but mainly in ‘royal’ robes with tin swords and crowns of gold paper” declaimed at the top of their lungs. The historian Gorin complains that “an actor did not make his entrance like an ordinary person, he came on with a wild leap or dance.” Yet sometimes “the wooden people in Horowitz’s plays might suddenly begin to talk like human beings and really touch the heart. These were in borrowed scenes from great foreign plays, though without any connection to the events being shown. A simple tailor jealous of his wife would make a speech taken from *Othello*.”

One eyewitness remembers a Thomashefsky performance:

He had a vibrating, crackling voice, somewhere between baritone and tenor, going into falsetto in the upper ranges. When he sang “A Brivete der Mamen” [“A Letter to Mother,” enormously popular on the East Side], the whole audience found it impossible to hold back their tears. No matter if the scene was laid in the hot sandy desert or the Halls of the Inquisition, Thomashefsky always managed to get in a song about Mania.

Thomashefsky played Hasidic rabbis and Cardinal Richelieu, Elisha ben Abuya and Judas Maccabeus. In the early days he often appeared on horseback, naked to the waist, with his legs in golden tights. . . . The theatre was drafty and Thomashefsky suffered from continual colds.

A shrewd contemporary judgment of Yiddish acting appears in an anonymous letter in an 1885 issue of *Yidishe Gasette*. The writer is discussing a new Horowitz play in which Bar Kokhba, leader of the doomed resistance to the Romans, escapes his tormentors by jumping into the sea and riding away on a fish: “The closing scene is too natural. The supernumeraries have poured their hearts into the scene with such force that they beat each other as in a real war. It is a miracle that none of them has been crippled. . . . They should remember that their enemies on stage are not real Romans, and there is no need for vengeance.”

In 1891 Lateiner’s company, touring in Philadelphia, presented *Exile from Russia*, which an astonished reviewer for the *Record* described as “a

tragic-musical melodrama or an operatic realistic drama . . . with a terrific climax in which three of the leading characters die violent deaths [followed directly by] a comic, topical duet." The play starts with a scene in a Moscow tavern, where the Jewish owner is forced to dance by tipsy Russian patrons, who then oblige with dancing of their own. The hero, Ossip, "with a wealth of bushy black curls . . . and a face pallid from ardent study"—Boris Thomashefsky, of course—debates with himself whether to convert to Christianity or abandon hope for university study. Scenes follow of Russian life, with a gentle heroine, daughter of a general, declaring her love for Ossip if only he will convert, and Ossip deciding to leave the faith. When a pogrom threatens, Ossip hurries home to lead his family to safety; he is spurned—no help wanted from apostates; the drunken soldiers beat the Jews "most realistically," and Ossip a little too. After more shooting and stabbing, the play ends with an historical coda set in New York: "The end comes with a parade of New York's foreign citizens, all in red, white and blue regalia and red flannel yachting caps, who are headed by a brass band playing 'The Star Spangled Banner' . . . Then a tableau is formed: the Stars and Stripes wave side by side with the scarlet socialistic banners."

Harassed by a growing number of competitors, Lateiner and Horowitz also began working up the *tsaytbild*, a sketch of the day, or in the later phrase, a living newspaper. Lateiner produced *Under the Protection of Moses Monfioire*; a new playwright, John Paley, did *The Johnstown Flood*; whereupon Horowitz unleashed his own *Johnstown Flood*.

It is characteristic of the Yiddish theatre during these years that together with *shund* (trash) it should turn to productions of Shakespeare, Schiller, and Goethe, done in hopeless translations but also reflecting an innocent respect for the idea of culture. Some Shakespearean productions, undertaken by serious younger actors like Jacob Adler, used more or less straight translations and were commercial failures, though Gorin reports that "after the first performance of *Hamlet* the audience was so pleased that it called for the author." (Adler is supposed to have replied that the author was an Englishman and hence not immediately available.)

Classics sufficiently "adapted" to Jewish life quickly won over the audience. *Romeo and Juliet*, starring Thomashefsky, was given an old-country setting, with the Capulets and Montagues turned into feuding religious parties, the rationalist Mithragdim and the pietist Hasidim. Romeo, now Raphael, and Juliet, now Shaimdele, played the balcony scene in a synagogue, with Raphael telling his beloved, "Look yonder! See the Eternal Light! It is a sign that the Jewish love of God is everlasting." A witty touch was the transformation of Friar Laurence into a Reform rabbi.

Within the Yiddish world the standard judgment of the early Horowitz-Lateiner theatre was advanced by the writer David Pinski: "tomfoolery, clownishness, and degeneracy, a caricature of Jewish life." There is obvious truth in these words, but finally they settle into a judgment a bit too simpli-

tic. For the serious theatre that began to flourish in the 1890's not only arose in reaction to, it also drew much of its vitality from, the earlier theatre: fondness for spectacle, love of extreme chiaroscuro in emotional effects, stylization of intensity. In any case, it is a common experience in the history of cultures that changes which to their participants seem radical breaks later come to look like continuities in a tradition. And had there been Yiddish critics in, say, 1910 familiar with *commedia dell'arte* or able to take pleasure in what later generations would call "happenings," the primitive vigor of the early Yiddish theatre might have won a more tender judgment.*

Time of the Players

A beser teyater!—better theatre! This cry began to be heard in intellectual and theatrical circles during the 1890's, as if the Yiddish theatre, until now snug in its local charms and vulgarities, were bent on connecting itself with the great European traditions. A wave of reforming enthusiasm swept across the East Side; talk was heard of a Yiddish drama sharing the seriousness of Ibsen and Hauptmann; names of great writers unfamiliar to ordinary theatregoers were invoked in discussion and printed criticism. The main figures at the head of this impulse toward self-improvement were Jacob Gordin, a playwright strongly influenced by nineteenth-century Russian literature, and a group of remarkable actors, led by Jacob Adler and David Kessler.

A handsome stump of a man, with a thick black beard and soulful eyes, Gordin looked and acted the very model of the enlightened Jewish intellectual, the sort who was imbued with a misty Tolstoyan idealism and was intent upon lifting the masses out of superstition and into culture. Like many half-deracinated Jews of his and later generations, Gordin was mad for culture, which often meant a smattering of references and notions about nineteenth-century European literature together with a neglect of native traditions and values.

In Russia Gordin had never so much as seen a Yiddish play, and when he came to America in 1891 he was by no means in secure command of

* A colleague who is an expert in Elizabethan literature suggests a comparison between early Elizabethan and early Yiddish theatre: "Many of the early Elizabethan and early Yiddish plays were shortlived and hastily written combinations of genres and styles. The rivalry between acting companies, the boisterousness of the audience, the postludes of jigs and songs and prayers, even the high productivity and generally low literary merits of men like Peele, Greene, and Dekker, with their heroes full of bombast androdomontade, remind one of the early Yiddish theatre on the East Side. The Elizabethan and the Yiddish theatre clearly had both actors and audiences delighting in what Bottom was hoping for, a part to tear a cat in."

Yiddish as a literary medium. To feed his family he wrote sketches for a Russian-language paper in New York, one of which attracted the notice of Zelig Mogulesco, a gifted comedian in Jacob Adler's company. A meeting was arranged between Gordin and Adler and Mogulesco at a New York café—Gordin, apparently unaware that he was betraying the condescension of the *maskil* toward the *masn*, described what happened:

I was curious to meet a Yiddish actor. . . . I thought that as soon as I told him I wanted to write a play, he would start emoring: wipe his nose on his sleeve, jump on a chair, and recite one of the popular tunes of the day ("Tsigete migele"). Imagine my surprise on meeting gentlemen with silk hats and handkerchiefs who talked intelligently. In their eyes I even detected a spark of talent. But if Yiddish actors are like other actors, why shouldn't Yiddish theatre be like all other theatres? At my first visit to the Yiddish theatre [a short while earlier], everything I saw was far removed from Jewish life: vulgar, false, immoral.

Always in awe of intellectuals who spoke Russian fluently, Adler commissioned Gordin to write a play, and the result, a fresh note in Yiddish theatre, was *Siberia*, produced in November 1891. Gordin evoked the ordeal of a Russian Jew who in his youth had been sentenced to Siberia, had then escaped, assumed another identity, become wealthy, and now, in the time present of the play, is betrayed to the police by a business rival. The actors were at first reluctant to do *Siberia*, which they judged to be weak in theatricality, but Adler, who took the leading part, stood firm by his new author. Though concessions were made to popular taste, such as inserting bits of song-and-dance routine, it looked on opening night as if the play would fail, since the restless audience was obviously unprepared for Gordin's sort of "realism." Stepping onto the stage before the third-act curtain, Adler made an urgent appeal: "I am ashamed because you do not appreciate this masterpiece by the famous Russian *pyesist* [writer] Yakov Mikhailovich Gordin. If you understood how great this play is, you wouldn't laugh! Adler then burst into tears, and the audience, deeply impressed, began to applaud." So at least does Leon Kobrin, a literary disciple of Gordin, tell the story.

Siberia was far from a masterpiece and Gordin was by no means a famous *pyesist*, but Adler knew what he was doing. He knew that if he wept and thundered, threw in a Russian phrase, and appealed to the audience's respect for "culture," he might change its mood. He did. In the final act, where the hero is dragged away by the czarist police, the actors and audience began sobbing together, as if in common recall of a still painful past. Though greeted by Abraham Cahan in the *Arbeter Tzeitung* as "a complete revolution on the Yiddish stage," the play was only a moderate success. Years later Cahan would write more circumspectly: "Today *Siberia* would be regarded as a weak melodrama. . . . Then, it established Gordin's reputation."



