

# Yiddish Theatre



The Yiddish Theatre District, also called the Jewish Rialto and the Yiddish Realto, was the center of New York City's Yiddish theatre scene in the early 20th century. It was located primarily on Second Avenue. The District hosted performances in Yiddish of Jewish, Shakespearean, classic, and original plays, comedies, operettas, and dramas, as well as vaudeville, burlesque, and musical shows

Modern Yiddish theater began with the work of Avrom Goldfajn, who has been canonized as the "father of the Yiddish theater." Collaborating with the Broder singer Yisroel Grodner (1841–1887), Goldfajn founded the first professional Yiddish theater company in Iași (Jassy), Romania, in 1876. Goldfajn's companies attracted young meshorerim (singers), badkhnim (jesters), shop attendants, servant girls, and artisans' apprentices, who traded their small-town lives for those of "wandering stars" (blondzhende shtern), as Sholem Aleichem dubbed them ("vagabond stars" in Nahma Sandrow's felicitous translation). Goldfajn's first productions were farces directed against the forces of so-called backwardness. Increasingly Goldfajn turned to historical melodramas. Large-scale, miracle-filled spectacle, purim-shpil writ large, frames the action in these plays. Angels wield fiery swords, spirits materialize amid "Bengal lights," pilgrims crowd the temple steps in Jerusalem and a wedding is celebrated in front of the altar; there are lions, battles, and massacres. No less important were the eclectic melodies that Goldfajn adapted for his plays. As the writer Yankev Dinezon pointed out, it was less the case that Goldfajn's songs were composed for the theater than that the entire Yiddish theater was created for the songs.

Goldfajn's legacy was the creation of a theatrical tradition. Fifty years after their debut, Goldfajn's plays were still being staged in their original versions; a director would encounter opposition even to an attempt to move a table

from its "traditional" location, which had attained the status of what one observer called "a Torah from Sinai." Along with his melodies, Goldfajn's characters—less individuals than types—moved beyond the stage and into the everyday cultural lexicon of several generations of Jews.

The Hebrew Actors' Union (HAU) was a craft union for actors in Yiddish theater in the United States (primarily in New York City), and was the first actors' union in the United States. The union was affiliated with the Associated Actors and Artistes of America of the AFL-CIO. The Hebrew Actors' Union was officially founded in 1899 by Jewish labor leader Joseph Baroness, who had been sent by the United Hebrew Trades to aid striking actors at the People's Theatre. The Union was closely associated from its beginning with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and with the general and Jewish labor movement. A 1925 article in *The New York Times* described the union as having, at that time, "over three hundred" members, and notes that it has, "not only placed all of its members in good positions, but [that] it has also granted many privileges to non-members..." It also notes that, "A great many members of the union are American-born and all of them are thoroughly Americanized." The union represented "performers (except musicians) who are engaged in the field of Hebrew or Yiddish Language Theater."



Yiddish theater was at the height of its popularity in the 1920s and even into the 1930s, when Yiddish theater attendance had already started to decrease, the Union claimed a robust membership and there was enough of an audience to maintain quite a few Yiddish theaters throughout the country. A variety of factors, including the Great Depression, the continued acculturation of the American Jewish population and the movement of Jewish audiences towards Broadway and motion pictures and the lack of new audiences that accompanied the end of immigration combined to erode the audience for the Yiddish theater. Theaters began to close, theatrical seasons were cut short and several of the biggest stars of the Yiddish theater left for the non-Yiddish stage or Hollywood.

The Golubok company was the first to arrive in the United States, in 1882, at the start of the great wave of Jewish immigration. Their prima donna was a Madame Sara Krantsfeld. Sophie Karp and many other actors came shortly afterward. For a decade and more, most American Yiddish actors were immigrants, as were their audiences, but Yiddish theater was so new that many who were born in Europe made their debuts in the new land. Others started careers in the Old Country and then immigrated; by 1900, talent scouts were aggressively importing actors whose reputations had arrived at Ellis Island along with other news from home.

Most of the qualities associated with Yiddish actors were already clear in the 1880s. Theatergoers favored fiery temperament and emotionalism in drama, and "quicksilver" energy in comedy, for female and male actors alike. As the theater acquired serious playwrights and discriminating audiences, truthfulness and sensitivity became highly valued. Types, in the styles of the period, included queenly lovers, strong heroines, glamorous villainesses, saucy soubrettes, and devoted mammas. And since music was interpolated in most shows, even including serious straight dramas, a good singing voice was also important.

## THE DYBBUK

*The Dybbuk* is a play by S. Ansky, authored between 1913 and 1916. It was originally written in Russian and later translated into Yiddish by Ansky himself. *The Dybbuk* had its world premiere in that language, performed by the Vilna Troupe at Warsaw in 1920. A Hebrew version was prepared by Hayim Nahman Bialik, and staged at Habima Theater, Moscow in 1922.

In 1922, Evgeny Vakhtangov directed a production of *The Dybbuk* by An-sky (real name S.A. Rapaport) for the Habimah theater troupe. Although the play was performed in Hebrew, which Vakhtangov did not know, he was able (with the help of the Jewish artist Natan Altman) to create a stunning production of this unusual play.

This quintessential Yiddish tale of desire, darkness and exiled spirits tells the story of love caught between two worlds, and a community torn between religion, superstition and spiritualism. Two children, betrothed by their parents before birth, are drawn together years later in a desperate web of ill-fated love and possession.

