

The Yiddish Theatre in Travail.

By WILLIAM SCHACK (New York).

It is freely admitted by all its leading figures that the Yiddish Theatre in New York is in a bad way. Two minor houses—the Liberty in Brooklyn and the McKinley Square in the Bronx—have closed down; the manager of the National (on Second Avenue), Harry Katz, was driven to suicide by business failure; the veteran showman, Max Gabel, not doing so well with his well-calculated-to-please efforts, has let his Public Theatre go to the B. S. Moss talking picture circuit; Ludwig Satz, the gifted comic artist, was on the verge of closing several weeks ago—his theatre is also on the block; Maurice Schwartz and his troupe, the chief exponents of the upper levels of the dramatic art in Yiddish, put on only four new plays this season, and have already shut up shop; and even the Second Avenue Theatre, where Molly Picon makes, as its outstanding comedienne, the longest runs of the Yiddish theatre, is not as profitable to the management as its popularity would indicate.

Not only are the rentals heavy, running as high as 120,000 dollars, but the personnel costs are proportionately higher than those of Broadway. For, while the latter must meet the demands of two unions, the Yiddish theatre must satisfy seven—the unions of actors, stage hands, musicians, ushers, chorus, dressers and doormen—all of whom, as members of the Hebrew Trades, affiliated with the American Federation of Labour, work in concert. Every theatre must take its quota of musicians, whether it wants them or not, and it must take as many ushers and distribute them as the ushers' union dictates. If the latter places three attendants in the orchestra and three in the balcony, when the management would prefer a four-two division, it has no alternative but to take on an extra man in the orchestra and retain the three in the balcony. The ushers receive, too, a salary of about 38 dollars. The actors' union has its regulations—a minimum of 75 dollars weekly and a 36-week season—and it assigns a certain number of actors to each theatre. Should the manager not find anyone in his roster to play a certain role and have to take an outsider to cast it, he must still pay the actors idle for the period of the play. While the managers do not complain so much of the actors—their union has indeed acknowledged the seriousness and the situation and financially aided some of the theatres—they do find the rest of the personnel a burden. At one of the large theatres, for example, the ushers and doormen draw 500 dollars a week. Such items add up in the 10,000 dollars, which is the weekly expense account of that house. Still, it must be remembered that the stabilisation of personnel has its advantages for the theatres, and the managers would no doubt be willing to pay for it if they were not so hard pressed.

Far more important than the over-production in theatres and the high overhead is the stoppage of Jewish immigration. The Yiddish theatre feels this keenly in an immediate way because the tens of thousands who used to arrive annually flocked to it as a novelty. Most of these people came from villages where the theatre and all its appurtenances were anathema, except when it was invested with religious sanction, as in the annual Purimspiel, which celebrates the saving of the Jews of Persia from massacre when Queen Esther interceded for them against the wicked Minister Haman. For the first time, perhaps, the immigrants were seeing a kind of real life acted out on a stage—the formula of two minutes and laughter and two minutes of tears was made for them—and the vicarious confessions fascinated them.

The Yiddish theatre no longer has these naive reinforcements. But its loss goes beyond the loss of members. The cessation of immigration, in hastening the break-up of the old Jewish culture here, has had its repercussion in the theatre.

In the popular Yiddish theatre—which means most of them—the language difficulty is met by peppering the plays with English. "Vos heisst, two is company, three's a crowd," says a lover. Bubbles another, a Borough Park swell, "Switheart, don't you disapperment me and sperl my evening." Jennie Goldstein sings in one place, "When I pretend I'm gay, Es is mir och un veh." Disturbing and ridiculous as this bilingualism seems at first hearing, it is by no means an illogical solution.

When the English in these Yiddish plays is confined to expressions more or less current in Jewish homes, or, when more freely used, to these characters who would be apt to talk English, one would, after a preliminary adjustment to the novelty, accept it. The trouble is that these theatres, drawing generously on every sort of hokum, often use English as an incongruity, to raise a cheap laugh. But, properly used, bilingualism need not arouse that baffling irritation one feels in the broken conversation of polyglots. The result may not be Yiddish, but it will be a language effective for the Yiddish theatre. Without some such compromise this theatre is likely to have in the future a decreasing audience.

Most of the theatre managers are not looking that far ahead—which may not be nearly as distant as it seems. But for the immediate future, for next season, they all expect one form of relief—the crash of a majority of the thirteen theatres, leaving five or six, including those in the Bronx and Brooklyn, to provide the various forms of theatrical fare. With the diminution of the number of troupes might come a drop in theatre rentals, thus reducing the burdensome overhead to a degree. Mr. Satz also thinks a reduction in the admission fee is desirable, the better to meet the competition of Broadway

Dr. Benzion Mossinsohn

Who has just returned to Johannesburg
from a highly successful tour of the
Union on behalf of the Zionist cause

Will Address a

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On Sunday Evening (May 18th),

At 8.15 p.m.

AT THE SELBORNE HALL.

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THE THEUNISSEN ZIONIST SOCIETY.

The annual general meeting of the Zionist Society was held at the Theunissen Hotel on Sunday, the 4th instant. The Chairman (Mr. B. Fuchs) presided over a fair attendance of members. Mr. D. E. Kotzen, the Hon. Secretary, read a report of the Society's activities for the year. This showed that £204 5s. 10d. had been raised for one Zionist cause or another besides monies for other Jewish purposes. Moreover, these figures did not include the periodical contributions which various members were making to the Keren Hayesod and other Zionist funds. Mr. Kotzen drew attention to the fact that the social side of the Society was not as successful as the financial.

The report having been accepted, the Chairman called for nominations for officers and committee. Mr. Fuchs, who was nominated for re-election, declined, holding that as he had filled the post for three consecutive years someone else should take over the reins.

Eventually the following honorary officers and committee were elected: Chairman, Dr. A. Bernstein; Vice-Chairmen, Messrs. A. Epstein and B. Fuchs; Hon. Secretary and Treasurer, Mr. D. E. Kotzen; Committee, Mesdames B. Fuchs and M. Mandelzweig, and Mr. D. Rosen.

Dr. Bernstein thanked the members for the honour done him and assured them of his best services. He also mentioned that the retiring Chairman had been elected Mayor of Theunissen, and on behalf of the Society he extended hearty congratulations to Theunissen's Jewish Mayor.

In view of the forthcoming visit of Dr. Benzion Mossinsohn, who was due to arrive on Wednesday, the 14th instant, a committee of three, consisting of the Chairman, Secretary, and Mr. B. Fuchs, was appointed to make all arrangements. It was also arranged that during his stay Dr. Mossinsohn would be the guest of the Mayor and Mayoress, and that the Keren Hayesod campaign in Theunissen would take place on the Wednesday evening, a reception being decided upon for this purpose at the Theunissen Hotel, Mr. and Mrs. B. Cahl, the proprietors, kindly lending the dining-room and rest-room for the purpose.

Warm thanks were extended to Mr. and Mrs. Cahl for their generous consent of the use of the hotel as the Society's headquarters, the Chairman remarking that the Society had come to look upon the hotel as the permanent centre of Zionist activities in Theunissen.

and the films, and to attract more of the Jewish masses who cannot afford the prevailing prices. If the Yiddish theatre does not stabilise itself it is possible that it will lose its stars to the English stage. Molly Picon, Bertha Kalich, Jacob Ben-Ami, Moscowitz and Ludwig Satz all have demonstrated their talent in English with marked success. With them and a few others gone there would not be very much left to salvage. But this catastrophe does not seem imminent.