

The Formative Years of the Yiddish Theater as Presented in the Autobiographical Writings of its Creators in America

Thesis for the degree of “Doctor of Philosophy”
by
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Submitted to the Senate of the Hebrew University of
Jerusalem
November/2022

This work was carried out under the supervision of
Prof. David G. Roskies and Prof. Yehuda Moraly

Dedicated to the memory of the dear friend and theater companion of my youth,
Alan J. Haber.

The passion for theater that lit up our youth produced this labor of love, later in life.

Acknowledgments

This research paper has its roots in two lifelong loves: the theater and the Jewish people. I grew up in New York, and during my adolescence, the New York theater was at the center of my life. After high school, what was intended to be a year spent studying in Israel turned out to be the beginning of a new life there, and the center of my life shifted to Jewish identity and scholarship. Twelve years of Torah study were followed by film school, filmmaking, and for the past 28 years, teaching filmmaking to young people in Israel. Art and Judaism have accompanied my life for decades in various ways and constellations. Now, in this paper, I return to the beloved New York theater of my youth, through my exploration of the autobiographical writings of four Jews whose lives expressed a synthesis of theater and Jewishness in the New York to which my great-grandparents emigrated over a hundred years ago.

In writing this dissertation, I was fortunate to find three men of great stature to guide me. All three shared my passion for art and Judaism. First and foremost is my dissertation co-advisor, Professor David Roskies, who made great efforts on behalf of this study and gave unsparingly of his vast knowledge and expertise. His courses on modern Yiddish literature at the Hebrew University, taught in Yiddish, were the highlights of all my years as a student. He was my mentor and guide not only during the course of the writing of this dissertation but also through the writing of the qualifying paper upon which it was based. That this paper would not exist without him is an understatement. In the area of theater studies, I was fortunate to have Professor Yehuda Moraly as a co-advisor on this dissertation for the past three years and as a part of its advisory committee during the preceding years. Professor Moraly shares my fascination with and passion for the intersection of Judaism and theater. He has been a major influence on my life for over thirty years, dating back to when he first directed me as an actor, and encouraged me to develop my talents in the areas of theater and film. His vast knowledge of the history of theater was invaluable in the writing of this dissertation. I thank him not only for his contribution to this dissertation but for his great effect on my life. Not only was he the first to encourage me to work in the areas of theater and film, he was the first to suggest that I research Yiddish culture. Another major contributor guiding me through writing this dissertation was Professor Joel Berkowitz, who was a member of its advisory committee and

gave unsparingly of himself, his broad scholarship, and his keen understanding of and insight into the world of Yiddish theater, reading and commenting on draft after draft of the dissertation. His dedication to the project went far beyond that of the usual member of an advisory committee.

The actors' autobiographies that form the basis of this study were written in Yiddish, a language I did not speak or read until my mid-fifties. Learning the language of my great-grandparents has been one of the joys of preparing this study. I had the privilege to study with some of the masters of the field of Yiddish language and culture and I want to thank them for all they gave me. Foremost among them, alongside Professor Roskies, was Professor Avraham Novershtern, who headed the Yiddish Department of the Hebrew University when my journey in the field began, and who co-advised the writing of this dissertation during its initial years, before his retirement. His encyclopedic knowledge of Yiddish culture is mind-boggling. As the head of both the Yiddish Department and Beit Shalom Aleichem, Professor Novershtern also helped me acquire scholarships over the years and I thank him for all his efforts. The other teachers with whom I had the pleasure and privilege to study Yiddish were Hanan Bordin at the Hebrew University, Dr. Miriam Trinh, Eliezer Niborski, Professor Eugene Orenstein, and Professor Yitskhok Niborski, a living legend, at the Tel Aviv University Yiddish summer program, and finally, my beloved Lea Skiba at Tel Aviv University and Beit Yehudit in Jerusalem.

Other teachers to whom I would like to offer my thanks are Professor Guy Miron, with whom I studied Contemporary Judaism at the Schechter Institute, for whom I wrote my first papers on the subject of Yiddish theater, and who was the first to encourage me to study Yiddish and pursue a doctorate in Yiddish theater; Mr. Isaiah Shai Bar Yaakov of the Theater Department of the Hebrew University, who taught me a wonderful course on directing styles, and then advised me and offered criticism on the chapter on acting and directing styles; Dr. Diego Rotman, the present head of the Theater Department at the Hebrew University for his support and encouragement, and Professor Ofer Dynes, former head of the Yiddish Department at the Hebrew University, for his support, both moral and financial.

I consulted various scholars from the realm of Yiddish theater on different matters addressed in this paper, and I thank them for their generous help: Dr. Nina Warnke, Professor

Nahma Sandrow, Professor Edna Nahshon, Alyssa Quint, Amanda Seigel, and James Hoberman. I would also like to thank Stefanie Halpern of the YIVO library for her assistance in locating relevant photographs and the YIVO library for granting permission to use them.

Much thanks to Tom Oppenheim, artistic director and president of the Stella Adler Studio of Acting, and great-grandson of Jacob and Sara Adler, for his aid, and for arranging for me to interview his mother, the late Ellen Adler Oppenheim.

I would like to acknowledge those who made this dissertation possible through the scholarships and awards they afforded me: The National Authority for Yiddish Culture, the Yiddish Department of the Hebrew University and its Hoffstein Fund, and Beit Shalom Aleichem.

Two editors worked on the dissertation, both old friends: Channah Koppel, who worked with me in the past as producer or editor of three short movies I directed, and Bracha Rosenberg. I thank them both for their hard and professional work and devoted friendships. And two proofreaders corrected the final version – Laura Firszt and my dear cousin Bob Gluck. I thank them both greatly for their important contributions to the final dissertation.

And finally, I thank my beloved wife, Sara, and my family, whose loving support made the writing of this paper possible.

The final corrections of this dissertation were made during the first weeks of the terrible war which broke out in Israel during October 2023, following the massacre of over a thousand Jews on Simchat Torah. The world around me resonated with the world described by Jacob Adler when he recalled the pogroms he witnessed as a young man in Russia almost 150 years ago. Jewish history, past and present, merged. May the future of the Jewish people be full of creativity and art, in the spirit of the extraordinary men and women whose life-writings are explored in this study.



Abstract

The early New York Yiddish theater (1883-1917) was an actor-centered theater that catered primarily to a lower working-class immigrant audience, and it served as a central focus of the social and cultural life of the Jewish immigrants. The boisterous audiences treated its stars with both intimacy and reverence. Primary among those stars were two couples whose autobiographical writings lie at the center of this study, Jacob and Sara Adler and Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. Much knowledge of the performance practice of the early Yiddish theater in America can be gleaned from the self-writings of these four actors, who also doubled as managers and directors at various points in their careers.

In their writings, all four actors showed a tendency to criticize the theater they worked in for a lack of professionalism. The actors described practices that were then prevalent on the Yiddish stage, such as relying on a prompter, using plays “borrowed” from other languages, or the absence of a director with an artistic vision to guide the production, as reflecting a lack of professionalism. In truth, these practices were typical of late nineteenth-century theater in general and not particular to the Yiddish theater. Other practices they found fault with, such as the actors’ frequent ad-libbing or extensive use of improvisation, were once considered a sign of professionalism in the actor-centered *commedia dell’arte* of the Italian Renaissance.

Their works provide insight into the evolution of their acting techniques and how these compared with practices on world stages. Jacob Adler’s techniques, probably influenced initially by Mikhail Shchepkin and Alexander Ostrovsky, bore a striking resemblance to the techniques that Constantin Stanislavsky later systematized. Like Stanislavsky, Jacob Adler emphasized working “from the inside out.” Sara Adler’s acting techniques resembled the approach of the British school exemplified by David Garrick before her and Laurence Olivier after her, which emphasized working “from the outside in.” The Thomashefskys were far less analytical of their acting techniques than the Adlers. Unfortunately, none of the autobiographers reflected significantly on his or her role as a director. Both women lamented the fact that the Yiddish theater had no great directors.

These autobiographies provide rare insights into the cultural, religious and familial factors that helped shape the nascent Yiddish theater in America. The Adlers were both from

relatively traditional but acculturated families in Odessa and were exposed to Russian realism at the Odessa State Theater in their youth. The Thomashefskys, also from traditionally oriented homes, were born in small Ukrainian *shtetls* and emigrated to America as children. Their different upbringings were evident in their theater. Both Jacob and Sara Adler chose Russian realism as the model for the Yiddish theater. Boris Thomashefsky's goal, in marked contrast, was not to imitate a foreign model but to create a theater that was authentically Jewish, including music he had learned as a child soloist in the synagogue choir. He directed and acted in historical operettas and melodramas on Jewish themes, which greatly appealed to the masses.

The early Yiddish theater in America, in other words, was largely a family affair that gave rise to two distinct schools — the school of Russian realism embodied by the Adlers and the Jewish folk theater embraced by the Thomashefskys. This is an important corrective to the accepted binary of “literary theater” vs “*shund*” (trash) promoted by the radical Yiddish press. The autobiographies of the Yiddish actors in this study do not show a desire to promote modern secular values like those of the radical Jewish intelligentsia. Boris Thomashefsky wanted to reflect traditional Jewish values in his theater and Bessie Thomashefsky tried to impress the reader with her dedication to those values in her life. Jacob Adler depicted the great moments in his career in religious terminology, revealing a religious nature expressed in a secular context. Sara Adler was a Russophile and not religious by nature but expressed no negative attitudes towards traditional Judaism. Though Jacob and Sara Adler joined forces with Jacob Gordin, an anti-traditionalist member of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, in his attempt to “reform” the Yiddish theater in the spirit of realism, while preaching secularism, gender equality and anti-capitalism, it seems that they endorsed the realistic aesthetic of his theater without always sharing his worldview.

Gender differences also emerge from a close reading of these autobiographies. As actor-managers, the men tended to arrogate the starring roles to themselves, while their wives played mostly supporting roles, until the women too began running their own theaters, a little-known chapter until now. In general, the role the men played in their wives' autobiographies is far more central than the role the women played in the autobiographies of their husbands.

These autobiographies were also exercises in self-fashioning. Boris Thomashefsky tried to model himself after Avrom Goldfadn, the acknowledged Father of Yiddish Theater, and wished to use his autobiography in order to crown himself the Father of American Yiddish Theater. Jacob Adler portrayed himself as a realistic actor who waged a constant battle against *shund*, although in practice, he appeared in many plays that belong in that category. The women for the most part wished to be remembered as luminaries of the Yiddish theater during its heyday. Sara Adler emphasized her contribution to the Yiddish stage as a realistic actress. Bessie Thomashefsky used both her autobiographies to work through the trauma of separating from Boris.

After 1917, and the decline of the old stars, commercial Yiddish theater continued along the lines of Thomashefsky, and various attempts to create Yiddish art theater, such as Jacob Ben Ami's short lived Jewish Art Theater of 1919-1921 and Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater, beginning in 1918, continued in the tradition of the Adlers. Later on, between 1930 and 1950, when the Yiddish theater attracted an English-speaking audience, Schwartz's "art theater" produced plays of a Jewish orientation reminiscent in many ways of Thomashefsky's theater.

Jacob and Sara Adler left an indelible impression on American culture, through their daughter, Stella Adler, one of the great acting teachers of the American stage and screen, who was greatly influenced by them. The writings of both Adlers on acting resonate deeply with the teachings of their daughter. The Yiddish theater in general, and Boris Thomashefsky in particular, appear to have been important influences on the American musical.

This dissertation demonstrates that actors' autobiographies, when read critically, can enhance academic research of theater history and performance practice by giving us a glimpse into the perspectives of those who created the theater as a living, breathing experience, especially in such actor-centered theaters as the early Yiddish theater in America.

Contents

Introduction	1
A. The Meteoric Rise of the Professional Yiddish Theater	1
B. Survey of the Current State of Scholarship and the Sources Analyzed in This Study	10
C. Autobiography in the Theater	20
D. Autobiography in Academic Research	24
1. Dilemmas Faced when Researching Autobiography	24
2. Theatrical Autobiography in Academic Research	26
3. The Approach Used in This Dissertation	29
E. On Stage and Back Stage: Four Actor-Directors in the Limelight	32
1. Jacob Adler	33
2. Boris Thomashefsky	42
3. Sara Adler	53
4. Bessie Thomashefsky	62
F. The Objectives of the Present Study	71
 Chapter One: Artistic Standards and Practices Prevalent in the Early Yiddish Theater ...	74
Introduction	74
A. The Prompter	74
B. Improvising and Ad-Libbing	78
C. Curtain Speeches	84
D. Audiences	87
E. The Plays	95
F. Conclusion	102

Chapter Two: Acting and Directing Style	107
I. Acting	107
A. Introduction	107
B. Their Approach to Acting	120
1. Jacob Adler	120
2. Sara Adler	134
3. Bessie Thomashefsky	140
4. Boris Thomashefsky	153
II. Directing	162
A. Introduction	162
B. Their Approach to Directing	167
1. Jacob Adler and Directing in the N.Y. Yiddish Theater	167
2. Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler.....	172
3. Boris Thomashefsky	174
III. Conclusion	176
Chapter Three: Jewish Theater or Russian Realism? Artistic Aspirations and National and Religious Identity	181
A. Introduction: The Radical Jewish Intellectuals vs. the Immigrant Masses.....	181
B. Artistic Aspirations	187
1. Jacob Adler – <i>Shund</i> vs. Russian Realism	187
2. Boris Thomashefsky – Master of <i>Shund</i> or of Jewish Theater?	197
3. Sara Adler, the Russophile	205
4. Bessie Thomashefsky – An Eclectic Approach	212
C. Jewish Theater	220
D. National and Religious Identity	229
1. Jacob Adler	229
2. Boris Thomashefsky	232
3. Bessie Thomashefsky	234
4. Sara Adler.....	238
E. Conclusion	245

Discussion and Conclusion	254
I. The Results of This Research	254
A. Artistic Standards and Practice	254
B. Acting and Directing Style	258
C. Jewish Theater or Russian Realism? Artistic Aspirations and National and Religious Identity	260
D. Gender Differences	268
E. The Styles of the Autobiographies	276
II. The Roads Ahead	280
A. Yiddish Theater in America after 1917	280
B. At the Movies	288
C. Non-Yiddish Theater after 1917	292
1. Improvisation	292
2. The Influence of Jacob and Sara Adler on their Daughter, Stella	294
3. Boris Thomashefsky and the American Musical	303
D. Theatrical Autobiography and Academic Research	306
Bibliography	312
The Autobiographical Writings Compared in this Study	312
Yiddish Theater and Culture	313
History of Theater and Acting	321
Other Works Cited	327
Filmography	329
Interviews	329

Introduction

The following work will present a composite study of the Yiddish theater as seen through the life-writings of two theatrical couples who were centrally involved in American Yiddish Theater from its inception: Jacob and Sara Adler and Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. Close ties existed between the four, they all achieved celebrity status in their own day, they wrote extensive autobiographical works, and at some point in their long and colorful careers they acted as actor-managers, running their own theaters and directing their own productions. The years focused on in this paper are primarily between 1883, when the Russian ban on Yiddish theater forced most of the Yiddish actors in Czarist Russia to emigrate, and 1917, the year before the founding of the Yiddish Art Theater by Maurice Schwartz began a new era in American Yiddish Theater. However, since the actors' autobiographies are our primary source, the year in which each actor began performing on the Yiddish stage is the actual beginning of his or her story: Jacob Adler in approximately 1879, Sara Adler in approximately 1881, Boris Thomashefsky in 1882, and Bessie Thomashefsky in 1888. Before proceeding to explore their aspirations, perceptions, and differing approaches to Yiddish theater, I shall backtrack to the emergence of the professional Yiddish theater, in which they were to play such a significant part.

A. The Meteoric Rise of the Professional Yiddish Theater

Traditional Judaism does not have a serious theatrical tradition. The Sages of the Talmud and Midrash often referred to theater in a derogatory fashion. In their eyes, the theater was a place of idol worship and foolery and was not an appropriate form of entertainment for one of the Jewish faith.¹ They stated that one who enters a theater transgresses the prohibition "Thou shalt not follow in the ways of the non-Jew."² To them, the theater was a place where non-Jews

¹ Talmud, Avoda Zara 72b; Midrash Eicha Rabba, Chapter 3.

² Sifra on Leviticus 18:3.

“anger G-d with their words and deeds.”³ It was considered the antithesis of Jewish study halls and synagogues as is stated in the Jerusalem Talmud: “You have assigned me a place amidst the dwellers of the study halls and synagogues and not assigned me a place in the theaters and circuses. For I labor and they labor. I labor to inherit heaven and they labor to merit an abyss of oblivion.”⁴ It is no wonder, therefore, that there were no Jewish theaters as long as Jews remained strictly within the bounds of their religious tradition. Aside from the play performed on the Purim holiday, a mock-Biblical musical play called the *purim-shpil*, there was no Jewish drama or theater until the onset of the Enlightenment and the Emancipation.⁵

The first secular plays written in the modern age for a specifically Jewish audience were written in a mixture of German and Yiddish by two *maskilim* (enlighteners) from Prussia: *Reb Hennoch, or What to Do About It* by Isaac Euchel (1793) and *Frivolity and Religiosity* by Aaron Wolfsohn (1796). In Eastern Europe, secular Jewish Enlightenment plays written in Yiddish proper did not appear until thirty years later: Shloyme Etinger’s *Serkele*, Israel Askenfeld’s *The First Recruit in Russia*, and Avrom-Ber Gotlober’s *The Bridal Canopy*. Like their predecessors in Prussia, they preached the values of the Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskala* – rationalism, secularism, and criticism of traditional education, dress, and customs. Handwritten copies circulated among middle-class Jews and were read for entertainment at parlor parties, but the plays were not performed professionally. In dramatic structure, maskilic comedy was patterned on Shakespearean comedy.

In the late-nineteenth century, the Yiddish language emerged as a potent cultural venue that went beyond the folk. In 1862, the first Yiddish newspaper, *Kol mevaser*, was published in Russia. Over the next two decades, the three great classical Yiddish writers, Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem Abramovich), Y.L. Peretz and Sholem Aleichem (Sholem Rabinovich), all became well-known and brought about, through their writings, a radical change in the way in which Yiddish was perceived. Yiddish went from being considered a ‘jargon’ for popular use among

³ Midrash Psikta of Rav Kahana, 30.

⁴ Talmud, Brachot 4b.

⁵ Interesting exceptions to this rule are the plays written by the Italian Jewish poet and Kabbalist, Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746), a singular figure in the rabbinic world. There is no evidence that his plays were ever performed during his lifetime.

the uneducated, to a language worthy of having its own literature and then, shortly after, its own theater.⁶

Two additional important influences on Yiddish theater were the *badkhn*, or jester, who traditionally entertained at weddings, in rhymes often improvised, and the 'Broder singers'.⁷ Essentially a secular form of *badkhanim*, the Broder singers were colorful, flashy figures who performed songs and monologues, often self-composed.

The Broder singers appeared in the Jewish wine gardens and inns which were then proliferating, in parallel with the growth of the Jewish middle class in Eastern Europe during the nineteenth century. Scholars are divided over the secularity or piety of these early performers. Nahma Sandrow refers to them as *maskilim* and freethinkers, while Alyssa Quint emphasizes that many had vocal training with cantors, continued their work in synagogue choirs, and often did not shave their beards as symbols of their continued piety and close identification with their audience. According to B. Gorin, synagogue choir-members viewed the synagogue as merely a means to make a living and lived "a wanton life" on the outside.⁸

Some of the Broder singers wore costumes, wigs, and make-up. Some had troupes that joined in choruses or with other actors in performances which took on the nature of a skit. One of these Broder singers, Yisroel Grodner, appeared not only with costumes but also with a stage curtain and scenery. He and Avrom Fishzon, a pioneer of Yiddish theater in Russia, traveled among cities in Southern Russia with singing and vaudeville shows prior to the period usually acknowledged as that in which the modern Yiddish theater was founded by Avrom Goldfadn.⁹

⁶ Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 26-36; Alyssa Quint, "The Botched Kiss and the Beginnings of the Yiddish Stage," in *Culture Front - Representing Jews in Eastern Europe*, eds. Benjamin Nathans and Gabriella Safran (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 83.

⁷ Named after the Galician city of Brod or Brody, from where the first of these singers came. Sandrow, 36.

⁸ Sandrow, 37-37; Alyssa Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019), 57; B. Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater (tsvey toyznt yor teater bay yidn)* vol. 1 (New York: Literarisher farlag, 1918), 181-182.

⁹ Sandrow, 39; Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 263; Boris Thomashefsky, "Tomashevski bashraybt dem yidishn teater in Yekaterinoslav," *Forverts*, Dec. 21, 1913, 6. Thomashefsky wrote there: "Fishzon was actually the true founder of the Yiddish Theater." See more about Fishzon in Barbara Henry, "Avrom Fishzon, or the Berdichev Sheherazad," Digital Yiddish Theatre Project website, web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/avrom-fishzon-or-the-berdichev-sheherazad. Fishzon remained in Russia performing in Yiddish theater even after the ban of 1883, and so is lesser known than the actors who emigrated to London and New York.

This well-documented event occurred when Goldfadn, *maskil*, poet, and songwriter, who had failed at several attempts to make a living, arrived in 1876 in Jassy, Romania at the age of thirty-six, aiming to start a Yiddish newspaper. One night, Goldfadn visited a wine garden called “The Green Tree” run by Shimon Mark, where Yisroel Grodner was performing, in order to recite his poetry. His recitation was a dismal failure but following it, Yisroel Grodner performed a song by Goldfadn called “The Merry Chassid” while dressed as a Chassid, to the great enthusiasm of the audience. That performance by Grodner inspired Goldfadn to begin writing Yiddish plays that would incorporate the various elements of Grodner’s performance into a more developed story.¹⁰

Goldfadn's first plays were written for Grodner and performed by a company of two — Grodner and his young male assistant, Sakher Goldstein, with Goldfadn serving as writer-manager for the company. The plays were written just as plot scenarios, with accompanying songs composed by Goldfadn. Goldfadn explained the characters and plot to the actors, who then improvised the dialogue and action. Goldfadn soon added a chorus to his two actors, and as Nahma Sandrow has noted, he then commenced to write plays for two actors and a chorus similar to what Sophocles had done centuries beforehand. From Jassy, Goldfadn and Grodner went to Botșani, Romania and then continued to tour Romania.

At first the company had only male actors, like Shakespeare's Globe Theater. Grodner played the old women and Goldstein the young women. But in 1877, a sixteen-year-old seamstress named Sara Segal joined Grodner and Goldstein in Goldfadn's acting company. She had seen the company perform in Galatz and became stage-struck. She longed to join the company, but her parents refused to allow her to do so as long as she was single. So Goldfadn and Grodner arranged for her to marry the young Goldstein, so that she could join the company. She became known as Sophie Goldstein and later, in N.Y., as Sophie Karp, among the most popular actresses of the early Yiddish theater.¹¹

¹⁰ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 160-161; Sandrow, 41-43.

¹¹ Sandrow, 41-43, 52-53; Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 169-174, 179, 194-195. Gorin mentioned other women, one of whom may have been the first actress in the Yiddish theater. According to Yiddish actor, Sigmund Mogulesco’s memoirs, the first was Rosa Friedman. Moyshe Hurwitz and Layzer Zuckerman both claimed to have brought the first actresses to the Yiddish stage. But Gorin maintained that the general impression by Yiddish theater-folk that the first was Sophie Karp is correct.

Soon Goldfadn began to write full-length plays, complete with dialogue. His early plays were comedies with music that promoted *haskala* values. To perform them, he took on additional actors and formed a theatrical stock company typical of the nineteenth-century European and American theater.¹² In Bucharest, in 1877, Goldfadn met with four young *meshoyrerim* (synagogue choir members) who sang in the choir of a cantor named Cooper, and they all joined his company as actors. Three of them went on to have illustrious careers in the Yiddish theater: Sigmund Mogulesco, a gifted comic who became one of the most important and beloved actors in the early Yiddish theater; Moyshe Silberman, who later became the manager of the Oriental Theater in New York and Layzer Zuckerman who remained with Goldfadn for many years and later had a successful career as an actor and a singer on the Yiddish stage in New York. When Goldfadn saw Mogulesco's great talent as a comic actor, he wrote the lead role in his play *Shmendrik* (1877) especially for him. This aroused Grodner's jealousy and caused a rift between him and Goldfadn, which led to Grodner leaving the company and returning to Jassy.¹³

The outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War in 1877 brought many Jews from Russia to Bucharest in the hope of making money from the war, and many of them became great fans of the Yiddish theater there. Thus, the Yiddish theater began to attract people from a higher socio-economic class.¹⁴ Two of the Jews who arrived in Bucharest from Russia after the outbreak of the war and joined Goldfadn's company were Moyshe Finkel and Israel Weinblatt. Finkel later became the manager of the Romanian Opera Company in New York and Weinblatt became a popular actor in the company.

Meanwhile, Grodner put together a troupe of his own in Jassy. At his invitation, both Mogulesco and Silberman left Goldfadn's troupe in Bucharest and joined Grodner's troupe in Jassy. Sacher Goldstein had remained with him all along. No sooner, therefore, was the first Yiddish theater troupe established in Romania than a second one already existed. At first, Mrs. Grodner played the female roles. Later, Sacher's wife, Sara Segal (Sophie Goldstein Karp) joined

¹² Joel Berkowitz and Jeremy Dauber, eds., *Landmark Yiddish Plays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 42.

¹³ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 182-183, 186-189.

¹⁴ Alyssa Quint, "The Accidental Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater," *Tablet Magazine*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history/articles/the-accidental-rise-of-the-modern-yiddish-theater>, accessed March 10, 2022.

them. Aside from the plays Grodner remembered by heart from Goldfadn's early repertoire, the troupe performed new plays written for them by Joseph Lateiner, a young man from Jassy who had joined Grodner's company as a prompter but then went on to write new plays for the company.¹⁵

In the spring of 1878, a third Yiddish theater troupe arose in Romania, run by Moyshe Hurwitz, a self-anointed "Professor" of questionable pedigree. Its actors included Abba Schoengold, Moyshe Teich and Hershel Goldenberg. They presented plays written or adapted by Hurwitz. Jealous of his competition, Goldfadn enticed Abba Schoengold to his company, and without their chief actor, Hurwitz's company collapsed. Hurwitz then proceeded to join up with Grodner, but the two didn't get along and the partnership soon fell apart. Hurwitz then formed a new company, to which he attracted Abba Schoengold back. A new actress, Clara, married Schoengold and they appeared together successfully on stage for many years afterwards. Jealousy within Grodner's troupe led the Grodners to quit the group, and Mogulesco remained at the head of the troupe in Jassy.¹⁶

In 1878, two actors left Goldfadn's company in Romania and opened a Yiddish theater in Odessa – Yisroel Rosenberg and Yakov Spivakovsky. They were joined by the actors Yankel Katzman and Mendel Abromowitz and the actress Sonya Oberlander, whose stage name was Sonya Michelson. They rented the Remeslini Club in which they performed various plays by Goldfadn including *Brayndele Cossack* and *Shmendrik*. This was the first Yiddish theater in Russia. Jacob Adler, who was an old friend of Rosenberg's, joined the company and started off playing small parts in it.

All the troupes in Romania did well, until the Russo-Turkish war ended in 1878, and the Jews who had come to Romania from Russia returned home. With their primary audience gone, Mogulesco's troupe disbanded, and Goldfadn moved his troupe to Odessa during Passover of 1878. At the time, his troupe included Morris (Moyshe) Finkel, Annette Schwartz, Leyzer and Mindel Zuckerman, Yankele Rosenfeld and Hershel Goldenberg. When Goldfadn's troupe

¹⁵ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 191- 192.

¹⁶ Edna Nahshon, ed., *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 26; Lulla Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile, Jacob Adler and the Yiddish Theater* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977), 53-54; Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 196-199.

arrived in Odessa, Rosenberg and Spivakovsky's troupe, which had been illegally performing Goldfadn's plays without paying him royalties, stopped performing.¹⁷

After Goldfadn's troupe had acted for a few months in Odessa, a decree arrived from St. Petersburg banning Yiddish theater performances in Russia. Goldfadn traveled to St. Petersburg together with a well-connected man named Krug to try to have the decree repealed. Meanwhile, the troupe traveled to Jassy and performed there for five weeks. Upon receiving a telegram that the decree had been repealed, they returned to Odessa, bringing Abba Schoengold with them.

Goldfadn then rented the Marinsky Theatre in Odessa. Yakov Spivakovsky and Yisroel and Annette Grodner joined his company. As is evident from the many splits and reconciliations among the various companies, the rivalries and grudges the actors bore against each other and against Goldfadn did not usually cause insurmountable rifts between them. This was often true later, too, in the American Yiddish theater. In addition to his troupe that played at the Marinsky Theater, Goldfadn formed another troupe under the management of his brother, Naftali, to play in the provinces. This company included Rosenberg, Katzman, Sonya Oberlander, and Jacob Adler. Avrom Fishkind joined the troupe in Kherson. In Kishinev, David Kessler, who was later to become a major star of the New York Yiddish theater alongside Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky, joined the company as an extra, and Moyshe Heimowitz joined as a full-fledged actor.¹⁸

In Smila, the travelling troupe found itself lacking an actress, after the father of one of the actresses came to forcibly remove his daughter from the stage and the company of actors, considered unacceptable in traditional Jewish society. In search of an actress, they discovered a talent who would become one of the great stars of the Yiddish stage – Keni Liptzin. Even in the Yiddish theater's earliest stage of development, then, all its great future stars, with the exception of Bertha Kalich, were already acting on its stage in some capacity.¹⁹

¹⁷ Ibid., 201-209.

¹⁸ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 1, 210-213. Gorin called Goldfadn's brother Tuvia. This error was probably caused by the similarity between that name, and his nickname, Tulya. See Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 68.

¹⁹ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 1, 213-214. Kalich, born in 1874, later than most of her contemporaries on the Yiddish stage, made her New York debut in 1894, after having played in Yiddish theater in Romania and

Goldfadn's company was doing very well at the Marinsky Theater, but then he and the owner quarreled. Spivakovsky used the opportunity to organize a company with Mogulesco and Lateiner, whom he brought over from Romania to Odessa, and they took over the Marinsky Theater, where they performed plays by Lateiner. Goldfadn and his company left Odessa for the provinces during November of 1880. He arrived in Nikolayev, where to compete with Lateiner's adaptation of Mapu's *Love of Zion*, he wrote his own variation on that work – one of his greatest and most successful creations, *Shulamis*. This was the first Yiddish historical operetta. It was so successful in Nikolayev that they began performing it nightly, including on Friday nights, the Jewish Sabbath, until Goldfadn received a threat that he had better respect the Sabbath. Until then, even in Odessa, Yiddish theater had never performed on Friday nights.²⁰

After Nikolayev, the troupe toured other cities in Russia, ending the tour with three months of performances in Moscow. Following the Moscow performances, Goldfadn traveled to Kiev alone to rest, and he left the company in the hands of Zuckerman, who took the company on tour in Lithuania. Insulted that the management of the company had gone to Zuckerman and not to him, Finkel took his wife, Annette Schwartz and left the company, returning to Odessa. Zuckerman took the company to Minsk, where they performed successfully for six weeks. From there, the troupe went to Kovno, and then to Dinaburg, where Jacob Adler and his wife, Sonya Oberlander, joined the company. Adler's performances were met with great enthusiasm.²¹

Meanwhile, in Odessa, the management of the Marinsky Theater was taken over by Osip Lerner, a Jewish intellectual, who dreamed of bringing classic European plays to the Yiddish stage.²² He began presenting plays written by non-Jews on Jewish themes, like Karl

Budapest. See Jewish Women's Archive Website, jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kalich-bertha, accessed March 15, 2022.

²⁰ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 222-224. See *ibid.*, vol. 2, 27, how in early Yiddish theater in New York, the actors were careful to not desecrate the Sabbath onstage while performing. Jacob Adler wrote that in the Prince's Street Theater in London of the 1880s, there was no Friday night performance. (Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben, Di naye varhayt*, May 9, 1925, 14; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 265.)

²¹ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 224-226.

²² Of the complex figure, Osip Lerner, see Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 100-104; Seth A. Woltz, "Translations of Karl Gutzkow's Uriel Acosta as Iconic Moments of Yiddish Theatre," in *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage*, eds. Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 87-115. Jacob Adler wrote positively of him, of being invited to perform in his troupe in Odessa, and also expressed great shock over his later

Gutzkow's *Uriel Acosta* and Eugène Scribe's *La Juive*, starring Abba Schoengold and Sophie Goldstein. He also presented original plays: his own *Menachem Ben Yisroel*, Katzenellenbogen's *Rashi* and a play by Moshe Leib Lilienblum, later one of the leaders of the pre-Zionist movement, *Hibat Zion*.

In search of new plays for the Yiddish theater in Odessa, Lerner turned to Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch (Shomer) to dramatize the latter's novels. Shomer dramatized three of them for Lerner, and they were successful. This gave Shaykevitch the idea of forming a company of his own, which he proceeded to do. His company included Yisroel and Annette Grodner, Moyshe Heimowitz, Jacob Katzman, Joseph Wachtel, Louis Fridzel, Mr. and Mrs. Gellis, and a young girl named Sonya Levitzky, who later married Heimowitz, divorced, married Jacob Adler, and became known as Sara Adler. Shaykevitch did not remain long at the head of the troupe, and the position of director of the company was taken over by Moyshe Heimowitz.²³

Goldfadn soon succeeded in ousting Lerner from the management of the Marinsky Theater, and he returned to manage it himself, presenting his historical operetta, *Bar Kokhba*, there on May 5, 1883. Soon after the presentation of *Bar Kokhba*, on Aug. 7, 1883, Yiddish theater was banned by the Czar throughout Russia.²⁴

This ban, which would not be repealed quickly like the ban of 1878, caused most of the Yiddish actors to leave Russia. Groups of actors tried to form Yiddish theaters in Romania and Germany but were unable to make a living for an extended period of time. The main places in which successful troupes were formed were London and New York. Soon after the ban, Jacob Adler and his then-wife, Sonya Michelson, Max Karp and Joseph Wachtel went to London to set

being baptized (Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine, Di varhayt*, Feb. 1, 1919, 3). See there how he blamed the ban on Yiddish theater on the informing of another convert to Christianity involved in Yiddish theater in Odessa, Dr. Ben Zion. In his later memoirs, he blamed Lerner for causing the ban on Yiddish theater in Russia (Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 13, 1925, 11).

