

**FROM THE BOWERY TO BRAKPAN:
A BIBLIOGRAPHIC GUIDE TO YIDDISH THEATRE WORLDWIDE**
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Description: In the context of the presenter's own research on the history of Yiddish theater in South Africa, this paper will provide a select guide to the most important books, articles, archival collections, and internet sites in the field of Yiddish theater today.

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While the idea of theatre in Yiddish has a certain pizzazz, conjuring up images of the soulful singing of cantors or of slightly off colour Yiddish jokes, in truth relatively little is remembered about it today. Because Yiddish theatre once had an enormous repertoire, much of which was not of great literary quality, never published, and proportionately very little of which has been translated. How then does one help one's average user, who can read no Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Russian or German, to go about researching and finding out more about it.

Although the internet today plays a vital part, it is not the place to start. When I first started to research this paper I did a google search of the terms "Yiddish theatre" and got 6 840 hits (if not more by now). Fortunately since the revival of interest in Yiddish in the universities, a critical body of literature is growing, which is gradually making Yiddish theatre more accessible to the general public. The most comprehensive bibliography of the multilingual literature on Yiddish theatre was compiled by Joel Berkowitz and can be found in his most recent book, *Yiddish theatre: new approaches*, published in 2003.¹ The book contains chapters by the leading scholars in the field, and takes an in depth look at aspects of repertoire and history in London, Cracow, and Vienna, as well as the United States and Russia.

The place to start for both the serious researcher and the enthusiast, is Nahma Sandrow's popular history of Yiddish theatre, entitled *Vagabond Stars: a World History of Yiddish Theatre*, first published in 1977 and updated in 1996.² Sandrow begins her history in Jassy in Rumania, the legendary birthplace of Yiddish theatre, moving over to Odessa in the Pale of Settlement and following the actors to Western Europe, London, the United States, and including for my purposes South Africa. She deals with all its facets, particularly with the central concept of *shund*, meaning "literary trash," which many of the Yiddish plays were deemed to be, and which was a source of conflict between the common man or *Moysh* in Yiddish theatre parlance, and the intellectual theatergoer. It was once unkindly suggested in a South African newspaper, that the nature of the Yiddish plays was influenced by the fact that the Jewish theatre-goer, 'being an astute businessman, expects, for the price of his seat, a show which consists of a tragedy, a comedy and an opera all rolled into one.' (*South African Jewish Chronicle*, 11 July 1930). What is really useful about Sandrow's book, though, is that she brings her history alive by translating lengthy excerpts from the plays, as the fact that so few plays have been translated, is one of the biggest obstacle to becoming acquainted with Yiddish theatre.

The first Yiddish playwrights, Abraham Goldfaden, Joseph Lateiner, and the slightly later, Jacob Gordin, produced the bulk of the Yiddish repertoire from the 1880s to the

early 1900s. Yet not a single play by Goldfaden or Lateiner and only two by Gordin have been translated into English. The more translated playwrights are from the third generation, because their plays conform more to modern standards of dramaturgy. By far the most translated is Dovid Pinski, particularly his one-act plays. On the other hand very few plays of Leon Kobrin and Zalman Libin, the most prolific and popular playwrights of the third generation, were translated, probably because their subject matter, which dwelt on the immigrant experience, became too dated. After Pinski, the greatest number of translated plays are by Sholem Asch and Peretz Hirshbein, then Isaac Leib Peretz.³ In point of fact aside from Anski's *The Dybbuk*, the most well known Yiddish plays on the English stage are adaptations of stories rather than plays, such as *Fiddler on the roof* adapted from Sholem Aleichem's Tevye stories, or Yentl, adapted from a story by Isaac Bashevis Singer.

For those who can read Yiddish the easiest way to access some of the most popular plays, because the orthography is modern, is in the one hundred volume *Musterverk fun der Yidisher literatur*, series.⁴ This was a project undertaken by Shmuel Rozhansky in Buenos Aires, after the Holocaust, with the aim of republishing a selection of the masterpieces of Yiddish literature. In this series you will find the classic *Serkele*, the first Yiddish play ever written, by the maskilic author, Shmuel Ettinger, as well as plays by Goldfaden, Gordin, Leivick, Pinski, Hirshbein, and Anski. A collection of one act plays is found in volume 83 of the series.

However for the serious researcher, the bulk of the plays, can only be found in archival collections at various institutions. These include the Yivo, the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, and the university libraries of Harvard and Stanford.

The Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library, has the Boris Thomashefsky Yiddish Theatre Collection of Plays in Manuscript. This consists of 308 playscripts, the titles of which can be accessed via an alphabetical author index on their website.⁵ The plays are those of the most popular playwrights of the earliest days of Yiddish theatre in the Bowery when Boris Thomashefsky and Jacob P. Adler were the matinee idols and Joseph Lateiner was the most popular playwright. Over a third of the scripts are by Thomashefsky himself, followed by Shomer (21), Leon Kobrin (17) Lateiner (16), Izidor Zolotorefsky (13) and Kalmanovitch (10). These are the melodramatic *shund* productions with marvellously descriptive titles, such as, Lateiner's *Dos Ferblondzete shefele* (The Lost sheep) and *Der Yudisher Yenki Dudl* (The Jewish Yanky Doodle). The collection also happens to include a rare play ostensibly written in Johannesburg in 1898 by one, Samuel Vaysberg, entitled, *Der Afrikaner, oder der farksh toysener zohn* (The Afrikaner, or the repudiated son.), which I had never heard of before. Apparently aspirant playwrights used to give Thomashefsky playscripts in the hope that he would use them. When he did, however, he tended to claim them as his own!

The American Jewish Archives, located on the campus of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, holds a collection of approximately 288 plays, of similar vintage to that of the Thomashefsky collection. The most prolific playwrights in this collection are Lateiner (25) and Zolotorefsky (23), followed by Izidor Lilian, (16), Zalmen Libin (11) and William Segal (9), who strangely given the immense popularity of their plays, are not represented in the Thomashefsky collection. Interesting that when

comparing 35 titles by Lateiner and 31 by Zolotorefsky, in the two collections, only 3 of Lateiner's and 1 of Zolotorefsky, are held by both, demonstrating how prolific they both were. Leonard Prager, from the University of Haifa, has compiled a catalogue and index to this collection of plays, which once belonged to actors, directors, translators and composers, that can be accessed on line in the archives of the *Yiddish Theatre Forum*.⁶ Prager has translated the scribbled comments, which appear in the margins of the plays, which provides an insight into the staging and the context of the performance.

The Library of Congress has the Lawrence Marwick Collection of 1200 plays, in manuscript and typescript, submitted to the Library of Congress by copyright deposit between 1870 and 1920. 77 of these playscripts, have been digitized and can be accessed on the Library of Congress's American Memory website.⁷ As before 1907, playwrights were only obliged to register the name and not to submit the entire script, the earlier playwrights, such as Lateiner, and Zolotorefsky, do not feature that much in this collection, which contains a number of forgotten and lesser known playwrights, many of whose plays were never produced. Zachary Baker has produced a bibliography of this collection, which was the subject of his paper which can be found in the *Proceedings* of the 35th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, Washington, 2000.⁸

The collection of the great Yiddish actor, Joseph Buloff & his wife Luba Kadison, was donated Harvard University in 1986. It can be accessed via Harvard's library catalogue by keying in "Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Collection." The careers of Buloff, leading actor in the Vilna Troupe, and his wife, Luba Kadison, leading actress and the daughter of the founder of the Vilna Troupe in Poland, Leib Kadison, are the most extensive in the history of Yiddish theatre. Buloff moved from Poland to New York in 1926 when he was invited to join Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, and by the mid 1930s he was performing in English as well. He created the character of Ali Hakim, the Persian peddler, in the original Broadway production of *Oklahoma* and directed *Mr McThing* on Broadway. The Buloff collection contains hundreds of photographs, programmes, flyers, recordings, correspondence, as well as just about 290 playscripts. However almost a third of the playscripts are of popular English plays in which Buloff performed, as well as English adaptations of the Yiddish classics of Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Asch, Leivick, Anski, and Dymov. The Yiddish playscripts include a large number adapted and translated from world literature, by authors such as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gogol, Moliere, Pirandello, Arthur Miler, Bernard Melamed, Wolf Mankowitz, and Noel Coward. Buloff was particularly famous for his interpretation of Chekhov's *Di Mahashefah* (The Witch), which he even performed in Johannesburg in 1950.

However all these collections pale in comparison to the extent of the holdings of the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research on Yiddish theatre. The Yivo Archives holds the papers of literally hundreds of Yiddish actors, directors, playwrights, composers, singers and even a couple of *badkhens* – wedding entertainers.⁹ Besides collections of playscripts and sound recordings of mixed provenance, it holds the remains of the Museum of Ida Kaminska, founder of the Jewish State Theater of Poland, the archives of Maurice Schwartz, director of the Yiddish Art Theater in New York, and of Sholem Perlmutter, writer, playwright and professional prompter. While the Schwartz collection contains 116 handwritten plays in Yiddish, English and German, reflecting

his repertoire, Perlmutter's collection incorporates 1300 plays and 483 operettas in manuscript, as well as 259 printed plays, thus constituting by far the largest and most representative collection for the early Yiddish theatre in the United States. The plays in manuscript include Lateiner (74), Zolotorefsky (60), Kalmanovitch (48), William Segal (41), 37 Professor Hurwitz (37), Gordin (34), and Goldfaden (34).

