

Dora Sowden Writes From A Window In Europe

IN London there are two permanent Yiddish theatres. They are both in the East End, within one bus-stop of each other, and as far as buildings go there is very little to choose between them. The Grand Palais in Commercial Road has bigger floor space and its seats make more effort to be comfortable, but you can hear better in the Folk House in Adler Street. In neither is the stage really adequate for a professional and full-sized company.

Why, then, do I write about them? Because they are one of the peculiar, interesting and almost inexplicable phenomena of Jewish life in London—and in some ways one of its saddest aspects.

You would think that here in the East End, in the area that harboured the prototypes of Zangwill's characters, you would find glimmerings of the life and soul that made the Jew of Lithuania a scholar and the Jew of Poland a mystic. You see it in the audience very occasionally. Here and there is a type that might have sat for a portrait of "Bonze Shweig." And the old crone who slips into the six-bob seats from the four-and-six-pennies as soon as the lights go down is also a deathless figure. But only very, very rarely do you find any of the old spirit on the stage.

Play of Manger

It is more often to be found in Adler Street, where Myer Zelniker heads the New Yiddish Theatre and gets aid for his productions from the Arts Council of Britain. There, now and again, a play is produced that has meaning for a wider audience than can be drawn from E.1 to the furthestmost eastern suburbs. There, for instance, "The Merchant of Venice" was nobly presented. And there, too, recently a play by Itzik Manger was offered with sets and costumes that did wonders to the tiny stage. Lighting and acting, in spite of shortcomings on the one hand and stylised exaggeration on the other, were a pleasure to watch. The play was called "A Goldfadden Dream" and was based on a poem of Manger's, originally called "The Worker of Magic." Even without knowing the original one could detect from the production that what appeared on the stage was a garbled version. For the producer, Jacob Rothbaum, a one-time director of the Vilna Troupe and lately of the New York Yiddish stage, is obviously not a poet in the same sense as the author. The result (aided and abetted by two "theatre doctors") did not escape the usual stereotyped situations of the Jewish play.

Yet there was life and vision in this show, and hope not only for the Jew but even for Yiddish in its unfolding and in the enthusiasm with which the audience received it and the wholly English (and non-Jewish) manager (I think) spoke of it after the performance on the first night.

So it was with some measure of confidence that I went to the Grand Palais to see Peretz Hirschbein's "The Forsaken Inn," presented as a 25th anniversary celebration of the theatre management. It appears that a quarter of a century ago Nathan Isaacovitch, actor and manager, started his association with this theatre, and since his death his wife has continued his work. The reigning "stars" are Mark Markov and Eta Topel, who, I believe, are from America, and it was Mr. Markov who was billed as producer of Hirschbein's masterpiece.

What a disappointment! It was not merely that all the actors (except Mr. Markov) shouted so much that you could not hear them. Yiddish actors very often use falsetto and badly placed voices when they wish to por-



ITZIK MANGER

tray emotion for some reason. It was not that the costumes were a dreadful hotch-potch of 1908 village garb and pre-war town dress. It was not only that the lighting was careless and the pace and tension of the play just non-existent.

There was in me the horrible feeling that neither the actors nor the audience understood what the play was about at all. The actors rushed and roared and ranted through its delicate scenes as if they were anxious to catch the last bus. The audience either whispered or snoozed or ate sandwiches. And when the Inn at last went up in flames (real smoke at the window) and the demented father cried that the "shades" were after him, I was sure that it must have been the indignant ghost of the great writer himself.

On Saturday Night

During one of the intervals one of the ushers with the smallness of the audience and remarked that "The Holy Sabbath" in Adler Street had drawn a full house the previous Saturday night. The usher replied with energy that they could also show full houses on Saturday nights (this was Monday). I felt certain that it

was not when Hirschbein was staged but rather when "The Forgotten Bride" or the "Eternal Lover" or "The Wedding Dress" or a song-and-dance show was on the bill that the house was full.

It seems that Jews, who are usually among the finest exponents of the best music and the greatest patrons of the arts, will sit through a show where the song-writer does not know a note of music and the singers haven't a real note in their voices. In the Yiddish Theatre they not only sit through it. They come and ask for more. And that is why, for the most part, the two permanent Yiddish theatres in London live by Gipsy Musicals and Strangers from America and the Hearts of Children. And only occasionally is there any symptom that Yiddish has had a great past.

The question that puzzles me, however, is: How long can this go on? Surely this is not a living theatre? Surely the passing of every old age pensioner in Whitechapel means the irreplaceable loss of a theatregoer for this kind of thing? Why is nothing being done to make the younger generation interested in the Yiddish theatre?

I am not overlooking the fact that a "Jewish Cultural Centre" is being planned for Whitechapel to include a better theatre and that a "delegation" has actually gone to America to "establish permanent contact with American Jewish culture" and to "assemble material and equipment . . . at present unobtainable in this country." But bricks and mortar will not make a theatre if there is no soul inside.

If the younger audiences do not want Goldfadden and do not like Hirschbein, give them song and dance. But give them also dancers who can dance and singers who can sing. Give them music that has meaning in Jewish life, performers who can convey a message. If you leave out of account the two Zelnikers (father and daughter) and David Segal and perhaps Mark Markov (who could be good), there is not much to choose between Yiddish theatre in South Africa and Yiddish theatre in London, though ours is occasional and London has something professional and permanent. Certainly, there is

no one better here in the Yiddish theatre than our own Fivel Zygielbaum. But then, as I see it, there is also no one to act for. There is no audience of a kind which can keep alive any new Yiddish writers or sufficiently revive the old ones.

Cause For Sadness

That is why the state of the Yiddish theatre in London is a cause for sadness in spite of "association with the Arts Council of Britain," in spite of crowded Saturday nights and in spite of projected new buildings. Apart from the talent of the Zelnikers and their indomitable persistence, there is nothing to sustain the standard of Yiddish acting. Apart from an occasional flicker like Manger's poetic comedy, there is little or no fresh inspiration. The old streams appear dried up, without appeal for the rising generation. No wonder each first night brings with it an exhortation from actors or managers to the audiences to bring friends, relations, sisters, cousins, aunts.

As one who loves the Yiddish language, I must mourn. As one who admires the great Yiddish work of the past century, I can only trust that its spirit will be translated into the Hebrew "bamah" if it can find no home in the "forsaken inn" of the Yiddish theatre.

I understand that Myer Zelniker is considering a production of Fivel Zygielbaum's "Ghettograd." As yet no definite news has reached me, but if it does materialise it will undoubtedly be a feather in South Africa's cap as well as a fillip to the jaded temper of Yiddish drama in England. I understand also that new Yiddish theatres are being built in the U.S.S.R.—in Birobijan and other places. I hear that a Yiddish theatre of one kind or another still holds several floors in the U.S.A. Perhaps, then, after all, there is still hope elsewhere for the Yiddish stage. Frankly, I cannot see it in England.

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