²³ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 1, 230-231, 234.

²⁴ Alyssa Quint, *Hamahaze 'Bar Kochba' me'et Avraham Goldfadn, Khuliyot* 6, Fall 2000, 79; Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 146. Rosenfeld gives a precise date to the ban. Gorin and others wrote that it occurred in September of 1883. (Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 1, 236). Gorin suggested that the ban was caused by *Bar Kokhba*, which glorified the revolt of the Jews against the Roman Empire and was considered subversive, though he admitted in vol. 2, 6 that it was not the sole reason. Though many scholars doubt this view of the ban (see, for example, "Yiddish Theatre" in the YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/theater/yiddish_theater, accessed March 8, 2022), it is taken seriously by others such as Marvin Caplan, "'Raisins and Almonds' – Goldfadn's Glory," *Judaism*, No. 166, Volume 42, No. 2, Spring 1993, 198; and Miriam Kachinsky, "Avraham Goldfadn, avi hateatron beyidish vehibat tsiyons," *Khuliyot* 8, Winter 2004, 350.

up shop. Soon afterwards, Moyshe Silberman organized a company which included Moyshe Heimowitz and his wife, Sara Levitzky. They set out for New York via London and took Karp and Wachtel with them.²⁵

B. Survey of the Current State of Scholarship and the Sources Analyzed in This Study

Yiddish theater, including that in America, has been the subject of research outside the academy since Khonen Jacob Minikes compiled *Di idishe bine*, in 1897.²⁶ Two decades later, in 1918, B. Gorin wrote the first history of Yiddish theater, a work published without a bibliography.²⁷ The first volume of Zalmen Zylbercweig's monumental encyclopedia of Yiddish theater, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, was published in New York in 1931 and contained entries on both Jacob and Sara Adler. The second volume, published in Warsaw in 1934, contained entries on both Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. Four more volumes of the encyclopedia appeared between 1959 and 1969.²⁸ Zylbercweig's encyclopedia is an invaluable source of information on Yiddish theater — however, like Gorin's, it is not always accurate.²⁹ Other, less comprehensive histories of the Yiddish theater appeared over the years.³⁰ In 1977, Nahma Sandrow published *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*.³¹ This broad attempt to cover the entire global history of Yiddish theater made that history accessible to the English-

²⁵ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 1, 237-242.

²⁶ Khonen Jacob Minikes, ed., *Di idishe bine* (New York, 1897). This early compilation includes memories of Jacob Gordin on how he became a playwright. For a full description of the volume, see Bettina Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press" (Ph. diss., Columbia University, 2001), 106-111.

²⁷ B. Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater (tsvey toyznt yor teater bay yidn)* 2 vols., New York: Literarische farlag, 1918).

²⁸ Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1 (New York: Farlag Elisheva, 1931), 13-27, 33-34; vol. 2 (Warsaw: Farlag Elisheva, 1934), 804-840, 840-846; vol. 3 - 4 (New York: Farlag Elisheva, 1959. 1963); vol. 5-6 (Mexico City: Farlag Elisheva 1967, 1969).

²⁹ On the problematics of the data in Zylbercweig's *Leksikon*, see Faith Jones, "Sex and Scandal in the *Encyclopedia of the Yiddish Theatre*," in *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage*, eds. Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 251-261.

³⁰ Such as *Hundert yor yidish teater, 1862-1962*, ed. Y.H. Klinger (London: Yidishe Kultur-gezelshaft, 1962); Jacob Mestel, *Undzer teater* (New York: YKUF, 1943); David S. Lifson, *The Yiddish Theater in America* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1965).

³¹ See footnote 6 above.

speaking public. It includes chapters on the history of Yiddish theater in America, in which Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky feature as prominent figures. Sara Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky are also addressed, though to a lesser degree. However, Sandrow's history, like the previous ones, is non-academic and not annotated.

A volume edited by Edna Nahshon that addressed itself specifically to Yiddish Theater in New York appeared in 2016. Entitled *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway*, it was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name that appeared at the Museum of the City of New York in 2016, and a large part of its 326 pages is comprised of photographs from that exhibition.³² The articles accompanying the photographs, written by scholars and annotated, include short chapters on Jacob Adler and his family and on Boris Thomashefsky, but all the articles are broad overviews which do not explore the subjects in depth.³³

Although Yiddish theater is rich in autobiographies, it is not rich in biographies. One exception is Mendel Osherovitch's *Dovid Kesler un Muni Vayzenfraynd*,³⁴ which examined the lives of David Kessler and Paul Muni as exemplifying two generations of Yiddish actors in America. Other non-academic biographies are Lulla Rosenfeld's *Bright Star of Exile, Jacob Adler and the Yiddish Theatre*, about her grandfather and the actors who surrounded him,³⁵ and Beth Kaplan's *Finding the Jewish Shakespeare*, about her grandfather, Jacob Gordin.³⁶

As for scholarship, eight previous doctoral dissertations have been written on Yiddish theater in New York. Though each of these made a significant contribution to researching Yiddish theater in America, their focuses are quite different from mine. Marvin Leon Seiger's "A History of the Yiddish Theatre in N.Y.C. to 1892,"³⁷ Diane Cypkin's "Second Avenue Yiddish

³² Edna Nahshon, ed., *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

³³ Edna Nahshon, "Jacob P. Adler and the Formation of a Theatrical Dynasty," *ibid.*, 104-116; Stephanie Halpern, "Boris Thomashefsky: Matinee Idol of the Yiddish Stage," *ibid.*, 118-126.

³⁴ Mendel Osherovitch, *Dovid Kesler un Muni Vayzenfraynd* (New York: n.p., 1930).

³⁵ Lulla Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile, Jacob Adler and the Yiddish Theatre* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1977). Rosenfeld was the daughter of Frances Adler, Jacob and Sara Adler's oldest daughter, known to the family as Nunya.

³⁶ Beth Kaplan, *Finding the Jewish Shakespeare, The Life and Legacy of Jacob Gordin* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

³⁷ Marvin Leon Seiger, "A History of the Yiddish Theatre in N.Y.C. to 1892" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1960). Seiger's dissertation focuses on the period cited in his title, and is based largely on Yiddish newspapers of the times. His research is quite useful for dates of productions about which the actors' memories are unreliable.

Broadway,”³⁸ and Rhoda Helfman Kaufman's “The Yiddish Theater in N.Y. and the Immigrant Jewish Community: Theater as Secular Ritual”³⁹ all took a broad approach, trying to cover all of Yiddish theater in New York during the period discussed, each through a different lens, be it timespan (Seiger), venue (Cypkin) or social significance (Helfman Kaufman). My research will be more specific than theirs and focus on certain key actors during the years 1881-1917. Although Joel B. Berkowitz's “Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage,”⁴⁰ David S. Lifson's “The History of Yiddish Art Theatre Movement in New York from 1918 to 1940,”⁴¹ Edna Nahshon's “The Arbeter Teater Farband: An Artistic and Political History, 1925-1940,”⁴² and Bettina Warnke's “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press”⁴³ all limited themselves to a more specific aspect of Yiddish theater, they did not focus on individual personalities, as I wish to do. Stephanie Halpern's “Crossing Over: From the Yiddish Rialto to the American Stage”⁴⁴ did focus on individual

³⁸ Diane Cypkin, “Second Avenue Yiddish Broadway” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1986). Cypkin wrote an extensive research work which tells the story of Yiddish theater in New York via the various venues in which Yiddish theater was performed. A chapter is devoted to the Bowery period of Yiddish theater (1882-1900) in which the personalities I will research play important roles and a chapter is devoted to the National Theater, which was built for Thomashefsky in 1912, and in whose first part he figures prominently (137-152).

³⁹ Rhoda Helfman Kaufman, “The Yiddish Theater in N.Y. and the Immigrant Jewish Community: Theater as Secular Ritual” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987). Helfman Kaufman examines the role of the Yiddish theater among immigrant Jews. Her view of Yiddish theater as secular ritual is relevant to the section of my research which will deal with the Jewishness of the Yiddish theater.

⁴⁰ Joel B. Berkowitz, “Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage” (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1995). Berkowitz later adapted his dissertation into book form: *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002). Berkowitz's work contains material that is relevant to both Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky, both of whom acted in productions of Shakespeare.

⁴¹ David S. Lifson, “The History of Yiddish Art Theatre Movement in New York from 1918 to 1940” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1962). Lifson focuses on a subject relevant to my study, popular vs. elitist theater, then known as “highbrow and lowbrow,” but refers to a later period in history than that discussed in the autobiographical works to be examined in the following research.

⁴² Edna Nahshon, “The Arbeter Teater Farband: An Artistic and Political History, 1925-1940” (Ph. D. diss., New York University, 1988). Nahshon focuses on the history of the Worker's Theatrical Alliance, better known as the Artef, a communist-affiliated amateur and later semi-professional Yiddish art theater centered in New York between 1925-1940. Nahshon later adapted her dissertation into a well-written and comprehensive book entitled *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre, The Art and Politics of the Artef, 1925-1940* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). Her research touches on artistic issues relevant to my own, but deals with a later time period in the New York Yiddish theater than the one I am researching and with a specific non-professional theatrical troupe.

⁴³ Bettina Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2001). Like Lifson, Warnke focuses on popular vs. elitist theater, but approaches it from the point of view of the Jewish intellectuals and press. I will approach it from the point of view of the actors involved.

⁴⁴ Stephanie Halpern, “Crossing Over: From the Yiddish Rialto to the American Stage” (Ph.D. diss., The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2017). Halpern focuses on the contributions to the American stage of individuals and plays that originated or were rooted in the world of the Yiddish stage. None of the personalities explored in this study is featured in her paper.

personalities, but she was interested primarily in their influence on the American stage. I am interested in the actors' approaches to Yiddish theater and their various influences on its character.

An area in which my dissertation will continue to address an issue central to prior research regards the view of Yiddish theater in America either as an instrument of change, dedicated to educating the masses in areas of modernity, or as a way of granting Jewish immigrants a nostalgic taste of the Old World and affirming its traditional values. Bettina (Nina) Warnke's "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press," and other articles by her, explore how Jewish intellectuals and the radical press tried to advance the former approach. She describes them as "having declared theatre to be the handmaiden of literature and, by extension of the Enlightenment, education, and nation-building."⁴⁵ This was typical of the way many viewed Yiddish theater throughout the world, as having been "charged with a mission to hasten the entry of East European Jewry into the modern world and create a cultural institution that could compare with the national cultures in Europe."⁴⁶ Nahma Sandrow, in *Vagabond Stars*, emphasizes the other side of the story – that of the American Jewish masses, for whom the Yiddish theater in America "represented loyalty to tradition and to the community," and "reinforced organized religion by assuming many of its values."⁴⁷ She draws a parallel between the Yiddish theater in America and the synagogue of Eastern Europe, both in the way the theater served as a meeting place at the center of the community and in its use of prayer onstage to evoke religious and cultural feelings. She even compares the stars of the Yiddish stage and their fans to Chassidic rabbis and their courts.⁴⁸ Our study will explore where the two couples whose autobiographies

⁴⁵ Nina Warnke, "The Child Who Wouldn't Grow Up: Yiddish Theatre and its Critics," *Yiddish Theatre – New Approaches*, Joel Berkowitz, ed. (Oxford; Portland, Or.: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), 201-216. See also Nina Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and Yiddish Theater Reform," *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, edited by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 23-41.

⁴⁶ Nina Warnke, "Women on the Immigrant Yiddish Stage: Paths to Stardom," *YIVO Institute for Jewish Research*, July 7, 2022. <https://yivo.org/YCLS2022-Warnke>. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxkym0_8rKs. Accessed Aug. 1, 2022.

⁴⁷ Sandrow, 77.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 91, 94, 122-123. Jacob Adler made a similar comparison. See Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 19, 1918, 3, where he compared the tales told by fans about actors to the tales told by Chassidim about their revered Rabbis. See also ibid. June 22, 1918, 3, in the chapter subtitled, "Actors also have Chassidim therefore they are

are being examined lie on the spectrum between the approach of the intellectuals, presented by Warnke, and that of the masses, presented by Sandrow. To what degree did they view their theater as a means for education and change, and to what degree did they want it to be a reminder of the Old World and its values? Were the two approaches always mutually exclusive?

Aside from the dissertations mentioned above, many academic articles have been written on Yiddish theater in America, many of which appeared in two important volumes edited by Joel Berkowitz: *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches* and *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage: Essays in Drama, Performance, and Show Business* (which he co-edited with Barbara Henry).⁴⁹ But in all of the above, as well as in the various Masters theses listed in the extensive bibliography of *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage*,⁵⁰ one is struck by the scarcity of actors as subjects for research and by the absence of research focusing on the lives or writings of the New York Yiddish theater's actors.

An important academic work on Goldfadn's theater from 1876 to 1883 by Alyssa Quint, entitled *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, was published in 2019.⁵¹ Quint not only wrote of Goldfadn himself but also explored his influence on the lives of the first Yiddish actors and the reciprocal influence of these actors on his theater. Quint made use of autobiography in her research, including the writings of Jacob Adler,⁵² and although she did not focus on the issues I will address, the legitimacy she gave to autobiography as an academic source "if read with common sense and against the grain of 'the intentional self-presentation' of their authors"⁵³ is very similar to mine.⁵⁴

Another way in which my research is in conversation with Quint can be seen in her forthcoming book, co-edited with Amanda Seigel, *Women on the Yiddish Stage*, which focuses

relatives of 'Good Jews'" where Adler recounted Rosenberg's conversation with the Good Jew of Nezhin, in which Rosenberg tells the Chassidic Rebbe, "We also have Chassidim."

⁴⁹ Joel Berkowitz, ed., *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches* (Oxford; Portland, Or: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003); Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry, eds., *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage: Essays in Drama Performance, and Show Business* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

⁵⁰ Ibid., 325-365, list for example, Aleksander Kohanski, "The Yiddish Theater in New York: Season 1932-1933," M.A. thesis, Graduate School for Jewish Social Work, 1933; or Corinne B. Stavish, "There's Nothing Like that Now: The Yiddish Theatre in Chicago – Personal Perspectives," M.A. thesis, Northeastern Illinois University, 1979.

⁵¹ Alyssa Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019).

⁵² Alongside the memoirs of Goldfadn, Avrom Fishzon, Bina Abramovich, David Kessler, Bertha Kalich and others. See Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 13.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Introduction, Section D3.

on the actresses who worked in Yiddish theater.⁵⁵ The book contains an article by Nina Warnke focusing on the use of memoirs by star actresses on the New York Yiddish stage for purposes of self-enactment, a further step in the direction I am taking in my research. I look forward to its publication and very much regret that I had no access to the material when preparing this dissertation.

Reflecting on the state of Yiddish theater scholarship, Joel Berkowitz stated:

As for trends in this early body of work on Yiddish drama and theater, a couple of things stand out. One is a tendency to focus on playwrights and plays rather than actors and performances. It is a distinctly text-focused corpus of historical and critical writing, and while much has happened in the past few decades to rectify the imbalance, Yiddish theater studies has yet to catch up to studies of other theatrical cultures in some respects. One noticeable gap, for example, is the nearly complete absence of book-length studies of the lives and careers of Yiddish actors. [...] So, figures as notable as Jacob and Sara Adler, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, Bertha Kalich, Keni Liptzin, Maurice Schwartz, the entire Kaminsky-Turkow dynasty, and many others, can keep researchers busy for many years to come.⁵⁶

Indeed, as Berkowitz noted, there has been a recent surge of interest in Yiddish playwrights, notably, Jacob Gordin, the playwright whose partnership with Jacob Adler was so significant.⁵⁷ Barbara Henry's thought-provoking book, *Rewriting Russia, Jacob Gordin's Yiddish Drama*,⁵⁸ explored how Gordin rewrote Russian culture for the American Jewish theater. Ruth Gay and Sophie Glazer's translation of the first successful play that Gordin wrote for Adler, *The Jewish King Lear*, is accompanied by essays on Gordin and on Yiddish theater in America⁵⁹. Avraham Novershtern's impressive overview of Yiddish literature in America, *Kan gar ha'am*

⁵⁵ Alyssa Quint and Amanda Seigel, eds., *Women on the Yiddish Stage* (Oxford: Legenda, 2023).

⁵⁶ From a lecture entitled "The Old, the New, and the Missing," delivered at the Hebrew University International Workshop on Yiddish Culture, May 27, 2015. Quote courtesy of Professor Joel Berkowitz.

⁵⁷ Outside America, the playwright whose works have been most researched is Avrom Goldfadn. In addition to Alyssa Quint's recently published study of his theater, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, numerous articles have been written about Goldfadn by scholars such as Alyssa Quint, Seth Wolitz and Joel Berkowitz, among many others.

The plays of Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz and Peretz Markish also have been the subject of a relatively large number of academic articles.

⁵⁸ Barbara Henry, *Rewriting Russia, Jacob Gordin's Yiddish Drama* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2011).

⁵⁹ Jacob Gordin, *The Jewish King Lear: A Comedy in America*, translated by Ruth Gay with notes and essays by Ruth Gay and Sophie Glazer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

hayehudi contains an analysis of two of Gordin's plays.⁶⁰ But the actors without whom Gordin would never have been able to succeed have not yet been the focus of any academic work.

I wish to fill in some of the gaps of which Berkowitz speaks. Because Yiddish theater in America at the turn of the century was actor-centered and not playwright- or director-centered, I believe that a careful critical study of the autobiographies of Yiddish actors can give us an understanding of what the driving and creative forces behind Yiddish theater were, on a deeper level of understanding than can be obtained by merely reading the plays. Therefore, the primary sources to be used in the present study will be the published memoirs of four central figures in Yiddish theater.

Jacob Adler published the first version of his memoirs in 1901, in ten short installments in B. Gorin's *Der teater zhurnal*.⁶¹ At the time, illness prevented him from completing it, and he later published a much lengthier version of his memoirs, in 170 installments, in *Di varhayt*, between April 30, 1916 and Feb. 22, 1919. It was then late in his career and he no longer had his own theater and no longer performed in new plays.⁶² The title given to the memoir was "Forty Years on the Stage – My Life Story and the History of the Yiddish Theater." When the first installments were published, Bessie Thomashefsky's autobiography was nearing the end of its serialization in the same newspaper. According to Zylbercweig, these writings, which deal with Adler's youth and years in Russia until 1883, were ghost-written, or adapted, by Joel Entin, without his receiving acknowledgment.⁶³ Entin, a journalist and translator who was involved in the short-lived organization, *the Fraye yidishe folksbine* (Free Yiddish People's Stage), which Gordin founded in late 1896 or early 1897, edited the organization's theater journal of that name.⁶⁴ Entin also wrote for *Di varhayt* between 1905 and 1915 and co-edited the Labor Zionist

⁶⁰ Avraham Novershtern, *Kan gar ha'am hayehudi: sifrut yidish be'artsot habrit* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2015), 203-228.

⁶¹ Jacob Adler, "Mayn lebns bashraybung," in *Der teater zhurnal*, 1901-2, 2-12, edited by B. Gorin. See Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 21. The memoir goes as far as his appearance in Yekateranaslav in 1879, before marrying Sonya Oberlander.

⁶² Lulla Rosenfeld, "A Yiddish Theater? How Did It Happen?" in Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, xxiv. See Introduction, Section E1.

⁶³ Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 22. Entin's involvement in the newspaper *Di varhayt* is possibly the reason this newspaper was chosen for the serialization of the autobiography. Adler's decision to publish his autobiography at the time, as well as the decision of *Di varhayt* to host its publication, may have been prompted by the success of Bessie Thomashefsky's autobiography, which began publication in the same newspaper almost six months earlier.

⁶⁴ See Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and Yiddish Theater Reform," 31. It is worth considering to what degree Entin's identification with Gordin's ideal of educating the Jewish masses

weekly, *Der yidisher kemfer*, between 1916 and 1920.⁶⁵ The years Adler spent in London and his first unsuccessful visit to America in 1887 were described in much less detail, in the 32 additional chapters he serialized in *Di naye varhayt* between March 14, 1925 and July 18, 1925, shortly before his death in 1926 and following a stroke and partial paralysis in 1920.⁶⁶ In 2001, the various articles were condensed, adapted, translated into English, and published in book form with added notes by Adler's granddaughter, Lulla Rosenfeld, in a volume entitled *A Life on the Stage*.⁶⁷ In the following paper the original Yiddish newspaper articles will be our initial reference. Whenever the section of the autobiography referred to appears in the English adaptation, I will refer to its place in the adaptation alongside the original Yiddish newspaper article, for the sake of the English reading public, though the translation used in these sections is my own and not that of Rosenfeld. In the few places that only Rosenfeld's adaptation is referred to, I am referring to a part of her adaptation whose source I was unable to locate in the original Yiddish newspaper articles.

Boris Thomashefsky published two volumes of memoirs in book form and numerous other articles related to Yiddish theater and to his life. In 1908, he published a short collection of articles on Yiddish theater called *Tomashevski's teater shriftn* [Thomashefsky's Theater Writings].⁶⁸ The articles had previously been published in the New York Yiddish newspaper, *Di varhayt*. A comprehensive telling of his life story was serialized in the popular Yiddish socialist daily *Forverts* between Nov. 23, 1935 and Mar. 25, 1937, under the title *Boris Thomashefsky –*

towards a modern, secular Jewish culture through the theater which lay behind his *Fraye yidishe folksbine* influenced the way Adler is presented in his autobiography.

⁶⁵ Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, 75; "Entin, Joel," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur* vol. 7 (New York: Marstin Press, 1962); "Entin, Joel," *Encyclopedia*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/entin-joel>, accessed Feb. 13, 2022.

⁶⁶ See Lulla Rosenfeld's notes in Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 230. The *Naye varhayt* was an attempt by the defunct *Di varhayt* to re-establish itself and was probably chosen by Adler because the latter had been the original home for his previous memoirs. Of Adler's final years, see Introduction, Section E1.

⁶⁷ Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, translated with commentary by Lulla Rosenfeld (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001). Rosenfeld's extremely readable adaptation is in general loyal to the original, but much of Adler's wording has been rephrased, and some of the memoir has been re-edited for the benefit of chronology. It is an important work that brings Adler's autobiography to a wider audience but is flawed from a scholarly perspective. Adler's autobiography only went as far as his visit to America in 1887. Rosenfeld has a section on his years in New York after 1889, which she stitched together mostly from memories of those years, which made their way into the original memoir, although its primary focus was on earlier times. There are a few parts of the New York section in Rosenfeld's adaptation whose origin I have been unable to trace.

⁶⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, *Thomashevski's teater shriftn* (New York: Lipshits Press, 1908).

Zayn lebns-bukh [Boris Thomashefsky – His Life-book], during a period after Thomashefsky had suffered several serious failures as both actor and entrepreneur in his later life and was quite impoverished. The collected articles were published in book form in Yiddish in 1937, two years before Thomashefsky's death, under the title *Mayn lebns-geshikhte* [My Life Story].⁶⁹ The book was a slightly edited version of the newspaper articles, with minor changes made and chapters organized differently than in the serialization. The memoir covers his life from childhood until 1904. Other uncollected newspaper articles he wrote are listed in Zalmen Zylbercweig's *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*.⁷⁰ Besides individual articles published over the years, they include two series of articles published in the *Forverts* between September 1913 and November 1914, most of which deal with his travels in 1913 in London, Poland, Russia and Galicia,⁷¹ and a longer serial account of his experiences performing on the road in Chicago, Baltimore, Boston and Philadelphia from 1885 to 1890, which was published in the *Forverts* between April 1916 and Dec. 1917.⁷²

Bessie Thomashefsky published her first series of memoirs in *Di varhayt* between November 6, 1915 and June 20, 1916, in 87 installments. Shortly afterward, in July 1916, it was published in book form, as *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*.⁷³ The memoirs were actually written by Eliyahu Tenenholz, based on his meetings with Bessie Thomashefsky, during which she told him her life's story. Tenenholz was uncredited in the original serialization in *Di varhayt* but was credited as co-author when the memoir was published in book form. Tenenholz was both a Yiddish actor and a writer. He acted with Bessie Thomashefsky, Jacob Adler and Maurice Schwartz onstage, and was vice president of the Hebrew Actors' Union for four years. He also

⁶⁹ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte* (New York: Trio Press, 1937). This autobiography was based on previously published memoirs that appeared in the *Forverts* between April 1916 and Dec. 1917. This earlier version was probably prompted by Thomashefsky's desire not to be outdone by his former wife, Bessie, who had published her memoirs between 1914 and 1916, and by his desire for the public to hear their story from his perspective. Of the various publications of this autobiography, we have chosen to address the one published in book form, which is the most well-known and most commonly referred to by researchers.

⁷⁰ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 831-832.

⁷¹ Commonly referred to as "Mayn bezukh in Eyrope."

⁷² The 1916-1917 memoirs appeared in 34 installments. The 1913-1914 series began with 14 installments on his trip to Europe, followed by 6 installments on miscellaneous subjects. Each article is given a different name. Thomashefsky probably chose *The Forverts* as the venue for his autobiographical writings because it was the most popular Yiddish newspaper at the time.

⁷³ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte* [My Life Story] (New York: Varhayt, 1916).

wrote novels that were serialized in the *Morgen zhurnal*,⁷⁴ and in 1923 edited a collection entitled *Yiddish Theatre* for the Hebrew Actor's Union.⁷⁵ During the period that the autobiography was published, Tenenholz wrote for *Di varhayt*,⁷⁶ which probably explains why that newspaper was chosen as its venue. The book was written after Bessie had separated from Boris and begun an independent career. The trauma of their separation and her desire for the public to hear the story from her point of view probably were her motivation for publishing the memoir at this time. The newspaper serialization and the subsequent book are virtually identical, with identically named chapters and only rare additions or amendments in the text. A second series of memoirs by Bessie Thomashefsky was serialized in *Der tog* between Oct. 12 and Dec. 27, 1935, after she had retired from the stage, also following a family trauma, while she was nursing her son, Mickey, who had been paralyzed when shot in a lover's quarrel.⁷⁷ These memoirs were never published in book form.

Sara Adler published her memoirs in the *Forverts* between June 29, 1937 and October 7, 1939, thrice weekly.⁷⁸ This sprawling memoir contains 337 chapters and was never published in book form. Like Bessie Thomashefsky's second memoir and Boris Thomashefsky's memoir of 1935-1937, it was serialized at a late time in her life, when she was no longer an active force on the Yiddish stage but wanted to be remembered as having been one.

⁷⁴ The *Morgen zhurnal* was a conservative newspaper, founded by the Orthodox journalist Jacob Saphirstein in 1901, and edited by him until 1916. Though it took on a more liberal slant when Saphirstein ceased to be its chief editor, the identification of Tenenholz with this relatively conservative publication may explain why Bessie was presented in her first autobiography as a typical good Jewish wife.

⁷⁵ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 885-887. On the politics of the various Yiddish newspapers see Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution," 32-35.

⁷⁶ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 887.

⁷⁷ The first of this series is entitled "Mayn lebn oyf dem [sic!] bine un in dem [sic!] heym" ("My Life on the Stage and in the Home" – written with two grammatical errors). Subsequent articles took on various titles based on their content. The autobiography is commonly referred to as *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebn-geshikhte*, and that will be the name used in this study. It was not uncommon for theatrical figures to publish multiple autobiographies. Seymour Hicks, the Edwardian actor-manager and dramatist, wrote seven autobiographies, as did Eddie Cantor, the American singer and comedian. Thomas Postlewait, "Theatre Autobiographies: Some Preliminary Concerns for the Historian" in *Assaph: Studies in the Theatre* C 16 (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2000) 158-159, lists fifteen well-known British or American personalities in the world of entertainment who wrote between three and ten versions of their memoirs. The choosing of *Der tog* as the venue for the autobiography may have been a result of her having published her previous autobiography in *Di varhayt*, which had meanwhile merged with the newspaper *Der tog* in 1919. Of the circumstances during which the autobiography was written see Introduction, Section E4.

⁷⁸ Sara Adler, *Di lebn-geshikhte fun Sore Adler, Forverts*, June 29, 1937 – Oct. 7, 1939. The original manuscript of these memoirs is available in Stella Adler, Series IV, Yiddish Theater, Box 44, Folder 8-10, *The Stella Adler and Harold Clurman Archives*, Harry Ransom Center of the University of Texas (Austin, Texas). As the most popular Yiddish newspaper at the time, *the Forverts* would have been Sara Adler's first choice as a venue.

Because we are interested in our personalities' approach to Yiddish theater in their own subjective views of themselves and in each other's eyes, the contemporary Yiddish press will remain outside the scope of this paper. Theatrical reviews, now available in databases⁷⁹ will certainly shed new light on the performance and reception of the Yiddish theater. Throughout, our approach will be interdisciplinary. While our primary focus will be theater history and performance study, we will also touch on the areas of life-writing and gender studies, essential keys to interpreting theatrical autobiographies.

C. Autobiography in the Theater

Autobiographies of important theatrical personalities apparently began with Colley Cibber's *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley*, first published in London in 1740.⁸⁰ Cibber was an all-around man of the theater – actor, playwright, manager and teacher. His discussions of actors in the *Apology* display an appreciation of different styles of acting and an understanding of the basic problems of the actor's art.⁸¹ Another man of the theater who wrote his memoirs in the eighteenth century was the French actor whom Voltaire regarded as the greatest tragedian of his time, Henri-Louis Cain, whose stage name was Lekain. Although Lekain, who lived between 1729-1778, was a contemporary of Cibber, his *Mémoires de Lekain* were only first published in 1801, making his memoirs the second known theatrical autobiography.⁸² The famous French actor Francois-Joseph Talma's tribute to Lekain as an actor, called *Reflections on the Actor's Art*, first appeared as a preface to Lekain's memoirs when they were published in 1825.⁸³

⁷⁹ Two important databases for the research of Yiddish theater in this fashion are *The Index to Yiddish Periodicals*, available at <http://yiddish-periodicals.huji.ac.il/> and *The Historical Jewish Press*, available at http://jpress.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI_heb/?action=tab&tab=browse&pub=FRW#panel=browse

⁸⁰ Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley* (London: Everyman's Library, J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd, 1740).

⁸¹ Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, *Actors on Acting: The Theories, Techniques, and Practices of the World's Great Actors, Told in Their Own Words* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949), 102-103.

⁸² Encyclopedia Britannica, "Lekain" <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Lekain>, accessed Oct. 17, 2021.

⁸³ Cole and Chinoy, 179; Francois Joseph Talma: *Reflections on the Actor's Art* (1825) (New York: Printed for the Dramatic Museum of Columbia University, *Papers on Acting*, Second Series, Number 4, 1915), 7-41.

The turn of the century saw a spate of theatrical memoirs. In France, Hyppolite Clairon, the well-known actress of the Comédie Française, published her memoirs in 1798, which included reflections on the art of acting.⁸⁴ In those reflections, she attacked the acting of her rival at the Comédie Française, Marie-Françoise Dumesnil, who she claimed acted with “reality” but without “art.” These memoirs provoked Dumesnil to retaliate by publishing her own memoirs two years later, in which she extolled naturalness in acting and demanded that actors create an emotional identification with their role, in opposition to Clairon.⁸⁵ At approximately the same time, in England, James Thomas Kirkman published a biography of the actor of the natural school, Charles Macklin (c. 1697 – 1797), which was based primarily on Macklin’s own writings.⁸⁶

From the nineteenth century on, theatrical autobiography became very popular. Between 1890 and 1920, approximately 350 autobiographies were written by people active in the English theater alone.⁸⁷ Several important examples from this period are the autobiographies of Fanny Kemble (1809-1893), the last actress of a famous theatrical family in England, who wrote a series of autobiographical books in which she is very critical of the acting profession;⁸⁸ the memoirs of the British actor William Charles Macready (1793-1873), which were published posthumously in 1875;⁸⁹ and the memoirs of the great Russian actor Mikhail S. Shchepkin (1788-1863), father of Russian naturalistic acting, entitled *Memoirs of an Actor-Serf*.⁹⁰

In America, the actor Joseph Jefferson (1829-1905) published his autobiography in 1889.⁹¹ The great Italian actor Tommaso Salvini (1829-1915) published his autobiography in

⁸⁴ Hyppolite Clairon, *Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon, the celebrated French Actress: With Reflections Upon the Dramatic Art* (1798), translated from the French (London: O.G. and J. Robinson, 1800).

⁸⁵ Marie-Françoise Dumesnil, *Memoires de Marie-Françoise Dumesnil, en reponse aux memoires d’Hyppolite Clairon* (Paris: Dentu, 1800). See Cole and Chinoy, 174.

⁸⁶ James Thomas Kirkman, *Memoirs of the Life of Charles Macklin, Esq.* (London: Lockington, Allen and Co., 1799).

⁸⁷ Thomas Postlewait, “Theatre Autobiographies,” 159.

⁸⁸ Cole and Chinoy, 338.

⁸⁹ William Charles Macready, *Macready’s Reminiscences and Selections from his Diaries and Letters*, edited by Sir Frederick Pollack (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1875).

⁹⁰ See Charles Meten, “Mikhail Shchepkin: ‘Artist and Lawgiver of the Russian Stage,’” *Educational Theatre Journal*, vol. 14, No. 1, March 1962, Johns Hopkins University Press, 45.

⁹¹ Joseph Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson* (New York: The Century Company, 1889).

