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Yiddish Theater Lives, Despite the Past

By ISAAC BASHEVIS SINGER

I was already a young writer and an ardent reader of world literature when I began to attend plays in Yiddish. Some of them were written by Polish or Russian Jewish playwrights and many of them were imported from the golden land of America. I could see even then that we had not produced in Yiddish a Shakespeare, Molière or a Strindberg. These plays were folkish, utterly naive and sometimes even ridiculous, but I enjoyed them and often laughed, not as much at the banal subject matter but at the clumsiness of the writers, directors, and even the actors.

I learned later in life that many non-Yiddish plays had the same faults. They were constructed from the same flimsy stuff as the Yiddish plays. It was true that every Yiddish play needed a heart-rending recital of Kaddish and a wedding ceremony in order to keep the noisy audiences quiet for some time. But I was told that in almost every second or

third English play there was a body of someone just murdered, with Scotland Yard trying to find the culprit. It seemed that the theater thrived on clichés and wishful thinking everywhere.

If someone were to ask me what was essentially the topic of Yiddish theater, I would say it was basically a love story — the tale of human love oppressed by religious asceticism and supposedly freed in an epoch of enlightenment. The protagonists of both the Yiddish theater and Yiddish literature were young men and women of the shtetl who refused to marry by arranged marriages and wanted to follow their own romantic desires. They craved to free themselves from their poverty stricken and backwards environment. They yearned for the big world, secular education and for the right to wear modern clothes, to do away with the caftan, the wig and the whole burden of orthodoxy which they considered Asiatic.

The villains of the Yiddish plays, as a rule, were Russian oppressors and Jewish religious fanatics. The most humorous character in these plays was of course the matchmaker. He was invariably dressed in shabby clothes, snuffed tobacco, sneezed and spat a lot of nonsense. To make him even funnier he was

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Isaac Bashevis Singer, winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize in literature, is the author of "A Play for the Devil," now at the Folksbiene Theater.

Yiddish Theater Through the Years

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A Yiddish play, like any other play, had to have a happy ending. In the Polish and Russian kitsch plays, the young lover might have been a count or some other dignitary. He took the girl to his palace and there they lived happily ever after: There was little hope in the Jewish ghettos for young couples and the happy ending was immigration to America. In many of the Yiddish plays which I have seen, the groom or bride discover that they have a rich uncle in New York who turns up at the wedding dressed in a top hat and a tuxedo with a check for \$20,000. The thrill of this event is overwhelming, especially if the bride is a poor orphan. Usually, there is a would-be seducer who wants the girl for himself, although he has a wife and a house full of children.

Are we experiencing a revival of Yiddish theater today? Each season, of late, including this one, offers several lively Yiddish productions. If we are in the middle of a revival, what could be the reason for it? Did the Yiddish theater possess artistic values that merit a place in the theater lore of our time?

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It is worth noting that when the great Spinoza wanted to describe in his "Ethics" unrestrained merriment and worldly pleasures, he specified the theater and the use of perfume. Spinoza was given a traditional Jewish education, and the theater and perfume represented to him indulgence in pleasures. Since the Jews were forbidden "to make unto thee graven images or any likeness of anything that is in Heaven above," the art of imitating people might also have been looked upon as a form of idolatry. Besides, according to Mosaic law a man was not allowed to dress in a woman's garment and vice versa. This too could have hindered the development of any theater among the Jews.

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There were some exceptions. The Talmud mentions a Purim festival in Babylonia which had the elements of a pantomime. They used to burn a figure of Haman that was strapped to a

wooden hoop. After much frolicking and dancing the figure was thrown into the river. In the year 408 the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II forbade this Purim spectacle. Similar festivities were practiced in Yemen and in Caucasia where Jews migrated to even before the Roman invasion.

After the Jewish exile from Spain and the migration to German and Gallic lands, the Jews put on extensive Purim Spiels (plays) and also Chanukah Spiels in German cities. The story of the tyrant Ahasuerus, the evil Haman, the Jewish statesman Mordecai and his beautiful cousin Esther who saved the Jews from a Holocaust, was too rich and dramatic a story to be overlooked as material for play acting. Purim was the only holiday where getting drunk was considered a mitsvah.

Even in my time, when I was a child in Warsaw, masked boys used to come to our house on Purim to play the characters in the Book of Esther. Sometimes they sang songs which my father did not approve of. He was always in a rush to give these performers the few groschen and let them go. For us children all this was sheer delight.

