

**A WORLD
HISTORY OF
YIDDISH
THEATER**



**VAGABOND
STARS**

**NAHMA
SANDROW**

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3 AVROM GOLDFADN

of the wandering companies of cabaret bards. But all these activities did not seem to him to be the real business of his life.

At the "real business of life" he seemed to be a flop. He tried teaching school for a while, but couldn't earn enough to eat. He opened a ladies' hat business in Odessa, but went bankrupt and had to leave Russia to escape his debts. In Vienna he tried medical school, without success. Then he edited several Yiddish journals, including a humorous one in partnership with Joel Linetski, the *haskole* writer, by then well known, who had been a schoolmate of Goldfadvn's. Though he enjoyed the work, the newspapers always collapsed. In 1876, at the age of thirty-six, Goldfadvn went to Jassy, Rumania, because a friend had advised him to try to start a local Yiddish newspaper there.

Like Brod, Jassy had been profiting from trade routes to the west. In 1876 there was a particularly large number of successful traders there because in anticipation of the Russo-Turkish War, a major Russian army supply headquarters was located in the area, offering a chance to get rich quick on military contracts. So it seemed to Goldfadvn that here was a likely public for a Yiddish newspaper. It had not occurred to him, because it had not occurred to anybody anywhere yet, that here was a likely public for a Yiddish theater.

The story of how Goldfadvn actually came to found a Yiddish theater in Jassy in 1876 has several versions. In fact, from this step on, every incident in the history of Yiddish theater has several versions, all told in later memoirs and reminiscences by eyewitnesses or participants, and all contradicting one another violently. Some stories report small-time professional Yiddish theater companies putting on plays in cafés just before Goldfadvn began, and Cesar (or Betsalel) Grinberg produced *Yoysef mit di Broider* (*Joseph and His Brothers*) with a large chorus and ballet in Constantinople a year before Goldfadvn arrived in Jassy. Generally it seems best to thread a historical path through the various assertions and anecdotes, trying to include the ones that are most often quoted with the ones that are most colorful. For Goldfadvn's professional debut, it's worth accepting at least three different stories.

In his autobiography, Goldfadvn records that he went one evening soon after his arrival in Jassy to a wine garden, Shimen Mark's Pomul Verde—Green Tree. He went especially to hear his songs sung by a very successful Broder singer named Israel Grodner. The thought occurred to him that the material would be much more interesting if it was integrated into a play, as he had seen in non-Yiddish plays in Western Europe, Rumania, and Russia. He sent for Grodner and they were off.

The friend who'd brought Goldfadvn to Jassy tells it differently. Goldfadvn was staying at his house, having just arrived in Jassy, and one day, all dressed up, walking stick in hand, he was on his way out to start making contacts for

AVROM (OR ABRAHAM) GOLDFADN (OR GOLDENFUDIM) was the father of Yiddish theater. He took that title himself, and no one has ever disputed it. Beginning in 1876, it was he who wrote the first professional plays, music and all, and he who produced them. It was under his guidance, in his own troupes, that the Yiddish theater began to take shape. When he was old and out of style, when Yiddish theater was developing along lines he could not approve, when the actors he'd trained wouldn't give him a job, Goldfadvn wrote that his child had grown away from the loyalties of its youth and become a stranger, a *goy* (gentile). But that wasn't altogether true. Yiddish theater maintained permanently very many of the characteristics of its youth. It also kept a close resemblance to its father, the man himself, Avrom Goldfadvn.

Goldfadvn combined in his own personality and career many of the elements that had come together to produce Yiddish theater. He was a folk singer and folk poet, product of the popular Yiddish cultural tradition of the *shetlekh* (townlets) of the Eastern European countryside. He was a Russian *maskil*, heir to modern European secular enlightenment. Furthermore, by nature he was a trouper, an artist, a dreamer, an intellectual, a hustler, a scrapper, a con man, a romantic, a dandy, an optimist, and a one-man band—and his child was a chip off the old block.

Goldfadvn circled his destiny for years before 1876, when he finally committed himself to Yiddish theater. By then he'd developed a reputation as poet and songwriter, before he was out of school, in fact, he had published two volumes of lyrics, and his compositions were in the repertoires of many of the Broder singers. In one of his volumes of lyrics, called *Di Yidene* (*The Jewesses*), there were even two little plays or skits that probably were performed by one

Avrom Goldfajn (1840–1908), the father of professional Yiddish theater.



the newspaper when the friend's wife blurted out, "What do you need a newspaper for? There's already a Yiddish newspaper in Rumania, and the editor starves to death seven times a day. If you start another paper, you'll both starve together. Listen to me: Jews need a theater—that's what you should do. Your sketch in *The Jewess* was like a play. Put it on, so we'll have a Yiddish theater, a theater like other people have, not what Grodner does."

Goldfajn, so the story goes, took off his top hat, took off his white gloves, took off his frock coat, and said, "Your wife has given me an idea. We're going to be shoveling in the gold coins." He sent for Grodner, who he knew was playing in town, and very soon thereafter he was writing away at a Yiddish play.

Grodner, naturally, has his own story. For years Rumanian actors, including Jews who played in Rumanian theater, had been coming to see his cabaret act. After the show they would kiss him and beg him to use his talent by acting real theater, proper dramatic theater. But he always answered that he had no plays to act in.

Israel Grodner was an enterprising young man. He had begun his working life as a cigarette-maker, which may be how he got the nickname of Yisrolik the Cig, and from that quite ordinary origin he had worked his way up until he eventually became one of Europe's best-known Broder singers. He had very little education, but a great deal of natural talent for singing and mimicry. He was also a clever businessman. Ignoring the small towns, he used to come into a city, hire the largest playing area available, build a raised platform for a stage, and set up numbered benches. He posted printed announcements that the famous Grodner would perform the best songs of the beloved folk poets

Zbarzher, Zunser (themselves both Broder singers), Linetski, and Goldfajn. And he made a point of singing funny numbers instead of the serious, even lugubrious ones that Broder singers often favored. So he certainly had the practical experience and the energy necessary to develop something new.

When Grodner heard Goldfajn was in town, he was of course interested to meet the man whose songs he sang. He proposed to Goldfajn, who he heard was broke, that if the famous poet would participate in the show, they would attract a big crowd. They could charge more and then split the profits. From this meeting between the poet and the Broder singer, Yiddish drama followed.

What everybody's story does agree on is that Goldfajn himself appeared that same week at Shimen Mark's Green Tree café and was a terrible flop. Dressed in his frock coat, white gloves, and top hat, he stood up in front of the crowd of working people out to drink wine and have a good time. He began to read a poem about the Jewish soul through the ages. Dead silence. Believing, as he himself ruefully admitted later, that they were simply too overwhelmed to applaud, he gave an encore: more silence. He gave another: people started to whistle and boo, and some even started toward him, apparently to beat him up. After all, they had paid extra because of him and they were being cheated. He had to be bundled home in a carriage, out of harm's way.

Grodner saved the day by jumping up onstage in such haste that his false beard hung half off. He scolded the audience for their ignorance and bad manners; they didn't care. He placated them at last with funny stories and songs, including Goldfajn's own "The Merry Hasid." It was an object lesson for Goldfajn, who kept his public's tastes in mind ever after.

Despite this failure, Goldfajn was stage-struck. He saw that he was no actor, but the very next day he started writing Yiddish plays. And for the rest of his life he devoted himself to writing and producing. He created a whole theater. He conceived, wrote, directed, produced, publicized, promoted, and painted scenery. In the process, he shaped the repertory, acting style, and even the theatrical life style that were to characterize Yiddish theater from then on and in all parts of the world.

Goldfajn's work reflects the crucial last quarter of the nineteenth century, when the Yiddish community was breaking with tradition but still dependent on it for nourishment. This was a period of transition between folk culture and the modern world, between folk and modern art.

Yiddish folk art was essential to Goldfajn's career. The jesters were an early influence on him. In fact, his father's nickname for him when he was a boy, in the 1850s, was "Avromele *badkhen*" ("Little Abie the jester") because he so enjoyed listening to *badkhorim*. He imitated them by playing with words and making rhymes. Another early influence were the Broder

singers; it is probable that one of the watchmakers in Goldfadh's father's shop was a part-time Broder singer. The boy began to write tunes and lyrics in the popular mode, and soon his songs became familiar to the working people around his home town of Alt-Konstantin in Russia.

Actually, Goldfadh was brought up in a *haskole* household. His home was middle class, and his father a committed member of the Enlightenment movement that was steadily widening its influence among Russian Jews. From his youth Goldfadh was aware of such manifestations of *haskole* as the plays being translated into Yiddish and Hebrew and the amateur plays being written in those languages. He was acquainted with Western history and literature, and he shared the *haskole* conviction that Yiddish culture had to develop its own secular aesthetic.

In the 1860s Goldfadh went to the Zhitomir Rabbinical Academy. This was one of the crown schools established in the hopes of training Westernized Jewish leaders who would lead their people toward assimilation. The Zhitomir Academy was especially known for its lively intellectual life. One of Goldfadh's teachers was Avrom-Ber Gotlober, the passionate *maskil* and author of *The Bridal Canopy; or, Two Weddings in One Night*. Gotlober reinforced Goldfadh's enlightened convictions and especially his instinct for Yiddish as a literary language—just as rich as Hebrew and more suited to the portrayal of Jewish life. Gotlober and Goldfadh also shared a love for popular folk tunes. The man and the boy used to ramble the countryside together, collecting these tunes and singing them for fun.

By coincidence, at the Zhitomir Academy some ten years before Goldfadh's time, two schoolboys had composed and presented several musical comedies in Russian and Yiddish for the benefit of soldiers wounded at Sebastopol. They had been a great success among Jewish merchants and Russian soldiers garrisoned in town. Everyone at the academy remembered these productions, or had heard about them, and many were intrigued by the idea of shows in Yiddish.

Then in 1862, a new headmaster arrived, a scholar named Slonimsky. His wife was an energetic, sophisticated lady, fresh from big-city *haskole* social life. She brought with her a manuscript copy of Shloyme Etinger's play *Serkele*. Reading the play aloud in the familiar living-room fashion of the *masklim*, which had become so widespread a custom that publishers were printing and selling plays in Yiddish for reading, was not enough for Madame Slonimsky. She felt bored in provincial little Zhitomir and wanted to make a splash, so she directed a "real" production of the play, with student actors. Young Goldfadh played the title role. He was also stage manager, property man, and improviser of scenery and costumes. This was his first theatrical experience, and it was a rare one for Yiddish boys in those days.

At that time, Jews, especially middle-class Jews like Goldfadh, were expanding their intellectual horizons as a result of the permissive policies of Czar Alexander II, absolute ruler not only of Russia but also of areas that are now Poland, Lithuania, and other Eastern European countries. Crown schools like the one at Zhitomir were part of a larger policy of access for Jews to a greater number of schools and universities. Goldfadh's stint at medical school in Vienna exemplified greater freedom to study and travel. His correspondence with Sholom Aleichem, Peretz, and Linetski exemplified the growing brotherhood of secular Yiddish writers. His association with a number of Yiddish newspapers and journals exemplified the increased freedom to set up printing presses.

As intellectual possibilities widened, traditional Yiddish-speaking society was breaking up, changing, becoming dislocated. Goldfadh was of the generation that saw places and things their parents had not dreamed of and were buried in cemeteries far from home.

Goldfadh's plays tell us a lot about his times. They are not great or profound literature; Goldfadh rarely claimed they were. But the best of them are touching, stirring, lyrical, comical. They tap the communal sources of Purim play, folk song, and poem, and they channel that energy into a more complex form. Unlike most of the Yiddish dramatists who rapidly appeared to compete with him, Goldfadh remained true to his source. Thus many of his plays have a freshness, energy, and theatricality which time has not diminished and which accounts for their frequent and successful revivals to this day.

The early plays Goldfadh devised in Jassy were hardly what we consider scripts. He handed plot scenarios to Grodner and Grodner's boy helper. The little company, which Goldfadh later described as an actor and a half, operated like the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, with which Yiddish folk theater had so many original similarities. Goldfadh made up the plot, wrote the songs, and explained to the actors the characters they were to play. Then the two actors, like *badkhnim*, had to improvise their own words and actions.

One of the first such plays, which he built around a song he had already composed, was a comedy about a drunken *hasid*, that favorite target of *masklim* and Broder singers. A *hasid* (played by Israel Grodner) and his wife (the boy helper, Sakher Goldstein) quarrel, sing, quarrel some more. In the second act the *hasid* is tricked by a boy (also Goldstein) who pretends to be a girl and makes a fool of him. Goldfadh later wrote he'd forgotten the title of the piece and that it wasn't even a play, but rather "a—I myself don't know what to call it—a mess, a kind of mix-up, an absurdity." All the same, the audience was astounded and delighted, evidently not so much by the play's merits as by the fact that it was identifiably a real play, not a Purim play or

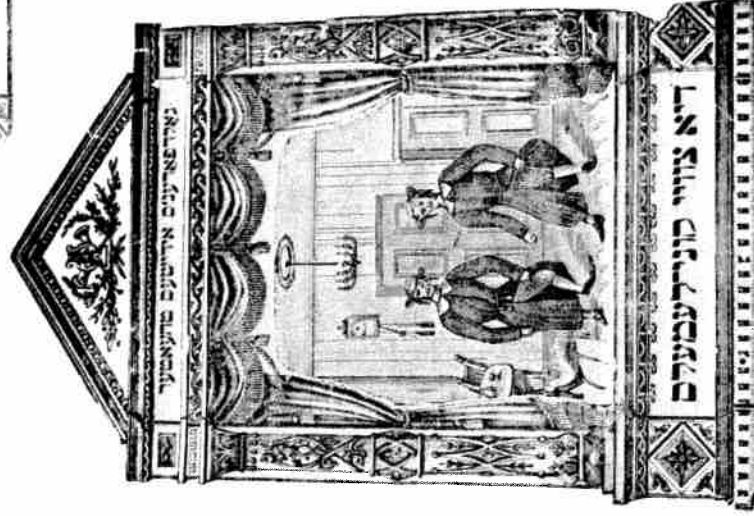
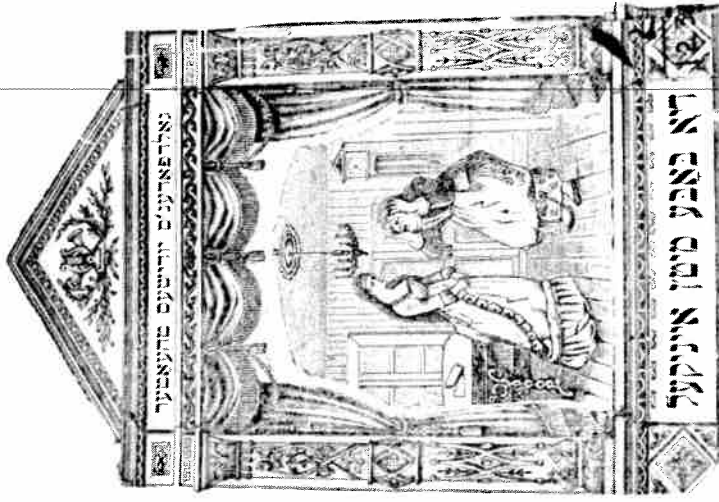
just a skit, it had more than one song integrated into the action—and all in Yiddish. They loved the novelty and yelled for more. The author got busy giving them what they wanted.

Goldfady was showman enough to catch on to what his audience would respond to. From Jassy he and his two actors went to Botosani, Rumania, but there they couldn't perform because the Russo-Turkish War had just broken out and officers were shanghaiing likely recruits off the streets. For a few weeks neither audiences nor performers dared to show themselves in public. But while the three were holed up in the attic of the café where they were to perform, Goldfady prepared a new comedy about the blundering of some Jewish draftees who couldn't adjust to army life. This was a standard subject for Broder singer monologues. As soon as the coast was clear they began to perform it downstairs in the café, and it was a great success. (The war turned out to be lucky for Goldfady since it brought a potential audience of prosperous traders to Rumanian cities.)

When Goldfady first began to write out his plays in neat Yiddish script in notebooks, they were of little literary value. Yitskhok Leyb Peretz was later to reproach him: "If I had had your talent, I would have constructed my dramas and comedies around much more significant and revealing aspects of Jewish life." But Goldfady answered all such charges in his autobiography and in various articles, claiming with some justice that his audience, at least in the early years, could not have absorbed any more sophisticated material than he gave them: a song, a slapstick, a quarrel, a kiss, a jig. When he tried to offer them higher drama they were resentful, felt cheated, didn't understand; they demanded a good laugh over a glass of wine to help forget their troubles. It was no use giving a child a marble statuette, he pointed out, when the child is crying for a crudely painted wooden doll. If fate had made him begin the Yiddish theater for Rumanian laborers and peasants rather than among the *maskilim* of Warsaw or Odessa, then—he explained—his job was to begin at his audience's level and elevate it.

In the *haskole* tradition, Goldfady justified his plays as didactic instruments, however popular and even crude their form. He was gradually educating his Jews both to the art of drama and to enlightened ideas. His established role as a poet of the people and his emerging role as a showman were both informed by his *haskole* sense of social responsibility. He later described himself as reflecting: "Since I have a stage at my disposal, let it be a school for you. You who had no chance to study during your youth, come to me to see the faithful pictures I will draw you of life . . . as in a mirror . . . you will take a lesson from it and improve by yourselves the errors which you make in family life, and among Jews, and between Jews and their Christian neighbors.

Frontispiece engravings from Avrom Goldfady's early plays *The Grandmother* and *the Granddaughter*; or *Bayse the Do-gooder* (left) and *The Fanatic*; or *The Two Kumi-Lemls*. In the first play the grandmother has arranged a match into a rabbinical family, but the granddaughter loves a *maskil*. In *The Fanatic* one Kumi-Leml is a genuine yeshive boy and a genuine fool; the other is an imposter.



