

MODERN JEWISH STUDIES

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Contents

YIDDISH AND CONTEMPORARY ARGENTINE FICTION

Lois Barr 1

GALLOPING ALONG THE 'FAULTLINES': THE FIGURE OF THE HORSE IN LATIN AMERICAN JEWISH NARRATIVE

Annette Prekker 18

LOVE PRESERVES: ETHNICITY AND DESIRE IN THE NARRATIVES OF SARA SEFCHOVICH

Sandra Messinger Cypess 26

MAX BERLINER AND CIPE LINCOVSKY: TWO GREAT ACTORS OF THE YIDDISH/SPANISH THEATRE IN ARGENTINA

Nora Glickman 50

CURATORSHIP, PATRIMONIALIZATION, AND MEMORY OBJECTS: EXHIBITION OF YIDDISH THEATER POSTERS CREATED IN ARGENTINA

Silvia Hansman and Susana Skur 57

FROM WHAT A LIFE!

Pesakh'ke Burstein 87

THE FACE OF THE OTHER: DIAGNOSING JEWISHNESS IN LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Erin Graff Zivin 91

BOOKS RECEIVED

Books

102



MODERN JEWISH STUDIES

איך ברען און איך ברען און איך ווער נישט פארברענט

I burn and I burn and I am not consumed. *H. Leivick*

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RAANAN REIN. ARGENTINA, ISRAEL,
AND THE JEWS: PERÓN, THE EICHMAN
CAPTURE AND AFTER.

David Sheinin

104

EDNA AIZENBERG. BOOKS AND BOMBS IN
BUENOS AIRES.

BORGES. GERCHUNOFF AND ARGENTINE-JEWISH
WRITING.

Malva E. Filer

107

YITSKHOK NIBORSKI, WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF
SIMON NEUBERG, ווערטערבוך פֿון לשון-קודש-שטאַמיקע
ווערטער אין יידיש

YITSKHOK NIBORSKI AND BERNARD VAISBROT,
WITH THE COLLABORATION OF SIMON NEUBERG,
יידיש-פֿראַנצייזיש ווערטערבוך *DICTIONNAIRE*
YIDDISH-FRANÇAIS

Jerold C. Frakes

110

Curatorship, Patrimonialization, and Memory Objects: Exhibition of Yiddish Theater Posters Created in Argentina

Silvia Hansman and Susana Skur

The aim of this paper is to describe the thematic script and analyze the theoretical framework underlying the implementation of a traveling exhibition of Yiddish theater posters created in Argentina and dated from 1901 to 2001 to be held by the IWO Foundation this year.

From late-19th century until mid-20th century, most of the Jews who settled in Argentina had Yiddish as their mother tongue. Their immigrant and ethnic language, Yiddish, withstood two adverse language policies. Firstly, it faced a set of homogenizing policies implemented by the Argentine government, and secondly the cultural and educational intracommunal policies supporting the use of Hebrew, the national language of Israel. As a consequence of these policies, Yiddish was linked to a traumatic past in the Diaspora, and relegated to restricted contexts (Skura 2004, 1998, 1997). Mainly, Yiddish was left to the family, the 'progressive' schools and press, and the theater.

As noted elsewhere, over a period of sixty years, Yiddish theater in Argentina developed into an important cultural expression within the context of domestic and international theater production, and was acknowledged as a genre in its own right. Theater companies made up of local and foreign Jewish actors attracted great audiences to many theater halls where, plays different in subject matter and style were staged. (Skura and Slavsky 2001, 2003)¹

Dramaturgical and stage activities grasped and interpreted difficulties of context. Texts and settings suggested ways of re-reading history by reformulating or creating stereotypes, as

well as identification models arising from the dialogue among playwrights, theater experts and the audience. Consequently, by-products such as posters, playbills and photographs constitute a privileged means of gaining access to the evolution of this cultural activity and to explain wider social processes which served as a framework for its development.

The history of the Yiddish theater was, of course, first written in Yiddish, the transnational language shared by its protagonists on and off the stage. Although today it may be possible to interview, in Spanish, informants who were involved in Yiddish theater, memory is always fragmentary and it is necessary to draw on documents written in Yiddish.