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After the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 and the pogroms that followed, Jews from Russia and

Poland began to immigrate to America in masses, Abraham Goldfaden among them. As a result, the Yiddish theater flourished for many years in the New World. The demand for plays seemed to inspire new talent. In time, many of these productions were brought to Europe. One of these immigrant playwrights, Jacob Gordin, specialized in adapting the works of classic European writers for the Yiddish stage. He adapted the works of Lessing, Schiller, Goethe and Shakespeare's "King Lear," which he called "The Jewish King Lear." One of Gordin's original plays, "Mierele Efros," was performed in Warsaw by Esther Rachel Kaminski and later by her daughter Ida Kaminski.

For millions of Jewish immigrants, mostly hard working people, many of them half illiterate, the Yiddish theater was a well of entertainment and a source of information about the great world, the United States of America, Jewish history, and many things they had never heard of in the old country. As Abe Cahan, the late editor of The Jewish Daily Forward, used to say, "The Yiddish press and Yiddish theater must teach these immigrants how to use a handkerchief."

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For many years, Yiddish theater kept growing in the United States, in Poland, in Russia, in Argentina. Goldfaden had returned to Europe and although he was the founder of the Yiddish theater, he himself lost his hold on it and was utterly ne-

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The Yiddish language came into being a thousand years ago when Jews, mostly from northern Italy and northern France, settled among the Germans, whose many dialects formed the basis for the special vernacular of these Ashkenazic Jews. By 1300, Jews, driven by persecution and invited by the ruler of Poland, had moved east, bringing their Yiddish with them. In their new home, Yiddish, which had already absorbed large vocabularies from Hebrew, Germanic and Romance languages, incorpo-

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In the 1800's, Yiddish, which has always been written in the Hebrew alphabet, shared the cultural Renaissance that swept so many nationalities during those years and produced literature, folksongs and theater that have claimed serious attention from scholars.

Before World War II, there were 11 million Yiddish speakers in the world. Today, after the German extermination and the linguistic assimilation of Jews in countries where they have lived, it is estimated that there are four million people who speak Yiddish scattered throughout the world. Yiddish newspapers, plays and schools are features of life in cities such as New York, Tel Aviv, London, Paris and Buenos Aires. The best-known Yiddish writer today is Isaac Bashevis Singer, who writes all his prose and plays in his mother tongue. Many of his stories are published in the Jewish Daily Forward before they reach readers in English translation, under his supervision.

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During World War I Yiddish theater was forbidden in Russia. After the Bolshevik revolution, the Yiddish theater came back to life under the leadership of Alexander Granovski. The Communists were eager to show their interest in developing the culture of minorities and they provided Granovski with a modern studio and a theater where the walls were painted by the already famous Marc Chagall. The Communists refused to depend on American plays and their stars. The Soviet Yiddish theater had brought out a star of its own, S. Mikhoeles. They performed works by Sholom Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Sforim, and the Yiddish poet Peretz Markish, who in later years was given the Lenin Prize and still later, in the time of the Stalin purges, was liquidated together with the same Mikhoeles and a number of Yiddish writers and intellectuals.

Through the years some good things happened to the Yiddish theater. In 1907 Sholem Asch's "God of Vengeance" was translated into German and performed by the famous Reinhardt. Maurice Schwartz had founded the Yiddish Art Theater and had many successes. The greatest of them was perhaps "Yoshe Kalb" by my late brother I. J. Singer. New playwrights had emerged, like H. Leivick, Ossip Dymov, A. Kacyzne, Aaron Zeitlin, Jacob Prager, H. Seclar. One of the biggest successes in Yiddish theater was S. Anski's "Dybbuk," which played all over Europe in the 1920's.

There were some optimists who believed that Yiddish theater still had a long life ahead. However, millions of Jewish children grew up in America, both north and south, as well as in Russia, Poland, Rumania and all over Europe without any knowledge of Jewish history, Yiddish or Hebrew. Some Yiddishists considered Yiddish a language with a mission to help the masses in bringing about socialism or communism and then to disappear. Abe Cahan was one of them. Yiddish was snubbed by the assimilationists and also by the Zionists, for whom Hebrew was the real Jewish language and Yiddish only some corrupted German dialect. The Wall Street crash and the Depression that followed convinced many young Jews in the United States that communism was the only solution to the Jewish problem. It was a consensus that Yiddish was dying slowly but surely.

