From the shtetl to the screen: The development of Yiddish theatre in performance

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ABSTRACT

From the Shtetl to the Screen: The Development of Yiddish Theatre in Performance

by

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This submission comprises a survey of Jewish drama as expressed through Yiddish Theatre in performance. It explores the origins, early trends, and significant works of Yiddish drama. The reader will gain an understanding of the ways in which the Jewish religion guided the emergence of Yiddish Theatre, the heights of achievement in the form, the decline of Yiddish Theatre, and some of the influences such development has had on the theatre world today.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this work to my grandfather William Grushow who had a hundred dirty jokes up his sleeve and was always quick to tell me they were funnier in Yiddish and to Davey Marlin-Jones who helped me appreciate the wonder of that.
CHAPTER 1

ORIGINS AND RELIGIOUS RESTRICTIONS

Once there was a shining tower of cultural development and theatrical joy. The tower sprang from a sense of heritage, communal identity, and the place of the individual in the universe. The tower was filled with both laughter and tears. It rang with sounds of song, jeers, and often applause. Though the tower is smaller now, and even at it’s height it never rose above Fourteenth Street, the impact of its presence is still felt in the works it inspired. The tower is, of course, the Yiddish Theatre. Its influence on the world of modern entertainment can be felt in all areas of the industry, though perhaps most profoundly in the beginning of the industry as it is now known. Perhaps the most striking aspects of the Yiddish Theatre are the art form’s remarkably rapid ascension and its equally rapid decline.

To understand the development of Yiddish Theatre one must understand the origins from which it sprang. Through much of the middle ages the Jewish world was kept isolated from secular life. Most Jews were forced to live in shtetls, or ghettos. Even so, in the midst of this isolation and religious control artistic expression permeated the community and continued to be an important outlet for worship. Though orthodox Jewish tenants forbade anything resembling entertainment derived through the portrayal of characters which was recognized as the component which, for the Greeks, advanced their Dionysian celebrations from ritualistic religious practice to Theatre; song, dance, and celebration have always been
an integral part of Jewish life and religious ritual. In fact, most of Jewish religious tradition revolves around storytelling and the perpetuation of an initially oral history in an exact and standardized written form.

An excellent example of this form is the Torah itself. The Torah is the scroll form of the holy Jewish scripture. Each Torah contains the five books of Moses in ancient Hebrew. Most people know the five books of Moses simply as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. One can find translations of these scriptures in many incarnations. They are most commonly known simply as the first five books of the Old Testament. It is important to remember, however, that the most common translations of the scriptures are English translations of Latin translations of the original Hebrew. This distinction is extremely important when looking at the development of Jewish, and later Yiddish literature. In an effort to preserve the words of the Torah over millennia, a strict process of reproduction is observed.

Every Torah scroll is handwritten by a person known as a Scribe. The commandments for the reproduction of the holy books expressly forbid even one letter of the scriptures to be written from memory. The Torah is almost completely devoid of vowels and symbols. Only rarely is punctuation to be found. Hebrew is a language which in its true form requires a speaker's knowledge in order to be read properly. Many believe that the absence of vowels and symbols in ancient Hebrew is an indication that the intention of the Jewish Holy Scriptures is to preserve for posterity words which had initially been relayed orally. One must be familiar with the spoken language and the nuances of its vocabulary in order to read and understand Hebrew text. A simple mispronounced vowel
sound can alter the meaning of ideas and the thrust of entire passages. The detail of the
Scribes art and the script practice of copying the text letter for letter display the importance
of accuracy and uniformity to the Jewish forbearers who insist that the strictures and
precepts of their heritage be passed down unaltered from generation to generation.

In addition to the need for unaltered text, one must also understand that the
difficulty of passing down the scriptures is compounded by the fact that prayers and
passages from the Torah are not truly meant to be spoken. They are meant to be sung. Yet
the Torah is free of any musical notation. Approximately fifteen hundred years ago,
symbols were added to additional manuscripts outside of the scrolls themselves. These
symbols, or tropes, communicated a standard melody and rhythm for the chanting of the
scriptures. Even though there are slight regional melodic differences as well as differences
in pronunciation between the Ashkenazic Jews from central and Eastern Europe, and the
Sephardic Jews from Spain, Arabia, and Africa; the tropes insure that the chanting one
hears in most synagogues throughout the world is nearly the same.

The Jewish religion is also filled with Midrashim.¹ A Midrash might best be
described as a moralistic fable or story. A Midrash often utilizes its form in order to
express the meaning behind an otherwise difficult passage found in the Torah. At other
times a Midrash seems to take the form of a nearly anecdotal account of the words and
actions of ancient or highly respected rabbis, sages, and prophets. It does not require much
supposition to note that if a Midrash were acted out it might bear a distinct resemblance to
the morality plays sanctioned by the church during the Middle Ages. It must also be noted,

¹Midrashim is the plural form of Midrash.
however, that the stories of the Midrash were not acted out. Each Midrash is told in the form of a story, in the study of Talmud these stories are often broken down into their component parts in the search for various meanings and religious significance. It is through the telling of the story and the consequent discussion that knowledge is perpetuated and learning achieved. The playing of roles and portrayal of characters in these stories was expressly forbidden by the doctrines of Jewish religion with one exception: The *Purimspiel.*

The first true example of Jewish Theatre, which would later evolve into Yiddish Theatre in the Nineteenth century, is the *Purimspiel.* The *Purimspiel* performance took place every year in celebration of the Jewish holiday of Purim. The holiday comes about each spring and commemorates the triumph of the Jewish people over a planned extermination. The events are recounted in the apocryphal, post-biblical book of Esther, known as the *Megile.* The story is well known in Judeo-Christian circles. Ahashuerus, the king of Persia became discontented with his wife Vashti and had her hanged. To replace her he holds a beauty pageant and falls almost instantly for a beautiful young woman named Esther who is, unbeknownst to the king, a Jew. Meanwhile; the king's Prime Minister, Haman, has hatched an evil plan to kill all of the Jews in the country. The initial focus of Haman's ire seems to have been the Jewish sage, Mordechai. Fortunately for the Jewish people, Mordechai was the new Queen's uncle. Esther appealed to the king who had come to love her for more than her looks. The king was shocked to hear of Haman's plot and had the Prime Minister seized at once. Mordechai was appointed to Haman's

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2 A *spiel* is a play, act, or story; therefore, a *Purimspiel* would be an enactment of the Purim story. The performers of a *spiel* are called *spielers.*

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former position; his first job was to see to it that Haman was hanged from the same gallows which had been built for Mordechai's execution. The festival of Purim is one of two times during the year that Jews are commanded to cut loose and be silly. In fact they are commanded to drink so much that they confuse the characters in the story and cheer the protagonist while condemning the antagonist.

The actual practice of the *Purimspiel* began with a procession. For the most part this was a procession of clowns. First was the *Marshelik*, or grand marshal of the revels. He would be dressed in the costume of his time. After the *Marshelik* came the fool known as the *nar*. The *nar* would be followed by the clown hero of the day. In her book *Vagabond Stars*, Nahma Sandrow describes the *nar* as he would have appeared in Prague *Purimspiel* around 1740. "He rides enthroned on a wine cask pulled along by a crowd of schoolboys, students at the local yeshiva (Talmudic academy). He is the crazy Purim King, a Bacchus, fat as a frog, waving an enormous wineglass and smiling, smiling."

The *nar* is followed by a steady stream of stock characters. They range from old men with young women, to Harlequin-like fools who do tricks and eat the pastries from their costumes. Once the clowns have passed, the biblical characters follow. Then the floats appear, and trade wagons. Finally the many types of musicians can be seen and heard along with revelers in costume. Scores of masqueraders dance through the streets leading the throng toward the Purim play. Sandrow's reference to Bacchus should not be taken too lightly. Despite the segregation of the Jewish population which had become

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3 The Yeshiva was the center of Jewish learning, as well as the place where students pursued rabbinical studies.

4 *Vagabond Stars* p.1
prevalent in central and Eastern Europe, the Jews of the eighteenth century were clearly influenced by the Greek and Roman festivals which included such processionals. It is significant to note that during the medieval period some yeshiva students also donned headdresses with goat-like horns as they danced through the streets. As early as the fifth century it was the custom to burn life sized figures of Haman in effigy. Clearly this is reminiscent of early Shrovetide celebrations among earlier civilizations. Purimspiels have been part of the Jewish tradition since the writing of the Megile, but the oldest published Purimspiel was printed in 1708.

