The allure of Yiddish

This is a peak moment in a cultural revival of a language almost no one speaks

By Jacqueline Hyman
Staff Writer

Most of the Yiddish-language plays produced at the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene in New York run for somewhere between four and eight weeks. But after the all-Yiddish "Fiddler on the Roof" opened at Folksbiene in 2018, audiences kept coming, even after eight weeks. Then "Fiddler," usually performed in its original English, was picked up for a six-month run off-Broadway, playing for a total of 18 months.

Yiddish "Fiddler" resonated with audiences, despite the fact that few people speak the language, said Motl Didner, associate artistic director at the Folksbiene.

> "We learn a lot about how Jews died. What we don't learn enough about is how Jews lived. And that is contained in these texts."
>
> —Motl Didner, National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene

The question is, why? What accounts for the continuing, perhaps increasing, interest in Yiddish culture? And if not the Yiddish language itself, then the works of theater and music produced in that language.

"For me it's a cool cultural touchpoint, I guess," says Erica Silverstein of Annandale, who went to see "Fiddler" in New York. In the Yiddish version, the Jews speak Yiddish and the Russians speak some Russian, enhancing the differences between the two peoples, she says.

Shows at the Folksbiene usually draw no more than 12,000 people, Didner says. About 150,000 people have seen the Yiddish "Fiddler."

Seth Rogovoy, programming consultant at the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Mass., has seen "a long, slow upward progression" in interest in Yiddish culture. "I think there's been several peaks, but just at the time we thought it had peaked, the last couple years ... have surprised us."

Didner says "Fiddler's" success shows an increasing mainstream acceptance of Yiddish theater.

There's something about hearing or watching performances in Yiddish that creates in audiences a feeling of connection and wonder, say Didner and others interviewed for this article. Yiddish productions are more than a novelty, they say. Shows like "Fiddler" connect many Jews to their Yiddish-speaking ancestors.

"It's a rich language," says Silverstein, who took three Yiddish classes in college and felt a sense of connection to her family. "My dad talks about his parents speaking it over his head with his grandmother. [His generation] never learned it."

Rogovoy agrees. He's been in the Yiddish music scene for about 30 years despite not speaking Yiddish himself.

"I feel a sentimental attachment to [the language] because of my family background," says Rogovoy, whose grandparents spoke Yiddish. "I know enough of it and I'm around it enough to know that it is filled with resonances and expression and ways of phrasing things that cannot be easily translated."

For Didner, learning Yiddish came later in life when he decided to study the language so he could read the original scripts of Yiddish plays that were roughly translated into English.

Silverstein says seeing "Fiddler" in Yiddish added an extra layer of meaning to the show.

"It really heightened the sense of otherness that the Jews felt. You could see how the language was setting [the Jews and the Russians] apart," she says, adding that Yiddish made the musical seem more authentic. "This is the way that they would've spoken."

Daniel Kahn and the Painted Bird, a Germany-based klezmer band, perform at Yidstock 2019.
Photo courtesy of Yiddish Book Center/Yidstock

Frank X, Christopher Warren and Valerie Leonard in Theater J's production of "The Jewish Queen Lear."

Photo by C. Stanley Photography

Yiddish Theater Lab

It's not just Yiddish language that can showcase Yiddish culture and art. Adam Immerwahr, artistic director at Theater J in Washington, heads the 3-year-old Yiddish Theater Lab at Theater J, which puts on shows in English. They're translated from Yiddish works that have been ignored or forgotten for decades.

"In America, we've historically put Yiddish on a shelf far away," Immerwahr says, pointing to the urge of the Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants to assimilate into the American melting pot.

But he wants to dust off those works and take them off the shelf. Immerwahr says his goal is to reignite a spark of interest in Yiddish literature — a cultural goldmine he says wouldn't be as easily accessible in Yiddish.

This season is a research season, which means the lab offers five or six readings. They experiment with translations of Yiddish classics as well as forgotten American plays written about the Yiddish-speaking immigrant experience.

