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**Judith Thissen**

## **RECONSIDERING THE DECLINE OF THE NEW YORK YIDDISH THEATRE IN THE EARLY 1900S**

In seeking to explain the decline of Yiddish drama in America after its “first Golden Age” (1892–1902), contemporary critics and later historians have primarily blamed the rapid proliferation of vaudeville and moving pictures. Above all, the collapse of literary drama has been described as a direct consequence of the growing popularity of Yiddish variety shows among Jewish immigrant audiences.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the cultural and financial position of the “legitimate” Yiddish stage declined in a period in which Yiddish music halls flourished and moving pictures achieved large-scale commercial exploitation certainly suggests a correlation between these phenomena. Yet, as I will argue, there were also more structural economic forces at work in shaping the fate of the American Yiddish theatre, forces that were determined by the stringent conditions of the ethnic marketplace.

Until now, histories of the American Yiddish stage have focused almost exclusively on the evolution of the Yiddish theatre as a dramatic art. A serious discussion of its economic development is absent. Responding to that absence, this article offers a historical analysis of the material conditions of theatre production on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, the hub of Yiddish theatre in America. In order to illustrate the changing patterns in theatre consumption among immigrant Jews, I focus in particular on the business history of the two-thousand-seat Grand Theatre on Grand Street, the first playhouse in New York City built specifically for Yiddish-language performances. Because this legitimate playhouse was later turned into a moving-picture and vaudeville theatre, its history can stand as a paradigm case for the transformation of the Jewish-immigrant entertainment market in the opening decade of the twentieth century.

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THE MARKET FOR YIDDISH-LANGUAGE DRAMA

To begin with, we need to understand something about the market for Yiddish-language drama in New York City and the ways in which the Yiddish theatrical business had been organized to cope with these specific market conditions. In the late nineteenth century, several small playhouses on the Bowery, which had once been the domain of German and Irish audiences, began to reflect the East Side's new immigrant population of Eastern European Jews.<sup>2</sup> The first professional Yiddish company landed in New York in 1882. During the following decade, the continuous arrival of actors and managers—rising young talent as well as established stars and company directors—led to a rapid expansion of theatrical activity. Extreme volatility characterized the Yiddish theatrical business in those years because the growth of the Yiddish-speaking colony in New York (the potential audience) lagged behind the sharp increase in the number of performances. By contrast, the years between 1892 and 1902—the alleged golden years—were a period of relative stability and prosperity. A peak in Jewish emigration from Russia to the United States around 1891–1892 spurred the demand for Yiddish drama. By the late 1890s, the business of producing Yiddish theatre in New York had become a lucrative enterprise. Nevertheless, the financial position of most local stock companies remained precarious. Competition was intense and vicious. Throughout the history of the New York Yiddish stage, Yiddish theatre managers faced the problem of drawing a sufficiently large number of theatregoers to maintain profitable operations. For linguistic reasons, the potential market for Yiddish drama was limited to the immigrant community of Yiddish-speaking Jews and was thus circumscribed by the relatively small size of the group and the low living standards of its members. The principal strategy that Yiddish theatre managers worked out to consolidate the commercial basis of their companies was the instauration of so-called benefit performances, that is, performances for the support of immigrant organizations.

Unlike their English-language counterparts, the Yiddish playhouses in New York did not play for the box office throughout the entire week. On weekday nights, the theatres were booked in advance to various Jewish immigrant associations for alternating performances of a wide range of plays (except for the latest productions). In the Yiddish press, the troupes regularly appealed for group patronage. The benefit system had been introduced in the mid-1880s. By the early 1900s, hundreds of hometown societies (*landsmanshaftn*), trade unions, and lodges organized a theatre outing once a year. They purchased blocks of tickets at sharply discounted rates (40–60 percent) to resell them at full price to their members and the broader public. Large organizations paid a fixed sum of money for which the benefit buyer received the total seating capacity of the theatre. Every dollar received over the price paid to the theatre was the society's profit; the earnings went to the treasury or to some charitable cause. For the voluntary societies, these sponsored theatre outings, commonly known in Yiddish as *benefit abenden*

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(“benefit nights”), became a powerful vehicle to raise funds. The Yiddish playhouses also fared well by these arrangements, which persisted well into the 1930s. The benefits helped to develop an audience of regular theatregoers, and the benefit audiences brought in a steady, although much reduced, income (\$200 to \$250 per night around 1900, which comes down to less than ten cents per seat) on weekday evenings when business was usually slow but actors and rent had to be paid anyway.<sup>3</sup>

Cost-effective benefit performances proved to be a successful strategy to spread risks and maximize attendance.<sup>4</sup> But while the benefit system offered the Yiddish theatres a financial respite, the box-office audience remained the key source of revenue. On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings, Saturday and Sunday matinees, as well as on Jewish and American holidays, the Yiddish playhouses competed to sell tickets to individual patrons, with prices ranging from twenty-five cents for cheapest matinee seats to one dollar for the best evening seats. The latest productions figured prominently on the bill, but classics from the old repertory that had proven their worth at the box office also highlighted weekend programs, especially during the slack season and for matinee performances. Like their English-language counterparts, Yiddish theatre managers sought to maximize their profits by outdoing the competition. The most straightforward approach was to create a light-entertainment product. But not all Yiddish theatre managers opted for the surest way to economic success. Jacob P. Adler, the manager of the Grand Theatre, for instance, prided himself in being a promoter of literary drama.

Before going on to look in detail at the history of the Grand Theatre (1903–1909), it is important to consider the context in which this theatre opened its doors. By 1900, the Bowery counted three large-capacity theatres used for Yiddish performances: together the Windsor Theatre, the Thalia Theatre, and the People’s Theatre seated nine thousand.<sup>5</sup> Each distinguished itself from the others by building its reputation around a specific fare and group of stars.

### MOYSHE HURWITZ’S WINDSOR: A RELIC OF THE EARLY AMERICAN YIDDISH THEATRE

Around 1900, theatregoers who enjoyed biblical or historical operettas and *tsaytbilder* (portrayals of recent events) most likely went to the Windsor Theatre, which was managed by “Professor” Moyshe Hurwitz. The aesthetics of variety entertainment—horseplay, slapstick, crazy mixture of genres, abundance of singing and dancing—characterized the type of Yiddish theatre offered by Hurwitz’s troupe. Its roots were in the traditional Purim play as well as in the secular popular performance culture that developed during the 1860s and 1870s in Romanian and Galician wine cellars. Hurwitz (1844–1910) began his career in show business in Romania in 1877. As dramatist and impresario, he became a central presence in the early American-Yiddish theatre. In the late 1880s, Hurwitz and his rival, Joseph Lateiner (1853–1935), held a virtual monopoly

over the Yiddish stage in New York. As they had earlier in Eastern Europe, they assumed both the artistic and financial direction of their respective companies in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

During the 1890s, however, the emergence of a new generation of playwrights and a new organizational model—in which the male star rather than the playwright became the troupe’s leading figure—gradually undermined the positions of both Hurwitz and Lateiner. By 1900, Hurwitz’s competitors condemned his troupe as “producing no new plays” and as being “hopelessly behind in times.”<sup>7</sup> Although the Windsor troupe with soprano Regina Prager as leading lady had passed its heyday and was indeed in many respects a relic of the early American-Yiddish theatre, it still managed to stand up to the competition. Hurwitz’s gaudy spectacles, which glorified the bravery, self-sacrifice, and noble deeds of Jews, whether ancient and eloquent kings or poor ghetto families, continued to appeal to a substantial part of the public. In 1901, *Ben hador oder der prints fun arabyen* (*Ben Hador; or, the Arabian Prince*), a reworking of an earlier operetta, was exceptionally successful, attracting audiences for twenty-three weeks.<sup>8</sup>

#### THALIA AND STRIVING FOR A BETTER YIDDISH THEATRE

For the devotees of more serious drama among the Jewish immigrants there was the Thalia Theatre, just opposite the Windsor, at 46–48 Bowery (formerly the Bowery Theatre). In *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), the American journalist Hutchins Hapgood notes that “many excellent realist plays” were given by the Thalia company, and he explained that “of late years, the great playwright of the colony, Jacob Gordin” had written mainly for this theatre.<sup>9</sup> Hapgood is right in emphasizing the significance of the Thalia Theatre for the history of Yiddish literary drama. For almost a decade, this playhouse and its stars—David Kessler, Keni Liptzin, and Bertha Kalish—had been closely associated with the drive for a better Yiddish theatre as it had been advocated by Jewish immigrant intelligentsia.<sup>10</sup>

