

# The Yiddish Comeback

"Yiddish is a civilization, not just a culture," says Shmuel Atzmon, founder and director of Yiddishpiel. The Yiddish Theater celebrates its Bar Mitzvah this year. By SHARON KANON



Shmuel Atzmon "kvels naches" (glows with pride, joy) when he talks about the upsurge in interest in Yiddish theater in Israel. Performances of the company draw thousands to its shows in the Opera House in Tel Aviv, and thousands more attend performances outside Tel Aviv. Total audience attendance so far is about 50,000.

"Mamaloshen (the mother tongue), or the vernacular language of the Jews in the ghettos of Europe began to arise as early as 1100 out of a blend of German dialects. It has also drawn on Hebrew and Slavic as well as other languages. Yiddish is an international language, once used by 11 million, now 4 million Jews all over the world. Many words have been absorbed into English: ganif, hutzpah, kvetch, mensch, mishigas, nosh, shlep, naches, nudnik.



Part of the exciting experience is seeing attractive young actors and actresses speaking Yiddish

Celebrating the 125th anniversary of the birth of Yiddish theater in Europe, Yiddishpiel will stage a new production of the classic "Kuni Lemel" by the noted playwright Avraham Goldfaden this spring. A comedy that spins on mistaken identity involving two suitors - one an innocent, unworried Chassidic student, another a medical student - the play is a superb portrayal of the contrasts and conflicts between the two worlds.



One of the four new offerings of Yiddishpiel this year was a lavish production of "The Rothschilds," translated into Yiddish

by Yakov Halperin, a veteran performer on the Yiddish stage. Derek Goldberg, director of the first performance of the play on Broadway 30 years ago, was brought in to direct the Israeli production which starred Dudu Fisher, the cantor/entertainer.

A "Borscht-belt" review, "Ze Svar Le Zein a Yiddina" (It's Hard to be a Jewish Woman), a take-off of Shalom Aleichem's

well-known play "Ze Svar Le Zein a Yid" ("It's hard to be a Jew"), was also previewed this season. With an all-woman cast, it was billed as a feminist Yiddish play.

Yiddish has had its ups and downs in Israel. Intent on erasing associations with the European Jew and the diaspora, young Zionists discouraged its use. They pressed for the use of Hebrew, the language of the Bible, to unify Jews from diverse cultural backgrounds. According to Atzmon, when actress Molly Picon first came to perform in the 1920's, she was told that she could not perform in Yiddish. Only intervention by noted poet Chaim Nahman Bialik saved the Yiddish show.

Part of the exciting experience of Yiddish Theater today is seeing attractive young actors and actresses speaking Yiddish. The secret: Atzmon has tapped the talent of graduates of the Israel Army Entertainment troupe as well as talented new immigrants. With the help of scholarships, they take a crash course in Yiddish.

Since 1995, Yiddishpiel has its own Studio for Young Actors, where young actors study language, culture and theater arts under the guidance of experienced Yiddish actors.

A young, attractive bachelor has sparked the revival of Yiddish

culture and entertainment in Jerusalem. At Yung Yidish on Yermiah Street, Belgian-born Mendy Cahan, 37, (the son of a Vishnitzer Hassid who studied Yiddish literature and drama at Hebrew University) offers a variety of Yiddish cultural experiences - concerts, readings, video shows, lectures and workshops.

Cahan himself usually introduces a program in a beautiful literary Yiddish that transmits both the richness of the language and his love for it. He sometimes intersperses Hebrew, English, or French, to be sure that his audience understands. A talented actor, singer, translator, and producer, he has his own 6-person band, Yiddish Express. Cahan is also devoting time to "rekindle the remnants of living Yiddish culture in Vilna, once a major center of Yiddish culture." ([www.yiddishvilnius.com](http://www.yiddishvilnius.com))

Yung Yidish, a non-profit organization, was originally started by Cahan while he was in university, to save Jewish books from the dustbin. Cahan realized that the basement he found

to house the books offered a perfect setting for a cabaret. You can browse through the books before and after a performance. At night, lanterns light the way to the venue - don't expect it to be fancy. Like a home in the shtetl, it offers an ambiance of warmth and authenticity.

As part of the total Yiddish cultural experience, guests are invited to taste the homemade schmaltz and pickled herring, cake, schnaps, and a glasse tea. Jewish food, like the language, appeals to the senses.



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