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YIDDISH THEATRE IN MONTREAL (REVIEW ESSAY)

Larrue, Jean-Marc. *Le théâtre yiddish à Montréal*, préface et postface de Dora Wasserman /*Yiddish Theatre in Montreal*, foreword and postscript by Dora Wasserman, trans. into English by Catherine Brown. Montréal: Éditions Jeu, 1996. 166 pp.

Yiddish Theatre in Montreal, a well-written and informative large-format art book, encompasses the history of Yiddish theatre, starting from its roots in the Purim *shpiel*. Written by theatre historian Jean-Marc Larrue, *Yiddish Theatre in Montreal* boasts plenty of photographs to help document its chronological trek through Yiddish culture. The volume is also distinguished by its duality of language; each page presents the material in both French and English, revealing the book's milieu in its very format. Its real contribution lies not only in providing the reader with a history of theatre, but in Larrue's thoughtfully conceived reflections on issues of culture and continuity. Larrue delivers a framework for understanding Yiddish theatre's function as an inherent part of the process of assimilation and acculturation.

Larrue first explains the celebration represented by the emergence of Yiddish theatre, highlighting the artistry of Avrom Goldfaden, whose career marks the beginning of professional Yiddish theatre. The significance of Goldfaden's success and the range of his impact and influence upon Yiddish theatre from his native Russia to New York to Montreal is examined in detail. We share in stories about the evolution of a theatre practice which moved out of popular Jewish folklore

while maintaining the musical element of classic Purim tradition, to one which embraced *Haskala* and secular culture. The “assimilationist responses” to the theatre are evident in the newfound freedom and new art forms which burst in a proliferation of new Yiddish companies and playwrights.

The Yiddish theatre moved from its first wave of Yiddish theatre as nostalgia for immigrants who had gone to the theatre to heal their nostalgia, to a theatre whose audiences expected a form of high art and entertainment and later, and ultimately to a Yiddish theatre which became the expression of a threatened culture. Citing New York and Montreal in particular, Larrue gives us glimpses into immigrant life and the relationship between survival in the new world and the expression of Jewish identity and culture. In this context, the immigrant experience and the Yiddish theatre are inextricably bound, and throughout, Larrue points to the specific issues at play for a diverse immigrant population. In the process of exploring the inter-relationship between immigration and culture, the text also accounts for the tensions surrounding the role of Yiddish, itself, as it moved from old country to new. The challenges and demands of life in the new world—rather than a longing for the familiar, romanticized and nostalgic backward look to the old country—are represented by the figure of Jacob Gordin, whose serious artistic theatre work was dedicated to the text and to “renewing dramatic writing,” in direct opposition to a popular theatre dominated by the very broad acting style of a “star” system.

Theatre never exists in a vacuum and *Yiddish Theatre in Montreal* rightly establishes the social and political backdrop which shaped these important shifts in art practices. These included the oppressive reign of Alexander III in the late nineteenth century, which forced Yiddish theatre underground, rendering it a theatre of resistance, to the emergence of Zionism and the Bund in the early twentieth century, for example, which helped to create a political and symbolic theatrical art form of survival.

Weaving the route to Canada, Larrue provides a fasci-

nating and sometimes surprising journey charting the development of Yiddish theatre in Czarist Russia, to the innovations of the Art Theatre movement, to *Shund* (here defined as “popular Yiddish theatre”), vaudeville, and Broadway. Montreal’s Yiddish theatre, like New York’s, responded to inevitable cycles of immigration, producing complex layers of performance which illustrated “the fragile balance that was maintained between new-comers and old-timers.” The theatre responded to this complexity by negotiating between the nostalgic desire for *Shund* while simultaneously addressing the conflicting needs for more sophisticated and theatrical experience. We get a strong sense of a vital theatrical life; of the divergent, vibrant Montreal, actors and directors filling a variety of different performing spaces (small venues along “The Main” in addition to the Monument-National); of the massive and fragmented growth of Yiddish theatre between 1905-1910, truly an exploding theatrical market.