1893.⁹² The Italian actor and playwright, Ernesto Rossi, known as the “Italian Talma,” whose appearances in Russia in 1877-78 caused a furor, had his memoirs published in Russian in 1896.⁹³ The memoirs of the Italian actress, Adelaide Ristori (1822-1906) were published posthumously in English in 1907.⁹⁴ That same year, Sarah Bernhardt published her autobiography, *My Double Life*.⁹⁵

On the Yiddish stage, the first to publish autobiographical writings was Avrom Goldfadn (1840-1908) who, according to Alyssa Quint, wrote nine autobiographical works and additional sketches between 1887 and his death in 1908.⁹⁶ Three autobiographical treatments, originally published from 1887 to 1901, were compiled and republished posthumously in 1926 under the title “Goldfadn’s autobiografishe materyal” (Goldfadn’s autobiographical sources) in the *Goldfadn-bukh*.⁹⁷ Additional attempts by Goldfadn to write the story of his early years in Yiddish theater, up until 1877, were published in 1929.⁹⁸ His final attempt to write a definitive autobiography which would also serve as a history of the modern Yiddish theater was published in 1930.⁹⁹ Despite these varied attempts, he never managed to write a complete and comprehensive autobiography. His most creative and productive years, between 1878 and 1883, are altogether missing. Alyssa Quint claims that whatever he wrote in his later years reveals the depressed mental state he suffered from after the ban on Yiddish theater in Russian in 1883, and his attempts at self-promotion are very strained and transparent.¹⁰⁰

Among theatrical personalities of the American Yiddish stage, Bessie Thomashefsky was the first to publish extensive memoirs, which appeared in *Di varhayt* between 1914 and

⁹² Tommaso Salvini, *Leaves from the Autobiography of Tommaso Salvini* (New York: The Century Company, 1893).

⁹³ Ernesto Rossi, *50 let artisticheskoi deiatel'nosti Ernesto Rossi* (50 Years of the Artistic Activity of Ernesto Rossi), ed. S.I. Lavrenteva (St. Petersburg: A.M. Lesman, 1896). See Cole and Chinoy, 451.

⁹⁴ Adelaide Ristori, *Memoirs and Artistic Studies of Adelaide Ristori*, rendered into English by G. Mantellini (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1907).

⁹⁵ Sarah Bernhardt, *Ma double vie: memoires de Sarah Bernhardt* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1907). An English translation appeared the same year as *My Double Life: Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt*, translated by Victoria Tietze Larson (London: Heinemann, 1907).

⁹⁶ See Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 39-41, for a thorough discussion of Goldfadn’s autobiographical works and their problematics.

⁹⁷ “Goldfadn’s autobiografishe materyaln,” in *Goldfadn-bukh*, ed. Jacob Shatzky (New York: Teater muzey, 1926), 40-68. See Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 273.

⁹⁸ “Der onfang funem yidishn teater,” *Yidishe velt*, April 1929–June 1929. See Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 273.

⁹⁹ “Fun ‘Shmendrik’ biz ‘Ben-Ami’: draysikyeriker epokhn-gang der antvikling fun mayn yidish teater-kind,” *Arkhyv far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame* (New York and Vilna: YIVO, 1930), 265–272.

¹⁰⁰ Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 39-41.

1916.¹⁰¹ She was followed by her husband, Boris, who published his memories of his early years on the road in the American Yiddish theater shortly afterward in the *Forverts* between April 1916 and December 1917.¹⁰² Jacob Adler, not wanting to be outdone by his competitor Thomashefsky, published his memoirs, beginning in childhood and continuing until his early days in the Yiddish theater in Russia, in *Di varhayt* from April 30, 1916 until February 22, 1919. Shortly after both of their memoirs began to be serialized, their rival, David Kessler, published a much shorter serialized memoir, concentrating on his early days in Yiddish theater in Russia, in *Der tog* in 1917. Bertha Kalich's memoirs were serialized in seventy installments in *Der tog* in 1925. That same year, Jacob Adler serialized the parts of his autobiography that dealt with his years in London and New York. Also published that year was Leon Kobrin's *Erinerungen fun a yidishn dramaturg* [*Recollections of a Yiddish Playwright*],¹⁰³ in which he wrote extensively about the various personalities he had worked with. Later Yiddish theatrical autobiographies, aside from Boris Thomashefsky's more complete autobiography which was serialized in the *Forverts* beginning in 1935¹⁰⁴ and Sara Adler's, serialized in the same newspaper beginning in 1937, include memoirs by the important composer for the Yiddish theater, Joseph Rumshinsky published in 1944,¹⁰⁵ memoirs of Yiddish actor Boaz Young, published in 1950,¹⁰⁶ and the autobiography of Jacob Adler's daughter, actress Celia (Tsili) Adler, published in 1959.¹⁰⁷ These various memoirs could possibly shed additional light on the subjects addressed in this study, but they will remain outside the scope of our research, aside from Kobrin's memoirs, which contain chapters on each of the personalities in this study and were therefore considered

¹⁰¹ Jacob Adler had begun to publish his memoirs in B. Gorin's *Der teater zhurnal* in 1901, but was interrupted by illness, as noted above, footnote 61.

¹⁰² As we have already noted, Thomashefsky also had shorter serialized memoirs published in the *Forverts* in 1913 and 1914. See footnotes 71 and 72 above.

¹⁰³ Leon Kobrin, *Erinerungen fun a yidishn dramaturg* [*Recollections of a Yiddish Playwright*] (New York: Komitet far Kobrins shriftn, 1925).

¹⁰⁴ Many contradictions and discrepancies exist between this later autobiography and the version he wrote in 1916-1917 in the *Forverts*. As we have noted, Thomashefsky's writing is in general sensationalist and self-aggrandizing and does not inspire confidence. We will not address ourselves to these discrepancies unless they relate directly to the subjects we are researching. For an example of two different versions of the same story, see *Forverts*, June 18, 1916, 6 and June 25, 1916, 8 as compared to Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns geshikhte*, 167-182, concerning his early days in the theater in Baltimore and his first meetings with Bessie.

¹⁰⁵ Joseph Rumshinsky, *Klangen fun mayn lebn* [*Echoes of my Life*], (New York: Itsche Biderman, 1944).

¹⁰⁶ Boaz Young, *Mayn lebn in teater* [*My Life in the Theater*] (New York: Ikuf, 1950).

¹⁰⁷ Tsili Adler and Yakov Tikman, *Tsili Adler dertseyt* [*Celia Adler Relates*], 2 vols. (New York: Tsili Adler Foundation un Bukh-komitet, 1959). Celia Adler was Jacob's daughter by his second wife, Dina Shtettin.

particularly relevant. I will refer to Kobrin's memoirs primarily in the biographical portraits of the actors later in this Introduction.

D. Autobiography in Academic Research

1. Dilemmas Faced when Researching Autobiography

In choosing autobiography as the subject of my research, I am entering a field that has been the subject of much debate and controversy in the past decades. The boundaries of autobiography have been questioned, and many attempts have been made to define it and to differentiate between it and memoir, self-portrait, and other types of self-writing. Marcus Moseley, in *Being for Myself Alone, Origins of Jewish Autobiography*,¹⁰⁸ differentiates between the autobiography, which is primarily introspective and self-reflective, and the memoir, which focuses on deeds and events. In addition, the autobiography concerns itself with other individuals who helped form the "self" of the writer, unrelated to their social status. The memoir will describe relations only with people whose social status grants them importance in the eyes of the reader. In contrast to the self-portrait, in which the writer describes himself at the stage of his adulthood during which he is writing, the autobiography describes the evolution of the self of the writer from a double perspective – that of the time in which he is writing, and that of the time about which he is writing. It is clear that the various works being evaluated here are not self-portraits. Though we will sometimes demonstrate in the body of the dissertation how the various works lean either toward autobiography or toward memoir, since the focus of this study is the actors' respective approaches to Yiddish theater and not the literary genre in which they chose to express themselves, we will usually use the two terms interchangeably.

Much of the discourse regarding autobiography concerns itself with the questions raised by postmodernism and deconstructionism about the nature of the self and the nature of reality. I prefer not to enter that discussion, and tend to ally myself with Moseley, placing myself outside the realm of what Sarah Pratt calls the "radicals," who deny the existence of the "self,"

¹⁰⁸ Marcus Moseley, *Being for Myself Alone, Origins of Jewish Autobiography* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006), 7-8.

and closer to the realm of the "traditionalists," who believe that the self exists.¹⁰⁹ Still, the question of truthfulness in autobiography arises even for a relative traditionalist. In the words of Thomas Postlewait, "Deriving reliable evidence from autobiographies is clearly difficult because these reports are based upon personal experiences, faulty memories, and subjective consciousness."¹¹⁰ Michael Stanislawski maintains in *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* that autobiography reflects more of how the writer would like to represent himself than it does objective truth. When writing his autobiography, a writer mythologizes his life, rather than recording its actual history.¹¹¹ Or in the words of Rikard Hoogland, "at the same time the author performs his memory, he is attempting to construct how he should be remembered."¹¹² This idea has gained currency among literary scholars and critics since 1960, when Roy Pascal wrote *Design and Truth in Autobiography*.¹¹³ In addition, even when the writer intends to record the truth, he is affected by the selective and "constructivist" nature of memory. One unintentionally reconstructs memories to suit one's agenda and narrative.¹¹⁴ In the words of David Gross, "the processes of memory involve so much selecting, editing, revising, interpreting, embellishing, configuring, and reconfiguring of mnemonic traces from the moment they are first registered in the mind until the moment of retrieval that it is almost impossible to think of memory as a trustworthy preserver of the past."¹¹⁵ Similarly, Sir Frederic Bartlett suggested that autobiography should not be viewed as an exact recollection but rather as a reconstruction of the past that is consistent with our current goals and knowledge of the world.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 5-6.

¹¹⁰ Thomas Postlewait, "Theatre Autobiographies: Some Preliminary Concerns for the Historian," *Assaph: Studies in the Theatre*, C 16, 2000, 60. Relevant works that try to deal with the challenge inherent in autobiography and its basis in subjective and faulty memory are David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2000) and Thomas Postlewait and Bruce A. McConachie, eds., *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989).

¹¹¹ Michael Stanislawski, *Autobiographical Jews: Essays in Jewish Self-Fashioning* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004), 3-4.

¹¹² Rikard Hoogland, "What Do Theatre Autobiographies Conceal?" *Nordic Theatre Studies*, vol. 29, No. 1, 67.

¹¹³ Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

¹¹⁴ Stanislawski, 5.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 14-15, see David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2000), 31-32.

¹¹⁶ Stanislawski, 15, paraphrases and then quotes Sir Frederic Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 213.

Despite the many dilemmas involved, since Pascal, autobiography has become a popular source for researchers, including the comparison of autobiographies. Examples include Albert Edward Millar Jr.'s "Spiritual autobiography in selected writings of Sewell, Edwards, Byrd, Woolman and Franklin: A comparison of technique and content" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1987) and Mary Jean Corbett's *Representing Femininity: Middle Class Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Women's Autobiographies* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), which includes analyses of the autobiographies of Victorian and Edwardian actresses.¹¹⁷ There has been a strong interest in particular in women's autobiographies, with hundreds of women's autobiographies analyzed in literary studies between 1980 and 2000.¹¹⁸ Attention has also been brought to the differences between male and female autobiographies.¹¹⁹

2. Theatrical Autobiography in Academic Research

Thomas Postlewait has written specifically on the use of theatrical autobiography in research.¹²⁰ He lists twelve types of theatrical autobiography and claims that the literary genre affects the content.¹²¹ Among the twelve types of theatrical autobiographies he lists, the ones that are relevant to our research are 1: Autobiographies that focus on the emergence and struggles of an artistic sensibility – this is a fitting description of Adler's autobiography, especially the part about his years in Russia. 2. Autobiographies which give a measured history of the author's entire career – this is what Sara Adler attempted to write, as did Bessie Thomashefsky in her first autobiography, which covered her career up until the time the memoir was published in 1916. 3. Sensational memoirs – to a degree, this genre reflects both of Boris Thomashefsky's serialized memoirs published in the *Forverts*: his series from 1916-1917, which was very anecdotal in nature and covered only five years of his early career, and the more complete memoirs published from 1935-1937. Both of these serialized memoirs contain many sensational, overly dramatic and self-aggrandizing stories which arouse skepticism in the

¹¹⁷ See Chapters 4 and 5 there (107-149).

¹¹⁸ Postlewait, "Theatre Autobiographies," 162.

¹¹⁹ See Thomas Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History," in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, 260-268; Jacky Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 101-102.

¹²⁰ Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History," 248-272; Postlewait, "Theatre Autobiographies," 157-172.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 165-170.

reader. The latter autobiography also goes into great detail on the subject of his amorous adventures. 4. Autobiography as self-justification – Bessie Thomashefsky's second autobiography is largely a justification of her leaving Boris and an affirmation of her career, written in her later years, when she felt forgotten. 5. The travelogue – this genre correlates with Boris Thomashefsky's series for the *Forverts* about his 1913 travels in Europe. 6. The collection of stories and anecdotes – a fitting description of Boris Thomashefsky's *Teater shriftn*.

When referring to the various memoirs, we will take their genres into account and consider how the genre may have influenced the content, as Postlewait notes.

Postlewait also discusses how theatrical autobiographies are an especially problematic source for a researcher because of the self-dramatizing nature of their authors, their often-inflated egos, and their habit of “playing to the audience,” all of which cause what is written to be particularly open to suspicion. Accustomed to appearing before an audience, the actor uses his autobiography as a way of continuing to please, convince and control his audience, often after retiring from the stage. Postlewait calls theater autobiography “a masquerade moved from stage to page.” The performer's autobiography, moreover, “besides being a record of accomplishment, is an appeal like all performances for recognition, for approval and for love.” Actors use autobiography as a means of establishing their place in theatrical history.¹²² This is certainly true of the autobiographies studied here, most of which were written at the end of the actors' long careers.

Bruce Wilshire claims that an actor's tendency to dramatize his life begins long before he writes his autobiography. Gratified by the way in which his characterizations on stage are received, he learns to be an exhibitionist and to “act out” his actual life, creating a “self” as dramatic as any character he has played on stage.¹²³ Leigh Woods continues along the lines of Wilshire, but using the example of the celebrated British actor Edmund Kean (1787-1833), he shows how actors proceed to further mythicize their lives when referring to themselves and their past. This tendency, according to Woods, is continued by their biographers, who often

¹²² Postlewait, “Autobiography and Theatre History,” 252, 258-259. See Joel Berkowitz, “Writing the History of the Yiddish Theatre,” 12-13, who both quotes Postlewait and gives his own approach to the autobiographies of Yiddish actors.

¹²³ Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 272.

relate to the actors' lives as a type of play.¹²⁴ According to their approaches, dramatization is an inherent part of the actor's life and of the way his life is portrayed both by him and by others — even outside the realm of autobiography. It is therefore necessary to take this tendency to self-dramatization into consideration when analyzing actors' autobiographies.

When analyzing the differences between men's and women's autobiographies in the field of theatrical autobiography, Postlewait claims that women's autobiographies emphasize ties with and breaks from family, dependency on men, moral honor and rectitude, defenses and demonstrations of their roles as mothers and wives, and alternating moods of hope and discouragement. They generally contain important turning points that occur upon meeting a grand man of the theater, emphasizing his role in their lives more than their own determination. Actresses present themselves as divided beings, with public and private selves. Actors are more prone to present themselves as self-made men independent of others. Their family lives are not emphasized and their moral honor is usually not an issue. They do not differentiate between their public and private selves.¹²⁵ In the final Discussion and Conclusion, we will examine the degree to which the autobiographies in this study accord with the above conventions of male and female theatrical autobiography.

Thomas Postlewait wrote in 2000 that "though literary scholars during the last few decades have shown great interest in the nature of autobiography [...] theatre autobiographies seldom even get mentioned."¹²⁶ This situation changed during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, with more attention being given to theatrical autobiography in scholarly works, especially to the autobiographies of actresses in the field of gender studies. For example, Mary F. Zirin used the autobiographies of two nineteenth-century Russian actresses as her primary sources in "Sister acts: Autobiographies by two nineteenth-century Russian actresses in cultural perspective."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Leigh Woods, "Actors' Biography and Mythmaking," in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, 230-245.

¹²⁵ Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History," 260-268.

¹²⁶ Postlewait, "Theatre Autobiographies," 160.

¹²⁷ Mary F. Zirin, "Sister acts: Autobiographies by two nineteenth-century Russian actresses in cultural perspective," in *Mapping the Feminine: Russian Women and Cultural Difference*, eds. Hilde Hoogenboom, Catharine Theimer Nepomnyaschchy and Irina Reyfman (Bloomington, Indiana: Slavica, 2008), 167-184.

3. The Approach I Will Use in This Paper

After elaborating on the challenges theatrical biographies place before the researcher, Postlewait nevertheless affirms that theatrical autobiographies are potentially important historical documents, as they provide historical evidence of cultural practices, attitudes and values. Theatrical autobiographies, moreover, according to Postlewait, “need to be approached as both documentary sources and performance pieces.”¹²⁸ It is this dual approach that will be adopted in our study.

Though obviously autobiography cannot be viewed as fact, since the subjects we are interested in are for the most part subjective – artistic goals, acting techniques, national and religious identity – when read critically, the subjective and biased approaches of the writers of the various autobiographies are indeed relevant. In the words of the French historian Marc Bloch, “in the last analysis it is human consciousness which is the subject-matter of history.”¹²⁹

Diana Taylor, in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*¹³⁰ differentiates between the archive of enduring material such as texts, documents, and buildings, and the repertoire, which consists of more ephemeral sources, such as performance. She maintains that both sources must be addressed when researching theater. Rikard Hoogland writes that theatrical autobiography straddles both categories and forms a link between them. “The autobiographies make it possible to get in contact with the writers’ performed embodiment.”¹³¹ If it is no longer possible to actually view the performances of the great Yiddish actors of the Golden Age of Yiddish theater in America, we can recapture something of what those performances were like by examining the actors’ last remaining recorded performances – their autobiographies.

The academic study of drama emphasized the texts of the plays at the expense of performance well into the twentieth century.¹³² The first movement toward change came in 1869, when Louis Leclercq examined the conditions and methods of seventeenth-century

¹²⁸ Postlewait, “Theatre Autobiographies,” 164.

¹²⁹ Mark Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 151.

¹³⁰ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹³¹ Rikard Hoogland, “What Do Theatre Autobiographies Conceal?” *Nordic Theatre Studies*, vol. 29, No. 1, 67-68, 79.

¹³² R.W. Vince, “Theatre History as an Academic Discipline,” in *Interpreting the Theatrical Past*, 3.

theater rather than its dramatic literature.¹³³ In the early twentieth century, Max Herrman in Berlin promoted the historical study of theatrical practice. His approach was championed in the United States by A.M. Nagler. Both Herrman and Nagler based their research primarily on archival research and primary documentary evidence. They were followed in France by the foundation of la Société d'histoire du théâtre in 1932, in England by the Society for Theatre Research in 1948, and in the United States by the American Society for Theatre Research in 1956. The approach of all the above to writing theater history attempted to base itself on fact and not anything as subjective as autobiography. The staging of the plays as reflected in documentation of lighting, stage design, and theatrical architecture were central to their studies. But with time it became apparent that in the world of theater studies “the boundaries of the discipline tend to expand in direct ratio to the intensity of the efforts to define and confine it.”¹³⁴

In trying to understand the nature of Yiddish theater in its formative years through the autobiographies of its actors, I am zeroing in on aspects of performance unattainable through archives. Orality and performance have become increasingly important in the humanities over the past decades. In the field of linguistics, for example, the focus moved in the early twentieth century from the written to the spoken word.¹³⁵ Later, in musicology, performance practice gained importance alongside the analysis of written compositions.¹³⁶ In theater too, performance practice has become an important part of theater studies in recent years.¹³⁷ Thus,

¹³³ Louis Leclercq [Ludovic Cellar], *Les décors, les costumes et la mise en scène au XVII^e siècle, 1650-1780* (Paris, 1869). This direction was continued by Arthur Pougin in *Dictionnaire du théâtre* (1885) and Germain Bapst in *Essai sur l'histoire du théâtre* (1893). See R.W. Vince, “Theatre History as an Academic Discipline,” 6.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³⁵ Beginning with the publication in 1916 of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, with the collaboration of A. Riedlinger, translated into English by W. Baskin (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977).

¹³⁶ Thurston Dart, *The Interpretation of Music* (London and New York: Hutchinson's University Library, 1954), analyzed performance practice in music from the Middle Ages until the 18th century. Later, research extended to later periods of history up to the present day. See *Performance Practice*, 2 vols., eds. Howard Mayer Brown and Stanley Sadie (New York and London: Norton, 1989); John Butt, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹³⁷ *European Theatre Performance Practice, 1900 to the Present*, eds. Nadine Holdsworth and Geoff Willcocks (New York: Routledge, 2016); Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Re-enactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011). In traditional histories of the theater, performance practice may be referred to, but it is not usually the main focus. See *The Cambridge History of American Theater*, vol. 2 1870-1945, eds. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigsby (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

the focus of this dissertation on how the leading American Yiddish actors approached their performance practice mimics and advances the wider academic shift from the play to the performer. It also echoes the growing interest in autobiography in the academic world in recent years, as researchers come to terms with the subjective aspect that exists in any interpretation of history.¹³⁸



Jacob Adler



Sara Adler



Boris Thomashefsky



The Thomashefsky Project / Collection of Michael Tilsen Thomas

Bessie Thomashefsky

446-486, 514-536; Patti P. Gillespie and Kenneth Cameron, *Western Theatre: Revolution and Revival* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1984), 398-454.

¹³⁸ R.W. Vince, "Theatre History as an Academic Discipline," 12-13.

E. On Stage and Back Stage: Four Actor-Directors in the Limelight

The four actor-directors addressed in this research are representative of the wide range of personalities and approaches to theater found in the early New York Yiddish theater. In the following pages, I will provide an overview of their theatrical careers before I analyze their individual approaches to theater as revealed in their autobiographies. Dates, taken from Zalmen Zylbercweig's *Lexicon of Yiddish Theater*, B. Gorin's *History of Yiddish Theater*, and other sources, may not always be precise because of inaccuracies common in these sources but roughly correspond to the time of the events' actual occurrence.

Before proceeding, however, it is important to point out a pronounced gender discrepancy in the readily available source materials. While Zylbercweig wrote extensively about Boris Thomashefsky, and a full-length biography of Jacob Adler was written by his granddaughter, Lulla Rosenfeld,¹³⁹ the lives of Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler were not well documented. Zylbercweig dedicated 36 pages to Boris Thomashefsky¹⁴⁰ and 16 pages to Jacob Adler,¹⁴¹ but he dedicated only six pages to Bessie Thomashefsky,¹⁴² and a mere two pages to Sara Adler.¹⁴³ Alyssa Quint attributes this discrepancy between male and female actors to "the more socially precarious status of Yiddish stage actresses," who "were not venerated with the same enthusiasm as were their male counterparts."¹⁴⁴ Therefore, in the following overview of the four personalities' careers, I will, of necessity, rely on the autobiographies of Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler to a greater degree than I will on those of Boris Thomashefsky and Jacob Adler.

¹³⁹ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*.

¹⁴⁰ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 804-839.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., vol. 1, 13-28.

¹⁴² Ibid., vol. 2, 840-845.

¹⁴³ Ibid., vol. 1, 33-34. David Kessler, in comparison, received 114 pages dedicated to him in Zylbercweig's *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 4 (New York: Farlag Elisehva, 1963), 2689-2803.

¹⁴⁴ Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 161.

1. Jacob Adler (1855-1926)



Jacob Adler was born in Odessa in 1855 to a poor, traditional family versed in Russian culture and politics. He received very little formal education because of the family's poverty and his own wild, undisciplined nature. His lack of education disturbed him throughout his life, and he believed he would have been a better actor had he been well-educated.¹⁴⁵ He and his sister were the only surviving children of twelve siblings. As a young man, he worked as a copyist for a lawyer, notary, and judge. Later, he became overseer for the city's Department of Weights and Measures.

An avid fan of Russian theater in his youth, he sought to play a small role in a production of the Russian theater director Miloslavsky, with whom he was acquainted. Miloslavsky told Adler that as a Jew he could never achieve a high status on the Russian stage. Intent, nevertheless, on working in the theater, Adler wrote a letter to an old friend, Yisroel Rosenberg, who was then working in Goldfadn's newly founded troupe in Romania, asking him to bring the troupe to Odessa. In response to that letter, Yisroel Rosenberg and Yakov Spivakovsky came to Odessa, in 1879, without Goldfadn, intending to put together their own theatrical troupe there.

¹⁴⁵ Jacob Adler, "Mayn lebensbashraybung," *Der teater zhurnal* 2, Oct. 15, 1901, edited by B. Gorin; Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 5 – 9, 310.

Initially Adler joined the troupe but did not perform. Later, he began to play bit parts. During this period, he entered into a relationship with Sonya Oberlander, an actress from an acculturated Odessa Jewish family who acted in the troupe under the name of Sonya Michelson. When Goldfadn announced that he was arriving to perform in Odessa with a large company of actors, Rosenberg's company left for the provinces to avoid competition. It was in Kherson, a town outside Odessa, that Adler played his first major roles, both in plays by Goldfadn — Marcus in *Koldunya* and Guberman in *Brayndele Cossack*, opposite Sonya Oberlander. After being fired from his job in Odessa for performing on the road with the company, Adler began acting full-time and soon become a matinee idol.

Continuing to appear with Rosenberg's company in the provinces, while Goldfadn's company performed in Odessa, Jacob and Sonya were married on the stage of the theater in which they performed, in Poltava. A gala performance of *The Two Kuni Lemls* was planned for immediately after the ceremony, with the proceeds of the evening going to the young couple.¹⁴⁶

In his autobiography, Adler expresses his dissatisfaction with being merely a matinee idol. Intent upon becoming a serious, realistic actor, he received instruction in the art of acting from the drama critic of the *Yelisavetgradskaya Novosty*, a Jew named Lehrman.¹⁴⁷ Zylbercweig noted that the Yiddish theater's repertoire at the time was comprised almost entirely of musical theater, and since Adler did not sing well, he was forced to focus on his actual acting.¹⁴⁸

After the assassination of Alexander II in March 1881, when Adler's reputation had grown, he and Sonya, then married, joined Goldfadn's troupe, and toured the Pale of Settlement with them. Rejoining Rosenberg's troupe in the fall of 1881, Adler performed in *Uriel Acosta* for the first time, in Lodz. His performance was a triumph, and it would become one of his signature roles. A crisis in Rosenberg's troupe brought Adler back to Odessa, where he performed for a short time in Shaykevitch's company, following which he formed his own company together with his wife and Keni Liptzin, then known as Keni Sonyes, who had joined

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 15, 67-70, 94; Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 15.

¹⁴⁷ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Mar. 30, 1917, 5; April 5, 1917, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 132-134; Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 82-84. Adler mistakenly called the critic Lerner. In *Bright Star of Exile*, Rosenberg asserts that his name was actually Lehrman.

¹⁴⁸ Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 17.

Rosenberg's troupe in the provinces back in 1880.¹⁴⁹ This was a turbulent period in Jewish history, marked by pogroms which forced the company to leave both Yelisavetgrad and later Niezhin, moving on to Zhitomir, where they performed with the Gartenstein-Spivakovsky troupe, and then to Rostov, where they appeared in a Russian theater troupe's production of *Boris Godunov*.¹⁵⁰

After performing in Leyzer Zuckerman's company in Dvinsk, Jacob and Sonya joined up again with Rosenberg. But the ban on Yiddish theater proclaimed by Czar Alexander III on August 7, 1883 drove the troupe to a decision to emigrate to London. At this point, the comic singer Yisroel Grodner and his wife Annette joined the company and as a result, Rosenberg, whose specialty was also comic roles, left it. Adler and the rest of the company arrived in London in December 1883.¹⁵¹

The troupe arrived in the Jewish slum of Whitechapel. They were looked down upon by the wealthy West End Jews who opposed the use of the Yiddish language, and were supported by the theater lovers among the East End immigrants from Eastern Europe. Among the company's first productions was *The Odessa Beggar*, a Yiddish adaptation of Felix Pyat's *The Ragpicker of Paris*. This was Adler's first character role as an elderly beggar, and in it he discovered new dimensions in his acting abilities. He continued to play the role throughout his career. Two months later, the troupe rented a theater in Holborn and presented *Uriel Acosta*, which was attended both by the son of the Chief Rabbi of England, a prominent relative of Adler's named Doctor Hermann Adler, who became Chief Rabbi himself a few years later, and by a member of the Rothschild family.¹⁵²

While Zylbercweig did not elaborate upon Adler's years in London, Adler himself presented these years as milestones, both in his own development as an artist and in the development of Yiddish stagecraft, despite abject poverty and very poor working conditions.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 117-145.

¹⁵⁰ Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 17.

¹⁵¹ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 146-150, 160. Zylbercweig wrote that they emigrated in 1882, but this is obviously a mistake, as the decree on Yiddish theater was not until Sept. 1883. See Zylbercweig vol. 1, 17. Later, Grodner and Adler's ways parted, though they were reunited shortly before the early deaths of both Grodners. See Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 177-179, 188.

¹⁵² Ibid., 169-171. Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 30, 1925, 14; April 15, 1925, 15; April 18, 1925, 6.

¹⁵³ Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 17; Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 20, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 249. He wrote of his London years at great length in *Di naye varhayt* between Mar.28, 1925 and July 11, 1925.

Lulla Rosenfeld, in her biography of Adler, followed Adler's narrative, speaking of his evolution there into a great actor, beloved by the public.¹⁵⁴ Among the important plays he first presented in London were Goldfaden's *Dr. Almasado* and Schiller's *The Robbers*.¹⁵⁵ After playing in low-class clubs in Whitechapel for several years, Adler finally had a music-hall-type theater built for him on Prince's Street, known as the Prince's Club. Many important actors of the Yiddish theater passed through Adler's theater on Prince's Street, including Sophie Karp, Zigmund Mogulesco, David Kessler and Abba Schoengold.

Tragedy struck Adler at the end of his years in London. His eldest daughter, Rivka, died of croup, followed, in 1885, by Sonya's death at the age of twenty-seven, shortly after giving birth to a son, Abram. Soon after his wife's death, Adler married Dina Shtettin (later Dina Feinman), a young actress from a very Orthodox family with whom he had had an affair and whose father felt disgraced and outraged.¹⁵⁶

When in the winter of 1887 a false fire scare at the Prince's Club, in which seventeen people were trampled to death, caused the theater to close, Adler sailed for America with some of his actors in February of 1887.¹⁵⁷ Given the cold shoulder by New York actors afraid of competition, he took his troupe to Chicago. After they played a few months in Chicago, the small audience had seen all their repertory and the troupe fell apart. Unwanted by the two Yiddish companies in New York, Adler returned to London in the fall of 1887, and then took his second wife, Dina Shtettin, to Warsaw, where he played in two plays by Shomer and in *The Odessa Beggar* and *Uriel Acosta*. From there they brought the troupe to Lodz and Lemberg.¹⁵⁸

His fame grew, and in 1889, Moyshe Heimowitz, known in America as Maurice Heine,¹⁵⁹ and Mogulesco brought him back to America. His debut in New York in *The Odessa Beggar* was a failure. The audience expected a tragedy and didn't understand the comic tone of the play. His second appearance in *Under the Protection of Sir Moses Montefiore* was also a failure. Only after appearing in a role that did not conceal his good looks, in *Moyshеле Soldat*, an adaptation

¹⁵⁴ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 171-172. We will later see that Sara Adler presented Adler's experience in London of 1884 as degrading. See Chapter One, Section D.

¹⁵⁵ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 2, 1925, 14; May 23, 1925, 5; May 28, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 272, 276.

¹⁵⁶ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 184-187, 191-197.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 199-204. Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 18, wrote that he arrived in New York in March 1887.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁵⁹ I will use his two names interchangeably.

by Yisroel Grodner of a German melodrama,¹⁶⁰ did he succeed with the audience. He played for Heine at the Thalia Theater until the spring of 1890, when a financial dispute with Heine led Adler to leave the company and join Boris Thomashefsky in Philadelphia. Adler asked Thomashefsky to allow Sara Heine (formerly Sonya Levitzky) to play opposite him in *Uriel Acosta*. After Philadelphia, Thomashefsky and Adler played together in Chicago, where they presented Hurwitz's *The Johnstown Flood*.¹⁶¹

In the summer of 1891, Adler married his third wife, Sara Heimowitz-Heine, after both had received divorces from their respective mates. Returning to New York in the fall of 1891, he played in Poole's Theater, renamed the Union Theater, starring in Zolotkev's *Samson the Great*, Scribe's *La Juive*, and *Quo Vadis*. He aspired to dispense with operettas and the old Yiddish repertoire and present only classics and modern European plays, playing opposite his new wife, a skilled dramatic actress.¹⁶²

That year, he met the Russian journalist Jacob Gordin, and Gordin wrote a play for him in Yiddish called *Siberia*. The play was considered realistic, and the dialogue was in colloquial Yiddish, something as yet unheard of on the Yiddish stage. The play was unsuccessful. Adler, who believed in Gordin, presented another play of his, called *Two Worlds*, which was also unsuccessful. Committed to realism and believing in Jacob Gordin, Adler proclaimed that his company would play "only beautiful musical operas and dramas giving truthful and serious portrayals of life."¹⁶³ This proclamation and Adler's commitment to Gordin caused David Kessler, Mogulesco, and other actors in the company to leave his company and join that of Hurwitz at the National Theatre.

Re-forming his company, Adler presented Gordin's *The Jewish King Lear* (1892), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which featured a rich Jewish merchant as the hero. The play was a great success, both critically and popularly. It brought the Russian Jewish intelligentsia to the Yiddish theater and remained in Adler's repertoire for almost thirty

¹⁶⁰ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 29, 1925, 5. Adler discussed this play at length there.

¹⁶¹ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 243-250. Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 19.

¹⁶² Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 243-250, 254-255. According to Zylbercweig, after appearing with Thomashefsky out-of-town, he appeared in a company with Mogulesco, Kessler and Feinman in historical operettas and melodramas. Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 19.