Jacob Gordin

For some two decades Gordin would be a central presence in the Yiddish theatre. A man of strong will and uneven talents, he did his best to make "the Yiddish theatre like all other theatres," untroubled by the thought that this might entail losses as well as gains. He planted Yiddish drama in the soil of common life, bringing, as his rival "Professor" Horowitz sneered, "Hester Street onto the stage." He banished the highfalutin Germanisms of early plays, though his own Yiddish was no more than serviceable. He enforced a percussive moralism, what the critic Jacob Mesrel called "folksy didacticism," or "lecturing on stage."⁸ He translated or borrowed from Hugo, Ibsen, Gogol, Shakespeare, Ostrovsky, whomever he could find in German or Russian. He "fell into line with the Russian spirit of realism now so marked in intellectual circles in the ghetto" and was largely responsible for the tendency of Yiddish writers and audiences to use "realism" as a term of automatic approval, even though fairly little of what happened on the Yiddish stage could properly be called realistic. Above all, he brought discipline to a stage marked by highjinks and chaos, insisting upon strict adherence to scripts, battling actors accustomed to the *laissez-faire* of ad-lib, and attempting to create a decent system of rehearsals.

⁸ Replying to an inquiry from an encyclopedia editor, Gordin offered his aesthetic principles: "The drama is not for amusement, merely, but for instruction as well. The greatest educational institution of the world is the theatre. The theatre socializes great ideas, and brings men of widely different social ranks to one intellectual level. The *realism* of a literary work is analytic in portrayal of characters and types of society. In *ideas* is vested the synthetic power of a work of art."

Once, during a rehearsal of *Siberia*, Mogulesco broke into a song-and-dance routine; Gordin violently protested; Mogulesco, screaming that Gordin was an anti-Semite, stormed out of the theatre; the actors sided with Mogulesco. Adler worked out a compromise that brought Mogulesco back to the stage and banned Gordin from rehearsals. On the opening night of a later Gordin play, *The Pogrom*, Bina Abramovich acted a Jewish matron who receives a visit from a Russian police inspector, played by Gordin himself. Miss Abramovich offered him fish and tea, wished him a good appetite, and suddenly whipped out an aside to the audience: "He should choke on it!" Gordin, infuriated and forgetting he was on stage, slammed his fist on the table and cried out, "Stop it, that's not in the script." Theatrical history does not record Miss Abramovich's reaction, but one may suppose she felt Gordin was out of his mind for trying to deprive her of this juicy bit of stage business.

Several of Gordin's plays became standard in the Yiddish repertoire, and even now, a good many decades later, they still have their moments of resonance, their fragments of nice perception.* One of his early successes, *The Jewish King Lear*, bends Shakespeare's plot to a Jewish milieu: David Masheles, old and wealthy, makes the same mistake with his three daughters that Shakespeare's character had made centuries earlier, and with similar results. The play is set in Russia, but its themes—torments of parents, ingratitude of children—are perennial to Jewish culture and especially acute with regard to the immigrant milieu. In writing this play, which gave Jacob Adler one of his most spectacular roles, Gordin was criticized for borrowing liberally from Shakespeare, but he replied cogently enough that since Shakespeare had himself borrowed plots, why should not he, Gordin, do the same? Indeed, he shrewdly made this dependence on old plots into an element of his plays: "There is a point at which David Masheles is told the story of Shakespeare's play [by Jaffe, a character functioning as *raisonneur*] and warned that he might be heading for a similar fate. . . . Gordin is making sure his unevenly educated audience knows exactly what he is up to. He is giving them a lesson in literature."

Somewhat less parasitic on classical texts are two of Gordin's later plays, *God, Man, and Devil* reworks the Faust story, setting its action in a little Russian town where weaving is a main occupation. Hershela, a poor

* One fragment deserves preservation. In Gordin's play *The Russian Jew in America* there is an opportunistic Jewish labor leader called Huzdak who keeps repeating a tag line: "What do I need brains for when I've got a constitution?" At an early performance Abraham Cahan, incensed at this "slur" against the labor leadership, jumped from his seat and cried out, in Russian, "That's a lie." This led to a fierce quarrel between Cahan and Gordin, with Cahan attacking Gordin endlessly in the *Forward* and Gordin making speeches of reply from the stage. Cahan's general criticism of Gordin's plays—that they tended to exhort more than to dramatize—seems well grounded, but he was hardly the one to notice that in Huzdak's tag line Gordin had vividly captured a type that would become more and more prevalent in the immigrant world.

weaver, buys a lottery ticket from a salesman who is actually the Devil in disguise. Hershela wins, of course, becomes a manufacturer and a cruel sweater of labor, so that "the holy prayer shawls are wet with tears of the crushed poor," and at the end, murmuring that "man is like a vapor that rises to the clouds and vanishes," hangs himself in remorse. *Mirele Effros*, first called the *Jewish Queen Lear*, is a warhorse of a play in which the Lear theme turns into a celebration of Jewish matriarchy, providing an endlessly usable vehicle for actresses in the grand style, from Kenni Lipitzen to Ida Kaminska.

By the early 1900's Gordin had become an East Side culture hero. His concern with "deep" problems, his anticlericalism, his Russian soulfulness, his obtrusive ethnicism, his acquaintance with European drama, his dismissal of Yiddish folk motifs in favor of "universal" themes, all spoke to the needs of the East Side, especially those radicalized workers beginning to find a new self-assurance. "The Jewish immigrant sought a transfiguration; Gordin tried to present him as a new man, closing out his past." Yet precisely those aspects of Gordin's plays that struck his audiences as most enlightened now make him seem most dated, while the more innocent pieces of Goldfaden, untroubled by echoes of European culture and rooted in Jewish folkways, have preserved a bloom of freshness. "Closing out [the Jewish immigrant's] past," Gordin discarded his religion, folkways, idioms—quite as the travail of immigration had begun to do in reality.

Gordin's plays, said David Pinski, are a kind of "semiart. . . . He doesn't really write plays, he writes roles." Though meant as a critical thrust, Pinski's remark illuminates Gordin's strength in the theatre, since to provide strong "roles" for actors like Adler and Kessler was perhaps quite enough. "Roles" meant loose, expansive outlines of characteristic behavior which the actor could fill in with voice, body, gesture, mime. On the printed page, the main figure in Gordin's *Jewish King Lear* or Kobrin's *Yankel Boyle* might come to no more than a rough sketch, but when Adler, or Kessler, took the part in hand, there followed a wonderful realization of cultural detail, toward high romantic drama with Adler and strong genre drawing with Kessler. Cues from the culture, these roles were just sufficiently outlined to enable actors to begin the job of creation.

The generation of Yiddish actors flourishing at the turn of the century—Adler, Mogulesco, Kessler, Bertha Kalish, Kenni Lipitzen, Sarah Adler—represented a large release of Jewish creativity. Unschoolled and with the merest slapdash sort of training, these performers burst into an expressiveness so brilliant, it is only natural to ask: where did they come from, what were the sources of their talent? From the *hazan's* dramatism, the *magid's* eloquence, the *badkhn's* clowning—no doubt. But, still more, from the very depths of the Jewish past. These actors vibrated with energies for which official Jewish culture had made only the sparsest provision, but which had nevertheless always been present in the life of the Jews. The roughnecks

played by Kessler, the *sblennets* elevated by Mogulesco to a purity of humor, the shielding mothers Bina Abramowich made her specialty, the glaring tragic heroines of Lipitzen and Kalish—such figures came out of the Jewish experience itself, where passionate outbursts had been only “natural,” so precarious did life always seem and so close to the edge of blood. These figures were cultural types filled through the plenitude of memory and then, on stage, heightened and enlarged. Jewish life itself had been heroic and deformed, rich in extremes, drenched with abundance of feeling. The “excesses” of the Yiddish stage served as a kind of magnifying glass to the “excesses” of Jewish life. Very little in that experience could have persuaded anyone toward a style of understatement, or that cramped signaling through eyebrow and shoulder that would later flourish on the American stage.

Joseph Buloff, a brilliant Yiddish actor, came to America in the late twenties after having played with the Vilna Troupe, an east European company favoring a modernist style of shadowy quiet. Trying out for Maurice Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theatre, which still preserved some of the Adler-Kessler expansiveness, Buloff encountered astonishment: he did not gesture elaborately, nor storm about, nor declaim in the top register. As if speaking for the whole tradition, Schwartz asked him: “But how will the fellow in the last row of the balcony hear you?”

Buloff tells another story illuminating the dominant style of American Yiddish theatre. Playing Willy Loman in a Yiddish version of *Death of a Salesman*, Buloff, a rather slight man, made his entrance between two large uitcases which rendered him almost invisible to the audience. He thought his a rather keen stroke for evoking the theme of the play, but his dresser, a veteran of the Yiddish stage, was troubled by the “feebleness” of Buloff’s entrance. “A Yiddish star,” said the dresser, “comes in proud and upright, like Jacob P. Adler”—and the dresser drew himself up in majestic posture to stride across the room.

Yiddish actors, in the age of Gordin and Adler, were committed to a style of baroque expressiveness. Hutchins Hapgood felt they performed “with remarkable sincerity,” and no doubt they did; but that tricky word meant something different then from what it has since come to suggest. For is, more than seventy years later, “sincerity” implies an emotional dynamic confined to the plain and the muted, but that can hardly have been what Hapgood saw when he went to the theatre of Adler, Kessler, and Thomashefsky. For the actors dominating the stage in, say, 1900, an effort to be “sincere” would mean a performance that opened up new possibilities of experience, evoking life through the larger-than-life and moving from the modest matter of the script to the enlarging gestures of the stage. Harold Clurman remembers Yiddish theatrical style as “realism with a little extra” — and what was distinctive was just that “little extra,” lavish and exuberant.

Almost all the early Yiddish actors shared the view that man had been

given a voice to shout, curse, whisper, weep, and woman to solace, scold, suggest, sing. Life on stage should be grander than on the street, for the Yiddish imagination was best released through images of potentiality. The leading Yiddish actors tended to be men of virility and heft, accustomed to filling the spaces of the stage. Actresses were ample, encompassing, womanly, who took in the whole of a rendered experience and formed worthy partners in stories of endurance. *Shtund* plays might indulge in vulgar innuendo, but the Yiddish theatre as a whole kept shy of sexuality. Love, in Clurman’s words, remained “behind the curtain,” though he also remembers the actresses as “very sensual,” bearing an aura of pride in their fullness.