While you are having your good laugh and are being entertained by my funny jokes, at that very moment my heart is weeping, looking at you."

When a play finished, Goldfadh often came out himself, formally dressed, to explain the play to the audience. After The Green Tree episode he knew better than to bore them, especially since their pleasure was now his livelihood, but he read them a poem or two of his own or made a speech. He was a combination teacher, elocutionist, and barker. The tradition of curtain speeches was just one of his legacies to Yiddish theater.

In his earlier plays Goldfadh concentrated on the standard *haskoile* targets of ignorance and superstition, especially among *hasidim*. *The Grandmother and the Granddaughter*; or, *Basye the Do-Goeder* has a girl elope with a young *maskil* when her grandmother tries to force her into an unhappy match for the sake of prestigious family connection with a rabbi. The grandmother, Basye, is the major character. In the end, she is left all alone and sick. A voice comes to her, promising that she will be granted a vision of the girl and her new husband, happily together, just before she dies. She has the vision—a tableau wreathed in eerie green lights—and dies repentant.

The play does not make its point subtly; nor is it subtle in style. Goldfadh still had only two actors, with a few extras as helpers and chorus, so Grodner as the grandmother naturally had many long monologues. Motivations are obvious and uncomplicated and so are the conflicts and the suspense. Still, the play's movement is brisk and self-conscious. The two women sing solos and duets, including a musical argument which is particularly well integrated. The play made Goldfadh's point so that anyone could understand it and enjoy it, even sitting over a glass of wine.

In 1877, within a year of his debut, Goldfadh was already writing out plays of some substance, and by 1880 he had written *Shmendrik* and *The Fanatic*; or, *The Two Kuni-Lemls*. Similar in message and plot to Gotlob's *The Bridal Canopy*, these plays concentrated on the battle against traditional abuses, especially matches forced on young people by *hasidic* families. Their message found an enthusiastic audience. But the real reason why both were instantly favorites, and have continued to be revived ever since, is simply that they're so funny.

Shmendrik, the protagonist of the first play, is a *yeshiva* student and an ass, but an ass of such a distinctive type that *shmendrik* entered the Yiddish vocabulary as a humorously contemptuous description. He is deeply stupid, but with flashes of cross-eyed, almost drunken, shrewdness. He is rude and suspicious, lazy, and intent on his infantile pleasures, especially honey cake. Jerry Lewis, whining and mugging and walking on his ankles, is a Shmendrik type. But Shmendrik has a certain charm and a mother who thinks he's a

genius; she only worries that he may strain himself by overwork. In the end, the girl to whom he's betrothed manages to evade the marriage by a trick. She marries her sweetheart, leaving Shmendrik to a suitably foolish bride.

In *The Fanatic* Kuni-Leml horrifies the girl who thinks she'll be forced to marry him. He is half-blind, with a crooked leg, a limp, and a dreadful stammer, and he's hardly brighter than Shmendrik. He is the walking punch line to every joke about a matchmaker's prize merchandise. Like Shmendrik's, his name entered the Yiddish language to signify a particular kind of shameful idiot. *The Fanatic* naturally turns out well by a trick: the bride's true sweetheart impersonates Kuni-Leml for the wedding. And when the real Kuni-Leml turns up for the ceremony and confronts the impostor, he becomes terribly confused. Seeing the other's (phony) eye, leg, and stammer, he ends up accepting the impostor as the real Kuni-Leml and tries to figure out who, in that case, he himself can be.

The mode is slapstick, with songs thrown in. Kuni-Leml insists that he's not a cripple and to prove it runs across the stage into a furious pratfall. Insisting he doesn't stammer, he gets himself tongue-tied into paralysis; insisting he's got perfect vision, he triumphantly identifies his father as a ceremonial banner and the banner as his father. And he has an indignant alibi for every defeat. Nobody could call this intellectual entertainment, nor is it sensitive to character. But from a stage or a cabaret floor, it keeps you laughing.

Another perennial favorite from this early period is an operetta called *Koldunye*; or, *The Witch*. Goldfadh was aiming at local superstitions, belief in witchcraft being especially strong in Rumania, among Jewish and non-Jewish peasants alike. The play is a sort of fairy tale fable about Mirek, whose wicked stepmother enlists the help of a woman reputed to be a witch to frighten the girl into running away from home. But a merry wandering peddler named Hotsmakh foils the plan. Hotsmakh has his peddler's foibles, but he is a particularly lively and winning character.

By now Goldfadh was writing on a larger scale. In the second act, for example, we see a whole lively East European market day. A butcher sings about his wares. A woman selling hotcakes has a solo about her cakes and the hard life of a market woman. Buyers sing, exclaim, dance. Hotsmakh makes his first appearance in the middle of this bustle, with an amusing patter routine full of sales tricks. And then at last comes the innocent young Miriele. The audience knows that the stepmother herself slipped away the purse with which the poor girl was to do the family shopping, so that she will think it's lost and be too frightened to go home. Helplessly we watch her discover that her pocket is empty; helplessly we see the witch falsely befriend her and then frighten her and lead her weeping and protesting, in song, through the silent

crowd. Right wins out in the end, in the person of Hotsmakh, but the final chorus says that there are indeed bad people in the world and they deserve their punishment.

It is true that Goldfadh was accomplishing what he had intended— weaning simple people out of cultural isolation into the non-Jewish world. Ironically, however, he was in a way accomplishing the opposite as well. For his songs, for characters like Shmendrik, Basye, and Hotsmakh, and for overall atmosphere, he drew his deepest strength from an altogether parochial folk atmosphere. He was actually entering and enriching popular tradition while he thought he was guiding his audience away from it. That paradox was to pursue him throughout his career.

During his first few years as a dramatist, Goldfadh continued to write plays aimed at enlightening Jewish behavior. These he interspersed with musical skits and pieces of all kinds that he made up in a hurry. Some plays he adapted crudely from popular French and German plays (his wife, Paulina, had a ladylike education) and some he adapted from current Rumanian hits. He had to scramble to keep attracting audiences with novelties. He once dashed off a piece about a flood to perform in a town that had just suffered one. Mean-



Scene from Goldfadh's *Koldumye, or, The Witch*, as presented in New York in 1925 by the Yiddish Art Theater. Maurice Schwartz, playing Bobe Yakhne the witch (a role traditionally played by a man), stands behind Anna Teitelbaum as the innocent Mirele; Mimi Weisenfreund (later known as Paul Muni), as the peddler Hotsmakh, sits third from left.

while his output was developing from scenarios and skits into real musical plays.

The institution of Yiddish theater was growing rapidly. As Jews became more worldly, the theater's public expanded. The Russo-Turkish War brought to Rumania sophisticated Russian Jews. They had seen good non-Yiddish theater in Russia, where drama was more highly developed than in Rumania, and they could afford to patronize the theater. Goldfadh's company increased. He recruited new actors. In fact, most of the actors who were to become famous in the first half century of Yiddish theater had their first jobs with him, including Jacob P. Adler, Sigmund Mogulesko, David Kessler, and Keni Lipt-zin.

Goldfadh's actors came from varied backgrounds. Jacob P. Adler was a young businessman in Odessa. He hung around the Russian theater because there was no Yiddish theater to hang around. Goldfadh arrived in Odessa on tour and gave him a bit part. Within twenty years Adler was considered the Yiddish stage's greatest tragic star. Sigmund Mogulesko was a seventeen-year-old *meshoyrer* (choir singer) in a Bucharest synagogue when Goldfadh arrived there on tour. *Meshoyrerim* were sophisticated musically, and were notorious for being freethinking and irreverent. As soon as Goldfadh arrived in town he heard about the young cutup who was the life of local parties, imitating scenes from Rumanian comedies and mimicking the dignified cantor he sang for. Within a year Mogulesko had become the comic genius of his generation.

As might be expected, a number of Goldfadh's actors were Broder singers and *backhionim*. He recruited a number of his actors from the ranks of *meshoyrerim* and cantors. Some were cabaret entertainers in Rumanian or Russian or Polish. Some were actors or singers from the non-Yiddish stage. In later years increasing numbers came from Yiddish amateur drama clubs.

Some new Yiddish actors were simply stage-struck youngsters. Maybe they had seen Russian or Polish dramas or operas. Maybe they had never seen anything like a play, except perhaps a *Purimshpil*, until Goldfadh blew into town. And they were dazzled. They were drawn to the makeshift stage, or they hung around the inn where those glamorous and worldly beings the *artistes* were staying. When the troupe moved on, they moved on with it, as chorus members or bit players or errand boys. Often this amounted to running away from home. Some pious families never did come to approve of the theater, and certainly not of the ragtag bunch who had skipped out of town without even paying the hotel bill, and had taken along their son.

Goldfadh got his earliest actors where he could find them. A sizable proportion seem to have been the lowlifes who hung around taverns and happened to be on the spot when the company needed chorus members for

a night or two: cardsharps, small-time gamblers and swindlers, even pimps. Some of them stayed in the theater. Others drifted out. Once Goldfadh had the brainstorm of hiring Rumanian soldiers from the local barracks for the chorus of *Recruits*, just because they could provide their own impressive costumes.

At the beginning Grodner acted old women and Goldstein young women. As in Purim plays and various other theaters, including Shakespeare's, the audiences accepted the convention. But Goldfadh soon began to feel badly the lack of an actress, especially in the cabaret atmosphere in which his company most often performed. By 1877 there were several actresses on the Yiddish stage, all claiming to have been the first. The first may actually have been a certain Rosa, who had already sung in Istanbul taverns and thus had no reputation as a nice Jewish girl left to lose. Or it may have been Grodner's wife, since Broder singers' wives did sometimes join the act.

But most likely the very first Yiddish actress was a sixteen-year-old seamstress named Sara Segal, who became stage-struck as soon as Goldfadh and his two actors arrived in Galatz. She had a sweet soprano voice and lively black eyes. They would have been delighted to take her along, but her mother refused, so finally they left town without her. She stayed home and pined. At last her mother told her in exasperation that once she got married, she would be her husband's headache and could do whatever she liked. When the company heard the news, they deliberated. Goldfadh and Grodner were married, young Goldstein was not. Sophie (more elegant than Sara) Goldstein joined the cast at once. Subsequent remarriage to another actor in New York made her name Sophie (sometimes Sophia) Goldstein-Karp, her daughter was a Yiddish actress after her.

Goldfadh ruled the members of his companies with a heavy paternal hand—not only their performances, but their lives. He explained every role to them individually; told them where to stand onstage; planned and executed the fireworks finales he favored. He assigned the roles and planned the tour itineraries. And he demanded respect for his superior education and position. He had a grand manner and a fastidious way of fingering his pointed moustaches. When the company was flush—and often when it wasn't—he fixed himself up an office that was richly furnished, at least by comparison to the actors' crummy digs, and held court there. At the door he liked to station not one servant but two, in livery: one announced visitors and the other ushered them in. The actors spoke to him very politely, though in later years it turned out that they'd resented his authority bitterly all along, and they made him pay.

Goldfadh's plays were suited to the actors who had to perform them, so

that his actors to some extent shaped the plays and thus shaped Yiddish theater. At the start, for example, Goldfadh, like Sophocles two thousand years before him, had two actors, plus a chorus. Since only two people could be onstage at a time, he had to plan very carefully how to plot his action and how to double roles. Also, his actors were generally uneducated and many were inexperienced as performers. He couldn't count on much skill from most of them and if he'd given them interesting monologues, he later explained, they themselves would not have understood what they were talking about, or remembered the words. So it is no coincidence that songs and sight gags far outweighed subtle dialogue in his early plays.

Goldfadh was clever at tailoring roles to suit individual actors, just as Shakespeare did at the Globe. For the young cutup Mogulesko he created Shmendrik. For a vivacious soubrette he created the title role in *Brandydele Cossack*; she played it all her life, and when she walked down the street people called to her by that name. For one of his earliest actresses, who was still too scared to open her mouth onstage, he wrote *The Mute Bride* so all she had to do was look pretty. Indeed, Paulina Goldfadh once commented that she thought the main reason actors remained under her husband's overbearing control was his power to give them roles with which they remained identified, vehicles that made them famous. When he couldn't come up with their wages, he promised them immortality.

Goldfadh painted his own scenery at first, with the help of Ber, a benevolent old house-painter with a bushy black beard. Asked to prepare a plain backdrop to represent a room, Ber painted yellow walls and added on his own inspiration a cozy oven with painted green smoke rising from it and looping back down to the floor. Goldfadh didn't want an oven and he certainly didn't want a loop of green smoke, but he didn't like to hurt the old man's feelings, so he explained tactfully that so much smoke inside the room might make the audience cough. But Ber, as kind to Goldfadh's ignorance, he thought, as Goldfadh had been to his, explained very gently that the smoke was only a picture. Goldfadh was stuck with the oven. Eventually the company acquired more elaborate sets, though sometimes they had to be abandoned with the actors' baggage when they crept out of hotel windows without paying the bill.

Their playing conditions oscillated between violent extremes. They played sometimes in the well-equipped opera houses with red plush lobbies which the Russian government helped maintain in many large and even medium-sized towns; at the grand Maryinski in Odessa they could expand with spectacles and an orchestra. Or they played one-night stands in drafty local theaters, where the actresses' shoulders had shivery goose flesh under their flimsy gowns and where the actors elbowed each other to make up at one mirror, by the

light of a single bulb suspended from low-hanging water pipes, in a dressing room up three flights of narrow stairs from the stage. Or, more primitive still, they made do with a makeshift platform in the courtyard of a village inn. Seidy Glick, now a character actress in the Bucharest Yiddish State Theater, still remembers that once, not long after the Goldfadvn years, her family planned to play in a barn, but the farmer's goat ate their scenery.

The stage effects that Goldfadvn used most often were adaptable to all sorts of playing conditions. His final scenes frequently called for eerie green Bengal lights made by burning a benzine-soaked rag. He also liked visions and tableaux, offstage voices, and fireworks for his grand finales.

When Goldfadvn's company were a hit in town—when, in the Yiddish idiom, they “wallowed in a *shmaltsgrub* [pit of chicken fat]”—they were everybody's darlings. Men fought to buy them drinks after the show, till dawn. Women made eyes at them from behind window curtains as they swaggered down the street. But when their show didn't catch on, or if they were competing against a company that was more of a novelty, Goldfadvn and his actors slept in a hotel garrer and went hungry.

Although when Goldfadvn started his was the only Yiddish theater company, within a year that was no longer so. New companies proliferated. At first, most of them were made up of actors who had worked with Goldfadvn and left him. Grodner quit soon after Mogulesko joined because Mogulesko was stealing his scenes. Grodner founded his own company. When Mogulesko in his turn fought with Goldfadvn and quit, he joined up with the group that Grodner had founded. Then Grodner went off, leaving that group to Mogulesko, and started a third company. And the dance was on.

There are many accounts of Yiddish theater companies, all with different dates and different versions of disputes, different facts about who played which play first and where and with how much success. But anybody's account sounds like a square dance. Companies were constantly forming, taking on new members who had maybe never seen a play two weeks before, traveling, breaking up, multiplying like paramercia, reshuffling, so that people who swore enmity over a scene-stealing episode in Buenos Aires might well find themselves singing a love duet, or quarreling over top billing, or sharing a pitifully small salami, in Poltava (or London, or Buenos Aires) six months later. That was to be the permanent condition of Yiddish theater, and not only in Eastern Europe, but wherever in the world Yiddish-speaking Jews immigrated.

Many companies were organized simply for a single season, or a single tour, or a single performance. Others played for a season or more, but only on weekends. A “season” was generally understood as meaning from the autumn

New Year holidays to after Passover in the spring, but companies kept touring in the summer as well.

Often these were repertory companies, divided into “lines”: a prima donna, a soubrette, a lover, a comic, a villain, a villainess (or “intriguer”), an older man and woman for character roles, and one or two more for spares as a plot might require. They had their own prompter, and sometimes the prompter was also the company dramatist, turning out scripts, or plagiarizing them, as best he could. Bigger companies had their own musical director, and anything from a single fiddler to a little orchestra. Sometimes they included a chorus as well, though more often they hired a chorus and extras from outside to fill their needs. Smaller companies might consist of nothing more, all told, than two actors.

Family troupes were very common, as they had been for centuries in all languages, throughout Europe and America. Yiddish actors not only recruited their wives onto the stage when they needed women, but it was also natural for actors and actresses, constantly together and constantly wandering, isolated from normal society, to marry among themselves. So a second generation of Yiddish actors grew up in theater trunks. By the age of five they were old pros at piping a little song and bobbing a little bow. Among the larger and better-known Yiddish theater families in Eastern Europe, the Treitlers, Kompaneytzes, and Glickmans were active within five years of Goldfadvn's debut. Such families might include parents, daughters and sons-in-law, sons and daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. Chances are that such a family could handle a full repertory, from soprano heroine to the man who got hit with a custard pie, plus the cashier and the boy who put up posters on walls all over town.

Often companies, whether they were family or not, were organized cooperatively. The mark system was most common in Goldfadvn's day: every actor took a percentage, or a number of marks, out of the week's take. This may sound fair, but it didn't necessarily make everyone happy. Directors, theater landlords, and stagehands took their established payments out of the week's receipts before the division into marks even began. Then, since more important actors got more marks than bit players, a bit player might end his week with empty pockets. And when the company as a whole had done very little business, a mark that week could be almost worthless, so that even the most important actor might not make enough to live on. Another complaint was that most company members didn't actually see the books, so they couldn't verify how much a mark was really worth on any payday.

Another system was based on a manager, who paid wages to all the artists. He might be a businessman or perhaps the landlord of the theater building,

a man with no feeling for theater at all, but only an eye for an investment. The management might consist of a partnership between two businessmen, or a businessman and an actor. With increasing frequency the manager, or one of the managers, was the star of the company. He took a cut of the gross and paid marks or a salary to everyone else. This star-manager system came to predominate, especially when America became the most active center for Yiddish theater, since it was the practice that had ruled nineteenth-century American theater.