After the procession made its way through the town, the Purimspiers would arrive at private homes to perform the play. They were not always invited guests as they went door to door much like Christian mummers or the Christmas carolers of today. If they were either invited or lucky they were taken inside a comparatively wealthy home and allowed to set up in the dining room where the performance would commence. The Purim plays of the middle ages and later varied in subject, though most often they recounted the story of Esther as found in the Megile. Sometimes the plays re-enacted bible stories which closely resembled the mystery plays of the Christians. Jewish legends outside the bible also made for popular performance. Sandrow points out that secular tales were also enacted, though they were most often performed as interludes. As the Jews of Eastern Europe sought the acceptance of their neighbors, secular material sometimes replaced biblical stories entirely. One can get an impression of the tone exhibited in the texts of Purim plays by reading the English Second Shepherds Play.

\[5\text{ Vagabond Stars p. 6}\]
The Purim plays did not however develop in a vacuum. Though the Jews in most of Eastern Europe were forced to live separately, many did travel a great deal and secular performance troupes, in turn, toured Europe often. As a result, many characters which began to appear in Purim plays seem to be an amalgamation of Commedia characters which were adapted into a decidedly Jewish and biblical context. The adaptation of secular performance styles and the inclusion of these adaptations would remain a part of Yiddish Theatre throughout its development. Most Purim plays contained a healthy dose of slapstick humor and fighting. Some accounts bring to mind the impression of a Punch and Judy show performed by actors rather than puppets. One can imagine this style being used to portray a scene which parodies the relationship between Ahashuerus and his soon to be hanged wife, Vashti. As Purim plays were seasonal events which only took place on or around the festival of Purim, it would be necessary to place the stock characters adapted from Commedia into a context which would be appropriate to the Purim story. Thus, Harlequino becomes the clever Mordechai. Haman becomes the power hungry Il Dottore, or the braggart Il Capitano. Ahashuerus becomes the old and miserly Pantalone chasing after his young wife. Sandrow explains: “There were as many different sorts of Yiddish clowns as there are Jewish comedians today.”

Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, secular ideas gained more and more hold on the Purim plays. The characters began to take on new identities in the ever tumultuous climate of Eastern European Jewish life. The frequency of pogroms coupled

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Vagabond Stars, p. 10

An organized, often officially encouraged massacre or persecution of a minority group, especially one conducted against Jews.
with phases of expulsion and suspicion constantly altered the Jewish place in society. These changes began to show in the Purim plays. More and more often they began to reflect the societies in which they were performed. The plays were regularly used as a vehicle for social commentary. The plays were the only forms of performance sanctioned by the Jewish religion. They became a way for the people of the ghetto to parody and make light of the hardships they faced. If the Christian administrator of the Shtetl or the head constable set over the Jews was particularly brutal, one might find that the Haman of the year's *Purimspiel* might be patterned after him.

One must keep in mind that the procession described by Sandrow would have taken place toward the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Purim plays, while the only form of theatre known and attributed to the Jewish culture and Yiddish language, were far behind the developmental standards of the secular theatre of the time. By comparison; in England, Shakespeare had long since been born, lived, changed the English language, and died. In France, Moliere had come and gone leaving Comedy of Manners in his wake. Centuries ago theatres had been built, yet *Purimspielers* still performed in dining rooms and only during the spring.

Life was not always a bleak and trudging journey for the Eastern European Jew. Pogroms and expulsions were not a daily occurrence. Throughout the nineteenth century there were decades of relative peace during which Jews were accorded a good deal more freedom than had previously been enjoyed. As restrictions on education and trade were lessened, Jews found themselves in better financial and political situations. As the period of enlightenment took hold; Yiddish, known as the *mama loshen*, or mother tongue began
to be looked upon as a jargon. German Jews in particular shied away from speaking Yiddish which they viewed as low class and beneath their sense of German nationalism. Jews had gained greater access to secular life in the century prior to World War I. Various areas of Eastern Europe treated Jews in different ways. Most often the rights and acceptance of Jews were specific to the cultural demographic of the individual country. The next phase in the development of Yiddish Theatre can be traced to Poland where, around 1830, a Jewish Doctor named Shloyme Ettinger had written Serkele, widely recognized as the first play in Yiddish.

Serkele is a common example of the trend in Yiddish adaptation of the current secular dramatic form. The play is a standard bourgeois drama with a Yiddish twist. The well to do merchant David Goodheart leaves his home for a trip. He leaves his business and his daughter under the watchful eye of his sister Serkele. Goodheart is gone for six years. When he returns he finds that Serkele has had him declared dead. She has mistreated his daughter, using the girl as a servant, and written a false will in which Goodheart has left everything to her. She has recently accused Goodheart’s daughter of theft and had the girl arrested along with her intended groom. In typical bourgeois style, Goodheart’s return rights all wrongs. He makes Serkele repent, and sees his daughter married. He makes several other matches and provides them with financial security. Serkele’s right hand man is first punished, then made to marry Serkele’s daughter. By the end of the play all is right in Goodheart’s world once again. Hand written copies of the

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8 Bourgeois drama is thought to have originated in England around 1731 with the play *The London Merchant.*
play were passed around the sitting rooms of middle class Jewish intellectuals known as \textit{Maskalim} \footnote{\textit{Maskalim} is the plural of \textit{Maskil} which means “Enlightened One.”} and a new trend was born.

It had taken a good deal of time for Yiddish theatre to approach anything resembling high drama, but once the period of enlightenment began to spread among the Jews of Eastern Europe, the muse descended with a vengeance. It took time for Eastern Europe to catch up with the developmental trends of Western Europe. The more enlightened and intellectual elite with their high drama had to reach a common ground with the provincial simple folk theatre of the past. Only when an urban middle class developed were these two extremes able to develop the common vernacular necessary for a common form of expression. While this type of development took several centuries in other parts of the world, the emergence of Yiddish into this common vernacular took only a generation. Sandrow clearly explains the development of Yiddish as a literary language as follows:

"Yiddish was the language of the Ashkenazic Jews of Central and Eastern Europe. (It was never the language of the Sephardic Jews of Spain, Arabia, and Africa.) In the late middle ages, when the Rhineland was a major center of Jewish population, Yiddish developed out of old High German plus a great deal of Hebrew, Romance, and other linguistic elements. As the Jewish population emigrated eastward in the next few centuries, Slavic elements entered the language. English, too, developed largely from German sources, which is one reason why Yiddish and English have words in common. Like English, Yiddish developed into a distinct language with its own syntax and flavor." \footnote{\textit{Vagabond Stars} p. 24}

With the emigration of Jews who moved eastward in search of greater freedom, they brought their language with them. In time Yiddish words became part of the
common vernacular in areas where the Jews settled. For this reason many of the Yiddish phrases found in popular culture today can be attributed to the mass emigration of Jews to New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, though not necessarily to the later emergence of the New York Yiddish theaters. The development of Yiddish as a viable literary force was, however, not the only ingredient needed to bring about the emotional mix that was to be associated with Yiddish Theatre. There were also the Broder Singers.

The first professional actor/producers in the Yiddish theatre world, the Broder singers, were traveling Bards similar to the German *Meistersingers* of earlier times. They took their name from Brode, an Austro-Hungarian city where this form of entertainment is thought to have originated. Brode was a center for activity during the enlightenment of the time and therefore relatively open to Jews. The city of Brode lay in the midst of several trade routes to Western Europe. As the industrial revolution continued to move eastward, an Eastern European middle class began to form. Constantly expanding railroads brought the merchants and traders to the cities that would also constitute the foundation of a steady audience. These merchants, including Jews, sought entertainment.

The Broder singers performed songs, monologues, and speeches most often of their own composition. They were very much like the Jewish ceremonial clowns referred to as *Badkhonim* or wedding bards. The *Badkhonim* essentially acted as jesters at

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11 *Meistersinger*: A member of one of the guilds organized in the principal cities of Germany the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries to establish competitive standards for the composition and performance of music and poetry. Also called mastersinger.
ceremonial events such as weddings. They would use their wit to extemporize insults and complex, pun-filled turns of phrase. The Broder singers performed much the same way but for a more secular audience which congregated in the common rooms of inns and the wine gardens that had begun to spring up in Eastern Europe. They were true entertainers of the people. Their subject matter most commonly focused on the trials of the working man. They often satirized the class struggle between the wealthy and the poor. Exploitation of the superstitious by the conveniently devout was also a popular subject. Scenes in which the more fortunate in either spirit or money took advantage of the less fortunate were consistent threads in the Broder singer’s repertoire.

