Raffaele Esposito

A STAGE FOR THE REVOLUTION. YIDDISH AND HEBREW WORKERS' THEATRES IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

On the 27th of October 1936 twenty-one theatres across the United States simultaneously premiered *It can't happen here*, a stage adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's same-titled political dystopian novel, which imagined a fascist dictatorship in the United States. The event opening on that night featured different productions of the same play staged by many companies in various languages, including Yiddish. It was a significant achievement of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), one of the government-sponsored programmes established as part of the New Deal during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency.[1]

The FTP also supported and included theatres of the minorities, and its Yiddish division entertained large audiences in New York, Boston, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The Yiddish version of *It can't happen here* at the Biltmore Theatre in New York, starring Julius Adler and showcasing a very young Sidney Lumet, ran until May 1937, playing eighty-six performances to 25,160 people.[2] On the opening night in New York City, FTP director Hallie Flanagan attended the first act of the English-language production at the Adelphi Theatre, saw the second act in Yiddish at the nearby Biltmore, and then returned to the Adelphi to see the last act. The Yiddish production, in her own words, was «a better show».[3]

Funding to the FTP was cancelled in 1939, following the accusation of its being communist propaganda. Summoned before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Flanagan was notoriously asked by a congressman if playwrights Christopher Marlowe and «Mr Euripides» were communists.[4] The Yiddish division of the FTP followed its fate and did not survive the shutdown. But Yiddish political theatre in the United States had existed long before the project was started. It had developed as an original and autonomous expression of the American Jewish community, rooted in the unique experience of Jewish immigrants.

At the dawn of the 20th century, a life of deprivation and hardship was not seldom the norm for the Jewish masses, both in the Eastern European *alte land* («old country») and among immigrants throughout the Western World. Even the United States, despite being labelled *goldene medine*, was far from being a «golden State». It is precisely from the «salty sea of human tears», as a poem by Ansky goes,[5] that Jewish leftist activism emerged, most notably

[1] Over the years, the project funded more than two hundred theatres nationwide, employing thousands of men and women and entertaining millions. Cf. H. Flanagan, *Arena. The history of the Federal Theatre*, B. Blom, New York 1965 (1940); N. Sandrow, *Vagabond stars. A world history of Yiddish theater*, Limelight, New York 1986 (1977), pp. 284-285; J.H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American theatre in the twentieth century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, pp. 131-144; A. Attisani, *Maurice Schwartz e i teatri d'arte yiddish*, Accademia University Press, Torino 2018, p. 164.

[2] J.D. Mathews, *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, relief, and politics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1967, p. 100; J. Schechter, *Messiahs of 1933. How American Yiddish theatre survived adversity through satire*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA 2008, pp. 105-111.

[3] Flanagan, *Arena*, cit., p. 124.

[4] B. Nightingale, *Mr. Euripides goes to Washington*, «New York Times», 18 September 1988, p. 14; Houchin, *Censorship*, cit., pp. 144-154.

[5] Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport (1863-1920), known as S. Ansky, was a Jewish Russian author, play-

represented in Europe by the Bund.[6] The most popular form of entertainment for Jewish masses, namely Yiddish theatre, could not but be an expression of such activism.

The red Messiah: Yiddish theatre and the American Left

A decade before the creation of the FTP, one of the major Yiddish theatre companies in America had developed from a radical workers' theatre. It was the Artef, acronym for *Arbeter Teater Farband* («Workers' Theatre Association»), which had its origins in the youth organisations of the Communist Party.[7] In 1925, the Yiddish communist daily *Morgn Frayheyt* («Morning Freedom») began fostering the idea of a radical theatre as a reaction both to the old folk plays and to the commercial vaudeville or melodrama labelled as *shund*, a Yiddish term for «literary rubbish». The call was responded to by a group of actors from the Young Workers League, who formed an amateur company called *Frayheyt Dramatishe Sektsye* («Frayheyt Drama Section»). The group later renamed itself Frayheyt Studio and merged with the left wing of the *Folks Farband far Kunst Teater* («People's Association for Art Theatre»). In the meantime, the latter was taken over by the communists, resulting in the socialists leaving in protest, and was renamed *Arbeter Teater Farband*, better known as the Artef.

The Frayheyt Studio, later called Artef Studio, began its training with nineteen acting students aged between eighteen and twenty-five. A second group was admitted in 1928 and others in the following years, training six generations of 120 students over a decade. Students worked their day jobs in shops or factories, after which they attended classes or rehearsed shows in the evening, supporting the studio with part of their income. The Artef was meant as a proletarian theatre aimed at—and made by—proletarians. Accordingly, throughout most of its lifetime it remained an amateur theatre, in the sense that actors did not make a living out of performances, whose revenues were used to self-fund study and productions.

The studio was first directed by Jacob Mestel, a poet, a theatre critic, and an actor who had performed in the Yiddish theatre in Europe before moving to America and that would later act in English.[8] As a teacher of the Artef Studio, he was soon joined by several colleagues: the famed dancer and choreographer Michel Fokine,

wright, ethnographer, and socialist activist. Among other things, he wrote *The dybbuk*, one of the most popular Jewish plays of all time. The quoted phrase (Yiddish: *In zaltsikn yam fun mentshlekhe trern*) is the opening line of *Tsum Bund* («To the Bund»), a poem by Ansky dedicated to the Jewish Labour party. It was published in 1902 in a London socialist Yiddish periodical, *Der idisher arbeter* («The Jewish Worker»), along with the equally famous *Di shvue* («The Oath»). Both songs were set to music and became anthems of the party (G. Safran, *Wandering soul. The Dybbuk's creator, S. An-sky*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 2010, p. 100).

[6] *Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poyln un Rusland* («The General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia»), known simply as the Bund or the Jewish Labour Bund, was founded by Marxist Jews in Vilna in 1897. Prior to the Bolshevik seizure of power, it was the major Jewish political party in Russia, as well as in Poland, where it survived until 1949. On political radicalism in the 20th-century Yiddish-speaking world, see A. Brossat, S. Klingberg, *Revolutionary Yiddishland. A history of Jewish radicalism*, transl. D. Fernbach, Verso, London and New York 2016 (1983).

[7] For a detailed history of the Artef, an illustration of its ideology, and an analysis of its productions, see E. Nahshon, *Yiddish proletarian theatre. The art and politics of the Artef, 1925-1940*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT 1998. See also: Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, cit., pp. 278-284; S. Kanfer, *Stardust lost. The triumph, tragedy, and* mishugas *of the Yiddish theater in America*, Vintage, New York 2009, chapter 11; E. Nahshon, *Yiddish political theater: the Artef*, in Id. (ed.), *New York's Yiddish theater. From the Bowery to Broadway*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, pp. 174-191; J. Polster, *A new approach to revolution. Artef and Hirsh Lekert in the Third Period*, in J. Fisher (ed.), *To have or have not. Essays on commerce and capital in modernist theatre*, McFarland, Jefferson, NC and London 2011, pp. 157-170.

