

The American Yiddish Theater: Origins & History

by Professor Israel Kugler z"l

There is a close connection between theater and language. A *lets*—a jokester—once said: “*Az di mame shrayt, vert der tate on loshn*”—when mama screams, papa is speechless—the origin of *mame-loshn*.

Until the end of the 19th century Yiddish was largely the everyday language of the Jewish masses. Hebrew was the holy language, *loshn koydesh*, to be used in the synagogue mainly by men, and in studying Torah and the Talmud—largely by men. The Enlightenment (Haskalah) looked westward toward German as the civilized language and to the east to Russian. The *khasidim*, expressing their joy in their religious continuity, used Yiddish. Traditional *misnagdim* (the Orthodox rabbis) tried to keep that wall of separation between Hebrew and Yiddish. In the Orthodox synagogue the women sat behind a curtain. Instead of reading the Torah in Hebrew, they followed along in a Yiddish version called *tsene urene*.

Jewish creative intellectuals recognized the need to wed the everyday language to standards of grammar, pronunciation, syntax, and spelling. In 1908, at the Tshernowitz Conference, Yiddish writers led by Yitzkhok Leyb Peretz proclaimed Yiddish as a Jewish national language.

Jewish culture always contained an element of the arts, despite the prohibition against making graven images. Theatricality was an important factor:

The following elements have continued into the diaspora in a kind of *goldene keyt*—a golden chain—to today.

- A single G-d who was invisible, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient;
- The chosenness of the Jewish people, who alone could communicate with the supernatural;
- G-d's will to justify suffering as well as joy;
- Abraham and the attempted sacrifice of Isaac;
- Moses from the basket on the Nile to the plagues visited upon the Egyptians to the parting of the Red Sea as the way of escape; to proclaiming the Ten Commandments;
- The secret visits of the prophet Elijah at Passover;
- The miracle of the lamp oil on *khanike*;
- The heroics of the Maccabees and Bar Kokhba;
- The vengeance of Mordekhai in killing Haman

- The victory of David over Goliath;
- David the psalmist and harpist;
- Solomon the wise and creative poet;
- The cantors and the choirs;
- The candle-lighting in hushed tones on the *shabes*.

Thus, going back to the Renaissance in the Italian city of Mantua, Jews formed *Universita Israelita* where Jewish writers, actors, stage craftsmen, musicians, costumers, and dancers performed in public.

Two celebrations in Jewish religious life were the settings for theater directed to the Jewish people, but attracted the attention of dominant forces—Moslems and Christians. These were:

- Simkhes Torah, celebrating the end of the cycle of Torah reading and beginning again with Genesis
- Purim, celebrating the end of Haman, the Jew-killer, at the hands of Mordekhai in the service of the Persian King Ahasuerus and his Jewish Queen Esther as set forth in the Megillah.

On Purim there were excesses of wild dancing, drunkenness, and garish costumes. The Jewish religious hierarchy issued warnings—to little avail.

Purimshpil

Here's the scene of a Purim festival in the Prague ghetto in the 1740's. There is a public parade:

- Led by the lord, the *marshalik*, riding a horse and wearing a baroque gentleman's costume;
- Then came the *nar*, the fool, on a horse, wearing a garish woman's costume, bedecked with pastries, eating and bleating on a trumpet;
- Then the clown-hero—*der payatz*, astride a wine cask pulled by a gang of Yeshiva boys,
- A crazy Purim King,
- A Bacchus waving an enormous wine glass.
- Then came more and more clowns—
- A Harlequin called Pickle Herring; a half fool;
- Biblical figures of Abraham, Moses, and Aaron;
- The various Jewish trade guilds;
- Finally, outlandish clown-musicians, one a dwarf playing a fiddle on top of a flagpole.