An adept student of theatre history might be able to guess what happened next. Some Broder singers began to work in costumes and develop personas. Eventually they brought in others to act as chorus members, joining them in their songs. Inevitably members of the chorus would sing defined parts attributed to characters in the story told by the lyrics. With the addition of other performers, scenes could be enacted. Finally, professional performers had emerged and Yiddish Theatre had begun in a rudimentary form. As the performers became more adept through practice, the audiences were also being conditioned. Soon they would be ready for something more substantial. In 1876 that something arrived in the form of Avrom Goldfadn, the self proclaimed and generally recognized father of Yiddish Theatre.
CHAPTER 2

YIDDISH THEATRE BEGINS

Most accounts of Goldfadn and the beginning of Yiddish Theatre agree on one thing: Young Avrom was a better writer than he was a performer. For many years prior to his commitment to the Yiddish Theatre in 1876, he held many occupations and pursued many interests. He spent time as a teacher, a medical student, a businessman, an entrepreneur, a journalist, and a newspaper editor. He published two volumes of lyrics while still a student, and his work was already cushioning the repertoires of many Broder Singers. He even published some small plays or skits in one of these volumes which were likely performed by the traveling performers. Nonetheless he considered these writings to be a diversion and not his occupational focus. He had little or no success in the many business ventures he attempted and he attempted many. Eventually, in 1876, he found himself in Jassy, Rumania. He had received word from a friend that a Yiddish newspaper might find success there. At the time, Jassy was profiting from several occurrences at once. In preparation for the Russo-Turkish war, there were military forces beginning to mass. Jassy was located near a large military supply headquarters and therefore was able to profit from trade routes, much like Brod. There were many opportunities to profit quickly from military contracts. In this climate one can understand why Goldfadn felt that his friend might be onto something.
There are many stories, most of them anecdotal and nearly all of them conflicting, about how Goldfadn played midwife to the Yiddish Theatre. Goldfadn claimed that while in Jassy he went to a wine garden to hear his work performed by the famous Broder singer Israel Gordner. While watching the performance he decided that the songs and poems he was writing would be best served by the composition of a play. He contacted Gordner and began the Yiddish Theatre. The friend who brought Goldfadn to Jassy in the first place credits his wife. According to this friend, the friend’s wife caught Goldfadn on his way out to look for investors in the Newspaper he had come to begin. She pulled Goldfadn aside and dissuaded him from starting yet another unsuccessful Yiddish newspaper in Jassy. According to the wife, what the Jews needed was a theatre of their own in order to match the entertainment of the secular world around them. Goldfadn agreed, sought out Gordner, and the Yiddish Theatre was on its way. Gordner’s account consists of his many fans who claimed that he was wasting his talent on Broder singing and belonged on stage as an actor. Gordner agreed but lamented that there were no plays written for his Yiddish talents. He knew Goldfadn was in town, sought him out, and convinced him to begin writing for the first truly Yiddish Theatre. One can see that each person involved puts himself at the center of the story. Is there merit to any of them? One interesting story may lend more credence to how the Yiddish parlor readings of the enlightenment and the emergence of professional performers in the Broder singers may have merged in the life of one man. It is known that Goldfadn was a music student of a man named Avrom-Ber Gotlober who himself was a poet and lyricist. Gotlober took ill during a cholera epidemic and was seen to by a Jewish doctor by the name of Ettinger.
Due to restrictions imposed upon educated Jews, Ettinger was practicing his craft without a license. This doctor was the same Shloyme Ettinger who had written *Serkele*. The doctor prescribed the reading of the play to his patient, presumably to entertain him through his convalescence. Gotlober was inspired to write Yiddish plays. His comedies gained a great deal of popularity in their own right. Here is a clear connection between the early Yiddish dramatists of the enlightenment and the young Goldfadn, who upon failing to be successful as a performing Broder singer, would in turn become the father of Yiddish Theatre.

Though most of the facts contradict each other vehemently, there is one account that all of the stories about the birth of the Yiddish Theatre seem to agree on. The story concerns an evening which involves both Goldfadn and the highly regarded young Broder singer Israel Gordner. According to the story, Goldfadn appeared at a café in Jassy at the same time Gordner was also playing in the town. Gordner was excited about the possibility of seeing the man whose material had become a staple among the routines of Broder singers, including himself. He quickly decided it was too fortuitous an opportunity to pass up. The evening did not start well. Goldfadn took the stage in formal dress and began to recite a poem he had written about “The Jewish soul through the ages.” This did not go over well. The audience was full of working people. They wanted to drink, laugh, and blow off steam. Even had they been interested in a poetic sermon, they likely could not understand either the depth or vocabulary of the piece. The audience gave no response. Goldfadn was clueless. He later admitted that he thought the audience was too moved to respond. Firmly ensconced in this misconception he pressed on with an encore. Again he
received no response so he gave them another, and another. By then the crowd began to
grow belligerent. Some even appeared to be growing violent. They had paid more than
usual to see him based on his reputation. They did not know that that reputation had been
built by the others who regularly performed his material. Just as the situation was about to
take an even uglier turn, Gordner leapt onto the stage and rebuked the audience for their
bad manners. They were unmoved. He launched into humorous anecdotes and songs. The
crowd settled. He continued until they were at last placated. By all accounts he completed
his performance with a piece entitled “The Merry Hasid.” The irony in this is that it was a
composition of Goldfadn’s. Young Goldfadn learned from his mistake. From that moment
forward the tastes of the audience guided his work. He also realized that he belonged
behind the scenes, controlling what happened on the stage rather than being on it himself.
He immediately began to work toward the creation of a holistic type of theatre.

The subjects of his plays give rare insights into Jewish life during the latter part of
the nineteenth century. A conflict had surfaced in the Yiddish community. Old bonds were
beginning to chafe and the traditions of past generations could not provide the comfort and
solace they once had. Yet at the same time the traditions were nearly all the people had to
hold on to in a rapidly changing world and an unpredictable place in society. Jassy and a
number of other cities were relatively open to Jews and they could live and work in relative
comfort and safety. This was not so in all places, and none knew how long it would remain
so. History shows that these concerns were justified, though not for several years.

There were, however, certain problems involved with Goldfadn’s approach, not the
least of which was that Goldfadn was an incredibly controlling individual. In these early
years, Yiddish Theatre companies were much like the traveling English troupes which were still touring England. Goldfadn ruled his performers with absolute authority. He picked up actors where he could find them. Many had been Broder singers. Others, like Jacob P. Adler, a business man from Odessa who within twenty years had become one of Yiddish Theatre’s brightest stars, had been hangers on in the Russian theatre because they had no Yiddish theatre of their own. Often the company would perform at an inn one evening and leave town with a new member or two. Initially, most of the performers were somewhat awestruck by the new situation they found themselves in. It was much like running away with the circus, though the circus likely paid better, and there was probably more freedom.

Initially Goldfadn kept to the superficial entertainments his audiences craved, but he always felt it was his responsibility to drag Yiddish culture, and as an extension, the Jews of Eastern Europe, kicking and screaming into the wider, more secular modern world. When one stops to consider the contradictions involved with the early Yiddish Theatre, one is compelled to wonder how it ever grew beyond its infancy. Goldfadn’s contempt for people with views developed outside of his upbringing in the cities of the enlightenment is clear throughout his career. His early work shows the need to perform pieces geared toward the lowest common denominator of Jewish society and his feeling of responsibility for bringing them to the less archaic views of his background. He believed this could be done through Yiddish Theatre. In fact, he considered it his particular calling.

The characteristic arrogance displayed by Goldfadn might make it seem nearly impossible for him to have been so pivotal to the development of Yiddish theatre. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of his story is that he was, for the most part, completely accurate.
in his assertions. The people he was trying to reach did need to be taught, step by baby step, how to appreciate more complex forms of entertainment and art. All they knew were the folk art of the Badkonin and the Broder singers. If they were to be trained into an audience of discriminating quality, they would have to be taken by the hand and led. Goldfadn was the man to do it, and if he had to do the same for his performers he was more than willing.

Toward the beginning of his theatre career he culled his actors from the dregs of society. It was not uncommon for him to build a chorus by pulling drunks out of the bar where the piece was to be performed. He had little aversion to recruiting lowlifes, gamblers, and even soldiers who could provide their own uniforms in order to portray the soldiers he needed for the chorus. Sometimes these people hung on, and sometimes they did not. Either way there seemed to be no shortage of lowlifes willing to participate for the promise of another drink or a few pennies. Initially men played women’s roles, but as early as 1877 there were several women acting on the Yiddish stage. All of them, of course claimed to be the first. According to Sandrow the first was most likely Sara Segal. She was a young seamstress in Galatz. Though only sixteen when Goldfadn blew through town with his two regular actors Grodner and Goldstein, young Sara became instantly enamored of the theatre. Goldfadn and his small troupe were all too happy to have her join, but her mother refused and Sara stayed home. Eventually, after enough badgering, mother Segal confessed that if Sara were married she would be her husband’s problem. Sara quickly got word to the actors. After much deliberation it was decided that Goldstein, the youngest of the three and the only one still single, would marry her. Sarah changed her name to Sophie, thinking it more glamorous, and Sophie Goldstein joined the troupe at once.
One can deduce from Sophie’s story that not only did Goldfadn control every aspect of his actors’ performances, he also controlled their lives. He doled out the finances the same way he doled out roles. He decided every aspect of production for his company. Initially the actors put up with his control because there was no other venue, but eventually other reasons surfaced. Goldfadn had an ability to tailor roles to the actors he had available, and since it was he who composed the scripts and music, actors consistently found themselves playing parts with which they related and often would later become identified. The company as a whole also benefited from this approach. One challenge that faces companies today is the need to cast appropriate actors in the roles required by a script. If the script is written for what is available, this challenge does not exist. The actors often shaped the direction of the plays and therefore the theatre which the plays were creating. Later playwrights such as Clifford Odets with the Group Theatre would also utilize this approach. The actors began to be associated with the roles they played and were often recognized on the streets they walked, not as themselves, but as their characters. Often they would play the same characters for years, trading up as they got older and more experienced. Much as was the case with the touring troupes of England who were lorded over by an actor/manager, Goldfadn controlled all aspects of the professional development of his actors including their progress and pay. The one real difference, and perhaps a critical one, was that Goldfadn was not an actor and could not relate to them on their level.

