

Zalmen Mlotek



Photos by Gidon Levin

by Jeanette Friedman

Max Bialystock move over and make room for Zalmen Mlotek. Did you ever hear of the Barry Sisters? No? In addition to traditional Yiddish classics, they sang “Hannah from Havana,” not to mention “Lena from Palestina,” and a whole host of amazing songs orchestrated by some of the best of Broadway and Hollywood’s arrangers and musicians. Do you think that their songs and souls will go the way of all flesh, to disappear forever in the cauldron of American pop culture? Not if Zalmen Mlotek has anything to say about them and the rest of the wealth Yiddish theatrical culture offers.

Why does the photogenic and charming Zalmen Mlotek love chasing rainbows?

“The rainbows are pretty vibrant and we see them with fresh eyes. Yiddish culture and Yiddish music were living organisms in our household. These songs were the stuff of our lives. They were the spices and the salt that seasoned our *simchas* (festivals and family gatherings).

“Second Avenue was full of life and a dozen Yiddish theaters brought us actors that went on to become famous in Hollywood, such as Paul Muni, Herschel Bernardi and Molly Picon. Some are still working today—like Fyvush

Finkel, who won an Emmy for *Picket Fences* and co-stars today on FOX’s *Boston Public*. Then there are all the young people today who want to experience the particular joy of expressing themselves in a picturesque language that has no peer.

“We held auditions for I.B. Singer’s *Yentl* and there were youngsters who wanted to learn Yiddish so they became involved. There are three stars in the play, and two of them are Israelis who are learning Yiddish as they learn their lines. They are seasoned and talented actors who wouldn’t miss the chance to connect to our common past in Europe and to the language Jews have spoken since the Middle Ages.”

The rich brocade that is Jewish culture came to the Mlotek home quite naturally. Zalmen’s father is a survivor from outside Warsaw and his mother was born in Brooklyn. Zalmen himself was born in the Bronx and sent to public school. Five days a week he attended the Arbeiter Ring Shule, where he had no choice but to learn Yiddish if he was going to understand what his parents were saying to each other. High School for Zalmen was New York’s prestigious High School of Music and Art, which he followed by pur-

suing studies wherever they could give him what he needed—from the Mannes School of Music and Juilliard to The New England Conservatory and the Tanglewood Institute. At Tanglewood, he had the opportunity to study with American Maestro Leonard Bernstein.

In all of these places, Zalmen concentrated on conducting. As he puts it, “A conductor comes to a group of musicians and leads them through a piece of music in a way that inspires them to use whatever they have in the most fulfilling way possible—and to get them to do it together. Meeting the orchestra members and rehearsing can often be more significant than the actual performance, because the excitement comes from creating the entity that is presented.

“But now, with the Folksbeine, my life is sort of split in different ways. I go around teaching Yiddish music and sometimes give choral workshops and performances. The people I work with may have extensive musical backgrounds and are great at what they do, but they haven’t had the chance to do it in Yiddish. They find it exciting to bring the past back to life, and to open a window to their heritage.

“For example, the success, excitement and popularity of Klezmer music in Europe has generated an interest in all things Yiddish—and makes it possible for me to travel to places as diverse as the Ukraine and London, where the enthusiasm of young is people inspiring.”

Mlotek points out that in places like Ukraine and St. Petersburg, the people who have Yiddish in their blood have had to ignore their heritage until recently. When he brings them Yiddish music, they tell him they can feel it literally in their bones, and they respond completely with hearts and heads.

As Zalmen says, “You know what it’s like. You can feel it in your *kishkes*.”

Playing the troubadour is one thing, but the theater is what resonates in every cell of Mlotek’s body. From the time he was a child he played piano. His mother (Chana) was a noted musicologist at the Yiddish Institute (YIVO at the Center of Jewish History) and his father was a writer and educator at the Workmen’s Circle, then later an editor at *The Forward*, who collected bits and pieces of the past

through Yiddish songs on audiotapes. He did this by asking his readers to send in their songs and from the tapes, his parents were able to publish four books of Yiddish folksongs, art songs, historical songs, lullabies, *lieder* and show tunes.

“In that kind of an environment, you do not escape the dramatic. I was exposed to Ben Bonus and Mina Bern, Sidor Belarsky, Seymour Rexsite and other amazing talents. My parents would take me to the Yiddish theater, and because I had the background in Yiddish music, the Claire Barrys and Molly Picon would call and ask me to accompany them because I had a contemporary style with the traditional background.

“I realized as I worked with these people that my contemporaries didn’t bother to familiarize themselves with this overwhelming talent unless it was presented in a contemporary way. That meant improving production values for Broadway and other professional theater levels. But as the Yiddish-speaking audience was literally dying out, the money to produce the shows properly dwindled considerably. I realized that everything in my life had conspired to put me in a certain place at a certain time, and that was how I found myself taking over The Folksbeine Yiddish Theater five years ago.

“It is a niche I am happy to fill. My partner, Eleanor Reissa, a Tony-nominated director in her own right, is now starring in our world premier version of *Yentl*. When we started five years ago, we never would have been able to do anything on this scale. There was no mailing list, no computer, no sense of the cultural value of what we had to offer. With that kind of sense of history and dedication to this art form, we came to the board and said, ‘Let’s just do it, no apologetics.’”

They started with an original piece written by Eleanor about what it was like to be a Yiddish actress on the edge of the 21st century, when everyone was telling them what they were doing is dead. The play was called *Zisse Chaloyms* (*Sweet Dreams*), and featured African American actress Racquel Polite, who learned Yiddish for the part.

At the time they could only do one show a year and thought it would be good to start with something original. They had a

good-to-middling response that showed them they were on the right track. Then they did the old classic *Yoshke Musikant* (*The Klezmer’s Tale*). That was a big hit and encouraged them to produce a family show to bring young people into the theater.

They created an on-going series, called “Kids and Yiddish” (soon to be released on CDs) which melded *Saturday Night Live*, *Sesame Street* and Yiddish to introduce children of all ages to the, pardon the expression, “joys of Yiddish.” That opened up the audiences. The show itself was 90% English, but whetted the appetites of the audiences for more. The fact that the Folksbeine does its productions with simultaneous English translations didn’t hurt. Audiences began to grow.

They did a play called *Amerikana Mishpocha* (*American Family*) by Sylvia Regan, a drama about life on the Lower East Side. Last year they presented a bi-lingual musical about *Gan Eden*, the Garden of Eden, and the expulsion of Adam and Eve. This year they have undertaken the most ambitious of all projects, *Yentl*, starring Eleanor.

Eleanor, also a child of survivors, wanted to step back as artistic director of the Folksbeine and take on the role of *Yentl*. She convinced her old friend and colleague Bob Kalfin—who originally directed Tovah Feldshuh in the role on Broadway—to direct her in the play. The story is familiar to many who saw the film starring Barbra Streisand, who annoyed I.B. Singer with her version. This one is truer to its roots, since the English script for this play is the one Singer worked on with Leah Napolin for Broadway.

“So this is truly a Yiddish premier,” says Zalmen, because we are bringing the characters back to life in the language that they originally spoke, with the original intent and traditions intact.”

Zalmen hasn’t only devoted himself to the land of make believe. He lives in Teaneck, NJ with his wife, Debby and three children, ages 15, 12 and 3. If he had three wishes they would be to have a permanent home for the Yiddish theater in New York; peace in the world, and that Jewish educators around the world would begin to understand the potential value of Yiddish culture for future generations. lifestyles