

Survey of Jewish Theater and Film

Jewish Theater

Jewish theater is a term that is somewhat ambiguous. In the beginning the term “Jewish Theater” meant theater acts that were performed in Yiddish but it has come to also mean theater acts performed in other languages as well. Even though Yiddish is a dying language Jewish theater still presents acts that use the traditional Yiddish language. Isaac Bashevis Singer observed:

“Yiddish may be a dying language but it is the only language I know well. Yiddish is my mother language and a mother is never really dead.”¹

Abraham Goldfaden, a Ukranian Jew, founded the first professional Yiddish language theater troupe in Romania in 1876. This troupe found success in Bucharest, Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Germany, and cities with large Ashkenazi Jewish populations – such as New York City. Between 1890 and 1940 there were over a dozen Yiddish theater troupes in New York City alone performing original plays, musicals, and Yiddish translations of theatrical works and even operas. The most famous Yiddish language play is Ansky’s *The Dybbuk* from 1919.²

From the time of the Emancipation of European Jews through pre-World War II Jews were very active in European theater. After World War II and the reconstruction of Europe many Jews once again became involved in European theater.² According to Paul Johnson, “The area where Jewish influence was strongest was the theater, especially in Berlin. Playwrights ... and producers ... appeared at times to dominate the stage, which tended to be modishly left-wing, pro-republican, experimental and sexually daring. But it was certainly not revolutionary, and it was cosmopolitan rather than

Jews.”³ Jews in Vienna, Paris, and Germany founded cabaret which was both a popular and effective means of expression. The involvement of Jews in theater in Central Europe was halted during the rise of the Nazis to power and the purge of Jews from various posts. Many Jews however emigrated to Western Europe or the Americas and continued working in the theater.²

Almost three-and-a-half million Jews immigrated to America between 1881 and 1925. Most of these Jews came from Eastern Europe and settled along the Northeast coast of America. Yiddish theater was a draw for these Yiddish-speaking Jews. The theater was a place where all classes of Jews and Jewish religious denominations could mingle. In the early days Yiddish theaters – such as People’s, Thalia, and Windsor – had performances on weekends and Jewish holidays. Eventually Yiddish theater spread out from New York into other cities such as Boston, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Eventually with the decline of Yiddish and the influx of immigrants Yiddish theater began to decline.¹

Those interested in Jewish theater today have many options. There are theaters not only in the Northeast of America but also in the Midwest (i.e. Detroit and Chicago), the South (i.e. Georgia), and the West (i.e. Arizona). Menachem Wecker observes: “Throughout the past century, Jews have participated in the theatre as managers, directors, playwrights, actors, characters, and audience members. Initially, the Yiddish theatre managed to be Jewish simply by using the Jewish language of Yiddish. With the decline of Yiddish, Jewish artists found ways to explore Judaism and their Jewish identities. In recent years, theatregoers interested in Jewish themes have enjoyed a variety of options of explicitly Jewish plays.”¹

Modern Hebrew theater began with the development of the Modern Hebrew language. Modern Hebrew theater is also connected to the Jewish national renaissance movement in the 20th century. According to Orna ben-Meir:

“The historical awareness and the sense of primacy which accompanied the Hebrew theatre in its early years dictated the course of its artistic and

aesthetic development. The Book of Books was the literary document which combined national revival with the revival of Hebrew culture in the Land of Israel, and was therefore the ideal natural source material for Hebrew plays in the initial years, as well as a suitable starting point for the new culture coalescing in the Land of Israel."⁴

Common themes in Modern Hebrew theater include the Shoah (Holocaust), Arab-Israeli conflict, what it means to be a Jew, and contemporary secular-religious tensions within Israel. HaBima ("the stage") is the most well-known Hebrew theater company and is Israel's nation theater.²