Outside of the United States the largest collection of manuscripts, over 2 500, is held by the State Theatrical Library of St Petersburg. These are Yiddish plays that were submitted to the Imperial Censor in Czarist Russia between 1895 and 1917. A discussion of this collection by Nina Warnke can be found on the internet in the archives of the Yiddish Theatre Forum.

Stanford University has a collection of books about Yiddish and Hebrew theatre, which belonged to Ezra Lahad, a Litvak-Israeli book collector from Vilna, which it acquired in 1998, and that is today searchable online. The collection, that is still being added to, contained 1227 books (at last count) with approximately 46% of the collection in Yiddish or relating to Yiddish literature and Yiddish theatre. The collection includes some early Goldfaden, Lateiner, and Gordin, the classic Yiddish playwrights, Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Asch, Hirshbein, Pinski, Leivick, Kacyzna, Bymko, Broderzon and others, translations from European literature, and a number of plays for children. Amongst these I found a rare children's play, *Dos Goldene kaykele*, by the South African Yiddish writer, Mendl Tabatznik, published in Vilna in 1931, which he produced at the Yiddish *Folkshul* in Johannesburg in 1930, which is not to be found in South Africa. The collection also contains some lesser known playwrights and plays with intriguing titles, such as *Dem Natsi's Yidishe tokhter* (The Nazi's Jewish Daughter), by Morris Katz, published by Narod Press in London in 1947, and *Ven Ben-Guryon iz antlofn: fantastish teater shtik*, (When Ben Gurion ran away: fantastical play) by Wolf Bresler, published in Buenos Aires in 1954. Besides books this collection also contains a component of archival material relating to Ida Kaminska, the Jewish State Theatre of Poland, and to the Fourth Theatre Festival Moscow-Leningrad in 1936.

Besides the plays, the indispensable tool for the serious researcher is the six volume *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, compiled by Zalmen Zylbercwaig, and published between 1931 and 1969.¹⁰ Volume 5 is devoted to individuals and theatres that were destroyed during the Holocaust. This encyclopedia contains information for thousands of actors, directors, playwrights and theatres, not available anywhere else. However information must be corroborated as it contains many inaccuracies. I for instance had a problem with the entry for Samuel Wallerstein from Philadelphia, the director of one of the companies which toured South Africa between 1902 and 1910. Two Wallerstein couples, cousins, are listed in the *Leksikon*, and the details about South Africa were attached to the wrong couple! I discovered this because a South African programme from 1907, had pictures of the couple which I could match with the photographs in the *Leksikon*. An alphabetical index to the six volumes, compiled by Faith Jones, is available on the website of the Dorot Jewish Division of the New York Public Library.

While the Internet is not the place to start researching Yiddish theatre, nonetheless it has become an indispensable tool, which enables even somebody situated far away from the main source material, like myself, to present a paper on the subject. Vital to

the serious researcher today is the *Yiddish Theatre Forum*, the Yiddish discussion forum, which began in 2002, as an offshoot of *Mendele* the electronic discussion group that emanates from Yale. This forum enables researchers to keep abreast of new projects and research and to exchange ideas. The internet also allows one to access the websites of the Yiddish theatres that are still operating today, such as the Folksbiene in New York,¹¹ the Dora Wasserman Yiddish theatre in Montreal,¹² and Yiddishpiel, the Yiddish theatre directed by Shmuel Atzmon in Tel-Aviv.¹³ Another very useful website is that of the Rutenberg and Everett Yiddish Film Library of the National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University.¹⁴ It has an excellent catalogue which lists 50 films with detailed annotations of their content. The latest website to appear was created by the Jewish Agency for Israel. Entitled, *All about Jewish Theatre*, it seeks to promote Jewish Theatre, not only Yiddish theatre, and performing arts worldwide. This website contains a worldwide directory of theatres and theatre professionals, news about productions and research, an events calendar, a resource centre, and a virtual gallery.¹⁵

Insights into the history of Yiddish theatre are also found in the personal memoirs of the actors. Whilst the bulk of this literature is in Yiddish, those that have been translated include the memoirs of Jacob P. Adler, the flamboyant actor and progenitor of a huge family who all took to the Yiddish stage,¹⁶ the filmstar Paul Muni,¹⁷ famous actor, Joseph Buloff,¹⁸ director and composer, Herman Yablakoff,¹⁹ actor, Hershel Barnardi,²⁰ darling of the Yiddish stage, Molly Picon,²¹ and Ida Kaminska, daughter of the grand dame of Yiddish theatre in Poland, Esther Rochel Kaminska.²² A lesser known memoir, is that of the English Yiddish actress, Anna Tzelniker, still going strong today in her 80s in London.²³ Anna is the daughter of the Rumanian Yiddish actor, Meir Tzelniker. In 1938 on a tour to South Africa from London, he and his family applied for permanent residence. Sadly for Yiddish life in South Africa they were refused.