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When I came to the United States in

1935, the Yiddish theater was already on its way out. An additional tragedy of the Yiddish theater was the fact that Yiddish writers as a rule did not write plays. Most of the drama were adaptations from novels or stories. The theater had to rely on kitsch. I remember my brother saying to me once, "If you ever intend to write a play, do it now because in a year or two it might be too late." Hitler was already in power in Germany and a second World War was imminent. How strange that in Warsaw and in Lodz they played Yiddish theater almost to the very day of the Hitler invasion. As a matter of fact they played Yiddish theater in the Hitler ghettos between one death-action and another.

For a man who began his career as a writer in such circumstances, it is not easy for me to be optimistic. Although Yiddish theater still exists here in America and in Israel, and even though I myself am foolish enough to dabble in it, I wouldn't dare to say that we are witnessing a revival or that one may occur in the near future. But the very fact that Yiddish literature and the Yiddish theater are not completely forgotten, proves that resignation is not an attribute of Jewishness. We still have some writers and I still see from time to time such Yiddish actors and actresses as Joseph Buloff and the great comedian Leo Fuchs, Seymour Reichtzeit and his wife Miriam Kressin, Dinah Halpern, Pesach Burstein and his wife Lilian Lux, Zvi Schooler and some others who just refuse to give up Yiddish.

It is hard to believe that there exist a number of young people who take Yiddish seriously and even try to build an artistic career on it. These young people know by instinct that the Jews have never given up their spiritual values. We carried away our books from the Inquisition and the auto-da-fé. We are still teaching Jewishness in some hideouts in Soviet Russia, Syria, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq and similar places. Even Hitler did not succeed in destroying our literature, both religious and secular.

I don't really look forward with nostalgia for a renewal of the Yiddish theater I knew because I am convinced that the Yiddish theater has never really died. It has entered like a dybbuk into many Broadway plays and musicals and into a great number of Hollywood movies and television contraptions as well. What I would really like is not a revival of the old theater, but a changed approach to the very essence of theater, which should be treated as an integral part of the great art of storytelling.

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Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1909) is considered the father of Yiddish theater. He wrote some 40 plays, directed them and acted in them as well. One of them, "The Two Kuni Lemels," is being performed right now (as "Kuni Leml") Off Broadway. Goldfaden attracted to his company a number of would-be actors who played and sang in wine cellars and taverns in Rumania and Galicia and wherever they could find an audience. They called themselves the Broder Singers — after the town of Brody where some of them originated. A handful were wedding jesters or folk-musicians, klezmorim. (Klezmer music is presently going through a sort of revival in the United States, in Israel and in some European cities.) Abraham Goldfaden and his partner Israel Godner, also an actor, discovered a prolific playwright, Joseph Lateiner. He produced some 80 plays in the late years of the 19th century and became a leader and promoter of Jewish theater in America.

After the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 and the pogroms that followed, Jews from Russia and

Poland began to immigrate to America in masses, Abraham Goldfaden among them. As a result, the Yiddish theater flourished for many years in the New World. The demand for plays seemed to inspire new talent. In time, many of these productions were brought to Europe. One of these immigrant playwrights, Jacob Gordin, specialized in adapting the works of classic European writers for the Yiddish stage. He adapted the works of Lessing, Schiller, Goethe and Shakespeare's "King Lear," which he called "The Jewish King Lear." One of Gordin's original plays, "Mierele Efras," was performed in Warsaw by Esther Rachel Kaminski and later by her daughter Ida Kaminski.

For millions of Jewish immigrants, mostly hard working people, many of them half illiterate, the Yiddish theater was a well of entertainment and a source of information about the great world, the United States of America, Jewish history, and many things they had never heard of in the old country. As Abe Cahan, the late editor of The Jewish Daily Forward, used to say, "The Yiddish press and Yiddish theater must teach these immigrants how to use a handkerchief."

Abe Cahan, himself an immigrant from Vilna, had become an American novelist and the most important critic of the Yiddish theater. He demanded that both the Yiddish press and the theater be strictly realistic and easily comprehended by the readers and the theatergoers. His criterion was whether the elevator man of the Forward building could understand and enjoy the article or the play in question. When Cahan wrote in a review that a play was too complex to be appreciated by the elevator man, it was taken off the stage. Of course, the elevator man was happy to comply and his answer was always, "No, Mr. Cahan, I cannot understand it; the whole thing is above me."