[8] Jacob Mestel was born in 1884 in the Austro-Hungarian Galicia, where he began his writing career as a poet and an essayist. After moving to Vienna, he performed in the Yiddish theatre and stud-

from the Ballets Russes, taught dance and movement; Dr Yankev Shatski[9] taught theatre history; Mendl Elkin[10] taught dramaturgy. But the most enduring influence came from the make-up teacher—Benno Schneider.[11] The director of the Folksbiene,[12] Schneider was also a former member of Habima, the first Hebrew-language professional theatre, which operated since 1918 under the auspices of the Moscow Art Theatre.[13] Therefore, he had worked with Evgenij Vachtangov and Konstantin Stanislavskij, besides being familiar with the work of Vsevolod Mejerchol'd. He eventually left the Folksbiene and stayed at the Artef, where he succeeded Mestel as the artistic director and brought his Russian experience with the revolutionary theatre.

In 1928 the Artef began to perform in front of audiences at communist celebrations, making its debut with the *Mass play and ballet of the Russian Revolution* (*Masn shpil un balet fun der rusishe revolutsye*) at the Madison Square Garden in front of fifteen or twenty thousand spectators. The next show, presented to an audience of two thousand people at Manhattan Central Opera House, was *Strike* (*Strayk*) by Nathaniel Buchwald and Boruch Fester. The training actors returned to the Madison Square Garden with *Red-yellow-black* (*Royt-gel-shvarts*), a history of the labour movement told through songs, dances, and speeches, and closing on the notes of the Internationale.

In December of that same year, the Artef made its debut with a first major production at President Theatre on 48th Street—*At the gate* (*Baym toyer*). Written by Beynush Shteyman, a young poet and playwright killed in the Russian civil war, it was a symbolic play on tyrannical oppression in three different periods of history. An enthusiastic review obviously came from the *Frayheyt*, with an article titled *Undzer groyser nitsokhn* («Our great victory»), which was not exactly devoid of communist rhetoric:

> Our actor brings with him a new message—the message of a red sun on a pale horizon (…) I have seen him—our new actor, the carrier of the idea of the red Messiah (…) Our actor plays out the pain and anger of the masses. He himself is the masses and therefore he is part and parcel of those who sit across the footlights. Our actor throws theatrical fi-

ied directing and dramaturgy. In 1920 he settled in the United States, where he acted and directed in several Yiddish theatres. He also played a recurring role in the popular English-language comedy show *The Goldbergs*, broadcast on American radio (1929-1946) and television (1949-1956). He died in New York in 1958.

[9] Yankev Shatski (also Jakub Szacki, Jacob Schatsky) was a renowned Jewish historian, researcher in the fields of Yiddish literature, theatre, and folklore. Born in Warsaw in 1893, he served as an officer in the Polish legion of Józef Piłsudski during World War I. After earning his PhD from the University of Warsaw, he emigrated to the United States, where he died in 1956.

[10] Mendl Elkin, born in Byelorussia in 1874, had acted in both Russian and Yiddish theatre. In 1923 he arrived in New York, where he was active as an editor, an essayist, a poet, a drama teacher, a stage director, and an initiator of various theatre companies and associations. After the relocation of the YIVO, the Institute for Jewish Research, from Vilna to New York, Elkin was its librarian until his death in 1962.

[11] Benno Schneider (1902-1977) «was praised both inside and outside of the Yiddish community for his visionary and harmonious directing, and he would soon become a star director, whom professional theatre companies would try to lure away from the Artef» (V.J. Hohman 2011, *Russian culture and theatrical performance in America, 1891-1933*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, p. 131). In the 1940s he moved to Hollywood, where he continued to direct stage plays while also working in the film industry as an acting instructor and coach.

[12] Founded in 1915, the Folskbiene («People's Stage») is the oldest continuously operating theatre in the United States.

[13] Habima («the pulpit» or «the stage» in Hebrew) was founded by Nahum Zemach and Menahem Gnessin, pioneers of the Hebrew-language theatre already active in the Russian empire and Ottoman Palestine, with Hanna Rovina, a schoolteacher destined to become the most iconic star of the Hebrew stage. In 1926 the company embarked for an international tour and never went back to the Soviet Union. Five years later it finally settled in Mandate Palestine and in the 1940s a prominent building was specially built in the heart of Tel Aviv, where the company is active up to the present day. Since 1958 it is officially recognised as the National Theatre of Israel.

re into the masses. For such an actor we have waited, of such a theatre we have dreamed.[14]

The play was met with mixed reviews in the Yiddish press. In radical circles, its messianic theme appeared contradictory with the communist principle that only the masses can free themselves. The staging was also criticised as too «artsy» and «bourgeois»,[15] and therefore contrary to the spirit of revolutionary theatre. A similar reception was shared by most subsequent productions, invariably criticised by non-communists for being too polemic and by communists for not being revolutionary enough. At the First National Workers' Theatre Conference and Spartakiade held in New York in 1932, the Artef was stigmatised as a bourgeois art theatre, also for using large and unwieldy sets. Such views were shared even by Buchwald, co-founder and mentor of the company, who claimed that the Artef neglected its agitprop activity in favour of art theatre.

Criticism from the Left does not seem groundless, since the members of the Artef, who were committed to art and high culture, seemed more at ease with literary drama and experimentation than with anti-capitalist skits and mere propaganda at party events. This perception may be influenced by the available sources, which favour major productions over agitprop activity. Nevertheless, we remember Artef today precisely because its theatrical mission went well beyond the role of a mere party mouthpiece. It has been observed that «the company's most significant and new feature was the fulfilment of something unique: a popular, amusing, and understandable theatre that was also radical in its content and sophisticated in its poetics».[16] Artef's productions, whose model was neither Second Avenue (the Yiddish theatre district in the Lower East Side of Manhattan) nor Broadway, were indeed a novelty. Benno Schneider left his mark with a grotesque style recalling the theatre of Mejerchol'd and other European experiences, such as Moscow's Goset (State Yiddish Theatre) and the Yung Teater of Warsaw, along with some American ones, such as the Prolet-Bühne. The constructivist stage of the Artef thus moved away from the naturalism that was establishing itself at the time on the American scene. With stylized poses, choreographed mass scenes, and an economy of movements favouring groups over individuals, which were the aesthetic outcome of its ideological orientation, the Artef adopted a style that on the Yiddish scene would become associated with art.

Whatever the judgement of the contemporaries about the adherence of the Artef to a certain idea of revolutionary theatre, it remained at any rate an affiliated theatre. And it was an affiliated theatre in a seminal period—the «third», according to Soviet directives. At the 1928 Sixth World Congress of the Comintern, Stalin had declared that capitalism was entering its «third period», which would mean its final collapse, following its rise and stabilisation. According to this doctrine, the revolution was imminent, but non-communist leftist forces, such as socialists and social democrats, stood in the way of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Therefore, following the line dictated from Moscow, communists could no longer align with those parties, which were labelled as «social fascists». Besides causing a radicalisation of communist militants, the doctrine was a hindrance to a united front against fascism. Militant theatre was directly involved, since the Comintern called for plays educating the workers on the doctrine. Given the scarcity of militant plays written in Yiddish by contemporary American playwrights, the Artef had to look elsewhere, producing a heterogeneous repertoire that included new readings of Yiddish classics, plays on the American working class, and Soviet plays.