*Purimshpil*ers, perhaps numbering 30, including musicians, would burst into their neighbors' homes,

usually the wealthy. These were the targets for joyous food festivities and money. *Homentashn* are triangular poppyseed cakes filled with raisins and almonds. Whenever Haman's name was mentioned, the noisemakers, the *graggers*, were quickly activated. Unfortunately sometimes these public displays were also occasions for anti-Semitic rumors by the non-Jews, and even pogroms occurred. The *purimshpil* continued well into the nineteenth century as the main theatrical event in Jewish life. It gave rise to the wandering musicians — *klezmerim*— who breached the confines of playing at weddings to go from one town to another town and perform street concerts. These actors were often the *badkhonim*—the jesters at weddings and the *payatsim*—the clowns skilled at rhyming — alternating Hebrew and Yiddish:

Broderzinger

They came from the town of Brod—located in Galicia in the relatively free Austro-Hungarian Empire. These bards and troubadours, who were influenced by the Enlightenment (*maskilim*), also enlisted the *badkhonim* and *payatzim* in wandering the countryside from town to town playing at taverns (*kretchmas*) in rudimentary playlets with lyrical tunes. They wore costumes, and the leader was attired in a frock coat. Some of these presentations were sheer poetry:

Night Watchman

I'm a poor night watchman
I lie awake and think all night
That my lot is harder than any other man's
For me there is no night
Every other creature God created,
Rests with his kind in their nest
But I lie on this cold ground, ill-fated
For God sends me no rest.

I carry loads all day, for I'm a porter.
All night I watch in the streets,
I carry heavy bricks. I carry mortar.
Whose body aches as mine does, and whose feet?
I would thank God and bless Him
If I could only rest and ease my weary bones
But whenever someone comes, before I pass him
I must not fail to call out, Halt who goes there?

Sleep, sweet sleep, you dearest brother,
You strengthen people with your art
If I could rest my limbs like any other

I'd have fresh energy to start
Another night of wakefulness and cold,
You'd give me life. But I must go again
To watch the streets. For bread, my life is sold,
Again you've flown away, Sleep, from my pain.

Change in Jewish Population

Together with the development of Yiddish as a recognized language of the East European Jews, was an important change in the character of the population. By the end of the 19th century there were over 500,000 Jewish artisans, 100,000 day laborers and at least 50,000 Jewish factory workers. This was despite the enormous emigration to America. They formed unions, embraced socialist ideology of the Labor Zionist and Bundist varieties. The ordinary worker was disdained by the aristocratic rabbinic Judaism; by the snobbish upper class Haskala Enlightenment; by regular Zionism, which was bourgeois and philanthropic. Yiddishist school systems were organized by the Jewish Workers Bund and some Labor Zionist elements—explicitly secular, but embodying traditional values such as social justice.

Avrom Goldfaden: (1840-1908) Founder of the Modern Yiddish Theater

It was in this setting that 36-year-old Goldfaden began his theatrical career in Jassy, Romania, in 1876. He wrote the first professional plays, music and all, and produced them. He was a folksinger, folk poet, *maskil* trouper, artist, dreamer, intellectual hustler, scrapper, as well as a con man. He succeeded the Broderzinger and corresponded with Sholem Aleichem and Peretz in hoping through drama to elevate the status of Yiddish. His plays were not profound, but touching stirringly lyrical, and comical.

In his play *Shulamis*, the heroine is left with her new-born child and faithfully awaiting her husband's return which occurs after many years of loneliness. Here is his most popular song: *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen*

*In dem beys-hamikdosh, in a vinki kheyder
Zitst di almone, bas tzion aleyh,
Ir ben-yokhidl, yidele, vigt zi k'seyder,
un zingt im tzu shlofn a lidele sheyn:*

*"Unter yideles vigele
Shteyt a klor-vayse tzigele,
Dos tzigele iz geforn handlen
Dos vet zayn dayn beruf;*

Rozhinkes mit mandlen
Shlof-zhe, yidele shlof!

Goldfaden took the audience at its level with a song, some slapstick, a quarrel, a kiss, a jig, and elevated it to a sense of responsibility. Some themes: *Bobe mitn Eynikl*—marriage for prestige gives way to a granddaughter marrying for love; *Shmendrik* and *Tsvey Kunilemls*—forced marriages in *khasidik* families; *Koldunye*, the witch, aimed against witchcraft; a wicked stepmother causes the stepchild Mirele to leave home. Mirele meets up with *Hotsmakh*, a merry wandering peddler who foils the plan; interspersed were songs with everyday characters that included a butcher, a woman selling latkes, and buyers—singing, dancing, and declaiming.