A Theatre of Festival

The Yiddish theatre was a theatre of primary, unevaded emotions, Jewish emotions that had only yesterday escaped from the prisonhouse of Europe. Brushing past the drab recognitions of the week, this theatre created an atmosphere of holiday, a secular Sabbath still in touch with received associations of religion. It was a theatre that staked almost everything on a high romanticism of gesture, a theatre of festival.

Nesher bagodel, a Biblical Hebrew phrase meaning “the great eagle” (in Yiddish Adler means “eagle”)—so his admirers called Jacob P. Adler (1855–1926) and so he often called himself. Where Jewish life had been mean and drab, he would make it princely and grand. It was all part of that trying on of roles, that delight in assuming new identities, which Jews began to experience after the emigration from eastern Europe. Benny Leonard was proving that a Jew could be the champion lightweight boxer, Arnold Rothstein that a Jew could be the most powerful of New York gamblers, Morris R. Cohen that a Jew could be the intellectual peer of George Santayana, and Jacob P. Adler, by the sheer force of will and blessing of physique, intended to prove that a Jew could make himself into an aristocrat, glittering in Prince Albert coat, dress shirt, spats, and diamond pin.

His early years were undistinguished. Born in Odessa, he drifted through nondescript jobs, a bit of dandyism along Odessa boulevards, a share of sexual adventure, some acting in a Goldfaden troupe, and then emigration in 1882, when the Russian government banned the Yiddish theatre. There followed a few years in London, unsuccessful and close to hunger, a journey to America in 1887, some desultory acting in Chicago, a return to London and Warsaw, and back to New York in 1890. Clearly a man uncertain of his vocation.

Teaming up with Thomashefsky, Adler toured the Yiddish theatres in

Chicago and Philadelphia, hardly an experience calculated to reinforce theatrical idealism, and then, in New York, became a partner with Kessler and Thomashefsky in Poole's Theatre on the Bowery. The three actors produced melodramas and operettas, floundering aesthetically and sometimes commercially, torn between the rewards of *shund* and the goals of art. For Adler and Kessler this would always be a genuine problem, both of them aspiring to serious theatre and goading themselves with self-contempt when they had to do trash; for Thomashefsky, despite intervals of high-mindedness, *shund* was a natural milieu. As Mrs. Thomashefsky later said: "While the others were creating their fame, we were creating our fortune. Well . . ."

Adler was by no means a quick success. He did not sing or dance well, a serious handicap in the early Yiddish theatre. Even when he began to be accepted by immigrant audiences, he remained restless, though unable to put his discontent into clear words. Like many other Jews of his time, Adler had caught "the Russian flu," that yearning for high artistic and moral ideals, but in the Yiddish stage there was as yet no way to realize them. The growth of his powers as an actor depended, first, on his ability to create for himself that public personality which soon took over the whole of his being, in or out of theatre, and, second, on a meeting with Jacob Gordin, who gave him the idea, the *word* by means of which to satisfy his longings. (This search for a *word*, some clue to the significance of their art, was recurrent among Yiddish actors: David Kessler would stammer to playwrights and colleagues, '*gib mir a varum* [tell me a why]'.")

Adler's first important role was in Gordin's *Jewish King Lear* in 1892; two years later he produced three Gordin plays; through the nineties, also, translations from Shakespeare and continental writers, not always marked by scrupulous fidelity. In 1901 he did a powerful Shylock on the Yiddish stage, and two years later the same role in a Broadway production, with the other actors speaking their lines in English and Adler in Yiddish. By now it was a commonplace to describe him as the greatest Yiddish actor in America.

For Adler "realism" would always be a sacred word. What Gordin and he meant by it was that their plays should deal with the lives and problems of "ordinary Jews," heads of households, patriachs running businesses, immigrants disoriented, families torn apart by generational clashes. But Adler's style as an actor was not, by any serious standard, "realistic" at all; it ended toward the grand, the picturesque, the flamboyant. He may have begun, in many of the Gordin plays, with ordinary Jewish life, but his urge as an actor was to magnify that life to the heroic, as if he were speaking less to the immigrants' experience than to their desires. The usual formulas—that an actor submerges his personality in the role he is playing, or that he allows his personality to violate the role—did not really apply to an Adler performance. For him the whole point of a production was to imbue the role with

the colors of his personality, transforming a Gordin protagonist into a figure of Adlerian temperament. Brilliant and satisfying this often evidently was, but hardly realism.

A good bit over six feet in height, with a nobly expressive face, Adler could not have avoided a romantic approach to the drama even if he had wished to. Leon Kobrin remembered him as "remarkably handsome and dignified. . . . The Jewish sigh is in his voice, the Jewish tear in his sigh. He has the anger of a great temperament, the tenderness of great love. Frequently he declaims or is too dramatic, a poseur. But all this is illuminated by a feeling of festivity. . . . He has a plastic beauty which imbues every gesture and glance." Sholem Asch recalled that Adler "looked like a lord, dressed like two, and carried himself like a king." Another Yiddish writer said that "Adler prepared himself for a new role as a saintly scribe might prepare a new Torah scroll."

Adler's inclination toward a style of high bravura was somewhat muted in his rendering of Shylock. An Elizabethan Shylock was, of course, out of the question for a Yiddish performer; he *had* to bend the text toward his own purposes. A critic writing for the *Theatre Magazine* in 1902 quoted Adler, in words obviously put into his mouth yet faithful to his meaning:

The opportunity is [Shylock's] for one moment of ineffable triumph and scorn, holding in his hands the very life of his former insolent persecutor. . . . Having purchased so dearly the right to his contemptuous opinion of his Christian fellow-townsmen, is it not certain that he will consummate his brief triumph by walking out of that court with his head erect, the very apotheosis of defiant hatred and scorn? That is the way I see Shylock.

Writing about the 1901 production, the Yiddish critic B. Gorin praised Adler for his "naturalness, absence of affectation." Two years later a *New York Times* reviewer praised Adler for his "simple, unaffected and naturalistic rendering" while remarking that Adler's difficulties with the role were due to "the fact that to make Shylock fully sympathetic to a Jewish audience is virtually impossible." What Adler could not achieve—given his reading of the part, necessarily so—was "the grim authority of an Irving or the malignancy of a Mansfield."

It did not take long for the Adler myth to spread beyond the boundaries of the East Side. Isadora Duncan, seeing in Adler, somewhat improbably, "a reincarnation of ancient Greek beauty," attended his performances worshipfully. When Adler was doing Tolstoy's *Living Corpse*, John Barrymore came frequently to admire and study his performance.

Theatricality, which may also signify a certain ruthlessness, was in Adler's bones. He tampered with scripts, pasted on touches of blowsy rhetoric, and once, when doing Kobrin's *Nature, Man, and Animal* (Yiddish playwrights like comprehensive titles), added an entire fourth act on opening night. "When I confronted him," recalls Kobrin, "Adler replied that the

fourth act of the original script had gotten lost; either someone stole it or he nice had eaten it. So he wrote a new act himself. Still, how marvelously he performed in that play!"

In 1902, when Adler was seriously ill, he had an announcement placed in the Yiddish press saying that he was dying and wanted his admirers to come to the hospital on Saturday afternoon to bid him good-by. Thousands came, with Adler standing at the window to wave farewell. That afternoon all the Yiddish theatres were empty—Adler later said he had meant to show the theatre managers that he had the power to spoil even such a sure thing as the Saturday matinee.

Playing once in Baltimore, Adler and the composer Rumshinsky went off to a *landsmann's* restaurant for a glass of tea.

I was sure [wrote Rumshinsky] that Adler had lost his mind. He rose slowly from his chair, put on his hat at a rakish angle, and we finally arrived at the theatre. It was 10:00 p.m., and the play had started with Anshel Shor doing Adler's role. I wanted to take Adler to the stage door, but he ran into the lobby. By this time I was convinced he was insane.

Adler ran down the aisle, stopped in the middle, and shouted in Russian, "*Gospoda, ya s'vami!*" and in Yiddish, "I am here, I am with you! We'll play for you, we'll give you good theatre!" The curtain came down, and in his dressing room Adler began to apply make-up. He said to me, "Rumshinsky, my friend, I love theatre! But I'm on stage only two or three hours a day, so I have to turn the rest of my life into theatre!"

When he was ready, the curtain rose and the play started again, from the beginning.

Life itself became theatre. By about 1910 Adler was earning large amounts of money and living in high style, the boy from Odessa resplendent in regal, staying in expensive hotels, dining expensively, and moving from woman to woman, regardless of expense. (Adler is said to have left behind a trail of illegitimate children, but this is beyond the historian's capacity to heck.) Yet, with all his pretensions, he retained a touch of plebeian Yiddish humor. When Sholem Asch once took him to a posh London restaurant, Adler, in full regalia, asked the waiter for *bebetakh un kliskelakh* (beans and eggdrop), explaining that this was an "American aristocratic dish."

To his admirers in the Yiddish world, Adler was all but exempt from criticism. Puritanical as the immigrant ethos may have been, reticent as the East Side was about sex, theatrical royalty was granted special dispensation. Zelia Adler, a daughter of Jacob by his first marriage, asked her mother, the veteran actress Dinah Feinman, whether she had felt any anger toward Adler after divorcing him because of his incorrigible skirt-chasing. Said the erst Mrs. Adler to her daughter:

Anger toward him? Never, my daughter. He was not to blame: women just would not leave him alone. He was too beautiful, the child of one of God's

rare moments of grace. . . . I remember when as bride and groom we walked through London's West End, everyone would stop to look at him. He wore bright blue clothes with a cape and top hat. "He's an ambassador or a prince," they would say. . . . I consider it my great good fortune that he crossed my path. . . . What would have become of me without him?

When Adler died, in 1926, his funeral was entirely worthy of him: he had taken pains to make sure it would be. His coffin was carried reverentially from Yiddish theatre to theatre; he lay in a black mourning coat with Windsor tie and *talit*, dual symbols of his life; thousands of people swarmed through the streets. As the first shovelful of earth was cast upon his coffin, a wail rose from the crowd of mourners: "the king is dead!"