While the Artef was moving its first steps, distant events played a part in exacerbating the internal conflict in the American Jewish Community between the Left and the Right—communists and socialists, respectively—with unavoidable consequences for the theatre. In the

[14] Quoted in Polster, *A new approach to revolution*, cit., p. 163.

[15] A reviewer from *Morgn Zhurnal* quoted in Nahshon, *Yiddish political theater*, cit., p. 180.

[16] A. Attisani, *Tutto era musica. Indice sommario per un atlante della scena yiddish*, Accademia University Press, Torino 2016, p. 192 (translation mine).

summer of 1929, the Arab riots in the British Mandate of Palestine caused the massacre of the Jews from Hebron and many other victims throughout the country. The events, which were reminiscent of pogroms in Russia, received wide coverage by the Yiddish press and inevitably shook the American Jewish community. The *Frayheyt*, at first, condemned the massacres, except that it made a U-turn in the following days with a fierce attack on Zionism, charged with being the real cause of the riots. The newspaper was following the guidelines of the Kremlin, which, in that stage, included Zionism in its struggle against British imperialism. A policy in stark contrast to the common feeling led to a boycott of the newspaper, which was abandoned by advertisers, including Yiddish theatres, and to a resolute anti-communist stance from many leftist artists and intellectuals who had hitherto sympathised with the movement. Communists, in their turn, carried out a counter-boycott, keeping away from the so-called bourgeois theatres. The tension subsided towards the end of the following year, yet the Artef continued to suffer from a certain hostility.

The year 1930 nonetheless saw the company's first big success with *Aristocrats* (*Ristokratn*), based on a one-act play by Sholem Aleichem, *People* (*Mentshn*), and directed by Benno Schneider. The show was noteworthy for its way of stylistically marking the class differences between masters and servants: lower-class people acted in a natural way whereas the rich appeared as grotesque figures characterised by stylised movements. At the end of the season, the studio presented *Benjamin Quixote* (*Binyomin Kikhote*), adapted from *The travels of Benjamin III*, an 1878 Yiddish novel by Mendele Moykher Sforim, which had been staged in a different adaptation by the Goset in Moscow in 1927. The play, directed by Schneider, was adapted by Moyshe Nadir, a satirical writer who had already worked for the theatre with Maurice Schwartz,[17] as well as for several periodicals. Nadir (a penname meaning «Here you are» in Yiddish), who was a member of the Communist Party and a contributor to the *Frayheyt*, also wrote a play staged by the Artef in 1933, *Messiah in America* (*Meshiekh in Amerike*), a satire on the show business and the false messiahs of capitalism.

Another satire on false messiahs and their promises was staged by the Artef in the season 1930-31. It was *Diamonds* (*Brilyantn*), a comedy by Soviet Yiddish author Avrom Vevyorke taken from his 1925 story *Comrade Shindel* (*Khaver Shindel*). Already staged in Moscow in 1926 under the title *137 children houses* (*137 kinder-hayzer*), it was among the Goset's worst failures. Based on *The government inspector* (*Revizor*, 1836) by Gogol', a classical satire on corruption in Russian society, the comedy transferred the action to a Jewish context in contemporary post-revolutionary Russia. «Comrade Shindel» introduces himself to the inhabitants of a *shtetl* as a government official from Moscow and claims to be on a mission for the building of orphanages. Since he claims to act in the name of the proletariat, he is welcomed as a sort of messiah, but his actual mission is diamond smuggling. The trickster is eventually arrested by the Čeka, the political police, which thus guarantees the victory of Soviet justice. It is nonetheless worthy of note that this comedy without heroes and heroism acknowledged the existence of black market and corruption in Soviet Russia. Also, the satirical choice about the wrongdoer's language, who adopts the classical revolutionary jargon and exploits its rhetoric to his own advantage, should have sounded as bordering on the blaspheme in Moscow in 1926 and among Soviet loyalists in New York four years later. Also written by a Soviet author, Shmuel Godiner, was the opening show of the same season, *Jim Copperhead* (*Dzhim Kuperkop*), a play about a sort of mechanical golem who unites with the workers in the struggle to overthrow the bosses. The sets designed by Boris Aronson for this show created an oppressive futuristic atmosphere reminiscent of the then recent German film *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang.

[17] Maurice Schwartz (1890-1960) was one of the most prominent Yiddish stage and film actors in the United States. In 1918 he founded the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York City and was its director and producer until it permanently closed in 1950. Schwartz's success and influence earned him the nickname «Mr. Second Avenue».

The following season (1931-32) opened with *Drought* (*Trikenish*), a play on a non-Jewish subject adapted into Yiddish from *Can you hear their voices? A play of our time*, by Hallie Flanagan and Margaret Ellen Clifford, which in turn was based on *Can you make out their voices*, a story by Whittaker Chambers. Anticipating by almost a decade John Steinbeck's *The grapes of wrath* (1939), Chambers's story told the drama of farmers from the Central United States stricken by the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl. A more decided call for revolution came from the following show directed by Schneider during the same season, *Hirsh Lekert*, written by Soviet Yiddish author Aron Kušnirov (1929). The eponymous hero was a Jewish Russian socialist hanged in 1902 for the attempted killing of general Victor von Wahl, the ruthless czarist governor of Vilna. Deemed a forerunner of the 1905 Revolution and risen to a symbol of revolutionary martyrdom, Lekert was an icon of the Bund. Several poems and plays were dedicated to him, including a play by H. Leivick, already staged by the Artef a few years before.[18] The 1932 production of Kušnirov's *Lekert*, which was one of the Artef's most successful shows and was revived in a new version four years later,[19] drew a parallel between the Russian events of 1905 and the contemporary condition in the United States, spurring the audience into revolutionary action. The choice of the text and its reading fully subscribed to the Third Period doctrine, whose influence, however, subsided by the middle of the decade. The change came again from the Comintern: following the rise of Nazism, which attested to the failure of the ultra-leftist model, Moscow became more receptive to the collaboration with non-communist leftist parties, thus accepting the Popular Front strategy.

The Artef production that in 1934 marked the passage to the new political phase was *Recruits* (*Rekrutn*), Soviet author Lipe Resnick's adaptation of a tragicomical anti-chassidic play published in 1862 by Israel Aksenfeld (*Der ershter yidisher rekrut in Rusland*, «The first Jewish recruit in Russia»). The story takes place in 1827, following the decree issued by czar Nicholas I that made it compulsory also for Jews to provide quotas of recruits for the military service, which lasted twenty-five years. When the Jews of the fictional Nibivale (Russian *nebyvalo*, «unprecedented») are compelled to provide a recruit, the notables of the town resort to corruption and manipulation to save their own sons. A tailor who takes a stand in defence of workers, exposing abuses of the religious power and of the bourgeoisie, is framed by his enemies and handed over to the army as a recruit. Directed by Schneider, *Recruits* was an unprecedented success with the public. The staging «in the stylized manner of the Habima troupe» was appreciated by reviewer William Schack, who deemed it «well worth the attention of the Broadway playgoer».[20] The great success attracted the attention of non-Jewish theatre experts. Brooks Atkinson, after having seen *Recruits*, praised the Artefniks on the *Times* and lamented the lack of notoriety, which did not do justice to their worth.

