

Ninety Years Of Yiddish On Stage By Nahma Sandrow

When you're at a performance of the Folksbiene, you're watching the longest continuously running Yiddish theater in the world. For ninety years now, despite all the brutalities of the twentieth century, the Folksbiene has survived; its values have survived; and it has maintained its place in the heart of Yiddish culture. In fact, the history of the Folksbiene in many ways is the history of Yiddish culture in America.

The Folksbiene began as an amateur group in 1915, at a time when Yiddish-speaking amateur theaters flourished in cities and small towns from Pinsk to Montevideo. The Folksbiene's members were dedicated. They came faithfully to rehearsals after long days bent over a sewing machine, and they never missed a show. Typically, one member scheduled her daughter's wedding on a weekday so as not to interfere with weekend performances. They threw themselves into whatever the collective needed: not only acting but also building sets and sweeping the stage. They even cast roles by committee! They loved Yiddish theater, and committed themselves to serving as its torchbearers.

They were serving Yiddish culture in a larger sense. In 1915 the Folksbiene was part of a lively theatrical universe: besides a wealth of books, journals, and newspapers, this was a golden period for the professional Yiddish stage. Much of the theater was popular, with its stars and hit songs, its sheet music, recordings and films. This was also the period when early Yiddish art theaters appeared, including the Vilna Troupe, the Moscow Yiddish Art Theatre and, in the United States, Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre. These were the Folksbiene's models. Professionals from that world, such as Jacob Ben-Ami, came to work with the Folksbiene, and the Folksbiene gave a hearing to serious repertory that commercial theater could not sustain.

Zoom through the ninety years. In Europe, Yiddish theater suffered through World War I, with its attendant famines and miseries, and through the Nazis and the Soviets, murderers of Jews and of their culture. In America, the inexorable progress of assimilation was accelerated by tightening immigration laws, the aging of audiences and artists alike and the gradual abandonment of old neighborhoods. Yet all the while, every year without fail, downtown at the Folksbiene the show went on.

Ask Folksbiene regulars for their favorite memories. The answer may be "*Yoshke Muzikant*" ("Yoshke the Musician," also known as "The Singer of His Sorrow," by Dimov), a romantic gem directed by Joseph Buloff who also starred in the role he'd created - with musical direction by an eighteen-year-old Zalmen Mlotek. Or Sholom Aleichem's "200,000," starring David Rogow. Maybe classics like Goldfadn's "Shulamis" and Gordin's "God, Man, and Devil," or perhaps lighter entertainments, such as the Israeli hit "The Wedding Contract," translated from Hebrew into Yiddish. Over the years, audiences have had the pleasure of applauding many fine professional performers, such as Leon Leibgold, Ben-Zion Vitler, and David Ellin, as well as amateurs like little David Braun, a thirteen-year-old who grew up to teach Yiddish at Harvard University.

And then just yesterday, at the end of the twentieth century, when the institution seemed to be flagging, came a new surge of energy. Today's rediscovery of Yiddish culture brought to the Folksbiene a cadre of young actors. The company is entirely professional now. The Folksbiene's present repertory combines classics with new pieces. Workshop productions and staged readings bring to life plays unknown for generations, giving the public a glimpse into the breadth of the universe of Yiddish drama. The Folksbiene mounted a successful children's theater, *Kids and Yiddish*, by and for the very young. This year a new amateur troupe created a clever musical revue, "Mame's Loshn Kugel," that tours the metropolitan area and beyond. (Yes, that's *loshn*, as in language, not *lokshn*, as in noodles.) And soon the Folksbiene will be moving into a fine space that is all its own.

The Folksbiene is no longer part of New York's Yiddish theater: it *is* New York's Yiddish theater. By supporting the Folksbiene, you not only endorse all it represents of our past—you help us prepare a glorious future.

Post Script: The rest of the world notices and respects the Folksbiene, too. Here are a few examples. Zypora Spaisman, for many years the indefatigable mainstay of the company, won an Obie, a Drama Desk Award, and a Show Biz Award; Mina Bern won a Lifetime Achievement Obie for *Zise Khaloymes*; The Folksbiene as an institution was recognized by CityLore for its unique contribution to New York's cultural life. And just this year, the Folksbiene's production of "On Second Avenue" won two Drama Desk nominations. In other words, you don't have to be a Yiddish-speaking Jew to love the Folksbiene.