Qualitative and quantitative studies reveal high rates of competent readers of Yiddish texts within the Jewish community in Argentina during the period of greatest vigor of the theater (Zadoff, 1994). But today, Yiddish proficiency is rare to such an extent that Yiddish is considered an endangered language (Hagège, 2002, p. 174) listed as such by the UNESCO in 1999. As a result, the history of Yiddish theater in Argentina has become virtually unapproachable to the new generations willing to recover it. In such social context theater posters may prove more accessible to people interested in Yiddish theater who do not have a good command of the language. The short texts of posters in Yiddish and Spanish, furnished with photographs or pictures matching different aesthetic movements tell us much about the dimension of this activity in Argentina during the first half of last century.

Four main features of the exhibition were examined:

1. Visibility. Posters are advertising devices that are exhibited in public or semi-restricted places and link public and private as well as communal and extra-communal domains. Consequently, posters reveal mediation, explication or covering mechanisms and explain the way messages are conveyed to their audience.

2. Posters are complex semiotic devices that allow articulation of two or more languages, integration of text and images (photographs, illustrations, etc.) and creation of meaning through typographic, composition, color, and format variations.

3. Outline and hierarchy of information are nege because of space restrictions, messages should be limited to vital information. Besides, posters are not aimed at telling a story to a reader who is distant in time but to spread specific and ephemeral information within a close context; therefore, messages are brief and economical. But certain details—such as paper quality or typography—hint at the importance and level of the event. Information included in posters does not always match the type of information recorded in other documents. For instance, posters state points of sale and prices but most generally year of production is omitted.

4. Elements constituting messages are both denoted and indicial, i.e., they are not highlighted intentionally.² Competence is necessary to unveil subtle traces of ascription or articulation, as if they were passwords, to gain access to highly effective reproduction and creation processes. By scrutinizing them, we can make inquiries about the contradictions within the permanent processes of community formation, the relationship of the community to other social groups, the organization of actors into guilds, the ideological disputes, the geographical (and symbolic) distribution of theater activities in downtown areas and the suburbs.

5. Memory and patrimonialization may be extracted, During the last two decades, heritage has become a crucial international and domestic issue and has involved the state as well as communal and cultural groups.³

The debate on cultural heritage has exceeded the political and administrative domains. Academic, museologic and archivist participation played a vital role in the discussion and dissemination of heritage concerns. For academic circles, memory goes beyond recording of past events. Individuals and social groups transform memory by means of their re-interpretations of the past based upon their present and on their projection the future. This creative act assumes that individuals and social groups determine that objects which are interpreted collectively as symbols that link memory to specific times and territories while creating a sense of permanence and membership are 'heritage or memory objects.'

6. The IWO archives were created within the framework of

the Jewish Institute of research and aimed at keeping a record of the history of all varieties of Jewish immigration into Argentina. It holds over 400 documentary collections created by different producers. The span of the collection is 1714-2004, with the bulk of the material dated the first half of the twentieth century, during the migratory movement of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. The collections include private and institutional files, as well as historical collections and are stored in over 1500 boxes of different sizes.

The IWO archives represent the most important documentary body relating to Jewish theater in Argentina and include private archives of actors and directors, the archives of the Argentina-Israel Actors Association, a collection of nine hundred manuscripts, playbills, over seven hundred posters, theater photographs, albums, news clippings (advertisements, reviews, etc.)

One of the educational strategies worked out by the IWO Foundation to display the heritage with regard to Yiddish theater was a poster exhibition.⁴ With objectives to:

1. Introduce to the visitors the idea of Yiddish theater as an integral part of national theater and international Jewish theater,⁵
2. Encourage creativity and research on heritage in academic environments and taking into account the needs of the local community,
3. Enhance sensitivity towards the singularities of different social groups that constitute the population of the country,
4. Create a visible event to arouse interest from governmental and non-governmental organizations, academicians of all disciplines, artists, schools and the general public.