> By day they are factory and office workers. But for the last six years they have been squandering their evenings on acting. Now, under the patient direction of Benno Schneider, who was once with the celebrated Habima troupe, they have achieved a style of orchestrated performance that is one of the artistic ornaments of this town (…) If the Artef players had come here, properly promoted, from Europe, every theatregoer interested in the fine art of acting would know them for what they are worth. Our theatregoing is so systematized that we often ignore the good things that are hidden in the gloom of our side streets.[21]

From «the gloom of our side streets» the Artef had just moved to a new venue, the President Theatre, a 298-seat house at 247 West 48th

[18] Cf. W.S. [W. Schack], *In memory of a hero*, «New York Times», 11 March 1936, p. 23, where it is stated that the Artef staged *Hirsh Lekert* by Leivick as well. Cf. N. Buchwald, *Hirsch Lekert at the Artef*, «New Masses» 18, 13 (1936), p. 26.

[19] *Ibid*.

[20] W.S. [W. Schack], *Artef opens uptown in noteworthy play*, «New York Times», 13 October 1934, p. 10.

[21] B. Atkinson, *The Artef in Yiddish*, «New York Times», 12 March 1935, p. 24.

Street, inside the boundaries of the Theater District of Manhattan. It seems odd at least that a workers' theatre moved to Broadway in the same year as a politically engaged playwright, Elmer Rice, publicly announced his bitter farewell to a district where «theatre is in the hands of business men (…) whose chief interest is to capitalize the creative talents of authors and actors and turn them into dollars and cents».[22] But even «the red Messiah» apparently needed the box office takings. After years wandering from one venue to another, including the ones supplied by trade unions, the new place, in conjunction with a greater political openness, allowed the Artef to extend its audiences.

In this period the company resorted again to the beloved and hugely popular Sholem Aleichem, whose work, even though non-political, could be easily adopted by a militant theatre thanks to the general sentiment of human compassion emerging from a realistic depiction of social inequality and the attention towards the humble. Sholem Aleichem's active support for Zionism could be overlooked. The season 1936-37 opened with his comedy *200,000* or *The jackpot* (*Dos groyse gevins*), already staged successfully by the Goset in Moscow in 1923 and by Maurice Schwartz in New York in 1928. The comedy stages the story of a humble tailor who suddenly becomes rich by winning the lottery and then, after many vicissitudes, appreciates the simplicity of his old life. Benno Schneider, who directed the show with sets by Solotaroff, choreography by Benyamin Zemach, and music by Ben Yomen, probably knew the Goset's reading of the play, also used by others in Brooklyn in 1931.[23] That approach «suffered from exaggerated Chagallism», according to Moyshe Nadir,[24] who thus described as a flaw one of the best traits of Moscow's Yiddish theatre. David Ben-Gurion, who had the opportunity to see a performance of *200,000* during a visit to Moscow in 1923, went as far as to affirm that he had not recognised the spirit of Sholem Aleichem in the Goset's production. The elements that he criticised were exactly the ones in which we immediately see the poetics of Marc Chagall.[25] As a matter of fact, the sets for *200,000* were designed by Isaak Rabičev two years after Chagall's break-up with the Goset's director Aleksandr Granovskij.[26] Chagall had only designed sets, costumes, and make-up for the one-act plays of the *Sholem Aleichem Evening* (*Sholem Aleykhem ovnt*), the inaugural show of the Goset that debuted on the 1st of January 1921. That show had taken «the form of living Chagall paintings», according to the favourable description by Soviet critic Abram Efros.[27] It is nonetheless clear that the work of Chagall, which continued to influence both the succeeding scenographers and the actors, starting from Solomon Michoels, had left a mark on the poetics of the Goset.[28] His dreamlike imagery, populated by upside-down goats, fiddlers on the roofs, and sharp-coloured figures moving in a space detached from the earth, reflected and at the same time influenced a concept of theatre decisively moving away from naturalism. But his influence goes well beyond a contribution to Soviet Yiddish theatre, considering that our *shtetl* imagery owes much to Chagall's reading

[22] E. Rice, *Elmer Rice says farewell to Broadway*, «New York Times», 11 November 1934, X, pp. 1-3, p. 3.

[23] Nahshon, *Yiddish proletarian theatre*, cit., p. 158.

[24] Quoted in Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 4, Nyu York 1963, p. 3433.

[25] B. Harshav, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater. Art on stage in the time of Revolution*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT and London 2008, p. 29.

[26] Also in Moscow, Chagall was invited to design the sets for *The dybbuk*, the Hebrew-language production directed by Vachtangov that in 1922 would bring worldwide fame to the young company Habima, the future National Theatre of Israel. In that case, disagreements with the director put an end to the collaboration even before starting the work. For a more unbiased reconstruction than the one offered by the painter himself, see E. Tolstoy, *Chagall in Moscow*, in H. Weiss, R. Katsman, B. Kotlerman (eds), *Around the point. Studies in Jewish literature and culture in multiple languages*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2014, pp. 514-540.

[27] A. Efros, *Chudožniki teatra Granovskogo*, «Iskusstvo» 4, 1-2 (1928), pp. 53-74, p. 64 (translation mine).

[28] See A. Attisani, *Solomon Michoels e Veniamin Zuskin. Vite parallele nell'arte e nella morte*, Accademia University Press, Torino 2013, pp. 32-62.

of Sholem Aleichem. It is perhaps no overstatement to affirm that Chagall's figurative strength contributed to a large extent to the shaping of modern Jewish imagery.

In the wake of its Soviet predecessor, the Artef production of *200,000* on Broadway was as much distant from a naturalistic interpretation of Sholem Aleichem. Social inequality was underlined through the grotesque, resulting in a reading of Sholem Aleichem that placed the issues of class at its centre and emphasised both the vanity of the privileged and the misery of the dispossessed through stylised, non-naturalistic acting. According to the *Times*'s reviewer, who praised the «gay ensemble of willing marionettes», this production was «one of the most genial events in the Broadway and Times Square sectors of the city».[29] Along with good reviews in the English-language press, the physical characterisation, which was almost clownish, attracted many spectators who did not understand dialogue in Yiddish yet could follow body language and choreography.

In the meantime, a greater financial soundness allowed actors of the Artef to leave their daytime jobs and devote themselves entirely to acting. A semi-professionalisation process had begun in 1934 and an equal pay for all members of the company was set at ten dollars per week, fifteen for the ones with families.[30] But revenue could not always cover expenses and payroll. Ironically enough for a workers' theatre, the bigger pressure came from the trade unions, which required that the Artef, as well as commercial theatres, hired stagehands even for tasks that could be fulfilled by the actors themselves.

