

ENGLISH ABSTRACTS

YIDDISH THEATER AS AN ARTISTIC INFRASTRUCTURE
OF HEBREW THEATER

A New Perspective on Theater Directors in the Yishuv Period

Dorit Yerushalmi

Although the development of professional theater in Hebrew ran parallel to the development of Yiddish theater, the latter was considered marginal in the historiography of Hebrew Theater. Needless to say, Yiddish theater is not only distinct from Hebrew theater in terms of language, but carries with it, as well, the “other” of the “new” culture. This article sets out to deconstruct the classification of a “Diaspora repertoire”, a definition widely used in the early research discourse on Hebrew theater during the Yishuv period, by means of a discussion of the productions of prominent directors who worked during this period. The personal and professional story of Baruch Tchemerinsky, Zwi Friedland and Moshe Halevi began in Eastern Europe, was nurtured in Habima Studio in Moscow and fulfilled in Palestine. The Yiddish theater repertoire was not chosen randomly. Rather, it was a conscious choice made by theater practitioners, who perceived Yiddish theater culture as a basis for a dynamic and effective Hebrew theater. The retrieval of Yiddish theater from the archives of Hebrew theater does not assume to tell its story. Instead, it aims to examine its function as an artistic infrastructure for Hebrew theater, and helps us understand the directors’ various approaches to infrastructure material and the diverse voices resounding through their performances.

THE STRUGGLE FOR A YIDDISH REPERTOIRE THEATER
IN ISRAEL (1950-1952)

Rachel Rojanski

The Goldfaden Yiddish Theater was established in Tel-Aviv – Yafo at the end of 1950 by new immigrants actors, and after it closed down there was no regular Yiddish repertoire theater in Israel until the late 1980s. The Goldfaden Theater was established to meet the immediate needs of actors who wanted to return to the stage but were unable, at that time, to become part of the Hebrew theater establishment. At the same time, it also provided for the needs of its audiences. However, the Goldfaden Theater was caught up in the vortex of the stormy early years of Israel's existence, and while its history embodied the struggle of Yiddish in the new state, it also reflected the dilemmas of evolving Israeli culture and the way in which new immigrants contended with the clash between their old and new cultures.

This article presents the history of the Goldfaden Theater as a reflection of the condition and status of Yiddish and Yiddish speakers in Israel in the early 1950s. It deals with the conflicts into which it was drawn, and aspires to ascertain how Yiddish culture was received in Israel in those years.

The pivotal question of this article is: why did the Goldfaden Theater fail just as it managed to overcome the obstacles set by the state, after it won its court battles and was legally able to perform without obstruction? Why was it precisely then that the theater was forced to close down and its company of actors to disperse?

My claim is that, paradoxically, although it was the limitations imposed upon performances in Yiddish that consolidated the Goldfaden Theater troupe, and perhaps even strengthened it, the Israeli society that was emerging in the early 1950s did not feel a need for a Yiddish theater that concentrated on the classic repertoire in Eastern Europe

between the two world wars. In the socio-cultural world of a society of new immigrants from Eastern Europe, as was Israeli society to a great degree in the early 1950s, there was no chance that a theater of this type would survive for any length of time, and its early closure was foredoomed.

THE VILNA TROUPE
PROLOGUE TO THE HISTORY OF *HABIMA*

Shelly Zer-Zion

Habima was perceived in the historiography of Hebrew theater, not only as the first Zionist and Hebrew professional theater, but also as the first Jewish art theater that rebelled against the performative traditions of popular Yiddish theater. Theater historians celebrated the involvement of Constantine Stanislavsky in the early days of *Habima* and argued that it expressed modernist Jewish issues in artistic and complex ways.

The Vilna Troupe was an innovative Yiddish theater founded in Vilna two years before *Habima*, in 1916. The troupe set new artistic, cultural and organizational standards in the world of Jewish theater. It was the first troupe to create high standard art theater performances based on a repertoire of highly esteemed literary plays. It was the first Jewish theater to incorporate the working model of the actors' ensemble and the theater director. Moreover, this troupe drew its inspiration from the Moscow Art Theater and the performance style of Stanislavsky. It was the first theater to premiere S. An-ski's *The Dybbuk*, a year before *Habima*. It gained international acclaim for this performance, setting new artistic standards in Jewish theater. *The Vilna Troupe* was a wandering troupe, centered in Warsaw. In 1921-22 it embarked on lengthy European tours. *Habima* followed exactly the same path, leaving Moscow in 1926, and touring Europe, the United States and Palestine until 1931.