There were others, equally or almost as talented. David Kessler excelled at depicting *proste yidn*, the sort of lusty common fellows whose experience carried an inherent dramatic tension. The American producer Jed Harris praised Kessler as the best actor he had ever seen, and Harold Clurman would write that Kessler "possessed animal force, a peasantlike strength." A tormented man, Kessler found it hard to articulate his theatrical intuitions. Lacking the culture that might bring his talent to the level of consciousness, he would break into wild rages if he could not explain to his cast how he wanted it to act. At the end of his life, when need drove him to a wretched operetta, Kessler was asked by a friend what he was doing: "He broke a toothpick and put down a piece of it on the table; he added a little bread, a bit of dirty paper from the floor, sprinkled some salt, pepper, and ashes from his cigar, mixed it all up with his finger, spat on it, and said, 'That's what I'm playing.'"

No such conflict between art and trash troubled Zelig Mogulesco, the first great Yiddish comic in America. He would simply turn on his high piping voice and delicious smile, begin to sing and dance, and for a few moments everyone would be transported into another world, innocent and sweet.

Once, at a performance of Horowitz's *Mishka and Mashka* there was an old woman on the stage, with a wrinkled face, who looked as though she had mistakenly wandered in from the street. The action took place on a ship en route to America. She had to be vaccinated and put out her skinny trembling arm; her whole body quivered; every wrinkle in her bewildered face fluttered. . . . The curtain fell and the audience cheered, "Mogulesco." The old woman appeared, smiled charmingly, and bowed. . . . Afterward I went backstage and met Mogulesco, slim and elegant, a sensitive cheerful face, not a sign of the exhausted old woman.

The same memoirist summoned a picture of Mogulesco's last role, when illness had destroyed his voice and he had to "sing" with his eyes, his face, his limbs:



David Kessler

By now very weak, Mogulesco played a Jew afraid of his wife. His son-in-law convinces him that he should show her who is boss by vigorously stamping his leg. But when he sees his wife, the leg gives such a diffident and fearful shake that one can see the whole timid soul of the little Jew crouching in that leg. All season long audiences came to the Thalia Theater just to see Mogulesco's leg.

The actresses were at least as gifted. Kenni Liptzen, "with a kind of Toulouse-Lautrec head crowned (offstage) by burning red hair," became in Gordin's *Mirele Efros* (which she is said to have done fifteen hundred times) or the Yiddish version of Grillparzer's *Medea* a fierce tragic actress. Bertha Kalish, "the female counterpart of Adler," with a "regal carriage and a marvelous voice," specialized in elegant romanticism; she began as a Yiddish

prima donna, starred on the English stage, and at the end, almost blind, returned to do Goldfaden's *Sulamith* in Yiddish. Sarah Adler, Jacob's second wife, was a veteran of the nineties, "the very emblem of womanliness, sensuous and discreet, with deep stores of elemental feeling."

The central impression of this period is of a bizarre unevenness: flaring brilliance and brutal waste all but indistinguishable. It took a long time for the conventional disciplines to be routinized in the Yiddish theatre—by the time they were, the theatre was already in decline. Lengthy rehearsals were unknown and, indeed, impossible, since each company had to keep a large number of plays on the boards. During a five-day period in November 1914, for example, Kessler's theatre advertised seven different plays!—two by Gordin, one by Asch, one by Pinski, and three more or less miscellaneous *shund*. Even the most conscientious actors could not possibly learn all their parts in advance; they had to pick up their lines as they went along, depending heavily on the prompter (who sometimes doubled as half director)* and on their intuitive grasp of the likely plot lines of Jewish drama. Despite the reforms begun by Gordin, playwrights were seldom accorded much respect (not that many deserved it!) and the stars could be ruthless in "fixing" scripts.

Among Yiddish intellectuals and journalists, who by now had to give sustained attention to the theatre, there were frequent complaints about the star system and appeals for ensemble acting. "The star," wrote the critic Jacob Mestel, "controlled the staging and 'direction,' ignoring the technical and ideological matter of the play, and was concerned mainly with dominating and outshining his colleagues. The star's role had to be 'sympathetic,' and scenes were frequently 'worked in' to prepare for his appearance."** There were plenty of grounds for these complaints, though, at times, especially hard times, when the stars had to combine companies, with Kessler going to work for Adler or Adler for Thomashefsky, they would share major and minor roles, sometimes even making an effort at artistic discipline. Yet in a theatre that rested on virtuosity of performance far more than on the depth of its plays or the coherence of its direction, the star system was not only unavoidable, it was a precondition for its erratic brilliance.

Yiddish theatre, then as later, depended heavily on "benefit nights," with Jewish organizations buying blocks of tickets at sharply reduced prices, usually for midweek performances.*** In 1914, Kenni Liptzen's theatre an-

* When Celia Adler was once brought into a Kessler play as a replacement, she only rehearsal she received was a kindly prompter's demonstration of where she was to stand and move at various points.

** Gorin wrote in 1902 that in a Yiddish version of *A Doll's House* a fourth act had been tacked on, with Nora returning happily to her husband. The sanctity of the family was one of the few absolutes of Yiddish stage convention.

*** It also depended, less heavily, on tours to outlying cities where the Yiddish-speaking communities, feeling themselves cut off from the centers of their culture, welcomed theatrical groups with an enthusiasm they did not always merit. "So big a crowd," reported the Pittsburgh *Dispatch* of May 13, 1915, "took possession of

nounced that \$105 worth of tickets (individual tickets were then selling for 15 to 50 cents) could be had by *landsmanshaftn* for \$30; later, especially during the depression years, the discount rate for "benefits" rose as high as 80 percent. Still, the benefit system had certain advantages: it brought in a steady if much reduced income, it forced unlettered immigrants to attend (having been pressured to buy a ticket you might as well go . . .), and it enabled theatres to do their "better plays" on midweek nights, when they had a semicaptive audience, while saving the trash for the weekends, when they had to take in money. Things didn't, of course, always work out so simply, for the society "buying the theatre" for a benefit night might insist that it be offered one of the more popular plays. *Landslayt* were not always thrilled at the prospect of seeing Shakespeare or Strindberg.

Except for a handful of stars who grew wealthy at about the time of the First World War, the theatre brought little material reward to Yiddish actors. They were a hardy lot: delicate souls didn't gravitate toward the theatre, in fact, "you had to be something of a rascal to become a Yiddish actor in those days." Managers were notorious for their brutal ways. In 1900, when one manager beat up a member of his company, forty-five Jewish actors came together to form a union, declaring a strike at the People's Theatre until the victimized colleague was rehired. Soon, all but the handful of top stars joined the union, the formation of which was helped by the omnipresent Joseph Barondess. "We are persecuted by the managers," read the union's opening declaration. "We play kings on the stage but our families are starving. We are part of the exploited proletariat and want to join with the labor movement." Within about a decade, the actor's union became very powerful, so much so that European actors as well as American beginners trying to join the union complained that its "examinations" were despotic.

By 1910, a year after Jacob Gordin's death, the trend toward an improved Yiddish theatre represented by Gordin's plays as well as those of such fellow "realists" as Leon Kobrin and Z. Libin, had exhausted itself. *Shund*, never truly defeated, came back more shamelessly than ever, and even such

the Schenley Theatre last evening to hear Boris Thomashéfsky, the Yiddish star, play the part of Salmian Puterkinépp in *The Green Millionaire* that it stretched to the curb and was packed densely in the lobby long after the house was sold out. Fearing that windows would be broken and damage done to the theatre, the Superintendent sent a hurry call to the Oakland police station for five or six more officers. It was almost impossible for the ushers to handle the excited crowds, people who had only paid for standing room taking seats and others occupying the seats they could find, without regard to reservations, and refusing to move.

"The crowd was a picturesque one. Old people, happy and excited at the prospect of hearing the thespian idol of their race in their native tongue, and foreign women in quaintly draped scarfs and brilliant colors, accentuated its unusual character. . . . Boris Thomashéfsky as the old Jewish coal and wood dealer was the very incarnation of the racial temperament one could feel that even if Yiddish was as the language of another planet. Clever acting can be recognized by intuition, and the audience was proud of him, was sympathetic, and flurries of laughter and half-hushed exclamations of delight passed over it."

old-timers as Horowitz and Lateiner prospered again. Motifs of Jewish nationalism, stirred by the Kishinev pogrom and the rise of the Zionist movement, provided a new source of exploitation. Applause could be secured by ranting from the stage, "*A yid bin ikh, un a yid vel ikh blaybn*" ("A Jew I am, and a Jew I will remain"). Thomashéfsky grew wealthy out of a piece of sentimental claptrap called *Dos Pintele Yid*, a play he could always count on for retrieving losses suffered from an occasional venture on a Kobrin or Libin script. At a 1914 production of *The Polish Wedding* (*Di polyishe khave*), chorus girls circulated in the theatre, distributing free pieces of cake. A hack named Isaac Zolatorevsky began churning out plays about prostitutes, gangsters, fallen women, and pious Jews, with titles like *White Slaves*, *The Sinner*, *Love for Sale*, and *Money, Love, and Shame*. To survive, Adler and Kessler also had to dip into *shund*.^{*} And in their eagerness for profitable vehicles, some of the managers, especially Thomashéfsky, began to "adapt" Broadway successes—though at this point the American stage was utterly trivial.

The persistence of *shund* came as a blow to those East Side intellectuals who had hoped that once and for all Gordin had raised the Yiddish theatre to a higher level. But while they attacked and deplored, only rarely did they ask whether *shund*, like its equivalents in all the popular arts, was intrinsic to the Yiddish theatre—perhaps, even, whether it evoked, in its own ways, some of the basic motifs of the Jewish imagination. Reviewing a Lateiner play in 1907, Cahán shrewdly called it a "music-hall skit stretched out over four acts," and made fun of its interweaving of "tragedy" and comic bits in rhymed couplets; but he did not stop to ask why *shund* was so deeply rooted in Yiddish theatre, or whether its persistence could be explained simply by pointing to the low cultural level of many immigrants.