While touring around Eastern Europe, the troupe performed in any venue they could find. As a result they were forced to become adaptable to whatever the stage. Sometimes they played in ornate opera houses, at other times they played in the back alley
garden of an inn, or the common room of a small hostelry. They handled these things as they came, when there was room and finances were good, they performed with grand spectacle and an orchestra. When things were lean, they crammed onto small platforms and sang to a musician or two playing from off-stage and seated behind a table. Whatever conditions they faced, they kept going. The only thing that did not change was that however slim the pickings were, the choicest bits always went to Goldfadn. He made sure he was well set up in an office somewhere in the business district of each town the troupe played. He found it essential to present a successful front whatever the truth was. Goldfadn’s fortune, as well of that of his company, often hinged on how well the performance was received on any given night: If it went well, they were kept well in food and drink. If it did not, they slept where they could and went hungry.

When Goldfadn began, his was the only Yiddish Theatre company around, by the time the first year ended there were several. Many of these companies were organized in the same manner as Goldfadn’s. There were actors involved in order to fill the types needed for individual performance, or a small core group and extras brought in as necessary. Others however followed the repertory company model more closely. There were members included to fill the types needed for the plays they were prepared to perform. There were also many family troupes. Marriages might have been arranged based on the companies needs much like Sophie Goldstein’s, but most often husbands brought their wives into the company and later their children. One such family was the Adler’s whose dynasty lasted well beyond immigration to America and produced such luminaries as Jacob, Celia, and of course Luther and Stella who would become part of the tour de
force known as The Group Theatre and later lead Stella to be seen as a matriarch in the world of American acting training.  

The financial affairs of early Yiddish Theatre companies were equally diverse, though in truth there are only so many ways to divvy up the spoils. Most of the companies used the “Mark system.” Each actor received marks, or shares of the profits, usually percentages. These marks were divided up each week as per the marks each actor held. This might sound like an equitable arrangement, but it most often was not. Some people were paid “off the top.” Directors, stagehands, theatre managers, and perhaps writers were paid a set amount each week, assuming there was enough to pay them. Then the more established actors were paid their marks. Eventually the funds would trickle down to the more novice actors, and those just beginning their careers. One might suspect, and rightly so, that often the players at the lowest levels of the totem pole did not get paid at all.

Another system employed a theatre manager who received all payments and paid the artists as per agreement. Often these managers were businessmen with no feel for the theatre. When the investment looked less appealing, they would often pull out of the arrangement leaving the artists to fend for themselves. As time went on, the manager was often the star player in the company. The “star-manager” system grew to be the most common in the Yiddish Theatre. The star would take his cut of the profits and the rest received their marks. This system would continue to be the most common especially as America began to emerge as the center of Yiddish Theatrical activity.

12 The Stella Adler Conservatory of acting is still one of the most highly respected training grounds in New York City.
Things were about to change for Eastern European Jews. Czar Alexander II had been a comparatively fair ruler as far as they were concerned. When the Czar was assassinated in 1881, he was followed to the throne by Alexander III, a much less trusting and more closed minded ruler than his predecessor. Jews were affected very harshly. Pogroms began in the Ukraine and parts of Russia. Legal rights were stripped away from Jews, and more of them were forced into city slums and out of the countryside. They were barred from practicing their professions, removed from positions of authority, and educational pursuits were prohibited. In the cities of Moscow, Kharkov, and St. Petersburg; the entire Jewish communities were taken as prisoners to the railway stations and forced to leave. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, forty percent of Russian Jews were destitute.

The situation was not much better outside of Russia. Judaism in Rumania was suffering under a series of sanctions, and was unlikely to survive. The Jews of Poland and Galacia starved due to economic inequities and prohibitions. Millions of Eastern European Jews had only two choices: emigrate or die. The majority of them chose to emigrate. Most of the immigrants departed for the United States, leaving the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe to make their own way toward extinction.

Strangely enough, the travails of the time made Yiddish literature more necessary to the people and it began to move forward quickly. Though the theatres were struggling under new edicts and sanctions, the subject matter of the writing was beginning to evolve. Whereas the plays had been simple entertainments, and sometimes object lessons or moralistic sermons disguised as fun romps, they were beginning to speak more to the
people of their own era. Plays began to surface which expressed the troubles of the time. They varied to the degree that they always had, but there was a new depth. Plays like Goldfadn’s *The Last Days of Jerusalem*, showed the Jews of old and their heroes resisting the oppression of conquering nations. It portrays the last stand of the Jews against the occupying Roman forces in the year 137 A.D. The play operates on a sprawling canvas of epic themes. Rife with stirring political speeches and choral numbers, the play is a cry for revolt. Though the revolt is eventually put down, Goldfadn shows knowledge of Aristotle by making the cause of the failure the hubris of Bar Khokba, the hero of the story and leader of the uprising.

This type of material is consistent with the emergence of theatre in other parts of the world which expressed current sentiments in thinly veiled historical drama. Goldfadn and his contemporaries were catching up quickly with the theatre in other parts of Europe and using their art as an outlet for political dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, the Yiddish Theatre, no matter what the subject matter, was still loaded with both melodramatic sentiments and musical interludes. Goldfadn’s plays soon began to slightly resemble those of his foreign contemporaries such as Gilbert and Sullivan. He had become a sort of folk hero in the Yiddish theatre world, both in Europe and the lower east side of New York City, which had become a sort of Mecca for Jewish immigrants.

Not surprisingly, the emergence and development of these plays coincides with the stirrings of the Zionist movement which had begun to take shape in the 1880s and gathered steam in the 1890s. The Yiddish Theatre had grown far beyond Goldfadn and its beginnings only a generation before. It proved to be an ungrateful child. Goldfadn lived his
last years and died in poverty, likely due to his love of spectacle and outward image. At the end of his life, however he must have been amazed at the wonder he had created. Either because of the mass emigration of European Jews to the United States, or in spite of it, The Yiddish Theatre thrived in New York. The first Golden age of the Yiddish Theatre had begun.
CHAPTER 3

NEW YORK CITY: THE GOLDEN AGE

At one time there were twenty three theatres in New York City devoted to Yiddish drama.\(^\text{13}\) This testament to the popularity of theatre among the Jewish immigrants shows a clear desire to retain their culture and a sense of home among their new surroundings. New dramatists had emerged to forward the art. Surrounded by the secular theatre, Yiddish performance began to take on certain, more universal characteristics, while maintaining an identity of its own. One aspect of Yiddish Theatre on the American stage which would both hamper and solidify its influence in the long run was the “star system.” The system of gathering an ensemble to support a particular star player was in no way an invention of the Yiddish Theatre, but it controlled the destinies of many companies and in fact the survival of the theatres which produced Yiddish drama. In order to express the breadth of the stars of the American Yiddish Theatre, one should look more closely at the two initial stars that set forth to raise the quality of the theatres they occupied: Boris Thomashevsky and Jacob P. Adler.

In the late nineteenth century Boris Thomashevsky began his working life as a cigar factory worker but before the end of his dramatic career he would rise to be one of the most

\(^\text{13}\) The theaters covered much of 2nd avenue from alphabet city to 14th street from approximately 1900 to 1925. This period was known as the first Golden Age of Yiddish Theatre.
respected and important stars of the Yiddish stage. His statue in the lobby of his National Theater showed him to be an inordinately large man. In his book *The Yiddish Theatre in America* David S. Lifson points out that a modern audience might think he looked more like a professional wrestler than a heroic actor. Nonetheless, audiences crammed into the theaters to see him. Thomashefsky, the man was a character. He insisted on being paid in gold, wore a money belt instead of carrying a wallet, had the first chauffer driven limousine among his peers, and employed a valet of Japanese origin. He walked like an aristocrat, with a cylinder top hat and a cane which could only add to his swagger. He was the most popular Yiddish actor of the time and by all accounts, the man was larger than life on stage as well as off.

One of the biggest contributions the actor made to the development of Yiddish Theatre was his willingness to try anything that would give him an opportunity to display himself as long as he felt the piece would further the development of his art. Sometimes this was successful, other times it was not. He did portray Hamlet in a direct translation of *Hamlet*, but he also originated the role in a Yiddish theatre adaptation which makes the skin crawl and brings up fits of irrepressible laughter when one hears a synopsis. Lifson describes it as follows:

"...The uncle is a rabbi in a small village in Russia. He did not poison Hamlet's father, but broke his heart by wooing and winning his "Queen." Hamlet is off somewhere being educated to become a rabbi when his father dies. Hamlet returns in the middle of the wedding feast, and turns the feast into a funeral. During ranting scenes between Hamlet and his mother and Ophelia and Hamlet various jokes and sneers are interpolated to denigrate the sect of rabbis who think they communicate with angels. The wicked uncle conspires against Hamlet, spreading rumors that the youth is a nihilist; the plot is discovered and instead of Hamlet, the wicked uncle is sent to Siberia. The last act is in a graveyard where it is snowing violently. Ophelia
is brought in on a bier; Hamlet mourns at her side and is married, according to Jewish custom, to his deceased beloved. Then he dies of a broken heart.”