¹⁶³ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 264, quotes a notice Adler took out in the Yiddish press.

years.¹⁶⁴ He followed this with Gordin's *The Wild Man* (1893), in which he played an epileptic semi-idiot. The elderly Orthodox merchant of *The Jewish King Lear* and the epileptic son of *The Wild Man* were not the traditional romantic leads usually played by the stars of the Yiddish theater. These non-glamorous roles enabled Adler to display his diversity and his acting ability. After playing *The Jewish King Lear*, Adler decided to take on real Shakespeare. In 1893, he reunited with David Kessler and they alternated in the roles of Othello and Iago in Moyshe Zeifert's translation of *Othello*.¹⁶⁵

In 1894 and 1895, Adler acted in more plays by Gordin, including *The Brothers Luria*, *The Jewish Priest*, and *The Russian Jew in America*. They were not financial successes but they helped seal Adler's reputation, according to Zylbercweig, as the greatest actor on the Yiddish stage.¹⁶⁶

Adler's lack of financial success drove him to rejoin forces with David Kessler at the Windsor Theater. But with their classical repertory, Adler and Kessler could not sell enough tickets to turn a profit. Adler decided to take Thomashefsky in as an additional partner, thinking that his popular approach to theater would yield a greater profit. This three-way partnership lasted only three weeks, after which Kessler left the company, but the partnership between Adler and Thomashefsky continued until 1901. At the time, they were also neighbors in the same building on 85 East Tenth Street. Though they were partners in the theater, during this period they seldom appeared together on stage.¹⁶⁷ Adler generally appeared in plays by Gordin and Kobrin, including Kobrin's *Mina* and Gordin's *Der Goen*.

In 1899, Thomashefsky and Adler moved to Miner's People's Theater, a more high-class venue in a better part of the Bowery, where Adler premiered with Leon Kobrin's *Sonya of East Broadway*, to which Adler himself added a fourth act, much to the dismay of Kobrin.¹⁶⁸ In 1901, the Miner's Theater production of *The Merchant of Venice* (called *Shylock*) featured Adler playing Shylock as a proud, intelligent patriarch. His interpretation of the role made such an impression that he was asked to repeat it in a Broadway production directed by Arthur Hopkins

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 259-267.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 268-274; Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, 77.

¹⁶⁶ Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 20.

¹⁶⁷ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 268-270, 274-277, 281.

¹⁶⁸ Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 21.

in 1903, in which all the actors spoke English and Adler alone spoke Yiddish. The production was presented on Broadway again in 1905.¹⁶⁹ The critic for the *New York Herald* wrote that Adler's performance was "that rare dramatic experience on Broadway, the coincidence of a great actor and a great play."¹⁷⁰

When Adler's wife, Sara, after having suffered many affairs on the part of her husband, had an affair with the Russian Jewish tenor Mikhail Medvedev and demanded a divorce, Adler became ill and unable to act. Soon afterwards, Sara, too, fell ill, developing tuberculosis. After her recovery, she spent some time with Medvedev in Europe, but in the end returned home to Adler and her children.¹⁷¹

In 1902, after recovering from his illness, Adler broke his contract with Thomashefsky. He then starred in Gordin's *The Tree of Knowledge*, after which he proceeded, in 1903, to direct Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*. The play was a resounding critical and popular success.¹⁷² *Theatre* magazine wrote of it that "the play was admirably performed, and the stage management little short of a revelation. Would that some of our managements, and our actors, too, made the pilgrimage to the Bowery to receive lessons from this gifted Jewish actor, who is unquestionably one of the great players of our time."¹⁷³ That year Adler also appeared in Libin's *Broken Hearts* and Gordin's *Solomon, the Wise*. In the fall of 1903 he directed Tolstoy's *Resurrection* to great acclaim. Later that season, in 1904, he presented Gordin's *The True Power* and in 1905, Gordin's *Der meturef (The Madman)*.¹⁷⁴

Between 1905 and 1908 almost a million immigrants came through Ellis Island. The new immigrants preferred light entertainment. The period which came to be referred to as "The Gordin Years" or "The First Golden Age of Yiddish Theater" in New York,¹⁷⁵ in which serious topical drama, realistically portrayed, characterized New York Yiddish theater, was over. Adler

¹⁶⁹ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 303-306.

¹⁷⁰ *New York Herald*, May 16, 1905, quoted by Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 306.

¹⁷¹ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 179-180.

¹⁷² Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 22; Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 286-291. See also Valleri J. Hohman, *Russian Culture and Theatrical Performance in America, 1891-1933* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 37.

¹⁷³ *Theatre*, November 1903, vol. 1, 8.

¹⁷⁴ Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 23.

¹⁷⁵ Some consider the first Golden Age to be 1892-1902. See Judith Thissen, "Reconsidering the Decline of the New York Yiddish Theatre in the Early 1900's," *Theatre Survey* 44:2, November 2003, 173.

too now had to present comedies and melodramas aimed at appealing to the masses in order to survive financially.¹⁷⁶

Alongside these productions, between 1906 and 1907, he presented Kobrin's *The Great Jew*, as well as Gordin's *Der fremder (The Stranger)* and *Elisha ben Avuya*, about a famous Talmudic heretic. Although the latter was one of his greatest roles, it was not initially successful. Only after Gordin's death, in 1909, when Adler presented it again, did it succeed. In 1907 he also starred in Sholem Aleichem's drama *Shmuel Pasternak*, which was not a financial success either. He ended his years at the Grand Theatre with Gordin's last play, *Dementia Americana*, in 1908.

In 1911, Adler tackled Tolstoy again, producing and starring in *The Living Corpse* (also known as *Redemption*), Tolstoy's posthumously published drama, translated by Leon Kobrin. It was his last great role. After that, he repeated past successes and acted in other directors' theaters in non-memorable plays that he himself would not have chosen and that he did not even mention in his autobiography.

In 1920, Adler suffered a stroke and became paralyzed from the waist down, but his mind and speech remained intact and he continued to perform, sitting in a chair, at yearly "farewell performances" and benefits.¹⁷⁷ He died in 1926. Jacob and Sara had separated a number of times over the years. Though they were estranged, they remained husband and wife until the end, and she nursed him during his years of illness.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Rosenfeld, *Bright Star of Exile*, 333.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 346-347.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 280, 312-313, 349.



Jacob Adler



**Jacob Adler as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*
Courtesy of the YIVO Library**

2. Boris Thomashefsky (1866-1939)



Boris Thomashefsky was born in 1866¹⁷⁹ in the village of Asitnyatshke, in the Kiev district of the Ukraine. Boris lived with his grandfather, a cantor in nearby Kaminka, between the ages of four and six or seven, singing in his choir. Boris's father also served as a cantor in a synagogue, but was clean-shaven and something of a dandy, associating with radical freethinkers.¹⁸⁰ After rejoining his parents, who had meanwhile moved to Kiev for a few years, at the age of eleven Thomashefsky joined the choir of the renowned cantor Nissan Belzer and

¹⁷⁹ This is the date according to the American Federal Census of 1910, <http://www.censusrecords.com/Search?FirstName=Boris&LastName=Thomashefsky&State=NewYork&CensusYear=1910>, accessed Sept. 17, 2015. This is also the date that appears in "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, <http://www.thomashefsky.org/timeline.html>, accessed Dec. 8, 2021. According to his autobiography, where he claimed he was thirteen when first performing in America in 1881, he was born in 1868 (Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns geshikhte*, 76). Various sources follow Thomashefsky's version of his birthdate, such as the IMDB website http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0859690/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm accessed June 15, 2015 and Zylbercweig, who wrote that he was 11 years old in 1879 (vol. 2, 804). In the first newspaper article of the series "Mayn bezukh in Eyrope," Thomashefsky wrote that he was eleven years old when he emigrated to America. This is almost certainly incorrect, and is probably an attempt by Thomashefsky to make himself younger at the time ("Mayn bezukh in Eyrope" *Forverts*, Sept. 21, 1913, 6). Later on, in the same series in the *Forverts* on Nov. 16, 1913, 4, he wrote as in his autobiography, that he was eleven when he went to sing in Nissan Belzer's choir, where he sang for two and a half years.

¹⁸⁰ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 804, "Boris Thomashefsky," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 4 (New York: Marstin Press, 1961), 17; Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns geshikhte*, 2, 19, 45-47.

lived with him in Berditchiv, until his family emigrated to America in 1881. In New York, he worked in a cigarette factory on the Lower East Side and sang in the choir of the Henry Street Synagogue.¹⁸¹ Through co-workers in the cigarette factory and with the aid of the president of the Henry Street Synagogue, Thomashefsky was involved in presenting what is commonly referred to as the first major public performance of Yiddish theater in America, in July, 1882 — Goldfadn's *The Sorceress* (*Di kishef-makherin*, also known as *Koldunye*).¹⁸² The first performance was a failure, but afterwards the company re-organized and at the end of 1882 began playing twice a week at the Old Bowery Garden. They presented plays by Goldfadn and Shomer, as well as original plays by a member of the troupe named Barsky. Thomashefsky's father, Pinchas, decided to enter the theater business. He rented the National Theater, and using Boris and his two daughters as actors, with support from other factory-workers-turned-actors, he catalyzed a split from the company playing at the Old Bowery Garden, and a new company was formed. The two companies could not both make a living. Pinchas Thomashefsky's company closed and that of the Old Bowery Garden emerged from the conflict greatly weakened.¹⁸³ When professional Yiddish actors arrived in New York in May of 1884, the Old Bowery Garden Company closed, and in 1885 Boris Thomashefsky reorganized the company, taking it to perform in Chicago.¹⁸⁴ In 1887, he brought the company to Baltimore, where they appeared in his own play, *Blood Libel* (*Aliles dam*) and other plays of their repertory.

¹⁸¹ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 804-805; "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, <http://www.thomashefsky.org/timeline.html>, accessed Dec. 6, 2021; "Boris Thomashefsky," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 4, 18.

¹⁸² Thomashefsky is largely responsible for creating this commonly held belief. The description of the events surrounding this performance, and Thomashefsky's part in it, vary depending on who tells the story. Thomashefsky's version is very far-fetched and self-aggrandizing (Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns geshikhte*, 72-86). "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, <http://www.thomashefsky.org/timeline.html>, accessed Dec. 6, 2021, and *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 4, 18 both basically follow Thomashefsky's narrative. Zylbercweig followed the example of B. Gorin, who after retelling Thomashefsky's version, wrote that he spoke to other actors who acted in that production of *Koldunye*, and their version of the story was "simpler and more prosaic." (Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 2, 23). Sandrow presents Thomashefsky's narrative but then casts doubt on its authenticity (Sandrow, 72-76). In any event, the performance, according to all accounts, was a failure. Moreover, Zylbercweig quoted B. Weinstein, who was an eyewitness, as saying that this was not even the first Yiddish performance in America — a performance of *Shmendrik* in 1881, which Thomashefsky did not appear in, preceded the performance of *Koldunye* of 1882 (Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 805-807).

¹⁸³ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*. vol. 2, 25-30.

¹⁸⁴ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 807-809, "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, <http://www.thomashefsky.org/timeline.html>, accessed Dec. 6, 2021; Sandrow, 76; Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 2, 30. Both Sandrow and Gorin wrote that the troupe from Russia arrived in New York in 1883, but because the ban on Yiddish theater began in Sept. of 1883, it was more likely that the date given by Zylbercweig, May 1884, is the correct one.

There he met fourteen-year-old Bessie Kaufman.¹⁸⁵ The company returned to Chicago, but without Thomashefsky, who remained in Baltimore and opened a Yiddish Dramatic Club where he taught some of the young Jews of Baltimore, including Bessie, to act in Yiddish plays. In 1888, he left Baltimore to perform with Spivakovsky in Boston. Later, Bessie joined with him and starred opposite him in Goldfadn's *Shulamis* at the Boston Music Hall.¹⁸⁶ Boris then put together a troupe in Philadelphia, consisting mostly of members of his own family. There he presented plays by his father, Pinchas – *Yankel Yungatsh* and *The Spanish Inquisition*, for which Boris wrote the music, as well as *Uriel Acosta* and an operetta of his own, *Rabbi Akiva and His Twenty-Four Thousand Students*.¹⁸⁷ Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky married in 1889. Thereafter, the couple joined Jacob Adler in Chicago and performed there with him and Sara Heine, later Sara Adler. Among the plays they presented there was Hurwitz's *The Johnstown Flood*. In this, as in his other productions, Thomashefsky displayed a love for extravaganza and showmanship.¹⁸⁸

Thomashefsky was known primarily for performing in historical operettas, which were popular with the public but frequently maligned by intellectuals and critics. Leaving Chicago to appear in the Romanian Opera House in New York, in the 1890-1891 season he appeared in Lateiner's *Golus Rusland* (The Exile in Russia) and *Ezra, or the Eternal Jew*, which Lateiner wrote specifically for him. In the 1891-1892 season, Thomashefsky appeared in Lateiner's *A Woman of Valor*. In Jan. 1892, he appeared in his first realistic drama, in Jacob Gordin's *The Pogrom in Russia*. In the 1892-1893 season, he left the Romanian Opera House company and moved to Maurice Heine's Thalia Theater, where he starred in Lateiner's *Alexander, the Crown Prince of*

¹⁸⁵ "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, <http://www.thomashefsky.org/timeline.html>, accessed Dec. 6, 2021.

¹⁸⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, *Forverts*, June 25, July 2, July 9, July 16, 1916; Dec. 3, Dec. 10, Dec. 17, Dec 24, 1916; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 29-68. Though details may differ in their two versions, they agree on these basic chain-of-events. The dates I have given, according to "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, fit both Boris's and Bessie's claims that she was fourteen when they met and fifteen when she starred in *Shulamis* in Boston. Boris's claim that he ran the Dramatic Club in Baltimore for two years is probably erroneous, as is the date 1887 that Zylbercweig gave for the performance of *Shulamis* in Boston (Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 810). In his 1937 version of the story, Boris told how Bessie ran away from Baltimore with him when he left. This is quite clearly a fabrication for dramatic and romantic effect. See Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns geshikhte*, 191.

¹⁸⁷ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 810-811.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 812. "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, <http://www.thomashefsky.org/timeline.html>. Accessed June 10, 2021.

Jerusalem, another historical operetta, which became one of his most famous and popular roles.¹⁸⁹ During this period, Thomashefsky became a great star of the Yiddish stage, frequently directing the plays in which he appeared. Stephanie Halpern wrote that “audiences, especially women, swooned over his curly black hair, dreamy eyes, and imposing stature.”¹⁹⁰ According to Abe Cahan, Thomashefsky –

was just perfect for historical operettas and Biblical stories, which were then at the height of their popularity on the Jewish stage. One could not imagine a more handsome Biblical prince. As a prince, he wore short, puffed breeches so that the women could admire the shapeliness of his legs. Thomashefsky had the most beautiful pair of legs on the Yiddish stage.¹⁹¹

B. Gorin wrote that Thomashefsky’s success, which was greater during this period than that of Adler and Kessler, was due not simply to his legs, but also to the way he played the heroes of Lateiner’s and Hurwitz’s historical operettas with his heart and soul, believing that he was displaying great artistry in his acting. Adler and Kessler also acted in similar roles, but the audience felt their disdain for the roles they were playing and did not enjoy being the object of the actors’ scorn.¹⁹²

Thomashefsky’s popularity among women also contributed to a long series of extra-marital affairs, which put a strain on his marriage.

Thomashefsky had two sides as an artist. Part of him was drawn to popular operetta and melodrama beloved by the masses, and part of him was attracted to what was considered more artistically challenging and elitist theater. Leon Kobrin, the playwright who collaborated with him many times during his career, called the two sides of him “Thomashefsky, the good-inclination” (“*Thomashefsky yeytser tov*”) and “Thomashefsky, the evil-inclination” (“*Thomashefsky yeytser hore*”).¹⁹³ He would swing from one pole to the other. The more ambitious artist in him hated hearing the populist showman being slighted. During the season of 1893-1894, in order to compete with Adler’s Windsor Theater, which was presenting *Othello*, he presented Zeifert’s translation/adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Soon after, he returned

¹⁸⁹ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 813.

¹⁹⁰ Stefanie Halpern, “Boris Thomashefsky, Matinee Idol of the Yiddish Stage,” *New York’s Yiddish Theater From the Bowery to Broadway*, ed. Edna Nahshon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 118.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., quote from Abraham Cahan, *The Education of Abraham Cahan* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969).

¹⁹² Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 2, 105-106. Kessler in particular would actually insult his audiences.

¹⁹³ Kobrin, vol. 2, 125 and throughout the section on Thomashefsky in his memoirs, 125-152.

to the historical operetta genre, first with Hurwitz's *Yifas toar or Bilam's Donkey*, and later in the season of 1894-1895, in Hurwitz's *Jonah, the Prophet*, and in Lateiner's *King and Builder*. Then he swung in the direction of the more sophisticated artist and later that season starred in Gutzkow's *Uriel Acosta*.¹⁹⁴ Returning to historical operetta, during the 1895-1896 season he appeared at the Windsor Theater in Hurwitz's *Kuzari*, Morris Rosenfeld's *The Last High Priest*, and Jacob Terr's *The Silver Anniversary*. He continued with this populist approach in 1896-1897 with Lateiner's *Yudele*, Feinman's *The Brave Soldier* and Goldfadn's *The Binding of Isaac*. Then, returning to more serious drama, that season he moved to the Thalia Theater, where he performed alongside Jacob Adler and David Kessler in Gordin's *The Jewish Priest*. After that, the three stars performed together in Gordin's *The Lithuanian Brothers Luria*. The three-way partnership lasted only a few weeks before ego problems broke it up.¹⁹⁵

Between 1897 and 1899 Thomashefsky performed in two more artistically ambitious productions at the Windsor Theater: Gordin's *Dovid'l meshoyrer* and Leon Kobrin's *Mina*, alongside Zolotarevsky's *The Yeshiva Student, or The Jewish Hamlet*. During the 1899-1900 season, he formed a partnership with Edelstein at the People's Theater, with he and Adler playing on alternate nights. He presented Gordin's *The Gaon (Der Goen)* and *The Jewish Ghetto*, followed by two more plays intended to appeal to the masses, *The Four Hundred Years* and *Little Gabriel*.

In 1901 Boris and his wife, Bessie, traveled to Europe. They appeared in Berlin in Lateiner's *David's Violin*. Shortly after the Thomashefskys returned to America, Adler left the People's Theater, and Thomashefsky remained manager with Edelstein, where he presented Shomer's *The Golden Land* and *The Jewish Immigrant*. Both were major successes. Thomashefsky was very wealthy at the time and he lived lavishly.

The season of 1901-1902 was dubbed "The Green Season" by Bessie Thomashefsky. Working as a couple, the Thomashefskys presented works that aimed for popular appeal with the word 'green' (as in "greenhorn") in the title: *The Green Girl*, *The Green Children*, *The Green Boy* and *The Green Wife, or the Jewish Yankee Doodle* – all financial successes.¹⁹⁶ It was

¹⁹⁴ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 813-814.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 814-815.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 815-816.

following this “green season” that Hutchins Hapgood published his book *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, where he described Boris Thomashefsky as –

a young man, fat, with curling black hair, languorous eyes, and a rather effeminate voice, who is thought very beautiful by the girls of the Ghetto. Thomashefsky has a face with no mimic capacity, and a temperament absolutely impervious to mood or feeling. But he picturesquely stands in the middle of the stage and declaims phlegmatically the role of the hero, and satisfies the “romantic” demand of the audience.¹⁹⁷

This is very similar to the description given by Leon Kobrin of the performances given by “Thomashefsky, the evil inclination,” which he described as being very stiff and lifeless with affected speech complete with rolling “r”s.¹⁹⁸ After criticizing Thomashefsky’s acting, Hapgood conceded that he was the Yiddish theater’s most popular actor, although in his opinion Adler was the best actor, aside from Mogulesco. Hapgood also admitted that when Thomashefsky played unsentimental characters, he was excellent.¹⁹⁹

The more artistically nuanced artist in Thomashefsky began to be displayed more steadily during the season following the very commercial “green” season. In 1902-1903 he appeared in Leon Kobrin’s *Lost Paradise*, a financial and critical success. Kobrin had originally offered the part to both Kessler and Adler, who had turned it down. Thomashefsky was his last choice, but Kobrin wrote ecstatically about his performance, calling it “the greatest artistic success in his career as an actor,” and claiming that he displayed a wide variety of intonation in it which “none more human were ever heard upon the Yiddish stage.” Encouraged by the admiration of the critics and the intelligentsia, Thomashefsky then entered into a period during which he emphasized his more artistically ambitious side and relegated the showman aiming for popular appeal to a less prominent place.²⁰⁰ He presented Goethe’s *Faust*, which was not successful, and then a Yiddishized version of Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, followed by Leon Kobrin’s *God and Trust*. In the 1903-1904 season he presented M. Goldberg’s

¹⁹⁷ Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 139-140. *Lost Paradise*, which marked the appearance of a more artistically mature Thomashefsky, premiered on Nov. 7, 1902, according to Zylbercweig (vol. 2, 816). Hapgood was probably responding to the 1901-1902 “green season” that preceded the publication of the book, or possibly to earlier productions, as the book was first published as separate articles in various magazines including the *Atlantic Monthly*. See Isadore S. Mayer, review of *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, by Hutchins Hapgood, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 4, June 1970, 545.

¹⁹⁸ Kobrin, vol. 2, 127, 130.

¹⁹⁹ Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 156-159.

²⁰⁰ Kobrin, vol. 2, 132-135; Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 816-817.

translation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, which was not commercially successful, a Yiddish adaptation of Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*, which also closed quickly, and three plays written or translated by Leon Kobrin: *The Blind Musician*, *The Two Sisters*, and Kobrin's translation of Israel Zangwill's *The Children of the Ghetto*. Kobrin wrote in his memoirs that during that period Thomashefsky often presented better plays than Adler or Kessler did in their theaters.²⁰¹

This artistically ambitious period in Thomashefsky's career continued in the 1906-1907 season with Osip Dymov's *Shma Yisroel* and Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, successful both critically and financially, and Sholem Aleichem's *Yiddish Daughters*, which failed at the box office. In the 1906-1907 season, he presented Libin's *The Dreamer* and Goldfadn's last play, the Zionist *Ben Ami*, based on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. In the 1908-1909 season he presented Molnar's *The Devil* and Gordin's last play *Dementia Americana*, which was not a popular success. His big success of that season was Jacob Terr's *The Jewish Soul*, a musical melodrama of a non-sophisticated nature with mass-audience appeal.

Following the failure of *Dementia Americana* and the success of *The Jewish Soul*, Thomashefsky was drawn back to his showman side that knew how to appeal to the masses, and in the 1909-1910 season he staged *Dos pinteke yid*, written by Moyshe Zeifert but credited to Thomashefsky. It played for twenty weeks and was the greatest popular success the Yiddish theater had known up until that time. Critical reception was less ecstatic. During that season and the next, he staged three operettas with music by Arnold Perlmutter – a Yiddish adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* called *The Beautiful American*, *The Polish Jew*, later performed on the Yiddish stage throughout Europe, and *The Village Girl*. During that period, alongside his popular operettas he continued to try to appeal to the more serious theatergoers with plays by Kobrin (*Womanly Love*, *The Storm of Life*), Libin (*Justice*) and Zolotarevsky (*The Second Wife*).

In 1911, he and Bessie Thomashefsky separated, as a result of the seriousness of Boris's affair with the soprano Regina Zuckerberg.

In the 1911-1912 season, he directed two plays in which Rudolph Schildkraut played the lead role. That same season, he starred in his own work, *The Soul of My People*, which was a

²⁰¹ Kobrin, vol. 2, 137; Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 2, 816 – 817.

great success both in America and on Yiddish stages throughout the world, and in Theodor Herzl's *The New Ghetto*.²⁰²

In the 1912-1913 season, the Adler-Thomashefsky National Theater was built specifically for staging Yiddish plays. Adler and Thomashefsky both presented their respective repertoires there. But their joint management of the theater lasted for one season only. For the length of that season, during the period that one of them performed onstage, the other took his company on the road. In May 1913, Thomashefsky traveled to Europe, appearing first in London, and later in Poland, Galicia and Russia.²⁰³ His performances were reviewed very positively by the important Yiddish intellectuals and critics Noah Prilutsky and Alexander Mukdoyni.²⁰⁴ Mukdoyni arranged for Thomashefsky to bring the Russian and Yiddish writer Osip Dymov back to America with him. During the 1913-1914 season, Thomashefsky directed and starred in two plays by Dymov – *The Eternal Wanderer* and *The Hired Bridegroom*, which later became well-known under the name *Yoshke the Musician (Yoshke Muzikant)*. Similar to what Leon Kobrin said of Thomashefsky's plays during the years 1902-1904, B. Gorin noted that his plays during the 1913-1914 season were of a superior artistic level to those presented by both Adler and Kessler.²⁰⁵ That season he also took a trip to Europe where he acted in London in *Hamlet*, *Dos Pintele Yid*, *The Soul of My People*, *The yeshive-bokher*, Goldfadn's *Ben Ami*, Kobrin's *Lost Paradise*, and Libin's *Justice*.²⁰⁶

In the 1914-1915 season Thomashefsky did another play by Dymov, *War*, and a play by Sholem Asch, *Our Belief*. Neither was successful. These failures threw him back in the direction of the popular crowd-pleaser, and he followed them with a series of productions aimed at the masses. The first was *The Green Millionaire*, a big hit which remained in his repertoire for a long time. Another popular presentation of that season was an operetta he wrote himself, *Dos Toyrele* (The Torah). Both these popular successes were presented at the National Theater, of which he had become the sole proprietor. Another presentation of that season was Zolotarevsky's operetta, *The Jewish Martyr in America*, about Leo Frank.

²⁰² Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 817-821.

²⁰³ This trip was written of extensively by Thomashefsky in the *Forverts* between Sept. 21, 1913, and Jan. 18, 1914.

²⁰⁴ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 823-824.

²⁰⁵ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 2, 213-214.

²⁰⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, "Mayn bezukh in Eyropa," *Forverts*, Sept. 21, 1913, 6; Sept. 28, 1913, 6.

In the 1916-1917 season, Thomashefsky presented another of his own operettas, *The Broken Violin*, with music by Joseph Rumshinsky. This production incorporated ballet in a musical for the first time in America. His collaboration with Rumshinsky continued over the next few years, in operettas and plays with music such as *Mazl tov*, *Yente Telebnde*, *Di khaznte* (*The Cantor's Wife*), *The Jolly Jews* and *The Old Song*,²⁰⁷ for which Thomashefsky wrote the librettos. Kobrin wrote that Thomashefsky's desire to be a writer as well as an actor-manager was his undoing as a serious artist because the plays he wrote, such as his collaborations with Rumshinsky, brought out the vulgar side of his creative talent which pandered to the masses. Following these self-made non-sophisticated operettas with more serious dramatic works such as Kobrin's *Back to His People* or Osip Dymov's *The Spirit of the City*, in 1917, his regular audience refused to accept him in such works, while the more sophisticated theatergoers had abandoned him, and so, according to Kobrin, the plays failed despite their artistic merit.²⁰⁸

During the 1920's, Thomashefsky continued to present operettas of his own writing. In 1920, he presented *The Musical Shtetl*, as well as *Parlor Floor and Basement*, with music composed by his children, Harry and Milton Thomashefsky. In 1922, he wrote and starred in *A Thousand and One Nights* and in a musical about Avrom Goldfadn called *The Golden Thread*, which he wrote himself.²⁰⁹ Overall, he wrote numerous plays in genres varying from operetta to comedy and drama, many of which were "adaptations" of plays written by others.²¹⁰ During this period, he was no longer always the principal actor in all the plays presented in his theater. During the 1920-1921 seasons, he presented plays in which Aaron Lebedeff or Rudolph Schildkraut was the principal actor. Kobrin wrote that in his later operettas, he often would appear onstage only toward the end.²¹¹

²⁰⁷ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 826-827.

²⁰⁸ Kobrin, vol. 2, 147-152; Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 826. Kobrin's analysis of Thomashefsky's career must be viewed within the framework of a collaborator's jealousies and the way Thomashefsky's career choices influenced Kobrin's own place on the Yiddish stage, when Thomashefsky's turn toward operetta of his own writing ended their long and fruitful collaboration.

²⁰⁹ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 827-828.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 835. On page 830, Zylbercweig brought an example of a play Thomashefsky claimed to have written, *Bar Mitzvah*, that brought an accusation of plagiarism against him by its real author, Louis Reingold, who claimed that Thomashefsky had added only a few songs and jokes. See also: *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 4, 18-20.

²¹¹ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 827-828; Kobrin, vol. 2, 147.

During the 1922-1923 season Thomashefsky lost the management of the National Theater following an illness, and from then on he spent much of his time traveling and appearing on the road outside the United States, including several months in South America in 1924, a brief trip to Europe in 1925, and several months in Toronto in 1925-1926.

For a time in 1924, he managed a Broadway theater on 44th Street which he called The Thomashefsky Broadway Yiddish Theater, the first Yiddish theater on Broadway. There he presented *The Odessa Jew*, together with Schildkraut, and a comedy, *Auction Pinochle*, with the German actor Adolph Philip. He also brought the Vilna Troupe from London to appear on the New York stage for the first time. Thomashefsky was very active in bringing talented Jewish artists from Europe to the New York stage and was a champion of new talent on the Yiddish stage in general.

In 1925 Thomashefsky appeared in Loew's vaudeville theater in English in a sketch version of *The Green Millionaire*. Between 1926 and 1928, he appeared primarily in Philadelphia, where he presented the operettas *Bar Mitzvah* and *Chad Gadya*. During the 1928-1929 season, he founded a Yiddish theater troupe in California. Later that season, he toured Europe, playing in England, France, Poland, Romania and Czechoslovakia.

Returning to America, he presented his Zionist operetta *The Land of Israel (Erets Yisroel)* in Nov. 1930 at the Public Theater. In September 1931, he presented an English adaptation of his operetta *The Cantor's Wife*, under the name *The Singing Rabbi* at the Selwyn Theater. It was poorly received and closed after a few performances. Two years later, he tried opening an International Music Hall in the Bronx, but it too was a costly failure.²¹²

In 1935, Thomashefsky's son Harry directed him in a movie version of *Bar Mitzvah*. It was unsuccessful both critically and financially.²¹³ He published his memoirs in the *Forverts* from 1935-1937, and then in book form in 1937. The lack of success of his later ventures on both stage and screen left Thomashefsky destitute and he was forced to perform in a wine cellar in the Lower East Side prior to his death in 1939.²¹⁴

²¹² Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 830-831; J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light, Yiddish film Between Two Worlds* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 206.

²¹³ Ibid., 206-207; "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, <http://www.thomashefsky.org/timeline.html>. Accessed June 15, 2015.

²¹⁴ "Boris Thomashefsky," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 4, 22.



Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky



Boris Thomashefsky as The Hungarian Singer
Courtesy of YIVO Library

3. Sara Adler (1858-1953)



Sara Adler was born Sonya Levitzky in 1858, to a well-to-do Jewish family in Odessa.²¹⁵ Her father was a lumber merchant and the owner of a fashionable riding stable. Her mother was Russian speaking, endowed with little Jewish education but with strong religious feelings. Sara grew up in a Russian-speaking environment and attended a private Odessa boarding school. She enrolled in the Odessa Conservatory of Music at sixteen, where she studied singing.²¹⁶ Although she had little knowledge of Yiddish, she joined the Yiddish acting company formed by writer Nahum Meir Shaikevich, commonly known as “Shomer,” in approximately 1881.²¹⁷ At first she sang songs in Russian between acts, but she soon learned Yiddish and

²¹⁵ This is her birth year according to “Sara Adler,” *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sara-Adler>, accessed Dec. 21, 2021; “Sara Adler,” *Prabook*, <https://prabook.com/web/sara.adler/3764727>, accessed Dec. 21, 2021; “Sara Adler,” *Jewish Women’s Archive Encyclopedia*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/adler-sara>, accessed March 8, 2022, and other sources. She did not mention the year of her birth in her autobiography, but it would appear from her autobiography to be seven or eight years later. See footnote 217 below.

²¹⁶ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, July 1, 1937, 7; “Sara Adler,” *Britannica*; “Sara Adler,” *Prabook*.

²¹⁷ See Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*. vol. 2. 234. In her autobiography she wrote that she was fifteen when she joined Shomer’s troupe. This is highly unlikely. If indeed, she was born in 1858, as most sources cite, she would have been 15 in 1873 or 1874. The first Yiddish theater troupe was only founded by Goldfajn in 1876. Even if she was born in 1860, as suggested by “Sara Adler” *American National Biography*,

began acting. In Shomer's troupe she met two men who greatly influenced her life – the director Berger with whom she studied acting and the company's manager, Moyshe Heimowitz, who later became her first husband.²¹⁸

Shomer left the troupe, but its members remained together and toured Southern Russia, Poland and Latvia for two years, under the directorship of Heimowitz. Sara was known then primarily as a light soprano performing in operettas. While on tour with the company, she married Heimowitz. According to Zylbercwieg, while in the troupe, she studied acting in Odessa with the German stage director Gritzkopf.²¹⁹ Following the ban on Yiddish Theater in Russia in 1883, the troupe emigrated to America via London in 1884. It was in London, en route to America, that Sara's path first crossed that of Jacob Adler. She saw him perform in *Uriel Acosta*, and he attended a performance of hers in the title role in Goldfadn's *Shulamis*.²²⁰

Arriving in America, her husband's troupe performed at a concert hall called Turn Hall on Fourth St. between Second and Third Ave. for approximately a month, in a repertoire consisting of Shomer, Goldfadn and Lateiner. She played the female lead, mostly in historical operettas. She refers to herself during this period as a "soubrette," a light soprano performing in comic operetta, as opposed to the "prima donna" who performs in dramatic opera, or the dramatic actress who performs in non-musical roles.²²¹

After finishing their term at Turn Hall, the troupe rented the Oriental Theater on the Bowery for the next three years. There they premiered with Shomer's *The Penitent*, with Sara in

<https://www.anb.org/search?q0=Adler%2C+Sara+%281860%3F%E2%80%93April+1953%29%2C+actress>, accessed Dec. 21 2012, she would have been fifteen in 1875, when there was certainly no Yiddish theater in Odessa. According to Gorin, Shomer's troupe was formed in 1881, when Sara was 23 or 21. Probably, like Boris Thomashefsky, she misrepresented her age in her autobiography in order to make herself younger. Arthur Miller told an amusing story about Sara Adler's reluctance to reveal her age in her later years. See "All Mothers Are Not Created Equal Part II: On Stella's Mother with a Word from Arthur Miller" *Stella Adler: A Life in Art*, <https://stellaadleralifeinart.wordpress.com/2013/05/01/all-mothers-are-not-created-equal-part-ii-on-stellas-mother-with-a-word-from-arthur-miller/>, accessed June 16, 2022.