During the 1880s, the East Side’s small, cultivated elite of Russian-Jewish intellectuals, most of whom were socialists or anarchists (or a combination of both), had paid little attention to the Yiddish stage. By the 1890s, however, the Yiddish theatre had become a serious rival for the kind of influence they hoped to achieve as writers, newspaper editors, labor activists, and political leaders. This competition gave rise to a fervent campaign to reform the Yiddish stage. In 1891, Abraham Cahan, Louis Miller, and Jacob Gordin, three radical journalists associated with the socialist weekly *Arbayter tsaytung* (*The Worker’s Paper*), launched a campaign to transform the Yiddish theatre from a lowbrow entertainment appealing to Jewish sentiments into a highbrow institution of cosmopolitan art and enlightenment. As Yiddish theatre historian Nina Warnke points out, they condemned melodrama and historical operettas as stupid and stupefying amusement, and demanded the elimination of this *shund* (trash) from

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the Yiddish stage. At the same time, they “postulated realist plays and natural acting style as true art and exhorted both actors and audience to embrace their artistic values.”<sup>11</sup> In their view, drama with realist character development and psychologically motivated action was to make working-class audiences aware of social ills and thus would reinforce the revolutionary demand for change.<sup>12</sup> For almost two decades, Jewish immigrant intellectuals targeted theatrical entrepreneurs, actors, and audiences for giving preference to spectacle and attractions rather than to content and drama as art. Confident of their own aesthetic values and judgment of quality, the East Side intelligentsia defined what was good art and what was bad taste, what was *literatur* and what was *shund*.

The reformers of the Yiddish stage, Jacob Gordin later explained, wanted to “utilize the theatre for higher purposes; to derive from it not only amusement but education, not merely entertainment but the highest aesthetical enjoyment.”<sup>13</sup> Implicitly, this new discourse on theatre heightened the status of the performers and playwrights to that of gifted artists who were entrusted with the task of elevating the taste of the theatregoing masses. A handful of talented actors—including Jacob P. Adler, David Kessler, Keni Liptzin, and Bertha Kalish—seized this opportunity to acquire cultural legitimacy. Instead of pandering to the public’s taste for cheap melodrama with *shund* plays, they sought to secure the goodwill of the East Side’s intelligentsia with *literatur* and increasingly incorporated the concepts of “true art” and “serious drama” into their public image.<sup>14</sup> Aesthetically sound drama that aspired toward universality became the showpiece of their companies even though *shund* plays still figured frequently on the bill. At the Thalia Theatre, the productions of “true art” were supported by the profits from the lighter fare (and in the process, the lighter fare also gained an aura of legitimacy because it was performed by an artist). A vehicle for advertising, reviews, and cultural criticism, the labor press further enhanced the image of the Yiddish theatre as an institution for highbrow art and helped to turn Yiddish drama away from melodrama developed out of the traditional *purimshpil* (Purim play) and *café-chantant* fare to modern theatrical forms exemplified by the social problem plays of Ibsen, Hauptmann, and Tolstoy (major sources and influences for Gordin). This discursive alliance between the actors and the labor press turned out to be one of the most effective strategies employed in attempting to reposition the Yiddish theatre as a highbrow institution rather than as a venue for a popular amusement.

Within a few years, the theatre-reform movement managed to create a small market for more serious plays, thereby breaking the Hurwitz—Lateiner monopoly. During the 1890s, realist drama acquired a more prominent place in the Yiddish repertoire, although the lighter fare remained the “bread and butter” business.<sup>15</sup> Clearly most Jewish workers were not interested in gaining cultural capital by patronizing realist drama: They simply wanted amusement for their hard-earned cash. If the theatregoing masses attended serious drama productions, I would argue, it was primarily to see the star’s performance (rather than the play). Another impetus to attend a realist play was that this was

considered a political act, affirming membership in the radical community. Under the influence of intelligentsia's discourse, the Yiddish theatre had become "the venue for highly politicized events," as Warnke's study on Jewish cultural politics and the New York Yiddish theatre convincingly demonstrates.<sup>16</sup>

Jacob Gordin, the leading Yiddish realist playwright and driving force behind the reform movement, became a cultural hero to many radical intellectuals and workers. For a brief moment around 1900–1903, it even seemed that his work began to hold the broader public. Several problem plays that Gordin wrote for the Thalia Theatre, including *Di yidishe safo* (*The Jewish Sappho*, 1900) and *Kraytser sonata* (*The Kreutzer Sonata*, 1902), did very well at the box office and they were revived time and again after their initial run.<sup>17</sup> The radical community saw the popularity of Gordin's work as an indication that they had successfully turned the Yiddish stage into a vehicle for their ideas about art and politics. The popularity of these plays, however, was in no small part due to their highly controversial subject matter. Gordin's provocative presentation and discussion of sexuality, infidelity, and suicide roused considerable public attention and led to heated discussions in the Yiddish press. Warnke notes that while the radical papers supported the progressive ideas of the playwright, the conservative newspapers blamed him for the disintegration of traditional marriages and the rising rate of murders and suicides in the Jewish immigrant community.<sup>18</sup> She convincingly argues that the newspaper war between the radical and the conservative press, turned the performances of Gordin's work at the Thalia Theatre into highly politicized events and that many workers regarded their attendance as a political act. At the same time, I would add, the scandals over Gordin's plays also incited less politically motivated immigrants to patronize the Thalia Theatre. Some might have been looking for any sensation, while others might have been attracted by the sexually suggestive scenes. In this respect, it is quite revealing that the conservative newspapers urged their readers to avoid the performances of Gordin's domestic dramas just as they should avoid Allen Street, the local red-light district.<sup>19</sup>

#### THE PEOPLE'S THEATRE: BROADWAY-STYLE MUSICALS AND TRUE ART

The People's Theatre, the third Yiddish theatre on the Bowery, was located a few blocks north of the Thalia Theatre, between Delancey and Rivington Streets. Hapgood considered it "the 'swellest' and probably the least typical of the three."<sup>20</sup> It was a rather fashionable playhouse, which admitted no babies and was exceedingly clean in comparison with the theatres farther down the Bowery, according to Hapgood. This "swell" setting attracted many Americanized immigrants—upwardly mobile youngsters and *allrightniks* (a sneering term applied to first-generation immigrants who had done "all-right" in America). In terms of its fare, the People's Theatre was also somewhat atypical, in the sense that it promoted two forms of theatre, which in the critical discourse were poles apart: literary drama and musical comedies. Lovers of "true art"

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(*emese kunst*) patronized the People's to see Jacob P. Adler and his wife Sarah starring in such Yiddish classics as *The Jewish King Lear* and other early Gordin plays. In 1894, Adler had tried to establish a playhouse entirely devoted to Jacob Gordin's work and translations of European classics, but it had soon turned out that his company could not survive without producing the less serious fare. The collaboration with the much younger Boris Thomashefsky allowed him to pass the leading parts in musical comedies and other popular genres onto the latter, thus nourishing the box office without damaging his own reputation as an ardent promoter of literary drama.<sup>21</sup> By 1900, the young matinee idol Thomashefsky, with his grand style, languorous eyes, and vibrating voice, had become a star in his own right. More important, Thomashefsky's Broadway-style shows yielded the larger part of the box-office takings at the People's Theatre. As a result, power relations between the two actors changed, and little by little the house evolved into an outpost of what the radical press strongly condemned as "the American stage tendency" (as opposed to the "Russian stage tendency" advocated by the immigrant intelligentsia).<sup>22</sup>

Such was the state of the infrastructure of the New York Yiddish theatre prior to the opening of the Grand Theatre: The Windsor Theatre offered old-fashioned operettas, the Thalia offered primarily literary drama in the realist tradition, and the People's Theatre alternated American-style musicals with early Gordin classics.

### A FOURTH YIDDISH THEATRE: THE GRAND

The relative stability and prosperity that marked the Yiddish theatre of the late 1890s and early 1900s came to end around 1905. For the next decade or so, the Yiddish theatrical business encountered serious economic difficulties. In discussions of the period, this decline has primarily been explained in terms of a cultural and commercial war between Yiddish "legitimate" drama and Yiddish vaudeville. The fact that the opening of a fourth Yiddish playhouse also put serious pressure on the market was acknowledged by contemporaries, but has been ignored ever since. Let us first consider for and by whom this playhouse had been built, and how successful the initial enterprise was.