One can clearly see that the Yiddish Theatre of Thomashevsky’s day had no compunctions about altering existing secular text. Perhaps the most humorous aspect of the adapted Hamlet, and of the literal translation, is that if Thomashevsky did play the Danish prince, he certainly did it in his usual style which was, for lack of a better term, to Out Herod, Herod, and in doing so break every shred of advice given to the actors in Hamlet’s famous speech to the players.

Despite his bombastic and popular performances, Thomashevsky did further the art of Yiddish Theater. He was apparently a generous benefactor and crusader for the art form that had been so kind to him. He was the first to produce new playwrights both from America and abroad. He brought actors to New York in order to pursue careers. He would give opportunities to writers who were shunned by others such as Ossip Dymov, Jacob Gordin, and Leon Kobrin. Perhaps most importantly, he tried to bring Yiddish theatre uptown to Broadway which he achieved in 1923 when Three Little Business Men and The Jolly Tailors were both produced at the Nora Bayes Theater.

The other side of the coin when it came to Yiddish actors of the generation is Jacob P. Adler. Where Thomashevsky began his theatrical career early by performing female roles as a young boy, Adler came to the world of Theatre much later. He started as a fan, loitering around the theaters of Odessa. Adler soon befriended many of the actors. Only slightly educated, he had never considered the possibility of becoming an actor himself. As

14 The Yiddish Theatre in America p. 148
time passed, he displayed an incredible memory for dialogue in spite of the difficulty he had in reading. It did not take long for his actor friends to goad him into trying his hand at performance. His early performances were a disaster. He was criticized for his boisterous acting and surface performances. These critiques hit the young actor hard. He decided that he must study the classics in order to improve, which he set to with an uncharacteristic fervor. He decided that he would never again perform a role he did not entirely understand. Adler yearned for realism. He wanted to perform works and roles which truly and completely expressed the experiences of the people. It was likely for this reason that he broke from Goldfadn's troupe fairly quickly. The exact date of his departure is cause for speculation. It is known that he left long before Goldfadn immigrated to America, and that he took several members of his old company with him to use as a nucleus for his new endeavor. When restrictions became too tight in Eastern Europe, he took his company to London. The move to Britain simply prolonged his early period of failure. Friends and well wishers alike urged him to give up Yiddish Theatre as a lost cause. They felt that Yiddish itself was a dying language which could only spawn a dying breed of theatre before it ever had a chance to reach adulthood. Adler was not ready to give up just yet. He moved the troupe to New York in 1887, where he had heard Yiddish Theatre was thriving. Unfortunately for Adler, there were no theaters available. He moved the company to Chicago. He had little more success there. He returned to New York. Though some of the prominent actors were encouraging, for the most part Adler was treated with hostility. He returned to London. Finally his fortunes began to turn. He was developing a solid reputation as a serious actor. In 1889 no less than four New York managers sought him out.
in London. With their support he agreed to return to New York. The managers did not do Adler any favors upon his return. They decided to pad his reputation. They compared him to actors such as Edwin Booth. This comparison must have terrified the newly returned actor. It is well documented that he felt such comparisons were far too ambitious to be realistic.

He did not start out well. The comparisons made him concerned about stepping on the toes of his contemporaries. As a result, he chose to enter the scene by trying his hand at comedy. Needless to say, it was a miserable failure. In one stroke he managed to alienate the audience, the managers, and his fellow actors by deviating from the styles which had given him success. Fortunately, he was able to redeem himself by returning to the dramatic roles he was hired to play. In a grand example of tit for tat; as the most successful actor in the company, the theatre later came into Adler’s possession and he promptly fired the rest of the troupe. He had a dream of what Yiddish theatre could be and a complete dissatisfaction with the material available to him. The only plays he felt worthy of production were those Yiddish translations of the great secular plays. He searched for a playwright with the same ideals. He met Jacob Gordin. From that meeting on Gordin filled the need that Adler felt by writing the first, and some say only, serious dramas of the Yiddish Theatre before the turn of the century.

Suddenly the Yiddish Theatre was able to keep up with the secular trend of realism. While other theaters were still presenting the same historical pieces, light comic operas, and slapstick vaudevilles, Adler’s theatre was presenting realistic plays which mirrored the traditions and travails of the Jewish community in which he lived. Initially the audience did
not respond well. They were still used to pure entertainment. They were not used to going to the theater to think. At the time the older, more boisterous and melodramatic forms of Yiddish Theatre were being performed as well as the new, more realistic forms. Adler only performed in the newer, realistic style.

Even with the progress he was making, Adler still had obstacles to overcome. He was hampered by the style of the actors of his generation. The problem still confronts many stars of today. When Adler took the stage, he was instantly recognizable and never able to lose himself in a role. If multiple stars appeared in the same production they had an uncontrollable tendency to steal scenes from one another. The idea of working as an ensemble was foreign to them. This would begin to change with the advent of Art Theatre, a form which catered to the more intellectual theatergoer and sought to mirror the artistic trends of the secular theatre. Art Theatre and stylistic innovation would become the calling card of Adler’s dynastic offspring. Over time; Adler became known as one of the best actors in New York, Yiddish Theatre or otherwise. He was often called to perform in the secular theatre. His most famous portrayal was that of Shylock whom he played often, sometimes in Yiddish while the rest of the company played in English.

In Thomashevsky and Adler one sees the diversity of actors performing in the Yiddish Theatre, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. One can also see the beginning of the trend toward a Yiddish Theatre which would be more viable in the face of changing movements in the secular world. Perhaps the most important distinction one can glean from this comparison is the understanding that Yiddish Theatre did not require one trend to fade out before another could begin. Adler and Thomashevsky
were superstars, but there were others who furthered the art. David Kessler was sought out for his ability to become completely absorbed in his roles. Ludwig Satz was a master comedian of the Yiddish Theatre and highly sought after by the secular world of vaudeville as well. He is often considered to be the forerunner of the Jewish Comedian and in many circles the precursor to the modern comedian as a whole. By taking his skills as a Bahdkonim further into the secular realm, and adding bits about every day Jewish life, his contributions can be seen in the development of stand up comedy in particular. Unfortunately, Satz died at forty nine years of age and had spent most of his career trying to become part of the Art theatre movement which was geared toward a more intellectual form of drama for the Yiddish Theatre. After his death stars such as Celia Adler were often heard saying that they considered his spectacular talents wasted.

Perhaps the actor most instrumental in bringing the Yiddish Theatre actor to national and international prominence during the first golden age was Paul Muni. Born as Muni Weisenfreund, he was as much a gain to the secular stage as he was a loss to the Yiddish. He was educated; his parents had brought him to America at the age of four. He was part of a Chicago based theatrical family. He was considered a genius when playing bearded roles. He had an ability to get his facial expressions across to an audience regardless of how much facial hair he sported. Oddly enough, Muni expressed a major insecurity about playing young roles. Nonetheless it was his first young role in Sholem Aleichem’s It’s Hard to Be a Jew. The critics praised him highly, so highly in fact that the head of the producing company Maurice Schwartz did not hire him for his next production. This rivalry would continue for years. As a result, Muni played at many of the Yiddish
theaters and was seen by both the Yiddish and the secular alike. He was perhaps the first actor to truly make the transition from Yiddish to secular entertainment. Muni’s talent soon led him to work more in secular theatre playing many roles to critical acclaim. Inevitably his success led to Hollywood where in 1929 he made his debut in the film *The Valiant* for which he was nominated for his first best actor Oscar. At that point his career became focused far more on film than on theatre. He made several film biographies including the portrayal of such figures as Emile Zola and Louis Pasteur. Muni was not just a star of the Yiddish Theatre, he was a star, in general. The loss of his contributions to the later development of the Yiddish Theatre is a subject of much lamentation. Many believe that if the star system had not been in place during his career, and had he been paid better, he may not have left for the secular world. Yet to be realistic, what actor would have resisted the siren call of Hollywood and superstardom? Once firmly in the limelight, he never returned to the Yiddish Theatre.

The actors helped advance the quality of work being performed on the Yiddish stage, and the Art Theatre movement brought the material closer to the secular trends of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, yet the world outside of the lower east side was still unconquered. Most often, the actors who had used Yiddish Theatre as a training ground abandoned it upon achieving even the slightest taste of secular success. In order to continue the advancement of Yiddish Theatre as a practical and literary art form, writers would have to emerge with voices that transcended the former restrictions and falsity displayed on the stage. By 1920 they had begun to emerge. A play was being performed by

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15 Muni would be nominated again for *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* in 1932 and *The Life of Emile Zola* in 1937. He would finally win the 1939 award for *The Story of Louis Pasteur*. 

32
The Vilna Troupe. It was initially titled *Between Two Worlds*. The play would later sweep the globe and come to be known as *The Dybbuk*. 

