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World's Yiddish theatres come to Montreal for festival

By JANICE ARNOLD, Staff Reporter

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**MONTREAL** — In an emotional and historic moment, members of all the major Yiddish theatres in the world gathered last week on the stage of the Segal Centre for Performing Arts in a joyous demonstration that a culture that was virtually annihilated is once again vibrant.

**Bryna Wasserman greets Mendy Cahan of Israel, founder of YUNG YiDiSH, at the Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival.**

Representatives of theatres that regularly present shows in Yiddish participated in the Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival which ended June 25. Bryna Wasserman, the eight-day event's initiator, said this was the first time the theatres have gathered together in one location.

The troupes came from Poland, Romania, Austria, France, Australia, the United States and Israel to put on performances and workshops. In addition, scholars of Yiddish theatre and culture held a daylong symposium at the Segal, in conjunction with McGill University, and musicians, both local and from as far away as Buenos Aires, gave concerts of klezmer and other Jewish music.

Altogether, about 130 people from out of town participated in the festival, and there were about 35 public events.

The festival was in honour of the 50th anniversary of the Segal's Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre (DWYT), one of the longest continuously running Yiddish theatres in the world, founded and directed by the late mother of Bryna Wasserman, who has directed it for the past decade.

Wasserman used a theatrical metaphor, "mending the torn curtain," to describe the festival, largely made possible by Leonor and Alvin Segal, longtime supporters of the DWYT and now the main benefactors of the Segal Centre itself.

"We are celebrating our past, but we have to look to the future," she said. She thanked the guests for keeping "the pintele Yid alive [with] your determination not to compromise when others told you to do it in Polish or Romanian or Hebrew or English or French."

At the June 17 opening, tribute was paid to Dora Wasserman, who immigrated to Montreal in 1950 from Ukraine, where she had been a disciple of Shlomo Mikhoels, director of the Jewish State Theatre. The DWYT, whose actors are volunteers, grew out of a children's Yiddish drama group Wasserman began after her arrival.

This year's festival was officially opened by 10-year-old Jordana Singer, representing the theatre's third generation. Her grandmother Lily Blander was one of the first members of the DWYT, her daughter Adina Singer is a current actor, and Jordana has begun appearing with YAYA (Young Actors for Young Audiences), the teen group.

Wasserman was remembered as "strong-willed and uncompromising" in her artistic standards and in keeping the theatre going. In a videotaped tribute, Quebec playwright Michel Tremblay described her as "someone who didn't take no for an answer."

Université de Montréal professor Jean-Marc Larrue, who wrote a history of the DWYT, doubts the theatre would still be around today had it not been for Wasserman's exceptional personality.

The festival's free outdoor Zumerfest in neighbouring Mackenzie King Park, was an invitation to everyone

in the multicultural neighbourhood to join in the fun.

In interviews, the theatre people from abroad spoke enthusiastically of the vitality of Yiddish theatre.

Jacob Weitzner, artistic director of the state-sponsored National Jewish Theatre of Warsaw, said at least one play in Yiddish is presented each season. The audiences, of course, are mostly not Jewish, and they are often young and not Polish. Students come from all over Europe come to the plays, he said.

At the festival, the Warsaw troupe put on *Bonjour Monsieur Chagall*, an original musical celebrating Jewish folklore. Weitzner, whose parents were Polish, is from Tel Aviv, but he has been living in Warsaw for five years. He wanted to contribute to the revival of Jewish culture in eastern Europe, which he feels personally attached to.

In Israel, where Yiddish was long suppressed in order to establish Hebrew as the national language, the *mamaloshen* is enjoying renewed interest, especially among younger people.

Mendy Cahan, now in his 40s, founded YUNG YiDiSH in 1993 to preserve and transmit Yiddish culture. The group now has chapters in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv whose members include both the Israeli-born and immigrants from Europe, North America and even North Africa.

“What they share is not necessarily knowledge of the Yiddish language and culture, but an acknowledgement of their importance to contemporary Israeli society and culture,” said Cahan, who was born in Belgium of Transylvanian parents, and speaks Yiddish fluently.

One of YUNG’s biggest projects is to collect and restore Yiddish books, and it has amassed 42,000 volumes. A year and a half ago, the group opened The Lively Yiddish Museum next to the central bus station in Tel Aviv, with support from the city and the National Authority on Yiddish.

Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer, general and artistic director of 20-year-old Yiddishpiel Theatre in Tel Aviv, represents the older generation of Israel’s Yiddish champions. He is adamant that Yiddishkeit is not only a culture, but a civilization whose preservation is essential to Jews wherever they live, including Israel.

Yiddishpiel’s audiences were older when it began, but today are “much like the audiences for Hebrew theatre, old and middle-aged, with a growing number of young people,” said Polish-born Shmuel Atzmon-Wircer, who came to Israel in 1948. He is also a veteran of Hebrew theatre and worked with the Habima National Theatre.

The interest among young Israelis is due in large part to the March of the Living, which has sent more than 20,000 Israeli teens to the sites of former concentration camps in Poland, Atzmon-Wircer said. They are sent to Yiddishpiel plays a part of their curriculum.

Yiddish got some overdue recognition a few weeks ago when the Knesset saluted Yiddishpiel and the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sholem Aleichem. The parliament declared that Yiddish, as well as Ladino, is a recognized language, like Arabic, he said.

“As long as Yiddish culture lives, the Holocaust will be remembered,” he said. “Today I am one of the big fighters in the recovery from the deep misunderstanding of our founders that Israel had to get rid of Yiddish because it was a danger to Hebrew.”

Alex Dafner, a founding actor and playwright with the Yiddish Theatre of Australia in Melbourne, said that for many years, he and his colleagues thought they were the only people left in the world working to keep Yiddish theatre alive. Then he attended the world Yiddish conference in London in 1998, where he met Dora Wasserman.

Born in Poland, Dafner immigrated to Australia in the 1960s, when he was 10.

For him, this festival was also a reunion with Golda Tencer, head of the Warsaw theatre, whom he knew 50 years ago in a Jewish school in Lodz. They have only met once before in Australia.

Yiddish theatre is quite healthy in Melbourne, Dafner said, because the Jewish community largely arrived after World War II. It has remained close to its culture, which has been transmitted to the second and third generations, many of whom speak Yiddish.

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