

# THE FIRST YIDDISH THEATER PRODUCTION IN THE USA

By Nathaniel Buchwald

THE Yiddish theater in the United States began with a production presented in New York with the participation of a professional troupe (six men and two women) brought over from London. There is some question about the exact date of this important cultural and historical event. The well known actor Boris Thomashefsky—still an amateur at the time—himself took part in that production. In his memoirs, however, written many years later, he mentions the date, 1880, which is impossible, for he himself had not yet then arrived in the United States. Nor has the exact location of this event, the name of the producer or the name of the play itself been finally established.

According to B. Gorin, the historian of the Yiddish theater, in his *History of the Yiddish Theater* (1918), the production was staged at "Turn Hall on Fourth Street, between 2nd and 3rd Avenues"; the producer was "a certain butcher named Frank Wolf," and "the first piece which was played in New York, with chorus, music, settings, was *Koldunia*" (Goldfaden's *The Sorceress*).<sup>1</sup> Gorin adds that "the poster stated that the world-renowned singer-artist Boris Thomashefsky will sing 'The Bobkelech.'" Actually, at that time Thomashefsky had only dreamed of acting. He was a worker in a cigarette factory and on Fridays and Saturdays was a choir-singer in a synagogue. But he was given this extravagant billing as a reward "for his diligent work in connection with the production." Concerning the date Gorin writes that "it would seem that this presentation was given not earlier than July or later than August 1882."

But, if we have only a few inaccurate details about the production itself, the details are more complete, although inaccurate, about the attempt of the Jewish Immigrant Committee, led by prominent *Yahudim* [middle class German Jews] to stop the production altogether. According to a citation by Jacob Mestel, student of the Yiddish theater and a noted Yiddish actor, the committee warned the troupe that the "recognized and important Jews of New York would not permit themselves to be ridiculed and dis-

graced by a theater in which the actors employed the abominable jargon" [that is, Yiddish].

Gorin ascribes another motive to the attempt to stop the production: "The committee did not like the idea of a play in which there is a peddler named Hotzmach who cheats his customers in the market place, performs silly antics and makes fun of Jews; and a Jewish woman fortune teller who sets fire to a house and burns Jews to death. [These incidents occur in Goldfaden's *Koldunia*—N.B.] The committee, according to Boris Thomashefsky, considered it degrading to present such a play in a land where Jews want to make their home. Thomashefsky further reminisces that the president of the committee delivered a long, threatening lecture and then screamed at the representatives of the troupe: "It was not for nothing that they drove you out of Russia; they will drive you out of America too for such conduct. Here we do not ridicule Jews!"

## The "Yahudim" Try to Stop It

Whether Thomashefsky quoted the precise words of the president of the committee of *Yahudim* or not, the theme is familiar. In Russia, too, the "recognized and important Jews," that is, the representatives of the Jewish bourgeoisie, made similar attacks on the Goldfaden theater, both for its "abominable jargon" and because Hotzmach did not please them. They were shocked by the folk simplicity which they construed as "vulgarity" and by the literary "barbarism" of Goldfaden's plays and characters. They considered his entire "*jargonisch*" theater as a disgrace to the Jews—that is, of their class. They were in large measure responsible for the tsarist edict of 1883 which forbade theatrical performances in the Yiddish language.

It is not remarkable that the "recognized and important Jews" of Russia and the United States shared the same opinions and tried, almost at the same moment, to stifle the new-born Yiddish theater and for the same reasons! Nor is this "tradition" dead. The "recognized and important Jews" of our own day still look down upon both the Yiddish language and the "common" Jewish people, Hotzmach's *landsleit*, who contributed so much to Jewish life in America and to the building of their new homeland. If they only could, these "recognized important Jews" would

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<sup>1</sup> B. Gorin. *Di Geshichte fun Yidishem Teater*, New York, 1918, Vol. II, chapter 1.



Boris Thomashefsky

obliterate the masses of Jewish workers and other "common" Jews from the pages of American Jewish history and give place only to the Jewish bankers, merchants, statesmen and rabbis.

