

The Yiddish Art-Theatre Movement

An Interesting Effort in Johannesburg

IN spite of the great crisis which the dramatic theatre is passing through as a result of the advent of the talking picture, the Yiddish stage seems to experience at present a great revival. Far from resting upon the laurels of the great success of "Yoshe Kalb,"—a play which took New York by storm and attracted the greatest attention of dramatic critics in the States—Maurice Schwartz is now busily engaged upon Zeitlin's masterpiece, "Helmer Chachomin," whilst yet another Yiddish company is producing with great success Peretz Hirschbein's "A Story of Old."

The so-called "operetta" and old-fashioned melodrama, which has been the fare of the Yiddish theatregoer for so many years, and to which Jewish audiences in this country have been treated often and enough, is evidently on the decline. In fact, one wonders lately whether performances of this nature, with their attendant hotch-potch of sentimentalism, mushy song and super-romantic dialogue, with the inevitable *schadechan* and *badechan*, can at all claim the attention of our public, at least so far as this country is concerned.

To the young Jewish immigrant in this country, chiefly a product of the modern Jewish school and environment in Eastern Europe, the old-fashioned Yiddish touring company has no appeal, and this is perhaps the main reason why the Yiddish theatre is losing ground in South Africa. As for the better class of Yiddish companies, there is little feasible hope that a visit by them to this country can materialise. Their work is essentially based upon collective effort, and any one of their performances here would necessitate the transportation of at least two dozen actors, not to speak of musicians, technicians, decorations and settings, which are part of the performances as much as the actors themselves.

THE only solution for the future of the Yiddish stage in this country is inevitably a determined effort on the part of amateurs through the medium of a well-organised and extensively planned Dramatic Art Studio. That this is by no means an impossible task here is proven by the wonderful achievements of our major Yiddish theatres abroad, which began life with small groups of amateurs. The Habimah, the Moscow Art Theatre, in the past, and the Workers' Ohel of Tel-Aviv at present, have all their human material recruited from the ranks of the *Yeshiva Bocher* and young Jewish provincials, who naturally had no theatrical tradition behind them. And it was the very same type of young man and woman who were to be seen on the stage of the Jewish Guild in Johannesburg in their first performance on Saturday evening last.

These Johannesburg amateurs are fortunate in having at their head Mr. Simche Natan, a member of the famous Vilna Troupe, and under his direction they managed to give a spectacle which is certainly the major achievement in the field of Jewish amateur effort in this country.

The play which they chose for their first production is a dramatic poem by J. L. Peretz, entitled "At Night on the Old Market Place." Both in scope of its theme and in the manner of its presentation by the writer it is certainly by far superior to Anskey's "Dybuk." In

a nutshell, Peretz contrived to condense within short and often spasmodic dialogue all the light and shade—shade more than light—in Jewish life. Almost every sentence is a concise summary of an important problem of Jewish existence, either philosophic or historical or contemporary.

IN this "dream of a feverish night" Peretz reduces to a minimum the distance between mortal and immortal and "God seemeth to descend upon earth." The border between life and death is completely removed. Heaven and earth combine to form a background for the presentation of life's problems, which by themselves are real and natural. Through the medium of a gallery of types, chosen from every stratum of the Jewish social structure, the *sturm* and *drang*, period of Jewish life in the early days of this century is presented to the audience without undue elaboration. The pious and the unfaithful, the usurer and the saint, the middleman and the pogrom victim, the Socialist and the Zionist, as seen by Peretz, all find their expression within the limited space of this three-act play.

To attempt a presentation of a play of this calibre is a Herculean task and all credit is due to the very ambitious studio, which has taken to its work with the greatest care and diligence, and to its most capable producer. The choice of the play for the debut was a wise one. The types vary from the tragic to the comic, from the supernatural to the real. Most of the mass scenes, in which over forty people participate, require collective effort. The members of the Studio were thus given a fine opportunity of proving their talent—without undue emphasis upon "star" artists, which are

the bugbear of any truly artistic dramatic enterprise.

For this reason it is unnecessary to comment upon the individual achievement of each actor. The only question which has to be answered is whether there is sufficient promise in this first attempt. The answer is certainly in the affirmative. There is a goodly number of promising talent amongst the players, and under the expert guidance of their producer, Mr. Natan (who is prepared to stay here for the purpose), a dramatic studio may evolve which will be a cultural asset to the Jewish community in South Africa.

It is now left to those who are interested in the development of Jewish culture to give this movement their care and assistance, so as to enable these clever amateurs to carry on without undue haste (as has been the case with the present performance which was staged after sixteen rehearsals) upon their very useful career.

In the meantime everyone, even those with whom Yiddish is not a mother tongue, is advised to see this play, which is an intellectual treat in the full sense of the word.

C. Gershtater.

Habonim Camp at Humewood

AT eleven a.m. on Sunday the Witwatersrand Section of the Second Annual Habonim Camp will leave Park Station for Port Elizabeth. Over 100 members of the Habonim Movement are attending this camp from all parts of South Africa, and the Port Elizabeth Jewish community has arranged a most interesting programme.

It will be remembered that the first annual Habonim Camp was held at Parys in 1932 and was an unqualified success. Since then the movement has developed on an unprecedented scale. Whilst at that time it had a membership of only 400, the present membership of the movement is over 1,300. All visitors to Port Elizabeth this year should make a point of visiting the camp at Humewood, where they will be most welcome.

A GUIDE TO BEAUTY

HEALTH IS BEAUTY! This is a maxim which should be written in flaming letters in every South African Home.

If you wish to possess bright, sparkling eyes, if you long to have ruby lips and rosy cheeks; if, in short, you wish the glory of youth to be eternally yours, then drink sparkling "GRAPINE" for dashing vigour in the morning, and for soothing restfulness at eventide.

"GRAPINE" is a blood purifier and corrective for indigestion and constipation; it helps nature in a gentle and mild manner and is a pleasant thirst quencher at all times.

"Grapine" is Recommended by Doctors

"The National Drink of South Africa."

Manufactured by—

Crystallizers, Ltd. - - - Johannesburg.

GRAPINE
HEALTH SALT

Grapine Grapine Grapine Grapine

Grapine Grapine Grapine Grapine