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CHAPTER 4

THE DYBBUK: YIDDISH THEATRE AS A DRAMATIC FORCE

S. Ansky wrote The Dybbuk sometime before 1914, when the Russian version of the play was first submitted to Stanislavsky to be considered for the Moscow Art Theatre. Though Stanislavsky did not choose to produce the play, the addition of the Messenger as a character was completed at his suggestion. The Yiddish version of the play, newly revised and including the Messenger, premiered in December of 1920. The Vilna Troupe¹⁶ premiered the piece as a memorial to the writer. Sadly, Ansky had died in November and never saw the play produced.

Little solid information is available about Ansky. It is common knowledge that the name under which he wrote was a pseudonym. His real name was Shloyme Zanvl Rappaport. He was better known for his research than for his writing. He was a student of and an expert in Jewish folklore. He was, in fact, the first Jewish folklorist to do extensive field work. His travels were made possible through a generous grant from Baron Horace Ginsburg. Another known fact is that his expeditions into the countryside began in 1912 and were interrupted by the First World War, yet during that time he gained an enormous amount of knowledge and perhaps an unparalleled understanding of what drove the

¹⁶ Influenced by Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theatre: The Vilna Troupe was formed in 1916 in an effort to provide entertainment to the populace, occupy, the youth, and reestablish forms of theatre suppressed by the Russians in favor of the recent German cultural preferred by Germany's occupational forces.
common Jewish soul of the time. These studies were clearly the driving force behind the composition of The Dybbuk.

The success of the play is beyond contestation. Within two years of its premiere it had been produced in New York and Moscow. By 1928 The Habima in Russia celebrated its six hundredth performance. In 1934 The Dybbuk was made into a feature film, and in 1960 it was seen on television as a play of the week selection directed by Sidney Lumet. The 1934 film was a landmark in filmmaking. It was produced on location in Poland. The music was composed by Henech Kon and featured the renowned Chazan Gerszon Sirota, one of the most highly trained and respected Cantors of all time. The Dybbuk is one of the few surviving recordings of Sirota's incredible vocal power. The film opened in New York in 1937 and was immediately considered a classic and in the words of New York Post reviewer Irene Thirer, "By far the finest Yiddish film production ever offered."

Ansky's play still holds the distinction of being the most popular Yiddish play in history. Its popularity goes beyond the success of many productions of the play which have been lovingly and expertly performed. The play is a prime example of the spirituality which infuses Jewish folklore, particularly among the Hassidim around whom the play centers. The Hassidic movement was founded by Rabbi Israel Ben Eliezer, known as the Baal Shem Tov or Master of the Good Name. He lived from 1700-1760. In Ansky's time the movement was operating under Rabbi Nakhmen Braslover, the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson. The Hassidim favored a return to the traditional spirituality and mysticism of Jewish heritage. They valued singing, dancing, and celebration as well. Much of the
Klezmer\textsuperscript{17} sound that many associate with Jewish music can be attributed to the joyous exaltations of the Hassidim. In one sense the Hassidic Jews resemble the Quakers of America. They valued the mystical experience of the individual man over the intense study of religious scriptures, in their case, the Talmud. Rabbi Braslover would speak in long extemporized narratives which were transcribed by his disciples in 1815. These improvisations take the form of lovely folk tales with an enchanting feel. The subject matter ranges from the rescues of princesses in towers and the slaying of dragons and folk tales to philosophical allegories. The Hassidim might argue, however, that even the stories which seem to be the most airy and frivolous are solidly grounded in philosophical meaning and moralistic messages.

Despite the fact that the Hassidim and the Jews of the enlightenment known as Haskoles were often fierce adversaries, they seem to have unwittingly shared at least one of the same goals. The Hassidim are often credited with advancing literacy among the common people and quickening the development and success of Yiddish literature and the resulting Yiddish publishing industry. They liked to read the teachings of their great rabbis often and encouraged others to do so as well.

The world of The Dybbuk is clearly the world of the Hassidim. Where else could a student of folklore such as Ansky find such a wealth of tradition and mysticism to explore? The world of the play is a world which existed somewhat separately from the world known to the audiences who first experienced it. There is no date given by the playwright for the action of the story, yet there is a reference to Rabbi Dovidl Tolner as being deceased. As

\textsuperscript{17}Klezmer is a type of folk music, performed traditionally by Jews in Germany and Eastern Europe. It is characterized by a fast beat; the music is driven primarily by the violin and the clarinet.

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Rabbi Tolner died in 1882, this reference dates the action of the play as some time after the death. According to the play itself, the first two acts take place in the Hassidic community of Brinnits. The third and fourth acts take place in another Hassidic community known as Miropolye. The first two acts are separated by two months, the second and third acts are separated by three days, and a half a day passes between acts three and four.

For the purpose of understanding the play, one must understand certain class and occupational facts important to the story. Joseph C. Landis explains, in his edition of the play\(^\text{18}\), that the term “Reb” preceding a name is a title of respect which should not be confused with “Rebbe” which means master teacher, or the title “Rabbi” which denotes a clergyman. The term “Reb” when used, always precedes the first name of the person being addressed or referred to. Several of the characters in the play are Batlonim. Landis clarifies that a Batlon, the singular form of Batlonim, is a man with no occupation. A Batlon dedicates his time to religious study and service to the Synagogue, subsisting on the charity of others. For this reason Batlonim are considered to be impractical men, hangers on who spend their time daydreaming. One should not confuse the Batlonim with the yeshiva students who are studying to become rabbis.

Finally one must understand the concept and nature of a Dybbuk. The word Dybbuk comes from the Hebrew word meaning attachment. In the mystical precepts of the cabbala, a Dybbuk is a spirit which attaches itself to a human body not it’s own and in essence possesses it. An important distinction must be drawn. A Dybbuk is a disembodied spirit and as such is neither good nor evil. A Dybbuk is not a demon. In Jewish lore, a spirit

\(^{18}\text{The Dybbuk and other great Yiddish plays p.21}\)
is often given the opportunity to return to earth as a Dybbuk in order to complete some task which was unfinished in life. In the case of the play the Dybbuk is trapped between the world of the living and the dead.

The structure of the play is as effective as the plot is complex. Each act centers itself around a specific character. The first act revolves around Khonnon, a former yeshiva student newly returned from wandering in search of greater knowledge. Through the talk of the Batlonim it is revealed that he is a brilliant if not wholly typical student. Rumors have surfaced that Khonnon’s search led him at last to the mysterious tenants of Jewish mysticism known as the Cabbala. The Batlonim gossip about the safety of such knowledge, and the steps one takes to achieve it. The dangers of such study are central to the action of the play and the fates of the characters.

The existence of both a heavenly and hellish host which interact directly with the world of the living is essential to the progression of the plot. Such interaction is the reason behind the initial title of the play. Between Two Worlds accurately describes the eventual fate of Khonnon, as well as the condition in which all of the characters live their lives. Through a series of events Khonnon’s fixation with the mystical world is expressed in more detail. He is obsessed with numerology and the hope that with further study he will be able to influence and eventually control outside events. As the play proceeds; the impetus behind Khonnon’s earlier departure and recent return is Laia, the daughter of a wealthy merchant, Reb Sender, who seeks a wealthy groom for his only daughter.

Khoumon’s obsession with the girl causes him to reject the teachings of the Talmud. He has developed the theory that the rejection of sin is ungodly. He believes that sin, as a

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creation of God should be elevated and mastered in order to reach the highest level of perception and knowledge. He perceives this highest level as discovering the true name of god. The fact that Reb Sender has thus far been unable to find a suitable groom for his daughter only convinces Khonnon that his studies have not been in vain. He opens himself to the dark forces of nature in order to find the name. When Reb Sender enters the scene to proclaim his joy over finally signing an agreement with a proper bridegroom for Laia, Khonnon falls dead. He has left the world of the living, yet he has triumphed with his last breath; he has found the name he sought.

One might think it a dramatic failure for Ansky to have his tragic hero die at the end of the first act but this is not the case. The characters in this play view life and death in a very different manner than the modern audience likely does. To the characters the veil separating the worlds of the living and the dead are very thin. Death does not constitute an end. They see it as a necessary ascension of the human being toward a closer relationship with their God. That Khonnon has turned away from the religious tenants of his faith only insures that the story is not finished with the young scholar.

The second act belongs to Laia. She is first seen by the grave of a couple who were killed by a pogrom before consummating their marriage. She is upholding the tradition of inviting them to her wedding. She seems odd. There seems to be a dark cloud following her. In this act the audience catches a glimpse of the supernatural forces controlling the lives of the people in the world of the play. The bride proceeds to the graveyard where she invites her mother, and unable to help herself also invites her lost friend Khonnon. Upon returning to the town, the rituals begin. The bride is required to dance with the poor before
proceeding to the wedding. Laia seems both dazed and afraid. The nervous groom approaches her for the wedding. As he moves to lift her veil she lets out a shriek, when she is approached she speaks in an odd voice. She points to the young man beside her and denounces him saying he is not her bridegroom. The Messenger closes the act saying that Laia is possessed by a Dybbuk.