Goldfaden recruited people who became legendary actors both in Europe and in America—including Jacob P. Adler, the dramatic tragedian; Sigmund Mogulescu, the comedian; David Kessler, the most versatile; and Kenni Liptzen, the exciting tragedienne. But Goldfaden found himself in murderous competition with proponents of *shund* (trash theater), who pirated his plots and songs and catered to the lowest popular taste. When Goldfaden came to America, he found that his plays had preceded him, and he was already old hat to the theater audiences.

Theater in America

Initially, the shows were based on the needs of the semi-literate working-class Yiddish families, for their life was *bread and theater*. After many hours of dreary sweatshop labor, Jewish masses flocked to the *shund* presentations with a varied and extensive repertory that was designed to titillate the audiences and was based upon superficial changes in plot. The theater lights were on all of the time so that the attendees would feel free to converse, eat, and identify with what went on by shouting at the actors during the course of the play.

The *star system*, where theaters were owned and managed by the superstars, soon prevailed. Thomashefsky, Kessler, Adler, and Liptzen had their own theaters, competed with each other for casts, and developed followings of fanatic *patriotn*. The many societies based on the towns and cities of European origin—the *landsmanshaften*—depended on additional income from theater tickets to finance sick and death benefits. These organizations, in

addition to the Workmen's Circle / Arbeter Ring branches, bought discounted blocks of tickets.

The Theaters

The Yiddish playhouses were originally places for simple English dramas on the Bowery, and then moved to over a dozen theaters on Second Avenue. The casts dwelt on types: the prima donna, the flirtatious soubrette, a lover, comic, villain, old men, and women character roles. It took some time to overcome the Orthodox prejudice against women acting. A convention that was finally abandoned was the use of Yiddish for low characters and Daytshmerish (Germanism) for noble and prestigious types.

Goldfaden's Contribution

Boris Thomashefsky gave this tribute to Goldfaden in the final and impecunious stage of Goldfaden's life:

"Goldfaden made us comedians, tragedians, playwrights, prima donnas, and soubrettes. If not for him, we'd be plain and simple Jews--cantors, choir singers, wedding jugglers, peddlers, and garment workers."

Jacob Gordin (1853-1909)

Gordin was a revolutionary intellectual. He came to the U.S. in 1891 at the age of 38 with his 8 children. He wrote 35 plays and sought to elevate Yiddish drama with a purer language and serious topics, and with the dramatist in command. He was hailed by Ab Cahan, the editor of the Yiddish Daily *Forverts*, as a welcome change from the popular *shund* theater. Gordin wrote about revolutionists imprisoned in Siberia, took themes from Shakespeare, Gogol, Chekhov, and Ibsen, and transmuted the plots into Yiddish life. *The Yiddish King Lear* has an old, wealthy Jew face the ingratitude of his daughters; *Got Mentsh un Tayvol*, reworks the Faust story: a poor weaver buying a winning lottery ticket from the Devil, becomes a rich exploiting boss in his factory, and then hangs himself in remorse.

Gordin's most famous play, a kind of Yiddish *Queen Lear*, titled *Mirele Efros* starred Esther Kaminska and later her daughter, Ida. It had the will of a matriarch standing up to an avaricious daughter-in-law and her weak son. The famous diary of the self-made Glückl of Hamlin, dating

back to the 17th century, may have been a model for Gordin. I have my own memory of that play put on by Polish Yiddish refugees in WW II Shanghai when I was in the navy. Gordin lost favor by obliterating the Jewish tradition and having actors orate and pontificate from the stage. But the cast *ad libbed* and he himself made some artistic compromises to *feed his family*.