Nevertheless, Yiddish theater brought out and encouraged quite a number of talents over the years, writers such as Peretz Hirschbein, David Pinski, L. Kobrin, Z. Libin, F. Bimko, and such actors as Rudolph Schildkraut and his son, Joseph, Jacob Adler, Keni Lipzin, Ludwig Satz, Sigmund Mogulesko, Jacob Ben-Ami, Berta Gersten, Muni Wiesenfeld (who later became Paul Muni), David Kessler and such stars as Boris Thomashevsky, Maurice Schwartz, Menashe Skulnik, Molly Picon, Clara Young, Bessie Thomashevsky, Julius, Celia, Luther and Stella Adler — all children of the great Jacob Adler — and many, many others.

Yiddish theater in the 1880's and 90's and in the early 1920's had become a binding passion for millions of Jewish immigrants. Boris Thomashevsky became an object of hero worship for many Yiddish-speaking women. It was said that one woman



Adam Newman

On Yiddish themes: Stuart Zagnit and Barbara McCulloh, above, in the musical Kuni-Leml," currently at the Audrey Wood; below, Avi Hoffman and Betty Silberman in "The Golden Land," the musical at the Norman Thomas.



Curt Kaufman

glected everywhere. He died a forgotten man in 1909. For a long time the Yiddish theater in Poland, in Russia and everywhere else depended on the plays and "stars" from America.

During World War I Yiddish theater was forbidden in Russia. After the Bolshevik revolution, the Yiddish theater came back to life under the leadership of Alexander Granovski. The Communists were eager to show their interest in developing the culture of minorities and they provided Granovski with a modern studio and a theater where the walls were painted by the already famous Marc Chagall. The Communists refused to depend on American plays and their stars. The Soviet Yiddish theater had brought out a star of its own, S. Michoelis. They performed works by Sholom Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Sforim, and the Yiddish poet Peretz Markish, who in later years was given the Lenin Prize and still later, in the time of the Stalin purges, was liquidated together with the same Michoelis and a number of Yiddish writers and intellectuals.

Through the years some good things happened to the Yiddish theater. In 1907 Sholem Asch's "God of Vengeance" was translated into German and

1935, the Yiddish theater was already on its way out. An additional tragedy of the Yiddish theater was the fact that Yiddish writers as a rule did not write plays. Most of the drama were adaptations from novels or stories. The theater had to rely on kitsch. I remember my brother saying to me once, "If you ever intend to write a play, do it now because in a year or two it might be too late." Hitler was already in power in Germany and a second World War was imminent. How strange that in Warsaw and in Lodz they played Yiddish theater almost to the very day of the Hitler invasion. As a matter of fact they played Yiddish theater in the Hitler ghettos between one death-action and another.

For a man who began his career as a writer in such circumstances, it is not easy for me to be optimistic. Although Yiddish theater still exists here in America and in Israel, and even though I myself am foolish enough to dabble in it, I wouldn't dare to say that we are witnessing a revival or that one may occur in the near future. But the very fact that Yiddish literature and the Yiddish theater are not completely forgotten, proves that resignation is not an attribute of Jewishness. We still have

"A Language of Exile, Without Frontiers"

When Isaac Bashevis Singer accepted the 1978 Nobel Prize in Stockholm, he told his audience, in Yiddish, which he then translated into English, "The high honor bestowed upon me by the Swedish Academy is also a recognition of the Yiddish language — a language of exile, without a land, without frontiers, not supported by any government." The point is that despite its detractors, Jews and others, who relegate it to the status of "dialect" and "jargon," Yiddish is a language, with its own grammar and vocabulary, no more a subsidiary of modern German than other languages in the Germanic family.

The Yiddish language came into being a thousand years ago when Jews, mostly from northern Italy and northern France, settled among the Germans, whose many dialects formed the basis for the special vernacular of these Ashkenazic Jews. By 1200, Jews had

rated many Slavic words and elements (including the popular "nik" ending, which eventually traveled to America in sputnik, nudnik and beatnik).

In the 1800's, Yiddish, which has always been written in the Hebrew alphabet, shared the cultural Renaissance that swept so many nationalities during those years and produced literature, folksongs and theater that have claimed serious attention from scholars.

Before World War II, there were 11 million Yiddish speakers in the world. Today, after the German extermination and the linguistic assimilation of Jews in countries where they have lived, it is estimated that there are four million people who speak Yiddish scattered throughout the world. Yiddish newspapers, plays and schools are features of life in cities such as New York, Tel Aviv, London, Paris and Buenos Aires. The best-known Yiddish writer today