In the world of the play the characters would know what such a possession means. Something is out of balance in the natural world and the spirit world has stepped in to set things right. There is also the allusion that if things are not put back in sync the Dybbuk might take Laia's spirit and she will die. The revelation of what is out of balance and what is needed to set things right propels the action of the final two acts of the play.

As the third act begins, the audience finds themselves in the house of Rebbe Azrielke, the sage, or Tsaddik of Miropolye. A sage or Tsaddik is considered a favorite of the divine possessed of supernatural powers. Laia has been brought to him for exorcism of the Dybbuk. The girl is brought before him. He orders the spirit to depart the girl’s body. The spirit refuses. Rebbe Azrielke determines that his authority alone is not enough to remove the spirit from her. He calls for a minyen, a gathering of ten men required for an official prayer service. The Tsaddik feels that the added spiritual authority of the minyen will bring about the success of the exorcism. The men come; an exorcism is once again attempted and fails. As a final solution, the Tsaddik threatens the spirit with excommunication. The spirit refuses with defiance and Rebbe Azrielke prepares for the excommunication ritual. The chief rabbi of Miropolye is summoned in order to get permission for the ritual. The Tsaddik is troubled. Things have spiraled out of his control.
The stubborn refusal of the spirit to leave is disturbing. The failure of even the minyen to expel it hints at some larger power at work. When the chief rabbi arrives he tells the Rebbe of a dream he has had in which Khonnon’s long dead father demands that Sender, Laia’s father, be called before the rabbinical court. Khonnon’s father accuses Sender of breaking an agreement they had sealed years before. Rebbe Azrielke sends for the bridal party insisting that the wedding be performed immediately upon the completion of the trial and exorcism.

The fourth act is shared by the ensemble. Preparations are being made for the trial. The spirit of Khonnon’s father is sent for to appear at the trial and all rituals of the rabbinical court are conducted in order to proceed with the trial. The spirit arrives and the trial begins. The spirit tells a compelling story of predestination. When he and Sender were young men, they were students together and the best of friends. Their lives seemed intertwined; they were both married at nearly the same time. They made a pact. If their wives conceived; one with a boy and the other with a girl, the children would be pledged to marry. It came to pass that the spirit’s wife gave birth to Khonnon and Sender’s wife gave birth to Laia. To the spirit, this was proof that God approved of the pact.

Shortly after Khonnon’s birth the spirit passed beyond the realm of the living followed shortly thereafter by his wife; leaving Khonnon an orphan. The Spirit continued to watch Sender’s progress through life and his efforts to find a groom for Laia in blatant disregard of the agreement between them. He accuses Sender of ignoring his obligations and through his disregard, bringing about the death of his only son. Khonnon’s death ends
the family line of the spirit and must be paid for. There is no one left to say Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, for either the spirit or his son. He seeks justice from the earthly court.

The court is faced with a difficult quandary. How can they execute justice for wrongs committed in the past? Sender is clearly guilty of a grievous error, but what constitutes justice? The court looks to the Talmud for the answer. They decide that since there is no way to determine whether the men's wives were pregnant at the time of the pact, the agreement was not binding. They cite a passage which states that agreements can not bind that which does not yet exist. However, the upper world seems to have accepted the agreement. Since Sender appears to have felt that Khonnon was the right groom for his daughter and ignored the impulse because of the student's poverty, he is sentenced to give half of his wealth to the poor and light a memorial candle for both the spirit and Khonnon for the rest of his life. Though this judgment is rational it is insufficient. Sender has gotten off on a technicality. Neither the spirit, nor the Dybbuk is satisfied. The balance between the worlds of the living and the dead are spiritual, not natural and logic alone is not enough to make things right. The Spirit refuses to express satisfaction with the judgment by remaining silent. The ominous silence foreshadows the actions of the Dybbuk. When he is again asked to leave the body of Laia, he continues to refuse.

The rite of excommunication begins. The Dybbuk fights to the last and ultimately succumbs to the power of the Tsaddik. As soon as Khonnon departs the body of Laia, the Rebbe allows him back into the fold of the children of Israel and recites the Kaddish for both father and son. In an effort to cement the balance which seems to have been restored, Rebbe Razielke insists that the wedding be conducted immediately, but the groom has been
forestalled by a broken wagon wheel and though the procession is continuing on foot, the delays are inevitable. Sensing that all is not well, the Rebbe places a protective circle around Laia before leaving in an attempt to speed the wedding on its way. Even separated from Laia’s body, Khonnon has not left the house. Laia senses his presence and in a consummation of love and fate chooses to join him in the spirit world. She falls dead and the messenger delivers the final line of the play, “Blessed be the True Judge.”

It does not take a skilled dramaturge to see that the Dybbuk is a giant leap forward for the quality and literary merit of the Yiddish Theatre. The tragic elements of the story combine to create not only a great love story, but also to explore the very nature of the world of man and its relation to the world of the divine. The play also calls to question the difference between the justice meted out by man and the true justice set down by the heavenly host. Khonnon’s moral struggle shows the conflicts faced by scholars mired in the arcane studies of Jewish mysticism.

Since the play first appeared on the stage Jewish audiences have been moved and perplexed by the themes it presents and the conclusions it forces them to draw. Is there justice on this earth, or is it only to be found in heaven? Secular audiences have been awed by the glimpse into the depth which is to be found in the Jewish faith as well as the mystical ideas expressed by the play. It has the feel of a good ghost story, the passion of a great love story, and the challenging psychological questions of a top quality fable. The structure of the play is also dramatically solid. Each act builds on the one which preceded it, building to a climax and raising the emotional level with each turn and leading to a climax that makes the audience hunger for a greater understanding of the circumstances.
and a satisfying resolution for the characters. Though Laia and Khonnon are together in the end, one does not know whether to be happy or sad. The conclusion of the play is perhaps meant to show that heaven will find a way to set things right and that is the best that can be hoped for.

The greater conflict is perhaps that of traditions and moral superiority. Khonnon’s view of sin, though a denial of the precepts of his Hassidic background, causes him to delve into the darkness in order to find the justice he is denied in the mortal world. Though he embraces sin in his efforts, his actions are nonetheless necessary to restore order to his destiny and the world around him. This is a far cry from the light operas and shameless melodramas of the previous generation.
CHAPTER 5

THE GOLEM: YIDDISH LITERATURE AS THEATRE

Leivick Halper, more commonly known as H. Leivick, is generally regarded as Yiddish Literature’s greatest poet. Of his twenty-one plays in prose and verse, and his ten volumes of poetry, The Golem is considered his masterpiece. Leivick’s combined works show a man who questions his place in the world as a man and a Jew. He ended his rabbinical studies in his teens because of what he referred to as “an argument with God.” The subject of the argument was man’s needless and unjust suffering at the hands of his fellow man. This argument would haunt him until his death in 1962. The unjust suffering of man is indeed the major theme in his combined writings and perhaps most clearly expressed in The Golem which the author refers to as “a dramatic poem in eight scenes.”

The legend of The Golem is as old as the Jewish folklore of the middle ages. The legends center around the making of a golem, a creature of earth and clay, brought to life through the cabbalistic numerological power of the combination of letters which make up the true name of God, known as the Shem. The most famous cabbalist to receive credit for the creation of a golem was Rabbi Judah Lowe. Rabbi Lowe resided in Prague between 1512 and 1609. He was known as the Maharal, and supposedly created a golem to protect the Jews of the city from those who meant them harm.
Many golem legends exist and there are innumerable variations of the story. A silent film version of the story also appeared in 1920. In the film of the same name, the golem is created to protect the Jews of Prague from an intended expulsion. As a silent film there is, of course barely any dialogue expressed through the text frames of the film, but the story is fairly clear and there are similarities to the play. The golem does develop an attraction for the Maharal’s granddaughter, and he does become more and more out of the Maharal’s control as the film goes on, yet in the end it is a child who innocently plucks the shem from the chest of the golem, putting him back to sleep. The film version of The Golem is one of the earliest contributions to the Horror genre. It is considered a masterpiece on the same scale of influence as films such as The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, Nosferatu, and The Phantom of the Opera.

Leivick’s play has no direct connection to the film other than the coincidence of appearing in the same year. One would be remiss however, not to point out that there must have been some current of feeling in 1920. Jews were enjoying a time of peace and prosperity, particularly in Germany. The film was shot on location in Prague. One might find it ironic to think that in nineteen years, the holocaust would begin and the attempt would be made to stamp out the culture created by Eastern European Jews, just as it was beginning to catch up and influence the rest of the world artistic community. Children, who would see the film on the big screen glorifying their heritage, would be riding in cattle cars to death camps by the time they reached adulthood.

The play also takes place in Prague but this sprawling verse drama is far more complex than a simple retelling of the legend. The plot, of course, centers on the creation of
a *golem* by the *Maharal*. In this version the *golem* is brought to life in order to save the Jewish community from a plot involving the villain of the piece, a priest named Thaddeus. The priest intends to plant two bottles of blood in the synagogue just prior to the Passover feast and later produce a corpse. He intends to frame the Jews in the community for the murder and lend credence to the rumor that the Jews use the blood of Christian children to bake their Matzos. Thaddeus is an evil man and Leivick clearly intends him to be the antagonist of the piece, but as the story progresses such distinctions become less clear.