In February 1902, Jewish builder and philanthropist Harry Fischel bought a piece of land of about 10,000 square feet (900 m<sup>2</sup>), at the south corner of Grand and Chrystie Streets with the intention to erect on the site a theatre for Yiddish performances.<sup>23</sup> Contrary to what is generally believed, the construction was commissioned *not* by Jacob P. Adler but by Sophie Karp (one of the first Yiddish actresses) and veteran dramatist Joseph Lateiner, in partnership with *kapelmayster* Louis Friedsel, comedian Bernard Bernstein, and actor-manager Maurice Finkel and his wife, the actress Emma Thomashefsky (Boris's sister). Almost all these theatre people suffered from what Bernard Gorin, the first Yiddish theatre historian, called "*di naye ordnung oyf der bühne*,"



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meaning the end of the Lateiner—Hurwitz monopoly. Karp and Lateiner (both connected to the People's Theatre) feared that their future was at stake, now that Adler and Thomashefsky had successfully consolidated their power by becoming star-managers, in which function they not only controlled the finances but also dictated the casting of roles and the selection of plays—and, hence, were in a position to push the “Old Guard” out of the market altogether. It should come as no surprise that the “losers” of this new order sought to turn the tide by opening their own theatre.<sup>24</sup>

Fischel agreed to construct, on behalf of them, a four-story building comprising a modern fireproof two-thousand-seat theatre, a basement store for a café and liquor saloon, offices and lofts on the upper floors, as well as space on the ground floor for a shop. The building was to be equipped with an electricity plant, steam heating, and a ventilation system. The builder and his wife personally invested \$50,000 in the project, while the future lessees of the theatre deposited a sum of \$25,000 as security.<sup>25</sup> With the incorporation of the Grand Theatre Company in April 1902, the project became officially a joint venture between the Fischel family and the Karp—Lateiner troupe. The newly formed corporation bought the property (land and the theatre to be built) from the Fischels for a sum of \$350,000. The troupe now co-owned its own playhouse, at least on paper.<sup>26</sup>

The opening of the Grand Theatre building was planned for 15 September 1902, but the work was not finished for the beginning of the theatrical season. The troupe also missed out on the Jewish holiday season, in particular on the eight-day festival of *Sukkot*, which in the urban American context had become primarily a festival for Jewish theatregoers and marked the start of the winter season. On the first two and final two days of this feast, thousands of immigrants flocked to the theatres for the special matinee and evening performances billed “*lekoved sukes*” (in honor of *Sukkot*). In addition to the loss of box-office takings from the weekend and holiday performances, the sale of benefit performances to immigrant organizations was seriously hampered as long as the exact opening date of the Grand remained uncertain.

The Grand Theatre finally opened its doors on 5 February 1903 with a gala performance of Lateiner's latest historical operetta *Zion; or, the Rivers of Babylon*.<sup>27</sup> The play, which firmly relied on the dramatic formulas of the 1880s, impressed neither the critics nor the crowd. After months of major expenses and no receipts, the Grand Theatre Company now faced disappointing box-office returns. The Grand's first season was a financial disaster. Besides the consequences of the much delayed opening, audiences had not been as loyal as Lateiner's troupe had expected them to be. The absence of a male star plus the old-fashioned repertoire seemed to have discouraged the crowd. In addition, those who strolled up and down the Bowery in search for an evening's entertainment might have simply ignored the new theatre because it was situated off their usual itinerary.

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To protect their \$50,000 investment, the Fischels, who held a controlling interest in the capital stock, bought the premises back from the company in June 1903, whereupon the building (including the stores, lofts, and rathskeller) was let to Karp and Lateiner for \$32,000 per annum for a period of five years.<sup>28</sup> The company's economic survival now depended on whether or not Karp and Lateiner would be able to contract a star of the new generation, an actor-manager who would bring in a more contemporary repertory, including realist plays by their archenemy Jacob Gordin. They proposed a three-year contract to Jacob P. Adler, as the Grand's new artistic director. Adler accepted their offer and left the Bowery for Grand Street.

On Friday, 28 August 1903, the Grand Theatre opened its second season with Jacob Adler starring in *Der yidisher kenig lir*, Gordin's adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. By the end of the November, Adler had given a total of seventy-nine performances at the Grand, mostly alongside his wife Sarah in his new vehicle *Gebrokhene hertser* (*Broken Hearts*), a sophisticated tearjerker about Jewish immigrant life by Zalmen Libin.<sup>29</sup> At first sight, it seems that Karp and Lateiner had sidelined themselves for the sake of the box office. However, a month later, when the company's new production, *Der emes* (*The Truth*), a romantic vehicle for Karp written by Zolotarevsky, fell through and Adler put *Gebrokhene hertser* on the bill again, he was almost immediately stripped of his duties as manager. The battle between Adler and the board lingered until February 1904.<sup>30</sup> Eventually, Karp and Lateiner lost the feud. They had overestimated their own box-office appeal and ignored the fact that the theatrical business had considerably changed. The Grand Theatre could not survive without a star-manager of Adler's caliber. In the eyes of the critics, the exponents of *shund* had acknowledged defeat. Jacob P. Adler himself proudly informed the public that the Grand Theatre was devoted again to "true art" (*emese kunst*) and promised them that it would become New York's finest temple of art.<sup>31</sup>

From the perspective of hindsight, it is clear that the problems of the first two seasons foreshadowed the economic hardships in the years to come. The exploitation of the Grand Theatre was a risky venture. To begin with, the rent of the theatre—about \$26,000 per annum—was extremely high compared to what Yiddish companies paid in the Bowery.<sup>32</sup> For instance, the thirty-five-hundred-seat Windsor cost no more than \$18,000 per year. Of course, the newly built Grand (two thousand seats) offered more comfortable, elegant, and refined surroundings than its competitors, but under the prevailing market conditions, ticket prices (ranging from twenty-five cents to a dollar) could not be raised to compensate for the high operating costs that resulted from the high rent and relatively small seating capacity. Given the restricted buying power of the immigrant population and the severe competition, increased ticket prices would undoubtedly discourage attendance. Whoever managed the Grand as a Yiddish theatre ran an increased risk of failure. Second, it remained to be seen whether the Yiddish-speaking community was large and prosperous enough to support a fourth Yiddish theatre, not only in the short term but also in the long run.

SHARPENED COMPETITION

At the beginning of the 1904–1905 season, four Yiddish playhouses competed for patronage: the Windsor (Hurwitz—Heine), People’s Theatre (Thomashefsky—Edelstein), Thalia (Gordin), and Adler’s Grand. Within a few weeks, Hurwitz and Heine went broke as a result of sharpened competition in combination with bad management. The strategy they had devised to meet the competition proved fatal: They had shifted the format at the Windsor from Yiddish operetta to legitimate opera in Yiddish. The local immigrant intelligentsia praised Hurwitz’s efforts to devote his theatre to high culture, but the public stayed away. In November 1904, A. H. Woods, a producer of ten/twenty/thirty-cent melodrama (in English) took over the Windsor for the remainder of the season. While Heine continued his career as business manager, Hurwitz never recovered from the blow.

Although the collapse of companies due to cutthroat competition was fairly common in the history of the New York Yiddish theatre, the crisis that followed the opening of the Grand Theatre was no normal business fluctuation. With the inauguration of the Grand Theatre in February 1903, the total seating capacity of the Yiddish playhouses had jumped from nine thousand to eleven thousand—an increase of almost 25 percent. In hindsight, it is clear that the market for Yiddish performances had reached a level of saturation that was commercially unsustainable. Consequently, market forces adjusted supply to demand and regulated the overcapacity in terms of “Yiddish” seats. Every season between 1904 and 1909, one out of the four large-capacity playhouses used for Yiddish performances was rented out to English-language companies offering ten/twenty/thirty-cent melodrama: the Windsor Theatre in 1904–1905, the Thalia Theatre from 1905 to 1908, and finally the Grand Theatre (1908–1909). On Sundays, these theatres continued to be used for Yiddish stage productions by companies that played the remainder of the week on the road.

The question remains why the Jewish immigrant community in New York could not sustain four legitimate Yiddish playhouses performing the entire week. New York’s community of Eastern European Jews—and, hence, the number of potential patrons for Yiddish performances—was growing explosively during this period. In the immediate aftermath of the Kishinev pogroms (April 1903), over one hundred thousand Jewish immigrants headed for the United States. Between 1904 and 1908 alone, a total of six hundred and thirty-five thousand Eastern European Jews sought a new home in America, almost twice as many as in the preceding decade.<sup>33</sup> The vast majority of these newcomers settled in New York City, where they crowded into Manhattan’s Lower East Side and the Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Brownsville. Although the potential market for Yiddish-language theatre productions was limited to the ethnic market (circumscribing its potential for growth, especially in the long run), this unprecedented influx of immigrants created short-term market conditions that were extremely favorable.