By the 1880s Goldfadh was famous, both as a poet and as the father of Yiddish theater. But he moved through this widening world, fighting for existence like the rest. He kept touring, every season and sometimes every few days, in Rumania and Poland and Russia. Often he had to go ahead to get money so he could send for his actors. He scrambled for enough customers to pay the hotel bill. He put up posters. He contacted patrons in every little town. He even crushed a rival company that was playing Bucharest when he was: offering the rival leading man a higher salary, he stole him away in the middle of his engagement. At the same time, of course, he kept writing.

In the rough-and-tumble competition for a livelihood, other companies often took advantage of his plays. Actors who'd worked with him simply remembered lines and songs and used them. Sometimes an outsider recorded a Goldfadh play and sold it to a rival. One reason Goldfadh went to Russia in 1878 may be that he thought Russia's copyright law would protect him. It didn't help.

One particularly flagrant case of plagiarism occurred when the actor Leon Blank found that he and Goldfadh were to arrive in a certain town on the same day. Everyone had heard reports that Goldfadh had recently been having huge successes with his Biblical operetta *Akeydas Yitskhok* (*The Sacrifice of Isaac*). Blank found someone who had seen the play and remembered it, songs and all. He rehearsed the play with his company, managed to open a day before Goldfadh, and stole Goldfadh's thunder and box office receipts. When Goldfadh, goaded this time beyond patience, took Blank to court, the actor blandly told the judge that the story after all was in the Bible; surely Mr. Goldfadh wouldn't claim to have written the Bible, would he?

In the early 1880s Goldfadh's plays changed. From crude scenarios built around songs, they became more complex, subtle, and dramatic, reflecting the drastic changes that were taking place in the situation of Eastern European Jews—which affected the stability of Goldfadh's troupe too.

The most dramatic change in the Jewish situation occurred in Russia, which included Jews in the Pale and part of Poland. Goldfadh happened to be playing in Odessa in 1881 when Czar Alexander II was assassinated. Under

Alexander III, a reactionary wave swept Russia, affecting Jews very harshly. Pogroms broke out in southern Russia and the Ukraine. New regulations paralyzed Jewish life with legal disabilities. In 1882 the May Laws forced more and more Jews out of the countryside into congested city slums. The quotas of Jews allowed to study were reduced, and Jews were evicted from the practice of their professions. The entire Jewish communities of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kharkov were marched in manacles to the railway stations and expelled. By the end of the century, 40 percent of Russian Jewry was totally dependent for survival on charity from other Jews.

Outside Russia, meanwhile, the situation was just as bad. A "cold pogrom" of legal economic persecutions made it doubtful whether Rumanian Jewry would survive. Polish Jews in Galicia were starving. Millions emigrated, most of them to the United States. The Eastern European Jewish community was in fact on its way to extinction.

Eastern European Jews were as distressed psychologically as they were materially. Not only were Jews physically leaving home, either dislocated by authorities or escaping to "Columbus's Nation"; they were also scattering spiritually. The community seemed to be becoming *Scattered and Dispersed*—the title of a play by Sholom Aleichem, which he put together in 1905 from sketches he had been publishing over the previous decade. In the play, a solid bourgeois Russian-Jewish family, with five grown children, disintegrates before the audience's eyes. One child feels himself so much a Russian that he converts to Christianity; one becomes a revolutionary, another a Zionist, another a forthright hedonist. All values and traditions are weakening, even simple respect for parents.

Under these pressures, the Jewish population's mere economic ability to support Yiddish theater became severely limited. Development ceased as Goldfadh's company and all the others had to struggle just to survive.

As the community that produced Yiddish theater and should have been its audience began to break up and emigrate, Goldfadh, like all other Yiddish artists, became a part of the vast swirling movement westward. He, too, had to keep moving to stay afloat, trying to establish companies wherever he found a potential audience. He continued writing plays, recruiting actors, training them, moving on, and starting again. His plays had their premieres wherever he happened to write them. Between 1881 and 1903 he had premieres in Leuberg and Paris, Bucharest and New York.

Yiddish actors became nomads, not just to follow their audiences, but also because they were actually outlaws. The Czar banned Yiddish theater in 1883 as part of his suppression of Yiddish culture. From then on, any Yiddish performances in Russia had to be given surreptitiously, called "German thea-

did live crowded into the same areas of Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and Rumania. But there was such a thing as secular Yiddishism, and to that concept it was becoming possible to feel patriotism. The Yiddish language itself became a national language, associated with pride and striving.

Just before Yiddish theater was actually outlawed in Russia, Goldfadin had had a cruel reminder of his responsibility to his public. *Shmendrik* had played in Moscow in 1880, with great success. Russians attended as well as Jews, and laughed at the slapstick. Now, in the growing wave of anti-Semitism, Russians began to yell "Shmendrik" after Jews on the street, as a term of ridicule and abuse. Goldfadin was very depressed. And as persecutions mounted, a poem dedicated to him appeared in the St. Petersburg Yiddish newspaper:

For shame, Abic, to be asleep now
 When your people need you to be awake
 And to fight their misfortunes. . . .
 We have enough Shmendriks and Witches,
 Of these we have more than we need. . . .
 The jokes that we like are sharp, sharp and sweet. . . .

But Goldfadin had already begun changing his subjects to give his people what they needed. In *The Capricious Bride; or, Kaptsonz on et Hungerman* (1877), instead of making fun of *hasidic* tradition, he makes fun of the enlightened younger generation who go foolishly overboard. A girl whose head has been turned by romantic novels refuses a sensible match with a widower named Solomon and runs off with a fortune hunter. This Kaptsonz (literally, Pauper) woos her cynically with comy poetry and romantic nonsense, pretending that his name is Franz, like the heroes of the novels she loves, because, as he confides to a friend, "It's all the same what they call me, and I'd just as soon be 'Franz' as 'thief.'" She herself does not like to be called plain Hanele, but Carolina. After their marriage he responds brutally, "What 'Franz? My name is Kaptsonz. Give me my money." In Goldfadin's earlier plays, the good characters spoke a Germanic Yiddish, in the *haskole* tradition; here such *Dayshmerish* is meant to indicate affectation and dislocation from Jewish roots.

Kaptsonz's brutality soon breaks Hanele's heart. The last scene takes place by the river. After a brief conversation with the sensible suitor she'd recklessly rejected, she runs off, and we hear a splash and her voice crying, "Adieu, Solomon." A crowd gathers and there are cries, lamps in the dark to search the river, and an anxious and mournful chorus. Solomon reappears in a boat with her corpse in his arms, and as the chorus sings, the boat is illuminated with greenish light.

Now Goldfadin also began to write dramas and operettas based on the Bible, on Jewish history and legends. His audiences were hungry for this sort of play. It was romantic escape at the same time it was a kind of supportive historical affirmation.

Bar Kokhba; or, The Last Days of Jerusalem (1883), for example, is a stirring spectacle about the hero of the last revolt of the Jews against their Roman conquerors, in the year 137. The play as a whole is somber and impressive. Immediately after the opening chorus, the high priest makes a long political speech favoring common-sense obedience to Roman commands, which Bar Kokhba answers with an impassioned call for revolt. The whole play is on such monumental lines that even the love scene between the hero and the priest's daughter Dina has him praising her as a noble flower of her people rather than for her personal charms. In one of the play's most famous episodes, Bar Kokhba tames a lion in the Colosseum and rides on its back. In another, Dina, who has been captured by the Romans as a hostage, addresses the Palestinian rebels from her prison wall. She exhorts them to fight on for independence, throwing herself down to her death at the peak of their excitement so that they will not be tempted to surrender in order to ransom her freedom. There are some lower-keyed, disturbing, subtly erotic scenes with a Palestinian named Pappus, who has turned traitor in order to revenge himself on Dina for her brutal rejection of his love.

In the end the revolt is put down. Goldfadin couldn't change history, but he structured the play in such a way that one of the causes for the Jews' defeat



Scene from Avrom Goldfadin's *Shulamis*, directed by Zygmund Turkow with the VYKT Company at the Nowości Theater in Warsaw, 1939.

was Bar Kokhba's personal hubris. Early in the play he denounces the Palestinians for their custom of calling themselves the "children" of Israel. It is time for them to be grownups, he says, and to take their fate in their own hands, to fight for independence. But at the end, after some arrogant follies have cost him his victory, he dies in combat, saying that history waits on God's will, without God, no hero can win.

According to one historian, it was Goldfadvn's rebel Bar Kokhba who irritated the Czar into finally banning Yiddish theater. According to another, the ban was triggered by the prompter of one little Yiddish company, who, in order to get rid of the competition, accused a rival company of performing a subversive play.

Other Goldfadvn plays based on episodes from Jewish tradition include *Doctor Almasado*, about a Jewish physician in fourteenth-century Palermo whose skill and bravery saved his people from exile; *King Ahashuerus*, based on the Purim story; and *The Sacrifice of Isaac*.

The play from this period that is perhaps most often performed is *Shulamis*; or, *The Daughter of Jerusalem*, a pastorate set in ancient Judea. It's a love story in the tradition of nineteenth-century romantic Hebrew novels, especially Mapu's *Love of Zion*. Absalom rescues Shulamis from a well in the desert. They fall in love and vow to be faithful forever, calling as witnesses to their pledge the well and a wild desert cat, these will avenge any betrayal of their love. Absalom continues on his way to Jerusalem, where he was going on a pilgrimage to the Temple, and there he meets another woman. He forgets poor Shulamis, marries, and has children. But years later his two children die, one drowned in a well and the other killed by a cat. He remembers his pledge and returns to Shulamis, who has been waiting for him all along, fending off suitors by pretending to be mad. Despite its dark notes, the overall atmosphere is lyrical, light, and sweet.

These plays set in ancient Palestine reflect a further Jewish communal impulse of the times. In the 1890s the Zionist movement swelled until it took shape in the First World Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s Theodor Herzl organized meetings and made speeches claiming that there was no use pretending any longer that Jews could survive in other people's countries; they needed a country of their own. With this conclusion Goldfadvn increasingly concurred. He became a speaker for Zionism, especially in the late 1890s, when he lived in Paris, and his plays reflected his convictions. Of his specifically Zionist Messianic plays, the most memorable are *The Messianic Age* (1891) and *Ben-Ami*; or, *Son of My People* (1907). The former is a panorama in time and space of Russian Jewry, from a Ukrainian village to sophisticated Kiev, to New York, to Palestine. The hero of

Ben-Ami, Goldfadvn's last play, begins as a European aristocrat, but ends up a happy farmer on Palestinian soil.

By the turn of the century, Goldfadvn had created a mass of plays and songs that were the staple repertory of every acting company, every songfest or amateur recitation. Yiddish theater companies were now proliferating across Europe and America, and even in Africa, as part of the mass emigration of Yiddish-speaking Jews. A number of other Yiddish playwrights were writing with great success. But Goldfadvn's works had become classics.

The most striking characteristic of Goldfadvn's plays as a body is that they are totally theatrical. Built into the texts are plenty of theatrical moments; in fact, American theatrical slang actually uses a Yiddish word—*shitik*—to describe such moments. Many examples come immediately to mind: Shmendrik mugging (*Shmendrik*); Hotsmakh counting fraudulent change so fast and freely that he bewilders his customers (*Koldumye*); Dina outwitting her Roman captor by wheedling his armor and weapons from him and putting them on herself, one item at a time (*Bar Kokhba*); devilish capers and by-play between angels and demons (*The Sacrifice of Isaac*). There are tense dramatic situations: the traitor Pappus spying on Dina as she sleeps in her prison cell (*Bar Kokhba*). There are artful uses of staging: the swelling of market calls into an elaborate symphonic ballet of songs and crowd business, until little Mirele finally enters, innocent of the enemies who the audience knows are lying in wait for her (*Koldumye*); the dancing flirtation between maidens and men which draws Absalom to forget his sweetheart (*Shulamis*).

Goldfadvn began as a songwriter and his cabaret predecessors, the Broder singers, were also primarily musicians. Music was an integral element in Goldfadvn's theater and was to remain essential in the majority of Yiddish plays. Goldfadvn would call a play "a comedy with music" or "a musical melodrama" or "a romantic opera." But what his public expected in every case was music. Goldfadvn wrote that in every play he gave them, sometimes against his will, "trios, duets, solos, choruses," and all the actors had to have good voices.

The music was integrated into his plays. Songs had their place in the stories and were themselves dramatic. For example, near the end of *Shulamis*, Absalom is on his way through the desert to find his old love and make amends for having abandoned her. He meets a group of shepherds. Through them he learns that she has gone mad (though the audience knows that she's only faking). Despite his remorse and his impatience to find her the next morning, he must spend one more night in the desert. The shepherds sing a song which is at once pastoral and menacing, in which the constant refrain, disturbingly syncopated, is "sleeps not." Their voices soften and drift off into sleep, the

stage grows darker and then lighter, and finally, with a rush, the action sweeps to a confrontation between the lovers—a confrontation that has been brewing since the first act, when they parted.

Similarly, when Dina, Bar Kokhba's sweetheart, spurns Pappus, the traitor sings a song of revenge which incorporates laughing in the chorus and a sort of recitative in the verse; it sounds villainous. The Biblical character *Lot* appears in *The Sacrifice of Isaac* and sings a song that would be appropriate for a music hall turn. The tune is merry, and the chorus to every verse confesses slyly that though he's really too old to enjoy his daughter's wedding, wine helps to heat his blood and put him in the mood for love. The song suits his obstreperously vulgar personality, as well as the Biblical account of his actions.

Many of Goldfadh's songs keep a sort of open folk-song quality, which echoes his earlier career. Even when they're sung by a full chorus to the elaborate orchestral accompaniments that later arrangers scored, both music and words reinforce the plays' special quality, which is popular, theatrical, and self-consciously Yiddish, with images often unique to Yiddish culture. Here, for instance, are the words of Shulamis as she sits of a lonely evening by the well in the desert outside Bethlehem, waiting for Absalom to return to her as he's promised:

Sabbath, holy day, and feast day
I say my prayers myself alone.
I have my holy ark and there I pray:
No one prays at it but I alone.

My sad heart is there the lecturer.
None see me turn the scroll about.
Love is there my light eternal.
It burns and never will go out.

The cantor am I, and I sing alone.
My griefs my only choir make.
We sing sad melodies in perfect tone;
At happy melodies our voices break.

Hope leads the prayers unending.
We hear her even when she's still.
We hear her crying and lamenting,
And tears beat time. They always will.

Unschool'd are women, but we, too, can pray.
Pain teaches us to read, and sigh,
Fine commentary on love's yesterday.
Our gallery is nearer God on high.

Enough of praying and enough lament.
Enough of weeping undisclosed.
My mourner's prayer I have to heaven sent.
God hear it! Synagogue is closed.

(*Shulamis covers her face with her hands and weeps. She speaks.*)

Oh, there's no worse death, no worse pain
Than to hope, to wait, and to long in vain.

The lyrical melody serves the play as did the tunes of Goldfadh's contemporary Sir Arthur Sullivan.

Though Goldfadh had since his youth a great gift for creating lilting, hummable melodies, he could only pick out a tune on a piano with two fingers. The melodies often came to him in the night, and once he'd been inspired, he had to wake someone else to transcribe them for him. For this reason, he preferred to hire actors who could write music. Mogulesko was very useful to him, for he could arrange a score to suit a full-size orchestra as easily as one fiddle and an accordion.

Goldfadh's musical sources were often, consciously or unconsciously, other people's music. He drew from liturgical music, influenced by knowledgeable cantors who had in their turn enriched their chants with elaborations of more

worldly motifs. He drew from the operas and operettas that were the rage in European capitals at the time: Meyerbeer, Halévy, Weber, Bizet, Wagner, Handel, and Mozart. For a while he incorporated the triumphal march from *Aida* into one of his productions; when a local opera company presented *Aida*, all the Jews in town believed that Verdi had stolen it from Goldfajn. He also drew from folk-song motifs, which are what his audience really preferred: Yiddish, Rumanian, Russian, Greek, Turkish, Oriental—some twenty-two distinct ethnic strains in all.

But these were only his *sources*, as he himself explained—he may not have been a composer exactly, but he was inarguably a creator. When he used operas, for example, he had to distill the tunes into their simplest form because that's what his public could hum and enjoy. In the process, he made most of them sound Yiddish.

Similarly, he transformed the plots or ideas or characters that he drew from an eclectic range of sources, so that not just the characters' names but the very atmosphere and conceptions became Jewish. For example, the character Shmendrik was evidently suggested to him by a current Rumanian hit, which Mogulesko had seen and imitated. *Recruits* used as its kernel a song about Jewish draftees that was already a staple in the Broder singers' repertoires. Goldfajn also drew from the caricatures that were Broder singer material: the matchmaker, the pious ignoramus, the foolish *yeshive* student. The comic plays of the *haskole* influenced him; Shmendrik's fiancée, for example, gets out of the match much as does the hero of Gotlob's *The Bridal Canopy*. Through the *haskole* comedies he drew on Western European domestic comedies and, in some instances, on sentimental tragedies (for the mood of *Kaptsnzn et Hungerman*, for example). The suitors who line up to request Shulamis's hand announce themselves and their claims as characters did in Purim plays. *Shulamis*'s plot is a combination of Talmudic legend and several popular *haskole*-era Hebrew novels. The plot of *The Two Kuni-Lemis* echoes Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, which Shakespeare in turn adapted closely from the Latin of Plautus's *Menaechni*. *Kaptsnzn et Hungerman*'s plot has some resemblance to Molière's *Les Précieuses ridicules*. *Ben-Ami* uses George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda*.

As Goldfajn slowly created this repertory, slowly changing from a young to an elderly man, in character he remained much the same. He posed with expansive dignity for a photographer, wearing a fashionable Brandenburg cap. Some admirers presented him with a handsome silver-knobbed cane, and he loved to stroll past the open-air cafés swinging it and eyeing the pretty women.

He had become a sort of folk hero in both the Old World and the New.