A year later Lateiner's *Dos yidishe harts* ("The Jewish Heart") proved to be an enormous popular success, almost as great as *Dos pintele yid*. Lateiner counterposed two families, that of a simple Jewish innkeeper, Lemach, and that of a cultivated Romanian noblewoman, Madame Popesco. The plot, complicated beyond recapture, turns on the discovery that the hero, Jacob, a young painter in love with Lemach's daughter, Dina, is also the abandoned son of Madame Popesco, a fact she has long suppressed because she is living a false life. But when things become difficult for Jacob—one difficulty being the other son of Madame Popesco, Victor, who, as everyone in the audience must have grasped, is meant to stand for Esau—then Madame Popesco's "Jewish heart," that infinitely expansive organ,

* Abraham Cahán printed "An Open Letter to Jewish Actresses," pleading with them, as "honored ladies of the Yiddish stage, decent women and mothers," to avoid obscenities. "I am convinced that when you sing obscene songs or use filthy language you are pained. . . . Our stage takes liberties that you won't find in any other theatre in the world. Tell the Actor's Union that you refuse to sing filthy songs." The hilarity with which this suggestion must have been met by the hard-bitten characters who ran the actor's union is not hard to imagine.

drives her to speak out. At Jacob and Dina's wedding, she watches at a distance and finally expires from joy.

Together with this "tragic" motif, the play featured a good deal of comic byplay, mostly having to do with Lemach's efforts to assert control over his virago of a second wife. There are also songs, one of them sung by Dinah, which states the theme of the play in case, God forbid, someone in the theatre hasn't gotten it:

No matter how much woe a Jew may suffer
He always turns to his dear God who has not led him astray.
He lives, survives, though troubles be great
They lead him not from the path of righteousness.
Any pain can be borne by him who has a Jewish heart.

Bad as the play is, it touches on a number of themes calculated to stir an immigrant audience to its depths: Jewish homelessness in a foreign land, the eternal sustenance of mother love, especially the Jewish variety, and so on. The theme of endurance is central to Yiddish culture, both the best and the worst of it, and what sophisticated readers find moving in the poetry of Leivick was vulgarized and parodied, yet in some sense also present, in the hack work of Lateimer. For whatever else *shund* may have been, it was not "escapist" in any obvious sense, it coarsened and corrupted, but it drove right to the center of "the Jewish heart." This was a perception that the Yiddish intellectuals, with their passion for enlightenment and their eagerness to create a culture on a level with those of Europe, could seldom allow themselves. They were too embattled within their own culture to allow their legitimate aesthetic distaste for *shund* to be complicated by a sociocultural grasp of its popular appeal.

A *Forward* writer calling himself Lead Pencil complained, for example, that

the Jewish reader regards the written word as sacred and the theatre as trash. This is traditional with us: the first printed words in our history were religious writings, but the first Jewish theatre was merely the Purim play, with actors going from door to door and reciting their couplet: "Today is Purim and tomorrow it's gone/ Give us a penny and throw us out." It will take a long time before the Jews feel that theatre is a serious art.

What Lead Pencil said here was true enough, but as an explanation for the low state of Yiddish theatre it was a little self-serving. Yiddish literature could survive, insofar as it did, because it had the ardent support of a minority public, while the theatre necessarily had to depend on the masses for its sustenance. Even when Adler had played to half-empty houses during his early years because he insisted on producing Gordin, Andreyev, and Tolstoy, relatively large sums of money had been involved. The cultivated Yiddish minority either scorned the theatre outright or turned out to be too small for sustaining its worthier efforts. As a result the Yiddish theatre re-

flected, as it had to reflect, the crazily mixed levels and tastes of the immigrant masses. As the Yiddish poet Moshe Leib Halpern wrote:

There was once a vulgarian who went to the synagogue on one corner of the street when he wanted to weep, and to a bawdyhouse on the other corner when he wanted to be gay. But once, when he wanted both to weep and be gay at the same time, he put up a theatre in the middle of the street that combined synagogue and bawdyhouse into one.

Yet what Halpern would not acknowledge was that the condition he deplored—a theatre of vulgar creativity—may have been true to the circumstances of immigrant life. The best qualities of Yiddish theatre came through, not when it aspired toward high culture, but when it spoke in its native voice. As long as both high and low brows accepted the simple division between *shund* and *literatur*—the first disreputable but vivid, and the second honorable but certain to lose money—Yiddish theatre was trapped. "The false identification of good drama with a species of good literature has merely [lent] life and popularity to *shund*. . . . For who wants to listen to a respectable bore when an interesting devil of a fellow is holding forth!"

When the *Forward* asked leading Yiddish actors in 1909 how their theatre might be improved, they answered with a range of banalities, deploring the lack of good playwrights now that Gordin was dead and the economic impossibility of staging serious plays if audiences did not respond. "Yiddish drama," said Kenni Lipzen, "is sinking lower and lower." Only Kessler spoke with candor: "*Shund* is more profitable. I must do plays that attract the public if I'm going to pay the rent." But "when I play trash it's like drinking castor oil." A few weeks later, when Sholem Asch came to America, he was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd at the Grand Theatre, where he made an appeal for a subsidized community theatre. Many speeches, as usual, were forthcoming, and committees too; but it all ended with nothing. Despite a "literary Thursday" now and then, Thomashefsky continued to prance on stage, Zolatorevsky to churn out his rubbish, and Kessler to take his castor oil.

Nothing revealed so sharply the limitations of the Yiddish theatre as its failure, two years earlier, to find a place for Sholem Aleichem, the great master of Yiddish literature, when he arrived in America hoping to earn his living by writing plays. Adler and Thomashefsky vied for his scripts, each offering the substantial advance of one thousand dollars; they began to prepare productions, Adler of a play about petty brokers in the old country, *Samuel Pasternak*, and Thomashefsky of a play about Jewish village musicians and singers, *Stempnytsa*. Both opened on the same night in February 1907, and within two weeks both closed, depriving Yiddish theatre of its one possible genius.

The Yiddish press split sharply over the merits of the Sholem Aleichem plays, with the conservative *Tageblatt* and *Morning Journal* praising their

evocation of folk life and the radical *Forward* and *Varheit* expressing discomfort over their lack of ideological militancy. Caban in the *Forward* was particularly tiresome with literalistic criticisms of *Samuel Pasternak*, as if "realism" had become a kind of literary cell into which writers had to be confined for their own good. Sholom Aleichem, it is true, had not mastered theatrical techniques: he needed a little help in shaping an act or bringing characters on and off stage, and all his plays suffered from discursiveness, precisely the quality that came through most charmingly in his stories. Still, he was the only Yiddish writer of world stature, and the dialogue he wrote, whether for print or stage, was the pithiest in the language. Though professing great admiration for Sholom Aleichem, both Adler and Thomashefsky did not hesitate to tamper with his scripts. Adler "improving" dialogue and Thomashefsky introducing banal theatre lyrics into the folk milieu of *Stempenyu*. Only after Sholom Aleichem's death were some of his works successfully done on the Yiddish stage: it took a relatively sophisticated audience to appreciate the pure simplicities of his humor.

Ultimately, the problem of Yiddish theatre was a problem of the audience. There were immigrants flushed with the sentiments of Tolstoy and Turgenev, immigrants who had never before seen a stage production and responded to Adler and Kessler with naive literalism, immigrants who found the very thought of theatre a desecration, and immigrants happy to sacrifice a meal in order to see their favorite on opening night. We have endless fervor of these audiences. Celia Adler writes that at a performance of *The Jewish King Lear* a man in the theatre, overcome by Jacob Adler's performance, rose from his seat, ran down the aisle and shouted, "To hell with your stingy daughter, Yankl! She has a stone, not a heart. Spit on her, Yankl, and come with me. My *yidene* [Jewess, wife] will feed you. Come, Yankl, may she choke, that rotten daughter of yours."

It was an unruly theatre. People munched fruit, cracked peanuts, greeted *landslayt*. A reader complained in the Yiddish press: "Audiences applauded at the wrong places, whereupon someone cries out, Order!, and then a second person yells, Order! to the first one, and a third, Order! to the second. You don't find this in any other theatre in the world." Probably because there was no such theatre anywhere else in the world, a theatre of the unwashed plebes rather than the decorous bourgeoisie. Carl Van Vechten, an American writer with a taste for slumming, found Yiddish audiences quarrelsome, avid, ill-mannered, and the last-minute rush for seats a "figurative biting, scratching, rough handling, accompanied with hard words." To work as an usher in these theatres required the wisdom of a Solomon.

What redeemed it all was the untutored passion of the audience, sometimes, recalls the stage designer Boris Aronson, "more exciting than the plays." Each star had his own *patriott*, not the paid claque of opera, but

pure-spirited fanatics who brought to the theatre an order of emotion other than immigrants brought to religion or revolution.

Art and Trash

Nineteen-eighteen marks a turning point, the beginning of the second and last major upsurge of Yiddish theatre in America. Serious new playwrights, gifted new actors, ambitious repertory companies, efforts at coherent and even experimental productions, all appear now, lasting about a decade and then, by the early thirties, sliding into the final disintegration of Yiddish theatre in America.

What were the reasons for this second creative outburst? During the war years the immigrant Jewish community had prospered, settled into growing comfort, and begun to cultivate somewhat more refined tastes. There were children who brought back ideas from colleges, there were new immigrants who brought back ideas from Poland and Russia. By 1918 New York City had almost twenty Yiddish theatres, and a number of others were scattered across the main cities of the country. The prosperity in which at least some of these theatres found themselves meant that a corner might be found, a little money allotted, for serious plays. Younger actors like Jacob Ben Ami, Bertha Gersten, Maurice Schwartz, Muni Weisenfreund (Paul Muni), and Ludwig Satz began to take over major roles; if not quite so flamboyant as Adler or Kessler, and perhaps not so talented, they were certainly more disciplined and intent upon ensemble performance. Playwrights like Sholem Asch, David Pinski, Ossip Dymov, and Peretz Hirshbein had come over from Europe staking out artistic claims in the badlands of the American Yiddish theatre. Writers of varying gifts, they were all intent upon doing plays of merit. Some had found the doors of the professional Yiddish theatres closed to them and had worked, instead, with the many amateur groups that had sprung up in the immigrant communities. Such groups were either subsidized by fraternal organizations like the Workmen's Circle or consisted of enthusiasts who each chipped in a few dollars in order to mount their productions; they came to serve as a conscience, by no means always heeded, of the professional theatre.