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### ART VERSUS ENTERTAINMENT, COSMOPOLITANISM VERSUS JEWISH NATIONALISM

What explains that the Yiddish legitimate theatre's inability to profit from the massive expansion of its potential market? Why did the newcomers bypass the large Yiddish playhouses on the East Side when looking for an evening's entertainment? Or more to the point: Why did the newcomers prefer the Yiddish music halls?—because that is where they went. The first Yiddish music halls and concert saloons emerged on the Lower East Side around 1901–1902, but it was not until mid-1905 that Yiddish vaudeville became a major force on the market.<sup>34</sup>

Following Bernard Gorin's *Geshikhte fun yidishen theater* (1917), most histories of the American Yiddish stage explain the end of the “first golden epoch of Yiddish theatre” (ca. 1892–1902) in terms of a transformation of the social composition and cultural background of the theatregoing audience. According to Gorin, the mass influx of newcomers in the early 1900s brought about the artistic and economic decline of the American-Yiddish stage. He argues that while under the influence of Jacob Gordin and other Russian-Jewish intellectuals, the “old” audience had developed an appreciation of better things, the “new” audience of immigrants who came in the aftermath of the Kishinev pogroms did not appreciate the Yiddish theatre that they found in New York. These greenhorns, we are told, consisted largely of uneducated Jews, who knew nothing of drama, except for the traditional *purimshpil*:

The large majority of these immigrants had never seen a theater before they came to America. As soon as they had settled somewhat, they became eager to see a Yiddish performance and poured into the theaters *en masse*, but the better plays and the better sort of performances could not find any favor with them. . . . Even the trashy plays were too high for them, because by now these plays had some polish and therefore did not match their taste. The newcomers wanted something which looked like the real *purimshpil*. Around the same time the music halls began to flourish. They had emerged in the Jewish district a few years earlier, but the public initially stayed away from them. . . . However, in the wake of the great migration, the music halls proliferated all over the Jewish quarter. The type of entertainment offered by the music halls met the needs of the newcomers and they wore out the doorsteps of these places.<sup>35</sup>

Gorin's comment is an exaggeration but a useful one. Though there is little evidence to support the idea that the masses of newcomers were an ignorant lot, there are sufficient indications to suggest that the Yiddish legitimate theatre no longer satisfied the needs of its core audience, that is, Jewish workers and their families. What made that these immigrants begin to desert the legitimate playhouses in favor of Yiddish music halls was not so much a shift in theatrical taste on the part of the public, but on the part of the star-managers. By the early 1900s, the efforts of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia to mold the Yiddish

theatre its own aesthetic standards and thus bring the *proste yidn* (common people) in touch with the high points of cosmopolitan European culture had alienated a considerable part of its potential public. Realism brought cultural legitimacy to the Yiddish stage and its stars. Yet, as a settlement worker remarked: “the lighter element among the Jewish theatre-going population . . . rebels against this seriousness. Their tastes are like those of our own comic opera and vaudeville habitués.”<sup>36</sup> Significant in this respect is the fact that the only Yiddish legitimate playhouse on the Lower East Side that never fell in the hands of an English-language company was Thomashefsky’s People’s Theatre. Thomashefsky and his business partner, the impresario Joseph Edelstein, rarely ventured on a realist play. They scored great commercial success with the production of fancy musical comedies that mixed melodrama, broad burlesque, and operetta. In this context, it should also be emphasized once more that although there had been a brief moment around 1900 that Jacob Gordin’s cosmopolitan type of plays held the broader public, realist drama never thrived on the American Yiddish stage. The star system made the staging of serious drama possible, but the masses favored lighter entertainment and distrusted the elite’s enlightenment project.

Another crucial factor contributing to the growing dissatisfaction with the realist fare and, at the same time, growing popularity of Yiddish music halls, I would argue, was a revival of ethnic consciousness among Eastern European Jews in the wake of the Kishinev pogroms (1903). The new wave of immigrants brought with them an acute sense of their Jewishness, developed in the context of and in response to excessive anti-Semitism. When they went to see a Yiddish performance, they expected a theatre that spoke to their experience and recognized their sensibilities as a persecuted minority—*not* a theatre that aspired to universalism and sophistication. Moreover, the anti-Jewish uprisings in Eastern Europe exerted a powerful consolidating force upon the entire immigrant community, mobilizing latent ethnic attachments and feelings of Jewish nationalism. In this period of crisis, both the “new” and the “old” audience expected the Yiddish theatre to function as a forum for ethnic expression, communal solidarity, and loyalty to Jewish traditions. But while the Jewish masses reaffirmed their commitment to Judaism, Gordin’s ideologically based attacks on traditional Jewish morality became ever more daring. When *Di yesoyme* (The Orphan)—a drama about the plight of an impoverished young girl who is abused by her wealthy relatives—was staged at the Thalia Theatre in October 1903, it shocked many audience members and the play’s negative portrayal of Orthodox Jewry provoked a bitter debate in the immigrant community.<sup>37</sup> Over the next few years, until his death in 1909, the influence of Gordin rapidly waned. According to the playwright himself, the masses no longer appreciated the cosmopolitan and realist spirit of his plays.<sup>38</sup> One could also argue that he failed (or refused) to acknowledge their need for a more “nationalist” Yiddish theatre. Ultimately, Gordin and the majority of Russian-Jewish intellectuals of his generation continued to associate Judaism with backwardness. As historian Gerald Sorin points out, “many socialists insisted

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that, though they were . . . speaking Yiddish [rather than Russian], they were not thereby *Jewish* socialists. In revolt against formal Judaism and very much enamored of progressive universalism, many of these men and women feared being associated with any form of nationalism.”<sup>39</sup> Tellingly, the Gordin plays that gained broad approval and remained the most popular—*The Jewish King Lear*, *Mirele Efros* (also known as *The Jewish Queen Lear*), and *God, Man and Devil*—were plays that, as Sandrow points out, reinforced basic Jewish values and traditions.<sup>40</sup>

### THE YIDDISH MUSIC-HALL BOOM

The elite’s relatively successful efforts at divorcing Yiddish legitimate drama from its origins in popular culture and the revival of ethnic consciousness and concomitant demand for traditional Jewish folk themes helped to create a firm market for Yiddish vaudeville. Another major impetus behind the upsurge in music-hall patronage was the rapid expansion of the potential audience due to immigration. Finally, the collapse of Hurwitz’s Windsor Theatre in November 1904 also spurred the demand for Yiddish vaudeville entertainment. For almost two decades, Hurwitz had been one of the main providers of Yiddish operetta, a type of theatrical entertainment that had much in common with the music-hall fare. Both in terms of its subject matter (motifs of Jewish life and history) and its format (variety), the music-hall fare resembled the early American-Yiddish theatre of the Hurwitz—Lateiner period. Tellingly, during the early days of the music-hall boom, Morris Heine, Hurwitz’s former partner at the Windsor Theatre, operated a thousand-seat music hall on Grand Street.<sup>41</sup>

East Side music-hall proprietors and concert saloonkeepers were quick to capitalize on the increased demand for their product. They renovated their establishments, cleaned up their ill-reputed shows, added extra attractions, and began to charge admission (ranging from ten to twenty-five cents). Proximity to the home and the low admission fee meant that many immigrant families, with the exception of the poorest, could attend the music halls on a regular basis. By mid-1906, New York City counted fourteen Yiddish music halls, each employing ten to fifteen actors, actresses, and chorus girls, several musicians, and stagehands.<sup>42</sup> The Yiddish music halls played their cards right on all levels: They offered an entertainment product that fitted the public’s meager purse, lowbrow taste, and strong preference for motifs of Jewish history. Writing about the rapid proliferation of Yiddish music halls on the Lower East Side, social worker Paul Klapper noted that “short play[s] which base their plot on the recent Russian riots are extremely popular. Many in the audience have either experienced these incidents themselves, or have relatives that are to-day suffering the consequences of these anti-Semitic outbreaks.”<sup>43</sup>