On the Lower East Side of New York, sweatshop workers were humming his tunes to the rhythm of their sewing machines even before *Koldurnye*; or, *The Witch* (the first Yiddish play in America) opened there in 1882. One scene that illustrates his prestige took place near the end of his life, after he had followed his fame to New York. He had an extravagant sweet tooth, and passing a fancy Lower East Side delicatessen, he went in and made up his mind, after thought, to buy a small package of imported figs. That was all he could afford; in fact, it was probably more than he could afford. But when he asked the shopkeeper the price, the man replied calmly, "What do you care?" The shopkeeper picked up a big box and went from shelf to shelf, filling it with confections. He refused to explain himself till the box was full. Then he turned solemnly to Goldfajn. "Mr. Goldfajn," he said, "I have been waiting for you for fifteen years." And he sent his delivery boy home with Goldfajn, to walk behind the great man and carry his box.

But a folk hero can be something of an embarrassment to those who have to deal with him. He was famous, yes. His portrait hung at the Hebrew Actors Union headquarters in New York. His plays were performed in Polish, Russian, and Hungarian translations. His own public, the Jewish masses, loved him. But he was broke.

Goldfajn had no solidly based community to maintain him. If he had been able to found a sort of subsidized Yiddish theater somewhere, things might have been different. As it was, he talks in his autobiography about walking down the street in various cities and hearing the sound of his music coming from the windows of comfortable bourgeois houses. People were gathered around pianos singing his songs while he kept walking, hungry, without a coin in his pocket to buy dinner. He constantly wrote and produced plays. He scrounged unsuccessfully to establish theaters in London and Paris. He wrote columns and articles, including his serialized autobiography, for Yiddish newspapers in New York and elsewhere. He tried to establish a newspaper of his own. He opened, briefly, a drama school. He gave poetry readings and speeches on any subject. He arranged benefit performances—for his own benefit. He and Paulina had to eat, and they loved good food and good wine. But he could never make much money.

And what he made he never held on to. In a letter to Sholom Aleichem, he blamed his wife for their poverty. While he floated on clouds of inspiration, Paulina was supposed to be on the ground looking after the money. But she was as impractical as he was. At a rehearsal in Philadelphia in the late 1880s, the actors Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, observing his pitifully worn shoes, quietly went out and bought him a new pair.

It was in 1887 that Goldfajn tried his luck for the first time in the growing

center for Yiddish theater, New York City. The producers of one of the major Yiddish theaters on the city's Lower East Side had brought him over from Europe as a director. There were several companies of actors in America by that time, and most of them had worked for Goldfahn in Eastern Europe, Paris, or London. When he walked onto the stage of New York's Rumanian Opera House, the actors who were assembled there to rehearse all walked out. They even picketed against Goldfahn outside the theater while he found another company and rehearsed with them. Goldfahn's overbearing ways had set up an almost Oedipal hostility among his spiritual children. Now they were asserting that they were grown up; they even had their own playwrights, and they could get along without him.

He went ahead with the show. But he flopped miserably. He was unprepared for the flash and hustle that the Lower East Side theater had taken on in five short years. His play and the production he offered seemed clumsy and corny to an audience straining every muscle to polish away any traces of the small-town greenhorn. Ironically, he couldn't present any of his better, sure-fire plays precisely because they were so popular; they'd been done again and again. Every passing company that needed an assured box office did them, and for the moment everyone was tired of them. The Rumanian Opera House fired him.

The original Opera House company returned in triumph, while Goldfahn tried to promote theaters in several American cities. At last he fled back to Europe for five years, and made bitter fun of America's "streets paved with gold."

By the time he returned to New York in 1902, it had become the mecca for Yiddish theater. At that time there were two major theater companies on the Lower East Side. One was controlled by Goldfahn's former bit player Jacob P. Adler, who was a star by then. The other was run by another star, Boris Thomashefsky. These two major theaters together gave him a weekly dole of ten dollars out of a sense of filial duty. But most of their productions were by newer, more fashionable writers.

In New York in 1907, Goldfahn completed his last play, the Messianic *Ben-Ami*. Adler bought the rights to the script but then lost interest in it. Goldfahn suffered. Naturally he longed to have the play performed. Besides, he needed the money that a production might bring in. His friends pressed Adler, who finally allowed Goldfahn to read the script to his company. The experience was traumatic. The actors squirmed and sneekered through two acts, after which a minor actor took it on himself to tell Goldfahn, publicly, that the play was old-fashioned and dumb, and that Goldfahn was clearly so senile that he himself didn't know what he'd put down on paper. Goldfahn

was crushed. In the less than a year till his death he kept begging his wife and friends for reassurance that he was not senile. Meanwhile Thomashefsky had stopped paying his five dollars because Adler had got the rights to *Ben-Ami*.

The very last act of Goldfahn's life was as melodramatic and sentimental a reversal of fortune as any playwright could wish. It even included the standard tearful repentance by ungrateful children around a father's deathbed. Dependent though he was on Adler's weekly five dollars, he begged and nagged to get back the rights to *Ben-Ami* and sold them to Thomashefsky. Thomashefsky's cast reading was enthusiastic. Vindication became Goldfahn's obsession. He wanted a wild success for the play, to prove he was not senile, and then he wanted to die. And *Ben-Ami*'s opening night, on December 25, 1907, was (according to most reports) a success: applause, curtain speeches, tears and kisses, toasts and flowers. Goldfahn walked home along Second Avenue exhilarated, with an entourage of friends and fans. At his doorstep he paused to arrange a great wreath of flowers around his shoulders and then burst in like a conqueror, calling to his wife, "Paulina, Paulina, they gave me laurel wreaths. I'm not senile, Paulina, I'm not senile"—and then he burst into tears.

The next five nights in a row Goldfahn watched *Ben-Ami* from a box. During the fifth evening he felt sick, and that night he died.

Until then, *Ben-Ami*'s box office business had not been good. Despite the laurel wreaths, Thomashefsky had been strongly considering switching plays. But suddenly now, the entire Lower East Side mourned the death of the "father of Yiddish theater." A funeral procession of some thirty thousand accompanied his bier to Washington Cemetery in Brooklyn, winding out of its way to pass Thomashefsky's house so the actor, who was sick, could pay his last respects from his window. Thomashefsky beat his breast publicly in the name of Yiddish theater artists: "If not for our old father Goldfahn, we none of us would have become tragedians or comedians, prima donnas, soubrettes, playwrights. If not for Goldfahn, we'd be plain and simple Jews: cantors, choir singers, folk singers, *badkhorim*, *goyishe* writers, clothes peddlers, machine sewers, cigarette makers, Purim players, wedding jugglers, clothes pressers and finishers. Goldfahn went out like a light in his dark room while, we, his children, ride in carriages, own our own houses, are hung with diamonds. Union members, club members, pinochle players, decision-makers, managers, sports—we're nice and warm, all of us—but our father was cold."

It made a wonderful curtain, and possibly all of it was true. And *Ben-Ami* played for months to packed houses.

Actors passing through Jewish settlements in other parts of the world got similar welcomes. Melbourne, Australia, was always ready to enjoy a show. In Toronto, Canada, Mr. and Mrs. Michaelson, ice cream parlor owners, opened a theater in 1906 together with Mr. Abramov; a year later a Toronto real estate dealer named Charles Pasternak converted a synagogue (which had been converted from a church) into The People's Theater, and Jacob Caplan's Café catered to the vagabond stars and their constellation of fans. Even in Brussels, before there was a Yiddish press to print posters, the audiences were welcoming Yiddish troupes. All over town, in the windows of Jewish-owned shops, restaurants, and beauty salons, placards scrawled by hand on colored paper proclaimed:

Stupendous production! Tears and laughter!
Enchanting music! Your favorite stars!

And people bought tickets.

5 SHUND AND POPULAR THEATER

THE YIDDISH MASSES LOVED THEATER. They ate, as the saying went, their *broyt mit teater*—bread smeared with theater. In the 1890s, on New York's Lower East Side, many greenhorns saw their first play, *zikh gelekt di finger*—licked their fingers—and called for more. There was a community of some three hundred thousand souls, most of whom barely scrounged a living as sweatshop machine operators or rag and pin peddlers, that managed to support several theaters, several music halls, tens of little cabarets, amateur drama clubs, concerts, lecture series, social dance halls. Their appetite for theater was astounding.

They used the theater building unceremoniously, as a meeting place, just as their fathers had used the little synagogue back home to study, gossip, pray, drink schnapps, and eat black bread with butter. The theater aisles and lobbies were clubhouses where *landsmanshaftn* crowded their fund-raising machinery for theatergoing en masse. Spectators ate drumsticks from brown paper bags, cracked walnuts, and even nursed infants during the show.

In fact, the Yiddish masses savored theater so much that they were a show in themselves. Hutchins Hapgood, a non-Jewish New Yorker, exploring the Lower East Side as if it were a foreign country—as indeed it was—wrote:

... the theater presents a peculiarly picturesque sight. Poor workmen and women with their babies of all ages fill the theater. Great enthusiasm is manifested, sincere laughter and tears accompany the sincere acting on the stage. Peddlers of soda water, candy, of fantastic gewgaws of many kinds, mix freely with the audience between the acts. Conversation during the play is received with strenuous hisses, but the falling of the curtain is the signal for groups of friends to get together and gossip about the play or the affairs of the week. Introductions

are not necessary, and the Yiddish community can then be seen and approached with great freedom. On the stage curtain are advertisements of the wares of Hester Street or portraits of the star actors.

And *The Rise of David Levinsky*, an excellent novel of the period written in English by the Yiddish newspaper editor Abraham Cahan, gives another glimpse:

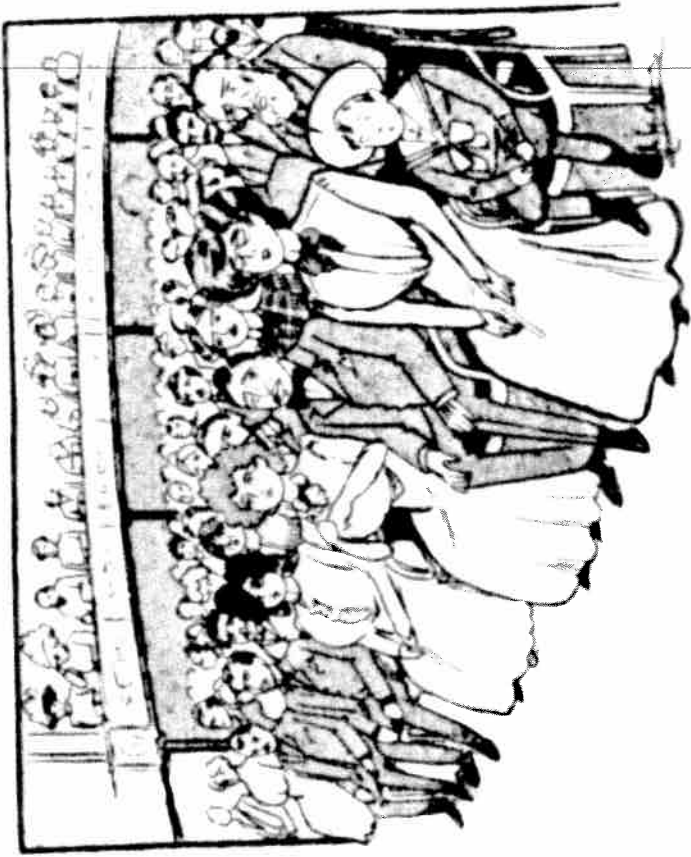
An intermission in a Jewish theater is almost as long as an act . . . musicians . . . were playing a Jewish melody . . . in the big auditorium. The crowd was buzzing and smiling good-humoredly, with a general air of family-like sociability, some eating apples or candy. The faces of some of the men were much in need of a shave. Most of the women were in shirt-waists. Altogether the audience reminded one of a crowd at a picnic. A boy tottering under the weight of a basket laden with candy and fruit was singing his wares. A pretty young woman stood in the center aisle near the second row of seats, her head thrown back, her eyes fixed on the first balcony, her plump body swaying and swaggering to the music. One man, seated in a box across the theater from us, was trying to speak to somebody in the box above ours. We could not hear what he said, but his mimicry was eloquent enough. Holding out a box of candy, he was facetiously offering to shoot some of its contents into the mouth of the person he was addressing. One woman, in an orchestra seat near our box, was discussing the play with a woman in front of her. She could be heard all over the theater. She was in ecstasies over the prima donna.

"I tell you she can kill a person with her singing," she said, admiringly. "She tugs me by the heart and makes it melt. I never felt so heartbroken in my life. May she live long."

This then was the public whose tastes shaped Yiddish theater. They wanted what people always want from theater, and they had special needs as well, derived from their special situation as Yiddish-speaking Jews, as homesick Eastern Europeans, as hope-filled new Americans, as individuals in the general uprooting and urbanization of late nineteenth-century America. Because the Lower East Side had the most energetic and prosperous Yiddish community of the time, and one of the most densely clustered, it was here that styles of production, writing, and acting were established, to be exported to every other Yiddish-speaking community in the world.

The Audiences and the Actors

From the beginning audiences were passionately responsive to what went on onstage. Yiddish theater always kept something of the Broder singer café atmosphere, just as it kept the exuberant intimacy of the *Purimshpil*. When



From *The Big Stick*, a comic Yiddish newspaper of New York in the early 1900s, a cartoonist's impression of the same people as they behave at "American" theater uptown and as they behave at home in the Yiddish theater. At the Yiddish theater they are hissing, and yelling "Hurrah!" "Shaddap!" and "Soda!"; some people read newspapers, a policeman with his billyclub breaks up a fight as an elderly gentleman munches a big sandwich, and a man in the front row takes off his shoes.

the show displeased the audience, they were ready to yell comments and hiss, as had Goldfadin's patrons at the Green Tree; if they were bored they yelled, "Get the hook!" which they had learned from American vaudeville. When the show pleased them they showed their pleasure lavishly. They might wait outside the stage door to carry an actor on their shoulders through the city streets, setting him down respectfully in front of his favorite after-the-show café. They might even treat him the way European students treated the "Swedish Nightingale," Jenny Lind: harnessing themselves to her carriage and pulling her along in triumph. They analyzed their own reactions to shows over endless glasses of tea in Lower East Side cafés. Newspapers carried not only drama reviews but also gossip columns, editorials, letters to the editor—all about Yiddish theater. When Abraham Cahan wrote in the *Jewish Daily Forward* that the popular favorite Ludwig Satz was "not really a comedian," it was considered a controversial issue. People argued the question. They even argued it at the theater while Satz himself stood onstage, singing as loudly as he could to make himself heard over the angry voices.

Yiddish actors have always been aware of the special quality of their audiences. Half a century ago the glamorous Bertha Kalish told an interviewer that the difference between starring in Yiddish on the Lower East Side and in English on Broadway was that "The American in the theater is virtually dragged along against his will," but the Yiddish fan "works with the actor or the author . . . he comes premeditatedly, with keen anticipation to the theater." To this day Yiddish actors boast that Yiddish audiences are livelier, more responsive, and more loyal than other audiences.

At the same time the relationship of the Yiddish actor and his audiences has always been complicated. Actors still sometimes refer to audiences as "Moyshe"—Moses—but with scornful connotations of simple-mindedness: a dumb yokel, a coarse rube. Or they sneer the catch phrase *oylem goylem*, rhyming *oylem* (audience) with *goylem* (or golem, the legendary mindless mechanical giant). They feel for Moyshe a regal mixture of condescension and responsibility, sentimental loyalty and irritation. They feel they should be elevating his taste, and though they may not lose too much sleep worrying about this obligation, it gives many of them some uncomfortable moments. They resent Moyshe's power too; if Moyshe isn't pleased, they starve. Besides, whereas the Yiddish actor came to conceive of himself as an artist, with certain responsibilities toward his community, the masses have always related to him as to something larger. For them the actor was a cultural institution with an almost religious hold on their imagination.

Popular Yiddish theater has traditionally been an actor's theater as opposed to a writer's theater; in this it resembled popular American theater of

Kahnen Yuvelir in the typically romantic setting, costume, and pose of a star of the full-blown romantic operettas of the turn of the century.



the late nineteenth century, in which such stars as Edwin Booth, Joseph Jefferson, and James O'Neill (Eugene's father) overshadowed their vehicles. Americans, including Jews and the other immigrant groups of the era, felt special adoration for, and a passionate wish to identify with, stars of drama and vaudeville. Perhaps one reason was that the stars embodied the American idea of success. Thus, whereas very few of the hit plays of the Yiddish theater at the end of the nineteenth century are remembered today, the names of such stars as Boris Thomashefsky, David Kessler, and Jacob P. Adler remain household words in households that don't retain a word of Yiddish.

Boris Thomashefsky billed himself on posters as "America's Darling." His memoirs are a series of romantic episodes, and he relates them all with equal gusto. Nice girls and respectable matrons sent him flowers and presents, filled his matinees, and swooned in the aisles. His wife, Bessie, ran away from her parents' Baltimore home and went on the stage for love of him. When he played King Solomon, the quip was that the only difference between Thomashefsky and the real king was that Solomon had to support his harem, whereas

the actor's barem supported him. Thomashefsky fixed up his dressing room at the People's Theater with rich furniture and carpets, tapestries and golden mirrors on the walls, and many little lamps with different-colored shades to cast warm, seductive light. For several decades respectable people worried about Thomashefsky's luscious calves, which in flesh-colored tights were destroying the modesty of American Jewish womanhood.

But it wasn't just his calves. It was also his sweet voice, powerful and unctuous, his flashing dark eyes, his soft and luxuriant masculinity, like that of the heroes of modern romantic films from India, which appealed greatly to Eastern European ideals of beauty. Hutchins Hapgood thought him "rather fat . . . rather effeminate . . . phlegmatic." But a circular distributed in the audience at one of his shows declared:

Thomashefsky! . . .
Your appearance is godly to us,
Every movement is full of grace,
Pleasing is your every gesture;
Sugar sweet your every turn.
You remain the king of the stage;
Everything falls at your feet.