Towards the end of the decade, the Artef underwent a crisis, as most workers' theatres, and stopped its activity for an entire season. But the final blow came from far away—from overseas communist politics. In August 1939 the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the infamous non-aggression treaty between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, was signed. Once again, a decision taken in Moscow generated a shockwave in the American Jewish community, causing bewilderment and raising concerns about the fate of European Jewry. American Jewish communists, who once boasted of being the vanguard of antifascism, were now branded as enemies of the Jewish people and provocatively hailed with the Nazi stiff-arm salute. Fights were a daily occurrence, while copies of the *Frayheyt* were torn to pieces in the street. The Artef was going to reopen right then, after a year off, but it could not remain untouched by a spontaneous boycott. The Mercury Theatre, a 679-seat hall on 41st Street and the home of Orson Welles's troupe, was rented for the new season. The opening show, *Clinton Street*, adapted from a story by Chaver Paver, was partly saved by the many tickets sold during the summer, previously to the outbreak of the crisis. But the following production, *Uriel Acosta*, which premiered on 27 December 1939, did not share the same fortune. About a month later, the *Frayheyt* laconically announced that the last show would be on the 18th of February.

A tent in Tel Aviv: Hebrew theatre and the Labour movement

In the same years that saw the birth, success, and fall of the Artef, a theatre scene was developing in the Yishuv, the Jewish settlement in pre-State Israel. It was a very different scene. Suffice it to say that Yiddish theatres in New York City sold one and a half million tickets for the season 1937-1938,[31] far exceeding the entire population of the Land of Israel at the time. Beyond the numbers, another fundamental difference was language. Going far beyond the simple immigration to the ancient homeland, the Zionist enterprise was a project of nation building with its own founding myths. It envisioned a reconnection with the ancient cultural roots, including the Land of Israel, the Hebrew language, and the supposed moral qualities, and therefore encompassed a process of identity building. The result of such a process, the prototypical New Jew, was defined through the rejection of the Diaspora with its cultural heritage, heavily loaded

[29] W. Schack, *Three now resident off the Avenue*, «New York Times», 29 November 1936, X, p. 3.

[30] Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, cit., p. 283.

[31] Attisani, *Tutto era musica*, cit., p. 191.

with negative connotations, and the return to the supposed purity of a biblical-heroic golden age. The diasporic Jewish identity, with its baggage of subjugation and perceived weakness, obscurantism, and intellectualism, had to be dropped to make room for a new Hebrew identity. The new identity was embodied by the Sabra (from *ṣabar*, «prickly pear»), the native Israeli, whose character had to be shaped by physical labour, collectivism, and secularism and whose attitude had to express strength, self-confidence, and *dugri*, straightforward talk.[32]

Theatre in the Yishuv was affected by the process of nation and identity building in two ways. In the first place, a departure from the Diaspora entailed the rejection of the Yiddish language, which was the subject of fierce attacks by the Zionist establishment.[33] In the second place, the development of Hebrew-language drama and performances was deemed a sort of national enterprise, closely interwoven with the national revival in the Land of Israel. Theatre in Hebrew was held in high esteem for its role in education and ideology, yet original drama in Hebrew was still very scarce. Therefore, Hebrew troupes had to resort to translated plays, which often happened to be Yiddish plays.

On the evenings of 22 and 23 May 1926, a new company made its debut in the hall of the Herzliya Gymnasium of Tel Aviv with the Hebrew version of seven texts—six stories and a one-act play—by classical Yiddish author Yitskhok Leybush Peretz. The show was received favourably by the press and subsequently presented in other venues across the country, both in towns and in agricultural settlements. The director was Moshe Halevy, a former member and co-founder of Habima who had left Moscow and the famous troupe. But the actors were not professionals: they were all workers who had joined Halevy's drama studio and devoted themselves to acting while keeping their day jobs in factories and farms. The new company, founded in 1925, was known as Ohel, «Tent», and the playbills of the time presented it as a «drama studio under the Central Culture Committee of the Histadrut», the General Organization of Workers in the Land of Israel.

Upon arriving in the country, Halevy had requested and obtained support and sponsorship from the Histadrut to open a Hebrew workers' theatre, a troupe made by workers to stage the life and struggles of the working class in Hebrew. Actors were accurately selected in kibbutzim and other workplaces, since workers were expected to have a class consciousness, whereas applications from professional actors were rejected.[34] The company itself, in accordance with collectivist principles, was organised on the kibbutz model, or, in the words of its founder, was conceived as «a kibbutz like all the other kibbutzim» and its aim was to create «an ‹assembly of art› of the workers' community of the country».[35] Both the organisational model and the intent of the Ohel would be questioned later, as new challenges arose. But the difficulty of defining a suitable repertoire was apparent from the very beginning.

The first production based on stories by Peretz was followed by an openly social play written by Dutch Jewish playwright Herman Heijermans, *The good hope* (*Op hoop van zegen*, literally «Hoping for the best», 1900). The play, «a rather unprepossessing piece of melo-

[32] On *dugri* language, see T. Katriel, *Talking straight. Dugri speech in Israeli Sabra culture*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1986. For a thorough examination of the process of identity building, see O. Almog, *The Sabra. The creation of the New Jew*, transl. H. Watzman, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2000 (1997).

[33] In the late 1940s and early 1950s, shortly after the independence, Israeli government went as far as to impose an official ban on Yiddish performances. See R. Rojanski, *Yiddish in Israel. A history*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN 2020, pp. 104-105.

[34] M. Kohansky, *The Hebrew theatre. Its first fifty years*, Ktav, New York 1969, pp. 97-106; B. Feingold, *'Ohel'. 'Aliyato u-nfilato šel teatron po'alim*, «Iyunim Bitkumat Israel» 15 (2005), pp. 349-372; D. Yerushalmi, *Toward a balanced history: 'Ohel,' the 'Workers Theatre of Eretz Yisrael' as a cultural alternative to Habima (1935–1946)*, «Journal of Modern Jewish Studies» 13, 3 (2014), pp. 340-359.

[35] M. Halevy, *Darki aley bamot*, Massada, Tel Aviv 1955, p. 102.

drama»[36] about the exploitation of fishermen by ruthless shipowners, was quite popular at the time. But Ohel's adaptation, *Dayagim* (*Fishermen*), translated by poet Avraham Shlonsky, was quite a different thing. Halevy had made extensive changes to the text, turning a small-scale naturalistic play about one family into a big-scale expressionist drama with mass scenes involving as many as thirty actors. He wrote a prologue and an epilogue, also translated into Hebrew by Shlonsky, and had mass scenes accompanied by songs written by composer Yoel Engel, who had already composed music for Habima's famed *The dybbuk*. The result, presented on 5 March 1927 in the 2,000-seat hall of the Orient Fair in Tel Aviv, was a monumental show that reflected onstage the collectivist ideology of the troupe. As it happened with the Artef, the emphasis on the group, on mass movement rather than on individual introspection, marked the aesthetic of a workers' theatre as the direct outcome of its political orientation. Praised in the press, the show was successful with critics and audiences alike. Even though it required a big stage and bulky sets, which made it difficult to perform it before workers in small places, it was popular with members of kibbutzim, who often set up special stages or organised trips to Tel Aviv to attend performances. Its songs also became popular and, as critic Mendel Kohansky recalled, «were sung by the public for many years».[37]