While favorable market conditions spurred the demand for Yiddish vaudeville, the music halls’ economic success also resulted from changing exhibition practices. In the early years of the Yiddish music halls, when most

shows had been free of charge, the programs comprised little more than singing, dancing, and making jokes on a makeshift stage, with a short sketch on the side. Initially, these vaudeville sketches featured just two performers—typically, the “sketch-artist” and a female companion. Eventually, the sketch developed into three-act melodramas for five or six actors and became the main feature of the bill.<sup>44</sup> This change was gradual but gained momentum when the concert saloonkeepers began to renovate their establishments and to charge admission. By 1906, a typical bill contained at least one three-act sketch or playlet, supplemented by jokes, dances, (illustrated) songs, and single turns.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, widespread acceptance of music-hall entertainment as a suitable pastime did not come until the saloonkeepers introduced entrance fees and dissociated their shows from the beer-drinking accompaniment. Although many vaudeville managers conveniently kept a liquor bar on the premises, the fact that patrons were no longer obliged to order a glass of beer made many Jewish immigrants—both men and women—feel more at ease in a music hall. Jews were no teetotalers, but a large majority abstained from drinking other than in the context of religious celebrations, family parties, and social functions such as *landmanshaft* balls or picnic outings.<sup>46</sup> At first sight, it seems that Yiddish music-hall managers followed the example set by their American counterparts. In the late nineteenth century, American variety entrepreneurs like Tony Pastor began to regulate drinking and smoking in their establishments and to clean up their shows from the rawest jokes and skits. Many of their efforts aimed at encouraging women and families to visit their shows, which until then had primarily catered to working-class men and “disreputable” women.<sup>47</sup> Yiddish music halls, on the other hand, had attracted young couples, single women, and families right from the outset. It had never been an exclusively male institution. Still, the introduction of an entrance fee, which dissociated Yiddish music-hall entertainment from the compulsory beer-drinking and hence made it more acceptable for Jewish immigrants of both sexes, did pay off with an increased attendance of women and children in particular.

The transformation of the Yiddish vaudeville business was so successful that it threatened to replace the Yiddish theatre as the popular entertainment preferred by immigrant Jews. The Yiddish music-hall boom prompted a commercial battle between the legitimate theatres and the music halls, in which the first looked for any sensation that would bring the public back. Yiddish theatre managers began to stage melodramas that outdid the early Yiddish theatre fare in spectacular effects, sentimentality, and folklore. Besides the conventional motifs of Jewish history and immigrant life, they also began to exploit the growing feelings of nationalism among Eastern European Jews. In 1908–1909, Lateiner’s tearjerker *Dos yidische harts* (*The Jewish Heart*) was exceptionally successful at Kessler’s Thalia Theatre, attracting crowds from *Sukkot* till the end of the season, thirty-two weeks in total. Boris Thomashefsky capitalized on the subject matter of Kessler’s smash hit with *Di yidische neshome* (*The Jewish Soul*) and *Dos pintele yid* (*The Essential Spark of Jewishness*), which set a new record

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by running for thirty-five consecutive weeks at the People's Theatre during the 1909–1910 season. In the eyes of most theatre critics, these plays were unadulterated *shund*. The reviewer of the *Tageblatt* complained that the basic story of *Dos pintele yid*—a story of a boy discovering his Jewish identity—was lost by “a Luna Park show of kingly palaces, gardens, forests, rich costumes, lights, songs, and dances.”<sup>48</sup> Yet the audience loved the play and was stirred to its depths, especially during the final scene, in which a tremendous electric Star of David was lowered from the grid.

### ADLER'S TEMPLE OF ART

While Kessler “threw away the art, threw away Gordin, and began delivering the goods to the great almighty Public,” as Bessie Thomashefsky writes in her memoirs, the advocates of the better Yiddish drama placed all their hope in Jacob P. Adler.<sup>49</sup> He was to keep the spirit of *literatur* that Gordin had brought to the Yiddish stage alive at the Grand Theatre. Yet despite all the fine words about “*emese kunst*” (true art) that Adler employed to distinguish his theatre from the competition and enhance his image as a promoter of serious drama, the Grand Theatre remained a commercial enterprise.

Adler knew from experience that a Yiddish company could not survive without lighter and more vulgar plays to nourish the box office. In 1904–1905, the Grand Theatre company still favored literary drama as its staple entertainment, but the economics of show business quickly gained the upper hand. A year later, *The Jewish King Lear* and other plays by Gordin already shared the bill with melodramas starring the soprano Regina Prager (formerly Hurwitz's prima donna). It became more and more difficult, if not impossible, to make money from a new Gordin play. With the exception of *Emese kraft* (1904), the plays he wrote for the Grand Theatre all fell through and closed within a few weeks (some even within a few days). Fortunately for Adler, the Gordin classics from the 1890s remained popular and hence figured prominently on the bill. Unlike his later works, which, as we saw, were very critical of traditional Jewish morality and respectability, these early plays reinforced basic Jewish values. A few sensational problem plays by Libin also found favor with the broader public and were frequently revived after their initial run. In 1906–1907, when the battle between the legitimate theatres and the Yiddish music halls came to a head, Adler bought Zeifert's historical operetta *Queen of Sheba*, a truly commercial venture designed to bring in the greatest number of spectators. It was an instant hit.<sup>50</sup>

Although there were enough successes to keep up an appearance of prosperity, Adler was hard pressed to keep the Grand Theatre profitable. On the one hand, he had to compete with Thomashefsky's People's Theatre and the Windsor Theatre (Kalish-Spachner), both of which offered the lighter fare as their staple entertainment. On the other hand, he experienced competition from neighboring music halls. The Grand Street Music Hall, the People's Music Hall



on the Bowery, and the Union Vaudeville House on Eldridge Street, together seating more patrons than the Grand Theatre, lured the less well-off theatregoers away, in particular the potential public for the twenty-five and thirty-five cent gallery seats.<sup>51</sup> However, stiff competition alone cannot account for Adler's financial troubles. His company nearly broke down under the burden of increased costs. In addition to the relatively high rent that Adler had to pay for the Grand Theatre, rising operating costs were a serious problem—not just for Adler but for all legitimate Yiddish companies operating in New York City.

#### INCREASE IN COSTS, FALL IN PROFIT

Increased costs and risks were undermining the economic stability of the Yiddish theatrical business as much as fierce competition from Yiddish music halls. Within less than a decade, the weekly expenses of a Yiddish theatre in New York City had more than doubled, from \$1,500 around 1900 to almost \$4,000 by 1909.<sup>52</sup> The main reason for this exceptional rise in costs was the success of the Hebrew theatre unions in winning substantial gains for their members in terms of wages and employment guarantees.<sup>53</sup> By 1909, salaries for actors, choristers, musicians, stagehands, and other employees accounted for over 60 percent of the Grand's weekly budget, according to contemporary estimates.<sup>54</sup> If this increase in costs would have been matched with an increase in ticket prices, everything might have been fine. But Yiddish theatre managers did not compensate their increased costs by raising ticket prices. Not only were they afraid that higher admission prices would further undermine their competitive position vis-à-vis the Yiddish music halls, but they also knew that the bulk of theatregoers could not afford to spend more than twenty-five or fifty cents at most for a seat. On the whole, box-office prices remained more or less the same throughout the 1900s, ranging from one dollar for the best seats in the house to a quarter for the top gallery. Since competition from vaudeville and the limited budget of the Jewish immigrant population in New York prevented the star-managers of the Yiddish stage from passing on the increased theatrical costs to the customer, profit margins of the local Yiddish playhouses dwindled. As a result, the companies' risks grew as each season they had to sell more tickets to break even. These stringent market conditions forced stars-managers to supplement their income with other business operations. In Adler's case, the growing gap between expenses and income at the Grand Theatre was made up for by touring the American provinces in the summer and one-night stands in the New York area on weekdays during the theatrical season. When the Adlers guest-starred outside New York in these years, they received as much as a thousand dollars per night. The huge profits from the road recouped the losses on their resident stock company. In other words, if Adler managed to keep the Grand Theatre open, it was in large part because he and his wife made a lot of money by playing on other stages.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the internal factors responsible for the economic downturn of the New York Yiddish stage—stiff competition and increased costs—the

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economic decline was further precipitated by outside forces. First, the years 1907–1908 brought on a severe depression that deeply affected the Jewish immigrant community in New York. On the Lower East Side alone, more than one hundred thousand men and women were out of work (over 25 percent of the labor force). The immediate effect of the crisis was a significant drop in theatrical attendance, because for many immigrants theatre tickets had become too expensive. They shifted their patronage to less expensive forms of entertainment. The depression indeed fueled the demand for cheap entertainment and the concomitant expansion of storefront picture shows in Jewish neighborhoods. A specific sign of that flourishing was the fact that between the summers of 1907 and 1908, nickelodeons had pushed the Yiddish music halls almost entirely out of the market. In May 1908, the *Forward* stated that the Yiddish theatre had also lost “a considerable number of patrons” to the moving pictures.<sup>56</sup> The paper explained that while both the Yiddish theatres and music halls suffered from the financial crisis, moving-picture shows were thriving for the same reason:

In order to forget the troubles, misery and sadness, the best thing is to amuse yourself. . . . To go to the Yiddish theater costs at least a quarter, that is, when you take a seat on the gallery. This is a considerable sum of money in a time of economic recession. Especially, when you have to treat a girl or a cousin, or your wife—then, it becomes a rather big expense. So people go to the “moving pictures.” There you sit for five cents like a lord, and if you are lucky, you get a seat in a box near the stage, in one of those houses which were once music-halls.<sup>57</sup>

Adler was particularly hard hit by the recession because the Grand Theatre heavily relied on a limited number of Gordin classics, which were presented time and again. The majority of theatregoers preferred to see something new, and therefore the market for these classics depended to a large extent on recently arrived immigrants, who had not yet seen the high points of the Yiddish repertory. But newcomers felt the effects of the economic recession even more than immigrants who had been in the country for a longer period, because they rarely had savings, unemployment benefits from their *landsmanshaft*, or other networks on which to rely for help. Moreover, many Eastern European Jews with plans to emigrate stayed home in anticipation of better times. Jewish immigration to the United States dropped by more than 50 percent in 1908.<sup>58</sup> In other words, the potential audience for Yiddish classics also declined as a result of the economic crisis.

### A DISASTROUS SEASON

The 1908–1909 season opened with four and a half Yiddish theatres. Thomashefsky’s People’s Theatre, Kessler’s Thalia, the New Star Theatre in Jewish Harlem (the first Yiddish theatre uptown), the Windsor Theatre, and the Grand (on Sundays only). The Windsor was in hands of Adler and Spachner. Adler had

subleased the Grand Theatre for a period of two years to A. H. Woods.<sup>59</sup> From Monday through Saturday traveling stock companies would present English-language melodrama for ten/twenty/thirty cents, while the Adlers continued to give two performances of literary drama at the Grand every Sunday. The uptown company, led by Morris Heine, collapsed within a few weeks; the New Star was taken over by William Fox and turned into a five-cent movie theatre. The Thalia had a box-office hit with *The Jewish Heart*; Thomashefsky followed with *The Jewish Soul*. The Windsor and the Grand struggled to survive. In March 1909, Adler ended his partnership with Spachner, and he and his wife went on tour again. On the whole, the Yiddish theatre managers avoided taking any risk and kept their more or less successful productions on the bill as long as possible; they even broke with the tradition to stage a new play for *Pesach*.

Despite the box-office hits and the sharp drop in the number of new productions, the 1908–1909 season was a commercial disaster, in part because the companies strongly felt the aftereffects of the economic recession. First, the Yiddish theatres witnessed a sharp decline in the sales of benefits. The treasuries of *landsmanshaftn*, lodges, and fraternal organizations were almost empty because of the unemployment benefits they had paid to their members during the depression. Consequently, they had little cash money to invest in advance in theatre tickets. If they nevertheless organized a theatre outing, they sought to spread their risk, either by buying blocks of a hundred tickets for different benefit evenings (on weekdays) or by demanding reductions on regular, weekend performances. In the battle for the benefit audience, theatre managers offered up to a 70 percent reduction, even on their latest box-office hits.<sup>60</sup> Second, part of the box-office audience who had abandoned the theatre for the much cheaper moving pictures, because of the depression, did not return with the coming of better times. Many Jewish families again had more money to spend on leisure, but they were still inclined to spend it in the most economic way possible. According to the Yiddish press, another reason the public stayed away from the Yiddish theatre was that they had nothing from which to choose.<sup>61</sup> In this respect too, the moving-picture shows provided a good alternative to the Yiddish theatre: They changed their programs two or three times per week. Finally, for those who continued to favor live entertainment, A. H. Woods offered every week a new popular-priced English-language “blood and thunder” melodrama at the Grand Theatre.

In addition to the aftereffects of the depression, the Yiddish theatres greatly suffered from the reinforcement of New York City’s blue laws. In December 1907, Mayor McClellan had already closed all places of amusement on Sunday in reaction to complaints by the conservative Protestant clergy, who denounced the indifference of theatres managers toward the Christian Sabbath. His measure produced a massive protest, led by German-American organizations. Under pressure from public opinion, the implementation of the blue laws was relaxed. The victory, however, was short-lived. In November 1908, the authorities were once again busy enforcing Sunday observance. While

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elsewhere in town the “holy war” soon ended and everything was back to normal, the East Side was subject to police harassment for several months. Russel, the district’s new police inspector, cracked down on the Yiddish theatres each and every Sunday from December 1908 until March 1909.<sup>62</sup> This burst of strictness deprived the Yiddish theatres of a major source of income, because Sunday was for most Jewish workers their only day off, and hence the best day at the box office. In an effort to comply with the law, which prohibited the use of costumes and makeup (among other things), the Yiddish playhouses switched to so-called “Sunday concerts,” but to no avail: The performances continued to be disturbed by the police. More important, in spite of popular prices and recitals by famous Jewish musicians, the audience stayed away. Adler suffered most from all this because he missed out on the Sunday box-office takings of two theatres, the Grand and the Windsor; Kessler and Thomashefsky were only slightly better off. As early as January 1909, the financial situation of the Yiddish theatres had deteriorated to such extent the Hebrew theatre unions accepted a 10 percent reduction on their members’ salaries, and an additional 5 percent cut for the actors of Adler’s troupe.<sup>63</sup>

### YIDDISH THEATRE POLITICS: MOVING PICTURES AT THE GRAND

Despite the disastrous 1908–1909 season, Adler sought to regain possession of the Grand Theatre for the entire week. A year earlier than they had agreed upon, Woods vacated the theatre. This meant that the 1909–1910 season would open with four Yiddish theatres: three large-capacity houses—the Grand, Thalia, and People’s Theatres—and the small London Theatre (Liptzin—Heine). Cashing in on the high demand for actors, musicians, and stagehands and anticipating the return of *prosperiti*, the Hebrew theatre unions imposed a number of new rules. The managers, for their part, agreed “to form a kind of an organization for the purpose that if the Union should attack either of them, all of them should help each other in that fight to the extent of the just rights.”<sup>64</sup> The plan, however, fell through almost immediately. Threatened with strikes, Kessler, Thomashefsky, and Heine gave in. Adler refused to settle with the unions, sticking to his point that if he would accept their conditions, he might just as well shut up his business. Hence, when the season opened on Friday, 27 August 1909, the Grand Theatre remained dark. The same day, news got out that a moving-picture company would take Adler’s theatre. The *Warheit* reported:

Yesterday, during negotiations with the unions Adler announced that he could not comply with their demands and that he had rented his Grand Theatre to a moving picture company. It was a dramatic scene when Adler broke this news, he and Mrs. Adler were weeping bitter tears. Mr. Adler said he was forced once again to play without a home of his own, to wander around without knowing where to go. In theatre circles, there is hope that Adler has not yet signed all the papers with which he gives his theater away and that he may stay in New York. It remains to be seen if that is possible.<sup>65</sup>

On 2 September 1909, Adler surrendered his lease of the Grand Theatre to Marcus Loew and Adolph Zukor.<sup>66</sup> The future Hollywood moguls had secured the lease for a period of twenty-one years. Everywhere in the Jewish quarter, large brightly colored posters in Yiddish and English announced that on Monday, 9 September, at 12 PM, the Grand Theatre (“formerly Adler’s Theatre”) would reopen as a five/ten/fifteen-cent moving-picture and vaudeville house.