²¹⁸ Zylbercwieg, vol. 1, 33; Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, July 8, 1937, 9; July 13, 1937, 5.

²¹⁹ Zylbercwieg, vol. 1, 33; Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* vol. 1, 234; "Sara Adler," *Prabook*. Her studies with Gritzkopf are also mentioned in "Sara Adler," *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/adler-sara>, accessed Dec. 23, 2021. Sara didn't mention him in her autobiography.

²²⁰ "Sara Adler," *Brittanica*; Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Nov. 9, 1937, 5; Nov. 16, 1937, 5.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, Nov. 30, 1937, 3; Dec. 2, 1937, 8; Mar. 19, 1938, 8. Outside the Yiddish theater, the term "soubrette" is usually used for an actress or singer playing supporting roles, often a coquettish maid. See Merriam-Webster dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/soubrette>, accessed Dec. 23, 2021. In Yiddish theater jargon it is used for a female role in comic operetta, even in a leading role.

the female lead and Moyshe Silberman in the male lead. They simultaneously continued playing the Shomer-Goldfadn-Lateiner repertoire. An important role of Sara's during that period was in Shomer's *The Orphans*.²²² During their first seasons, attendance was poor, but with time, they built up an audience that included wealthy Jews who came from uptown to see them perform.

During the troupe's third season in New York, competition arrived from Europe – actors like David Kessler, Sigmund Mogulesco, Maurice (Moyshe) Finkel and Sigmund Feinman. Two competing companies began performing at the Romanian Opera House and at Poole's Theater. During this season, Sara and Moyshe Heimowitz divorced, after having two children together. Sara left the Oriental Theater and began to perform alongside Finkel, Feinman and Mogulesco in their company.²²³

In 1890, while appearing in *Shulamis* at Poole's Theater, she was visited by Jacob Adler, who soon proposed to her, maintaining that she was meant to be a great dramatic actress and would be able to fulfill that destiny by his side. The engaged couple appeared together at Poole's Theater in *Uriel Acosta* to great success and acclaim, and so Sara began her career as a dramatic actress alongside Adler.²²⁴

The couple went to Chicago in 1890 to marry, since Sara and Heine were divorced only by religious law but not by civil law, and could legally be married in Chicago but not in New York. In Chicago, they performed alongside Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. Returning to New York in 1891, Sara joined Jacob Adler in his attempt to reform the Yiddish Theater of New York with the help of playwright Jacob Gordin. She appeared alongside him in Gordin's first play, *Siberia*, in 1891, and in 1892, she played Taybele opposite him in Gordin's *The Jewish King Lear*. In 1892, she also appeared alongside him in Gordin's *The Wild Man*.²²⁵

In general, when Sara appeared alongside Adler during those years, the lead role belonged to Adler, and Sara's role was secondary to his in importance. So it was with Gordin's *Shloymke, the Charlatan* in 1896, in which Adler and Kessler alternated in the lead role, and in

²²² Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Dec. 25, 1937, 10; Jan 11, 1938, 11; Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 33.

²²³ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Jan.13, 1938, 3; Feb. 5, 1938, 5; Feb. 24, 1938, 3; Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 33.

²²⁴ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Mar. 19, 1938, 8; Mar. 22, 1938, 3; Mar. 24, 1938, 3; April 7, 1938, 3.

²²⁵ Ibid., April 16, 1938, 5; April 21, 1938, 3; April 28, 1938; Aug. 13, 1938, 10; Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 404.

Dovidl meshoyrer (1899), in which Sara Adler played a supporting role. She did play the lead however, in Leon Kobrin's first play, *Mina*, in 1899.²²⁶

Around the turn of the century, Sara took a lover, Mikhail Medvedev, the Russian Jewish tenor. They made plans to leave for Russia together, but when Jacob fell ill as a result, Sara postponed her trip at the request of Gordin. Sara then developed tuberculosis and was sent to a sanitarium for nine months. After her recovery, she and Medvedev traveled to Italy, Switzerland, Berlin, and Russia. In Moscow, Sara appeared in a comedy by Anton Chekhov, *Medved* (*The Bear*). There she was offered a job in a Russian theater, on condition that she convert to Christianity. Unwilling to pay that price and determined to continue to act, she left Medvedev in Russia and returned to her family and the Yiddish theater in New York.²²⁷

Back in New York, she appeared alongside Adler in Dec. 1901 in *The Merchant of Venice* (as Portia to Adler's Shylock),²²⁸ and then in 1902 in Gordin's *The Tree of Knowledge*, followed by Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness*, translated by Gordin. The couple also appeared together in Libin's *Broken Hearts*. In 1903, Sara appeared in the role that is considered her greatest and which established her preeminence on the Yiddish stage, that of Katyusha Maslova, the servant abused by her master and later forced into prostitution, in Tolstoy's *Resurrection*.²²⁹ She continued to appear in it until she retired from the stage in 1928, not long after Adler's death in 1926. Her final performance onstage anywhere was of the third act of *Resurrection*, in which she appeared at a gala event celebrating her 50 years of performing onstage in March 1939.²³⁰

Between 1904 and 1907, Sara appeared alongside Jacob Adler in a series of plays by Gordin. In 1904 she played the role of Fanya Zarbis in Gordin's *The True Power*. In that play, Adler and Kessler alternated in the male lead. This was followed in 1905-1906 by Gordin's *The Stranger* (based on Tennyson's *Enoch Arden*), *The Madman* (*Der meturef*), and *Elisha ben Avuya*. In 1907, she received her second most important leading role, that of Bas-sheva in

²²⁶ Ibid., 34, 408, 415; Kobrin, vol. 2, 117-119.

²²⁷ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, May 24, 1938, 5 - Sept. 22, 1938, 3 (50 chapters). See above Introduction E1.

²²⁸ Joel B. Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, 79. Oddly, Berkowitz is the only one who mentions Sara playing Portia. This may be because the role was greatly cut, as Berkowitz points out, in order not to take the spotlight away from Adler's Shylock.

²²⁹ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Oct. 3, 1938, 3; Oct. 15, 1938, 11; Oct. 18, 1938, 3; Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 23, 25, 424; "Sara Adler," *Brittanica*. According to Gorin, *The Power of Darkness* was produced in 1905.

²³⁰ "Sara Adler," *Jewish Women's Archive*.

Gordin's *Without a Home*, the role most associated with her after that of Katyusha Maslova.²³¹ The role was of an immigrant woman who suffers and eventually goes mad when her husband and son adjust to life in America but she cannot. It expressed the feelings of many immigrants who felt misplaced in their adopted country. Sara Adler continued to appear in the role throughout her career, and in 1937, she directed and starred in a production of it for the last time.²³² Another major milestone in her career was Jacob Adler's production of *The Living Corpse*, which premiered on Nov. 3, 1911, and in which Sara Adler played the gypsy and Sofia.²³³

In 1909, Jacob Gordin, who had supplied the Adlers with much of their repertory since 1892, died. He had given Sara most of her important roles and had written *Without a Home* specifically for her.²³⁴ The Adlers continued to perform the Gordin repertory, advertising that "Jacob Gordin died and Jacob Gordin lives." Their repertory during the following years included Gordin's plays *The Jewish King Lear*, *The Wild Man*, *The Stranger*, *The Madman (Der meturef)*, *Solomon the Wise*, *Elisha Ben Avuya*, *The Tree of Knowledge*, *The Kreutzer Sonata*²³⁵, *The Jewish Sappho*²³⁶, *The True Power* and *Without a Home*. Other staples in their repertory included Leon Kobrin's *Mina*, Libin's *Broken Hearts* and *God's Punishment*, Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, and Jacob Adler's old favorites from the days in Russia, *The Odessa Beggar* and *Uriel Acosta*.²³⁷ Of the many plays in their repertory, very few afforded Sara a real starring role other than *Resurrection*, *Mina*, and *Without a Home*. In some of the plays Sara participated in a supporting role, and others were performed without her. All the non-musical performances included Jacob Adler in a starring role. During the week of November 25, 1910, for instance, their company performed *Shylock (The Merchant of Venice)*, *The Odessa Beggar*, *The Jewish King Lear*, and *Resurrection*. Jacob Adler appeared in a starring role in all four productions; Sara appeared only

²³¹ Zylbercweig, Vol 1, 34, 427-432; Kaplan, 151.

²³² Sandrow, 155; Kaplan, 231.

²³³ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Nov. 3, 1911; Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 34.

²³⁴ Sandrow, 155, 161.

²³⁵ Gordin's *Kreutzer Sonata*, distinct from Tolstoy's which Sara Adler presented in 1912. Gordin's *Kreutzer Sonata* was written for Bertha Kalich in 1902. The Adlers appeared in it later. (*Forverts*, Oct 5, 1912).

²³⁶ Gordin's play of 1900, also written as a vehicle for Bertha Kalich. The Adlers included the play in their repertory in later years. (*Forverts*, Nov. 18, 1910).

²³⁷ List compiled from theatrical advertisements in *Forverts* between Nov. 1909 and Nov. 1910.

in the last one.²³⁸ Even when she was given star billing alongside him, only his picture would appear on the advertisement.²³⁹ Their daughter, Stella Adler, explained her predicament thus: “Because he [Jacob Adler] was such a great star, the plays often featured the star-ism of the man. And she knew that couldn’t go on. She needed plays of her own.”²⁴⁰

Sara’s aspirations to artistic independence and more starring roles led to her forming her own theatrical company at The Novelty Theatre in Brooklyn in 1912. According to Harold Clurman (her son-in-law between 1943 and 1960, the years when he was married to Stella Adler), Sara’s desire for artistic independence was driven by Jacob Adler’s infidelity:

When Jacob left her for a while and took to living with a servant-mistress, Sarah formed her own company, with Rudolf Schildkraut, a former Reinhardt star, one of the finest actors in my playgoing experience [...] as her leading man. She chose and directed the plays, she designed and sewed most of her own costumes, she polished and arranged the fruit sold in the theatre during intermission, and, of course, she acted the main female parts [...].²⁴¹

Whatever the actual motive, her first production in her own theater was an adaptation of Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata* by Moyshe Katz²⁴² which featured Sara and Schildkraut in the lead roles. It is interesting to note that precisely when, according to Clurman, her husband was living with a servant-mistress, she chose to present this work, which is very critical of carnal love and promotes sexual abstinence. In advertisements in the newspapers at the time, the theater is called The Sarah Adler Novelty Theater, with a subtitle “The only Yiddish Artistic Theater in the world.”²⁴³ She intended to create an Art Theater dedicated to high art. Possibly, she wished to emulate the Moscow Art Theater, which was already well known at the time.

Adler, Kessler and Keni Liptzin all had theaters of their own that season, and all were presenting serious works by Gordin in them. But they all found that for financial reasons they

²³⁸ Theatrical advertisements in *Forverts*, Nov. 25, 1910.

²³⁹ See for example, *Forverts*, Dec. 10, 1909.

²⁴⁰ Rosemary Malague, *An Actress Prepares: Women and ‘the Method’* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 76. Nina Warnke quotes an interview with Sara Adler in the *Forverts* in 1902, in which she complained that both Adler and Thomashefsky, then co-managing the People’s Theatre, made decisions that were best for themselves, and did not give the actresses performing with them any opportunities. She contended that even if she left the People’s Theater, the situation would not be any better elsewhere (Nina Warnke, “Women on the Immigrant Yiddish Stage: Paths to Stardom”). Ten years after this interview, Sara finally formed her own company.

²⁴¹ Harold Clurman, *All People Are Famous (instead of an autobiography)* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), 112.

²⁴² Not the Gordin play by that name in which Bertha Kalich had starred both in Yiddish in 1902 and in English on Broadway in 1906. Gordin’s play is suggested by Tolstoy’s novella but is not an actual adaptation.

²⁴³ See, for example, *Forverts*, Oct. 3, 1912, 2.

had to combine their more serious presentations with plays that would appeal more to the masses.

The Kreutzer Sonata ran for six weeks beginning on August 31, 1912. When business slackened, beginning in early October, Sara added popular successes from her repertoire, such as Libin's *Broken Hearts* and *The Punishment of God*.²⁴⁴ She also added operettas to the program, though she did not appear in them: two operettas by Rumshinsky, *The Girl of the West* (libretto by Anshel Schorr based on the play by David Belasco)²⁴⁵ and *The Green Actor* (libretto Nakhum Rakov) as well as the old war horses, Goldfadn's *The Sorceress* and Lateiner's *David's Fiddle*. Regina Prager guest starred in Goldfadn's *Bar Kochba* and *Shulamis*, and in Hurwitz's *The Destruction of Kishinev*.²⁴⁶ Though Sara continued presenting *The Kreutzer Sonata* once a week until November, the advertisement in the newspaper no longer spoke of "The only Yiddish Artistic Theater in the world."²⁴⁷ She had discovered that she had to compromise on her aspiration to run an "art theater."

The second original production of the company was Leon Zolotkov's *Zalmen Troubadour*, with Rudolph Schildkraut in the lead role. Sara did not act in the play. It ran for only eleven performances over a period of three weeks in November, 1912. In December of that year, Sara Adler asked her friend Bessie Thomashefsky to guest star at her theater and to bring her own repertoire with her. Bessie performed her own repertoire successfully, but the plays she brought to the enterprise were far from the "art theater" that Sara had dreamed of forming. During the two months that Bessie performed there, Sara would occasionally take the stage for an evening, acting in one of her well-known parts in plays like *Without a Home* or *Resurrection*.²⁴⁸

In February 1913, the company presented another new work, *The Tragedy of a Woman*, written by Paulina Katzman especially for Sara Adler. Sara performed the play for two weeks.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ *Forverts*, Oct. 8, 1912, Nov. 15, 1912.

²⁴⁵ Belasco's play of 1905 was adapted into an opera with music by Puccini in 1910.

²⁴⁶ *Forverts*, Oct. 10, 1912.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1912.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Nov. 8, Nov. 15, Nov. 23, 1912; Jan. 31, 1913.

²⁴⁹ A play written by a woman was a rarity in the Yiddish theater, as well as in the American and European theaters of the times. Rosemary Malague compares Sara to Ibsen's Nora, claiming her unconventional marriage and professional ambitions demonstrated implicit feminist understanding.

The company ended the month of February with a guest star, Dana Weisman, starring in an operetta by Rumshinsky and Schorr, *The Sweet Girl*.²⁵⁰ This was the company's final production under Sara Adler's direction. In March 1913, The Sara Adler Novelty Theatre closed its doors. Sara had run the theater and its company for six months. Members of the theatrical company she had established included Abraham Fishkind, Mendel Teplitzky, Jacob Ben-Ami and Sam Kestin.

In her autobiography, Sara claims that members of Adler's family, possibly Adler himself, had tried to sabotage her performances at the Novelty Theater in order to entice her back to acting alongside Adler. Be that as it may, she returned to performing alongside Adler, in Abraham Shomer's *The Yellow Passport*²⁵¹ at Adler's Dewey Theater. Soon afterward they resumed their old repertoire together at the Adler-Thomashefsky National Theater.²⁵²

Stella Adler wrote of her mother:

She needed plays of her own. That made her go to Europe and play her plays while he was playing his here. They were independent in their theatrical lives after awhile. She would not be a part of his theater life. She needed to have complete control over her own theatrical life.²⁵³

Sara performed in Europe without Adler and mentions performing without Adler in a Russian-language theater troupe that traveled from coast to coast in America during her mid-life, and even sang in Ukrainian operettas.²⁵⁴ But, as we shall see, Sara's autobiography raises questions as to the degree to which she indeed reached independence, and the degree to which she remained dependent on Adler until he died. Though they separated several times, they continued living together until Jacob's death and continued appearing together on stage. Stella's view of her mother may have been somewhat colored by how she wanted to see her, or by whom her mother had desired to be.

Sara and Jacob had six children, all of whom acted in the theater, first in Yiddish and later in English: Frances (1892), Florence (1894?), Jay (1896), Julia (1899), Stella (1902), and

²⁵⁰ *Forverts*, Feb. 7, Feb. 14, 1913.

²⁵¹ Sara Adler calls him "the young Shomer" as opposed to Shaykevitch with whom she worked in Russia. Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Aug. 26, 1939, 7.

²⁵² See *Forverts*, April 2013- June 2013.

²⁵³ Malague, 76.

²⁵⁴ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Sept. 26, 1939, 6.

Luther (1903).²⁵⁵ Frances often got billing alongside her parents and starred opposite her father when her mother acted without him.²⁵⁶ Stella tells of acting with her mother, as a child, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.²⁵⁷ Four of the children traveled with their parents to London in 1919-1920 to perform onstage alongside them.²⁵⁸ Later, in the 1930's, Stella and Luther appeared in the Group Theater. Stella went on to become an internationally known acting teacher, and Luther, a well-known actor of stage and screen.



Sara Adler in *Resurrection*, Courtesy of YIVO Library

²⁵⁵ Adler Family Papers, *Center for Jewish History*, <https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/3/resources/34>, accessed Jan. 2, 2022; "Sara Adler," *Jewish Women's Archive*.

²⁵⁶ *Forverts*, Dec. 10, 1909; Oct. 28, 1910; Chana Pollack, *Frances Adler's Theatrical Heritage*, <https://forward.com/life/215082/frances-adler-s-theatrical-heritage/>, accessed Jan. 7, 2021.

²⁵⁷ Malague, 76. Other sources also cite Sara Adler's performance as Nora in *A Doll's House*, including Zylbercweig (vol. 1, 34) and "Sara Adler," *Jewish Women's Archive*. In "All Mothers Are Not Created Equal Part II: On Stella's Mother with a Word from Arthur Miller," *Stella Adler: A Life in Art*, the author cites that Jacob and Sara Adler starred in it together. I have been unable to discover when the performance took place. It is not mentioned in Sara's autobiography. Zylbercweig mentioned a performance of Gordin's adaptation of *A Doll's House* called *Nora* on Jan. 23, 1895, at a benefit for Gordin at Adler's theater (Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 407), but he listed no cast, and nor did the Yiddish newspapers of the times. Stella Adler was born in 1902, seven years later. The production she acted in was obviously not this one.

²⁵⁸ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Sept. 26, 1939, 6.

4. Bessie Thomashefsky (1873-1962)



Bessie Thomashefsky was born Bessie Baumfeld in 1873 in the village Tarashche in the Kiev province of Ukraine. Her family was traditional but not strictly Orthodox. Though her parents were connected to the Talner Rebbe, her father smoked on the Sabbath, which is forbidden by Jewish law, and he had nihilist leanings that caused him to have to flee Russia in 1878. At that point, the family emigrated to the United States, where they took the name Kaufman and eventually settled in Baltimore. Bessie had very little formal education. She was taught to read Yiddish by a friend. The family was quite poor, and Bessie worked as a child – first in factories and later selling fruit in the street.²⁵⁹

At fourteen, she fell in love with the theater and began attending the Academy of Music every Saturday, where she saw Edwin Booth, Mary Henderson, and Margaret Mather onstage. Her brother-in-law, Louis Levitzky, arranged for Boris Thomashefsky's amateur acting company to perform in Baltimore. Bessie went to the first performance and later met Boris

²⁵⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 14-22; “The Timeline,” *The Thomashefskys Official Website*; Zylbercweig, vol 2., 840.

Thomashefsky in her sister's home. When the company left Baltimore and Boris remained there, opening a Yiddish acting school, Bessie was one of his students. She appeared alongside him on stage and became infatuated with him. He encouraged her to pursue a career as an actress.²⁶⁰

When Boris left Baltimore to perform in Boston, he invited Bessie to appear alongside him in *Shulamis*. She was only fifteen, and her father refused to allow her to go, until Boris's father, Pinchas, promised to personally take care of her. Her father then agreed to let her go to Boston for a few days. The troupe rehearsed for two weeks and then appeared in *Shulamis* at the Boston Music Hall.²⁶¹

Afterwards, Bessie did not return to Baltimore as she had promised her parents but remained in Boston in Boris's troupe. Boris brought Goldfadn and a group of professional actors from New York to Boston, and they presented Goldfadn's *The Two Kuni-Leml*, with Bessie in the supporting role of Liebele. It was then that Bessie's personal relationship with Goldfadn began. Her next role was that of a man – Uriel Acosta's brother Ruvayn, alongside Max Karp as Uriel Acosta and Annette Finkel as Yehudis. Following a falling out with Annette Finkel, Boris left the company, and Bessie performed both *The Two Kuni Leml* and *Uriel Acosta* without him. After performing in both those plays, Bessie joined Boris in Philadelphia, where he had put together a new company with other members of his family. They presented a melodrama by Pinchas Thomashefsky called *Yankele Yungatsh* and an historical operetta by him for which Boris wrote the music, *The Spanish Inquisition*. They also presented *Uriel Acosta*, this time with Bessie in the role of Yehudis. While they were appearing in Philadelphia, Bessie received permission from her father to marry Boris, and they married in Philadelphia in 1889, when she was sixteen.²⁶²

The company then toured Baltimore, where Bessie, already pregnant, was reconciled with her parents.²⁶³ Returning to Philadelphia, they presented Goldfadn's *The Sorceress (Di kishef-makherin)* with Bessie in the leading role of Mirele, and an operetta with music by Boris, *Rabbi Akiva and his 24,000 Students*, with Bessie in a featured role. She did not always play lead

²⁶⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 23-42.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 53-69. Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 841.

²⁶² "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 70-91; Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 841.

²⁶³ She apparently was pregnant when they married, which may explain her father's sudden change of mind.

roles. Sometimes she played comic characters, such as the role of Pia, a funny old woman with a long nose in Lateiner's *Paternal Honor (Kibud Av)* whom she played the night before her first child, Esther, was born in 1899.²⁶⁴

In the summer of 1889, Jacob Adler and Sara Heine, as yet unmarried, appeared in Thomashefsky's theater in Philadelphia for a number of weeks. After they left for Chicago, they invited Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky to come appear with them in Chicago. The first play in which they all performed, in Chicago, was a retelling of the Purim story called *Ahasuerus, or Haman and Esther*. The leading roles went to Jacob Adler as Haman, Boris Thomashefsky as Mordechai, and Sara Heine as Esther. Bessie Thomashefsky played the supporting comic role of Haman's son, Vayzusu.²⁶⁵ When playing with the Adlers, not only Bessie was relegated to supporting roles, sometimes Boris was too. In *Samson and Delilah*, an operetta, Adler played Samson, Sara played Delilah, and Boris and Bessie both played Philistines.²⁶⁶

In the autumn of 1889, the Thomashefskys joined the Adlers in New York, where they all performed in a company at Poole's Theatre. Bessie's New York debut took place then, in the role of Vayzusu in *Ahasueurus, or Haman and Esther*.²⁶⁷ After a brief period in New York, they returned to Chicago, where they were joined by Mogulesco, Sigmund Feinman, and Yisroel and Sabina Weinblatt. Bessie acted alongside her idol, Mogulesco, in *The Polish Boy* and *The Coquettish Dames*, plays from Mogulesco's repertoire. They continued performing in Chicago, where they were again joined by the Adlers.²⁶⁸

During the 1890-1891 season, Boris was invited to perform in the Romanian Opera Company in New York, managed by Moyshe Finkel. Finkel wanted Boris to play the leading romantic roles that David Kessler, who had moved to the competing Thalia Theater, had previously played. The Romanian Opera Company had strong female lead performers – both Keni Liptzin and Sophie Karp, and so Bessie was assigned mostly supporting character roles,

²⁶⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 99-108. "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*. The Thomashefskys were both married and had their first child in 1899. In Bessie's autobiography the relative times of these two events were obscured, probably in order not to draw attention to her pre-marital pregnancy.

²⁶⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 133-142.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶⁷ As the *purim-shpil* can be viewed as the origin of Yiddish theater, variations on it were common in the Yiddish theater, during the 1880s and 1890s. See Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution," 24-25. See Introduction, Section A, above.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 157-165. Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 2, 841.

although Boris was quickly given leading roles. For example, in Lateiner's *A Woman of Valor*, Boris played the hero, a prince who disguises himself as a poor man, and Bessie played his mother.²⁶⁹

In the 1891-1892 season, Bessie appeared in the major role of Manitchka, a Jewish girl who falls in love with a gentile, in Jacob Gordin's second play, *The Pogrom in Russia*. The cast included Boris Thomashefsky, Max and Sophie Karp, Bina Abramovich and Moyshe Finkel. Gordin himself chose the cast. It was one of Bessie's most important roles with the Romanian Opera Company.²⁷⁰

In the 1892-1893 season, the Thomashefskys left the Romanian Opera House and rented the Thalia, where Boris starred in *Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem*, by Lateiner. The female lead was played by Sophie Karp. Bessie played Alexander's maid, Zilpa. Boris's performance aroused great enthusiasm among the female fans of Yiddish theater, and the subject of Boris's faithfulness to Bessie began to be an increasingly acute issue for her. At the Thalia, Bessie was in the comic department, meaning she played character roles, and would do comic routines in front of the curtain before the curtain rose on the dramatic parts of the play.²⁷¹

In the 1894-1895 season, she appeared as Sara Dvora in Gordin's *The Lithuanian Brothers Luria*, alongside Jacob and Sara Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, and David Kessler. During 1895, her daughter Esther died of diphtheria and her son, Harry, was born.²⁷²

The following season, Boris and Bessie moved to the Windsor Theater, where they appeared between the fall of 1895 and the spring of 1901. Many of the roles she played there were male characters, known in the theater world as "trouser roles": Isaac in Goldfaden's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Spinoza to Morris Morrison's *Uriel Acosta*, Pini in Gordin's *Dvoyrala Meyukheses*, and Beinishi in Zolotarevsky's *The Yeshiva Bokhur*, opposite Boris. Among the female roles she played during this period was Mina's daughter in Leon Kobrin's *Mina*, which starred Sara Adler, and a role Hurwitz wrote especially for her in *Kuzari*, one of Boris's great

²⁶⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 170-194.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 198-202.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 207-220.

²⁷² "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*.

successes.²⁷³ None of the above roles was a starring one for Bessie. It was during the years at the Windsor Theater that Bessie and Boris's second son, Milton (Mickey) was born, in 1897.²⁷⁴

In 1901, they moved to the People's Theater, where she succeeded Mogulesco in his popular role as Faytl Pavolye in Shomer's *The Immigrants*. It was during this period at the Windsor Theater that Bessie began to play starring roles and become a major box-office attraction in her own right. In the 1901-1902 season, the series of hit plays about immigrants ("greener") which she called their "green season" elevated her status from the role of popular character actress to that of leading lady. She had arrived in New York in 1890. It took her eleven years to establish herself as a star actress in that series of light comedies.²⁷⁵

"The Green Season" may have made Bessie a star among the patrons of the Yiddish theater, but it made the Thomashefskys an object of ridicule among the intelligentsia. In the following seasons, they tried to compensate by presenting more serious works, such as Leon Kobrin's *Two Sisters* and Isodore Zangwill's *The Children of the Ghetto*, both of which afforded Bessie major dramatic roles and critical approval.²⁷⁶

In 1904 Bessie gave birth to a son, whom she and Boris named Theodor Herzl, after the great Zionist leader who had died the night before the birth of their child.²⁷⁷ This choice of the name for their child is in the spirit of the strong nationalistic Jewish feelings expressed in many of the plays the Thomashefskys presented, such as Osip Dymov's *Shma Yisroel* (1907), in which Bessie played Chana, or Goldfadn's last play, *Ben Ami* (1907) in which she played the character Felikus.²⁷⁸ These were dramatic roles and not roles of the soubrette which she had been used to playing. Following Goldfadn's *Ben Ami*, she played a dramatic role in Hauptman's *The Weavers*. That same season, they also presented Libin's *The Dreamer*, with Bessie in a major dramatic role.

Shortly after presenting Goldfadn's *Ben Ami*, Boris brought over a prima donna from England, Regina Zuckerberg, to play the dramatic soprano roles in the company's operettas.

²⁷³ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 842-843.

²⁷⁴ "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*.

²⁷⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 265-268; Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 843; Warnke, "Women on the Immigrant Yiddish Stage: Paths to Stardom."

²⁷⁶ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 274.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 272; "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website*.

²⁷⁸ Zylbercweig, vol 2, 843.

Bessie could play the lead in comedies or dramas and soubrette roles in operetta but was not considered a proper prima donna. It was then that Boris's long-term affair with Regina Zuckerberg, which eventually broke up his and Bessie's marriage, began.²⁷⁹

In the 1908-1909 season, Bessie played three major dramatic roles: The title role in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, a major role in Gordin's last play *Dementia Americana*, and Lena in Avraham Shomer's *Aykele Mazik* opposite Rudolph Schildkraut. In the 1909-1910 season, her major new roles were as the lead in *Dos meydil fun vest*, a Yiddish version of David Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West*²⁸⁰, and opposite Boris as The Jewish American Beauty in *A Yiddish Yankee Doodle*.²⁸¹

Bessie's relationship with Boris continued to be troubled, as his affair with Regina Zuckerberg deepened. Bessie suffered a nervous breakdown which led to her leaving Boris and their home.²⁸² They separated in 1912.²⁸³ Bessie wrote about how she allowed her children to choose whether to stay with their father or with her. Harry and Ted chose to stay with Boris, and Mickey stayed with Bessie.²⁸⁴ During the 1911-1912 season, she continued appearing alongside Boris at the People's Theatre, though relatively infrequently. She stopped appearing with him in the 1912-1913 season, when he began to perform in the National Theatre.²⁸⁵

As we have seen, during the 1912-1913 season, after Bessie and Boris had separated, Sara Adler, herself separated from Jacob, invited Bessie to perform at the Novelty Theatre she was then managing in Brooklyn.²⁸⁶ For the first few weeks, Bessie acted in her own familiar repertory – *The Green Boy*, *The Green Girl*, *The Emigrants*, *The Two Kuni Leml*, *The Street Children*, *Chaim in America*, *Bowery Tramps*, *The Golden State*, and Zalmen Libin's *Justice*.²⁸⁷

²⁷⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 287, 290.

²⁸⁰ Zylbercweig, vol 2, 843; "Bessie Thomashefsky," *Jewish Women's Archive*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/thomashefsky-bessie>, accessed Jan. 16, 2022.

²⁸¹ "Yiddish Musical Theater in the United States," *Jewish Women's Archive*, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/yiddish-musical-theater-in-united-states>, accessed Jan. 17, 2022.

²⁸² Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebns-geshikhte*, Nov. 2, 1935, 5, 7.

²⁸³ In her first autobiography, she mentioned that Boris was acting in *Blind Love* during the period before their separation. He appeared in *Blind Love* between Dec. 1911 and Feb. 1912, according to the theatrical advertisements of the *Forverts*. See Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 301; *Forverts*, Dec. 8, 1911, Feb. 9, 1912. "Bessie Thomashefsky," *Jewish Women's Archive* states that they separated in 1911. "The Timeline," *The Thomashefskys Official Website* states that it was in 1911-1912.

²⁸⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebns-geshikhte*, Oct. 16, 1935, 4, 7.

²⁸⁵ On the basis of theatrical advertisements in the *Forverts* between Sept. 1911 and Dec. 1912.

²⁸⁶ See Introduction, Section E3, above.

²⁸⁷ *Forverts*, Nov. 28, 1912; Dec. 5, 1912; Dec. 13, 1912; Dec. 19, 1912, Dec. 26, 1912.

Then, she began to present a new play by Nakhum Rakov, *Khantshe in America*, a musical with music by Rumshinsky, whose score has been described as the first to bring American rhythm to the Yiddish stage.²⁸⁸ The play became a big hit and ran for the entire month of January 1913, and then continued on to the Bowery.²⁸⁹

In the 1913-1914 season, she appeared in her repertoire in the Prospect Theater in the Bronx. The next year she appeared at Jacob Adler's People's Theatre in the role of Penny Untrey in Rakov's *The Female Kingdom*, with music by Rumshinsky. In the 1915-1916 season, she herself took over the management of the People's Theatre, starring in Zolotarevsky's *The Price of Love*, in Moyshe Richter's *Suspicion*, and in Rakov's *Forbidden Fruit*. Besides managing the theater, she chose the repertory and directed the plays.

The following season, 1916-1917, she renamed the theater Bessie Thomashefsky's People's Theatre. She remained the manager of that theater until Sept. 1918, presenting plays such as Libin's *The Big Question* and *The Two Mothers*, Zolotarevsky's *Suzy Bren*, with music by Fridzel, Richter's *The Two Mothers-in-Law*, and Leon Kobrin's *The Doctor's Wives*, in which she played Minka, the maid.²⁹⁰

Though Bessie's venture into independence gave her much experience as a director of a company and manager of a theater, the plays she chose to present were generally light entertainment and not serious drama or even sophisticated comedy. After leaving the management of The People's Theater, she continued in this direction, with comedies and musical comedies such as Richter's *How Men Live* (1919), M. Goldberg's *The Happy Parisian* (1919) with music by Rumshinsky, and *Jenny Runs for Mayor* (1920), a musical comedy by J. Kornbluth with music by Joseph Brody. In the latter, she played the first woman candidate for mayor. This role is typical of the period after she separated from Boris, in which she played a number of liberated women. In Kobrin's *Doctor's Wives*, she played the role of Minka, the maid, an Eliza Doolittle-type character who, after being turned into a respectable lady, rejects her Henry Higgins. And the title character in Rakov's *Khantshe in America* is an immigrant girl who is

²⁸⁸ Ibid., Jan 10, 1913; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Encyclopedia*, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/thomashefsky-bessie>, accessed Jan. 18, 2022.