Corpus formation and organization

We have divided the analysis of corpus into four aspects: Linguistic and discourse aspects: Linguistic choices for translation, transliteration, linguistic varieties, alternation of codes (Yiddish, Spanish, Russian, Polish, German, Hebrew) and discourse choices (e.g., genre and register). For example, we have pointed certain cases such as the first Yiddish theater presentation in Buenos Aires, where the title of the play, 'Kuni Leml,'

appears in the poster as 'Chu- ne-le-mel. El tartarnudo O Fanatismo y Civilización.' [Series 2 poster]. In the play 'Dos pinteles yid' transliteration resulted in 'Dus pinteles yid,' showing variety of linguistic options. The translation of the play 'Bar Mitzva' as 'Comunion' (Communion) is significant since it creates parallelism between the passage rituals of the minority religion and the official one. [Poster DSC02924] Posters show the difficulties of relating to acquisition Spanish competence. 'El campechino' (sic) shows lack of mastery of spelling rules and 'Una madre del otro mundo' uses a Yiddish term (paralis) in a Spanish context. [Poster DSC02768]

As regards discourse features, we have analyzed lexical choices, modality (rhetoric questions, imperatives, assertions, etc.), [poster DSC02941] subject formation within text, argumentative forms. [Poster DSC02952] Characterization and euphemism are noted. Possibly in order to protect the Jewish community image in the eyes of the general society, 'Far tmeim farbotn' is not translated literally as 'Prohibido para impuros' (Prohibited for the impure ones) to refer to the members of the Warsaw organization,⁶ but veiled as 'la casa se reserva el derecho de admision' (right of admission reserved), and preceded by the phrase 'Espectaculos altamente morales para Familias' (Highly moral shows for Families) (see the use of capitals in the original). [Poster DSC02944]

Visibility and intercommunal relationships: We noted posters produced during the 1910s and 1930s used theater halls of other immigrant communities, such as Orfeon Gallego Primitivo [poster DSC02773] and Orfeon Espanol, Italia Unita [poster DSC02944] and Unione y Benevolenza. Then there appeared theaters devoted exclusively to Yiddish plays which started moving from fringe areas to downtown. And afterwards various Jewish organizations, such as the IFT theater or the 'Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina' (Argentine Israelite Benefit Society) opened their own theaters. We have also found posters which made reference to theaters in other towns [Kadima poster].

Deictic aspects, denotation and connotation: The beginnings of Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires were linked to the 'Asociacion Israelita de Socorros Mutuos Varsovia' (Warsaw

Israelite Mutual Benefit Association), which greatly influenced theatrical production. The poster advertising the Goldfaden's play *Sulamita* shows that new relation. It says the play will be performed 'a beneficio del Cementerio de Barracas al Sud' (in aid of the cemetery in the southern part of Barracas), where prostitutes and knavish men of Tzvi Migdal were buried. [Poster SUL1]

On the other hand, in the late twenties, due to the activities carried out by different entities, such as the newspaper 'Di presse' and the charity organization 'Sociedad de Proteccion para las Mujeres y Ninas israelitas Ezras Noshim' (Ezras Noshim Association for the Protection of Israelite Women and Girls)⁷, impresarios were forced to specify their position by adding the legend 'Prohibida la entrada a tmeim' (no admission to tmeim). [Poster DSC02905]

Style was also used to determine genre and theater movements. Sometimes, subgenres were stated explicitly – operetta, [poster DSC02914] children's theater, [poster DSC02784] crime. [Poster DSC02925] Other plays use photogenic elements (poses, objects touching up, gestures, lighting), object representation (set design, costumes). These elements can be seen on the poster advertising 'Conciencia limpia' (Clean consciousness), where the face of the leading actress expresses very emotionally different moods pointing to the melodramatic genre, which alternates between pain and happiness and between crying and laughter. [Poster DSC02891] The center of the poster announcing 'La noche alegre' (Happy Night) shows a scene depicting the characteristics of comedies of intrigue: hidden characters, doors, one character asking for silence in the audience –thus showing complicity with the audience–, and certain textual elements, such as 'Lakhen, lakhen' or 'lekhent bild,' stress the fact that the play is a comedy. [Posters Kom1 and Kom2]

Semiotic aspects: Although certain political and ideological features of the theatrical message are made explicit in the play scripts and are also told about in biographies and memories, posters tell as about other ways of expression of ideological tendencies, such as certain aesthetic choices. For example, the IFT (Idish Folk Theater) used woodcut to refer to pictorial techniques typical of the expressionist avant-garde and includ-

ed thematic motifs of Russian realism. [Posters DSC02767 and DSC02953].

