

# Stage: 'The Marriage Contract'

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By RICHARD F. SHEPARD

**T**HE only play in any language this season that begins its story with a hassle over seltzer opened over the weekend at (where else?) the Folksbiene Playhouse, at 122 East 55th Street.

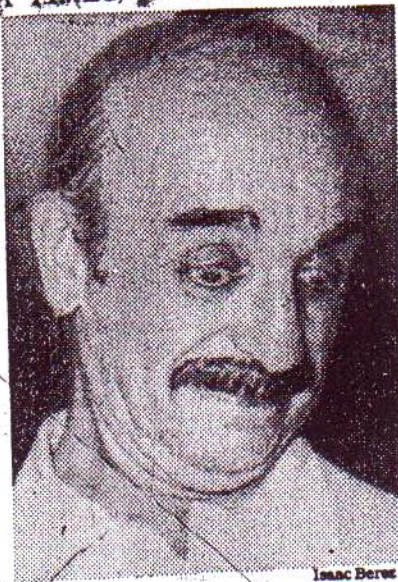
"The Marriage Contract" is a genuinely funny comedy, one of the few in Yiddish in which the emphasis is on humorous dialogue and conscientious characterization. The Folksbiene is in its 68th season, one of the oldest companies in town, but it still can stir up a chuckle.

It's no accident that the show is funny. It is by Ephraim Kishon, the Israeli humorist. "The Marriage Contract," which is basically a comedy with some songs thrown in, has been translated from Hebrew into Yiddish by Israel Beker of the Habimah, the Israeli national theater. Mr. Beker is also its director, and he keeps the action moving briskly.

Now, about that seltzer. The centerpiece of the work is a Tel Aviv plumber who is so demanding of the women in his life that he makes an American male chauvinist seem a Caspar Milquetoast by comparison. He flies into a rage when the seltzer bottle he reflexively reaches for on the table is not there; his wife and daughter have forgotten to buy a bottle! A sexy widow, a neighbor, who has eyes on our hero, saves the day but also complicates it by bringing in her own bottle of seltzer, wrapped like champagne in a green napkin.

Seltzer bubbles up as a minor theme throughout. But the main plot concerns the daughter's betrothal to a priggish young statistician whose mother insists on seeing the marriage certificate of the daughter's parents before assenting to a wedding. The problem is that the parents don't remember getting a certificate; they were married on a kibbutz where liaisons were not casual but rituals often were. The plot thickens as the plumber's wife rebels against tyranny and refuses to marry him again, forcing him to become a suitor and thwarting the young folks' marriage.

Leon Liebgold plays the plumber and Zypora Spaisman is the wife. These are two true veterans of Yiddish theater, he having played roman-



Isaac Berov  
Leon Liebgold as the father in  
"The Marriage Contract."

tic leads and she a genuinely comic sharp-tongued shrew in years past. This is the first play in a long time that

has put them into lead roles that have some depth to them, and they both do first-rate interpretations of their parts. They portray fully developed characters that are humorous figures and that appeal to our sympathy: Mr. Liebgold's plumber is a weak man who compensates with bluster. Miss Spaisman's part takes her from frightened spouse to reflective, rebellious but loving mate.

Ibi Kaufman strikes just the right note as the daughter, attractive and lively and strong-minded but unsure about whom she wants to marry. Ruth T. Kaminska brings much humor to her part as the intrusive, obviously designing widow. I. W. Firestone is the very essence of stuffiness as the mother-ridden statistician while Sandy Levitt captures the earthiness of a young, free-wheeling kibbutz secretary.

"The Marriage Broker," for which you should know Yiddish because the only help you get is an English synopsis in the program, is by no means Noël Coward, but then he only worked in seltzer in drawing-room surroundings, never in Tel Aviv.