The principal actors; Adler, Thomashefsky, Kessler, Moguescu, and Kenni Liptzen swung between their yearning for a purer Yiddish theater and succumbing to *shund* to make the theater business a going concern. Even the Hebrew Actors Union, which antedated Actors Equity, became a job trust in deference to the star theater owners and their casts. Through auditions they prevented such coming stars as Maurice Schwartz, Jennie Goldstein, and Peysakh Burstein from being admitted. Even Herman Yablokoff, known theatrically as Der Payatz, was initially rejected, but later became the head of the Hebrew Actors Union.

Actors, critics, and producers of the English stage paid profound respect to the Yiddish actors and actresses. The eminent critic Stark Young, found in Yiddish acting

"expressiveness of hands and eyes and shoulders—tremendous and inexhaustible vitality. It has the realism of intense feeling and a deep respect for that feeling. Its best efforts come from a compulsive rendering of that intensity; and the beauty of these effects is a spiritual beauty, almost without appeal to the eye."

Gilbert Seldes, Jed Harris, and John Barrymore expressed similar sentiments.

Toward a Yiddish Art Theater

Beyond Jacob Gordin, there were outstanding literary figures who enriched the quality of Yiddish drama and entered into a race between Yiddish survival in a less and less compact Yiddish-speaking population and its cultural expression. The grandfather of Yiddish literature, Mendele Moykher Sforim; the father, Yitzhok Leyb Peretz; and the grandson, Sholem Aleichem had their plays performed on the Yiddish stage. Mendele wrote of the Meat Tax and Military Conscription. Later a movie starred David Opatoshu in *Fishl der Krumer*; it featured the love of a blind girl for a crippled young man. Peretz wrote more directly for the theater:

- *Shvester* is about 3 young women; a widow with starving children, one who is seduced and made pregnant, and a third whose boyfriend is stolen by the middle sister.
- *Frimorgen* pictures poverty and despair in a slum basement.
- *Kvores-Nakht* deals with an abused wife crying on her mother's grave,
- *Di Goldene Keyt* concerns a rabbi who wants to preserve the very essence of Jewish continuity through the creative device of an eternal *shabes*,
- *Bay Nakht Afn Altn Mark* employs symbolism in the interaction among the ghosts of the past. They include a poet, a streetwalker, and a water-carrier.

Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916)

Among Sholem Aleichem's one-act plays was *Mentshn*, which was set in a wealthy Jewish household, with the servants being abused. In my college days, I worked as a waiter in Rosenblatt's Hotel in the *Borsht Circuit* in the New York Catskills. The owner, Lebke Rosenblatt, was a Yiddishist who staged a play in Yiddish. Since I knew Yiddish from my *Arbeter Ring Shul* days, I acted in *Mentshn*. The word *mentshn* has three meanings—a person, an outstanding human being, a servant. In this play the head of the household castigated his children for their nefarious acts toward the servants. Sholem Aleichem's punch line was, "*Mentshn zaynen oykh mentshn*" (Servants are also people).

Then there is the often-produced *Dos Groyse Gevins*. This is a happy play of a simple tailor whose lifestyle changes when he thinks he won a 200,000-ruble jackpot. Still another is *Shver tsu Zayn a Yid* where two students, a Russian Christian and a Jew trade places for a year. *Fiddler on the Roof*, the successful musical, is derived from *Tevye the Dairyman*.

Sholem Asch (1880-1957)

His reputation, outside Yiddish Theater, was as a novelist.

- *On the Sanctification of the Name* is about martyrdom in a Yiddish stage
- *Kiddush Hashem* in a 17th century Cossack pogrom.
- *Motke Ganef* about the underworld.
- *Uncle Moses* dealt with love and money in the Lower East Side garment trade.

- *G-t Fun Nekome* (G-d of Vengeance) was notorious—dealing with a Jew who owns a whorehouse, is married to a former prostitute, and their daughter who defies the father's effort to save her when she is involved with a lesbian prostitutes.

