

YIDDISH THEATRE IN PERTH, BRISBANE AND SYDNEY

by
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Yiddish theatre in Perth may be said to have begun in 1913 following the arrival of Mr. M. Berenson from Palestine. From that year until 1928, he worked together with a number of amateur actors to produce a series of plays. In all, they numbered over 40 and among them were 'The Jewish Priest', 'Kuni Leml', 'Don Judah Abrabanel', 'The Power of Love', 'Mirele Efros', 'King Lear', 'The Millionaire as Pauper' and 'Where are my Children?'.

These amateur groups with which Berenson performed centred around a committee on which sat Rabbi Freedman and Mr. Masel. Both of these men rendered great assistance to these groups. The groups staged some three plays a year, most of them towards communal causes and for the various Palestine funds.

The upsurge of Jewish immigration to Australia in the years 1928-30 increased the size of the Perth community. A section of these new arrivals were discontented with the Perth Jewish theatre and created another amateur circle which staged pieces like 'The Blind Painter' and 'Anna Karenina'. After this, the two amateur groups united to form the Yiddish-Hebrew Stage, Perth. This combined amateur troupe then staged 'Kuni Leml', 'The Jewish Heart', 'Mishke and Moshke', 'The Stranger', 'Kol Nidrei' and 'Semke in America'. The troupe then fell apart and a splinter group emerged calling itself the United Dramatic Company which performed 'Chasye the Orphan', 'The Jewess', 'Shlemke and Rikl', 'Holy Sabbath', 'The Slaughter', 'The Blind Painter', 'Tzipke Feier' and 'The Wild Man'. Thanks to the efforts of Mr. Breckler and Reverend Grochowski, both groups were once more reunited. Together, they produced 'A Brother's Revenge', 'To Be A Man' and 'Dora' as well as a series of one-act plays and concert evenings consisting of recitations, songs and sketches.

The most active participants and supporters of Yiddish theatre in Perth were, as mentioned, Rabbi Friedman and Messrs. Masel and Breckler and Reverend Grochowski, the directors Messrs. Berenson and Troy, the ladies Mrs. Berenson, Gotlib and Mackay, and the Messrs. Blank and Epstein.

Upon his return from Brazil in 1940, Jacob Waislitz passed through Perth and held two word-concerts there and produced Sholom Aleichem's 'The Big Lottery Win'.

For a community with such a small Jewish population, Perth Jewry has written a commendable page in the history of Yiddish theatre in Australia.

IN BRISBANE

The Yiddish Dramatic Circle in Brisbane was a part of the Jewish Workers' Union which was created in 1914 by a small group of Russian

Jews. The aim of the organisation was to bring together the few Jews who then lived in Brisbane and to give them the opportunity to meet and to discuss a variety of Jewish problems. But the main aim was to create a library to offer the members a chance to obtain a Jewish newspaper and to learn what was taking place in the Jewish world.

Australia at the time was of course isolated from the rest of the world with a population of five million. According to the Census of 1911-14, there were 772 Jews in the whole of Queensland and certainly not all lived in Brisbane. The members of the Dramatic Circle consisted entirely of Russian Jews and, with few exceptions, they all spoke only Russian.

An English Jew called Portrate, who was a one-time member of an amateur acting group in London, decided to stage a Yiddish play in Brisbane. He believed that the Workers' Union would provide him with enough actors and, indeed, set to work to produce Goldfaden's 'The Mischief Maker'. Problems abounded. A number of the actors had never spoken Yiddish. Also, there was no director who could show them how to act. Yet the play was performed and "the audience was content, leaving the theatre with a sense of nostalgia, reminding them of something they had once loved and now forgotten". The performance was of an historic nature, it being the first time that a Yiddish drama had been staged in Brisbane.

The encouraging response of the audience prompted the amateur actors to perform Sholem Asch's 'With the Stream', Abraham Raisen's 'Good Brothers', something of Sholom Aleichem and Yevgeny Chirikoff's 'The Jews', which, in Russian, had met with great success. This last play, staged with the aim of showing Russian non-Jews how pogroms were provoked, and of raising money towards a library, was performed in Russian. Another Russian play followed. This was Dymov's 'The Eternal Wanderer'.