The playwright changes the story a great deal. The legend presents the figure of a *golem* as a mindless creature which does the bidding of the *Maharal* thoughtlessly, and lumbers forth half formed and clumsy. In this play Leivick gives the creature emotions, conscience, and an individual identity. He calls the *golem* Joseph which implies the coming of a figure known as the Messiah Ben Joseph, an obscure talmudic figure expected to appear in the tumultuous days before the coming of the Messiah Ben David, also a character in the play, who is supposed to herald a time of peace, justice, and prosperity. Leivick also includes the great prophet Elijah who precedes the Messiah Ben David, as a precursor to his coming, and the “Man on the cross” who is given no other name. Obviously this is no simple retelling of a folk tale.

In his forward to the play, Landis describes *The Golem* as “A play in which the Jews become symbolic of all mankind suffering innocently, suffering in spite of its innocence, suffering because of its innocence.” The play shows a world in which the Jews, as tireless pursuers of justice and equality are destined to be wronged in a world

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where justice and equality are afterthoughts, if they are thought of at all. The Jewish idea of redemption is shown to have no place in a world which sees suffering as its lot. The Maharal also proves to be a tragic hero. He is a good man, tired of seeing the suffering around him. He reaches into the spiritual realm to find a solution. His creation is intended to be a simple tool, a means by which he can bring an end to the endless suffering he can no longer abide, yet the tool suffers as well. It is said that when one names a living creature one forms an attachment to it. The Maharal proves this to be true. By naming the golem Joseph and attempting to show him compassion he forges a bond which will become the albatross around the golem’s neck and causes the creature to strive for little more than the love and attention of his creator.

Joseph’s suffering also mirrors the suffering of the Jewish people, chosen by their creator and then left to their own devices. Joseph yearns for his creator. He is a creature of infinite power and childlike intellect. He dreams, and his dreams show him a fraction of what he is meant to be, but without the guidance of the Maharal he is terrified by what he sees. He is lost in a world he never asked to be a part of. He is kept ever separated from union with the people around him who react to his advances of fellowship with fear and scorn, casting him out to be forever alone and only appreciated by his creator who comes and goes as if the very existence of the golem is an inconvenience. The emotional journey of Joseph through the play takes the themes beyond just the suffering of the Jewish people. His journey is no less than a cautionary tale about the responsibility of man for that which he creates.
The poignancy of Joseph’s travails creates a structural problem within the play. One gets the impression that the Maharal is intended to be the protagonist and Thaddeus the antagonist, but from almost the instant Joseph appears as a thinking character on the stage, the play is his. One of the challenges of staging this immense work is that the change of the audience’s sympathies must be handled with deftness few directors command and few actors embody. Joseph is a tragic hero for the twentieth century. He is a creation ostensibly abandoned by his creator. Left to fend for himself he searches for a connection to the world around him and a purpose to his existence only to be pulled back from understanding every time his creator deigns to give him notice. The Maharal sets things into motion then returns chiefly to rebuke Joseph for his wrong doings and to tell him to stay where he is. Joseph is constantly being told by his creator that his time will come, that he must fulfill his potential and become what he is meant to be. Yet at no time does the creator tell him when that time is, or what his purpose will be.

As the play progresses one is moved to great sympathy for the golem. He is a creature of infinite power and ability kept chained by the realities of the world around him and destined to do the unpleasant tasks which his master disdains. In the seventh scene of the play The Maharal sends Joseph into the caverns below the ruined tower where the Jewish poor recently resided. He is to pursue, and likely destroy the evil Thaddeus. In the caverns below the tower the golem, nearly paralyzed by fear, he begs the Maharal not to leave him. The Maharal rebukes him, gives him a protective mantra to repeat as he journeys through the caves and heartlessly insists that he be about his appointed tasks. It is
at this point that Joseph speaks the line to his creator which sums up much of the thematic
struggle expressed in the play.

Joseph: How often has it happened,
   When you must send me somewhere, that you come
   And wake me from my lethargy and silence
   And change me to a wholly different being
   You think I do not know this?

In this comparatively simple passage, Joseph expresses his innocence, his
confusion, his awareness of being used, and his desire to rise above his servitude. This does
not go over well with the Maharal who acidly tells Joseph that his purpose in life is to
serve and his privilege to await that service. He calms down and attempts to tempt Joseph
with images of glory and redemption. Finally, his patience spent, he sends the golem off
into the demon infested, and horror filled caverns in search of his quarry.

Joseph’s struggle is not only the struggle of the Jewish people, but the struggle of
all mankind. Beset on all sides by meaningless suffering, mankind strives to answer the
questions of its own existence. The only answer to these questions is faith in one’s creator
and the belief that there is a higher purpose which will be made clear if one only does what
he is instructed to do by his creator. Questioning does not help. Begging does not help. One
must bear the iniquities and inhumanity of human existence and accept that there may be
no greater purpose regardless of what is perceived to be guaranteed at the end of it all. The
nihilistic implications of the play are lessened by the wonder of Joseph’s sustained
innocence and steadfast belief that even in his own ignorance, his creator must have a
purpose. The negativity of the Maharal is offset by the fact that however shabbily he may
appear to treat the golem, he is reacting to the threat which faces his people by calling forth

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a Messiah of violence and sending away a Messiah of peace because he is familiar enough with his world to know the time is right for one and not for the other.

Confronted with the massive scale of Leivick's The Golem, one cannot help but wonder at the journey which made it possible. The Yiddish Theatre artist might ask, "Did our journey to this place really begin with the Purimspiel?" The answer would of course be yes, but it is astounding to consider that the progress of Yiddish theatre from its origins with Goldfaden in 1876 to the resounding humanity and emotional impact of The Golem in 1920 could have happened so quickly.
CHAPTER 6

INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

There is an old adage which states that the candle which burns brightest burns shortest. The Yiddish theatre may be the perfect example of this truth. The same worldwide influences which may be credited with making it to blaze so brightly and with such momentum may also be blamed for its fading from the modern theatre world. With secular acceptance comes assimilation. As more Jews gained a firm foothold in the United States and moved out of the ghettos, fewer Jews were forced to move to the Lower East Side. As generations of Ashkenazic Jews were born into American society, the more English replaced Yiddish as the language of the Jewish household. By the mid twentieth century, Yiddish had become the language of grandparents. It became the preferred mode of speech for saying things in the presence of children that their parents did not want them to understand, or that they were considered too young to hear. The assimilation of Yiddish culture into the culture of America has merged the Yiddish language so seamlessly into the American vernacular as to render it almost extinct as an entity unto itself. So what of the future? Though the Yiddish Theatre in America is all but a memory, does it not live on in some form? Of course it does.

The Yiddish language, if not the Yiddish Theatre, has had a good deal of impact on American entertainment as well as American life. Perhaps the most direct example of a
Production today which draws its breath from the Yiddish Theatre is the hit musical *Fiddler On The Roof*. The play with music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick and book by Joseph Stein, is the now legendary adapted compilation of Sholom Aleichem’s stories about the improbable folk hero Tevye the milk man.

Tevye is an iconic everyman for the Eastern European Jews of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. His struggles represent the struggle of the Jewish community to find its place in a rapidly changing world. The traditions which held the community together for countless generations have begun to fall short of the needs of the people. In a time when Jews were being forced into ghettos and expelled from villages in which they had lived for centuries, Tevye forged a unique relationship with his God. He often spoke directly to him, weighing his options and asking for advice which never comes. This relationship is central to the movement and development of Sholom Aleichem’s stories and the plays derived from them. Tevye talks to God but does not expect an answer. The very action of the conversation allows the man to find his way in the world and make difficult decisions. The milkman’s appointed route takes him through many villages and exposes him to several cultural relationships inherent in *shtetl* life.

Tevye confronts situations which are as timeless to Jews of today as they were to the Jews of Tevye’s Russian village of Anatevka. His relationships with his five daughters bring him face to face with questions of faith. Because the audience sees the world through the eyes of Tevye and his relationship with God, the subjects range from mixed marriage and anti-Semitism, to poverty and the hope for a healthy milk cow that might provide a good dowry for his eldest daughter.
Fiddler on the Roof was not Tevye’s debut. He had been on stage and screen many times before, most notably in a film version which was released in Yiddish. The stage version took Broadway by storm winning nine Tony awards in 1965 including best musical, best author, and best composer/lyricist. When the play was brought to the screen in 1971 it garnered three academy awards including best cinematography and was nominated for five others, including best picture. A revival of the show starring Alfred Molina as Tevye is currently running on Broadway.

Once there was a shining tower of cultural development and theatrical joy. The tower sprang from a sense of heritage, communal identity, and the place of the individual in the universe. The tower was filled with both laughter and tears. It rang with sounds of song, jeers, and often applause. The tower is smaller now, yet it still stands as a pillar of achievement and has been raised far, far beyond Fourteenth Street.
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