Who knows how long the establishment and development of the Yiddish theater in our country would have been postponed if the Jewish Immigrant Committee had succeeded in stopping that production? If they did not succeed, it was not because these "recognized and important Jews" spared any efforts or cash. Even if we discount Boris Thomashefsky's exaggerations and inventions and his penchant for the melodramatic, his reminiscences about the Jewish Immigrant Committee and the first production contain more suspense and "color" than the production itself.

This is the essence of the story as related by Gorin on the basis of Thomashefsky's reminiscences. The managers of the troupe and Thomashefsky as well were really frightened by the threat made by the committee president that they would be deported to Russia if they went ahead with the production. But the producer, a saloon-keeper from Essex Street and no longer a "greenhorn," said "that he would pay as much attention to the committee as to the snows of yesteryear," especially since the public showed such a great interest in the event.

Gorin writes: "Two hours before curtain time the streets around Turn Hall were black with people. The German owner of the hall was terrified by the great crowd and sent for the police. A squadron of police immediately arrived and started swinging their clubs . . . and the 'green' Jewish workers said the proper blessing over the American club and tasted its bitter flavor. But the clubs did not keep the crowd from pressing toward the Hall. The appeal of a theater performance in Yiddish was too powerful to be overcome by a blue uniform.

"Amidst the tumult several wagons appeared. Speakers mounted on the wagons told the crowd what a shame and a disgrace the production was for the Jewish people and

pleaded with the public to disperse peaceably and not pay the slightest attention to the actors and their play."

Nor was this all. The committee bribed the prima donna (with \$200, a lot of money in those days) to plead illness and stay away from the theater. The producer, relates Thomashefsky, then gave the prima donna \$100 more to appear and sing. By this time it was late, the singers and musicians had left, the audience was noisy, the actors behind the scenes were quarreling and the presentation "ended in a brawl and a scandal."

There is reason to believe that the whole story is greatly exaggerated, that the police did not come to drive away the tremendous crowds, since the crowds were not even there. It is certain, however, that the Jewish Immigrant Committee used every means, including threats and intrigues, to stop the performance.

### The Yiddish Theater Grows

Apparently the committee made no attempt to halt subsequent productions in Yiddish. After several weeks the same troupe with the addition of some amateur players renewed its work. The saloon-keeper from Essex Street was joined by two partners in the enterprise ("one of them was a butcher from Bayard Street") and "they made all the preparations for the holiday 'shows.' During Succoth week they played the old Goldfaden pieces, *Koldunia*, *Capricious Daughter*, *Grandmother* and *Grandson*."

Two months later M. Golubok, manager of the now reinforced London troupe, signed a contract for three years with the owner of the "Old Bowery Garden" to stage Yiddish plays every Friday evening and Saturday afternoon. This was the first "home" for the Yiddish theater in the United States.

In a few short years the Yiddish theater movement grew quickly, new personnel arrived and competing companies appeared. Competition and the practice of luring the public with new plays and "spectacles" immediately created a fertile field for the *shund*-makers. [Mr. Buchwald defined "*shund*" in an article in *JEWISH LIFE*, December 1950, thus: "Defying translation, *shund* stands for a combination of hokum, drivel, bad taste, cheap sentimentality, and—terrific mass appeal."—*Eds.*] When Jacob Gordin came to New York nine years later (1891) he already found a full-grown *shund* theater.

After his first visits to a Yiddish theater, Gordin wrote: "Everything I saw and heard was far removed from Jewish life, vulgar, inartistic, false, low and corrupt." But five or six years later the so-called Golden Epoch of Yiddish theater in the United States had already begun with Gordin as the standard-bearer of better plays and enlightened Jewish workers as the main base of the better theater. The cultural kernel which the pioneers of the London troupe had sown with the first Yiddish presentation in New York had produced both healthy shoots and poisonous weeds. But the pioneer work had not been in vain.

(Translated from the Yiddish by Max Rosenfeld)