Thomashefsky seems genuinely to have enjoyed peacocking, preening, and grand gestures. He played successfully in more serious roles too, but he was supreme in musical comedy and melodrama. He portrayed young princes and other romantic heroes through the 1920s, went on Broadway, tried other ventures. In the end he returned to the Yiddish stage with a play based on his own life, but the Yiddish stage had sadly diminished by then. He died in 1939.

David Kessler, Thomashefsky's rival, was tall, broad, and vigorous, with a strong peasant neck; a vulgar good fellow, rather arrogant in his bearing. He was a demonstrative man, who clapped an acquaintance over the shoulder when he felt friendly, shook his hand, and then kissed him. Over a third glass of wine Kessler started talking excitedly, even incoherently, and his eyes burned. He was not a ladies' man, on the contrary, he was notoriously dominated by his wife. Gossips said he regularly put on an apron and scrubbed the kitchen floor. In backstage politics, he was in his later years no match for his own son-in-law, Max Wilner.

Kessler was a dissatisfied soul. In his earlier years, starting with one of Goldfadin's first companies, he won favor from the crowds with his powerful singing and emoting. But evidently, even though he was quite uneducated, he had resources for artistry. He came to be committed to the idea of fine, realistic drama in Yiddish, and he was capable of playing quietly, gently, and

sensitively. However, the masses who had made him a star wanted broader and more sensational stuff. Many anecdotes picture Kessler facing away from the audience during some melodramatic scene and muttering savage asides to his fellow actors, parodying the silly dialogue that "Moyshe" forced him to mouth, and cursing his fate.

Jacob P. Adler was perhaps the most colossal figure of the great three. Contemporaries always referred to his eyes: how deep they were, how magnetic, how intelligent. *Adler* is German for "eagle"; his nickname with the public was *Nesher Ha-Godol*—"The Great Eagle" in Hebrew—by virtue of his piercing glance, his strong profile, and his commanding stage presence. In his later years people raved about his mane of pure white hair. Most of the anecdotes about him give the impression of a personality which was suave, strong, and cold.

Adler's daughter Celia describes how he moved through a London park, wearing a black cloak and looking like an Oriental prince, driving aristocratic Englishwomen to pluck at his sleeve in hopes that he would look at them, just once, and perhaps grant them a smile. Adler had several wives before he married the actress Sara Heine-Haimovitch. He had a number of children; among them, Celia, Stella, and Luther all made resounding names for themselves in the theater.

Adler was already crazy about Russian theater when Goldfadin gave him a walk-on in an Odessa semiprofessional production. He was never much of a singer, which made him a rarity on the Yiddish stage, and he was much more comfortable with tears or with heroic thunder than with comedy. Before coming to America, Adler had been a star in London and a famous carouser, moving from café to café with a train of hangers-on whom he insulted in Russian and Yiddish. The first time a New York theater sent him money to cross the Atlantic he squandered it and had to stay behind. When he did arrive he spent a short period out of favor, hanging about in a dingy hotel room wearing a torn bathrobe. But soon he established a dominion that was to endure for the rest of his life.

After some twenty years of stardom, during a period of tense jockeying for control of the Lower East Side theater business, Adler fell sick. He had word published in the Yiddish papers that he was dying and that he wished to bid farewell to his beloved public. The next day was Saturday, ordinarily the big matinee day. People came to him from all over New York. Those who wouldn't ride on the Sabbath walked, some from as far away as Brooklyn over the bridge. The street outside Adler's hospital window was packed. Adler spoke to them awhile out the window and then went back to bed. Next day he sent word that he was already convalescing. To his cronies he boasted that

even from a hospital bed, Adler could empty all the other shows on the Lower East Side.

Thomashefsky, Kessler, Adler, and many others were the romantic idols of the ghetto. Sigmund Mogulesko was another type of star. He was a comic. Hutchins Hapgood called him "a natural genius," with a "naïve fidelity to reality . . . perhaps the greatest talent of them all," and added: "He and Adler, if they had been fortunate enough to have received a training consistently good, and had acted in a language of wider appeal, would easily have taken their places among those artistically honored by the world."

Mogulesko's presence could make a play, his winks and nuances could make a song. He was gifted musically, having begun as a choirboy, and orchestrated many of Goldfajn's scores as well as his own. He seems to have had an unusually flexible range, from sensitive character portrayal to nimble—often obscene—improvisation. Mogulesko was a rather small man, with a warm smile for his friends, though he was not above theatrical feuding or ad-libbing so as to confuse an actor he didn't like. Clowns like Mogulesko and his successors Aaron Lebedev, Ludwig Satz, and Menashe Skulnik had a special place in the public's collective heart. In the earliest years of Yiddish theater, before drama and romance came to dominate the downstage center spotlight, they were the soul of the play.

There were also star actresses, in several categories: vivacious soubrette or hoyden, stately prima donna, emotional heroine, character comedienne, villainess. They all had to have good voices, and usually they had to be able to dance. In looks, the public favored flashing eyes, adorable smiles, and *zaffik* (juicy) figures.

The names of some of the most important actresses indicate their offstage romances. Sophia (or Sara) Goldstein, the very first actress, left Sakher Goldstein and married another actor, to become Sophie (sometimes Sophia) Karp. Bessie Thomashefsky was Boris's wife. Bina Abramovitch married the actor Max Abramovitch. Dina Stettin became Dina Adler when she married Jacob P. Adler. When Adler left her for Sara, wife of the actor Heine-Haimovitch, Sara Heine-Haimovitch became Sara Adler. Dina Stettin Adler married the portly baritone star Sigmund Feinman and took the stage name Dina Feinman. Whereas male stars consolidated their power by being star-managers—choosing plays, casting roles, controlling money—female stars generally needed powerful alliances. However, they, too, sometimes headed companies of their own.

The popular style in Yiddish acting was unsubtle, broad, and electric. Yiddish actors to this day explain proudly that if there is any one quality that sets them apart from their non-Yiddish fellows, it is the intensity and abun-

dance of their temperament, which they also call energy, or presence. Just like the actors who strode the nineteenth-century American stage, they were bigger than life. Fans, however, customarily praised how true to life, how natural, they were. But then truthfulness is judged differently in different eras. An eighteenth-century tragedienne electrified Paris because Voltaire persuaded her to run across the stage rather than walk sedately. In her hoop skirt and powdered pompadour, reciting blank verse, she seemed to them as lifelike as Marlon Brando's mumbling and scratching seemed to later audiences. Thus when Yiddish actors were being heartrendingly "natural," they swept and stamped about, declaimed in big voices, rolled their eyes, gestured operatically, wept. The prima donnas had hysterical fits at regular intervals. The comedians milked each *shitik* till it was dry.

Most Yiddish actors at the turn of the century had very little formal education and little or no professional training. They didn't know much about non-Yiddish theater; many of them had never seen it. Those who had sung in synagogues did know about voice production and music, but even in simple voice placement the majority were ignorant. David Kessler was generally hoarse in the fourth act after having yelled through the first three.

Since the time of Goldfajn's first play, Yiddish actors had felt free to make up lines as they went along. In this they followed the commedia dell'arte tradition and indeed the repertory system in general, for learning a new play or two every week forces the actor to rely on his prompter and his wits. Sara-Sophie Goldstein-Karp was notoriously weak on learning lines. Sometimes she pretty well repeated her role line by line from the prompter, and if he sneezed she was on her own to improvise. When she played opposite Thomashefsky in a Yiddish version of *Romeo and Juliet*, they had a specially constructed prompter's box hidden next to Juliet's balcony. Unfortunately, when they went on tour to Philadelphia, where the balcony was too far away to hear the prompter, what her Juliet crooned to Romeo was a combination of improvisations and snatches of soliloquies from Goldfajn's *Shulamith*.

In typical repertory fashion, actors and their specialties—the young lover, the comic, the soubrette—were types as set as Greek masks or commedia dell'arte roles. It is true that no Yiddish actor ever became as typed as the American Joseph Jefferson, who played Rip Van Winkle and virtually no other role across the country for fully the last forty years of the nineteenth century, but Yiddish stars did nonetheless have their distinctive styles and did fight to establish squatter's rights over juicy roles by identifying themselves with them.

People were fascinated by the actors, and the more they knew about them, the more fascinated they became. They whispered and pointed as actors promenaded not too modestly along East Broadway, flicking walking sticks.

Boris Thomashefsky in a comic character role. "Green" means a newly arrived immigrant, as in "greenhorn." Avrom Shomer's *The Green Millionaire* was only one of a series of "green" plays that were the rage of the Lower East Side for a few seasons around 1910. The best known of these was *Di Grine Kusime*, or *The Green (Girl) Cousin*, whose catchy title song about the country girl with her cheeks like red apples is still sung today; other examples were *The Green Girl* and *The Green Boy*. *The Green Wife*, or, *The Jewish Yankee Doodle* was based on Abraham Cahani's story *Yekl the Yankee*, which in 1975 also became the source for the movie *Hester Street*.

They gossiped about the romances between actors and actresses. They kept up with company politics and feuds, which the actors themselves sometimes referred to onstage. They were present at actors' weddings—like that of Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich—which were held onstage as afterpieces, for slightly higher-priced tickets.

All this private information only intensified the public's reactions to the plays they saw. When an actor and actress who were recently divorced from each other played a tender love scene together, the audience got two dramas for the price of one, and the emotional level was almost twice as high. When Thomashefsky had to play a father soon after his own little son had died, and broke down while singing a lullaby, the whole audience wept till the curtain had to be rung down. Similarly, at a benefit production for Celia Adler, both her mother, Dina Feinman, and her father, Jacob P. Adler, came before the curtain and embraced her together and wept. Knowing the couple had been bitterly estranged since Celia's babyhood, everyone shared the sweetly melancholy significance of the gesture. And wept.

As part of their contracts, most actors had the privilege of a benefit sometime during the season. This was a play that they chose in order to show themselves off in the starring role, casting the other parts as they wished and pocketing the profits. (Benefits were common practice for centuries in English and American companies.) For actors who were special favorites, the evenings were generally triumphs. They got box office money, applause, splendid curtain speeches, bouquets. After their first joint benefit, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky had to hire a cart to take home the cut-glass pitchers, mantelpiece clocks, songbirds in fancy cages, and other outpourings from admirers. One woman contributed a satin hanging on which she had laboriously embroidered in delicate colors the names of all Thomashefsky's roles, surrounded by a laurel crown.

One aspect of the public's passionate commitment to theater was the phenomenon of *patriótn*—patriots or special fans of particular stars. Actors like Adler and Thomashefsky, and some lesser ones as well, could count on ovations at every entrance and gifts on all occasions from their hangers-on. Some *patriótn* took their idols' names and became known as "Adler" or "Karp." Other *patriótn* actually entered the theater professionally, as did Morris Gest, who became a successful Broadway producer and son-in-law of the famous (Jewish but not Yiddish) producer David Belasco. More often *patriótn* simply were *there*, running for coffee, hopping to pay the bill when their idol was ready to leave the café. They hustled tickets to their idols' benefits. Some slipped right into being a part of the actor's household—echoes of the disciples who clustered at a *hasidic rebbe's* court.



THOMASHESKY THEATRE
MANHATTAN & 42ND ST.
NOW PLAYING

MR BORIS
THOMASHESKY

AS
SOLOMON PUTTERKNOPF
"THE GREEN"
MILLIONAIRE
BY ABRAHAM SOMER AUTHOR OF "TODAY"



One of David Kessler's *patriótn* (fans) has strayed by mistake into the People's Theater, which is Boris Thomashefsky's domain; Thomashefsky's *patriótn* have "trimmed" him as he deserved. From a cartoon in the newspaper *Der Groyser Kibitser* (*The Big Kibitzer*).

Young David Levinsky, hero of Abraham Cahan's novel, joins his best friend, Jake, as *patriot* of a certain prima donna:

We would hum her songs in duet, recite her lines, compare notes on our dreams of happiness with her. One day we composed a love-letter to her, a long epistle full of Biblical and homespun poetry, which we copied jointly, his lines alternating with mine, and which we signed: "Your two loveborn slaves whose hearts are panting for a look of your star-like eyes. Jacob and David." We mailed the letter without affixing any address.

The next evening we were in the theater, and when she appeared on the stage and shot a glance to the gallery Jake nudged me violently.

"But she does not know we are in the gallery," I argued. "She must think we are in the orchestra."

"Hearts are good guessers."

Fights broke out between *patriot* of rival stars. Once, for example, David Kessler opened in the title role of *Uriel Acosta*, a part for which Jacob P. Adler had been famous for years. A group of Adler's *patriot* paraded past Kessler's theater with signs calling Adler "the only true Uriel Acosta." Kessler's *patriot* fought back by leaning out the theater's windows and dousing them with pails of cold water. Sometimes these rivalries came to brawls, although in the Yiddish theater they never reached bloodshed, unlike the 1849 Astor Place riot, when the militia had to be called out to end a fight between fans of rival Macbeths, the American Forrest and the English Macready; twenty-two people were killed.

Often, the public naively identified actor and role. Once, for example, Dina (Stettin Adler) Feinman was playing a long-suffering wife. Her drunken stage husband yelled at her, insulted her, hit her, ordered her to pull off his boots. At this a woman in the audience had had all she could take. She stood up in her seat and yelled, "Don't you do it, Dina, don't you do it. You tell that bum where to get off." Similarly, when Jacob P. Adler was playing in *The Yiddish King Lear* and his daughter begrudged him a bowl of soup, a spectator couldn't bear the old man's sufferings. He was drawn out of his seat and clear down the aisle to the stage, yelling, "Leave those rotten children of yours and come home with me. My wife is a good cook; she'll fix you up."

A spectator once rebuked a young comedian bearded and costumed as an old man: "For shame, an old man like you dancing and singing like a fool." Others hissed smoking onstage on the Sabbath, absolutely refusing to allow even gentle characters to break Jewish laws, so that directors simply learned to avoid this action on Friday-night and Saturday performances.

Because of this inability of the audience to separate onstage situations from those offstage, actors fought to play virtuous characters rather than villains;



In the comedy *The Three Little Businessmen*, Rudolph Schildkraut, Boris Thomashefsky, Ludwig Satz, and Regina Zuckenberg (left to right) are all very excited.

nobody liked actors who played villains because they seemed to be bad people. Once the other featured dramatic actors in Thomashefsky's company complained that he'd been playing "all the Josephs"—an allusion to Bible-story plays—and they forced him to take a turn at playing a bad guy. But at the moment when he was supposed to deliver innocent Jews into the hands of a wicked king or some such evil deed, he stepped forward with a tirade defending the Jews and proclaiming that he would die for their survival. Naturally, he destroyed the play. But he consolidated his place in his audience's hearts. (When Joseph Jefferson died in 1905, shopkeepers put his portrait in their windows, draped in black; people grieved because they felt that the actor had had all the lovable qualities of Rip Van Winkle. Even today housewives who follow soap operas have been known to confuse actresses with the home-wrecking women whom they portray.)

The stars indulged in displays of personal temperament without minding how they distorted the play. For example, once when Kessler, Adler, and Thomashefsky all happened to be playing together, their personal feuding created a whole new play. Evidently Kessler started the fight by mimicking Thomashefsky while they were onstage. At that moment in the scene, which took place in a kitchen, Thomashefsky was supposed to throw a plate on the ground and break it, but he was irritated enough to break two. Kessler, not to be upstaged, broke a few himself—both of them continuing with the dialogue as written, more or less, all the while. Adler was supposed to be playing a quiet, gentle old rabbi, but he refused to be left out, so he, too,

started breaking plates. By the end of the act, all the plates lay in shattered bits on the stage, and the three were starting to smash the furniture. The crowd loved it.

Sometimes even non-stars took such liberties. Once a bit player who had been waiting many years for his big moment simply stepped forward and delivered the star's major third-act monologue. He left the star literally speechless, but he got a great ovation. And since such monologues were often set pieces, like arias, it didn't make much difference to the progress of the plot.

The Playwrights and the Plays

The actors dominated Yiddish theater, but the playwrights, too, enjoyed careers that were theatrically flashy, melodramatic, and farcical. These men, the playwrights of most of the popular Yiddish drama of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were Goldfadh's younger contemporaries, his rivals throughout his lifetime, and more successful than he in his American years. They were creators and symbols of a different kind of theater from his. Their plays, and the plays later patterned on theirs, sustained the commercial Yiddish theater.

Moyshé Ha-Levi Ish Hurwitz (literally Moses the Levitic Man Hurwitz) (d. 1910), who liked to be called "Professor" Hurwitz, turned up on the scene of Yiddish theater in Rumania as early as 1877, when he offered Goldfadh a play he'd written. According to Goldfadh's later account, the play was awful. Furthermore, it was plagiarized from a Rumanian source. Goldfadh was already so desperate for new material that he might have bought it despite these failings, except for the fact that Hurwitz had apparently become a Christian missionary not long before. (Christian missionaries, Hurwitz was to explain, make good livings, and his family had got tired of living on potato peels.) Goldfadh figured that for his new little theater, fighting to become accepted in the Jewish community, connection with a deserter would be disastrously poor press.

But Hurwitz was a hustler. He marched into the largest local tavern, ordered a lot of wine all round, and for the benefit of all who happened to be drinking there, Jews and Christians alike, he improvised an emotional "reconversion" ceremony, in the course of which he added Ha-Levi Ish to his name. "Professor" was a later addition, when he began to claim he'd taught geography at a Rumanian university. A standing actors' joke during his thirty years on New York's Lower East Side was that the geography professor didn't dare go uptown on the subway for fear he wouldn't be able to find his way

back down. Actors also called him Professor Meshumed—Professor Convert—but only behind his back.