The theme of assimilation is prevalent in "Bronx Express" by Osit Duimov, originally performed in Yiddish and which the lab read in English in 2018. In the 1926 play, an immigrant falls asleep on a Bronx subway car and has a conversation with another immigrant from the old country.

That drive to assimilate is part of the family story of many American Jews.

"My grandparents were born in America, their parents were immigrants and my grandfather, I've heard, forbade use of Yiddish in the house because he wanted the family to become American," says Immerwahr. "[Yiddish] was the old country, we left that behind. There was this incredible push for many decades by a generation of Jews to say, 'No, we Americanized.'"

This year, the lab put on an English-language adaptation of "Mirele Efros" an 1898 play that the lab translated as "The Jewish Queen Lear."

"We chose to do the Yiddish Theater Lab in English because we want to treat it like Chekhov," Immerwahr says. "You don't go running to see Chekhov plays in Russian. We accept that it's a beautiful story … It's a moving experience to see it, even in translation."

Yiddish DNA

In the 1920s, Yiddish theaters flourished on Second Avenue in New York City, in addition to cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

"Really, the Yiddish theater, which starts in the 1880s in Europe, begins to thrive when all those Jews come to America and realize that the only way they can talk to each other is in Yiddish," Immerwahr says, of the massive immigration of Yiddish-speaking Jews from Russia to the United States, ending in the 1920s when the United States imposed immigration restrictions.

"The Jewish population was still concentrated in the Lower East Side, so when the Yiddish theater was at its peak, there were 14 theaters along Second Avenue playing two shows a day and keeping houses packed," says Didner.

In later decades, Jews moved from the crowded immigrant neighborhoods to the suburbs. For U.S.-born Jews, English was their language. Yiddish was a relic of the old country and the people who had come from there. And in the Holocaust, 5 million

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Eleanor Reissa and Frank London's Klezmer Brass Allstars perform at Yidstock 2019.

Photo courtesy of Yiddish Book Center/Yidstock

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Yiddish-speaking Jews were among those murdered.

All these factors contributed to the "long period of decline," Didner says.

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Didner, Rogovoy and Immerwahr agree that a resurgence of Yiddish arts began in the 1970s and '80s.

In addition to theater, there's a big Yiddish music festival scene, especially in New York. Rogovoy, author of "The Essential Klezmer: A Music Lover's Guide to Jewish Roots and Soul Music," has produced several concerts that highlight Yiddish.

The concert Yidstock, which will have its ninth iteration in 2020, gathers musicians who are creating new Yiddish music, like Daniel Kahn and the Painted Bird. In April, Rogovoy put on the "From Shtetl to Stage" concert at Carnegie Hall, which featured vocal and instrumental Yiddish music performances, as well as poetry readings and theatrical scenes.

Mishka Jaeger, of Reston, says she has several artist friends who participate in Yiddish theater, music and poetry.

"I think these arts are all very important connections to our cultural past that still define our identity today," Jaeger says. "Probably the most accessible — since few of us speak the language anymore — is the music."

New Yiddish music, according to Rogovoy, often includes influences from other styles, like rock, reggae, rhythm and blues, rap and hip hop.

But Yiddish music definitely has its unique sound.

"Yiddish music sounds a certain way because of its musical DNA, which comes from the same place as the old world synagogue music, cantorial music and the Chasidic vocal music," Rogovoy says. "They have their very specific modes — not the same thing as scales — certain chords or modes work together in certain ways. So there are composers who will have incorporated some of that into their work, so it's recognizably Jewish when you hear it."

Didner says Yiddish culture and language are also important to recognize because we're often taught about Jewish history only in the context of tragedy.

"We learn a lot about how Jews died. We learn a lot about anti-Semitism, not just the Holocaust but the history … before that. What we don't learn enough about is how Jews lived," Didner says. "And that is contained in these texts. We understand not only how the Jewish people viewed themselves, but how they viewed the world around them."

Regardless of the method or the medium, those interviewed for this article share a common goal of preserving Yiddish culture. And fanning what looks to some as a reawakening of interest. Immerwahr puts it this way: "It's not so much that I said the time is right, but I said what are we waiting for? Why haven't we started sooner?" **WJW**

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