Some posters created during the thirties and the forties show graphically two ways of seeing the theatrical event which differ in their ideological stand about the objectives of theater and theater management, i.e., commercial versus independent theater. These features are stressed in various ways. Some posters advertising plays by independent theater troupes or guilds show the name of the group and the photographs of each of the members thus pointing to values such as union, fairness and homogeneity. [Poster DSC02915]

On the other hand posters representative of the star-system highlight the image of leading figures by means of size, position or photogenic resources while supporting actors completing the cast are merely mentioned (by means of legends such as 'important cast' or 'group of actors') or are included in small photographs or pictures. [Poster DSC02920] Another characteristic of the star-system, although not extensively used in the exhibition, is the presence of sponsors as noted on the poster announcing 'Der Kornediant' in which appear two advertisements. [DSC02948]

Some posters provide hints about the scenic resources that were displayed during the plays. Sophisticated staging techniques are referred to in the poster 'Di bine brent' [poster BIN1] as the audience is alerted to the realistic show which includes fictitious fire on stage, or the possibility of having sophisticated costume to characterize the social diversity put on in 'Venganza de indios' (Indians' revenge) [poster DSC02769] show the magnitude and variety of resources of the theatrical phenomenon.

Posters are the only direct evidence we have to reveal the existence of an advertising apparatus devoted to theater that included printer's technologies, graphic artists and photographers. Preservation of two posters by Berta Singerman (one of which lacks legends indicating theaters or dates) helps us understand the steps in the planning process. Firstly, large quantities of color posters were printed. And then, small numbers were overprinted with specific information of each presentation of the tour.

Finally, we want to mention one feature concerning both anthropologic interpretation and archival history. Several items have signs of corrections that can be interpreted as comments. In some cases, the image of an actor is deleted or ridiculed. [Poster DSC02898] Scripts are also mutilated or include judgmental notes on the literary quality or social legitimacy of the play. In some other cases, especially posters of the first decade of Yiddish theater, we find contradictory archival legends that show controversies on the dating of the earliest Yiddish plays in Argentina.

Conclusions

We wanted to show by means of these examples the richness of posters as a mode of communication, their relevance as objects of memory that allow describing the dimensions of Yiddish theater in Argentina, and the validity of an interdisciplinary approach to their research.

For that purpose we have developed a theoretical and methodological approach for studying posters as graphic records which, over and above their original advertising purpose and due to their genre characteristics, have given shape to a means which allows transmitting a message in a simple, accessible, brief and direct way (form and content). These messages provide specific information and provide access to contextual data as well as to ideological, aesthetic, artistic and economic stands which are expressed via semiotic and argumentative choices aimed at persuading, impressing, engaging or seducing the audience.

Therefore, although we have focused on the analysis of relevant features of posters included in the exhibition, our aim is to advance the analysis of posters as a possible means of research in social history of theater and their conceptualization as relevant objects of memory in other fields of study.

NOTES

1. During the twenties? the professional Jewish theater was consolidated and achieved continuance in theaters such as Ombu, Olimpo, Nuevo, Excelsior, Soleil, and Mitre, and then started declining by the sixties.
2. The indicial paradigm (paradigma indiziario) assumes it is possible to track 'truth' through details. Subtleties allow reading traces of "authenticity", i.e.,

traces of elements that cannot be faked and which are neither hidden nor evident. Therefore, not everybody pays attention to them and not everybody is able to interpret them. Indexes are considered to be so if they are placed in a context that allows their decodification creating an interpretative framework (Ginzburg, 1983).

3. In this sense, the World Culture Report: Culture, Creativity and Markets, (UNESCO, 1998, p. 235) states: "Countries interested in safeguarding this heritage for future generations participate actively in the formulation and implementation of maintenance guidelines to guarantee its survival." (Translation from the original in Spanish.)
4. The collection of Yiddish theater posters grew gradually via independent in professional and amateur theater.
5. For a more detailed account, see Skura and Slavsky, 2004.
6. Better known by the name of its president, Zvi Midgal.
7. Ezras Noshim's archives, Buenos Aires IWO archives.

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