This reconversion stunt in the Jassy café was a very good show in itself. It was also great publicity for the Yiddish theater Hurwitz promptly set up, using benches in the courtyard of the same café. His posters promised a free glass of beer with every ticket. Finding a cast was no problem, for the floating population of Yiddish actors was already increasing. First he put on the play that Goldfadh had rejected. Then he began turning out others. In the early years he mostly followed Goldfadh's system, whereby the playwright controlled the group. But sometimes, when he went broke, he joined another troupe wandering through Rumania as actor, or dramatist, or prompter, or all three. In 1886 he arrived in New York by way of London and joined the Rumanian Opera House company, which included the actors Mogulesko, Kessler, Feinman, Finkel, and Abramovitch. He was already a known playwright.

New plays were in great demand. Regular audiences kept clamoring for them. Actors demanded them to beat the competition. So Hurwitz turned out a new play every week or so for the next thirty years. The usual term for this process is to "bake" plays—to turn them out like trays of indistinguishable buns, shaped from the same batch of dough and shoveled in and out of a hot oven. Under repertory pressure, Hurwitz sometimes left his company at curtain time on opening night without any last act. In one such emergency he provided a fourth act for a play that was set in an obscurely Oriental setting by coming onstage himself, dressed in a sultan's turban, and delivering a speech, extempore, for three-quarters of an hour. Among Hurwitz's plays were *Judah the Galilean*; or, *The Prince of Bethlehem*, *Mother Love*, *Monte Cristo*, *Elijah the Prophet*; or, *Millionaire and Beggar*, and *The Gypsy Woman*.

Hurwitz loved flash and swagger. When he was riding high, as on the David's Harp fraternal order that he promoted, he would keep a carriage with four fine horses and a liveried coachman. When times were tight, he scrounged and borrowed—even from the coachman—so as not to lose the carriage, whatever else went. By 1904, times were permanently bad for Hurwitz. He promoted an opera company in Yiddish and went broke. Under the strain he suffered a stroke. He lived in a miserable nursing home until 1910, when he died poor and lonely. His small funeral procession set out from a stable on Houston Street.

Hurwitz's principal rival was Joseph Lateiner (1853–1935). Ironically, despite their fierce rivalry, history now lumps their names together like a vaudeville team. Hurwitz-and-Lateiner are synonymous with vulgar dramatic baked goods of uncertain freshness. However, some critics do claim that

Lateiner was more gifted and more conscientious than Hurwitz. Among his more than eighty plays were *Ezra*; or, *The Eternal Jew*, *Blumele*; or, *The Pearl of Warsaw*, *Mammon God of Wealth*; or, *Koyrek's Treasure*, *Mishke and Moshke*; or, *Europeans in America* (or, *The Greenhorns*), *Satan in the Garden of Eden*, and *The Jewish Heart*.

Lateiner became an actor and prompter within a year of Goldfajn's Green Tree debut. Soon he began translating and "Yiddishizing" plays from Rumanian and German. He wrote some plays, including two on the themes Goldfajn used later in *Shulamis* and *The Two Kuni-Lemls*. (Goldfajn's versions were infinitely better.) For a while Lateiner was with Grodner and Mogulesko in Bucharest as their company dramatist. They paid him his first fee as a dramatist: twelve francs in the form of a dozen one-franc tickets to a single night's performance. The catch was that he couldn't get rid of the tickets. At last the company's own ticket-seller took pity on him and relieved him of the twelve tickets—for eight francs—on speculation. Already Lateiner could see that a Yiddish playwright had to hustle to stay alive. Soon he left them in the lurch to work for Goldfajn, who was also in Bucharest at the time.

When a troupe consisting of the Heine-Haimovitches and the Karpis arrived in America several years later, they found Lateiner there before them, stitching shirts in a shop. Since he already had a reputation, they hired him at once as their prompter and dramatist. His private library of German plays (published in pamphlets at six cents apiece) kept him supplied with plots that he could adapt at need. At first Lateiner took care over each play, and it showed. But his company needed novelty, always novelty, to draw the crowd away from the competition, and soon Lateiner's own special competition—Hurwitz—arrived in America. Both men plunged into the bakery business, until the two were almost continually bent over their respective ovens like cartoon madmen, jerkily kneading and shoveling in play after play after play.

There were other dramatists of similar accomplishment, among them Nokhem Meyer Shaikévitch (1849-1905), often called simply Schomer. Schomer began his career as a young *maskil*, peddling writings in Hebrew. An editor offered him three rubles for a story in Yiddish and, broke, he accepted, writing all night and turning up with a story the next day. He sold the astonished editor nine stories in a row and kept on writing, till he became probably the most popular Yiddish novelist before Sholom Aleichem (though on a much lower literary level).

Schomer-Shaikévitch met Goldfajn in 1876, when the former was in Rumania as a merchant involved in the Russo-Turkish War, and it was Goldfajn who first inspired him to dramatize his stories for stage production. Most of Schomer's plays, including those he himself directed with hastily

put-together companies, were dramatizations of his novels. By 1889, when the Rumanian Opera House sent him money to come to America, his plays were repertory staples. Among the best known of them were *The Coquettish Ladies*, *The Jewish Prince*, *The Unfaithful Wife*; or, *The Bloody Idea*, *The Golden Land* (*Di Goldene Medine*, a common epithet for America), and *The Second Haman*. In all, he wrote hundreds of novels and dramatizations.

The plays of Moyshe Zeifert (1851-1922) were very like the others'. The main distinction is that he sneered openly at them himself, apparently getting sardonic relish out of acknowledging that they were trash. He once wrote that he'd dreamed he'd died and gone to heaven, where the recording angel judged his lifework. Although his good angel tried to excuse his plays on the grounds that he'd had a family to support, the judge found his lifework so bad that he sentenced him to twenty years in flames—to be followed by rebirth as a Reform rabbi in St. Petersburg.

Some of the other important names among the popular playwrights of the time were Anshel Shor, who was a successful manager as well, Yosef Yehuda Lerner, Rudolph Marks, Yitskhok Oyerbakh, and Nokhem Rakov. A better category of melodrama writers includes—as we shall see in a later chapter—Max Gabel, Zalmen Libin, and Isidore Zolotarevsky.

And there were many playwrights who were primarily actors. The most significant of these was Sigmund Feinman, a very portly, melting-eyed baritone. Feinman had been a choirboy from a bourgeois Kishinev family. He was relatively well educated for a Yiddish actor of the period. While many actors could put together some gags and a song or two, Feinman was capable of somewhat more substantial efforts. He wrote a number of plays that remained popular, such as *The Jewish Viceroy*; or, *a Night in Eden*, *The Father's Curse*, *Azarial*; or, *The Valorous Hero*, *The Jews of Morocco*, *Tsirele the Rabbi's Daughter*, and *The Silent One*; or, *Buried Alive*. Boris Thomashetsky himself wrote or adapted a number of popular plays, including *The Polish Wedding*, *The Jewish Soul*, and *The Little Lost Lamb*.

"Baking" plays required certain techniques. "Professor" Hurwitz tended to make up his own skeleton plot and flesh it out with scenes he found elsewhere. In one of his plays, for example, the poor tenement-dwelling hero became violently jealous of his wife, though she was innocent, and for several minutes the couple spoke to each other in a Yiddish prose version of *Othello*—probably by way of a German translation. Lateiner, after writing a few Bible-story plays, developed the technique of taking a serious plot from somewhere and adding a farcical subplot from somewhere else or out of his own head. People in the theater sometimes called him "professor" too, meaning a medical specialist who does radical surgery. Thus a tear-jerker called *The*

Jewish Heart is interspersed with comic scenes about wives henpecking husbands. *Mishke and Moshke; or, Europeans in America* (or, *The Greenhorns*), about a girl who defies her uncle in order to marry the poor boy she loves, was popular especially because of a comic elderly couple prone to malapropisms—such as *malerike* (malaria) for America.

The essence of “baking” was to add a superficially Yiddish flavor to somebody else’s play, by giving it a Yiddish title, by giving the characters Yiddish names, and by setting them down in Eastern Europe or the Lower East Side or ancient Palestine. One blatant example occurred when Hurwitz learned that his competitors, at the Rumanian Opera House across the street, were rehearsing a play by a man named Weissman about Jews in fifteenth-century Spain. It was called *Don Isaac Abravanel*. Hurwitz simply rummaged up a play about a hermit by the popular German playwright Kotzebué, adapted it violently, named it *Don Joseph Abravanel*, and managed to open it, barely rehearsed, before his rivals knew what hit them.

From such a creative process, naturally enough, the dramatic development tended to be faulty or out-and-out incoherent. And indeed the actions and ideas and characters of Hurwitz-Lateiner plays generally held together from scene to scene “the way a pea sticks to a wall”—a Yiddish expression that means: not at all.

Many of these plays were simply copied by hand, never printed. Often an actor got not a whole script, but merely his role, with cue words from preceding speeches. (The word “role” probably derives from a similar system in which individual actors’ parts were copied onto rolls of paper in the Middle Ages.) As different companies played a play, moreover, the words changed; the same was true of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other American plays that barnstormed the country. Consequently very few texts remain from all those thousands of performances.

There’s no way of knowing how many actors “baked” a play when they needed one. Sometimes they didn’t bother to tell the audience the author’s name. Sometimes, to attract customers, they advertised on posters that the play was by “Professor” Hurwitz or some other well-known writer. Sometimes they did the opposite: altered a play a bit and listed themselves as author rather than crediting the real author. One of Thomashefsky’s greatest hits, *Das Pintele Yid* (*The Essential Spark of Jewishness*), seems actually to have been by Zeifert, who got little of the money and none of the glory.

Since the presence of actors onstage had as much impact as the lines they spoke, it didn’t much matter that often they didn’t know what would be coming out of their mouths next. In the 1880s, Thomashefsky set up a company in Philadelphia consisting of his brothers and sisters, their spouses and children, and his father, Pinchas. Pinchas doubled as charac-

ter actor and company dramatist. He had a habit that drove his son mad. They needed a new play every week, and it sometimes happened that on the very day when they were about to open he handed Boris a final act that broke off without a conclusion. There would be several blank pages, and at the very bottom of the last blank page, Pinchas would carefully have drawn a fancy curlicue and the words “Curtain Falls.” When Boris lost his temper over this, Pinchas invariably lost his, too: “Nu, you’re supposed to be a star—let’s see how you’ll end the play. I have to write everything out for you?”

In the archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York there are hundreds of Yiddish plays, most of them copied by hand into ruled notebooks and scrawled over with line changes. I read a number of these plays, but they are hard to make out—not just the words, but the action. The plots are convoluted, with sections left out and characters unidentified, so that by the end of many scenes it is impossible to recall the beginning. The long speeches go on and on, in a strangulated, pompous *Days/merist*; and the grand finales bring together—so to speak—handfuls of obstructed plot strands that I could not make head or tail of.

That’s why I was delighted to find this scene synopsis in the memoirs of an actor named Boaz Young. It is the third-act curtain of an unnamed historical operetta, evidently by “Professor” Hurwitz, and there is no dialogue; playing a hero who had been denied his rightful throne, Young improvised as follows:

“I alone and no other have the right to the throne,” I explain to the audience. The king’s courtiers are trying to poison me. When I come to see the king in his palace, they serve me a certain sort of apples which are poisoned. For some reason I become suspicious and ask myself, should I eat these apples or should I not? The spectators know that the apples are poisoned and enjoy themselves when I am about to start eating them (. . . the audience played roles along with me; some yelled that I shouldn’t eat and some told me to go ahead and eat.) And so, puzzling—eat or not eat—I sniff the poison. I made a long pause, expressing with my face that now I understand what’s going on. I say, smiling quite coolly, “No, these apples I shall not eat!” (At these words, the public applauded strongly.) Right away I spoke the sentence, “God has given me too much intelligence for the Heavenly One to betray me now.” And, leaping up upon the throne, I stood in a regal pose and cried out with great pathos, “I must and I shall become the King of Israel!” At that the curtain fell . . . [but immediately] rose again several times. When the Professor came up on the stage to bow to the audience, he complimented me and said that that was exactly what he’d had in mind all along.

The catchall term for most popular Yiddish plays from the 1880s to the present is *shund*, pronounced with a short oo sound, as in “wood.” *Shund*

means trash; popular etymology traces the word back to *shindn*, which means to flay a horse.

Shund is the sort of art that most cultures and most people like best. It is not by any means the sum of the culture. It is art for the masses. It's neither the string quartet nor the piously preserved folk song, but the commercial, mass-produced jukebox song. Songs on a jukebox may seem all alike; yet there's always a new one which is the rage. Jukeboxes used to offer not just music, but a whole spectacle of changing records and colored lights; that, too, could be called *shund*. Calendar pictures of puppies, pin-ups, and sad-eyed children are *shund*. So are soap operas, the Grand Old Opry, a lot of Broadway shows, *I Love Lucy* and *Hee Haw*, John Wayne cowboy movies, and Charlton Heston Biblical epics.

Shund in the theater feeds the human appetites for amusement, excitement, escape, affirmation. The Renaissance Spaniard Lope da Vega stated without apology that when he sat down to write his four hundred (or more) successful plays, he locked up the highbrow rules "with six keys" and concentrated on pleasing his public.

I asked dozens of people in Yiddish theater to tell me exactly what *shund* is, and I got dozens of answers, among them this: "A brother and sister, separated in infancy, meet and fall in love, but under the wedding canopy, just in the nick of time, they discover their true identities and their hearts are broken."

דעם פראגראם פון דעם 17טן יולי
 זענען פאראן: און שבת אכטע 16 און 17 יולי
 דעם פראגראם פון דעם 17טן יולי
 זענען פאראן: און שבת אכטע 16 און 17 יולי



This detail from a flier advertises *Two Mothers-in-Law*, a comedy about cultural collision. In this scene, one of the mothers-in-law, a fashionably "modern" woman, turns up her nose at the other mother-in-law, who is pious. The actors involved are Celia Adler and David Baratz as the unfortunate young married couple, Misha German, B. Rosental, Molly Picon, and our beloved comedian, Ludwig Satz. Arch Street Theater, Philadelphia, 1917.

This happens to be the plot of Aksenfeld's *haskole* drama *Man and Wife, Brother and Sister*, and it requires no more violent a suspension of disbelief than plots by Shakespeare or Ibsen.

Another actor explained that *shund* is artistically primitive, like Jacob Jacobs, in *The President's Daughter* (produced in New York in 1972), lining up his actors at the edge of the stage, where they cranked out dialogue as if it came off an assembly line. Or like the romantic leads in *Money, Love, and Shame* (produced in Tel Aviv in 1975), who burst into a love duet only minutes after they meet.

Shund may lean heavily on insulting repartee and on puns. In *My Son the Doctor* (Tel Aviv, 1975), the father, bitterly mugged by Menashe Varshavsky, complains that instead of *nakhies* (gratification) from his son, he gets only *kadokhies* (fever, with humorous connotations); the pun is dumb, like those in television comedies or Abbott and Costello movies.

Shund is also associated with *Daytshmerish* and, more generally, a diluted, crippled, macaronic, or eviscerated Yiddish. It freely mixes everything: classical Yiddish songs, topical jokes, pilfered dialogue, irrelevant new show tunes.

Israel Bercovici, dramaturge of the Bucharest Yiddish State Theater, began his definition of *shund*—as do many other observers—by saying that it includes vulgarities, especially double entendres. Several comedies of the 1970s offer examples. The hero of *Here Comes the Groom* (New York, 1973) disconsolately rips blank pages from his diary; the audience is given to understand that these are the days when his wife refused to sleep with him. *My Son the Doctor* mentions a naked woman painted in a toilet bowl as a comical example of the depravity of hippie youngsters, and a middle-aged man shakes in every limb when his son's girlfriend wiggles up in a bikini.

To call a play *shund* is an insult. But *shund* is so elastic a concept that people can disagree over whether a certain show is *shund* or not. Yiddish actors call each other's productions *shund* in the conviction that their own are of higher artistic quality, more refined, more intellectual, spoken in purer Yiddish. The Yiddish intellectual community, endlessly analytical, endlessly verbal, spits out the term with venom in the heat of debate. All the same, though *shund* is certainly theater of the lower sort, geared to box office receipts, meant mainly to provide actors with good roles and audiences with laughs and thrills, that does not necessarily mean that it's bad theater. It can have energy, theatricality, flair, flashes of art and wit, in Yiddish theater, as in other popular art forms, what people call *shund* can be very good stuff indeed.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the Yiddish public's favorite sort of show was what we can call, tongue in cheek, "high *shund*"—melodrama-operettas. They

reigned on the garishly gaslit stages of the Gay Nineties, and were the Yiddish latter-day equivalent of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Pisarro*; or, *The Conquest of Peru*. (These in turn were picked up from a form that Pixérécourt and Kotzebue had made the rage of Paris and Berlin in the early nineteenth century.) Such melodrama-operettas added sensation and spectacle to high romance (which the Yiddish masses were already addicted to through the *haskole* novels and *hasidic* tales they devoured by the thousands). "High *shund*" plays took place in exotic lands: ancient Judea, fifteenth-century Spain, the courts of sultans and emperors. The plots wandered on and on, providing twists and thrills; comedians turned somersaults and made vulgar puns.

Two such operettas were special hits for Thomashefsky. The plot of *Rabbi Akiba and His Twenty-Four Thousand Disciples* has the revered post-Biblical Palestinian scholar go mad and wander into the woods, where he happens to find a gypsy's daughter and fall in love. She sings him "Raisins and Almonds" (a lullaby which the author "borrowed" from Goldfadi's *Shulamis*), whereupon Akiba becomes unmad, and together they go to the Temple in Jerusalem, where the chorus performs Russian dances with balalaikas and high boots. Thomashefsky played Akiba, naturally.