Repeatedly providing a context for understanding profound transitions in the approach to performance in Yiddish theatre, Larrue establishes a counterpoint by documenting parallel changes occurring in Western theatre—such as Naturalism and the advent of the Modern theatre, with Emile Zola, Ibsen, and Antoine’s Théâtre Libre. Larrue brings us to the extraordinary recognition that Gordin actually pre-dates Stanislavsky in his reformation of theatre practice by at least six years! Moreover, by the early 1920s there were no theatrical avenues which had not been explored by the Yiddish theatre. From Goldfaden to the avant-garde and from Gordin to *Shund*, the Yiddish theatre embodied the entire recent history of Western theatre, and a theatre tradition “identified not with a country, but with a people.” This was a theatre of exile.

The development of Yiddish theatre is also marked by the *North American* theatrical innovations which, defying expectation, influenced *Russian* tradition between 1905-1910. During that brief period of freedom from government policy, Peretz, Sholom Aleichem and Asch all wrote for the European

theatre. In both Europe and North America, the Jewish communities, recognizing the skill of its talented Yiddish playwrights and actors, honoured its art theatres. Larrue also reveals that Yiddish theatre was performed on non-Jewish stages: Max Reinhardt's productions, *Fiddler on Broadway*, Jewish Art theatre and the Hebrew language Habimah troupe all emerged during this time. The book tracks a complex range of issues in both playwriting and acting styles (in Goldfaden's *Shulamis* (1882), Gordin's *The Jewish King Lear* (1892), and the Vilna Troupe's production of Anski's *The Dybbuk* (1922), for example), with respect to the changing profile of the Yiddish audience. Secular commentary is woven into this mix, juxtaposing the development of Yiddish theatre with the development of Broadway and the contemporary theatre, even drawing on reviews from theatre critics of the period.

In documenting the particular circumstances of the burgeoning Yiddish theatre in Montreal itself, Larrue charts its history from 1892, as a part of the community infrastructure that eased the arrival and adaptation of Jewish refugees. Chronicler of the 100th Anniversary of the Monument-National, Larrue brings special insight to *Yiddish Theatre in Montreal*, insofar as he marks the bonds between Yiddish theatre and the Francophone community in Montreal, using the development of French-speaking Quebecois theatre as a counterpoint to its Yiddish-speaking audiences. We discover that daily life in the neighbourhood known as "The Main" dictated the nature of their theatrical experience. Supporting a younger population, more recently arrived than New York City's immigrants, this segment of the Montreal community was "more afflicted with homesickness." Consequently, they were drawn to more traditional theatrical production exemplified by Goldfaden in direct contrast to New York Yiddish theatre, which had already evolved to the more contemporary forms of Gordin. Montreal was, at once, however, home to an active and sophisticated theatre-going audience, who, along with their French neighbours, were used to small but professional variety show houses. Larrue

speculates that both of these factors helped to shape the Montreal community's taste for professional Yiddish theatre, and ensured the success of the first professional productions by Louis Mitnick. He documents numerous examples of exchanges between two communities, as well as the influence of Jewish artists on Francophone artists.

Yiddish Theatre in Montreal also accounts for a North America routine, in which theatre companies would need to make use of existing stages, rather than functioning out of a permanent space of their own. We discover that Jewish Montreal's intimate relationship with the Francophone community had a direct correlation with the ongoing need for a theatre space. Situated in the heart of what became the Jewish quarter, "another community constantly under the threat of assimilation," The Monument-National was conceived by the Association Saint-Jean-Baptiste as a "national institution that would serve both as a home for popular education and training and as a recreational and cultural centre." It was a symbolic and physical structure that was to serve as "a bulwark against assimilation into English culture." Given the Association's strong support of community initiatives, "whatever the language, culture, religion of the groups involved," the Monument-National's stage in the large auditorium became the primary venue for the largest Yiddish theatre in Canada for more than fifty years. Larrue describes many of the plays and actors of the period, from the most traditional *Shund* plots to the most controversial of texts by Gordin. By the summer of 1913, there were three professional Yiddish troupes, each providing six to eight performances per week for a thirty-five to forty week season on half a dozen secondary stages!