In a declaration that was printed in the *Forward* of 8 September, the United Hebrew Trades claimed that Adler had never seriously tried to negotiate with the delegates of the theatrical unions. He had accepted with great eagerness “the gold which the trust had offered him.”<sup>67</sup> Not all the money came from Loew and Zukor, however. As it turned out, the other three Yiddish theatre managers had given Adler \$11,000 to retire from the New York Yiddish stage. Kessler and Thomashefsky each contributed \$5,000; from the management of the smaller London Theatre, Adler received \$1,000.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the deal was a masterly example of Yiddish theatre politics and an effective measure to regulate overcapacity. Even before the season had started, it had been clear to Adler, Kessler, Thomashefsky, and their business partners that “there was no room for four Yiddish theatres in the City of New York.” At a meeting in early August, they had already discussed the proposal of paying \$10,000 to the one of them who would “retire from the business and close [his] theater.”<sup>69</sup>

With dollars from the deal, Adler bought the Standard Theatre in Philadelphia and secured the lease of the Thalia Theatre for the 1910–1911 season, forcing Kessler to look for another playhouse. There were rumors that Kessler wanted to take the Grand Theatre; it was also reported that Thomashefsky and Adler were eager to pay Loew and Zukor for keeping moving pictures at the south corner of Grand and Chrystie Streets.<sup>70</sup> Zukor and Max Wilner (Kessler’s business partner) even considered building a roof garden for moving pictures on top of the Grand Theatre building and use the main auditorium on the ground floor for Yiddish performances again.<sup>71</sup> Nothing came of this. In 1913, the Grand Theatre fell in the hands of Louis Goldstein, who turned it into a Yiddish-language vaudeville house offering feature films as its main attraction.

In the early 1910s, the total of seats available for Yiddish legitimate drama further declined as the Yiddish theatre district moved from the Bowery to Second Avenue. The first Yiddish theatre on the avenue was Kessler’s Second Avenue Theatre, which opened in 1911. A year later, the National Theatre (Thomashefsky—Edelstein, initially in collaboration with Adler) opened its doors. Both playhouses had a seating capacity of two thousand. Despite these smaller and more up-to-date accommodations, the economic position of the New York Yiddish theatre continued to deteriorate. On the eve of the 1912–1913 season, the three star-managers and their business partners merged into a trust to secure a sound financial future for their companies, but like previous attempts to join forces, the merger quickly fell through. Business slowly improved during the late 1910s. In August 1917, the Grand Theatre opened with Jacob P. Adler

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starring in the *Jewish King Lear*. But the “happy hour for him and his fans” did not last very long.<sup>72</sup> A new generation of actors and managers began to take over from the great stars of the turn of the century. They turned Second Avenue into a Yiddish Broadway. The Grand Theatre was given over to movies and vaudeville for good.

### CONCLUSION

Until now, a sharp line between art and business, highbrow and lowbrow entertainment, has constituted the organizing principle of most scholarly work on the American Yiddish theatre. The growing popularity of Yiddish music halls and moving pictures with Jewish immigrant audiences has been held responsible for the collapse of literary drama and the concomitant revival of *shund* (trash) theatre in the opening decade of the twentieth century. This is not to say that there is no relationship between the changes in programming practices and the emergence of alternative forms of commercial entertainment. On the contrary, I have demonstrated that the ongoing differentiation within the theatrical infrastructure, especially rapid proliferation of Yiddish music halls, threatened the economic survival of the New York Yiddish legitimate theatre and undermined its cultural position. However, I have redressed the imbalance of the “vaudeville and the movies killed the theatre” cliché by broadening my research to include the economic and ideological forces that shaped the business of producing Yiddish theatre in the early twentieth century. The structural conditions of the ethnic marketplace (limited growth market; low living standards of immigrant households) had a strong impact on theatre practices and business arrangements. In addition, much of the pressure of the legitimate theatres to change their fare, I argued, originated in the revival of ethnic consciousness among Jewish immigrants in the wake of increased anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. Finally, overcapacity, stiff competition, increased costs, and the depression of 1907–1908 were also factors that precipitated the decline of the Yiddish legitimate stage. As illustrated by the case of the Grand Theatre, there was a constant clash of interests between business opportunities, market conditions, and aspirations toward high culture. Its history complicates the usual historical perception of the period.

### ENDNOTES

I wish to thank Tom Connolly, Henk Gras, and James Harding for their valuable comments on the first draft. Thanks also to Nina Warnke for generously sharing her passion and wide-ranging knowledge of the New York Yiddish theatre with me. All translations from the Yiddish are my own.

1. The Yiddish press, socialist papers in particular, frequently blamed the Yiddish music halls for the decline of literary drama. The tone was set by Abraham Cahan, the editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward* (*Forverts*) in a series of articles that appeared in the *Tsaytgayst*, the *Forward*'s weekly supplement, in October 1905. Bernard Gorin, the first historian of the Yiddish stage, also concluded that success of the music halls destroyed the movement for a better Yiddish drama. *Di geshikhte fun yidshen teater*, 2 vols. (New York: Literarisher ferlag, 1918), vol. 2, 178–80. Others followed his

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lead. For instance, Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (1977; Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 161. Recently, Nina Warnke presented a far more elaborated analysis of the rise and decline of Yiddish literary drama, but again she does not seriously challenge the predominant view that the Yiddish music halls were to blame for the crisis in the Yiddish theatre. Nina Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press, 1887–1910" (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, May 2001), esp. 195. In film history, it is widely assumed that the movies killed ethnic theatre (both "legitimate" and vaudeville theatre). E.g., Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 103.

2. The key sources for the early Yiddish theatre in New York are Gorin, vol. 2: 5–94; and Marvin Seiger, "A History of the Yiddish Theater in New York City to 1892" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1960). Seiger's research, based upon contemporary newspapers, frequently challenges the account that Gorin gives of the 1880s. Also useful are Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (1976; New York: Schocken, 1990), 460–85; Ronald Sanders, *The Downtown Jews: Portraits of an Immigrant Generation* (1969; New York: Dover, 1987), 275–300; and Zalmen Zylbercweig, ed., *Leksikon fun yidshen teater* (New York: Hebrew Actors' Union of America, 1931–1967), 6 vols.

3. Gorin, vol. 2: 165–67; Jacob Gordin, "The Yiddish Stage," *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1901): 26–30, at 27; Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (1902; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1967), 114–15; Edmund J. James et al., *The Immigrant Jew in America* (New York: B. K. Buck & Co., 1907), 229–30.

4. Playwright Jacob Gordin estimated that in 1900–1901, the three Yiddish playhouses (total seating capacity of nine thousand) sold over 2.5 million tickets for about eleven hundred performances. In 1904, again according to Gordin, the four Yiddish playhouses (total seating capacity of eleven thousand), had given about fifteen hundred performances with an attendance of three million. This comes down to an occupancy rate of ca. 70–75 percent. Gordin, 27; "Jewish Summer Assembly Supplement," *Jewish Daily News*, 29 July 1904.

5. Gordin, 27.

6. Diane Cypkin, *Second Avenue: The Yiddish Broadway* (Ph.D. diss., New York University / Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1986), 4–7.

7. Hapgood, 134.

8. Gorin, vol. 2: 162–63; Zylbercweig, 1: 601.

9. Hapgood, 131.

10. The most extensive study on the reform movement is Nina Warnke's dissertation, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater." Her research provides us with much needed insights in the debates over the Yiddish theatre at the turn of the century. On Jacob Gordin see also Gorin, vol. 2: chap. 5 ("Der reformator fun der yidisher bihne"), 107–27.

11. Warnke, "Reforming," 63.

12. Nina Warnke, "Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization, 1900–1910," *Theatre Journal* 48 (1996): 321–35, at 323.

13. Gordin, 28.

14. As Sandrow points out, the concept of *shund* was an elastic one: "Yiddish actors call each other's productions *shund* in the conviction that their own are of higher artistic quality. . . . The Yiddish intellectual community . . . spits out the term with venom in the heat of debate. Though *shund* is certainly theater of the lower sort, geared to box office receipts, meant mainly to provide actors with good roles and audiences with laughs and thrills, that does not necessarily mean that it's bad theater. It can have energy, theatricality, flair, flashes of art and wit; in the Yiddish theater, as in other popular art forms, what people call *shund* can be very good stuff indeed" (111).

15. Gorin, vol. 2: 137.

16. Warnke, "Reforming," 146.

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17. *Ibid.*, 145.

18. In chapter 4 of her study, Warnke discusses in great detail the controversies that broke out in the Yiddish press over Gordin's plays during the early 1900s. *Ibid.*, 143–96.

19. *Ibid.*, 174.

20. Hapgood, 130.

21. Gorin, vol. 2: 156–59.

22. Gordin, 28–30.

23. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section I, liber 70 cp 157. Fischel paid \$200,000 for the lots 255–261 Grand Street and lots known as 78–81 Forsyth Street.

24. Since companies were often entanglements of relatives, personal factors must also be taken into account. For instance, at the People's Theatre, both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sarah Adler (Jacob's third wife) challenged Sophie Karp's position as the leading lady. Maurice Finkel had a bone to pick with Boris Thomashefsky, his brother-in-law, because the latter had tried to convince his sister Emma that Finkel was a bad match for her.

25. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section I, liber 68 cp 348. Exhibit A contains a description of the theatre; Exhibit B concerns the terms of the lease. According to the initial contract, the auditorium was designed for 1,650 seats (later sources consistently mention a seating capacity of 2,000) of which 600 were on the parquet floor, the dress circle, and the boxes—all of "iron and nicely upholstered." The theatre further comprised one balcony and two galleries—with "seats of plainer design." Each floor had a lobby, and there was a smoking room in the basement, probably connected to the saloon. Ladies toilets were located on the level of the balcony and first gallery; sanitary facilities for men were in the basement and on the top gallery (perhaps indicating a gendered distribution of the audience as far as the cheapest ranks were concerned). Finally, the house had various dressing rooms, a storage room, a property room, and a musicians' room. The building had two entrances. The main entrance was situated on Grand Street. On Chrystie Street, there was a side entrance with one box office leading directly to the top gallery—which, of course, had something to do with regulating the theatregoing crowd and separating the lowest orders from the rest of the visitors. Whether the theatre was built according to the architect's original plans as described in Exhibit A is unknown. To my knowledge, no municipal documents regarding the construction of the Grand Theatre (or subsequent alterations) have survived.

26. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section I, liber 70 cp 308 and liber 75 cp 210.

27. "Grand Theater Opened," *New York Times*, 6 February 1903.

28. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section I, liber 79 cp 183, contract of sale for the sum of \$50,000 between Grand Theatre Company and Rebecca Jacobs (Fischel's daughter), 12 June 1903.

29. *Jewish Daily Forward (Forverts)*, 15 December 1903.

30. Particularly revealing are the advertisements of the Grand Theatre in the *Forward*. From 14 until 22 December 1903, the Grand Theatre continued to advertise but without providing details about its program. No advertisements appeared in the period between 23 and 27 December 1903. Thereafter, Karp and her associates were once again firmly in control. Lateiner's work figured prominently on the bill. For almost two months, the Adlers did not perform at the Grand.

31. Advertisement, Grand Theatre, *Forward*, 8 February 1904.

32. In 1903, the rent of the entire building was fixed at \$32,000 per year. As noted, in addition to the theatre itself, the lease included several lofts and stores, and the rathskeller in the basement. Sublease contracts for these spaces generated about \$6,000 rent per year for the benefit of the lessee.

33. Immigration figures from "Commissioner General's Reports," in *American Jewish Yearbook*, 14 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913), 429. See also, Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 270, table 1.

34. For a detailed analysis of the initial responses to the Yiddish music halls, see Warnke,



“Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere.” For a somewhat different interpretation, see Judith Thissen, “Charlie Steiner’s Houston Hippodrome: Moviegoing on New York’s Lower East Side, 1909–1913,” in Gregg Bachman and Thomas J. Slater (eds.), *American Silent Film: Discovering Marginalized Voices* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 43–47.

35. Gorin, vol. 2: 179–80.
36. Paul Klapper, “The Yiddish Music Hall,” *University Settlement Studies Quarterly* 2.4 (1906), 20.
37. Warnke, “Reforming,” 172–84.
38. Gorin, vol. 2: 181.
39. Gerard Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration, 1880–1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 112.
40. Sandrow, 162.
41. Advertisement, Grand Street Music Hall, *Forward*, 11 August 1905.
42. “Fun vanen nehmen zikh unzere verayeti ektors,” *Forward*, 24 February 1906; Kayim Malits, “Yidishe muzyk hols in nyu york,” *Der amerikaner*, 30 November 1906; Gorin, vol. 2: 225–26.
43. Klapper, 21.
44. David Bernstein, “Di yidishe theaters un di yidishe muzyk hols,” *Tsaytgayst*, 8 September 1905; “Di stars fun di yidishe muzyk hols,” *Forward*, 16 February 1906.
45. Moving pictures were still much of a novelty during the 1905–1906 season. They were presented by self-acclaimed “professors,” who initially seem to have operated as itinerant film exhibitors, touring the local Yiddish variety circuit with their own film projector and a set of one-reelers.
46. James et al., 222–23; Raymond Spaulding, “The Saloons of the District,” *Yearbook of the University Settlement Society of New York* (1899), 34–38, at 34.
47. Robert W. Snyder, *Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 18–32; David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 13–14, 25–27.
48. *Tageblatt*, 29 September 1909, quoted in Cypkin, 23.
49. Bessie Thomashofsky quoted in Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage: A Memoir*, trans., ed., and commentary by Lulla Rosenfeld (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 364. Originally serialized in the daily *Warheit* (1916–1919).
50. Gorin, vol. 2: 180–85.
51. “Vus thut zikh in theater?” *Tageblatt*, 21 January 1910.
52. “Der grend theater,” editorial, *Warheit*, 8 September 1909; “Vus thut zikh in theater?” *Tageblatt*, 19 November 1909.
53. The power relations between the Yiddish theatre managers and the unions are discussed in Gorin, vol. 2: 171–75; David S. Lifson, *Yiddish Theater in America* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965), 130–34; Sandrow, 296–98.
54. The calculations did not include any payment for the Adlers themselves. For a detailed breakdown of Adler’s expenses, “‘Grend’ far muving piktschurs, spaltung in aktyoren nyunon,” *Warheit*, 31 August 1909. The United Hebrew Trades contested some of the figures given by the *Warheit* in “Adler, miler un kompani: an erklehrung fun di feraynigte yidishe geveerkshafte,” *Forward*, 8 September 1909, but these were only minor corrections.
55. Jacob Adler, 359. As early as 1905–1906, Adler rented out the Grand to an American vaudeville company, both at the beginning and the end of the season, while he and his wife were touring through the United States and Europe.
56. “Vu zaynen ahingekumen di yidishe muzyk hols?” *Forward*, 24 May 1908.
57. *Ibid.*
58. Jewish immigration to the United States dropped from almost 150,000 per year in 1906–1907 to slightly over 100,000 per year in the period June 1907–May 1908. In the following twelve months, it went further down, to 57,551. “Commissioner General’s Reports,” in *American Jewish Yearbook*, vol. 14: 429.

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59. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section I, liber 117 cp 294, Adler to Woods (lease), 1 July 1908.

60. “Vus hert zikh in der yidisher theater velt,” *Forward*, 5 December 1908; see also advertisement, Kessler’s Thalia Theatre, *ibid.*, 4 December 1908.

61. “Peysekh iz der ‘sempel’ fun dem theater sizon,” *Forward*, 3 March 1909; “Di tsushterer fun yidishen theater,” *Warheit*, 31 August 1909.

62. The Yiddish daily press extensively covered the developments surrounding the enforcement of the Sunday laws, frequently accusing the city government of anti-Semitism. These claims were not entirely unfounded. In 1908–1909, for instance, the attacks on Sunday performances were directed primarily at the Yiddish theatres in downtown Manhattan. The strict implementation of the city’s blue laws in the Jewish quarter could be interpreted as act of revenge for the fact that, a few weeks earlier, New York City Police Commissioner Theodore A. Bingham had been forced publicly to withdraw his claim that Eastern European Jewish immigrants made up 50 percent of all the city’s criminals (against 25 percent of the population).

63. “Vus hert zikh in der yidisher theater velt?” *Forward*, 16 January 1909.

64. “Supreme Court, Kings County. Extract. Isidore Lerner, plaintiff, against Jacob P. Adler, defender,” 13 December 1909, printed in *Forward*, 29 January 1910, 1 [hereafter, “*Lerner v. Adler*”].

65. “Adler git avek zayn theater?” *Warheit*, 27 August 1909.

66. Office of the City Register, Pre-1917 Conveyances, Section I, liber 124 cp 380, Adler to Jacobs [Fischel’s daughter], surrender of lease, 2 September 1909; liber 125 cp 165, Jacobs to Bedford Theatrical Company (Marcus Loew, president; Adolph Zukor, treasurer), lease, 14 September 1909.

67. “Adler, miler un kompani: an erklehrung fun di feraynigte yidische geverkshafte,” *Forward*, 8 September 1909. During the course of my research, I did not find out how much Loew and Zukor paid for the lease.

68. “Di andere menedzshers shrayen az adler halt nit vort,” *Forward*, 23 October 1909; “*Lerner v. Adler*.”

69. “*Lerner v. Adler*.”

70. *Warheit*, 1, 2, 9, 25, 29, 31 January 1910; *Tageblatt*, 9 January and 4 February 1910.

71. *Warheit*, 31 January and 5 February 1910.

72. Advertisement, Grand Theatre, *Forward*, 18 August 1917.