Sticking with the original intention of staging social plays apparently posed a challenge, considering that *Fishermen* was followed by a biblical play, *Jacob and Rachel* (*Ya'aqov ve-Raḥel*, 1928), based on a Russian play by Nikolaj Krašeninnikov (*Plač Rachili*, «Rachel's lament», 1911). In the context of the Yishuv experience, the choice of a biblical play by a workers' theatre should not come as a surprise. Nobody could deny that the Bible was the basis of Jewish cultural heritage and a fundamental source for Jewish drama. Additionally, in those formative years, a secular approach to biblical stories, heroes, and landscape was consistent with the Zionist ideology, which encouraged a connection to the ancient homeland founded on national history and myth. Even «Tent», the suggestive name chosen by Halevy for his drama studio, was not only inspired by the camp tents of the pioneers, by the rough, precarious conditions of their life, and by the intention to create a movable theatre for the purpose of bringing art to workers in peripheral places. The word *ohel* was also replete with ancestral references, evocative of biblical landscape, of wanderings through the desert, and of the Tabernacle (*ohel mo'ed*, «tent of meeting»), the movable sanctuary containing the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 26:1-37, 36:8-38). It should also be recalled that Ohel's *Jacob and Rachel* was not the usual biblical play, being a bold synthesis of the Zionist recovery of the past, on the one hand, and the lesson of Mejerchol'd, on the other. Halevy had first conceived the show when he was still in Moscow with Habima, but his project had been rejected. Resuming it with the Ohel, he worked on text and performance in search of a supposedly authentic Hebrew expression, freed from Christian-influenced depictions and inspired by the national approach. He had the non-Jewish play translated and adapted by Shlonsky, who rendered it in a language close to that of the Bible and interlaced dialogue with biblical verses. Moreover, based on the assumption that the original Hebrew way of life may be found among the Bedouin, actors had to visit a tribe in the Negev, experience their lifestyle, and study their movements and facial expressions. As a result, the constructivist, geometric, cubistic sets and costumes designed by Boris Poljakov in Russia, the heavy makeup, and the stylized movements of the actors, who resembled living statues, contributed to an impressive show, far removed from a traditional biblical play.[38]

It was nevertheless no proletarian play. And neither was the next production, an adaptation of Sholem Aleichem stories, nor the one after that, a biblical play again. Feingold counts «six or seven distinct ‹workers› plays that Ohel staged during the decades in which it was sup-

[36] Kohansky, *The Hebrew theatre*, cit., p. 102.
[37] *Ibid.*
[38] R. Abeliovich, *Possessed voices. Aural remains from modernist Hebrew theater*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY 2019, pp. 137-141, 146.

posed to act as a workers' theater».[39] Regardless of all intentions, in the 1930s, when the world-renowned Habima settled in Tel Aviv becoming the main competitor to Ohel, both companies had to resort to productions of Yiddish plays and of the classics of European drama to sustain themselves. Each of the two, anyway, tried to hold to its standards, which means that Ohel still sought to build a socialist repertoire, even though the reception of proletarian plays was lukewarm. Proletarian plays appeared disconnected from the actual situation in the Land of Israel, which, «with its powerful nationalism colouring socialist ideologies, was no proper background for a theatre emphasizing class struggle».[40] The call for class struggle appeared irrelevant, given the absence of large private-owned industries or big landowners, neither was it supported by Labour Zionism, which adopted a strategy of cooperation between workers and capitalists. The call for national unity was perceived as much more urgent, with a looming two-front conflict against the Arabs and the British Mandate.

As anticipated above, the organisational model as a collective of working actors was also questioned, leading to Ohel's first crisis. In 1930, seventeen of the forty members quit the troupe in protest at the idea of turning a socialist commune into a professional theatre, whose actors would receive a salary and could devote themselves entirely to theatre. The Ohel's tension between ideals and reality was reflected in its ambivalent relationship with the Histadrut and the establishment, and Halevy believed that the troupe had to gain international reputation if they wanted to enhance its local status. It proved the right choice. In 1934, Ohel embarked for a European tour, staging with great success, in Hebrew, both biblical-national plays and proletarian plays. Upon its return home, the Histadrut awarded it the title of «Workers' Theatre of the Land of Israel».

The next production was *The bread mill* (*Reḥayim*) by Dovid Bergelson, a play probably—and naïvely—chosen to honour the new official status of workers' theatre. The play had all the credentials to be staged by a proper workers' theatre, since it dealt with class issues, the author was a Bundist, and the original Yiddish version (*Di broytmil*) had been produced by the Goset. It did not prove the right choice this time. Labour leaders were furious about insistence on class struggle and withdrew their support, leaving Ohel with limited funds.[41] The production that saved the troupe in 1935 was the same anti-war satire that would be staged later by the Artef—*The good soldier Švejk*. Halevy had seen the stage adaptation of Hašek's novel produced in Berlin in 1928 by the Piscator-Bühne, a notable production under the direction of Erwin Piscator, with sets by George Grosz. But whether to stage the play was a matter of lengthy debate for Ohel. The objections did not concern content: the beloved, ironic, gently subversive character of Švejk, a simple-minded soldier facing military absurdity, embodies the little man who resists oppression and tyranny. The main concern of Ohel members was that such a character could make an actor a star, which was problematic for a troupe organised as a collective.

The production was indeed a watershed for Ohel, both artistically and commercially. Avigdor Hameiri had translated the German adaptation by Max Brod e Hans Reimann, which was structured as a three-act drama, and not as a montage of episodes like the adaptation by Piscator. And when the play went on stage, it was soon clear that Ohel had turned from a director's theatre into a troupe with a star. Actor Meir Margalit, a construction worker immigrated from Poland in 1922, was perfectly cast as Švejk, whom he portrayed in a way that was the antithesis of the solemn, pathos-driven acting style of Habima that hitherto dominated the Hebrew scene. Margalit-Švejk in his oversized military uniform with a small, peaked cap and a long rifle, with his prominent nose and mischievous eyes, became Ohel's icon. The production, directed by German Jewish refugee Friedrich Lobe, was enormously successful. It was staged for many years with hundreds of performances, resumed whenever the company was in need to fix its finances. Ironically, the appearance of Švejk, the rheumatic anti-hero who always man-

[39] Feingold, *'Ohel'*, cit, p. 355 (translation mine).
[40] Kohansky, *The Hebrew theatre*, cit., p. 106.
[41] Yerushalmi, *Toward a balanced history*, cit., pp. 344-345.

aged to avoid the frontline, was paralleled by another character, or national myth, that would dominate the Hebrew stage—the Sabra fighter who self-sacrifices for the freedom of Israel.[42]

In 1936, Halevy directed Ohel's first original Hebrew play, historical drama *Sabbatai Zevi* by Nathan Bistritzky (Agmon), followed by the translation of another Yiddish classic that had been seen on the Artef stage, *The travels of Benjamin III*. The connection with Yiddish theatre became tighter when Halevy had the opportunity, in London, to see a performance of *Yoshe Kalb*, adapted and directed by Maurice Schwartz from a novel by Israel Joshua Singer. The show was among the greatest hits of Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre of New York and Halevy saw the commercial potential of a Hebrew production.[43] In 1937, Schwartz arrived in Tel Aviv to personally direct Ohel's production of *Yoshe Kalb*, which was followed by *The brothers Ashkenazi*, also adapted from a novel by I.J. Singer. Both productions proved successful with the public and introduced innovations from the American stage, such as light effects, singing, dancing, and improved acting. It is hardly a coincidence that Habima, soon thereafter, produced the Hebrew version of a classic Yiddish melodrama, *Mirele Efros* by Jacob Gordin, which was also a hit. As the repertoires of the two major theatres in the Land of Israel became more and more similar, a Hebrew popular theatre was being established in continuity with Yiddish theatre.