In addition to the continual influx of immigrants and consequently the continuous and dynamic movement in the Canadian Yiddish theatre, there was yet another factor which came to determine the theatre's shape. This was the reality of a new second generation Jewish community: Jews born in Canada, whose knowledge of the *shtetl* life existed only

through the stories of parents. Larrue identifies this generation as a bilingual audience—English and Yiddish, or English/Yiddish and French—who brought their expectations from great Anglophone theatre to the Yiddish stage.

We learn that this sense of expectation obliged the Yiddish theatre to redefine its relationship with its audience in the “Art Theatre” revolution. The Yiddish theatre that was characterized first by naturalism, was later re-interpreted by scenic designs that established atmosphere, rather than simply situating the action. This expressionism and constructivism makes clear that the Yiddish theatre was at the forefront of artistic evolution, anticipating the rest of North America. Larrue documents a fascinating history of the Vilna Troupe, for example—one of the most famous and daring Jewish troupes in the world—comparing it to New York’s more tame Yiddish Art Theatre, including their two stops in Montreal during June of 1924. *Yiddish Theatre in Montreal* also profiles the Habimah actors who visited Montreal several times in 1930. Their influence was strongly felt in the Montreal community, and so too, was the genius of the Yiddish Players’ Maurice Schwartz.

If the 1920s served as the heyday of Yiddish theatre in North America, then the Depression marked a decline from the Golden Age of Yiddish theatre. With the closing of many theatres, Yiddish artists were forced to play in English on American stages. Further, the immigration laws excluding the influx of Jews meant that audiences which the Yiddish theatre served began to diminish—since many were by now Canadian born, conversant only in English. Undermined by assimilation and the lack of immigration, major local Yiddish troupes stopped production with the Depression, and New York touring companies serviced Montreal, providing them with “the quality if not the quantity” of Yiddish performance. Other theatrical activity became the domain of amateur troupes in Montreal. The Monument-National had deteriorated and it was no longer a site for Yiddish theatre, and indeed, as Larrue rightly points out, this was a loss for the cultural community of Montreal, as

a whole. In fact, between 1960s and the early 70s, Larrue could record the production of only ten musical comedies and revues. The highlight of the decade was the appearances of Ida Kaminska, whose mother, Esther Rachel Kaminska had played in Montreal sixty years before! Apparently, she was the last great Yiddish artist to visit Montreal. A minority of *Shund*, cabaret, burlesque, and melodrama survived until the mid 1950s, though Anglophone stages usurped this kind of entertainment—sometimes even featuring Yiddish actors. Nevertheless, with the exception of 1939-1945, Montreal received Yiddish stars without interruption until 1952.

The activity Larrue documents in this volume speaks to the vitality of Montreal's Yiddish-speaking Jewish community and the delight with which the Yiddish actors, from New York and Europe, were received. In addition to tracing its professional history of Yiddish theatre, Larrue also traces the impact of a vital amateur theatre in Montreal. Through synagogues, schools, community organizations and the Jewish Public Library, the theatre became an important way of expressing Jewish culture and continuity. In particular, of organizations involved in amateur theatre before 1960, Larrue cites the YM-YWHA, not only for its perseverance in theatrical activity, for including some significant Yiddish productions, and for organizing acting and dramatic writing contests, but also for launching the career of many amateur and professional Yiddish speaking artists.

