A lost stage
Historians and critics examine the rise and fall of Yiddish theater in New York

GLENN C. ALTSCHULER

Yiddish theater may have been born in 1876 in a wine garden in Iasi, Romania, when Abraham Goldfaden provided a simple storyline to two itinerant folk singers. Goldfaden soon formed his own theatrical company, which performed his plays, adapted from Jewish and European sources, accompanied by cantorial tunes, marches, waltzes and classical compositions.

Along with hundreds of thousands of European Jews, Yiddish theater migrated to the United States at the end of the 19th century. The first production in New York City was Goldfaden’s operetta The Witch in 1879. By 1900, Yiddish theater had become immensely popular in New York, where 580,000 Jews lived.

That year, New York’s three Jewish theaters, all located in the Bowery area, presented more than 1,000 performances to more than two million patrons.

“The East Side has about one chief amusement,” The Jewish Messenger declared in 1902, “and that is the theater.”

In New York’s Yiddish Theater, editor Edna Nahshon, a professor of theater and drama at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and senior associate at Oxford University’s Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, provides an assessment of the contributions of “Yiddish Broadway” to Jewish-American culture. Beautifully illustrated with images borrowed from the Museum of the City of New York and the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the volume casts a wide net. Essays by historians and critics examine the superstars of the Yiddish Theater (Jacob P. Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, and Molly Picon); the Yiddish Art Theater Movement, led by Maurice Schwartz; the Artel (a communist-dominated theatrical troupe); the Yiddish Puppet Theater of Yosl Cutter and Zuni Maud; Jewish theater set designers; Yiddish Vaudeville; the Borscht Belt; and the iconic Broadway musical Fiddler on the Roof.

Nahshon and her colleagues demonstrate that Yiddish theater helped Jewish immigrants “engage in a conversation with America and incorporate icons of Anglo culture while still preserving and cultivating a distinct ethnic subculture.” Audiences enjoyed Judaized versions of Shakespeare’s tragedies, dramas by Ibsen and Chekhov, and plays about the Johnstown flood and the sinking of the Titanic.

In 1901, Nahshon tells us, two Yiddish theaters mounted productions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the racial melodrama based on the immensely popular novel written by the abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852. One of them retained the English lyrics for some of the musical numbers. Significantly, Nahshon writes, both productions downplayed the Christ-like submissiveness of Uncle Tom (because it was “alien to the Jewish ethos”), focusing instead on the slave who was willing to fight for his freedom and, as one critic put it, “became a despot and solitary Maccabee.”

On the other hand, melodramas were often set in contemporary America, featuring characters who had left parents, wives and children behind and were struggling to adjust to a new and unfamiliar culture. Playwrights addressed political and social issues, including sweatshops, strikes, birth control and the Russian revolution, and made use of songs such as “Di Grine Kuzine” (“The Greenhorn Cousin”) to tell the tale of a young girl’s descent into poverty. Staged by Thomashefsky, Das Pintele Yid (“The Essential Spark of Jewishness”), the most popular play on the Yiddish stage in 1909-10, celebrated Jewish survival in the face of anti-Semitism – and ended with a Jewish star and the words “das pintele yid” descending from the rafters, while the actors sang “Yankee Doodle.”

The restrictions on immigration imposed by the federal government in 1924 drastically reduced the potential clientele of the Yiddish theater. As second- and third-generation Jews Americanized, moreover, many of them became embarrassed by their Yiddish-speaking parents and, in any event, preferred Broadway shows and motion pictures. The decade-long Great Depression also took a toll on Yiddish theater. In the middle of the 1932-3 season, Nahshon relates, five venues had to close their doors. The remaining four soldiered on, but only because they did not pay full wages to the actors.

By the 1940s, the decline was even more precipitous; few new plays were written for the Yiddish stage and Jewish actors crossed over to Broadway and Hollywood. “Yinglish” entertainment, associated with Borscht Belt comedians in upstate New York mountain resort hotels, “became the cross-cultural mediator between Yiddish stage traditions and the broader culture.” By invoking the shell as part of a search for roots in a nation of immigrants, Fiddler on the Roof (1964), Nahshon reminds us, “legitimized ethnic self-representation on the mainstream stage.”

The New York-based Yiddish theater is (mostly) gone, but not forgotten. Witness the Yiddish-speaking prologue to Joel and Ethan Coen’s movie A Serious Man (2009). As Nahshon emphasizes, the American Jewish theater remains alive as part of “an imagined space defined by language and culture,” a space that still inhabits the “American” stage, our movies, modern adaptations of old texts, the “shtrick” of comedians, many of whom are not Jewish, and, most importantly, “the dynamics of inter-cultural conversations.”

The writer is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.