Ohel and Habima proceeded on parallel tracks during the 1940s, alternating translations from Yiddish and other European languages with few original Hebrew plays. In the same decade, they also ceased to be homeless theatres that shared the same halls, such as the Moghrabi cinema, and moved to their permanent homes in the heart of Tel Aviv. In 1940, Ohel began operating in its new building in Beilinson Street; five years later, Habima House at the end of Rothschild Boulevard was completed. From that moment on, their fates seem to diverge. In 1958, the Histadrut severed its connection with the now declining Ohel, which—having lost its financial support and even its title «Workers' Theatre of the Land of Israel»—survived for little more than a decade. In that same year, Habima was awarded official recognition as the National Theatre of Israel. Nothing describes their fates better than the current state of the two buildings: the house built for Ohel is now an abandoned and crumbling building with its back to Zina Dizengoff Square, whereas Habima Square, with its shiny and recently renovated theatre, remains to this day one of Tel Aviv's landmarks.

If there is a commonplace based on the idealised programmes of Ohel and Habima, it is that they represented proletarian art and bourgeois art, respectively, although they had much in common when it comes to the reality of both repertoire and acting. An even more entrenched assumption is that Ohel had a marginal role, compared to the centrality of Habima. Gershon Shaked went so far as to say that «Ohel was a ‹second-rate› Habima» and that Ohel actors, with the exception of Meir Margalit, were «a kind of poor man's [Hanna] Rovina . . . [and Aharon] Meskin».[44] Notwithstanding the unbalanced and disputable prominence assigned to other experiences by traditional historiography, or «the accepted myths of the Hebrew theatre»,[45] it is noteworthy that in a seminal place and time, during the decades that saw the development of Hebrew theatre in Tel Aviv, a major role was played by a workers' theatre. Again, as with the Yiddish scene of New York, one must notice the centrality of political theatre in the Jewish world.

Hunger and rags: Jewish political drama

The experience of Jewish workers' theatres, which also had a role in the shaping of English-language political theatre in America, was preceded and followed by a Jewish dramatic production in which political commitment was anything but secondary.

[42] Cf. R. Esposito, *The hero and his death. Hebrew theatre between national revival and voices of dissent*, «Materia Giudaica» 25 (2020), pp. 191-202.

[43] Halevy, *Darki*, cit., pp. 192-193.

[44] G. Shaked, *Actors as reflections of their generation*, in L. Ben-Zvi (ed.), *Theater in Israel*, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI 1996, pp. 85-100, p. 90.

[45] Yerushalmi, *Toward a balanced history*, cit., p. 340.

Already in 1919, the Naye Yidishe Teater in New York produced *Bronx Express* (*Bronks Ekspres*), an anti-capitalist comedy by Osip Dymov. The set of the first act is a subway car whose interior is covered with advertising posters. Later in the play, the characters from those advertisements come to life as tempting devils and entice the protagonist, a poor Jewish immigrant worker, into living the life of a greedy capitalist. Even before, in 1907, Sholem Asch's *God of vengeance* (*Got fun nekome*) had been produced in a German version in Berlin by Max Reinhardt and in the original Yiddish in New York. It is not exactly a political play, for it deals with a private conflict and follows a tragic plot ruled by inescapability. Yet the setting and the subject are scandalous: the story is set in a brothel owned by a Jewish man married to a former prostitute, whose teenage daughter, betrothed to a well-born young man, is having an affair with a woman working in her parents' brothel downstairs. The political importance of the play lies in the challenge to what contemporary sensibilities deemed acceptable. Unsurprisingly, the 1923 English production had to deal with censorship and ended up in court, with producer, director, and actors indicted for staging an «indecent, immoral and impure drama».[46]

A much more open attitude could be found in the Land of Israel, where the Hebrew version (*El nekamot*) of this play was produced without facing any problems. As early as 1922, when Ohel did not exist yet and Habima was moving its first steps in Moscow, it was staged in Jerusalem by Ha-Teatron ha-Dramati, one of the first Hebrew troupes, under the direction of Miriam Bernstein-Cohen. The show was met with positive reviews in the local press with a few exceptions, such as an editorial in *Haaretz* speaking about «pornography on the stage». Despite the controversy started by the newspaper, or maybe thanks to the curiosity it aroused, the performances had great success with the public.[47] It should be noted that *God of vengeance* was hit by censorship in America a good sixteen years after its debut, and only when it was staged in English. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that Yiddish publications and theatre had the advantage of being more easily able to address issues that were—and are—controversial, such as birth control and abortion. Yiddish shows and publications were much less likely than the English ones to be hit by censorship and repression, and therefore many American Jewish men and women were forerunners in the sexual and reproductive rights movement.[48]

A clear political line is recognisable in much of the dramatic production by one of the most prominent Jewish playwrights in the interwar period. Today, Yiddish author H. Leivick (Leyvik Halpern, 1888-1962) is best known for his play *The golem* (*Der goylem*), set in sixteenth-century Prague and based on the Jewish legend about an animated being created from clay or mud. The play, more precisely a dramatic poem, was written in 1920 and first staged five years later in the Hebrew translation of Binyamin Caspi by Habima in Moscow.[49] The audience in the Soviet Union read a revolutionary subtext in the show and welcomed it by singing the Internationale.[50] But with the other plays written by Leivick in the 1920s there was no subtext to grasp, since they were overtly politically engaged.

Leivick, who had been born into an impoverished family near Minsk, «was a dramatic hero in his own life».[51] Arrested by czarist police at the age of eighteen for his political activism, he was sentenced to forced labour and perpetual exile to Siberia. After years in chains, he managed to escape and in 1913 he arrived in New York, where he earned a living with physical labour.[52] His first play staged in a theatre was

[46] See «New York Times», 7 March 1923, p. 6; 24 May 1923, p. 1; 29 May 1923, p. 2; 11 January 1924, p. 21.

[47] Kohansky, *The Hebrew theatre*, cit., p. 73.

[48] Cf. J. Lambert, *Unclean lips. Obscenity, Jews, and American culture*, New York University Press, New York and London 2014, pp. 102-103.

[49] A. Citron, *Habima's «The Golem»*, «The Drama Review» 24, 3 (1980), pp. 59-68.

[50] R. Esposito, *La nascita del teatro ebraico. Persone, testi e spettacoli dai primi esperimenti al 1948*, Accademia University Press, Torino 2016, pp. 85-86.

[51] N. Sandrow (ed.), *God, man, and devil. Yiddish plays in translation*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY 1999, p. 16.

[52] *Ibid.*; Z. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 2, Varshe 1934, p. 1059.