Recalling the story of *The Vilna Troupe* enlightens the cultural traditions and the organizational and artistic patterns according to which *Habima* was shaped. It thus enables us to estimate the artistic and ideological innovations of *Habima* more accurately.

PURIM RAV – A ONE-DAY THEATER

Ariela Krasney

This essay examines a unique Jewish theatrical phenomenon – a standup performance in the form of a “derasha” – held during the Purim meal. This practice, called “Purim Rav”, can be found today in many “yeshives” in Israel and especially in the United States.

A “yeshive bokher”, usually one of the best “talmidim”, is chosen as a “Purim Rav”. He is allowed to turn religious subjects into parodies and jokes. Moreover, he criticizes important personalities of the “yeshive”, for example, the “Rosh Yeshive” or teachers, and uses vulgar language and mockery. The article shows that the common attitude toward this practice and other Purim celebrations is one of ambivalence.

The Purim celebrations are based on the tension between two co-existing sides of life: the framework of halakhic commandments, whose source is the strict system of Jewish law, and the carnivalesque side, which sets out to break the laws and is defined in “Megilat Ester” by the words “ve’nahafokh hu”.

The “Purim Rav” found himself in a very interesting and challenging situation. Being a most authoritative preacher, his audience could do nothing but listen to him.

Beneath the surface moved desires, impulses, envy and hatred. These emotions were the basis for many literary pieces of art in various genres: stories, plays, poems, folksongs and

jokes, all reflecting a bitter and complicated conflict between the honoured “Rosh Yeshive” and his chosen “Purim Rav”, between teachers and their “Yeshive talmidim” and between the “yeshive bokherim” and their friends.

These loaded emotions play a very important role in literature and are reflected in humor, laughter and suspense.

THE PLAYS OF PERETZ MARKISH
Balancing between “Jewish” and “Soviet”

Ber Boris Kotlerman

Serious problems confronting Soviet Jewish State Theaters (GOSETs) during the period when social realism was taking root in Soviet art were partially voiced for the first time at the first All-Union Conference of Jewish Theater Workers held in Moscow at the end of December 1933. Some of the questions posed were: how to reflect the enormous changes taking place in the country; how to present Jewish workers in new conditions in which the *shtetl*-like way of life has broken down and a new Jewish village is being built; how to resist non-Communist movements such as Zionism or the Bund. But a more serious and complicated problem was: how to avoid violating the fundamental principles of social realism (art should be socialist in content and nationalist in form); how to remain “national in form” without sliding towards “national content”.

This article poses the question: how did Yiddish theater in the USSR manage to adjust itself to this paradoxical equation? The answer can be found by analysing Soviet Jewish plays, especially those staged after 1934. The works of Peretz Markish (1895-1952) are of particular interest. His plays were written not only for the Yiddish-speaking audience but for the Soviet audience as a whole and were often staged by leading Russian-language theaters, in addition to the Yiddish ones.

The article examines three of Markish's plays: "The Ovadis Family" (1937), "Feast" (1938) and "Uprising in the Ghetto" (1945). Markish's creative approach and his understanding of social realism enabled him to construct an ideologically consistent framework (socialist content) with an inherent Jewish ethos (national form). Markish did not regard the Jewish ethos as an end in itself but rather as a means for handling universal problems. His use of cultural codes defines in many respects the complex relationship between "form" and "content" in Soviet Yiddish drama in the 1930-40s.

THEATER AND POLITICS

The Debate in the Warsaw Jewish Press Regarding
Itzik Manger's Adaptation of the "Kishef-makherin" (1937)

Nathan Cohen

This article discusses the public debate that followed Itzik Manger's adaptation of Avrom Goldfaden's play "Kishef-makherin". The question was raised whether or not Manger had the right to rewrite Goldfaden's play, adding his own personal message. The debate deteriorated into a dispute marked by sharp personal slander and political antagonism.

YIDDISH THEATER IN VIENNA AND ITS CRITICS

Thomas Soxberger

In Vienna there existed a lively Yiddish theater scene from about 1900 until 1938. This article concentrates on contemporary perceptions of this theater and discussions on its qualities and shortcomings. Yiddish theater in Vienna was often perceived as amusement for the lower classes and its low quality and commercialism were deplored. Behind this

call for quality and the repeated calls for a reform of the Yiddish theater from Yiddish intellectuals, we find a cultural agenda that had been formulated by Nathan Birnbaum, who had a strong influence on several generations of Yiddishist intellectuals in Vienna. According to his belief, the better Jewish theater in Yiddish was to play the role of a cultural institution, which would serve to advance a Jewish cultural renaissance and to place Jewish high culture on an equal footing with other national cultures.