After traveling between Jewish shtetls (villages) in Russia and the Ukraine, playwright S. Ansky took what he had learned about dybbuk folklore and wrote a play titled "The Dybbuk." Written in 1914, the play was eventually turned into a Yiddish-language film in 1937, with some variations to the storyline. In the film, two men promise that their unborn children will marry. Years later, one father forgets his promise and betroths his daughter to the son of a wealthy man. Eventually the friend's son comes along and falls in love with the daughter. When he learns that they can never marry, he invokes mystical forces that kill him and his spirit becomes a dybbuk that possesses the bride-to-be.

Between 1912 and 1913, S. Ansky headed an ethnographic commission, financed by Baron Vladimir Günzburg and named in honor his father Horace Günzburg, which traveled through Podolia and Volhynia in the Pale of Settlement. They documented the oral traditions and customs of the native Jews, whose culture was slowly disintegrating under the pressure of modernity. According to his assistant Samuel Schreier-Shrira, Ansky was particularly impressed by the stories he heard in Miropol of a local sage, the hasidic rebbe Samuel of Kaminka-Miropol (1778 – May 10, 1843), who was reputed to have been a master exorcist of dybbuk spirits. Samuel served as the prototype for the character Azriel, who is also said to reside in that town. Historian Nathaniel Deutsch suggested he also drew inspiration from the Maiden of Ludmir, who was also rumored to have been possessed, thus explaining her perceived inappropriate manly behavior.

Because the Yiddish public was passionate about theater, they generally were aware of actors' private lives, including romances, which were matters of comment in theater columns and critiques in the press. Although respectable families were not pleased if their daughters went on the stage, actors committed to intellectual or political ideals were highly respected by the intelligentsia, and for the community at large the presence of actors lent dash and style to café life. Actors, like other performers, customarily contracted for one night a season to be played for their own benefit. In this practice, not unique to Yiddish theater, the performer picked and cast the play. On these benefit nights, the house might be filled with an actor's enthusiastic fans, and the box office take came to a significant yearly bonus. She might also receive gifts in addition to money profits.

Ester-Rokhl Kaminska, a seamstress from an impoverished shtetl, along with her husband, Avrom-Yitshok Kaminski, had organized Yiddish companies that toured the Russian Empire in the 1890s. In 1905 they returned to Warsaw and amid the new freedom discovered a new kind of repertoire. These were the plays of Jacob Gordin (1853–1909) that had become the sensation of the New York Yiddish theater. Gordin's melodramas, the first attempt on the Yiddish stage to mirror contemporary social reality, were filled with powerful roles, especially for women. Ester-Rokhl Kaminska took on a succession of such roles, most famously, that of Mirele Efros, the "Jewish Queen Lear." These performances led to her adoration by huge audiences for whom she became the "mother of the Yiddish theater."

After World War I, no longer ruled by multinational empires and no longer subject, as in Russia, to a host of restrictions, Jews found themselves citizens either of modern nation-states or of the newly created Soviet Union. In Poland during the interwar years, Yiddish companies, professional and amateur, performed in more than 400 cities and towns. In Romania, two Yiddish theaters performed in Bucharest, two in Cernauiți (Czernowitz), and one in Iași; numerous smaller cities and towns entertained visiting troupes. In the Soviet Union, unprecedented state funding supported a network of Yiddish theaters.

Even before the end of the war, wherever Germans or Austrians replaced Russian authorities, restrictions on Jewish life were eased. This was the case in German-occupied Vilna in 1916, where a group of idealistic young amateurs received permission to perform theater professionally. In contrast to the norms of contemporary Yiddish theater with its "star" system, they organized themselves cooperatively and favored ensemble performances. The new company's productions of plays by Sholem Asch, Sholem Aleichem, Perets Hirshbeyn, David Pinski, Y. L. Peretz, and others were acclaimed by the Jewish intelligentsia. In 1917, most of the company, now known as the Vilner Troupe (Vilna Troupe) relocated to Warsaw. There, on 9 December 1920, they opened a play that was to change the course of Yiddish theater history: S. An-ski's *Tsvishn tsvey velt: Der dibek* (Between Two Worlds: *The Dybbuk*).



Originally intended as an act of homage to its author, who had just died, the Vilner Troupe's *Dybbuk* blazed an unexpected and astounding path: from the Warsaw stage to the cities and towns of Eastern Europe, and then into the repertoires of Yiddish companies throughout the world. Translated into a dozen languages, it became the accredited emissary of Jewish theater art to the world at large. Crucial to this development was the Hebrew production by the Habimah company, which premiered in Moscow in 1922 and was then performed by Habimah on numerous world tours. Hailed as a Jewish mystery play (misterium) spun out of slow, solemn, ritualized speech and gesture and nigunim taken from Hasidic traditions, *The Dybbuk* inspired an unprecedented kind of frenzy. For more than a year, rich and poor, secular and Orthodox, assimilationists and nationally minded Jews, as well as good numbers of Poles, streamed into the Elizeum Theater in Warsaw, in the words of one journalist, "to sit quietly together and watch the stage with bated breath."

With *The Dybbuk*, the Vilner Troupe demonstrated that Yiddish theater was capable of producing world-class art. This example laid the foundation for the development during the interwar period of a Yiddish dramatic theater of very high caliber.