²⁸⁹ *Forverts* theatrical advertisements, Jan 1913 – Feb. 1913.

²⁹⁰ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 843-844.

fired from her factory job and then assumes a male identity in order to become the chauffeur for the factory owner who fired her.²⁹¹

The comic, wise-cracking, and self-mocking Jewesses, on occasion dressing as men, whom Bessie frequently played, appear to have served as role models for Fanny Brice, Molly Picon, and possibly Barbara Streisand.²⁹²

There were more serious productions that she appeared in, even during this later period, such as a Yiddish translation of Alexander Ostrovsky's *Dikarka (The Wild)* in 1919,²⁹³ but on the whole, these years were more typified by light comedies like Israel Rosenberg's *Berele Tramp* (1921) or Osip Dymov's *Lady Khaye Tsipe* (1922). In the 1920s Bessie played much in the provinces outside New York, also touring London in 1924 and Toronto in 1925. Another direction she turned to during these years was that of vaudeville, both on the Yiddish stage in 1923 and 1924, and on the English stage in 1927 and 1928. After the 1920s she rarely appeared onstage.²⁹⁴

Bessie was the first Yiddish actor to publish an autobiography; in 1916 she published a memoir in the Yiddish newspaper *Di varhayt*, which was actually written by Eliyahu Tenenholz, based on interviews with Bessie. In 1935, when nursing her son, Mickey, who had been shot and paralyzed in a lover's quarrel, she published her second autobiography, serialized in *Der tog*, which is more revealing in terms of her relationship with Boris and his many infidelities.

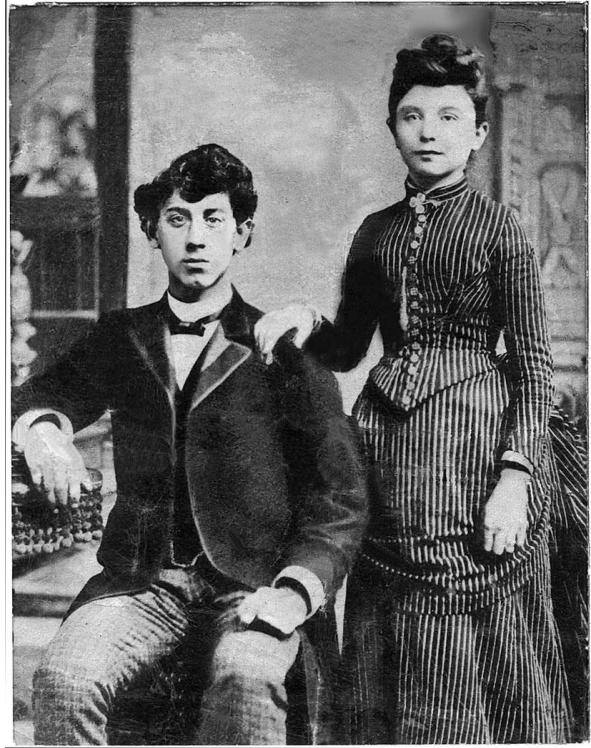
As opposed to Sara Adler, whose theatrical career completely independent of Jacob lasted only six months, Bessie achieved independence as an actress after separating from Boris. But like Sara Adler, she never divorced her husband and they remained married during the 27 years of their separation, from 1912 until Boris's death in 1939.

²⁹¹ Nahma Sandrow, ed., *Yiddish Plays for Reading and Performance*, translated by Nahma Sandrow (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2021), 305-311.

²⁹² "Bessie Thomashefsky," *Jewish Women's Archive*.

²⁹³ It is ironic that Bessie Thomashefsky appeared in an Ostrovsky play, whereas those great lovers of Russian realism, Jacob and Sara Adler, did not. Ostrovsky was the father of Russian realism in the theater as we will show in Chapter Two, 1A. The Adlers did appear in Gordin's adaptation of one of Ostrovsky's plays, *Shloymke, the Charlatan*. Another adaptation by Gordin of an Ostrovsky play was *Dvoyrala Meyukheses* in which Bessie Thomashefsky acted. See "Jacob Gordin," *Yiddish Leksikon*.

²⁹⁴ Zylbercweig, vol 2, 844-845.



Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky as a young married couple



Bessie Thomashefsky, Studio Portrait, Courtesy of YIVO Library

F. The Objectives of the Present Study

Modern-day theater is thought to be the medium of the playwright, as opposed to film, which is considered the medium of the director. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, very much like its American counterpart, Yiddish theater was primarily the medium of the actor. As we have noted, actors such as Jacob Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, and David Kessler not only chose their own repertory; they also directed themselves and the productions in which they starred, building the production around themselves. We have seen that Sara Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky acted similarly in the theaters they ran independently later in their careers. Actors were the reason the audience came to the theater – and they knew it. They encouraged their clagues, or *patriotn*, frequently gave long curtain speeches after the plays, and as we shall see, often ad-libbed their lines instead of following a definitive written text. Though efforts were made to change this practice, it persisted in the Yiddish theater, as if it were part of its DNA. Actors were the foundation of the Yiddish theater, and this study maintains that understanding them is the key to understanding that theater. It therefore follows that an important way of understanding who they were and how they approached Yiddish theater is to critically study the writings in which they presented the way they viewed themselves, or at least how they wanted to be perceived and remembered. To this day, the self-writings of the actors of the Yiddish stage have not been the focus of a scholarly work.²⁹⁵

Although I have chosen to focus on Jacob and Sara Adler, and Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, they were not the only important actors of the period in question, nor were they the only ones to write memoirs. David Kessler was an equally important leading man on the Yiddish stage at the time, and Sophie Karp, Bertha Kalich, and Keni Liptzin were equally important leading women. Kessler wrote a short autobiography²⁹⁶ and Kalich wrote a lengthier

²⁹⁵ Aside from the qualifying paper I wrote under the guidance of Prof. David Roskies, “Yiddish Theater Through the Eyes of Adler and Thomashefsky” (Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2015), of which this study is an expansion.

²⁹⁶ Serialized in *Der tog* in 1917 and translated into English in *Memoirs of the Yiddish Stage*, ed. Joseph Landis (New York: Queens College Press, 1984), 3-54. I have not included Kessler’s autobiography in this research because it is very limited in its scope, and contains no significant references to the central subjects of this research: acting and directing style, artistic aspirations, and Jewish identity and its relationship to his theater.

one.²⁹⁷ But I chose to focus on the Adlers and the Thomashefskys because together they covered the full spectrum of styles that existed in the Yiddish theater of their times. Furthermore, the fact that they were two married couples gives an added dimension to the analysis of their writings, because of the way in which each one presents his or her view of the same event, and because of the various gender issues that arise when comparing the writings of married couples. In addition, the close personal and professional relationships that existed between all four personalities create frequent cross-references between them. The combination of all the above makes them excellent subjects for a comparative study through their autobiographies.

The cumulative substantial body of life writing of these two couples, this thesis argues, yields significant insight into the approaches to theater, personalities, rivalries, influences, and conceptions of secular and religious identity that shaped American Yiddish theater. The questions this thesis will focus on will be:

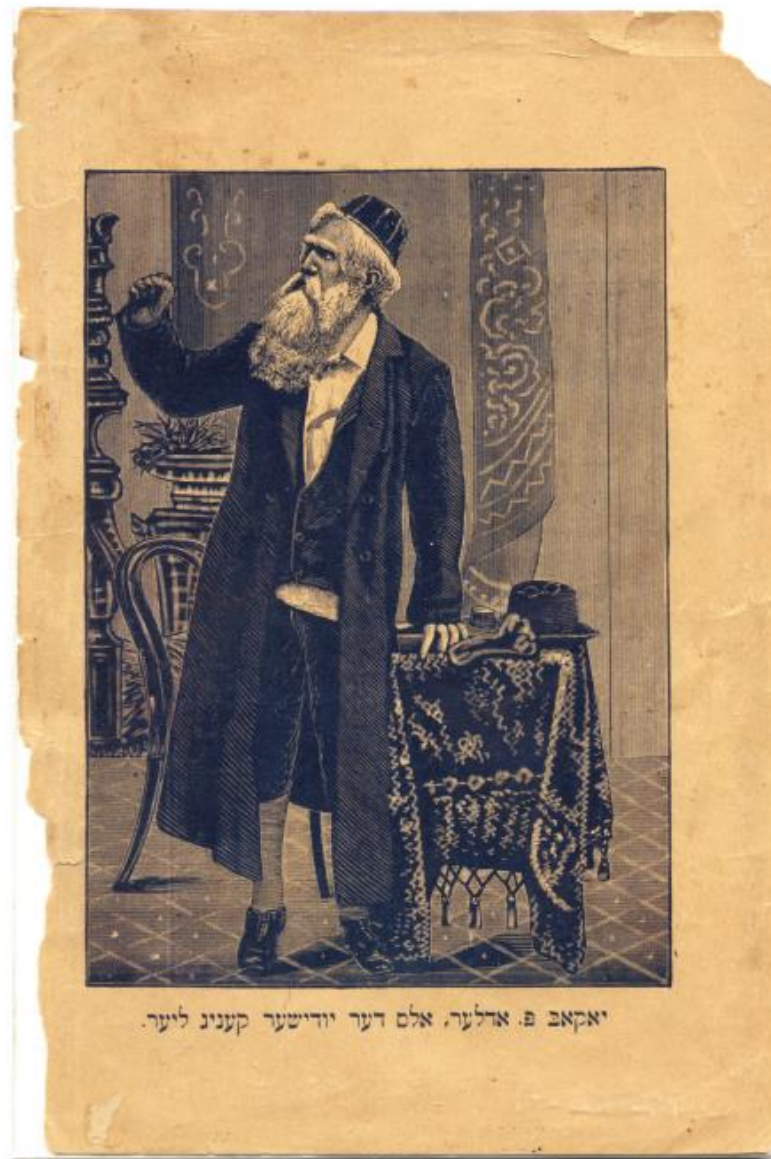
1. How do the various personalities in this study present the professional standards of the Yiddish theater during its formative years? How do those standards compare to those of other western theaters during that period and beforehand? The exploration of these questions will be the focus of Chapter One.
2. How do they describe their acting and directing techniques, and how do these relate to the larger history of acting and directing? The exploration of this question will be the focus of Chapter Two.
3. How do the various personalities present their artistic aspirations? How do these artistic aspirations grow out of each one's approach to acting and directing, his or her national and religious identity, and his or her specific approach to Yiddish theater?

In conjunction with the actors' presentations of their artistic aspirations, how did their very divergent views of traditional Judaism, religious praxis, and the meaning of being a modern-day Jew affect the theater they created? How do they present their national and religious identities, and how does their approach to the issue of the Jewishness of Yiddish theater resonate beyond

²⁹⁷ Bertha Kalich, *Mayn lebn, Der tog*, March 7, 1925 - Nov. 14, 1925. Kalich's autobiography may be a good subject for future research along the lines pursued in the present one. It was not included in this study primarily in order to maintain the symmetry formed by analyzing the memoirs of two married couples.

their own place in that theater, touching on questions of national and religious identity that accompanied that theater throughout its existence? These questions will be the focus of the various sections of Chapter Three.

I believe that the cumulative answer to all these questions will paint a well-balanced and detailed picture of the formative years of the Yiddish theater as seen in the eyes of its creators in America.



**Jacob Adler in *The Jewish King Lear*, Engraving
Courtesy of YIVO Library**

Chapter One: Artistic Standards and Practices Prevalent in Early Yiddish Theater

Introduction

The early years of Yiddish theater, in both Europe and New York, were described by all four actors as years in which the artistic standards were quite problematic. All the actors, to varying degrees, saw it as their responsibility to raise the standards of that theater, and to make it more professional. They related many stories that presented the Yiddish theater in a comic light and presented it as an unsophisticated theater-for-the-masses, requiring much devotion and hard work to effect any improvement.

It must be remembered that the autobiographies under study were written between 1914 and 1939, and usually described an earlier period, primarily between 1881 and 1910. Accepted performance practice in the theater continually undergoes changes throughout the generations. Theatrical norms that may seem unprofessional or unconventional to a contemporary audience should be understood in the context of American and European theater of the time, and of earlier times as well. Furthermore, the actors' attitudes may have been influenced by the prevalent tone among critics of the American Yiddish theater, who wrote for the progressive New York Yiddish newspapers, such as the *Arbeyter tsaytung*, the *Forverts*, and the *Abend blatt*. These newspapers had an agenda for the Yiddish theater that differed from that of the actors who catered to the tastes of the Jewish immigrant population. In this chapter, we will examine what the various actors said of the practices in the early days of Yiddish theater and then put those words in a historical context.

A. The Prompter

Boris Thomashefsky recounted a story that he set in the mid-1890s, when he acted in *Romeo and Juliet* opposite Sophie Karp in Philadelphia, after the two had played their respective parts in New York. Ms. Karp was entirely dependent on the prompter for her lines. During the balcony scene, in her debut in Philadelphia, she couldn't hear the prompter. Not

knowing what to say, he claimed that she began saying lines she remembered from *Shulamis*, *Alexander*, *Crown Prince of Jerusalem* and other plays. She was unintelligible. Thomashefsky related that he left the theater in the middle of her monologue and took a train to New York, where he was sick with fever for two weeks. Morris Finkel, the theater manager, got on stage and told the audience that Thomashefsky had been taken ill. That night, the company performed *Shulamis* instead of *Romeo and Juliet*.²⁹⁸

However preposterous and self-promoting this story may be, and however disparaging to Ms. Karp's professionalism, it is clear that in the Yiddish theater of that period actors did not always know their lines by heart, and relied heavily on a prompter to help them recite their parts. This is confirmed in the autobiographies of Jacob Adler, Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler. In her second autobiography Bessie Thomashefsky confirmed the common practice of relying on a prompter in the early American Yiddish theater:

[The actors] would often come on stage without knowing one word of the part and had to wait for the prompter to read them the part, screaming to them out loud. Often that also didn't help. On occasion, the prompter had to speak louder than the actor and the prompter's voice was heard screaming from his booth throughout the theater. Not only the actor but everyone in the audience could hear him. What the quality of such acting was, I need not tell you.²⁹⁹

Bessie Thomashefsky's autobiographies, particularly the second one, were especially bitter and sarcastic when referring to practices and standards in the New York Yiddish theater. She left the world of the Yiddish theater wounded and disillusioned. Many people she believed to be her friends turned their backs on her when she separated from her husband, Boris. She suffered much betrayal and hurt, and did not have much good to say about the world of the Yiddish theater. Despite her professed love for the Yiddish theater, as someone who described herself as having been "in love with the Yiddish theater before ever seeing it"³⁰⁰, the tone of bitterness and disillusion often overpowered that of love.

Sara Adler lacked that bitterness but painted a similar picture:

Unfortunately, on the Yiddish stage there are actors – among them very famous artists – who are too lazy to learn their lines. The Yiddish-American stage always suffered from this terribly. I say "Yiddish American" because I cannot recall Yiddish actors in the Old Country being so

²⁹⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 337-338.

²⁹⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 18, 1935, 5.

³⁰⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens geshikhte*, 28. See also *ibid.*, 205, "But I knew Gordin's contribution to the Yiddish theater and it is beloved to me, because the Yiddish stage is beloved and dear to me."

indifferent to their work as was the case in America. For the last few years I haven't acted and therefore I don't know where things stand at the present moment with studying roles. I am told that the situation has significantly improved in this sense.

Years ago [...] a significant amount of our actors would often get onstage and look the prompter in the eyes. If the prompter was hoarse or his enunciation wasn't sharp enough, one actor would grab another's monologue. When I remember those times, I wonder until today how the Yiddish public had enough patience to sit at a performance and not protest.

[...] if one or more of the actors doesn't know his lines, a mish-mosh takes place on stage. Not only does the acting of the lazy actor suffer but the actor whose attitude to the stage is serious also suffers. As well as he knows his role, he can't show his talents when another actor grabs his lines, or interrupts him before he finishes his monologue. And that is unavoidable when one or more actors come before the public totally or partially unprepared. The public sits in the theater and discerns trivial or often egregious errors. Worse is when a prompter must sit in a booth and read the lines. That would be unnecessary if every actor learnt his lines and knew when to begin and when to end.

As skillfully as the prompter may say the lines, one hears him in the theater, and not only in the front rows but even in the balcony. The true goal of acting in theater is to create an illusion in the audience, an impersonation. Acting onstage must, as far as possible, mirror real life. How can one speak of artistic achievement in drama, when in a booth up front a man whispers in a way that a significant part of the audience in the theater can hear what the actors are about to say?³⁰¹

Sara told a story that took place in 1916, about an actor who took over the important role of the king in Goldfaden's *Bar Kochba* when the actor who usually played the role took ill. He went onstage totally unprepared, never having studied the part at all, relying entirely on the prompter. This incident is indicative of the fact that relying entirely on a prompter the way Sophie Karp did in the mid 1890's was still a problem in the Yiddish theater twenty years later. Another fact evident from this anecdote is that the Yiddish theater of New York in 1916 did not use understudies. Sara wrote: "On the non-Jewish stage there are understudies who studied the part in case they had to play it. On the Yiddish stage there was no such thing. By us, the actor relied on the prompter."³⁰²

Sara Adler recalled that the actors in the early Russian Yiddish theater were more conscientious in learning their parts by heart and less dependent on the prompter than those of the American Yiddish stage. Jacob Adler painted a different picture. In a section of his autobiography subtitled "A war with a prompter who would not shut up,"³⁰³ when describing the role of the prompter in the early Russian Yiddish theater, he noted that "the entire success

³⁰¹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Jan. 4, 1938, 3.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 20, 1917, 3.

of a play once depended on the prompter. Because prompting a play was a great art. It was not possible for an actor to learn entire books by heart. Someone must read his lines aloud to the actor.” He praised their prompter, Rubele Weisman, for being intelligent, tactful, and skilled at his job. When he left them on the road to visit his family, in 1880, they were left like “the blind who have lost their leader.” The prompter who took his place would shout the lines louder than the actors and ruin the performance. According to Jacob Adler’s testimony, prompters in the early Russian Yiddish theater were totally necessary and crucial to the success of the play. Adler was not critical of the actors for relying on the prompter; he claimed it was impossible to learn the amount of text they were required to act by heart.

Later on, when Jacob and Sara Adler presented Tolstoy’s *Resurrection* in 1903, they wanted the play to be staged according to the standards of Russian realism and not like ordinary Yiddish theater. Jacob Adler said to his wife, Sara:

In this play, I don’t want a prompter. You and I and the other actors from the greatest to the smallest, will learn the parts by heart. The more rehearsals, the better. *Resurrection* must make a revolution on the Yiddish stage. It will be a performance that will surpass anything New York has seen.³⁰⁴

Having all the actors learn their parts by heart, in 1903, was revolutionary for the Yiddish stage of New York. Even Jacob and Sara Adler, the Odessa sophisticates, generally had no choice but to concede to the norms of the American Yiddish stage and work in an atmosphere in which actors did not know their parts but relied on a prompter. For their ‘baby,’ Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*, they insisted on a different norm, more like the theater in Odessa that they had grown up on. The actors would know their lines by heart. There would be more than a few rehearsals. Their theatrical dream would now come true.

The tradition of an actor relying on a prompter for his lines has a long pedigree. John Barnes, in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, wrote that during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, the prompter in European theaters “often read nearly the entire script aloud to the actors onstage.” He added that until well after 1900 casts frequently did not fully know their lines and blocking, and had to rely on a prompter.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁴ Ibid., Oct. 3, 1938, 3.

³⁰⁵ John Barnes, “Prompter,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance*, vol. 2, Dennis Kennedy, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1072.

Rehearsal time was an important factor affecting the extent to which actors memorized their lines. Until the populations of cities had reached a sufficient size to justify long runs of plays, theater troupes had to present many plays in a season in order to keep their audiences buying tickets. During the second half of the nineteenth century plays never received more than eight or nine rehearsals, and with such a limited period of rehearsal and bills that changed two or three times a week, actors would often not know their roles by heart. Only when the long run gradually became the norm, and when actors began to be paid for rehearsals, did rehearsal time increase greatly for the average play and the standard procedure became for actors to learn their parts by heart and not rely on a prompter.³⁰⁶ The Yiddish theater, which had to present new plays at a very fast rate in order to satisfy the demands of the relatively small Yiddish-speaking audience, often after only three or four rehearsals, did not act significantly differently from other Western theaters before the advent of the long run, and so actors had to rely on a prompter. This had not been the practice in the theaters of Odessa that Jacob and Sara Adler visited, or even in the Yiddish theater in Russia, according to Sara Adler, but it was certainly not unheard of in many professional theaters of the late nineteenth century. The practice described by the various actors of how Yiddish actors relied entirely on prompters for their lines certainly does not reflect positively on the professional standards of the Yiddish theater. But neither is it the terrible disgrace that Sara Adler and the Thomashefskys made of it.

B. Improvising and Ad-Libbing

During the early days of the Yiddish theater in America, plays were not always written in their entirety by the playwright. Bessie Thomashefsky recalled that Pinchas Thomashefsky, Boris's father, who managed their company in its early years, used to write plays in which he would leave the last four pages of an act blank, telling the actors to finish the act themselves. So they did with *The Spanish Inquisition*, which they performed in Philadelphia in 1889.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁶ Michael R. Booth, "Nineteenth Century Theatre," *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, John Russell Brown, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 331.

³⁰⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 85.

Sometimes, personal matters would be woven into a performance, unrelated to the play being performed. Bessie Thomashefsky told a story of how when Boris Thomashefsky and his father, Pinchas, acted together onstage in Boston, Pinchas tried to upstage his son by parading back and forth onstage during the scene. Boris told him to sit still but he refused. The son left the stage and the father shouted after him: “Rebellious child, have you no respect for your father?” The curtain was lowered on them, and the audience thought the exchange was part of the play.³⁰⁸

The lack of a definitive text allowed leeway for working various aspects of real life into the plays. Bessie Thomashefsky told how after her first baby was born, she returned to acting. She brought the baby to the theater, leaving her in a hammock that she hung under the curtain while she performed. She played a comic role in an operetta called *The Merry Cavaliers* which allowed her to do whatever she wanted, as long as it was comic. When the baby cried, she comically wove calming her down into the play.³⁰⁹

Sara Adler claimed that Lateiner’s plays were actually only a skeleton that the actors first began to fill with meat on stage. “They spoke their own fabricated prose, sang whichever songs they wanted, and danced any kind of dance that fell into their heads. The actors in general felt lively and happy as if it wasn’t a stage but a free-for-all.”³¹⁰ She explained that both Lateiner and Hurwitz were supported by the actors because “from the moment they got on stage, the actors could do whatever their hearts desired.”³¹¹

She wrote that the actors in Lateiner’s and Hurwitz’s plays:

were not only actors but complete partners in piecing together a play for the audience’s ears. I mentioned earlier that the ‘authors’ didn’t have to worry about what the actors would do on the stage; [they did] whatever their hearts desired, and for that exact great freedom, the actors rewarded Lateiner and Hurwitz nicely. The reward was that for years the actors helped the two dramatists not to allow any new people into the theater. It was simply a conspiracy against young blood.³¹²

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 104-105.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 115.

³¹⁰ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, May 19, 1938, 5. It is unclear why she here specified Lateiner. In the other places I quote in which she related to the degree of freedom to improvise the actors had in those days, she placed Lateiner and Hurwitz in the same category. Maybe she spoke specifically of Lateiner because the Adlers’ company was usually connected with Lateiner and not with Hurwitz. It is unlikely that Hurwitz wrote more fleshed-out plays than Lateiner. Hurwitz’s output was even greater than Lateiner’s and his reputation even worse.

³¹¹ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, May 17, 1938, 3.

³¹² Ibid.

Sara Adler told many stories of how the actors would ridicule any unknown playwright who tried to bring a new play to the Yiddish theater. She claimed that they were interested in maintaining Lateiner and Hurwitz's monopoly so that they could continue to do whatever they wanted on stage in an undisciplined fashion.³¹³

All this began to change when Jacob Gordin entered the New York Yiddish theater scene. Gordin was the first to insist on the actors acting his text as it was written, without embellishments or ad-libbing. Bessie Thomashefsky related that when they performed Gordin's *The Pogrom in Russia* at the Romanian Opera House in 1892, Finkel, the company manager, wanted to insert a song and dance. Gordin refused. He took his script under his arm, said goodbye and left the theater. An actor ran after Gordin, bringing him back to the theater, where everyone promised to do just as he said.³¹⁴ Gordin himself played the Russian police commissioner (*pristov*) in the play. During a performance one evening, the actress Bina Abromowitz ad-libbed a line, cursing the *pristov*, as a way of pandering to the audience. Gordin, who played the scene with her, pounded on the table and shouted at her, "Stop the nonsense! That is not written in my play!"³¹⁵

Gordin not only broke the monopoly of Hurwitz and Lateiner, he paved the way for other young serious Yiddish dramatists who came after him such as Zalmen Libin, Leon Kobrin, and David Pinski. Yiddish plays left the realm of improvisation and entered into the formal world of written plays, where the text was presented essentially as written. This development was consistent with the goals of the Jewish intelligentsia to influence the modernization and secularization of the Jewish masses through the Yiddish theater. This could only be possible if the Yiddish theater presented precise written texts, leaving the realm of the actor-centered theater for the realm of the author-centered theater.³¹⁶

Yiddish theater was not the first actors' theater that performed by improvising on a given idea rather than playing strictly according to a written text. The *commedia dell'arte*,

³¹³ Ibid., May 21, 1938, 2.

³¹⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 202. An examination of many Gordin plays such as *The Jewish King Lear* reveals much singing and dancing in the script. See Jacob Gordin, *The Jewish King Lear*. Nina Warnke said that his primary objection was to couplets – "songs performed outside the context of the play and in direct interaction with the audience." See Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution," 28. Gordin may have differentiated between a song well woven into the play and one randomly inserted.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 203; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 18, 1935, 5.

³¹⁶ Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution," 28.

originating in Italy and popular in Europe from the middle of the 16th century to the second half of the 18th century,³¹⁷ was the first great actors' theater. The actors used only a skeletal script, which contained a basic plot outline which was usually provided by the director of the troupe. The actors then improvised their own dialogues upon the theme of the play. Like the early Yiddish theater, the *commedia dell'arte* was a "popular" theater that appealed to all social levels, as opposed to the *commedia erudite*, or learned drama of the Italian Renaissance, which was literary drama based on scripted plays. Interestingly, the *commedia erudite* was performed by amateurs, whereas the *commedia dell'arte* was performed by professional actors. The full name of the genre was *commedia dell'arte all'improvviso*, professional improvised comedy. Winifred Smith explained that the name implies that "only the actor profession or gild, *arte*, could be sure enough of itself and sufficiently at home on the stage to play without being tied to lines."³¹⁸ Gordin and Sara Adler viewed the improvisations of the Yiddish actors as unprofessional, against the background of the professional Russian theater they were familiar with, in which nothing was improvised. The *commedia dell'arte* viewed the improvisation ability of the actors to be a sign of their professionalism and their feeling at home on stage.³¹⁹

Aside from the similarity between early Yiddish theater and *commedia dell'arte* in their use of improvisation, there are many other similarities between the two. In *commedia dell'arte* each actor played a stock character, which he spent his professional life perfecting. These included the young lovers (the *innamorati*) such as Isabella and Flavio; the masked comic servants (the *zanni*) such as Arlecchino (Harlequin), Pulcinella, and Scapino; and the wealthy old men (the *vecchi*) such as Pantalone and Il Dottore.³²⁰ Though they did not play stock characters with a set name, actors in Yiddish theater were typecast and repeated the same type of role in play after play. Mogulesco always played the comic figure in the play, often an old man. Boris Thomashefsky was always the romantic lead, and Bessie Thomashefsky, in the earlier part of

³¹⁷ Giacomo Oreglia, *The Commedia dell'Arte*, translated by Lovett F. Edwards (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 1. It reached its peak in the middle of the 17th century, waned between 1650-1750, and disappeared after 1750. See Cole and Chinoy, 43.

³¹⁸ Winifred Smith, *The Commedia dell'arte* (New York, London: Columbia University Press, 1964), 2.

³¹⁹ Actually, the roles were only partially improvised. Each player possessed a book which he filled with compositions, either original or borrowed, suitable to his role (Smith, 4).

³²⁰ Kenneth Richards and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte, a Documentary History* (Cambridge, Mass: The Shakespeare Head Press, 1990), 2-3, 109-112. For a detailed description of the various main stock characters see Oreglia, 56-127.

her career, was usually cast in a comic supporting role. Sara Adler wrote how during the first years of her career she was always cast as the soubrette, the light soprano in comic operettas, until she proved that she was capable of playing dramatic roles.³²¹ The difference between the *commedia dell'arte* actors and the actors in Yiddish theater may be clarified by the example of Charlie Chaplin and his stock company in his early silent films. Charlie Chaplin's Tramp was like a *commedia dell'arte* character, which Chaplin polished all his life, continuously adding depth and complexity to it. The other members of his stock company were more similar to the actors of the Yiddish stage. Edna Purviance always played his romantic interest and Eric Campbell was always an intimidating bully who tried to victimize Charlie's Tramp.

In *commedia dell'arte* the plots were less important than the characters and the short, interpolated comic business, stunts and witty comments, known as *lazzi*, which gave these performances their life and color. Song and dance were widely used, and the audiences came to the theater for the actors more than for the plots. All this is also true of Yiddish theater. Like the Yiddish actors, *commedia dell'arte* actors were often idolized by their fans.³²²

In the *commedia dell'arte*, couples who were married onstage were often married in real life. This was thought to enhance the realism of the performance. For example, the great actors of *commedia dell'arte* in Italy, Francesco and Isabella Andreini, were married in real life and played lovers onstage. Their son, Giovan Battista Andreini, also appeared onstage opposite his wife, Virginia Ramponi.³²³ Similarly, married couples often played together on the Yiddish stage. Besides Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky and Jacob and Sara Adler, who often played lovers together onstage, married acting couples included Max and Bina Abromowitz, Sigmund and Dina Feinman, Max Rosenthal and Sabina Weinblatt, and Max and Sophie Karp.³²⁴ Jacob

³²¹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 2, 1937, 8; Mar. 19, 1938, 8.

³²² Richards and Richards, 150, 173-178, 192; Oreglia, 11, 129. Aspects of the *commedia dell'arte* that were not shared by the Yiddish stage were the custom for some of the characters to wear masks, extended use of pantomime, and performing outdoors in town squares and courtyards.

³²³ Ibid., 223-225, 228-229.

³²⁴ Theatrical couples as well as theatrical families were found throughout the generations. Famous theatrical couples included Molière and his actress wife Armande Bejart in 17th-century France, Susanna Mountfort and John Verbruggen in 17th-century England, Sophie Schroeder and Konrad Ackerman in 18th-century Germany, Dion Boucicault and Agnes Robertson in 19th-century America, and Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne in 20th-century America. Famous theatrical families included the Kemble, Terry, and Redgrave families in England, the Bejart family in France, the Devrients in Germany, and the Booths, Jeffersons, and Barrymores in America. The Thomashefskys and Adlers, as theatrical couples and families, were part of a long theatrical tradition.

Adler proposed to Sara Levitzky Heimowitz without ever having courted her and before they knew each other well, with the acknowledged purpose of acting together on stage.³²⁵

Theatrical families were also common in the *commedia dell'arte*. These included the Gabrielli family, the Andreini family, and the Riccoboni family. Yiddish theater also had its theatrical families. All the Adlers' six children became actors, as did Jacob's daughter with Dina Shtettin, Celia Adler. Besides Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, Boris's sister Emma, his father, Pinchas, and his brother-in-law, Louis Levitzky, were all actors in his touring troupe. Morris Finkel, prominent Yiddish company manager, first married Yiddish actress Anette Schwartz, then Yiddish actress Emma Thomashefsky, and both of his daughters with Emma became actresses on the Yiddish stage.

Bessie Thomashefsky, whose second autobiography is exceptionally critical of practices on the Yiddish stage, spoke of a kind of ad-libbing in the Yiddish theater that was not rooted in the *commedia dell'arte* tradition.

It also frequently occurred that the actors made fun of the audience. They babbled like drunken goyim³²⁶ and didn't even use the words of their role that the dramaturg put in their mouths. Instead of the words of their parts, they made all kinds of hackneyed, ugly jokes at the expense of the audience [...].³²⁷

She gave an example of actors making jokes about the "*Moyshes*" who filled the theater that day, directly insulting the audience with the pejorative used by actors to designate the unsophisticated Yiddish audience. Though it may be that not all the practices in the Yiddish theater were necessarily indicative of a lack of professionalism and may be attributed sometimes to a different understanding of the nature of theater, the extremity to which they brought these practices, as indicated in the above quote of Bessie Thomashefsky, points in the direction of a theater quite irreverent and often lacking in discipline.

³²⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Mar. 19, 1938, 8; Mar. 22, 1938, 3; Mar. 24, 1938, 3.

³²⁶ gentiles

³²⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 18, 5.