Jewish Film

During the time the Yiddish theater was a major force in the theatrical world over 100 films were also made in Yiddish. Unfortunately many of these films are now lost. These films included *Shulamith* (1931), *His Wife's Lover* (1931), *The Wandering Jew* (1933), *Lang ist der Weg* (1948), and *God, Man and Devil* (1950).² The movie industry was put together almost entirely by Jews. At the end of the 1890's poor immigrant Jews combined cinema with the amusement arcade. By 1900 New York had over 1,000 arcades and about 50 of them also included nickelodeons. In 1908 there were 400 nickelodeons and they were spreading across the north into other cities. The movies made for these nickelodeons were silent and since many immigrants did not understand English this fact alone made the nickelodeon an immigrant art-form. This was the ideal setting for the Jewish enterprise of cinema.³

In the early years the Jews themselves were generally not involved with the inventive and creative sides of the cinema. They were mostly relegated to being owners and operators of arcades and nickelodeons. However, Sigmund Lublin joined other patent-owners to form Patent Company which was the beginning of the Jews leading the cinema industry, not on the east coast, but in California. Most of the early Jewish men involved in the cinema were poor and either immigrants or offspring of new immigrants.³ These entrepreneurs included Samuel Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, the Warner Brothers, David O. Selznick, Marcus Loew, and Adolph Zukor.²

“When they [Hollywood rulers] gave a haven in the 1930s to the Jewish diaspora from the German movie industry, they tried to impose on it a spirit of conformity. It was their own form of assimilationism. Like the Jews who rationalized the retail trade in the eighteenth century and created the first big stores in the nineteenth, they served the customer. ‘If the audience don’t like a picture,’ Goldwyn said, ‘they have a good reason. The public is never wrong.’”³

In recent time Jewish producers, directors, and cinematic artists include such notables as Michael Ovitz, Michael Eisner, Lew Wasserman, Jeffrey Katzenberg, Steven Spielberg, and David Geffen. However it must be noted that few of these people bring specifically Jewish sensibility to cinema or their choice of subject matter – the exception to this is Spielberg. According to Eric Hobsbawm:

“It would be just as pointless to look for consciously Jewish elements in the songs of Irving Berlin or the Hollywood movies of the era of the great studios, all of which were run by immigrant Jews: their object, in which they succeeded, was precisely to make songs or films which found a specific expression for 100 per cent Americanness.”⁵

“A more specifically Jewish sensibility can be seen in the films of the Marx Brothers, Mel Brooks, or Woody Allen; other examples of specifically Jewish films from the Hollywood film industry are the Barbra Streisand vehicle *Yentl* (1983), or John Frankenheimer's *The Fixer* (1968).”²

*Additional Resources:

+Yiddish Theater: A Love Story (Part I) -

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=El_OU7Wfrsg

+Yiddish Theater: A Love Story (Part II) -

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9b_3K0IDr4k

+Yiddish Theater: A Love Story (Part III) -

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vmb_MQEk7Yg

+Belgium: The Jewish Theater is Playing -

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ah-ssanmB-A>
+Witness Theater - <http://vimeo.com/66738579>
+Jewish Theatrical Play: Stories of I. L. Peretz - <http://vimeo.com/45736383>

+Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive -
<http://www.spielbergfilmarchive.org.il/>
+History of Yiddish Cinema (Part I) -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wwdhylniAQ>
+History of Yiddish Cinema (Part II) -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JNp9YZDxec>
+History of Yiddish Cinema (Part III) -
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBmru2u_K7o
+History of Yiddish Cinema (Part IV) -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9JenUZ1eVU>
+History of Yiddish Cinema (Part V) -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSf-pCfVd7M>
+The Wandering Jew (1933 – clip) -
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGmbD1DnjTI>
+Dybuk (1937 – German) - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6i1g7K3sx5c>

¹Menachem Wecker. American Jewish Theatre. My Jewish Learning, n.d.
[http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Theatre_and_Dance/Theatre/America.shtml?p=0]

²“Jewish Culture.” wikipedia.org. Wikipedia, n.d.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secular_Jewish_culture]

³Paul Johnson. *A History of the Jews*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1987. (pp. 463-465, 479)

⁴Orna ben-Meir. *Biblical Thematics in Stage Design for the Hebrew Theatre*. All About Jewish Theatre, n.d. [http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article_display.aspx?articleID=714]

⁵Eric Hobsbawm. *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2003.
[<http://books.google.com/books?id=y2gyK5PxNB8C&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>]

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