Alexander; or, *The Crown Prince of Jerusalem* was bread and butter for Thomashefsky for twenty years after its debut in 1892. A girl named Naomi lives in a woods in Palestine with her poor father. A hunter comes by—who turns out to be Alexander, the prince of the realm—and Naomi and he fall in love. He has to go back to tend to business in Jerusalem, and she and her father (and their comic servant) agree to follow in six months. When she arrives at his palace, he has become insanely suspicious and brutally accuses her of infidelity, whereupon she faints from shock and loses her power of speech. Curtain. Alexander discovers that he was wrong. In an agony of remorse, and a long and fiery monologue, he gives up his crown and scepter. He puts on full armor, tells his mother goodbye, mounts a white horse, and gallops off to fight a war. Sensational curtain, with Thomashefsky on a real horse! Later Naomi recovers her speech. It turns out that she is really a princess, so they marry and live happily ever after.

Alexander, incidentally, figures in a classic tale of *patritót* warfare. Followers of one of Thomashefsky's rivals so resented his triumph in this role that they fed his horse an emetic just before show time.

The historical operettas are full of pageantry and fustian, creating scenes of monumental impressiveness for the audience to gape at. Here, for example, is a bit of a scene from Hurwitz's *Athalia*. It is based on an incident in the Biblical book of Kings, in which Queen Athalia and her young grandson are rivals for the throne. The boy king has been hidden away by loyalists, who are plotting their next move.

YEHOYADA [the priest] The hour has come. Now we must speak out, Princess. The dear theft can no longer remain hidden. God's silence for so long a time feeds the pride of the evildoers in the evil that they do, and they deny the truth that God has spoken. Your grandmother Athalia wants to sacrifice to her idol Baal on our altar. Therefore let us reveal the king's son whom you have saved and whom we have kept hidden under God's protection.

PRINCESS YEHOSHEVA [the boy king's aunt] Does the child know of his fate and of his great name?

YEHOYADA No. He still believes that his name is Eliazin and that his mother abandoned him and that I have been a father to him out of sympathy.

PRINCESS YEHOSHEVA Ah! What danger did I rescue him from, and what danger does he now face!

YEHOYADA What, Princess? Does faith in our dear God tremble within you so easily?

PRINCESS YEHOSEVA To your wisdom, lordly man, I entrust my all. I have poured out my tears in prayers to God for him. Now I ask you a question. Which of our friends will stand by you? Will Eviezer help you? . . .

Such pseudo-Biblical bombast certainly glorified the Yiddish *jargón*. It glorified the spectators' identity too, as they watched Jews wearing golden robes and crowns, and speaking Yiddish with crushing dignity. It was a marvelous new experience for the proletarian immigrant community. And the star actors, too, aggrandized their images as they strutted monumentally through heroic roles.

Since the Yiddish theater's public and budget were generally smaller than those of their non-Yiddish counterparts, their scenery lacked the really first-rate gloss of fashionable theaters in New York and Paris. They were hindered also by having to change repertory very often, so they pieced together new sets as best they could. Nevertheless, they always attempted to affect lavish sets.

In *Alexander*; or, *The Crown Prince of Jerusalem*, the hero's horse made a sensational entrance wearing a jeweled saddle. In a play about the Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood, there was a scenic water wall made of blue cloth, with real water behind it, so the actors actually got wet. In *Parsifal* (in a radical departure from the usual), Thomashefsky invested fifty thousand dollars in costumes and scenery.

As for music, that had been featured from the days of the Green Tree skits. The critic for the (non-Jewish, of course) *New York Sun* saw *Bar Kokhba* on February 21, 1885, and wrote in his review that music underlay the entire show,

vivifying even the dullest portions . . . a melodious monody which swells sometimes into a chorus of tearful and tender lamentation . . . quaint, eloquent and

touching, full of heart and feeling . . . So idealized . . . that it lifts up both play and players and creates an illusion stronger than would be possible by the most deft arrangement of ordinary dramatic materials.

A number of accomplished musicians, such as Joseph Rumshinsky, Alexander Olshanetsky, Sholem Perlmutter, and Sholom Secunda, composed scores for chorus and orchestra. Selling show tunes on sheet music and recordings was a lively industry, featuring love duets and marches, sentimental ballads about the old home town and comic patter songs (which regularly stopped a show).

Tsaytbilder (scenes or pictures of the times) were another type of play, also popular. These loosely documentary, highly sensationalized portrayals of current events were not peculiar to Yiddish theater—Broadway audiences in 1857 saw *The Sidewalks of New York*, about a fire and panic that occurred earlier that same year, and eighteenth-century Japanese saw kabuki plays about real-life love suicides—but they were a substantial part of Yiddish theater from Goldfadh's earliest years. Lateiner wrote a *tsaytbild* called *Immigration to America* soon after his arrival. Both he and "Professor" Hurwitz based theater pieces on the Johnstown flood. Hurwitz wrote a play about the Dreyfus trial. And one of his biggest hits was called *Tisa Esler*, after a town in Hungary where a Jew had recently been brought to trial on charges of having sacrificed a Christian child in order to drink his blood as part of a religious ceremony. The New York audience liked solid evenings of four hours or so, but *Tisa Esler* was so long that it had to be divided into two evenings. Part One was called *Tisa Esler*. Part Two was called *The Tisa Esler Trial*, and Hurwitz himself played the defense lawyer, talking for an hour straight, extemporaneously.

Domestic Drama

Besides the "high *shund*" historical operettas and *tsaytbilder*, there was a third form of Yiddish theater—domestic dramas. These eventually came to dominate the Yiddish stage. Plays of the cozy sort that people have laughed and cried over since Menander, they aimed at mirroring real life, and did so superficially. Domestic dramas pushed toward a satisfying conclusion at the final curtain, juxtaposed young star-crossed romances with lower-class comic characters, and indeed mixed sad and funny elements so violently that a French term for the genre was *comédie lamoyante* (tearful comedy). They also added such standard features of nineteenth-century melodrama as: pathetic deathbeds, innocent children, rising suspense, dramatic music, stunning curtain lines, and above all, wrenching appeals to clearly defined social attitudes. (The nineteenth-century masters of this form were the Frenchmen

See Ludwig SATZ

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Poster for *The Messiah Is Coming*, a particularly sensational mixture of musical show and emotional drama, starring Ludwig Satz in an uncharacteristically serious role.

Scribe and Sardou; on the American stage, some hits at midcentury were *A Working Girl's Wrongs*, *East Lynne*, *The Octoroon*, and *The Drunkard*; or, *The Fallen Saved*.)

Yiddish audiences responded wholeheartedly to these dramas, getting so caught up in the characters' sorrows that they facetiously classified plays as one-handerchief, two-handerchief, or three-handerchief ordeals. Another term was "onion plays." The Yiddish word for sympathy is *mit-filn*—literally "with feeling"—and the audiences "with-felt" the characters totally. The stories and the spectators' will to believe carried the *mitgefil* along, even when the actors were far too old or too fat to look their parts.

The Jewish Heart (1908) by Lateiner is a good example of domestic drama. So powerfully did it sway the masses that it set a record by running several hundred consecutive performances. Yankev, or Jacob, a poor orphaned Jewish art student in Rumania, has won a prize for a painting entitled "The Sinful Mother." His archrival, a Christian art student named Viktor Popeska, is bitterly jealous and makes strongly anti-Semitic remarks, though his mother, Madame Popeska, tries to soothe him. Act One ends with Yankev's discovery that Madame Popeska is actually his mother as well as Viktor's; she had abandoned Yankev and his father (now dead) when he was a baby and run off to marry her Christian lover and bear his Christian children.

Yankev is in love with Dina. In Act Two, according to a new edict Jews must have their parents' signatures in order to get a marriage license, so Yankev goes to acquire Madame Popeska's. Moved, Madame Popeska promises to give her signature, and the mother and her new-found son embrace. Viktor enters. Horrified by the scene, and by the revelation that his mother is Yankev's mother, as well as by the humiliation that her public acknowledgment of Jewish blood will bring to him, he threatens Yankev with a gun. Madame Popeska is torn between her two loyalties and at last refuses her signature. The curtain falls on Yankev's declaration to his weeping mother: "We remain strangers."

In Act Three Yankev and Dina have decided to emigrate to America, where they will be free to marry without anyone's signature. But Yankev has been lying sick since his confrontation with his mother. She comes now to his sickbed:

MADAME POPESKA (*Draws the curtain to YANKEV'S bed.*) Ah, noble picture, heart-quickenng appearance. My Jewish child, believe me, never has mother loved her child as I love you, my Yankev. Outcast wife, how was I able to conceive such a crime, and—and—Oh, how bitterly I now regret it. Can you ever forgive your mother, my good child, my Jewish child? (*Falls onto the bed, weeping.*)

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DOES
CRIME
PAY?

מאמע פאפסקא

FROM CRADLE TO THE
ELECTRIC CHAIR

As late as 1933, domestic melodrama was still helping the Jews of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to teach their children moral lessons.

YANKEV *(Awakens. Note: She uses the familiar form of "you," du, to him; he uses the coldly formal it to her.)* Is it you, Madame? In such a condition as this? Please rise, Madame.

MADAME POPESKA No, not until you say you will hear me out.

YANKEV Yes, but first take a seat, please. What is it you wish from me, Madame?

MADAME POPESKA Yankev, I am speaking to you as to a grown man. Yankev, you want to marry. But first I beg you to answer me: do you love your Dima? Do you really love her?

YANKEV I love her so much that I would sacrifice my life for her.

MADAME POPESKA Thank God. Yankev, you know the power of love and you will understand me. When I married your father, I was a child, fifteen years old. I didn't marry him for love. My poor parents pressed me to become a rich man's wife. Three years later, chance brought me together with my present husband, and then I, too, loved, as only an eighteen-year-old loves for the first time in her life. I sacrificed everything for him, for the emotion of my first love bewitched, enchanted me. I acted without thinking, without considering. When I grew older, the first enchantment passed. With time I recalled more and more strongly my own dear ones whom I had left behind me in my Jewish home. *(Trembles.)* Most of all I recalled my child, whom I left behind in the cradle. Ah, how often a burning longing came over me, and like a madwoman I wanted to run out into the world, run and find my child. But by then I was already also the mother of my two Christian children, and they, too, still lay in their cradles. *(Weeps.)* And this mother-heart of mine was torn in two. I did not know whom to sacrifice, or for whom. No one can imagine how I suffered in silence. Years passed, and the picture of my Jewish child did not fade, until chance brought you to me as a grown man. Now *(she kneels.)* Yankev, this sinful woman kneels before you, as before her judge. Hand down your verdict on your sinful mother. Demand the hardest sacrifice from me, and I will do it gladly, only let me be your mamma. You are a Jewish child with a Jewish heart—have mercy on your unhappy mother and forgive her. *(Kisses his hand.)*

YANKEV *(After a strong inner struggle, presses her to his heart.)* Mother!

MADAME POPESKA What sweet, heavenly music for me to hear the word "mother" from your lips.

YANKEV *(Kisses her.)* My poor mother!

MADAME POPESKA No, not poor—I am the richest, the happiest mamma to have a child like you.

YANKEV *(He now uses du for "you.")* Now, be strong, Mother. For just as horrible fate tore mother and child apart twenty years ago, now we have found each other again only to lose each other once more.

MADAME POPESKA *(Fearfully.)* What are you saying, my child?

YANKEV I have no other choice but to leave this place.

MADAME POPESKA *(Screams.)* No, no, never again!

(A knock is heard at the door.)

YANKEV Mother, perhaps you should not be seen in this house now?

MADAME POPESKA *(Leaving.)* No power in the world can tear me away from my new-found child, from my Yankev. *(Kisses him. Exits.)*
(Enter VIKTOR.)

YANKEV Who is this unexpected guest?

VIKTOR Sir, I come to you now as one businessman to another.

YANKEV With you, sir, I do not do business.

VIKTOR Say then that I come to make you a proposition.

YANKEV And if I am not curious to hear your proposition?

VIKTOR You must!

YANKEV I must? Apparently you forget that you are in my house, and I can show you the door as you did yesterday to me.

VIKTOR You wouldn't dare, Jew! Remember the consequences, which could be very unhappy for you.

YANKEV Heartless beast! Why do you pursue me so unkindly? Even into my own home your bitter hate pursued me and gives me no rest. Why?

VIKTOR *(Excited.)* As you see, I am calm; follow my example and be calm now too. Ask me to sit down and hear what I've come about.

YANKEV Among Jews, hospitality is holy. You are actually my enemy. However, now you are my guest. Sit down, if you please.

VIKTOR *(Mockingly.)* Thank you. *(Sits down.)*

YANKEV Now tell me the reason for your coming here.

VIKTOR First, I want to be sure you are aware that the Popeska family is one of the most aristocratic and noblest in Rumania.

YANKEV I know it. In particular, you are the noblest of the noble; you have given me evidence of that more than once. Well, then, continue.

VIKTOR Joy and harmony have always reigned in our family. Suddenly you came and destroyed our home. Please, hear me out calmly.

YANKEV I am calm.

VIKTOR I have been thinking over a means whereby you, who destroyed our happiness, can make good that misfortune which you brought upon our house.

YANKEV *(Ironically.)* "How I might make good that misfortune." Good, I am calm.

VIKTOR I demand that you leave our land, our Rumania, as soon as possible, and leave it forever.

(Pause.)

YANKEV Ha la ha! That is marvelous.

VIKTOR What is marvelous?

YANKEV That for once we both should have the same idea. You see, yesterday, immediately after I left your house, I came to the firm conclusion to leave this sweet fatherland, Rumania.

VIKTOR Well, then, our Rumania isn't good enough for you? All the better. Leave on your travels, but quickly. Perhaps you need travel expenses?

YANKEV Thank you very much, I no longer need money for travel expenses.

VIKTOR Why not?

YANKEV Because I now intend to remain here in this land.

VIKTOR But did you not just say that you decided yesterday to leave?

YANKEV Yes, yesterday I reached that decision. However, today a certain person tells me that it is no longer necessary.

VIKTOR A certain person?

YANKEV Yes, a certain person, and no other, in fact, than our mother.

VIKTOR Jew, be very careful how you speak. I forbid you to repeat that expression "our mother." My mother cannot also be your mother.

YANKEV I beg your pardon a thousand times for having been born to the same woman as you. Believe me, if she had asked me, I would have told her it was better for me never to be born than to have you as a brother.

VIKTOR Jew, who gives you the right to call me brother?

YANKEV Once again I beg your pardon a thousand times. Unfortunately, you are, against our will, two brothers. And if you have read the Bible, Esau.

VIKTOR And I insist to you that Madame Popeska, my mother, ceased to be yours in the moment when she entered the Christian faith.

YANKEV Brother Esau, my mother never entered the Christian faith. The proof is that now after twenty years there beats in my mother's breast a warm Jewish heart.

VIKTOR Jew! Do not insult my Christian mother!

YANKEV Your Christian mother is now at this very moment in my Jewish house. Just a few minutes ago she knelt here before me and was overjoyed to hear the word "mother" from me, her Jewish child.

VIKTOR Take back your damned lie. Madame Popeska would never sink so low.

YANKEV And her Jewish son pressed her to his Jewish heart and called her mother, for she is and she remains my Jewish mother.

VIKTOR Jew! Two of us is one too many on this earth.
(Pulls out his revolver. They struggle.)

YANKEV Beast, do you want to cause a murder?

(The revolver goes off. VIKTOR falls dead. MADAME POPESKA and DINA rush in.)

To protect Yankev, Madame Popeska tells the police that she shot her own son Viktor, and they take her away.

Act Four takes place at the wedding canopy set up for Yankev and Dina. Madame Popeska is there, under arrest. At the end of the marriage ceremony the rabbi prays, at her request, for Yankev's father, the Jewish husband whom she abandoned in her youth. Overcome by remorse and joy, she dies. Yankev sings a reprise of a song he'd sung in the first act; its refrain goes: "Always



Conclusion of Act II, *Dos Yidische Harts (The Jewish Heart)* by Joseph Latsiner, as presented in 1908 at David Kessler's Thalia Theater on the Lower East Side. Yankev, played by Kessler, has just accidentally shot his Rumanian Christian half-brother Viktor; their mother heroically seizes the gun and takes the blame.

remember your mother's song." Curtain.

Popular dramas of this sort operate by pushing certain buttons calculated to bring on tears or laughter. In Western cultures such buttons include sweethearts' love, lost innocence, mother love; in Yiddish, hillbilly songs twang on about the same subjects.

The Jewish Heart pushes scores of these buttons, touching so many deep nerves and releasing so many powerful responses that it is in effect a ritual performance. The main story, as opposed to the comic subplots, deals explicitly with Jewish identity. Yankev's transformation from passive victim of anti-Semitism to active hero, which he achieves by confronting Madame Popeska and Viktor and ultimately expresses by emigrating, is the essential action of the play. Yankev insists throughout on pride in his Jewishness. He can't reform, nor can he really destroy his anti-Semitic antagonist, but he can disdain and diminish him. Like black heroes facing "Whitey" in plays, movies, and novels of the 1930s, he is cool, proud, and elegant, he is in control of the confrontation; he can even beat Viktor within Viktor's own code of aristocratic etiquette. Besides, Yankev is essentially a good man, and always dealt honorably with his art school rival, whereas Viktor is "heartless." This is Yankev's real victory over his tormentor—this and the winning away of his mother's heart—since the actual killing is not his responsibility. Yankev is further rewarded for his Jewishness by getting revenge on Madame Popeska for having deserted him; even better, it is revenge without guilt. In the course of such scenes, the audience vicariously gets its own back at all the Rumanians and Poles who insulted them and discriminated against them, both personally and as a group. Safe, together, and comfortable in a theater on another continent, the audience watch a Jew conquer a Christian nobleman in a ritual of vindication.

Madame Popeska, who deserted the Jewish community, pays for her sin. She has suffered all her life. Toward the final act her suffering crescendoes; she is humiliated in front of both her sons, and she has a particularly painful moment when she believes that Yankev is about to leave her. She earns forgiveness by repenting, like all the fallen women nineteenth-century audiences and novel readers liked to weep over. But in the end such heroines inevitably die.