David Pinski (1872-1959)

The 1903 Kishenev pogrom caused Pinski to write the *Family Tzvi* about a bourgeois family awaiting a pogrom with the patriarchal grandfather confronting his three grandsons who were—a Zionist, a Bundist, and an assimilationist. His *Yankl der Shmid* plot concerns a virile blacksmith who desires his neighbor's wife in addition to his own wife. One of Pinski's plays was translated into English and produced by the Theater Guild—*The Treasure* about a town getting wild with greed and also about a treasure that supposedly was hidden in a cemetery.

H. Leivick (1888-1962)

Maurice Schwartz staged three of Leivick's plays dealing with the clothing business on the East Side—*Shmates, Shop, and Bankrupt*. His *Der Goylem* is set in 17th century Prague, where a rabbi fashions a mechanical man out of clay to defend the Jews against a blood libel. The Golem then turns to the rabbi's daughter, at which point the rabbi reverts the Golem to a heap of clay.

Ossip Dymov (1878-1959)

Yoshke Musikant (adapted by Joseph Buloff) was produced by the Folksbiene Yiddish Theater. The theme has a fiddler who loves a servant girl and wins a fortune in a lottery. He turns the money over to a rival wastrel (a spendthrift) who then betrays him and marries the servant girl. Yoshke commits suicide over his broken heart. *Bronx Express* appeared on Broadway in English. Nahma Sandrow translated it from the Yiddish and made it into a musical.

Peretz Hirshbein (1881-1949)

He wrote of rural Lithuanian Jewish life. In *Grine Felder* a Jewish farmer hires Levi Yitzkhok to tutor his sons. The daughter Tsine tries to prevent him from taking a job with a nearby farmer and wins Levi's hand. Other plays include—*Dem Shmid's Tekhter* and the *Puste Kretshme*.

Anski (1863-1920)

Anski's *Der Dybbuk* was and continues to be one of the most popular Yiddish plays. This play also has been performed in English and Hebrew. It deals with exorcism of a spirit in the bride's original betrothed who dies and afflicts the bride when she turns to a rich suitor.

Maurice Schwartz (1890-1960)

After moving from Irving Place to the original Madison Square Garden, Schwartz amassed funds to build his own theater on Second Avenue and 12th Street. Its greatest successes included J.J. Singer's *Yoshe Kalb*. The actresses were Bina Abramovitch, Jennie Goldstein, Celia Adler, and Berta Gersten. The actors were Jacob Ben-Ami, Lazar Freed, Maurice Schwartz, Muni Weisenfreund (Paul Muni), David Opatashu, and Joseph Buloff.

The Vilne Troupe

This company was made famous by the avante-garde production of the *Dybbuk* in Vilne (Yerushelayim d' Lite). Led by Leyb Kadison, his daughter Luba, and her husband Joseph Buloff, his company achieved world-wide recognition. It arrived in New York's competitive theater in the late 20's and was pulled in many directions by rival companies. After Muni Weisenfreund left Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, Buloff took his place, acting in such classics as *Three Cities* by Sholem Asch, and I.J. Singer's *Yoshe Kalb* and *The Brothers Ashkenazi*.

Buloff's ability as an actor resulted in his joining the English stage where he appeared as the Greek landlord in *My Sister Eileen*, the peddler in Oklahoma, and in Arthur Miller's *The Price*. He also acted in a Yiddish version of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. He held one man shows with readings from Chekhov and delightful humorous pieces by Lutsky (*A Piece of Paper Driven by the Wind*, and *A Pot of Bubbling Soup*).

Yiddish Comedy

Yiddish comedy was an important phase, of Yidish theater, but some of it descended to *shund*. Ludwig Satz, Aaron Lebedeff, and Peysakh Burstein were outstanding followers after Sigmind Mogulescu in their use of mime—a variety of vocal expression, facial plasticity, and body language to caricature a character. Last in this male line was Menashe

Skulnik—the perfect Shlemil and Shmendrik. The diminutive Molly Picon stands out all by herself, in her ability to sing, dance, turn cartwheels, and sparkle as a gymnast. All of the comedians were capable of acting more serious roles if called upon.

