‘Jewish Shakespeare’ struggled with audiences used to lighter fare

Finding the Jewish Shakespeare: The Life and Legacy of Jacob Gordin by Beth Kaplan, Syracuse University Press.

Stardust Lost: The Triumph, Tragedy, and Mishugas of the Yiddish Theater in America by Stefan Kanfer, published by Alfred A. Knopf.

By BILL GLADSTONE

One of the great moments in Yiddish theatre occurred the evening the curtain opened upon actor Jacob Adler in the role of “the Jewish King Lear,” as envisioned by playwright Jacob Gordin in his play (Der Yiddisher Kenig Lir), which premiered on New York’s Lower East Side in 1892.

More than a direct translation of Shakespeare, Gordin’s groundbreaking opus was a fresh interpretation of the story of a patriarch with three daughters who are unkind and disorderly to him. In Gordin’s retelling, the hero is David Moisheles, a Russian-Jewish merchant whose daughters abandon their filial love and duty toward him.

Adler triumphed in the role, which he would reprise until his death, but the production also made Gordin’s reputation as a bold realist and reformer of the Yiddish theatre, and as someone who, as a rival playwright observed, wrote “reels, not plays.”

To a generation of incipient Americans who had left their parents behind in the shtetls of Europe, the play’s theme of parental abandonment rang with a deep and sad resonance.

“Gordin’s play had a profound impact on the Lower East Side,” writes Beth Kaplan in Finding the Jewish Shakespeare, her remarkably thorough and insightful biography of the playwright, her legendary great-grandfather. “In one much-told story, a distraught playgoer was so swept into the drama that after a tragic scene, he ran down the aisle toward the stage, shouting that Adler should leave his heartless daughters and come home with him. Young people, witnessing the degradation of the elderly man, were stricken with remorse about their own parents.

“It is another famous legend that local bankers knew which nights the play was being performed because early the next morning, youths afflicted with guilt were lined up at the banks, waiting to send money home.”

Ironically, after the play’s first reading, many of the players had prognosticated it would fail because Gordin had removed the cheap effects, cheap laughs and contrived melodrama that were hitherto compulsory elements of the Yiddish stage. “What will I do in that play? Catch flies?” one actor had complained.

Further, the tyrannical playwright had insisted that actors give up their time-honoured tradition of ad-libbing long flowery speeches to make their parts more meaty. Astonishingly, he wanted them to stick to the script – and the original Yiddish language in which it was written, not the embellished, more elegant “Daytshmierish,” closer to German, that they often preferred.

Embracing the trend toward realism set by Chekhov, Ibsen, Tolstoy and others, Gordin (1853-1909) was determined to improve the Yiddish theatre as practised by Abraham Goldfaden, his illustrious contemporary who had established the first Yiddish theatre in Jassy, Romania, in 1876 and had penned a series of crowd-pleasing comedies and satires in a fluffy, romantic vein. As Kaplan points out, the Oxford Companion to Literature defines realism as “a movement devoted to the facts of life, especially if they’re gloomy.”

To Gordin, theatrical realism was an essential medicine that modern audiences needed to swallow.

The dark, bearded author of some 80 Yiddish plays, including the classics Mirele Efros (a sort of Yiddish “Queen Lear,” 1897) and Got, Mensh un Tayvel (God, Man and Devil – a sort of Yiddish Faust, 1900) was not above delivering stern reproaches to audiences between acts on their need to improve their artistic taste.

“My plays, and those of my colleague Ibsen, do not please,” he lectured during the first week of the initially underappreciated Got, Mensh un Tayvel, and went on to emphasize that the theatre was a place for instruction, not amusement. “Truth is the teacher, and therefore, I will continue to provide serious plays until you acquire a taste for them.”

Kaplan observes, “Surely never before had an audience been admonished directly by a playwright, even a smiling one, to change its taste for shallow entertainment and gravitate to him. Gordin’s speech worked. The play went on to become a success.”

When the playwright’s serious play Elisha (1906) proved an unqualified flop, he was hurt beyond words and delivered much lighter fare in his next work, The Stranger, which proved a hit. Even so, Gordin was appalled that theatregoers were regressing back to their old habits, and came out one night and scolded them.

Kaplan relates, “I gave you a play, Elisha, and you didn’t like it, though I liked it very much. Now I give you another play – you like it, and I, not at all,” he said, again surely unique among playwrights in publicly dismissing his own most recent work. “Why do you run to see a melodrama like this? What pleases you about it?” (The players, naturally, were furious with him, especially Jacob Adler, who performed the leading role. “Mr. Gordin, what have you done?” he cried. “You’re killing my success!”)

Kaplan documents Gordin’s long-running public feud with Abraham Cahan, the influential editor of the Jewish Daily Forward, who once observed that Gordin suffered from “critic fever” because he could not tolerate criticism.

“Gordin considers himself a fighter because he has a big mouth,” Cahan wrote.

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