Yiddish Theater: A Love Story

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USA 80 minutes
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Yiddish Theater: A Love Story at the Santa Barbara International Film Festival.

By Batya Weinbaum

Offered a job in California, after offering the first course on Jewish American Literature at Cleveland State, I hesitated to seize the opportunity. You can kiss your Jewish community goodbye, a young man who had left for Arizona told me flying out on the plane.

But yes, Zypora Spaisman, may you rest in peace; there really are Jews in Santa Barbara. Many of us met in the dark cold audience of the first showing of a film made to commemorate your lifetime achievement award for keeping Yiddish theater alive. Many of us cried.

Some of us met in a café afterwards. I was eating bagels and lox. This film, shot with a small PD 150 home video camera on the Lower East Side, made me hungry after ethnic comfort.

A young Israeli director shot the film, which his wife produced. Both live in LA, and attended this first showing. Dan had been traveling on vacation in NYC and felt at a crisis in his artistic life. He happened by chance to have met Zypora, then in her eighties, in a subway.

The film begins to tell its story as Green Fields, a Yiddish theater classic written in 1916, enters its last eight days of performance on East Broadway in a largely Chinese section of the city. Years ago, Zypora had performed in the same neighborhood in buildings which have Hebrew written on the outside (the office of The Forward). They sport Chinese characters now. Not many people made it to Mazer Theater, which once performed to audiences less than the size of the cast.

The young Israeli film maker’s grandmother had proudly proclaimed in a documentary that she was glad to have been in the founding generation that killed Yiddish in the process of building up Israel. Early in the film, Dan asks this alternate grandmother from off camera where she was during the war. She calmly proceeds, making a dinner with meat and chicken soup as she explains, in Russia. There, she performed in the Soviet labor camps in 1941. “Why did you go to Russia?” his soft voice asks. “Because of what’s his name—they were trying to kill me. You think they would give me a kiss?” Zypora was born in Poland, and ran away with her boyfriend when the war broke out. They married later.

Perhaps still tapping into the determination to keep her own life, Zypora tries for the rest of her years to extend the 1000 years that Yiddish as been a spoken language. While there used to be 12 Yiddish theaters in NY, she kept the last one—the Folksbiene—alive. She acted for 42 years, and sold tickets as well as swept the floor.

The filmmaker explored the saga because he was intrigued with the metaphoric nightmare for an artist to have to perform in a language is dying out. Times change. Yet we keep performing, playing, painting and writing, to audiences that dwindle. This could be a metaphor, as well as a diagram of a struggle to retain itself by any dwindling culture group as it assimilates into America. Zypora explains the nightmare of becoming an elder, perceived as young people as no longer having anything to offer, when she persists in feeling that she has something to give. You have something to give to the world, she says, get up and give it! What is the point of lying all day in a bed?
Although Zypora remains the strongest voice throughout, audience members are interviewed, as well as producers, actors and actresses. Audience members comment, “this is the last generation to come to a play like this, because we heard Yiddish growing up. Our children didn’t. We can’t speak it, but we understand it. They don’t. They won’t come.” Yet the last play she puts on attracts positive coverage by the NY Times and the Post, and is elected to the top ten of the off Broadway shows in the year 2000. Members of other ethnic groups come, just to hear the language. One of the Yiddish actors comments that he goes to hear Chinese opera, and to see Indian plays, for the same reason.

Nazis attempted to kill the Yiddish culture of European Jews. Stalin murdered the Yiddish writers who survived the Holocaust in the 1940s and 1950s. Israel tried to change the image of Jews and Yiddish became representative of a victim culture. It was the language of the dead, and avoided. Yet what delivered the final deathblow to Yiddish culture and theater, implied by the film, was assimilation. The film depicts the struggle to raise money from the Jewish community to keep the last show alive, to move it to a better venue on Broadway.

The show closes. The appeals had fallen on deaf ears. The actors and actresses disperse. The young Israeli female lead returns to Jerusalem to try to have a go at it there. Another young female actress in the production goes to LA to try to make it in Hollywood. The young male lead, originally from Williamsburg to which he takes the filmmakers, went back to his Jewish roots after this production and became a cantor. What he said on film about his background was, Williamsburg “was like growing up in a different century, a different place—a different country.” He had left the tight fold originally because some one had given him an Elvis record, and then another by John Lennon “Once you break a few rules,” he said, it is hard to know where to stop.”

The filmmakers say their appeals to raise money to produce the film after it was shot were also falling on deaf ears. They raised small amounts of money from funders in LA and Israel, but nothing from NY. They complained that they could not get it into the NY Jewish Film Festival. In spite of success at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, to date the film has not been scheduled yet to come to the Cleveland International Film Festival.

As a member of Cleveland’s Workmen’s Circle Klezmer Orchestra, I heard many a time about the importance of keeping Yiddish alive. If you want to see interviews with Yiddish Theater actors and actresses as they remember their lives, their loves, and their roles, rifling through original scores, awards, photographs, albums, and papers, try this film. Yet, it is also about a woman artist struggling to live by her dream, as much as it is about anything else.

In her eighties, Zypora says, “I am still young. I have something to give.” She wanted to live her life as long as she had it, “til I die.” She had it dead set in her mind to keep Yiddish theater alive. If Hitler couldn’t stop her, and Stalin couldn’t stop her, nothing was going to stop her, she explained to a young producer who tried to raise the money to keep the show alive. “What was I going to say, no? He smiles ruefully at the camera.

Trying to keep the show alive and to conform to the expectations of theater-going audiences, Zypora is faced with the crisis of having to perform on Shabbas, which she resists. “Never on Friday, she says. Then hesitates, “Well, maybe between 12 and 4, but not after lighting the Shabbas candles. I am not a shicksa.”

The tragedy is that after the last show closed, Zypora died. She never got to see the film. It will be played at YIVO in New York in May, honoring the acquisition of some of the archives that were uncovered in the film. These include the boxes and closetfuls of original Yiddish theater scores and arrangements demonstrated by the head of the Hebrew Actors Union. He had served as President of the organization since 1975. He explained in the course of the movie that this union had been the beginning of all the actors unions in NY. He, too, has died since the shooting of the film, making the footage priceless. We are shown pictures of Eleanor Roosevelt and “what’s his name” (JFK) coming to Yiddish theater, and a picture of Albert Einstein taken with the entire cast of a large production. The dialogue provoked is classic:
“Did Einstein speak Yiddish?” the filmmaker asks.

“ What do you think, yes. “

“What did he say?”

“ It’s not important. What a stupid question. I am not going to tell you.”

“Do you think your generation has a responsibility to continue Yiddish?”

“No.”

The whole story containing real-life exchanges such as this is cut between visuals of lighting the Chanukah candles, and Christmas decorations all over NY as the actresses and actors trudge through the snow to keep the show going, rain or storm. Their last performance was New Years Eve, Dec. 31, 2000.

One of the actresses explained that Woody Allen and Mel Brooks both got their start in Yiddish Theater. Mel Brooks once mentioned her theater on the Johnny Carson show.

In the end, the governor of NY presents a check o $200,000 at the ceremony commemorating Zypora for a life time achievement award. Her son accepts the money because Zypora cannot come; she is in a coma. So far the money has been used to buy an old synagogue on the Lower East Side to turn into a theater, so that Yiddish Theater will always and forever have a home on the Lower East Side.