Probably the most significant new factor was the gradual impact of a number of European theatrical companies. The renaissance of European theatre in the first two decades of the century left an imprint on the Yiddish theatre. Jacob Ben Ami and Peretz Hirshbein had formed a short-lived Yiddish company in Russia, after Hirshbein visited the Moscow Art Theatre and observed its scrupulous methods; by 1918 Ben Ami and Hirshbein, as well as others, tried to transplant some of the Moscow Theatre's central

disciplines onto the Yiddish stage in America. Rudolph Schildkraut, a fine actor, brought from Europe some of the notions developed in the German experimental theatre, especially those of Otto Brahm. Max Reinhardt's famous Berlin theatre abandoned Brahm's ascetic style in favor of a sensuous theatre, "a big wedding cake" featuring lavish sets, copious music, elaborate staging—all of which were more congenial to the Yiddish theatre than the modernist styles appearing elsewhere in Europe. Toward the end of the First World War, a traveling east European company calling itself the Vilna Troupe went from Jewish town to town, bedraggled and penniless, producing plays in a style that might be called Yiddish Gothic—grotesque, shadowy, darkened. It scored a major success in 1919 with the debut of Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, and when an offshoot of the company came to New York five years later it offered *The Dybbuk* and Hirschbeim's charming pastoral, *Green Fields*. The company was too offbeat and modernist to win the Yiddish audience, and most of its members returned to Europe; but a few, like Joseph Buloff, remained here, to work with Schwartz and, when they could scrape together a few dollars, start independent companies that offered plays for a year or two and collapsed. The Habima, organized in Moscow after the Russian Revolution, performed in Hebrew in a style of ecstatic stylization, or what one critic has called "mystic expressionism." This company came to New York in 1926, but, like the Vilna Troupe, failed to establish itself—though it did leave a mark on the experimental rim of the Yiddish theatre, especially the Artef (see p. 489). Even the American theatre, which Yiddish actors had scoffed at over the years, now began to show a few signs of liveliness, with the Provincetown Players and Washington Square Players gaining the attention of the more serious Yiddish directors.

It would be a mistake to suppose that precise lines of influence can be traced from any of the major European companies to the New York Yiddish theatre. The eclecticism of this theatre was so incorrigible that no European style could survive transplantation intact. What really mattered was not the theatrical ideology of the European companies as it might be transported to New York and sometimes mangled along the way; what mattered was the influx of sentiment concerning a "new" theatre, the feeling among young actors, directors, and writers that Yiddish theatre should share in the possibilities of their moment.

Hopes for such a development settled in 1918 on a company that Maurice Schwartz brought together at the Irving Place Theatre. A group of first-rate younger performers—Jacob Ben Ami, Celia Adler, Ludwig Satz, Bertha Gersten—came to work for Schwartz, lured by his promise of serious productions. When Ben Ami proposed doing Hirschbeim's *A Secluded Corner* (*A farvorfn vinkel*) Schwartz was skeptical: it struck him as a mere *bikbl* (literally, little book, but used contemptuously about "literary" plays said to lack theatricality). Ben Ami insisted, took a pay cut in order to mount the production, and finally opened on November 16, 1918. Yiddish

theatre historians regard this date as marking the start of their serious, or "art," theatre. The production was integrated in style, the actors spoke with purity and restraint, and the company avoided the egocentrism of the "star" system. Hirschbeim's play was slight, but free of the bombast that had so often been the curse of Yiddish theatre. A bucolic comedy, it was set in the old-world countryside, where Jewish life seemed, insofar as Jewish life ever could seem, "natural."

For the sophisticated fraction of the Yiddish theatre public, all this came as a relief from Gordin's lumpy "problems" and coarse adaptations of European classics: a little like Synge after Galsworthy. The Yiddish and American reviews were excellent; Ludwig Lewisohn wrote that the company "is the noblest theatrical enterprise in New York." The play ran for fourteen weeks, very long for the Yiddish theatre, and was followed by productions of Hauptmann and two Yiddish writers, Pinski and Dymov.

Ben Ami represented something fresh in the Yiddish theatre, an actor-director completely dedicated to a vision of theatre as art. A colleague described him as "frail and reticent, with a touch of the mystic and the ascetic . . . a cultured, soulful player." Another Yiddish actor recalled Ben Ami, in a tone of respectful amusement, as one who "played with his shoulders." Allergic to compromise, Ben Ami broke from Schwartz and for two years, 1919-1920 and 1920-1921, led a group called the Jewish Art Theatre in productions of Hirschbeim, Sholom Aleichem, Tolstoy, and Hauptmann that caused one critic, Clayton Hamilton, to say "the Yiddish theatre is now superior to the American. Yiddish theatre is aimed at art." But, alas, Ben Ami's group had a financial backer named Schnitzer, and Schnitzer had a wife with theatrical ambitions named Henrietta (whom Celia Adler derisively called the *balaboste*, or boss's wife). The company believed in rotating leads, Schnitzer in getting them for his wife, and soon Ben Ami was out and the company disbanded. Ben Ami went to the Broadway stage, where he was a notable success, though he tried several times in later years to revive, never effectively, a serious Yiddish company. In the seventies, an octogenarian, he was still acting in revivals of Yiddish theatre.

It was left to Maurice Schwartz—tougher in spirit if coarser in sensibility than Ben Ami—to build the one enduring repertory company in Yiddish. Over some thirty years, with interruptions now and then for recouping losses, Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre staged almost 150 productions, from *shund* to art, folksy genre pieces to "grotesque-cubist" experiments. Translations of Gorky, Schnitzler, Shaw, Molière, Toller, and Chekhov jostled the work of almost every significant Yiddish playwright.

Idealistic and crafty, imaginative and gross, pure in heart and a bruising "go-getter," Schwartz was simultaneously leading actor, stage director, play doctor, and manager. To keep his theatre alive over so many years was itself a triumph of will: he exploited actors, pilfered ideas from gentile directors, courted financial backers, entangled creditors in promises, used every device

of modern publicity to win the Yiddish (and American) public, wrote, adapted, and butchered plays, and, to make up deficits, went on vaudeville tours in the United States and on Yiddish stock-company tours in Latin America.

A man of Rabelaisian energies and appetites, Schwartz wanted to put everything into theatre, loading his stage with the whole jumble of Yiddish cultural aspiration. He wanted to please the East Side intelligentsia while wooing the *altrightniks* from the outlying neighborhoods; he wanted to establish his reputation as a director comparable to Reinhardt and Vakhtangov and continue the tradition of Adler and Kessler, perhaps even Horowitz and Lareiner. "With his native shrewdness and mimetic faculties Schwartz grasped much that passes as a cultured man's equipment, although his training has been limited to the reading of classic plays and contact with cultured theatre-goers who visited him."

Schwartz had no conscious aesthetic program—or he had a dozen, which comes to the same thing. A "temple of art," such as Ben Ami and the intelligentsia dreamt of, he could not build: he was neither purist nor highbrow, and given the culture in which he had to work—it dictated that Yiddish theatre be a popular art or nothing—his energetic confusions were by no means a complete disadvantage. Schwartz yoked together all the conflicting impulses of Yiddish theatre and made of them an exuberant tension, sometimes brilliant, sometimes absurd. A Habima director, looking down his Hebraic nose, said of Schwartz: "The trouble was that he seldom followed a definite line in directing . . . several styles would sometimes be employed in one performance." This was true enough, and in some of Schwartz's more pretentious offerings, when he tried to show himself a master of *velt kultur* (world culture), the mixture of styles could be disastrous.

But eclecticism—as the aesthetic corollary of multilingualism, eternal wandering, and *galut*—was in the very nature of the Yiddish theatre. Ill-educated as he was, and therefore especially susceptible to the lures of alien culture, Schwartz understood in his bones that, finally, the kind of theatre he wanted to create could flourish only if it were rooted in Yiddish culture, in its deep if narrow soul, in the native, the indigenous, even the provincial. "Schwartz's greatest virtue," wrote a Yiddish critic, "is that he is not a spoiled intellectual, not a genteel youth avoiding conflicts. He is a common man who makes his own way. Common people built the Yiddish theatre, and common people will give it its content and significance. We hear the heavy breathing of Schwartz's theatre] as it struggles to create. It reaches toward the heavens, but has dust on its shoes."

Schwartz the actor was as unevn as Schwartz the director. His gift was for unpolished comedy, his yearning for high classics. In the first he played with native ease and "an intuitive motor sense for impersonation"; in the second, he was simply a ham. Schwartz's adaptations of Sholom Aleichem were vivid, earthy, authentic, the first that succeeded in transposing

the great humorist to the stage, but when he tried to do his own production of *The Dybbuk*, he was painfully heavy-handed, smothering it with scenery and circling it out of its delicate beauty. Producing Leivick's *Rags*, one of the few serious plays about Jewish working-class life in America, Schwartz made a lucid piece of theatre. Producing Sholem Asch's *Sanctification of the Name* (*Kiddush hasbem*), Schwartz became "a slave to spectacles and decorations": the play had forty-two speaking roles, mass scenes with fifty supernumeraries, elaborate sets, music, and choreography, as well as a fifty-six-page program.