In the wedding scene in the last act of *The Jewish Heart*, Hebrew prayers are chanted onstage. Such a device was very popular, and many plays included at least some part of a marriage ceremony, a prayer for the dead, a Passover *seder* table, or a mother blessing the Sabbath candles. Liturgic cantorial music was often used, even in Jewish vaudeville programs. Such moments of prayer evoked religious and cultural feelings which heightened whatever action was

going on at the time. Prayers intensified the play by acting out an experience that was special to the community who sat together and watched it. It is interesting that the specific situation in which a parent (or surrogate parent) manages, despite obstacles, to attend his or her child's wedding, and then swoons or dies beside the wedding canopy, recurs in a number of plays and movies, such as the American-made, tear-jerking film of the 1930s, *The Two Sisters*, starring Jennie Goldstein.

The Jewish Heart enters two especially painful and interrelated areas: guilt and the mother-child relationship. Many American plays of the period, non-Jewish as well as Jewish, manipulated these raw feelings. Indeed, the experience of leaving mother behind, on the farm or across the ocean, was one of the essential American experiences of the late nineteenth century. This inevitably meant leaving behind the life style learned at mother's knee. Guilt and homesickness were constantly set overflowing in sentimental tears by such songs as "A Brivele der Mamen" ("Write a Little Letter to Your Mother"), the Irish-American "Mother Machree," and the American "Old Folks at Home." In *The Jewish Heart*, Yankev is rewarded by a reunion with his mother and, subtly, by the liberty to leave his home without guilt.

The Jewish Heart also touches on feelings about the old country. The play corroborates that leaving for America was the right thing to do. It hints at the future success waiting for Yankev. But in some scenes it deals with the old country differently, though equally effectively, by offering the sweet ache of homesickness. Yiddish theater was lavish with choruses of peasant girls in embroidered blouses, and in songs like "Mayn Shtetele Belz" ("My Little Hometown Belz"), "Rumania, Rumania," and "Odessa Mame," which praise the tree-lined streets, the outdoor cafés, the wine, and home cooking of another life. Even Cossacks in boots seemed relatively safe, from a distance, and almost evoked nostalgia. The other life seemed warmer and sweeter, the farther the audience got from it; memories of it, as of childhood, charged the play with emotion. On Broadway the equivalent was an obsession with the idyll of a farm back home: farmers' daughters and sons were ruined, or almost ruined, in the big city, or farms were saved from mortgage foreclosure.

Comedy

In a domestic drama like *The Jewish Heart*, the emotional pitch could be so grueling that audiences needed the relief of comic interludes. Every act of *The Jewish Heart* has at least one episode of a complicated comic subplot which involves Dina's father and stepmother. Here is a scene in which the

stepmother, named Serke, is alone with her own newly married daughter, Rosa.

SERKE (*Springs to her feet.*) My child, you are lost! My daughter, you are unlucky!

ROSA What's come over you, Mamma?

SERKE Just a few weeks after the wedding, and already he is trampling you beneath his feet.

ROSA What are you talking about, Mamma?

SERKE Do you think that I care about earrings? (LEMEKH, a *bumbling grocer*, SERKE's second husband, *appears outside the window and stays throughout the scene to eavesdrop and comment.*) All I care about is why he should have it all his own way. My child, you are still too young and don't know that everything in married life depends on the direction you take right after the wedding. All you have to do is let him have it all his own way now already, and for the rest of your life you won't be able to do a thing with him. Follow your mother's advice, daughter. You must have those earrings, and for only one reason: so as to have your own way.

ROSA But, Mamma, is it worth quarreling with my husband just for a pair of earrings?

SERKE Who says you should quarrel? A woman has methods enough for keeping her husband beneath her slipper. Oh, Rosie, when I was your age, what couldn't I do with your father, my first husband, may he rest in peace! He wasn't such a broken-down creature as my current one, Lemekh. Your father, may he rest in peace, was a hero, a real man, but with one glance of my eyes I could twist that hero around my little finger.

ROSA With one glance? But what sort of a glance could it have been?

SERKE The glance of a young woman who is winning the victory over her husband.

LEMEKH (*Eavesdropping at the window. Aside.*) What's this I hear? Serke was young once too? And here I always thought that she was born an old hag.

SERKE (*Sighs.*) Ah, child, at your age, how I used to toy with my husband, how I used to dimple for him.

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) Serke, dimple for me too.

SERKE Yes, yes, Rosele. You have to know how to deal with men. For example, mine—he should intercede for us in heaven—really hated tears. So what did I do? Over every little thing I whimpered so and sniffled so that he practically went out of his mind. And that's how I got my way about everything.

ROSA Mamma, mine can't stand tears either.

SERKE Nu, darling, why not use that?

ROSA (*Laughing.*) But, Mamma, how can you cry, pour out tears, when you don't feel like crying?

SERKE Get away, you silly girl—can't a woman manage a bit of art? Give your eyes a little squeeze, and there are your tears.

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) Oy, men! These women lead us right into the bathroom.

SERKE Shh, here comes your husband. Yes, my child, just give it a try the way I taught you, and let us see which of you two will win out. (*Exits.*)

(HERMAN, ROSA's new husband, enters.)

HERMAN So here you are, Rosele. I thought you were coming with us. Why did you stay here?

(ROSA turns away from him.)

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) Aha, the comedy begins.

HERMAN Rosele, aren't you feeling well? Why do you sigh so sadly? Is there something you need?

ROSA And if you found out what I needed, would that help me?

HERMAN What sort of words are those? Child, don't you know that you are my entire life? (*Tries to caress her.*)

ROSA How should I know that? When you refuse me the littlest thing I ask you for!

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) She's pretty good at playing the comedy.

HERMAN I refuse you the littlest thing? Oh, maybe you mean the earrings? Listen, Rosa, you know very well that for my part, nothing is too precious for you. I've already bought you more than one valuable gift without your having even asked for it! But this time I truly don't know what you saw in those earrings. I find them absolutely unappealing. The stones have no sparkle.

ROSA But if they appeal to me!

HERMAN But tell me a reason.

ROSA Without a reason. They appeal to me.

HERMAN In other words you've just got a crazy idea in your head. Well, I am sorry to say it, for I truly love you, but I'm never going to give way to your crazy ideas. My name isn't Lemekh.

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) Even though he insults me, it gives me pleasure. Now, there is a man. Oy, Serkele will have a fit.

ROSA Herman, can you refuse me such a little thing? Me, Herman? Unless—unless you don't love me. Yes, now I see it, you never did love me, you never did.

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) She is actually crying tears. Ha ha. "Give your eyes a little squeeze, and there are your tears." But now I look forward to hearing how he'll tell her off.

HERMAN She's crying! And I made her cry! (*Goes to her.*) Don't cry. You know I can't bear to see your tears.

ROSA (*Craving.*) I only know one thing, that you don't love me, and I'm the unhappiest girl in the world.

HERMAN What's come over you, child? I don't love you? (*Caresses her.*) After all, what a bad man I am, what a tyrant. How can I have the heart to make her cry over such a little thing? Her tears are not a little thing. I must really have hurt her. (*Deciding.*) Rosele, come on now.

ROSA I won't come on. I haven't made up yet.

HERMAN Come, I tell you. Do you know where to? To buy you the earrings.

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) Oy, that's bad. Get out of here, you're a Lemekh.

ROSA Let it go. I don't want them anymore.

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) Serkele is actually a pup compared to her.

HERMAN Rosele, you know what? You stay here. I'll just run over myself and bring them back here to you. Where is my hat? Adieu, Rosele. In five minutes I'll be back with the earrings. (*Exit.*)

LEMEKH (*Aside.*) And here I thought that I was the only Lemekh in the world. How strongly he took his stand at first: "My name is not Lemekh." What does his wife do? She gives her eyes a squeeze and makes him into a squish.

ROSA (*Explodes with laughter.*) Mamma, your advice was right. You have to know how to handle men. You've to get a good firm hold on them. What's he going to do, run away? He won't get there what he gets at home.

Curtain

In the end Herman reasserts himself and carries Lemekh along with him, so Serke and Rosa get their comeuppance and become happily docile wives.

Mogulesko played Lemekh. His droll winks, quavers, and capers made "Oy, that's bad" and "Get out of here, you're a Lemekh" catch phrases in every café on the Lower East Side. In another scene of *The Jewish Heart*, he sings the comedian's almost obligatory comic patter song—the *kuplet*:

Like the Gilbert and Sullivan patter song of the cra, and like the parabasis of Aristophanic comedy, the song hooks on only tangentially to the plot of the play. Thus, in response to some remark, Lemekh steps to the footlights and sings a song whose chorus goes:

Just a minute, pal of mine,
what's the rush, my friend?
I'll stop your running. I'll
give you a kick.
I'm gonna smack you with a
stick.

Where is the fire? You're
gonna get burned.

The first verse of the song is about a young man who starts getting fresh with his girlfriend ("When he started creeping with his hands, this is what she said . . ."). The second verse is about an elderly cuckold who catches his wife halfway out the door with her young lover. The third is equally unrelated. (For a contemporary example, one verse of the naughty *kuplet* of *Money, Love, and Shame*, sung by a clever comedian in Tel Aviv in 1975, makes fun of Brezhnev, to the delight of an audience of recent immigrants from Russia, even though the scenes just before and after the *kuplet* are about a prostitute on trial for killing her pimp, in a setting of some fifty years ago.)

The *kuplet* took the clown out of the play framework, reasserting the primacy of the relationship between the individual performer and the audience. For the moment, the play resembled the vaudeville of the era, both Yiddish and American (and the English music hall), with its intense rapport between performer and public. (Half a century later, Jacob Jacobs is still leaning over to the audience, in the course of a *kuplet*, to commiserate with someone in the first row on his Galician accent—always good for a laugh. Another of his perennial routines is to sing a verse about a man who is cuckolded or impotent, peer out into the audience, and ask someone why his wife is laughing so hard.) The *kupletist* danced off into the wings, but the audience knew their role, and their applause draws him back to add another verse, and another, and another, while the inevitability of the chorus as punch line to each verse, and the catchiness of the tune, encourages the audience to join in and sing.*

*A *kuplet* recorded not long ago in Buenos Aires by the comedian Pinco Goldstein refers explicitly to the relationship between *kupletist* and public: "Lebedik on Yiddish," Tikva Records T66).

Chorus

It never gets on, and it never gets off
The whole damn thing is really just a bluff
It never gets on, and it never gets off
You end up in the same place, sure enough
You push and you pull,
And you think that you have got it,
But you aren't here, and you aren't there,
And what you've got is not it
For it never gets on, and it never gets off
The whole damn thing is really just a bluff

In *The Jewish Heart*, Yankev and Lemekh speak two very different sorts of Yiddish. Putting what seemed to be nobler language in the mouths of nobler characters is not a Yiddish invention. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the runaway slave Eliza says, "They press upon my footsteps—the river is my only hope. Heaven grant me the strength to reach it, ere they overtake me! My child, *we will be free— or PERISH!*" In the same play the slave girl Topsy says, "Reckon I'se goin' to dance, Boss." Shakespeare uses the same convention when his noble characters speak blank verse, while his rustic clowns speak colloquial, relatively realistic prose. But in Yiddish *shund* the speech gap is wider than in its English counterparts. Yankev speaks *Daytshmerish*—like Alexander the Great and the other princes of historical operettas—stressing the Germanic components of Yiddish over the Slavic and Hebrew, as an affected English-speaker chooses the Latinate over the Anglo-Saxon. He uses purely German words instead of their Yiddish equivalents, so that an uninitiated spectator has to guess the meaning from the context. Though to modern ears *Daytshmerish* sounds like a parody of Yiddish and of German both, to the actors and audiences it sounded finer than their workaday *mame-loshn*, Yiddish. Thus romantic actors like Thomashefsky had to master *Daytshmerish*, while clowns like Mogulesko did not.

When young David Levinsky, hero of Abraham Cahan's novel, goes to the

It never gets on, and it never gets off.
You end up in the same place, sure enough.

Verse

Young Abie falls in love with Sadie,
Treats her swell, just like a lady,
Swears he'll give her riches without end.
He'll buy her this, he'll give her that,
Whatever she wants, from a house to a hat.
She'll be a princess with the world to spend.
Before they're wed the lover talks with passion.
But afterwards you can yourselves imagine—

(*Chorus*)

Verse

Why look beyond the end of your nose?
Take Yiddish theater impresarios—
They tell you that for tickets you must dash,
They say their music is the latest,
That Pinve Goldstein is the greatest,
That compared to their set up, and their scenery,
and their lights, every other theater is just trash.
You come, you sit, you hope, but all in vain,
For in the end they've bluffed you once again—

(*Chorus*)

theater, in a scene set around the turn of the century, he is perfectly satisfied by the convention.

Madame Klesmer was playing the part of a girl in a modern Russian town. She declaimed her lines, speaking like a prophetess in ancient Israel, and I liked it extremely. I was fully aware that it was unnatural for a girl in a modern Russian town to speak like a prophetess in ancient Israel, but that was just why I liked it. I thought it perfectly proper that people on the stage should not talk as they would off the stage. I thought that this unnatural speech of their was one of the principal things an audience paid for. The only actor who spoke like a human being was the comedian, and this, too, seemed to be perfectly proper, for a comedian was a fellow who did not take his art seriously, and so I thought that this natural talk of his was part of his fun-making. I thought it was something like a clown burlesquing the Old Testament by reading it, not in the ancient intonations of the synagogue, but in the plain, conversational accents of everyday life.

Shund in America

Yiddish popular theater asserted Yiddish identity, and not only Yiddish, but more specifically American Yiddish. In fact, *shund* was the first art form to express the distinctively American Yiddish community. When the scenes were romanticizing past Jewish glories, the audience's identification with the characters moved them with pride and longing. And when the butcher, the rabbi, the market woman, the pants presser, and the tenement landlady made their entrances, a shock of recognition expanded the audience's delighted sense of self. Familiar representations titillated non-Yiddish audiences too; they relished seeing a typical shrewd Yankee (in *The Contrast*, 1787) or a typical New York Irish fireman (in *The New York Fireman and the Bond Street Heiress* and a string of others, in the 1850s) upon stage. It is no coincidence that New York vaudeville houses of the period, including Yiddish ones, hung huge mirrors in the lobbies to reflect the audiences. They were part of the show.

At the turn of the century Yiddish audiences were still greenhorns fighting to "ungreen" themselves. Later they were an Americanized generation struggling to cope with "Yankee" children. Both these problems became major dramatic themes. Even the simplest allusion to these problems, or to any facet of the Lower East Side experience, galvanized audiences with the feeling that the play was truly and intimately about them.

Since a new language was part of the New World, one staple situation was a dialogue of misunderstandings, half in Yiddish and half in English. This

GLOSSARY

kehile	organized Jewish community
kleynkunst	"miniature" theater, usually revue consisting of music, dance, and satirical sketches
kultur-tuer	one who actively supports the cultural activities of his community
kunst	art
kuplét	comic patter song, as in the French <i>couplet</i>
kupletíst	entertainer whose specialty is to deliver <i>kuplét</i>
landsman (pl. landsmen or landslayt)	person from the same town or region in the old country
landsmanshaft (pl. landsmanshaftn)	fraternal organization of <i>landslayt</i>
lets	clown, buffoon
magid	itinerant folk preacher
mame-loshn	affectionate term for the Yiddish language; literally "mother tongue"
marshelik	jester, master of ceremonies
maskil (pl. maskilim)	adherent of the Enlightenment movement
megile	Book of Esther, read on Purim
meshoyrer (pl. meshoyrerim)	synagogue choir singer
nar	fool, clown
oylem	public, audience
Pale of Settlement	in czarist Russia, the area within which Jews were allowed to live. The Pale comprised about 362,000 square miles of western Russia, extending from close to the Baltic Sea on the north to the Black Sea on the south, and including Lithuania, part of the Ukraine, and part of what is now Poland; its Jewish population at the end of the nineteenth century was about 5.5 million.

badkhen (pl. badkhnim)

Daytshmerish

wedding bard, jester

form of Yiddish language with German words added and Germanic elements emphasized or overemphasized; originally associated with *haskole*, refinement, and intellectualism

dybbuk

in legend, soul of a dead person which has entered a living person's body

hasid (pl. hasidim)

adherent of *hasidism*. (Note: These are the familiar spellings; more accurate, phonetically, would be *khased* and *khasidim*.)

hasidism

Jewish religious movement, beginning in the eighteenth century, committed to piety, ecstasy, and the guidance of wonder rabbis

haskole

Enlightenment movement, committed to modernizing the Jewish religion and community, which flourished in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe. (Note: in Hebrew, *haskala*.)

hey mish

homey, warmly familiar

jargon

familiar, disparaging term for the Yiddish language

patriót (pl. patriótn)	fan of particular actor or company
payats	clown
Purim	festive holiday in early spring
Purimshpil	Purim folk play
Purimshpiler	performer in <i>Purimshpil</i> , usually amateur
shalekht-mones	gifts exchanged between households on Purim, especially sweet cakes, fruits, and wine
shitetl (pl. shitetlekh)	small town, village
shund	trashy art, especially theater
tsiolnt	heavy stew which is allowed to continue cooking throughout the Sabbath day
Yiddish	Jewish, Yiddish language, developed from the eleventh century, and spoken by Ashkenazic Jews living principally from France eastward through Russia, as well as in those areas of America, Africa, and Australia where Ashkenazic Jews have settled. Its primary roots are Germanic, Hebrew, Slavic, and Romance. (Note: Sephardic Jews of Spain, Portugal, and Africa, and their descendants, speak not Yiddish but Ladino, whose primary roots are Spanish and Hebrew.)
Yiddishkayt	Jewishness; cultural "Yiddishness"
yold	sucker

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YIVO: Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut [YIVO Institute for Jewish Research]
 YKUF: Yidisher Kultur Farband [Yiddish Cultural Association]

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(These two lists include most of what are considered the major works in the field, as well as some other useful references.)

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