C. Curtain Speeches

The degree to which the actors felt at home on stage, enabling them to both improvise and ad-lib freely, was evident in an important practice at the Yiddish theater – the lengthy curtain speeches which the male stars and creators of New York Yiddish theater enjoyed making to their audiences. Interestingly, it seems that only men participated in this ritual. We hear in the various autobiographies of curtain speeches given by Jacob Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, David Kessler, Jacob Gordin, and Moyshe Heimowitz. But Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler made no mention of any curtain speeches of their own. The tradition of curtain speeches began in the Yiddish theater with Goldfadn, who considered himself an educator, and would ascend the stage at the end of a play to explain its meaning to the audience.³²⁸

Thomashefsky told of a battle that took place between Adler and himself via curtain speeches. When Thomashefsky and his shapely legs had a great success in Lateiner's *Alexander, the Crown Prince of Jerusalem*, Adler and Kessler decided to put on *Othello*, alternating in the roles of Othello and Iago. Thomashefsky told of a curtain speech in which Adler announced this planned production to the public, adding, "One must be an actor to play Othello. Othello is not *Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem*." Upon hearing of the way Adler slighted him, Thomashefsky proceeded to make a curtain speech of his own. He announced that he would star in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Following this announcement, Adler gave another curtain speech, in which he told his public that he and Kessler were entitled to perform Shakespeare, "but the other, 'Alexander, the Woman of Valor' actor from across the street, had no right to perform in Shakespeare's work!"³²⁹

According to Thomashefsky, Adler loved to make speeches to the public, but it would seem that Thomashefsky also had a weakness in this area. When Boris's sister, Emma, aged 15, was being courted by Moyshe Finkel, the manager of the Romanian Opera House where they all acted, who was 21 years older than her, Thomashefsky brought Emma out onstage after a

³²⁸ Sandrow, 48.

³²⁹ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 299. In this supposed quote of Adler's, he derogatorily referred to Thomashefsky by combining the names of two of the Lateiner operettas in which he appeared – *Alexander, the Crown Prince of Jerusalem* and *The Woman of Valor*.

performance and made Emma swear never to see Finkel again. Emma did so, but promptly ran off with Finkel and married him.³³⁰

When Medvedev, the Jewish Russian tenor, was brought over to New York by Thomashefsky to act in the Yiddish theater, the audience laughed at the way he spoke Yiddish with a Russian accent. Thomashefsky made a curtain speech after the first act in which he explained that the Yiddish theater was honored to have Medvedev sing and act in it.³³¹

Lulla Rosenfeld, in her commentary on Jacob Adler's autobiography, told a story of a curtain speech given by Adler after the second act of the debut performance of Gordin's first play *Siberia*. The audience, which had never before heard ordinary Yiddish spoken onstage, grew more and more restless and began laughing and hissing during the second act. Adler spoke to the audience after the second-act curtain, telling them "if you would open your hearts, if you would open your mind and your understanding, you would not laugh at this play by the great Russian writer Jacob Mikhailovich Gordin but would give it your most earnest attention." Afterward, the performance went better.³³²

Sara Adler also had a story of a curtain speech given by Adler, at a performance he did not appear in. He had recently arrived in New York from London and they were unofficially engaged. Adler came to the theater to see Sara perform. After the performance, Sigmund Feinman announced from the stage: "We have with us tonight a beloved guest, the greatest artist of the Yiddish stage who has chosen to cross the ocean and has come to New York yesterday. Let us hope that he will stay with us for many years." After Feinman pointed to Adler in his box and called him by name, thunderous cries and applause burst from the audience. "Not only did the audience stand, clap and scream, 'Adler! Adler!'" Sara wrote, "but hundreds of people climbed on their chairs and filled the air with shouts of 'Adler, come up on stage! Speech! Speech!'" Adler conceded, came up on stage, and gave the requested speech.³³³

Not only actors gave curtain speeches. Playwrights and managers also gave them. Thomashefsky referred to curtain speeches made by Gordin in which he said that

³³⁰ Ibid., 291-293.

³³¹ Ibid., 328.

³³² Rosenfeld, commentary on Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 323. Rosenfeld quotes the story from the writings of Yiddish actor Leo Blank.

³³³ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Mar. 27, 1938, 3.

Thomashefsky with his “Alexanders” and “Pinteleles”³³⁴ wreaked havoc with literature.³³⁵ Sara Adler told of a speech that her first husband, Moyshe Heimowitz, the manager of the theater company, made after they appeared before a half-empty theater during their New York debut. He pointed to the empty benches in the theater and said quietly, “I hope that the time will come when we will remember tonight’s performance with happiness and a feeling of gratification.”³³⁶

Another theatrical manager who gave a curtain speech was Boris Thomashefsky’s father, Pinchas, who managed the Thomashefsky troupe during the period they appeared in Philadelphia in 1889. Bessie Thomashefsky, in a super-theatrical anecdote befitting her husband, told how they had given a benefit for a synagogue. After the performance, Pinchas began preaching socialism from the stage and shouted, “Down with fanaticism! Down with the darkness of synagogues!” The audience started breaking chairs and throwing them on stage. The company escaped via a ladder from the attic of the theater and afterwards could no longer perform in Philadelphia.³³⁷

The various stories told by the different personalities in this study about curtain speeches paint a varied picture. A curtain speech could be used for very personal matters, like Thomashefsky asking his sister Emma to swear not to see Moyshe Finkel again. It could be used for occasions in the life of the theater, such as Feinman welcoming Jacob Adler to New York, or Heimowitz wishing his theatrical troupe greater success in the future than that which they had at their New York debut. It could be used to inform audiences of plans for future plays, such as Adler’s announcement of *Othello* and Thomashefsky’s announcement of *Hamlet*. It could be used to try to admonish or educate the audience, the way Adler tells the audience to appreciate Gordin’s *Siberia*, or Thomashefsky tells them to appreciate Medvedev’s performance. It could be used for political purposes, like Pinchas Thomashefsky’s anti-religious socialist speech, or to slander a member of the theatrical community, such as Adler or Gordin’s slights of Thomashefsky made onstage. In short, the theatrical community saw the stage as

³³⁴ Referring to one of Thomashefsky’s greatest successes, *Dos Pintele Yid* (1909).

³³⁵ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 365.

³³⁶ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Jan 11, 1938, 11.

³³⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 107. Pinchas Thomashefsky, portrayed as a cantor in Boris Thomashefsky’s autobiography, emerged as an extremely problematic personality in Bessie Thomashefsky’s autobiographic writings.

their rightful domain, where they could do what they wished. It was not simply a place from which to perform but a place from which to express all that they wanted to express.

The theater was not only a place in which they acted. They felt completely at home in it. Jacob Adler told how actors often married on the stage in the Yiddish theater. He and Sonya Oberlander were married in the theater in which they were performing in Poltova.³³⁸ Boris Thomashefsky also told a story of an actor who married in the theater the troupe was performing in.³³⁹ To Yiddish actors, the theater did not exist outside of life, it was at the center of life.

D. Audiences

The actors were not the only ones who felt at home in the theater. The audience often felt that the theater was an extension of their homes, or possibly of the local pub. Sara Adler related a story of a very fraught visit to see Adler perform in London, when she and her troupe stopped in London on their way from Russia to America. She described the venue in which he played as being “not a theater but a hall, a long, dirty, dark hall, full of polluted air, that suffocated and choked and make the audience cough so loudly, that at times the chorus of coughing, groaning and hiccups would muffle the entire play on the stage.” As for the audience, she wrote:

But worse than everything was that the London theater fans, during the performance, were so noisy, so quarrelsome, that the play looked just like a rowdy rally in every respect. The performance took place on a platform instead of a stage, and just like in a hall, on the platform sat a Jew who, like a chairman, held a wooden hammer in his hands that he would bang to call the public to order. And don’t think that the “chairman” was satisfied with banging; the commotion and screaming in the hall would at times make him lose his patience and then he would begin to threaten to bring the police.

There was one moment that he almost had to call the police. It was when Adler began Uriel Acosta’s long monologue. [...] In the very middle of the monologue a few *patriotn* (fans) began to quarrel. A rumpus began, and this time the “chairman” didn’t bang with his hammer but stamped with his feet, screaming at the top of his hoarse bass voice, and finally threatened to call the police and have the rabble rousers arrested. Only then did the public calm down somewhat and the play could go on.

³³⁸ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Sept. 9, 1917, 7; Sept. 15, 1917, 3; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 152-154.

³³⁹ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 162.

Sara described the audience during this scandal as being amused by the whole thing. They:

gave the impression that the whole ordeal was like a pastime to them. It seemed as if the scandal were an integral part of the play. During the fight, the audience enjoyed themselves with apples, candies and other treats. [...] There were people with appetites who ate sandwiches, drumsticks and salami.

The rabble-rousers did not let up all evening; they only sometimes changed their tone. When the scandal became so great that Adler couldn't say a word, he would wave a sword he held in his hand, or lean on it and stand "like a beautiful statue." Throughout the evening most of the audience smoked. The floor of the hall was covered with sawdust.

The problem, according to Sara Adler, was not only the venue and the audience but Jacob's fellow actors, who seemed almost amateur. She had heard the New York Yiddish theater was no better than that of London and wanted to return to Odessa. Heimowitz, her husband, convinced her to continue with the trip to New York where, he promised, they would not play in a dirty hall but in a real theater. There, in New York, he assured her, theater fans fought outside the theater, not inside.³⁴⁰

What seemed to Sara Adler to be outrageously unprofessional behavior in the London Yiddish theater can be better understood within a sociological and historical context. Sara Adler came from a culture where the theater audience came from the middle and upper classes. Until the nineteenth century, Russian theater was a theater of the court and the nobility where French and German were spoken. The Russian language was considered "vulgar," and aristocrats spoke it only with their servants. With the rise of the merchant class and the intelligentsia in the nineteenth century, plays began to be written in Russian which told stories about the different classes of society, including the peasantry, and the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia began attending the Russian theater.³⁴¹ But it was in London's Yiddish theater that Sara encountered for the first time a theater geared to the lower classes. Michael R. Booth explained that:

The nineteenth century was the last time when the mainstream theatre catered to all social classes and all income levels, and the last time when theatre was a mass market entertainment. The presence of a huge working class (80 percent of the population of London in the 1890s, for

³⁴⁰ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 9, 1937, 5.

³⁴¹ Harold Clurman, "Introduction," *The Pictorial History of the Russian Theatre*, Herbert Marshall (New York: Crown Publishers, 1977), xiv-xv.

instance) in all industrially advanced countries meant the wholesale provision of theatre buildings and the rapid writing and rehearsing of plays in their thousands.³⁴²

Even in non-Jewish London of the period, theater audiences were largely made up of the working class, and this was certainly true among the Jewish immigrants. But London had another cultural development at the time, the music hall, which became a serious rival to theater during the nineteenth century. Music halls existed primarily to sell food and drink, with entertainment thrown in as an incentive. They usually had a simple stage at one end, like a concert platform, that employed little or no scenery; the unraked floor of the rectangular hall was filled with long tables and chairs for the drinking, smoking, and eating patrons (none of these activities being officially permitted in regular theaters). A chairman presided at a sort of head table, armed with a gavel, to announce the artists, keep order, and provide a jocular commentary on the proceedings.³⁴³

In 1884, the year described in Sara Adler's autobiography, the audience in the British music hall was comprised of members of the urban working class and some members of the lower middle class. Only toward the turn of the century did more members of the middle classes hesitantly begin to attend the music hall. In London there were some upper-class music halls in the wealthier parts of the city, but in the poorer sections the audience was decidedly working class.³⁴⁴

Jacob Adler performed in a music hall in a poor section of London. His venue may have removed the tables but it remained within the cultural sphere of the music hall, in which people sat in an unraked hall, smoking and eating throughout the performance, and a chairman with a gavel kept order. Sara had probably never seen a music hall of this sort. The Odessa City Theater of her youth was a theater not inferior to the best European models of the time. The poet Batiushkov considered it to be superior to that of Moscow and only slightly below that of St. Petersburg.³⁴⁵ For a patron of such a high-quality theater, entering the world of the music

³⁴² Booth, 317.

³⁴³ Ibid., 319.

³⁴⁴ Dagmar Hoher, "The Composition of Music Hall Audiences 1850-1900," *Music Hall – The Business of Pleasure*, Peter Bailey, ed., (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1986), 75-76.

³⁴⁵ "The First City Theater," *History of the Theatre* <https://operahouse.od.ua/en/about/history/>, accessed July 12, 2021; Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa: A History, 1794-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 141.

hall was a shock. But if taken in context, what she saw was not unique to the Yiddish theater but belonged to a larger cultural development in London of the nineteenth century.

In the end, Sonya Levitzky (later Sara Adler) performed in London – not in a dirty music hall like Adler but rather in one of the finest theaters in town, by her account. A young Russian revolutionary named Finkelstein who had escaped from exile in Siberia to London, was a relative of Baron Ginsburg, and had contacts in the upper echelons of London Jewry, came to her aid. He was good friends with a young revolutionary in Odessa who was a regular guest in the Levitzky household, Bachtieniev. Bachtieniev asked Finkelstein to take care of Sonya in London. Finkelstein arranged for Heimowitz's company to perform at the High Holborn Theater,³⁴⁶ one of the finest in London (according to Sara), and he also arranged to have the elite of London Jewish society attend, including people like the Rothschilds and a millionaire named Montague. The company performed Goldfaden's *Shulamis*, with Sonya in the lead role. The audience arrived in carriages with the men dressed in top hats and tails and the women in velvet gowns. The performance was a great success, both financially and artistically, and a great morale booster for Sonya and the company.³⁴⁷

The sharp contrast in Sara Adler's autobiography between the dirty music hall in Whitechapel where Jacob performed and her own company's appearance in the grand theater on High Holborn brings to mind the contrast between two types of theaters that existed in Paris of the nineteenth century. The *Comédie Française*, the state theater founded in 1680, had a monopoly on the classics of Molière, Racine, and Corneille. The middle and upper class would attend their productions. For the lower classes, another theater developed on the Boulevard du Temple, where melodramas were presented alongside variety shows which included acrobats, fire-eaters, tightrope-dancers, giants, and dwarfs. Described as "colourful, lively, extravagant, eminently democratic," like the Yiddish theater, boulevard theater had its challenges in terms

³⁴⁶ There were two theaters on High Holborn in London in 1884. One, a beautiful and large amphitheater, was located at 85 High Holborn. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holborn_Theatre, accessed July 13, 2021. The other was a large and elegant music hall located at 242-245 High Holborn, known in 1884 as Weston's Music Hall. It was rebuilt and renamed The Holborn Empire Theater in 1905. See <http://cinematreaasures.org/theaters/30225>, accessed July 13, 2021. Although Sara Adler called the theater she appeared in The Holborn Empire Theater, this could not have been the name of the theater she appeared in then. If, indeed, she did appear in the theater which in 1937 was called The Holborn Empire Theater, then it was the latter theater, known in 1884 as Weston's Music Hall, which was then a high-class music hall, in contrast to Adler's very low-class music hall in Whitechapel.

³⁴⁷ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 11, 1937, 7; Nov. 13, 1937, 9; Nov. 16, 1937, 5.

of artistic standards, but this did not mean that great artists could not grow within its boundaries.³⁴⁸ Great talents like the mime Deburau³⁴⁹ and the actor Frédéric Lemaître, considered by many to be the greatest actor of nineteenth-century France, developed there. From the Yiddish theater of Whitechapel, the Jewish equivalent of French boulevard theater, emerged Jacob Adler, the great artist of New York Yiddish theater.

Sara Adler was distressed by the state of Yiddish theater in London. She soon arrived in a New York plagued with similar challenges. Upon arriving in New York in 1884, she heard stories told about the American Yiddish theater by the few professional actors who had preceded her troupe to America.

We were told that the American Jews came from small, faraway little towns in Russia, Galicia, Romania and Hungary. They had never seen Yiddish theater before. They looked at actors not as people interpreting the characters that a playwright wrote, but as if they were the actual characters they were playing. In a play in which a woman tried to take a man away from his faithful wife, a woman in the first row of the audience stood up and began to scream at the actress "Shame on you, you evil woman! I'll tear your hair out!" The woman was hysterical and had to be taken out of the hall. There were cases when cucumbers and banana peels were thrown at the villainess. There were doorkeepers whose job it was to escort such people out of the theater.³⁵⁰

Boris Thomashefsky told a story in his 1917 memoirs about the enthusiastic but unruly Jewish audience in Boston around 1888. When in Boston with Spivakovsky and two other actors, they gave a concert in a church whose priest was a sympathetic man. The audience was quite enthusiastic, but when the performance was over, the church was in shambles. The enthusiasm of the audience wreaked havoc on the church. The following day the English newspapers in Boston wrote that the Jews had made a pogrom in the church.³⁵¹

A few years later, when Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky first arrived in New York to perform at the Romanian Opera House in the season of 1890-1891, Bessie Thomashefsky described the atmosphere in the audience thus: "People chew apples, crack peanuts, and all

³⁴⁸ Booth, 321-324.

³⁴⁹ Immortalized in Marcel Carné's classic film of 1945 *Les Enfants Du Paradis* in the character played by Jean-Louis Barrault.

³⁵⁰ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Jan 8, 1938, 10.

³⁵¹ Boris Thomashefsky, *Forverts*, April 1, 1917, 8; April 8, 1917, 8.

the while you hear the pop of a soda bottle. It reminded me of our 'beer hall' in Philadelphia when my mother-in-law was the manager."³⁵²

But such behavior was not unheard of in nineteenth-century America. During the mid-century, Frances Trollope described scenes in theaters of major East Coast cities which, in her words, "seemed to disdain the restraints of civilized manners." She described men "throwing their legs over the boxes, reeking of onions and alcohol, chewing tobacco and spitting constantly." In the second half of the nineteenth century American audiences were regularly admonished through notices in the playbills to adhere to proper conduct.³⁵³

According to Sara Adler, this state of affairs began to undergo a change:

The Jewish immigration to America at that time was great and was growing. Together with the shtetl Jews who didn't place great demands on the Yiddish theater, intelligent young men and women began to come to the theater. In Russia and other countries, they had seen the best that the European stage possessed. Here, in America, they were not much interested in the English theater. They didn't know the language and didn't like the cheap plays that played in most Broadway theaters. They wanted to see Yiddish drama but not those playing in the three Yiddish theaters.

Goldfaden's repertoire - the best that we then possessed - didn't satisfy the demands of the intelligentsia. They strove for something new, something original, and at the same time reminiscent of life in the old Jewish home. Joseph Lateiner and Professor Hurwitz, the two chief and one could say, professional 'professors' of those times, could by no means satisfy that demand. They were not by nature gifted with a great creative talent, nor did the circumstances under which the Yiddish theater was established encourage better works.³⁵⁴

Jacob Adler and Jacob Gordin combined forces the following season, in December 1891, to present Gordin's first play, *Siberia*, and they began the movement toward raising the artistic level of the New York Yiddish theater and making that theater more attractive to the Russian Jewish intelligentsia. Adler wrote, "I knew from the first that a giant step had been taken, a step from which there was no turning back."³⁵⁵ The following year, in October 1892, Jacob and Sara Adler starred in Gordin's first major hit, *The Jewish King Lear*, which opened the way to serious Yiddish drama and the beginning of an era known as "The Golden Era of Yiddish Theater" or "The Gordin Years." Sara wrote of the opening night of *The Jewish King Lear*:

³⁵² Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-gechikhte*, 175.

³⁵³ John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1990), 219; Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 131-133. Concerning the presentation of the New York Yiddish theater audience in the Yiddish press, see *ibid.*, 123-137.

³⁵⁴ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-gechikhte*, May 14, 1938, 7.

³⁵⁵ Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 321.

The first performance of *The Jewish King Lear* was a real triumph for the professor [Gordin], for Adler, and for the whole Yiddish stage in America. On opening night every corner of the theater felt the beginning of a new era in the Yiddish American drama. Never before on the Bowery was there such an audience. The theater was packed with the highest of the Yiddish intelligentsia.³⁵⁶

Thomashefsky also spoke with admiration of Adler's ability to bring the intelligentsia to the New York Yiddish stage. Recalling how he helped Adler stage Tolstoy's *Resurrection* ten years later, in the fall of 1902, Thomashefsky wrote:

At the box-office things were joyful, but the joy was entirely different than at ordinary plays. A whole 'different' audience came, not the kind of customer we were used to. Not the young girls, nor the pretty women who used to run to my plays. The Russian Jewish intelligentsia came.³⁵⁷

Despite these changes, in later years Adler waxed nostalgic about the Yiddish theater audiences of old. He wrote that the Yiddish theater fans of New York in the years 1912-1913:

... lived and blossomed, shouted and made a racket, applauded and whistled, cried and laughed, stared in astonishment and gazed open mouthed. Now, that kind of theater fan is dead. [...] Where are the young boys and girls who filled the Yiddish theater with cheerful, happy, fire-lit, battle-happy noise? [...] In Yiddish theater today it is quiet, calm, respectable and courteous. Only respectable people sit today in Yiddish theater. Only respectably dressed people whose first youth is now gone.³⁵⁸

Though he was proud of how he had helped Adler bring the Russian Jewish intelligentsia to the theater with *Resurrection*, Thomashefsky had no illusions as to who his own audiences were. Of the season of 1895-1896, when he starred in Hurwitz's *Kuzari*, a historical spectacle, he wrote:

There were brothels on Allen Street, Forsythe Street, and Christie Street. The prostitutes were the best customers of Yiddish theater. They and their companions would fill the first few rows and the boxes of the theater. The pimps came in formal dress and the women in ballroom gowns. Respectable people couldn't get seats in the first rows or the boxes. Scalpers would buy them and sell them at high prices to their prostitutes and their companions. These prostitutes came to see *Kuzari* more than any other play.

According to Thomashefsky, Abe Cahan, the editor of *The Forward*, waged a campaign to have the brothels closed down and the prostitutes deported. When that effort succeeded, "the Yiddish theater for a short time suffered materially, my theater more than the others."³⁵⁹ Thomashefsky told all of this quite matter-of-factly. He was not ashamed of having attracted

³⁵⁶ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Aug. 13, 1938, 10.

³⁵⁷ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 374.

³⁵⁸ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 10, 1925, 15; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 326.

³⁵⁹ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 317-318.

the prostitutes and their pimps. But the picture he painted of the Yiddish theater audience in the 1890s was not a flattering one.

It is interesting to note that the music halls of London of the late nineteenth century, which paralleled the New York Yiddish theater in their appeal to the working class, also attracted a substantial number of prostitutes.³⁶⁰

All of these tales of woe about the 1880s and 1890s leave the impression that as time went on, audiences became more normative. This was reflected in the words of Jacob Adler, who related that by the 1920s the audiences were “calm, respectable and courteous.”³⁶¹ Still, the change didn’t occur overnight. Bessie Thomashefsky told an anecdote about the lack of sophistication of the New York Yiddish theater audience in 1903, when Boris performed in *Hamlet*. She wrote that when the play was over the audience clapped and clapped and called for the author Shakespeare to take his bows.³⁶²

In Adler’s autobiography he embarked upon a diatribe against popular theater aimed at mass-appeal, commonly called *shund* by critics of the times. The word *shund*, according to Warnke, came from the German context, where, during the 1890s and 1900s, a campaign was made against cheap, commercial literature (*Schund*) and pornography (*Schmutz*), called the “*Schund und Schmutz*” campaign. Abe Cahan first used the term in 1893. The word gained popularity slowly, becoming the predominant term used to denote commercial literature and drama considered to have practically no artistic merit towards the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. Although it was not clearly defined, plays considered *shund* often included a disregard for historical accuracy, the use of Germanized Yiddish, an emphasis on spectacle, a gratuitous display of sexuality, a rapid succession of emotional climaxes, and an insistence on a happy ending.³⁶³ But the term came to be used even when referring to plays in the Yiddish repertoire from its very beginning, such as Goldfaden’s *Shmendrik* (1877) or *The Two Kuni Leml* (1880), which mixed low comedy and musical numbers.³⁶⁴ Both plays deal with a comical

³⁶⁰ Hoher, 74.

³⁶¹ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 10, 1925, 15.

³⁶² Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 222.

³⁶³ Warnke, “Theater as Educational Institution,” 29-30; Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater,” 278, footnote 7. See Chone Shmeruk, “Letoldot sifrut ha-‘shund’ be-yidish,” *Tarbits* 52, 1983, 326-354.

³⁶⁴ During the second stage of Goldfaden’s career, between 1880 and 1882, he no longer indulged in broad comedy. His works took on a serious tone, and reflected important issues in the life of the Jewish people. He became an

imbecile from a Chassidic family who is supposed to be wed to a young girl in love with another, more worthy mate (a *maskil*). The hero, an object of ridicule, was played by a comic actor like Sigmund Mogulesco.³⁶⁵

Adler described the audience at a memorial production of Goldfaden's *Shmendrik* in 1912: "In the theater the same deafening uproar, the same coarse empty laughter as in the Remesleni Club thirty-five years ago. [...] Triviality and vulgarity, both on the stage and in the audience." Thirty-five years had passed since he took his parents and his Uncle Arke to see Yisroel Rosenberg's production of *Shmendrik*, the father of all *shund*, at the Remesleni Club in Odessa. His own audiences of 1912 he described with nostalgia as having "lived and blossomed, shouted and made a racket, applauded and whistled, cried and laughed...", calling their noise "cheerful, happy, and fire-lit;" and when describing the audience watching *Shmendrik*, he called their laughter a "deafening uproar" with "coarse empty laughter."³⁶⁶ Adler changed his narrative in order to suit his changing agenda at any given moment, but his ultimate goal was to change the Yiddish theater audience from the low-class one who had attended his performances in Whitechapel, to the intelligentsia who came to see Gordin's plays or Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. When he attended Sara Adler's performance of *Shulamis* at High Holborn in London, the very high-class audience that attended did not go unnoted by Adler. It may have been one of the reasons he was convinced that he and Sara had to become a couple even before they really knew each other. He knew that with her at his side he would be able to bring a more sophisticated and discerning audience to the New York Yiddish theater.

E. The Plays

One of the major difficulties that faced the early Yiddish theater was a lack of plays. Unlike theaters in other languages, such as English, French and Italian, which had theatrical traditions going back generations, with both original plays and translations from other

ardent Zionist, and his works reflected his beliefs. During this period he wrote the operettas *Shulamis* and *Bar Kochba*.

³⁶⁵ Sandrow, 48-49.

³⁶⁶ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 10, 1925, 15; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 326, 366.

languages compiled over the generations, the Yiddish theater had to create its entire repertoire overnight, from scratch. Theatrical managers were always on the lookout for new material, trying in various ways to obtain plays to perform. Plays had to be written very quickly in order to answer the great demand, and all kinds of strategies were used to come up with new plays, often not completely honest ones.

Bessie Thomashefsky told how when they were in need of a new play when performing on the road in the early 1890's, Boris would go to New York, go to see a play at the Yiddish theater and write down the plot on a piece of paper while watching it. They would add music of their own and perform a new play based on Thomashefsky's notes. So, for example, he brought the play *Judah the Macabee* back from Zilberman's Oriental Theater and adapted it.³⁶⁷ On another occasion, when Thomashefsky sat in Zilberman's theater writing down what he saw onstage, someone came over to him and told him that Zilberman wanted to speak to him. Zilberman warned him not to "steal plays" from him and evicted him from the hall.³⁶⁸

Even serious adaptations were written hastily and with questionable practices. Sara Adler recounted how Jacob Adler asked M. Katz to adapt Tolstoy's *Resurrection* into Yiddish quickly, because Thomashefsky was also planning his own version of it. Katz wrote the first act in a week. In order to beat out Thomashefsky, Adler went with his one act to Joseph Edelstein, the manager of the People's Theater, to sign a contract to stage *Resurrection*, claiming he had the rest already written.³⁶⁹

On another occasion, someone at Stark's café, a café frequented by Yiddish actors, suggested writing a play based on the Beilis trial.³⁷⁰ Adler was enthusiastic about the idea, and to make sure that no one stole the idea from him, he notified the newspapers the next day that the play was already written and he was beginning rehearsals. He then proceeded to have someone write the play. In a little over a week, the play was written.³⁷¹

Both these stories illustrate how the limited time frame must have adversely affected the quality of the plays. Even Jacob Gordin, who is commonly credited with bringing artistic

³⁶⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 101.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁶⁹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 1, 1938, 2.

³⁷⁰ Menahem Mendel Beilis, a Ukrainian Jew falsely accused of ritual murder of a Christian young boy, was arrested in 1911, and acquitted after a much-publicized trial in 1913.

³⁷¹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Aug. 22, 1939, 2.

integrity to the Yiddish theater, sometimes wrote plays in a very short time for pragmatic reasons. According to Bessie Thomashefsky, he wrote a play in 48 hours to compete with Leon Kobrin's *The East Side Ghetto*. Kobrin's play was a success and Gordin's flopped.³⁷²

Sometimes adaptations were more or less plagiarisms. According to Thomashefsky, Hurwitz "used to go to Steiner's, a German bookstore, and buy some German plays for seven cents apiece. He didn't even have to adapt the language much because then, in Yiddish theater, we used to speak *Daytshmerish*."³⁷³

In an article published in the *Forverts* on Feb. 1, 1914, entitled "*Vi azoy men hot geganvet a geganvete pyese*" ("How a Stolen Play was Stolen,") Thomashefsky was quite unapologetic about "stealing" plays. He told how the American Jewish actor, David Warfield, came to see him many times during the staging of Lateiner's *David's Violin*, and then "borrowed" the play, with some variations, for his tremendously successful vehicle *The Music Master*. Thomashefsky wrote that he didn't make a fuss when this happened, because he knew that Lateiner had "stolen" the play from a German one, which in turn had been "stolen" from a Hungarian one. He wrote: "So it goes and so it will be as long as theater will exist. You can't exist without taking. If you don't take, you don't have."³⁷⁴

Sara Adler claimed that Lateiner's and Hurwitz's plays were more often than not adaptations of cheap Broadway plays:

Only Goldfadrn's musical plays gave us an opportunity to feel more-or-less like serious actors on the stage. All the other playwrights of those times, like Lateiner and Hurwitz, considered the Yiddish theater to be a business that required merchandise. *Shtick* was what they called their works. And most of those plays deserved to be called by that name. The American *shtick* were either revamped cheap Broadway plays, or dealt with sensational occurrences of those times. For example, there was a *shtick* in Yiddish theater then, called *The Johnstown Flood*. The play dramatized a flood in the American city Johnstown and was monstrous.³⁷⁵

³⁷² Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 253.

³⁷³ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 302. "Daytshmerish" is a Germanized form of Yiddish, spoken only on the Yiddish stage. It originated in Russia, when the Czar banned Yiddish theater, and performances continued as if they were in German. This practice was continued in the American Yiddish theater as a means of granting the Yiddish theater a type of pseudo-classiness until Gordin's plays gained popularity. Hurwitz and Lateiner wrote in "Daytshmerish." See Ruth Gay and Sophie Glazer, "Yiddish Theater in America," in *The Jewish King Lear: A Comedy in America*, by Jacob Gordin, translated by Ruth Gay with notes and essays by Ruth Gay and Sophie Glazer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 91.

³⁷⁴ Boris Thomashefsky, "Vi azoy men hot geganvet a geganvete pyese," *Forverts*, Feb. 1, 1914, 4.

³⁷⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, May 12, 1938, 2. Bessie Thomashefsky told of how Adler and Thomashefsky presented *The Johnstown Flood* together, when they were teamed up in Chicago around the year 1900. The play was written by Moyshe Hurwitz and was a big hit on the Yiddish stage in New York before Adler and Thomashefsky

Whether the plays were “borrowed” from the German theater or the American one, both sources agree that these were basically plagiarisms and not original works. A similar picture was painted by Jacob Adler, who wrote about his first appearance in *The Odessa Beggar* in London, in a role he repeatedly appeared in throughout his career. He wrote apologetically about the origin of the play, given to him by Herman Fiedler. Speculating that Fiedler patched it together from a French play about a ragpicker and a Russian one on the same subject, he wrote:

Where he somewhere discovered it, from where he pieced it together, G-d forbid if I began to think of it. And maybe I never really was interested in knowing. What does an actor want? Just give him a play with a role in it for him, and he is happy. And maybe it is justly so. The actor is no writer, no dramaturg, no literary historian, no archive-custodian.³⁷⁶

In Lulla Rosenfeld’s notes to Jacob Adler’s autobiography, she remarked that *The Odessa Beggar* was an adaptation of Felix Pyat’s *The Ragpicker of Paris*, a very successful play in Paris in 1848. When Adler wrote about his experiences in the London Yiddish theater in 1924, he was quite aware of the legal question of paying royalties for an adaptation. Nevertheless, he preferred to avoid the issue and make excuses for himself, claiming that an actor is not a historian.

It was not only the Yiddish theater that did not pay royalties or acknowledge the sources of adaptations. In 1866, Alexander Ostrovsky, who was by far the most popular playwright of nineteenth century Russia, wrote to the actor F. Burdin, “I receive almost no profits from the theatre (although all the theatres in Russia live by my repertory).”

In America at the end of the nineteenth century the well-known playwright David Belasco (1853-1931) did many adaptations without crediting his sources.³⁷⁷ Nor was Belasco the only American playwright to borrow plots and characters from pre-existing plays in the late nineteenth century. American playwrights of that period produced little that was original, and

presented it in Chicago. Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 153-154; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 29, 1935, 7.

³⁷⁶ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 18, 1925, 6; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 244. See Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Jan. 5, 1918, 5, where Adler discussed the change he went through in his attitude towards paying royalties after his experiences as a theater entrepreneur and company manager who paid for works by Gordin that were then presented by others without paying royalties.

³⁷⁷ Glenn Hughes, *A History of the American Theatre, 1700-1950* (New York: Samuel French, 1951), 293. Besides writing plays, Belasco also acted in, directed and produced them.

“borrowed and adapted plots and characters or whatever else they needed.”³⁷⁸ Like the Yiddish theater of the time, the dominant genre in American theater toward the end of the nineteenth century was melodrama with sensational plots, spectacle, and topical subjects aiming to attract a large popular audience.³⁷⁹ None of the plays written in America during this period continue to be revived on the American stage, and practically none of the writers popular then, like Augustin Daly, Bronson Howard, and Edward Harrigan continue to be well-known names in the theatrical world.

The playwrights whose works dominated the stage of the New York Yiddish theater during those years, before the appearance of Jacob Gordin, were Joseph Lateiner and “Professor” Moyshe Hurwitz. According to Nahma Sandrow, Hurwitz wrote a new play every week for thirty years. Though this may be an exaggeration, still it points in the direction of recycled goods of questionable quality. Lateiner, who some critics claim was more gifted and more conscientious than Hurwitz, wrote more than eighty plays.³⁸⁰ Most of their plays have not survived and whatever remains is usually in manuscript form.