Sometimes it all came together, Yiddish motifs and modern stagecraft. In 1926 Schwartz produced a stylized version of Goldfaden's old play *The Tenth Commandment*, for which Boris Aronson designed a brilliant expressionistic set. Abraham Cahan, faithful to his old love of "realism," found this production "a mishmash of repulsive noises, disgusting shrieks. One actor has two pairs of eyes, another three noses." The critic Alexander Mukdoyni, by contrast, wrote, "this is theatre in its purest and most refined form, a marvelous fusion of acting, daring sets, and gay, playful music." And the American reviewer John Mason Brown felt that Schwartz's production had "vast energy, a blatant, exciting kind of underscoring that is more familiar to Berlin than Broadway."⁸

In the thirties Schwartz scored his greatest commercial success with *Yoshe Kalb*, an adaptation of I. J. Singer's novel. About this play it is almost impossible to have a clear opinion at all, so hopelessly did it mix Schwartz's best and worst, his gift for sharply evoking Jewish traditionalism and his exploitation of Jewish sentimentalism. By now, in any case, Schwartz had completed most of his interesting work in the theatre; the remaining years, harder and harder to sustain financially, were given over to sluggish adaptations of social novels such as Asch's *Three Cities* and Singer's *The Brothers Ashkenazi* and to a growing mania for spectacle. If the earlier Schwartz had fancied himself a Yiddish Reinhardt, the later one showed unhappy resemblances to De Mille. The Yiddish Art Theatre formally disbanded in 1950, though Schwartz persisted in running about the world, performing here, producing there, still infatuated with greasepaint, floodlights, and the Yiddish word. "You always know," said Brooks Atkinson about Schwartz's theatre, "that you are not in a library."⁹

At least as much could have been said for another significant company, the Communist-inspired Artef, which began to offer plays in 1928 and managed to survive for a decade. Its ideological narrowness apart, the Artef was a remarkable group. It recruited actors from the shops, training them night

* The testimony of qualified non-Jewish critics, who cannot be accused of parochial indulgence, is important here. James Agate, the English critic, reviewed a production of Andreyev's *Seven Who Were Hanged* which Schwartz brought to London: "The performance by these Yiddish players contains more great acting than I have ever seen on any stage in any place. . . . I do not propose to forget anything which happens in this play."

after night in stage techniques and both Yiddish and other dramatic literatures. It had a very gifted director, Benno Schneider, who had worked with Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov. Though it put on a number of straight agit-prop evenings, meant to fire the revolutionary sentiments of Yiddish-speaking workers, its best work had little to do with "socialist realism." A number of Arfey plays used texts drawn from Mendele and Sholom Aleichev which tastefully, though now and then with some class-angling, re-created Yiddish classics. This was the "folk" side of Arfey. A number of other plays drew upon the work of left-wing Yiddish writers like Moshe Nadir and Chaver Paver, as well as the Soviet Yiddish writers David Bergelson and Moshe Kulbak, and these were often done in a tensely stylized manner. This was the "modernist" side of Arfey.

What seems remarkable about the company is not merely the high level of its work but that, finally, it responded more to aesthetic scruples than to political ideology. While the "cultural work" of the Communist-inspired groups in English was almost always middlebrow in character, the Arfey functioned mainly as an avant-garde theatre, one of the very few Yiddish has ever known. The middle position having already been appropriated by the Schwartz company, Arfey had no choice, if it was to establish its distinctiveness, but to take aesthetic risks. Though for a number of years one of the best companies in New York, Arfey never managed to become part of the mainstream of Yiddish theatre. It succeeded far more readily in attracting English-speaking intellectuals than in establishing a permanent audience of the Yiddish masses, who seem to have found it too rigid politically and austere aesthetically.

A good many other attempts were made in the twenties and thirties to establish serious repertory companies, by Yiddish actors bravely banding together for a year or two and then having to retreat to commercial theatre; by Joseph Cutler, a Yiddish poet, and Jack Tworokow, a young painter, who in 1926 set up a brilliant puppet theatre in Yiddish; by the Yiddish branch of the Federal Theatre Project, which did some good work in the few years granted it. All failed.

The energies and gifts of Yiddish theatre in the twenties and thirties were by no means confined to the repertory companies. In the commercial theatres one could see actors of great talent, sometimes doing superb work, sometimes shaming their art, often both on the same evening. Ludwig Satz transformed Jewish comedy from traditional wordplay to a mime's body movement. Aaron Lebedeff, a lad with a shock of hair, polished boots, and embroidered shirt, would come prancing onto the stage, to dance and sing with a devil-may-care good nature: what the Russians, and the Jews after them, called a *molodiets*, a lively fellow who performs fine deeds. Samuel Goldenberg, Celia Adler, Lazar Freed, many others, were accomplished actors seldom able to fulfill themselves. Such players were trapped within

the narrowing confines of a commercial theatre which, merely to survive, had increasingly to pander to a low order of taste. An entertainer like Lebedeff could still manage to seem fresh and good-spirited; but Satz, a sophisticated artist, suffered from self-contempt because of the roles he had to play and, like Kessler before him, would masochistically make still more debased as he went along.

Yet, all through the twenties and thirties, American theatre critics would hold up Yiddish theatre, or at least a portion of it, as a model of accomplishment and seriousness. In 1922 Gilbert Seldes wrote that Leivick's *Rags* had the "exceptional quality of infusing poetry into common speech—or perhaps more accurately, shaping common speech so that its poetry was not destroyed in utterance." He speculated as to why the Yiddish theatre could do plays so fine as Hirshbein's *Idle Inn* or Dymov's *Bronx Express*, far beyond the reach of Broadway. And Stark Young, the best theatre critic of the time, found in Yiddish acting "expressiveness of hands and eyes and shoulders . . . tremendous and inexhaustible vitality. . . . It has the realism of intense feeling, and a deep respect for that feeling. Its best effects come from a compulsive rendering of that intensity; and the beauty of these effects is a spiritual beauty, almost without appeal to the eye."

By the late thirties and the decades to follow, very little was left of the qualities that had excited Seldes and Young. Each year the audience shrank in size; those actors able to find a place for themselves on the American stage or in Hollywood were long gone; and the few stars who remained, like Menashe Skulnik and Molly Picon, often stooped to mere imitations of earlier plays, watering their scripts with English and exploiting sentiments of nostalgia.* One amateur group, the Folksbiene, survived through the decades on a subsidy from the Workmen's Circle; its productions, especially when including a great survivor like Joseph Buloff, were admirable; but to attend them was somewhat like visiting an animated museum.

For the Yiddish dramatists the situation had long been hopeless, and if it is true that there was always more talent on the stage than in the script, that must be laid to the failure of the Yiddish theatre to sustain its writers. One Yiddish scholar has published a study showing that the majority of plays written by the more esteemed playwrights were never given professional productions: "Hirshbein wrote forty-two plays in Yiddish, of which eight were staged. Pinski published fifty-six plays, and not more than ten were produced. . . . Leivick, in this regard, was the luckiest Yiddish dramatist, since of his twenty plays, twelve were done in professional theatres."

It does not seem likely that any large portion of Yiddish drama will survive the passing of the Yiddish theatre. A few plays still read well, offer-

* For some of the old-timers, especially those who had not been careful with their money, the final years were painful. Boris Thomashefsky, matinee idol for decades, was reduced to singing in a Second Avenue cabaret, competing with the noise of waiters and customers. "I won't give up," he said. "If I have no theatre, I'll appear at a cabaret."

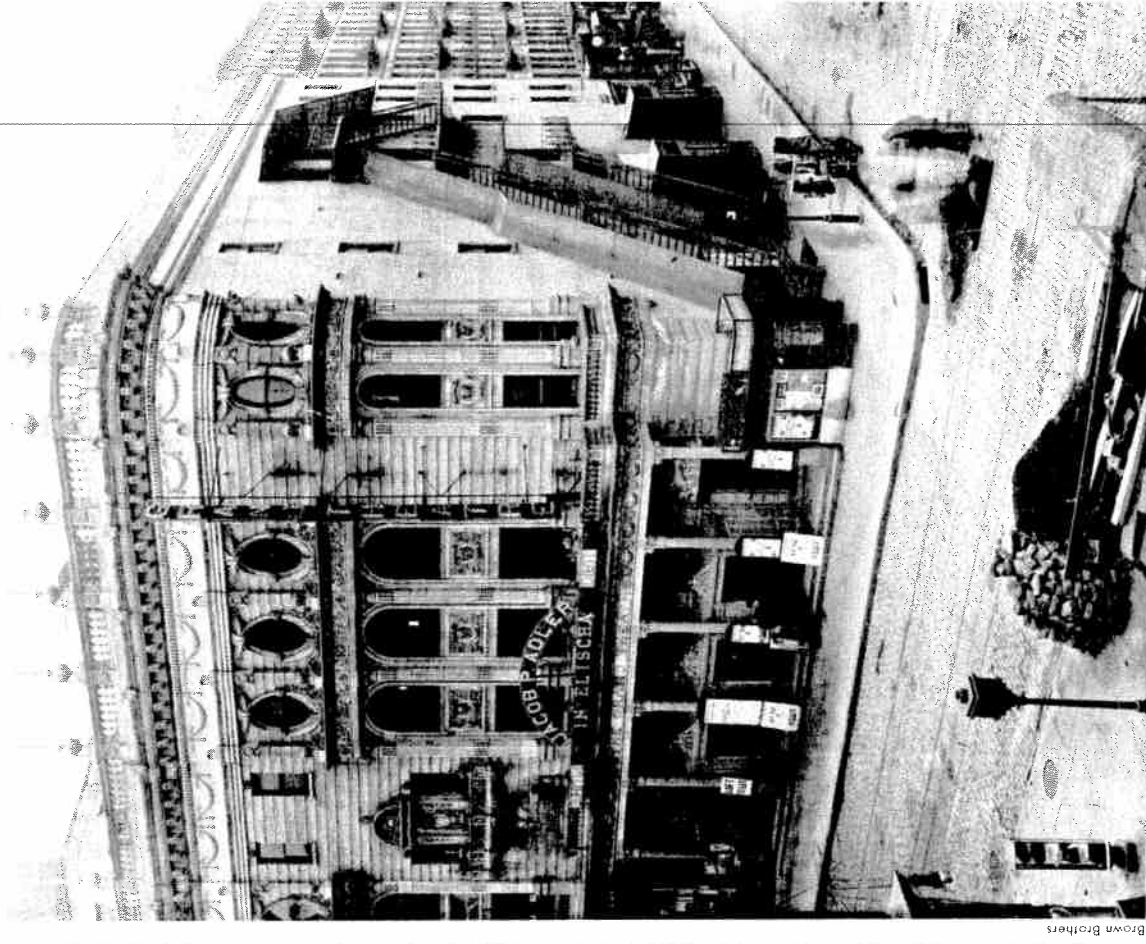
ing possibilities for restaging in Yiddish or translation. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, most widely produced and acclaimed of Yiddish plays, touches upon the motifs by which a culture makes itself aware of possibilities for evil within its own norms of conduct, and then disciplines itself into a return to abstinence. On the face of it a simple love story, the play dredges up, from the collective Jewish memory, a sense of the uncanny, the irrational, the awesome, everything not held in check by rabbinic discipline. It is a wonderful vehicle, built along a single line of fatality, with sharp transitions and strong climaxes—to read *The Dybbuk* is almost to see it played! Yet for all its brilliant darkness, it offered no path of development for the Yiddish theatre: it was a work sealed into the past, which could be imitated but not enlarged upon.