Larrue highlights the influence of two women in Yiddish amateur theatre: Khayele Grober, a former member of the Moscow Habimah, and Dora Wasserman. Grober's professional career took her world wide, and in addition, she conducted theatre and singing lessons, which led her to establish several amateur theatre groups, often consisting of her own pupils. The YTEG (Yiddish Theatre Group) was the most remarkable of these groups, with "daring and ambitious productions" between 1941-59, enhanced by the participation of talented professional painters and dancers.

Dora Wasserman's legacy provides the artistic vision behind Montreal's forty-three year old Yiddish theatre group, the oldest amateur Yiddish troupe in North America. It is, in fact, Wasserman—"godmother" of Canadian Yiddish Theatre—who first introduces us to this glossy volume. Trained at the Moscow Jewish State Theatre (GOSET), which was closely associated with the famous Moscow Art Theatre, Wasserman's relationship with the Montreal theatre community began through the Jewish Public Library, where she taught workshops for children, and later with Shloime Wiseman's Jewish People's School. Principal Wiseman invited Wasserman to direct plays in an effort to find a place for Yiddish for his graduates, and "to counter the devastating effects of assimilation on the young people with whom he worked on a daily basis."

In 1957, Wasserman's desire to work with adults led to the establishment of a regular troupe organized by Wiseman and comprised of members the People's School Graduates' Society. By 1964, with strong vision from its director, the artistic assistance of Gratien Gélinas, well-known artist of the French-Canadian stage, an experienced core of actors, and varied scripts, the growing professionalism of this new Yiddish Repertory Theatre Group (YRTG), became a significant representative of Yiddish culture, especially in a milieu in which Yiddish productions—amateur or professional—were more and more rare. *Yiddish Theatre in Montreal* details how Dora Wasserman shaped the company, its mandate, its artistic choices; the politics of functioning within the auspices of the YM-YWHA, and the arms length relationship vis-à-vis artistic decisions.

That YRTG nurtured theatre 'dynasties' is evidenced by an abundance of photographs picturing two and three generations of actors from a single family, amongst many of the Group's cast (if anything, there are too many of these, too few extant period photos). Wasserman also created a theatrical tradition which resisted a particular style of text, or form of presentation, rather maintaining a dedication to moving from the

classics to contemporary work, and from satisfying simply educational needs to pure entertainment.

She established a liaison with the National Theatre School of Canada [NTS], and appropriately, working with NTS production graduates, marked the 10th anniversary of The Yiddish Theatre Group—which coincided with Sholom Aleichem’s 50th anniversary—back in the old Monument-National, by then home to NTS, with a production of *Tevye*. Like other young theatre and dance troupes in Montreal, the Group wandered from one site to another, until in 1968, the Saidye Bronfman Cultural Centre provided a permanent home, without whose commitment, Larrue explains, the Yiddish Theatre Group would not have survived, to date. Wasserman’s collaboration with musician/composer Eli Rubinstein is cited as an important direction for the Group. Noteworthy too, is her association with Isaac Bashevis Singer, with whom Wasserman developed six full-scale productions of his work between 1974–1988. And finally, embracing major dramaturgical currents, like Schwartz twenty years before her, Wasserman looked to the Québécois French-language repertory and chose to present a Yiddish version of Michel Tremblay’s *Les Belles-Soeurs* in 1992! Since the publication of Larrue’s volume, Montreal’s Yiddish Theatre has evolved and flourished, now under the artistic direction of Bryna Wasserman, who took over the theatre reigns from her mother in 1997. Keenly aware of the history, challenges and opportunities before her, Bryna Wasserman continues the Yiddish Theatre’s mandate to attract both new performers and audiences, making use of technology to do so, for example, with the installation of “supertitles” that make accessible all their productions, in both French and English, simultaneously. Bryna Wasserman has also produced major contemporary pieces, including two new musicals, Richler’s *Duddy Kravitz* and Shavelson’s *The Great Houdini*. Ultimately, we come away from *Yiddish Theatre in Montreal* knowing that in Montreal, there is a theatre that transcends all obstacles of language, economics or aesthetics, and *that* is the Yiddish theatre.