ARTEF

ARTEF was a politicized Yiddish art theater. It is the acronym for Arbeter Teater Farband (Workers' Theater Union), a group tied to the Jewish sector of the American Communist Party. Existing in the glow of the Moscow Art Theater of Stanislavsky and the great Yiddish actor-producer Shlomo Mikhoels (later murdered by Stalin along with Soviet Yiddish writers), ARTEF drew a following under the direction of Benno Schneider. The Yiddish plays had expressionistic staging and adapted some standard Yiddish plays with a party-line twist. Many Broadway actors came to ARTEF performances. David Opatashu got his start there and appeared in movies and on Broadway. Jules Dassin, who was associated later with the great Greek actress Melina Mercouri, also was a product of ARTEF.

Music & Dance

Much of the music for the Second Avenue Yiddish theaters came from the pens of Abraham Ellstein, Joseph Rumshinsky, Alexander Olshanetsky, and Sholem Secunda. Secunda composed *Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn*, and in the depression years sold it for 15 dollars! Many plays had choreographed dance developed by Binyumin Zemach, Felix Feibush, and Pearl Lang.

Yiddish Theater Today

Despite the growing number of vinklen and Yiddish courses at universities and at Workmen's Circle, as well as well-attended outdoor Yiddish festivals, the Yiddish theater leads a tenuous existence.

There are a number of small Yiddish theater companies that pop in and out of existence, but the most prominent theatrical organization is the Folksbiene—National Yiddish Theater. It was founded in 1915 as a branch of the Workmen's Circle, with amateur actors and actresses and has performed continuously since then, in various

venues including the Forward Building, the Central Synagogue on East 55th Street, and the Baruch College Playhouse.

This year the Folksbiene has celebrated its 100th birthday by sponsoring a massive international festival called Kultur-Fest; and at the same time, it has secured a permanent theatrical home through a merger with the prestigious Museum of Jewish Heritage in Battery Park, New York City, whose lovely theater is now its locus for presentations of all kinds.

The enlarged and revitalized National Yiddish Theater—Folksbiene puts on a large number of dramas, musicals, and concerts throughout America each year, sponsors competitions for new plays, and conducts dramatic training for new young actors. It begins to look as if Yiddish theater in America has a bright and growing future. That is only proper since Yiddish theater is an expression on Yiddish culture that is too important a part of historical Jewishness to disappear into nostalgic oblivion.

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Professor Israel Kugler's Biography

Professor. Israel Kugler was Professor Emeritus in Social Science, The City University of New York. He graduated from *Elementar shul* and *Mitlshul* of the Workmen's Circle, and later was elected President of the Workmen's Circle from 1980-84 and was on its National Executive Board. He was graduated from City College of New York (CCNY), served in the U.S. Navy during World War II, and later returned to earn his Ph.D. at New York University.

At City College he was the Organizer of the Yipsels (Young Peoples Socialist League). He organized unions of college and university faculty at the Fashion Institute of Technology, Nassau Community College, and Westchester Community College. As an officer of the United Federation of Teachers, and President of the United Federation of College Teachers. In the 1960s he led a year and a half strike by faculty members at St. John's University.

Along with Dr. Beller Zeller, in 1972, Kugler brought two rivaling organizations together. They agreed to merger and created the Professional Staff Congress. The congress today represents more than 25,000 faculty and staff members of the City University of New York—the nation's largest, oldest and most visible urban public university.

His wife Helen Barkan and he moved to Chevy Chase, MD. Where he died on October 1, 2007 at the age of 90.

Prof.. Kugler's book — *From Ladies to Women: The Organized Struggle for Women's Rights in the Reconstruction Era*. Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1987. ISBN 0-313-25239-4

Prof. Kugler's articles were published in the:

Labor's Heritage
Changing Education
Journal of Educational Psychology
Labor Heritage
Labor History

Editor's note: Iz Kugler and his wife Helen were dear friends. Our friendship began when our views were very similar at the Workmen's Circle Executive Board Meetings. Coming from outside of the long-time inner circle, my opinions were not taken seriously. Iz and Helen befriended me and for my eight years on the Board, they often sided with the "newcomer."

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