At the opposite pole of Yiddish drama, Hirshbein's *Green Fields* is one of the few plays that keeps its bloom over the years. A romantic-comic pastoral in which a pious young man is cozily absorbed into a not-so-pious rural Jewish community, the play charms through a relaxed acceptance of life. It does not strain toward high ethical or religio-mythic meanings; it balances form with matter lightly, content with its own pleasantness. Spontaneity, not exactly the most abundant of Jewish qualities, comes through *Green Fields* as an impulse rather than idea, so that in the happy ending, a little like a Shakespearean comedy in its balancing of couples, even the much-vaunted learning of the Jews gives way to deeper affections for land and air.

Other playwrights have made lasting contributions. The plays of Peretz, perhaps not for the stage, and those of Sholom Aleichem have an authenticity of their own. Leivick's dramas remain impressive, though some are clearly for the lamp and others are so entangled with Yiddishist motifs as to present difficulties for later readers or spectators. Asch's plays, like his novels, now seem heavy and overwrought, though perhaps still playable by unembarrassed actors for unembarrassed audiences.

An Art of Their Own

The position of the Yiddish theatre was always uneasy: it could never quite define its goals or values. Intellectuals kept hectoring it to satisfy one or another notion that usually derived from dogmas as to the historical responsibilities or immanent nature of Yiddish culture. After the First World War, the thought of older and more prestigious theatres in the gentile world kept nagging at those Yiddish theatre people who had some claims to artistry. Meanwhile, circumstances forced them to cater to audiences that neither did nor could share their interest in the latest experiments of the European or American theatre.



Brown Brothers

Jacob P. Adler stars in *Elischa* at the Grand Theatre.



Chaim Weizmann, first president of Israel, presents a Torah scroll to President Harry S. Truman at the White House, May 25, 1948.

The Yiddish Theatre

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In the Yiddish theatre, the stage as spectacle, outburst, expression, was almost always more vital than dramatic text or program. Vast outpourings of creative energy made the performance of a Yiddish play an occasion for communal pleasure—the kind of pleasure that audiences took in seeing their experiences (or, more often, their memories) mirrored back to them in heightened form. But this outpouring of mimetic energy was so intimately related to folk sources and so little mediated by the cautions and indirections of high art, there was almost always an alloy of shoddiness running through the brilliance of performance.

For the more serious theatre people of the twenties and later, the problem was exasperating. While both they and the intellectuals might complain, for example, about the liberties that actors took with scripts, much too often it was precisely these liberties that brought the Yiddish theatre to life—especially with brilliant comics like Mogulesco and Satz. And while the serious theatre people might want to break away from historical pageant, folk legend, and provincial setting, insofar as the Yiddish writers and directors took this advice and turned toward “serious theatre,” which often meant imitating Chekhov and Ibsen, they risked losing touch with the sources of Jewish creativity.

The central aesthetic question was this: to what extent is it profitable to think of Yiddish theatre in the terms commonly employed for sophisticated Western theatre? Obviously, to *some* extent, since there are continuities in all theatre. But to what extent did it make sense to apply the same order of expectations and criteria of judgment that one brought to the theatre of Shaw, Pirandello, and Hauptmann to the theatre of Goldfaden and Gordin? Or even Leivick and Hirschbein? Beyond such commonplaces as, say, the “universality” of the tragic, it turns out that a close examination would lead one to stress differences rather than similarities. The settings of Yiddish plays were extremely special in reference, as were their terms of emotional response (consider the distance between the Yiddish view of sentimentality and the French!) It was facts such as these that often reduced the more serious theatrical criticism in Yiddish to a species of nagging, in effect, a wish that Yiddish theatre were . . . not Yiddish theatre.* Any given complaint a Yiddish critic might make was likely to be accurate, yet the thrust of such criticism was not often helpful, since, insofar as Yiddish theatre people listened, it made them self-conscious and arty.

Yiddish theatre was an aesthetic medium that could best be appreciated either through a complete “inner” submission to its modes, such as its audiences achieved effortlessly, or through seeing it from a critical distance, not

* Not always, of course. When Alexander Mukdoym published a study called “The Immigrant Drama,” in which he noted that “Yiddish drama is still anchored to its European origins,” and that with a few exceptions, such as Leivick’s *Rags*, “there is no real Yiddish-American drama” dealing authoritatively with the life of the immigrants, he was making a significant critical observation. It was the virtue of this critic that, without accepting *shand* or indulging parochialism, he understood that Yiddish theatre could flourish only by drawing upon Jewish sources.

as an inferior replica of Western theatre but as a theatre indigenous to the Jewish experience—and, oddly enough, with some points of resemblance to Italian opera. For what counted in Yiddish theatre, as it counted in Italian opera, was the sheer display of virtuosity, a talent driving past its material in order to declare itself all the more vigorously. Hit the high C no matter what happens to the plot of the opera, do the bang-up scene where father banishes errant son no matter what happens to the story of the play. What counted, as perhaps it always must in popular art, was the exuberance of the occasion, available every evening as cast and audience joined in a magical interchange of pleasure. What counted was the virtuosity with which archetypal characters were rendered: Jacob Adler as the towering, heartbroken father, Bertha Kalish as the steely Jewish heroine, Ludwig Satz as the clown, Aaron Lebedeff as the high-spirited rascal, Maurice Schwartz—well, as Maurice Schwartz.

There was a way of approaching both Yiddish theatre and Italian opera that only very simple or very sophisticated audiences could command. Whoever took seriously the plots of Italian opera would, as Dr. Johnson said of Samuel Richardson's plots, be tempted to hang himself; but if one saw these plots as residues of traditional romance or grandiose reflections of a culture's view of itself, they might make sense, if not in their details then in their larger rhythms. And much the same was true for the Yiddish plays, with their handful of worn and predictable plots.

The audiences cared more about expressiveness than coherence, more about moments of vision than organized themes. Yiddish theatre structured their responses in ways that brought a solace of recognition, sometimes a flash of illumination. It was a theatre spontaneously expressionistic, for it set as its goal not the scrutiny of personal relationships or the probing of personal destinies, both of which have been dominant concerns of the modern and classical theatres of the West, but rather a mythic ordering of Jewish fate, whether through historical spectacle or family drama. Yiddish theatre cared for the common patterns of Jewish existence, its inner lines of formation; it held up a mirror of recognition to its audiences—and they, for a good length of time, seemed almost to care less about what the mirror showed than about the mere fact that, in all its glitter, the mirror was there. As for what it did show, that was so strong and blunt that even the least-lettered of immigrants could gain pleasure and a primitive sense of definition by going to the theatre. The theatre was the art form that reached everyone in the immigrant world, collapsing distinctions between serious and popular, high and low art; and this inclusiveness came to be both its glory and its curse.

Take, for example, Gordin's *Mirele Efros*. By any ordinary standards it is a wantonly sentimental play, calculated to indulge aging spectators through its one-sided picture of generational conflict. The wisdom of its matriarch, Mirele, is blatantly asserted, and to a modern audience must seem

hopelessly manipulative. Yet over the decades it has been one of the most successful Yiddish plays, and not merely because audiences have brought to it naive expectations. In some deep way *Mirele Efros* spoke to the common Jewish perception, grounded in a sufficiency of historical experience, that the survival of a persecuted minority required an iron adherence to traditional patterns of family life. Mirele represents the conserving strength of the past, which alone has enabled the Jews to hold together in time. And audiences grasped this intuitively, just as Gordin had projected it intuitively.

But the Yiddish intellectuals could not quite see this, or wanted to see more than this. They had read Chekhov and Hauptmann, Ibsen and Schnitzler. They were troubled by the fact that Yiddish could boast of no modern drama to equal *Hedda Gabler* or *The Three Sisters*. They wanted a Yiddish drama that would be worthy of the European masters exploring bourgeois life, and nowhere could they find it. They failed to see that the troubles of middle-class life, the fantasies of a Nora or the meanderings of an Ivanov, could not take root in the Yiddish theatre because that order of life had not yet taken sufficient root among the immigrant Jews. The realist or naturalist drama that dominated late-nineteenth-century Europe would never thrive in the Yiddish theatre, as realism and naturalism did, to some extent, thrive in Yiddish literature.

No; the strength of Yiddish theatre was largely its own, an indigenous popular art. On the page most Yiddish drama seems hackneyed; on the stage it could overwhelm audiences, both Jewish and gentile, shattering aesthetic scruples and inhibitions. The strength of Yiddish theatre rested on such traditional folk materials as sentimental domestic drama, broad comedy, and symbolic versions of traditional legend. Ansky's *Dybbuk* and Leivick's *Golem* are works radically different in theatricality and literary value: the first is a "natural" for the theatre, the second a thoughtful closet drama; yet both rely on religious legend stylized to grotesque intensity.

It might be said, as indeed it often was, that Yiddish theatre could not thrive simply by returning to its indigenous sources; that the old folk themes and situations, the shrewd genre characterizations that were handed down, like mended clothes, from author to author were bound to wear out in the American setting; that some sort of leap was necessary, as the Vilna Troupe and Schwartz's Art Theatre and the Artef at their best undertook from folk to cosmopolitan. But was there no possibility for bringing together the indigenous strengths of Yiddish theatre with the styles and experiments of modern drama? Perhaps; but only if there had been more time only if there had been several generations that used Yiddish as their native tongue yet were also at home in Western culture. Had Yiddish culture survived with some measure of self-assurance, there might have appeared new playwrights spontaneously blending native and acquired motifs. But there was no time: a blink of history and it was all over.

Yiddish theatre had to work out its own terms of existence, mostly

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