Rags (*Shmates*), which premiered at New York's Yiddish Art Theatre (*Yidisher Kunst Teater*) in 1921, with Maurice Schwartz directing the performance and playing the leading role. *Rags* belongs to the genre of the *tsaytbilder* («pictures of the time»), which were realistic depictions of the conditions of Jewish life, often involving «loosely documentary, highly sensationalized portrayals of current events».[53] The protagonist, Mordkhe Maze, is an elderly man who went from being a respected scholar in the old country to picking and sorting rags in a sweatshop in New York. He is estranged from his assimilationist children and does not take part in the struggle of his fellow workers, feeling that their demands cannot substantially improve their life of misery and exploitation.

After several plays staged by the Yiddish Art Theatre, Leivick's new political play *Shop* premiered on 9 December 1926 in New York at the Irving Place Jewish Art Theatre.[54] The show was directed by Jacob Ben-Ami and the cast included a twenty-five-year-old Stella Adler, daughter of legendary Yiddish actor Jacob Adler and later the founder of the prestigious Stella Adler Studio of Acting. Also conceived as a *tsaytbild*, Leivick's *Shop* stages the exploitation of immigrant workers in a textile factory in New York. The recurring setting is not accidental, since appalling working conditions were common in the garment industry at the time and the memory was still alive of the 1911 fire of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company's factory.[55]

As well as with the condition of the working class, Leivick once more dealt with conflicts inside the Jewish immigrant community. *Shop* opens with an argument between Wolf and Leyzer, who were fellow convicts in Siberia, where they had been exiled for their political activities. Now, in New York, Leyzer is a lowly cleaner in a factory, whereas Wolf is a boss in the same factory, claims to be «from here», shuns allusions to life in the old country, and does not want to be called *khaver* («comrade»). He keeps his distance from the old life by addressing the former comrade in the second-person plural, which denotes formality, and asks him to do the same, at least in the presence of *biznes-layt* («business-people»).[56] Several characters in the play show a dichotomy in their identities, split between the life before, in the old country, and after, as immigrants. This tension may be intrinsic to the immigrant condition, particularly for marginalised groups. Yet the efforts of some characters to reconcile their pre-existing identities with the current loss of dignity should be read as a symptom of internalised oppression, and therefore within the framework of capitalist exploitation that is central to the play.

The immigrant condition, as well as the Jewish transnational identity as a permanent minority, is reflected in the frequent language switching. The characters in *Shop* speak «potato Yiddish», a Yiddish speech replete with English loanwords used by immigrants in daily life. In addition, they may swear in Russian, sing in English, or pray in Hebrew. To portray that world with greater realism, Leivick offered a faithful depiction of the speech. The text includes dozens of English words transliterated into Yiddish (i.e., into Hebrew script according to Yiddish spelling), starting from the title word, rendered as *shap* to better match American pronunciation. The dialogue was realistic to such an extent that the Vilna edition had to be printed with a glossary of English words,[57] so that it could be understood by non-American Yiddish readers.

The Hebrew version, translated by Avraham Shlonsky, was staged in 1932 by Ohel under the direction of Moshe Halevy and severely crit-

[53] Sandrow, *Vagabond stars*, cit., p. 114.

[54] Not to be confused with Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre (*Yidisher Kunst Teater*), which was also housed, at different times, at the Irving Place Theatre.

[55] The ghastly disaster in the Greenwich Village neighbourhood of Manhattan took the lives of one hundred and forty-six garment workers, mostly Italian or Jewish girls and young women. Many of the victims jumped to their deaths from the building's windows in a tragic attempt to escape flames, since the proprietors used to keep the exit doors locked during working hours. For a thorough account of the disaster and its aftermath, see L. Stein, *The Triangle fire*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 2011 (1962).

[56] H. Leivick, *Shap. Drame in fir aktn*, B. Kletskin, Vilne 1928, p. 9.

[57] *Ivi*, pp. 137-138.

icised by some newspapers. «I thought I was not in Tel Aviv but in Moscow», a reviewer wrote.[58] As seen above, plays exposing capitalist exploitation and calling for class struggle appeared irrelevant to the social conditions in the Yishuv and were not supported by the establishment, including by the trade union that sponsored Ohel.

Conclusions

With the end of the Depression and the beginning of the Second World War, the public attention moved to more pressing matters. As the concern for the conditions of workers dwindled, the revolutionary masses became less relevant. The consequent decline of the far-left theatre, combined with the growing assimilation of American Jewry, determined the fate of the Artef. Its road had always been rough, having to pass through the internal conflicts of the Left, and every single production was criticised, for different reasons, by communists and non-communists alike. The Artef remained nonetheless committed to an ideal of high art and made a major contribution to the Jewish stage. And since it dissolved into English-speaking mainstream, rather than simply disappearing, its contribution went far beyond.

Operating in pre-State Israel, Ohel had to deal with a very different context, where the establishment was made up of socialist institutions and trade unions, yet the call for national unity prevailed over issues of class. Still, as its Yiddish counterpart, Ohel developed from a drama studio into a professional theatre that aimed at being evaluated by artistic criteria. And it played a major role in the art scene of the Yishuv, «gradually crystallising into a popular Hebrew theatre in principle and style, working towards a specific national image, still socialist in outlook».[59] Its decline came later, along with a general decline of a Hebrew theatre that was instrumental in the process of national revival and with the rise of a theatre of protest in the late 1960s.

The experiences of Artef and Ohel intersected and overlapped each other because they started out from the same premises, mostly initiated by people sincerely engaged in the same struggle. Both troupes were the prosecution onstage of a Jewish tradition that, throughout the 20th century, was particularly responsive to revolutionary ideology. Jewish political radicalism, which emerged in Eastern Europe from a «salty sea of human tears» and was imported in the United States and Israel, had its expressions in Yiddish and Hebrew, two souls of the Jewish world—or, better to say, two voices of the same Jewish soul.

An idea of the performance as a political action, where the demand for social justice is brought onstage, led to a theatrical aesthetic shaped by ideology. This is the mark of both theatres, although often weakened by the necessity to make compromises with the reality of the show business. The examination of such an interweaving of political activism, drama, and performance puts the 20th-century Jewish theatre into a new perspective, from where its expressions in Yiddish and Hebrew appear as parts of a shared experience.

Raffaele Esposito
Università di Napoli L'Orientale
e-mail: raffaele.esposito@unior.it

[58] Quoted in Kohansky, *The Hebrew theatre*, cit., p. 132.

[59] G. Abramson, *Modern Hebrew drama*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1979, p. 38.

Raffaele Esposito

SUMMARY

The two voices of Jewish national discourse in the early 20th century, Yiddishism and Hebrew-based Zionism, are commonly perceived as the expressions of two separate, distant, and mutually exclusive worlds. But the stories of Artef and Ohel, two workers' theatres founded in the same year (1925) in New York City and Tel Aviv, respectively, the former a Yiddish troupe, the latter a Hebrew-language one, are particularly significant in that their shared experiences reveal how much those two seemingly contrasting worlds were intertwined. Their parallel stories call for a new approach in the study of Jewish arts that explores their expression in Yiddish and Hebrew as an interconnected whole and investigates their connections with two recent yet significant Jewish experiences, namely political activism and drama.

KEYWORDS: Hebrew theatre; Political theatre; Yiddish theatre.