YIDDISH AT THE CROSSROADS: BIALIK,
PERETZ AND SUTZKEVER

Moshe Goultshin

At the beginning of the twentieth century the status of Yiddish changed, from the language of masses of Yiddish speakers in Central and Eastern Europe to a language of secular creation, an aesthetic language having a different perspective, modern and secular. This revolution was also involved with an intermediate stage of creativity in Hebrew, through the encounter between Bialik and Y. L. Peretz that occurred on the editorial board of *Hashiloah* in Warsaw. The work with which we identify this turning point in the status of Yiddish is *V' Im Yishal ha-Malakh* (Should the Angel Ask), which is both a turning point and possibly even a point of decision and crisis in Peretz's work.

The poem *V' Im Yishal ha-Malakh* concludes a group of love-songs by Bialik, which also include *Ayekh* and *Tziporet*. These poems were written in the wake of a semi-serious love affair that took place in 1904 during Bialik's vacation in the town of Merozi. A central motif common to all these poems is the cloud. In *Ayekh*, the poet's object of love is compared to a bright cloud that ascends from between the pages of the Talmud in answer to his prayer, Only you, only you. The

small cloud continues to hover in the distant heights of the world of *Tziporet*, but only reaches its full, multi-faceted significance in *V' Im Yishal ha-Malakh*. The source of this motif is Elijah's encounter on Mount Carmel. This poem constitutes one of the most representative examples of the new aesthetic-linguistic strategy that this paper wishes to examine, for whose creation at that time, Bialik, in his works, and Peretz in *Di goldene keyt* (Golden Chain), are responsible.

At the basis of these two literary occasions, that of Bialik and of Peretz, lies one basic pattern that questions the tension between the sacred and the aesthetic. In Bialik's *V' Im Yishal ha-Malakh*, the aesthetic and the sacred serve as two levels with a rift between them, serving as a tension of inspiration on the one hand, and of polarity and rejection, on the other. Within this rift the poem itself is to be found. In his short story *Three Gifts* (Dray matones), Peretz presents a similar dual-layered structure of inspiration and polarity within which the work functions – a structure that will mature in Peretz's final version of *Di goldene keyt*.

The cloud in Bialik is both a development of the cloud of doubt in Peretz as well as its solution: Eros takes the place of naive faith. The dove is no longer the symbol of loyal faith, but represents the quest for Eros, a sign of the hidden structural process of divorce of the aesthetic from the sacred. The sheaves of the light of faith in *Di goldene keyt* are replaced by rays of a golden ray of compassion that leads the child-like soul of the poet to the gates of death of another type, a death-rattle "in the womb of dead letters" of "a holy page of Talmud". Bialik's move in this work is seemingly opposite to that described in Peretz's *Di goldene keyt*, but in practice it does nothing more than to draw the theological conclusion, and by extension also the aesthetic conclusion, of what was already present in Peretz's work. In this paper we then go on to trace the development of this aesthetic-ethical conclusion up until Sutzkever's *Ode tsu der toyb* (Ode to the Dove).

THREE KUNI LEMLS

Donny Inbar

Written and first performed in the late 1870's, Abraham Goldfaden's comedy *Der fanatic oder di beyde Kuni-Lemls* was to become the ultimate anti-Hasidic theater piece, one of the last Maskilic plays that faithfully adhered to the matrix of the Jewish enlightenment satirical plays, starting with the late eighteenth century German pieces in Yiddish-German-Hebrew. Shortly after *Two Kuni Lemls* gained its popularity, both Jewish Haskalah and Yiddish theater changed their ideological and stylistic course and took a more nationalistic path. *Two Kuni Lemls* became, thus, the last gem in a long line of anti-religious light plays. It was also to gain a rich stage afterlife.

A hilarious comedy of errors that is also a harsh satire on the struggle between fanatics and the enlightened, between arranged marriages and free romantic love, and between the beauty of the self-emancipated and the hideous ugliness and deformity of the adherents to Hasidism, *Two Kuni Lemls* was a perfect specimen of the first generation of Jewish/Yiddish plays.

Three Kuni Lemls will present and compare three twentieth century adaptations of the play, in three languages and on three continents: *Trupe Tanentsap* (Yiddish) in Poland of the 1930's, *Shnei Kuni Leml* (Hebrew) in Israel of the 1950's-60's and *Kuni Leml* (English) in the United States, 1980's. In order to survive, each of the renditions of Goldfaden's classic had to relinquish at least one of the play's key components. Against all odds, the comedy not only survived, but even thrived when shedding its foundations to the constraints of post-shtetl, post-Holocaust politically correct rules.