Yiddish playwright’s works quickly fell out of fashion

Continued from page 35

“That is his heroism. This tall man with the grey beard, the proud carriage and the coquettish walk is as deathly afraid of the mildest criticism as a baby is afraid of lukewarm water.”

Although Cahan occasionally softened his criticisms with praise, Gordin was terribly wounded by Cahan’s negative judgments and considered him “my principle detractor, because whatever I build, he tears down, because whatever I’ve been doing all my life, he negates. We are working for the sake of the selfsame people. But I want to lead them forward, and he drags them backward through the Forward.

“I say to them, a man must be upright and defend his principles unequivocally; he teaches them to be politicians. I say, a revolutionary should not be two-faced... He says, you have to keep the [newspaper] circulation in mind. I say, you have to lift the masses up to your level. He says, you have to stoop down to the level of the masses, cater to them and accommodate yourself to their base instincts.”

One senses Gordin’s underlying perception of the “low” Jewish masses who need to be educated and elevated, and Cahan’s populist approach by which he gave the people what they wanted and increased his paper’s circulation astronomically in the process. By illuminating such intrinsic ideological and artistic differences, Kaplan helps us understand the Jewish world of more than a century ago and brings a dim milieu to vivid life.

A perceptive biographer with a close psychological grasp of her subject, Kaplan examines her great-grandfather’s legacy within the theatrical context of the times. As to the central question as to whether Gordin’s legacy has lasted, the answer is both yes and no. Yes, because Gordin ushered in a golden age of Yiddish theatre with his most popular work, Mirele Efros, which became a “dependable warhorse for legions of actresses, most notably the indomitable Esther Kamińska,” and which is still performed around the world in a multitude of languages.

“What has guaranteed the longevity of Mirele Efros when so many other Gordin plays vanished instantly?” she asks. “The writer takes the bones of Shakespeare’s Lear... but sets it solidly in the Russian-Jewish merchant class of his own background. Like Chekhov in The Cherry Orchard, Gordin demonstrates the end of an old-fashioned, cultured, privileged way of life, and the beginning, for better or worse, of a new way.”

On the other hand, Gordin lived to lament the recidivism by which public taste reverted back to the artless melodrama known as “shund,” and suffered financially when star managers and producers showed reluctance to take on a new Gordin work, “which brought with it the burden of controversial issues, large casts and the wrath of the Forward and the Daily Page.” Although upon his death his portrait appeared in every Yiddish theatre and he was honoured in lugubrious speeches as a shining patriarch of the Yiddish stage, his works quickly fell out of fashion, and most remain obscure today.

With this wonderful and meticulously researched book, Kaplan—a Toronto woman who teaches creative writing at Ryerson University—has done much to revitalize Gordin’s memory. Part of the book’s charm is her own vital link with its subject as a mysterious ancestor whose reputation had fallen into curious disdain, even among family members. (The book is partly about her journey to “find” what he was all about.) Although Finding the Jewish Shakespeare does not convince us that Gordin deserves the epithet of “Jewish Shakespeare,” it easily demonstrates that he has found the biographer he deserves, and shall certainly find no better.

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After reading Finding the Jewish Shakespeare, with its close-up view of its subject, picking up Stefan Kanfer’s Stardust Lost feels a bit like gazing through the wrong end of a telescope. The author takes a bread, anecdotal view of his material, and his prose is full of colour and lore—sometimes insightful, but sometimes distracting, too. Although Kanfer lacks the closeness and authenticity that Kaplan brings to her study, Stardust Lost is a useful and entertaining addition to our literature of the Yiddish stage.