In 1917, there came to Brisbane the actor Jacob Strunin and his wife from Poland. After much effort, Jacob Strunin succeeded in staging a four-character play in Yiddish 'Two Corpses Eat Breakfast'. This was the sole play that he directed in Brisbane.

In 1924, came Israel Rotman who had behind him many years of work in Russian drama circles as well as in professional theatre. His first piece in Brisbane was in Russian — Karpov's 'Zharieve'. Despite his success, he determined to start Yiddish theatre. With the help of the troupe that had performed 'Zharieve', he succeeded in creating a Yiddish amateur group. In March 1925, this group performed Gordin's 'The Jewish King Lear' which received a warm response which, in turn, encouraged Rotman to form a circle for Yiddish literature and theatre. He subsequently directed a number of plays — Gordin's 'Kreutzer Sonata', 'Chasye the Orphan', 'The Slaughter', 'God, Man and Devil', 'The Stranger', 'To Be A Man' and 'Money, Love and Disgrace'. The circle also initiate a series of literary evenings in which were presented the works of Peretz, Sholom Aleichem, Asch and Raisen. All proceeds went towards a library and reading room where there were to be kept various Yiddish newspapers and journals.

In 1928, Rotman decided to stage Sholem Asch's 'God of Vengeance'.

This raised a storm amongst Brisbane's religious Jews on the grounds that the play blasphemed the Torah. The play was nonetheless performed before a highly appreciative audience.

In 1930, Rotman was invited to conduct theatre activities in Sydney. He stayed in Sydney until 1932, then returned to Brisbane where he staged once more 'God, Man and Devil' and 'The Massacre'. After Rotman's departure for Melbourne, it is assumed there has been no more Yiddish theatre in Brisbane.

IN SYDNEY

As already indicated, the first Yiddish play performed in Sydney was Abraham Goldfaden's 'Shulamis' in 1905 under the direction of Chaim Reinholz. Also in 1912, the impressario Mendelssohn brought from Melbourne to Sydney the Finkelstein troupe. What they performed after Mendelssohn gave up his entrepreneurial activities is not known. Indeed, information relating to Yiddish theatre in Sydney in general is at a premium. However, one thing is certain. All artists who came to Australia had, if only for a short time, an active involvement with the Yiddish theatre.

Towards the late 1920's, Jacob Strunin, who had for a time been in Brisbane, advertised the staging of the first Yiddish opera in Sydney — 'Bar Kochba'. The first performance was sold out. To the second performance there came a mere 16 persons. Several weeks later, Strunin staged a play in the Jewish Club with a pitifully small response. A collection was made for the troupe's expenses, but as so often happens in the theatrical world, the actors left, not paying the hotel for the board provided, a repetition of the Finkelsteins' behaviour some time earlier.

In 1930, there existed in Sydney a Jewish National Club whose dramatic group performed a series of Jewish pieces, most of them under the direction of a Mr. Stoliar. His last staged play was Sholom Aleichem's 'Scattered and Dispersed' in 1939.

Also in 1930, Rotman was invited to Sydney by the Jewish Club. In the space of two years, he performed 'Chasye the Orphan', 'To Be A Jew', 'Kreutzer Sonata', 'Broken Hearts', Sholem Asch's 'With the Stream', two of Sholom Aleichem's one-act plays and finally 'The Jewish King Lear'.

Between 1932 and 1937, another Yiddish theatre group performed Kobrin's 'The Wild Boy', 'The Deserted Tavern', Sholom Aleichem's 'Gold-Diggers', 'Man' and 'Only a Doctor', 'The Jewish King Lear', a Biro-Bidzhaner piece and a series of other familiar plays.

On 24 July, 1937, Abraham Braizelatt gave a concert of Yiddish folksongs and recitations.

Between August and November 1938, Jacob Waislitz performed a series of word-concerts, and moreover, directed Sholom Aleichem's 'The Big Lottery Win'. In 1941, after his return to Australia from Brazil, he gave a similar concert.

In 1939, Rachel Holzer gave two word recitals; and in 1941, Sonia Zamira, a young actress from Poland, held two concerts of folk-songs.

Sources:

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