Understandably given its prominence, most of the theatres that have been researched, are in New York. Before the appearance of Sandrow's *Vagabond stars*, the main source for this history was David Lifson's *Yiddish theatre in America*,²⁴ as well as a number of doctoral dissertations.²⁵ Joel Berkowitz has explored the popular cult of staging Shakespeare on the early American Yiddish stage,²⁶ whilst Edna Nahshon has written up the history of the Artef, the innovative workers' theatre which existed in New York between 1929 and 1940.²⁷ Besides New York, the history of Yiddish theatre in Detroit,²⁸ Chicago,²⁹ Cincinnati³⁰ and Omaha³¹ also feature in the literature. Montreal in Canada had probably the most vibrant eastern European immigrant life after New York, and a Yiddish theatre, named for its founder, Dora Wasserman, that has lasted to this day.³²

After New York theatres in Russia have merited the most scholarly attention. Articles have been written about the State Jewish Theatres of Belorussia,³³ Birobidzan,³⁴ and St Petersburg.³⁵ However the bulk of the research has concentrated on the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, which lasted until the assassination of its artistic director and star, Solomon Michoels, in 1949, which marked the beginning of Stalin's purge of the Jewish intellectuals. This theatre is the subject of Geoffrey Veidlinger's excellent monograph, *The Moscow State Yiddish theatre: Jewish culture on the Soviet stage*, published in the year 2000.³⁶

Yiddish theatre enjoyed its greatest flowering in Poland between the two World Wars, yet up to quite recently, not that much had been published about it in English. Michael Steinlauf has a chapter on Jewish theatre in Poland in the latest volume of *Polin*,³⁷ which originated in his doctoral theses.³⁸ While a growing body of literature is emerging in Polish, the bulk of the sources are still in Yiddish. Individual troupes that have merited attention include the Yung Teater, the innovative theatre that existed in Warsaw between the wars,³⁹ and the company of Esther Rochel and her daughter, Ida Kaminska, documented in Ida Kaminska's autobiography. Besides Warsaw, Yiddish theatre in Cracow has been the subject of recent research,⁴⁰ as has Vienna, an interim stop on the route of Yiddish actors from East to West.⁴¹

South Africa's closest overseas theatrical connection has always been with London. David Mazower's *Yiddish theatre in London*, is an outstanding short publication with history, biography, and numerous wonderful illustrations, published in 1996.⁴² Extracts can be viewed on the website of the Jewish Museum in London.⁴³

Theatres further off the beaten track that have been documented include the David Herman Yiddish Theatre which flourished between 1937 and 1992 in Melbourne Australia, which is the subject of the book, *Wanderers and dreamers*, by Arnold Zable.⁴⁴ Before emigrating to Australia in 1937, one of its directors, the Polish actor-director, Yankev Waislitz, spent 6 months in Johannesburg. Unfortunately his efforts with the South African Litvaks did not bear the same fruit that they did with the more diverse Jewish community in Melbourne. South Africa too is way off the beaten track, yet between 1902 and 1910 two overseas Yiddish theatre companies, competed against each other in Johannesburg and Cape Town. In the 1930s South Africa also had a workers' theatre, the Communist sympathizing anti-Zionist *Yidisher Arbeter Klub* in Doornfontein, which produced theatre with a Leftist slant. A post-Holocaust revival with visiting overseas actors did not last, as unlike Australia there was no post-Holocaust Jewish immigration to South Africa.⁴⁵

I would like to end by touching on what is missing from the record. Buenos Aires, which had a thriving Yiddish theatre from the early twentieth century until the 1940s is hardly documented. I am aware of this as South Africa's premier Yiddish actress, Sarah Sylvia, moved between London, Buenos Aires and South Africa in the 1920s and 1930s, and I can find no record of this anywhere. Equally elusive is my own personal favourite, Max Perlman, based in Buenos Aires, and the favourite of South African audiences in the post-Holocaust period. His catchy tunes and witty social commentary, which document the modernisation of Jewish life, deserve further analysis.

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