Such extraordinary productivity was not unusual for a playwright at the end of the nineteenth century. The playwright-manager Augustin Daly (1838-1899), who ran his own theatrical company and his own theater in New York between 1869 and 1899,³⁸¹ and is considered a founder of modern American drama, mostly adapted the plays and novels of others, usually from German and French sources, and wrote more than ninety plays. In adapting these foreign plays to the New York stage, he “domesticated” them, like his Yiddish counterparts, in order to suit the American audience.³⁸² Despite how prolific he was, he enjoyed a good reputation and was known for high production standards. He was a strict disciplinarian as a director and has been called “The Autocrat of the Stage.” A famous critic of his era, J. Ranken Towse, claimed that despite Daly’s taste, courage, and ingenuity, “some of the pieces he produced were unmitigated trash, flagrant melodramatic absurdities, with no

³⁷⁸ Tice L. Miller, “Plays and Playwrights: Civil War to 1896,” *The Cambridge History of American Theatre, vol. II 1870-1945*, eds. Don B. Wilmeth and Christopher Bigby (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 258.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁸⁰ Sandrow, 105-106.

³⁸¹ Aside from the years 1877-1879.

³⁸² Hughes, 230, 282-283.

other possible object than to catch the mob.” Another critic of the time, William Winter, wrote that Daly kept the theater “worthy of the sympathy and support of the most refined taste and best intellect of his time.”³⁸³ Daly, in short, enjoyed a much better name among his contemporaries than did Lateiner and Hurwitz among their own. It is possible that Lateiner and Hurwitz were less talented than Daly. But it is also quite possible that Yiddish theatrical personalities and critics were more critical of their stage than their American counterparts.³⁸⁴

Sara Adler, for example, often referred to Lateiner and Hurwitz in one breath, derogatorily, as if they were the same person.³⁸⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky likewise expressed a low opinion of them both.³⁸⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, by contrast, differentiated between Lateiner and Hurwitz, always treating the former with respect, referring to him as a first-rate playwright. Thomashefsky recalled that when Heimowitz tried to convince him to become his partner in the Thalia Theater and to leave the Romanian Opera House, he promised that Lateiner, “the best playwright,” would write for them.³⁸⁷ And indeed, Lateiner wrote some of Thomashefsky’s greatest successes such as *Alexander*, *Crown Prince of Jerusalem*, *A Woman of Valor*, and *David ben Yishai*. Thomashefsky was quite proud of his successes and usually didn’t question their literary value.

On the other hand, Thomashefsky spoke critically of Hurwitz, writing that he “did not think highly of his plays. He created very few original ones. Most of his work didn’t portray anything of depth concerning the old Jewish way of life.”³⁸⁸ Despite being critical of his work, he was careful to attach the title “Professor” to Hurwitz’s name, using his self-given title, even though Hurwitz was nothing of the sort.³⁸⁹ Hurwitz wrote *Yifas Toar*, *Kuzari* and *King Solomon*

³⁸³ Ibid., 230-232.

³⁸⁴ David Belasco, well respected as a playwright-manager in New York between 1882-1931, reputedly had already altered, adapted, rewritten or written more than one hundred plays when he arrived in New York from the West Coast in 1882, at the age of 28 (ibid., 240).

³⁸⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, May 12, 1938, 2; May 17, 1938, 3; May 19, 1938, 5; May 21, 1938, 2; Aug. 13, 1938, 10. I will further elaborate on Sara Adler’s attitude towards Lateiner and Hurwitz in Chapter Three, Section B3.

³⁸⁶ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 193, 223, 255; *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 29, 1935, 7. I will further elaborate on Bessie Thomashefsky’s attitude towards Lateiner and Hurwitz in Chapter Three, Section B4.

³⁸⁷ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 277.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 302. We will see in Chapter Three that portraying Jewish life was an important value to Thomashefsky in his brand of Yiddish theater.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 201, 272, 297, 302, 308, 332.

especially for Thomashefsky. Concerning *Yifas Toar*, about a man who imagines he's pregnant, Thomashefsky wrote: "So long as the box office made money and Jews came to the theater, we held our peace and acted as if all kinds of foolishness were indeed great wisdom." Of Hurwitz's *Kuzari*, also a great success of Thomashefsky's, he wrote: "Hurwitz dug up some tale from somewhere about Jews in the Caucasus, and put together a concoction that he called *Kuzari*. [...] The girls and young women melted with pleasure when they saw me as a Cherkessian. The costume suited me. They said I looked like a 'prince' or a 'king' of the Jews of the Caucasus." Despite his reservations about Hurwitz, he restrained himself and said little of him, stating simply that "for the public his plays certainly were good material, and we made good business with them."³⁹⁰ Though Thomashefsky's drive for success was stronger than his sense of aesthetics, it is clear that he did not hold Hurwitz in high regard.

Jacob Adler did not mention the name of Lateiner. In Thomashefsky's autobiography, when he quoted Adler as mocking Thomashefsky by saying that "Alexander, the Woman of Valor" had no right to perform Shakespeare, the plays he chose to mock Thomashefsky with were both vehicles written for him by Lateiner: *Alexander, Prince of Jerusalem* and *The Woman of Valor*. But Adler elegantly refrained from criticizing Lateiner openly in his autobiography.

As mentioned, Moyshe Halevi Ish Hurwitz liked to be called "Professor" Hurwitz even though he had no degree whatsoever. Hurwitz had become a Christian missionary, hoping to make easy money, when he saw his chance to become involved in Yiddish theater. He quickly reconverted back to Judaism and started grinding out play after play. His ethically questionable escapades continued after he joined the Yiddish theater.³⁹¹ Hurwitz worked with Adler in London on Prince's Street. He referred to him thus:

That well-known playwright who ruled over the Yiddish theater for twenty years [...] and many of his plays are still presented today from time to time. [...] Professor Hurwitz was one of the most educated men around Yiddish theater. [...] He knew several languages and knew what was going on in the non-Jewish theatrical world. Nevertheless, he was not arrogant towards us. Just the opposite, he was a good brother to us. He gave us many of his plays like *The Gypsy Girl*, *The Wisdom of Solomon* and *The Polish Boy*.³⁹²

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 302, 308, 316.

³⁹¹ Sandrow, 82-84, 104-105.

³⁹² Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 13, 1925, 11; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 268.

It is curious to note that Thomashefsky, the king of *shund*, treated Hurwitz like a hack, but Adler, who had sworn to fight a crusade against *shund*, treated him like a respected scholar and a capable playwright, even though he most assuredly knew that neither was the case. Perhaps the key to this lay in Adler's attempt to cast his years in London in the most positive light possible. As he wrote:

Yet it was destined that if in Romania and Russia the Yiddish theater was born and had its infancy and in America it reached maturity, in London it went through its *cheder* years. True, a poor, narrow, not-too-clean *cheder* [...]

In London we learned much. Take myself for example. In 1883, when I came from Russia to London, I was almost unknown, having more-or-less excelled in two or three roles, with the greatest part of my success being thanks to my youth, good looks, and my youthful audacity. Five years later, in 1887-1888, when I came from London to America, I was famous, with the title "The Great Eagle" hovering over me and with a long row of roles in my repertoire. And now, I acted my roles, I did not recite them, did not declaim them, didn't go through them with poses and facial expressions. And where did this happen? In the London Yiddish theater clubs!³⁹³

This description of the London clubs contrasts sharply with the squalor and indignity that Sara Adler recalled.³⁹⁴ Because the main thrust of Adler's autobiography was to present himself as a hero who brought dignity to the Yiddish theater, he was willing to grant whatever dignity he could, whether to the very undignified London Yiddish theater of the 1880s, or to "Professor" Moyshe Hurwitz, the greatest master of *shund* in the Yiddish theater.

F. Conclusion

The autobiographies examined in this study were written between 1917 and 1937. Most of them were written from a perspective of many years, with the actors looking back at the formative years in the Yiddish theater and trying to summarize those years and to portray their view of their own place within that era, or at least how they would like their careers to be remembered. Within this framework, all of them complained of a lack of disciplined professionalism in the Yiddish theater, and all except Bessie Thomashefsky tried to claim a place for themselves in trying to make the theater more professional.

³⁹³ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 4, 1925, 8; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 256.

³⁹⁴ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 9, 1937, 5. See Chapter One, Section D, above.

The various actors seemed to be sensitive to the subject of the dependence of the actors on the prompter in the early Yiddish theater. We have shown that this practice was prevalent during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries in European theaters, when the prompter often read nearly the entire script aloud to the actors onstage. Furthermore, until well after 1900, it was common for casts to not fully know their lines and blocking, and to rely on a prompter. It may be that the situation in the Yiddish theater was worse than in many others in this respect, but it was certainly not an unheard-of practice at the time for an actor to rely on a prompter for his lines. This practice was necessary in American theater because of the frequent changes made in troupes' repertoires, owing to the relatively small populations in cities of the time and the resulting need to put on plays with only a few rehearsals. In this, the New York Yiddish theater was possibly at an even greater disadvantage, having to draw their audiences entirely from among the population of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Another practice strongly criticized by both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler was the custom of the actors improvising their parts, or ad-libbing lines for comic effect even when they were supposed to be acting according to a script. Sara Adler in particular was very critical of this practice, as was Jacob Gordin, who outlawed it in productions of all his plays. They both viewed it as totally unprofessional. Like the practice of relying on a prompter, this practice was a result of the continuous change in repertoire. Plays were written at an extremely fast rate, often without much regard to their quality, and sometimes, according to Sara Adler, written only as plot outlines without all the dialogues. We have shown that improvisation was the basis for the great *commedia dell'arte* tradition of the Italian Renaissance, and can be looked at with admiration, as that theater is looked at today, and not only as an example of a lack of discipline and professionalism, as portrayed by Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler.

The freedom that the Yiddish actors felt on stage, the sense of being at home that enabled them to freely improvise their parts differently every night, was also the source of another practice prevalent in the early Yiddish theater which was prominent in the various autobiographies – the curtain speech. All the autobiographies brought examples of curtain speeches given by the male stars, playwrights, or managers. Sometimes the speeches were directly related to the troupe's performances, such as announcements of plans for the future or

a heart-felt wish to the troupe. Competition between actors could also be in the background, or else an admonition of the audience for not responding properly to what they were seeing onstage. But these speeches were not always relevant to theater. They could be related to purely personal matters of the actors or to political issues. We noted that the various people who gave curtain speeches in all the autobiographies were always male. Women were never described as giving curtain speeches.

In the various autobiographies, the audiences of the early Yiddish theater were described as being very boisterous and without propriety. They would chew apples, crack peanuts, and pop open soda bottles during a performance. They could also on occasion shout things to the actors onstage if they felt the urge to do so, or even enter into fights with each other. This atmosphere was a result of the arrival of the working class in the theater and was present in other places in which the lower classes created a theater of their own, such as the British music hall in the nineteenth century, or the boulevard theater in Paris of the nineteenth century. Sara Adler came from a culture in which theater was traditionally for the aristocracy and nobility, slowly expanding during the second half of the nineteenth century to include the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia. She was shocked to witness for the first time the behavior in a theater of the lower classes.³⁹⁵ When Jacob Gordin began to present his plays in the New York Yiddish theater, beginning in 1891, the intelligentsia began to attend the New York theater, and the uncouthness of the audience began to give way to a quieter, more civilized atmosphere.

The lack of plays to perform was a major issue during the early years of Yiddish theater. Plagiarism was very common, with uncredited adaptations of foreign plays being the norm. We have shown that this practice was also common in the American theater at the time, including among well-known and respected figures like David Belasco. Even plays that were acknowledged adaptations were written in great haste in the Yiddish theater, out of necessity, and could not be given the attention a work of art deserved.

Two playwrights had a monopoly in the Yiddish theater in New York before 1891 – Joseph Lateiner and “Professor” Moyshe Hurwitz. They turned out plays at a very fast rate,

³⁹⁵ Though the Odessa theaters were places in which different classes and ethnic groups mixed more freely than virtually anywhere in Russia, still they were vastly different from theaters that catered specifically to the lower classes, like the one Adler was performing in. See Charles King, *Odessa, Genius and Death in a City of Dreams* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012), 101.

without aiming for quality. Their plays were popular with the audiences, but little remains of them today. Sara Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky were critical of them both. Boris Thomashefsky praised Lateiner as a playwright, but was critical of Hurwitz, calling plays Hurwitz wrote for him “foolishness” or “a concoction.” Jacob Adler, who, among the actors in this study was the most vocal against *shund*, nevertheless was not openly critical of any specific writer. He even praised Hurwitz when writing about his days in London, but this is probably in order to give those undignified years in Adler’s own life an aura of dignity.

The low quality of the writings of Lateiner and Hurwitz was usually attributed partially to the great haste in which they had to write and their subsequent enormous output. We have shown that the very well-respected American playwright of the late nineteenth century, Augustin Daly, also wrote over ninety plays, most of which were adaptations of French and German plays which he Americanized to suit the tastes of the audience. Although Daly is generally viewed as a writer of artistic integrity, at least one critic wrote that some of what he wrote was “unmitigated trash.”

There is little in the early Yiddish theater that was unprofessional in ways that were exceptional or unheard-of during the late nineteenth century. The critical tone taken by the actors when relating to the relative lack of professionalism of the early Yiddish theater is probably a result of the era in which the autobiographies were written, decades later, when these practices were no longer acceptable.



Jacob Adler as Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*

Chapter Two: Acting and Directing Style

I. Acting

A. Introduction

The essential problems in acting—those of whether the actor actually ‘feels’ or merely imitates, of whether he should speak naturally or rhetorically, and of what actually constitutes being natural—are as old as theatre itself.³⁹⁶

In the following pages, I will attempt to give the historical background necessary for understanding the period in theatrical history under discussion in this study, 1881-1917, and the various forces that may have influenced the acting styles of the various actors whose autobiographies are being analyzed.

Two major questions have accompanied the history of the art of acting since the era of ancient Greece. The first is whether acting should be formalistic and adhere to rules that apply exclusively to the world of acting and not necessarily to real life, or whether acting should be realistic and appear to be like life itself. The second question lies within the sphere of realism: Should the actor ideally feel the emotions of the character, or only imitate the expressions, gestures and manner of speech of a person who experiences those emotions?³⁹⁷

The realms of formalism and realism were not always firmly delineated and mutually exclusive. Although theater in ancient Greece was largely formalistic, with actors wearing stylized large masks and thick soled boots that made them seem larger than life, nevertheless it was not a theater devoid of realism.³⁹⁸ In Athens of the fourth century B.C., when the actor Polus played in Sophocles’ *Electra*, he carried an urn with the ashes of his own son, while playing Electra carrying an urn with the ashes of Orestes, “and filled the whole place, not with the appearance and imitation of sorrow, but with genuine grief and unfeigned lamentation.”³⁹⁹ Aristotle cites two means of achieving good acting – either by having the actor learn to imitate that which he observes, or by his transporting himself out of himself and becoming what he

³⁹⁶ Lee Strasberg and Ned Chaillet, “Acting,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/art/acting>, accessed August 24, 2020. *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

³⁹⁷ Cole and Chinoy, 4-5.

³⁹⁸ Jean Benedetti, *The Art of the Actor, The essential history of acting, from classical times to the present day* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 9; Strasberg and Chaillet, “Acting.”

³⁹⁹ Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, translated by John C. Rolfe (London: Loeb Classical Library, William Heinemann, Ltd., 1927), Book VI, Chapter 5, 35-37.

imagines.⁴⁰⁰ In these words of Aristotle, written during an era of predominantly formalistic theater, we can discern the divergent approaches to acting taken to this day by actors who follow the model of Laurence Olivier versus actors who follow Lee Strasberg's Method. Those who follow the Olivier model build characters from the outside in, studying the external behavior of a person experiencing a certain emotion and imitating it.⁴⁰¹ Those who follow Lee Strasberg's Method build characters from the inside out, so that their acting begins as an internal process and the actor's goal is to actually experience the character's emotions in front of the audience.⁴⁰²

Elizabethan theater, too, contained a combination of formalism and realism. On the one hand, Elizabethan acting appears to have been primarily formalistic. Acting manuals of expression and gesture which described the gestures that were appropriate for particular emotions were common during the Elizabethan period. On the other hand, Hamlet instructs the troupe of actors who have come to the castle not to "o'erstep the modesty of nature," but rather "to hold, as t'were, the mirror up to nature."⁴⁰³ Richard Burbage, the lead actor in Shakespeare's company, reportedly played with a mixture of psychological truth and technical control which became the bedrock of the tradition of English acting.⁴⁰⁴

During various periods in history when formalistic acting dominated the stage a realistic-style actor would appear to try to move the theater in another direction. For example, in France of the seventeenth century, the accepted formalistic acting style of the period was affected, flamboyant, and bombastic, as typified by the actor Montfleury. This style of acting was challenged by Molière, who ridiculed Montfleury and his style of acting in his plays *Les Precieuses ridicules* (1659) and *L'Impromptu de Versailles* (1663), and taught a more realistic approach to acting.⁴⁰⁵ But after the retirement of Molière's student, Michel Baron (1653-1729),

⁴⁰⁰ Strasberg and Chaillet, "Acting." In his *Poetics*, Aristotle wrote that the best writers were those who actually experienced the emotions they were describing (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 17).

⁴⁰¹ Cole and Chinoy, 410. See Byron Lee Collie, Jr., *Working from the Outside In*, 2016, University of Louisville, Master's Thesis, *ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository*, <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3624&context=etd>, accessed July 12, 2021.

⁴⁰² Cole and Chinoy, 621-628. Strasberg emphasized the internal side of Stanislavsky, but Stanislavsky himself also taught techniques for external acting, "from the outside in." See Robert Blumenfeld, *Stagecraft: Stanislavsky and External Acting Techniques* (Milwaukee, WI: Limelight Editions, 2001).

⁴⁰³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2.

⁴⁰⁴ Cole and Chinoy, 77; Benedetti, *The Art of the Actor*, 35.

⁴⁰⁵ Cole and Chinoy, 155-157.

who brought Molière's realistic approach to tragedy, chanting declamation returned to French tragic acting and dominated it throughout the eighteenth century.⁴⁰⁶

Another type of formalism was taught by the famous writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832), who directed Duke Karl Augusts' amateur theater in Weimar between 1791 and 1817. Goethe taught an extreme form of formalism that rejected any attempts at realism, believing in artificial beauty on the stage and in an external, artificial approach to acting, in which each word was perfectly pronounced. Goethe's approach to acting was not flamboyant and bombastic but very stylized and harmonious. He wrote his views on acting in a work called "Rules for Actors," which was largely accepted as the correct guide to histrionic principles in Germany during this period, because of Goethe's fame. But Goethe's approach to acting was challenged in Germany by figures such as the actor August Wilhelm Iffland (1759-1814) and the manager Eduard Devrient (1801 – 1877), both of whom advocated a realistic approach to acting.⁴⁰⁷

So, too, in England during the first part of the eighteenth century, acting was marked by an emphasis on vocal pyrotechnics and exaggerated action, such as that of Colly Cibber (1671-1757). David Garrick (1717 – 1779) changed the style of acting by introducing a style of natural characterization combined with grace in motion and posture. He was assisted by his friend and mentor, Charles Macklin, whose acting was even more naturalistic than that of Garrick. But even one generation after them, one of the leading actors of the times, John Philip Kemble (1757 – 1823), returned to the mannered and grandiloquent style of acting.⁴⁰⁸

Beyond the tension between the formalists and the realists, the approaches of "feeling" vs. "imitating" or "working from the inside out" vs. "working from the outside in," also co-existed throughout the generations. David Garrick may have been a major force in moving eighteenth-century English acting from formalism to realism, but Garrick did not immerse himself in his roles but rather studied the body and motions of a person experiencing a certain emotion. He claimed that he could "speak to a post with the same feelings and expression as to

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 147-148, 159-160.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 267-283.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 93, 96, 102.

the loveliest Juliet under heaven.”⁴⁰⁹ Another great realistic actor of the eighteenth century, the German actor Friedrich Ludwig Schroeder (1744-1816), claimed to remain so cold when acting “that between the scenes and the acts I play the part of manager as if I had done nothing but stand in the wings.” Of his acting in *King Lear*, he said: “Do you think that I should succeed in making the spectators forget Schroeder if for one moment I myself were Lear – or make them fancy they were seeing Lear, if for a moment I forget Schroeder?”⁴¹⁰ On the other hand, their contemporary, Charles Macklin (1697?-1797), friend and mentor of Garrick, insisted that an actor must actually live his part, and acted in accordance with John Hill’s treatise on acting written in 1750, which claims that an actor “will never make others feel what he does not feel himself [...]”⁴¹¹ Another outstanding realist of the generation after them, Sarah Kemble Siddons (1755-1831), said of one of the characters she played: “Belvidera was hardly acted last night; I felt every word as if I were the real person, not the representative.”⁴¹² Her “Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth” contains descriptions of Lady Macbeth’s past life, and detailed psychological analyses of her character and her relationship with Macbeth that would seem to emerge from the teachings of Stanislavsky, whose influential acting theories appeared in the world of the theater over fifty years later.⁴¹³

An example of the two varying approaches to realism even before the times of Garrick and Macklin can be found during the Restoration, when the actress Elizabeth Barry (1658-1713) experienced the emotions of the character she played, continuing to cry even after arriving home after the performance,⁴¹⁴ as opposed to her contemporary Mrs. John Verbruggen (Susanna Mountfort [1667-1703]), who was perceived as acting completely from design with “not a look, a motion, but were all acquired.”⁴¹⁵

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 132.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 277.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 120-122; John Hill, *The Actor: a Treatise on the Art of Playing* (London: R. Griffiths, 1755), quoted in Cole and Chinoy, 126.

⁴¹² Ibid., 141.

⁴¹³ Sarah Siddons, “Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth,” in Thomas Campbell, *Life of Mrs Siddons*, 2 vols. (London: Effingham Wilson, 1834), vol. 2, 10-39.

⁴¹⁴ Charles Gildon, *The Life of Mr. Thomas Betterton, the Late Eminent Tragedian, Wherein the Action and Utterance of the Stage, Bar, and Pulpit are distinctly Considered* (London: Printed for Robert Gosling, 1710), quoted in Cole and Chinoy, 116.

⁴¹⁵ Anthony Aston, *A Brief Supplement to Colley Cibber, Esq.; His Lives of the late Famous Actors and Actresses* (London, 1747), quoted in Cole and Chinoy, 116.

During the nineteenth century, most actors would not commit themselves to one side of the argument and preferred to describe acting as a combination of both “living the part” and technique.⁴¹⁶ This dual approach to acting was presented by the French actor Francois-Joseph Talma (1763-1826), in *Reflections on the Actor’s Art*, published in 1825, a work Lee Strasberg called “the clearest and most precise statement about acting to be found.”⁴¹⁷ In 1830, the French philosopher Denis Diderot’s well-known work *The Paradox of Acting*, which became a paradigmatic text for acting theorists and practitioners, was published posthumously.⁴¹⁸ Diderot claimed that it was the spectator that should be moved by the acting and not the actor. The actor must employ a mechanical application of an external technique. If one feels the role he or she plays, one will not be able to repeat the performance satisfactorily night after night. Instead, the actor must create an inner model of the character based on observation of nature, reflection and experiment.⁴¹⁹ Diderot admired David Garrick, whom he met in Paris in the winter of 1764-1765, and he based his theories in part on the technique of Garrick.

Diderot’s *Paradox* became the source of a long-standing quarrel between the emotionalists and anti-emotionalists. In the late nineteenth century the leading representatives of the two sides were Henry Irving (1838-1905), England’s most prominent actor, an emotionalist, and Benoit-Constant Coquelin (1841-1909), the leading actor of the Comédie Française, an anti-emotionalist. Their debate precipitated William Archer’s *Masks or Faces? A Study in the Psychology of Acting*, which attempted to present an approach different from that of Diderot, closer to the side of the emotionalists. Archer believed that although it is possible for an actor to affect an audience without experiencing emotion himself, his performance will achieve a higher level if he does experience emotion, even from a source outside the play. In opposition to Diderot, he claimed that an actor is capable of living in multiple levels of

⁴¹⁶ Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing – Modern Acting Theories in Perspective* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 13. See also Cole and Chinoy, 149, 178-186.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 16, 624. Talma’s text is available online at *Internet Archive*, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924027176332/page/n5/mode/2up>, accessed Aug. 25, 2020.

⁴¹⁸ Denis Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting* (London: Chatto and Windus, Piccadilly, 1883). Also known as *Paradox of the Actor*, it was written in 1773 and first published in 1830.

⁴¹⁹ Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing – Modern Acting Theories in Perspective*, 12-15.

consciousness, feeling what the character feels, and simultaneously remaining outside looking in, as an actor.⁴²⁰

Although many actors throughout history strove for “realism” and openly spoke of it as their goal, the term is a relative one, and the realistic acting of one country may vary greatly from that of another, all the more so the realistic acting of different periods in history. Coquelin wrote that the English idea of “nature” does not correspond with that of the French. Garrick thought the French actors of his generation were not sufficiently natural, and the French of Coquelin’s generation thought that one of England’s greatest realistic actors, Henry Irving, was not sufficiently natural. The German conception of nature was “unnaturally tearful” in Coquelin’s eyes and he wrote of German acting that “the style which to our ears rings so false was introduced by them to the stage in the name of ‘nature’.”⁴²¹ In America, Edwin Booth (1833-1893) brought a far more natural manner to his acting than that which had dominated the American stage before him, which had been influenced by the larger-than-life and powerfully extravagant style of Edwin Forrest (1806-1872). But when Booth appeared in England, where he had to compete with the “new school” of actors such as Henry Irving (1838-1904), Charles Fechter (1824-1879), and Squire and Effie Bancroft (1841-1926 and 1839-1921, respectively), he already seemed old-fashioned and dated in his brand of realism.⁴²² The most popular form of theatrical entertainment in the nineteenth century was melodrama, a genre that did not naturally lend itself to realism, though actors like Henry Irving (1838-1904) and Dion Boucicault (1820?-1890) did bring a realistic approach in acting to melodrama.⁴²³

The goal that both Jacob and Sara Adler set for themselves in aspiring to be “realistic actors” was one forged by the type of Russian realism they had been exposed to in the Odessa City Theater in the 1870s. This was a style of realism whose father was Alexander Nikolaevitch Ostrovsky (1823-1886), who was by far the most popular Russian playwright between 1853 and 1886. He wrote almost fifty plays and, like Shakespeare, spanned many genres, including

⁴²⁰ Cole and Chinoy, 161; William Archer, *Masks or Faces? A Study in the Psychology of Acting* (London: Longman’s, Green and Co., 1888).

⁴²¹ Benoit Constant Coquelin, “Acting and Actors,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, May, 1887, 907-908.

⁴²² Booth, 305; Cole and Chinoy, 558.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 353-354, 546-547.

comedies, tragedies and historical plays.⁴²⁴ Ostrovsky had an outsized influence on the Russian theater of the period. The novelist Ivan Goncharov wrote in a letter to Ostrovsky in 1881: “You have given Russian literature a whole library of works of art and you have created a world of its own for the Russian stage. [...] It is only after you that we Russians can proudly claim to possess a national theatre of our own – a theatre that can justly be called the Theatre of Ostrovsky.”⁴²⁵ Margaret Wettlin said of him, “In a word, Alexander Ostrovsky was the Russian theatre of his day.”⁴²⁶ Her words echo those of Ostrovsky himself, who wrote in 1866, “All the theaters in Russia exist on my plays.”⁴²⁷ He was the first to bring tales of the merchant class to the Russian theater, but he also wrote about civil servants, noblemen, landowners, peasants, teachers and servants, provincial actors, and representatives of the emerging capitalist class. All of Russian society is represented in Ostrovsky’s works. He used a colloquial Russian in his writing, making use of both local speech and idiom. Ostrovsky’s plays depicted everyday life to a far greater extent than ever before seen on the Russian stage. N.A. Dobrolyubov, a critic writing during his times, wrote that his plays showed “the unadulterated truth” and “faithfulness to reality.”⁴²⁸ Many of his plays expressed social protest and criticism. He believed in theater as a great educative force in society.⁴²⁹

Besides Ostrovsky’s groundbreaking work as a playwright, he was also an important director. He was influential in introducing a greater authenticity in acting style to Russian theater and he believed strongly that actors should bring their own experiences and recollected emotions to their roles. In this, he was an early exponent of a system not unlike that which was later developed by Stanislavsky, and it is likely that Ostrovsky’s directing style influenced Stanislavsky.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁴ Kate Sealey Rahman, “Alexander Ostrovsky – Dramatist and Director,” *A History of Russian Theatre*, eds. Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 166.

⁴²⁵ David Magarshack, “He created Russia’s National Theatre: Alexander Ostrovsky,” *Anglo-Soviet Journal*, 9, 1948, 6.

⁴²⁶ Margaret Wettlin, “Alexander Ostrovsky and the Russian Theatre before Stanislavsky,” in *Plays/Alexander Ostrovsky*, translated by Margaret Wettlin (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 8.

⁴²⁷ David Magarshack, “Alexander Ostrovsky: the founder of the Russian theatrical tradition,” in *The Storm* by A.N. Ostrovsky (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1988), 5.

⁴²⁸ Rahman, 170-171. Of course, these phrases must be understood in a historical perspective. Ostrovsky’s realism preceded that of Gorky or Chekhov, and was more romantic than the later realistic Russian dramatists.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 170, 177.

⁴³⁰ See Magarshack, “Alexander Ostrovsky: The Founder of the Russian Theatrical Tradition,” 5-13. We will elaborate more on Ostrovsky’s approach to acting in Section B1 of this chapter.

To this day, Ostrovsky is the most-produced playwright in Russia.⁴³¹ But his name is much less well known outside of Russia. In the West, professional productions of Ostrovsky's plays remain rare, few of his works have been translated, and there is very little critical comment on him. Ostrovsky's plays are often overlooked in major anthologies of Russian drama. The reason for this, according to many critics, is that "his work is so closely tied to a specific Russian milieu that it is difficult for foreign audiences to penetrate the wealth of local colour and typically Russian characterization."⁴³² Dostoyevsky said of Ostrovsky in 1873 that "at the very least, three-quarters of his comedies remain completely beyond European understanding."⁴³³

As a result of this relative anonymity in the West, Kate Rahman claims that he has not received the place of honor he deserves in theatrical history. But it is quite clear that the realism that so inspired Jacob and Sara Adler in their theater-going youth was primarily his. When Jacob Adler wanted to relate how as a young man he was knowledgeable in the area of theater and capable of carrying on a conversation about it with young Russian intellectuals, he wrote: "Not only was I familiar with Ostrovsky and the other best Russian plays of that time, but I had rather good knowledge of Shakespeare's tragedies and other classic works."⁴³⁴ To Adler, the two most important playwrights whose works a Russian intellectual had to be familiar with were Ostrovsky and Shakespeare. According to Sara Adler, when Jacob Adler met her in London and was contemplating a future of acting alongside her in New York, he said:

When I have such an actress, I will take a Jew [...] and translate Tolstoy and Ostrovsky and other classics for him, and believe me, the intelligent Yiddish public will be delighted. We will act in the best world plays in Yiddish translation. Only then will we develop serious Yiddish playwrights and it will be the end of *shund* plays.⁴³⁵

Ostrovsky was clearly considered a classic by Adler: the kind of source, alongside Tolstoy, that would bring the best world plays in Yiddish translation to the intelligent Yiddish public, as an important stepping stone towards making Yiddish theater respectable. In the end

⁴³¹ Magarshack, "Alexander Ostrovsky: The Founder of the Russian Theatrical Tradition," 5.

⁴³² *The MacGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama*, IV, ed. Stanley Hochman (New York: MacGraw-Hill, 1984), 54.

⁴³³ Fyodor M. Dostoevskii, 'A. N. Ostrovskii', *Grazhdanin*, 13 (March 26, 1873), quoted by Rahman, 172.

⁴³⁴ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Nov. 16, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 99.

⁴³⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, March 22, 1938, 3.

Adler never brought an unadapted work by Ostrovsky to the Yiddish stage, though in 1896 he did star, together with David Kessler and Sara Adler, in Gordin's adaptation of Ostrovsky's play *Bednost ne porok* (*Poverty is no disgrace*), known in Yiddish as *Shloymke, the Charlatan*.⁴³⁶ Adler's two presentations of plays by Tolstoy were more loyal to the original. It is possible that, unlike Tolstoy, Ostrovsky was deemed inaccessible to the Yiddish-speaking audience, most of whom were from the shtetl and not steeped in the Russian way of life, and that Ostrovsky needed too much adaptation to become accessible.⁴³⁷ In any case, it is clear that Ostrovsky was a part of Adler's intellectual and aesthetic world.

Though Ostrovsky was the most important playwright in Russian realism before 1880, he was by no means the only one. Nor did Russian realism during this period express itself in theater alone. Realism was the major force in Russian culture in the second half of the nineteenth century. It embraced literature and painting as well as theater. The Russian novel gained international recognition, and for the first time Russian painters established a school of art on a par with those of their European counterparts.⁴³⁸ In the realm of theater, Russian realism was mainly concerned with areas of Russian life free from Western influence and therefore outside the understanding and interests of mainstream Western culture. Russian realism was drawn to portraying Russian peasantry; the Russian grotesque as the essence of fantastic realism; and Russian history, the theatricalization of which was to have great implications for set design. Plays that dealt with the peasantry and their lives included Aleksei Potekhin's *The People's Judgement, not God's* (1854), Aleksei Pisemsky's *A Bitter Fate* (1859) and Lev Tolstoy's *The Power of Darkness* (1886). These plays used the language of simple peasants onstage.⁴³⁹

In the realm of acting, aside from Shchepkin, whose great influence on realistic acting we will elaborate on shortly,⁴⁴⁰ there were many other actors who acted in a realistic manner

⁴³⁶ See "Jacob Gordin," *Yiddish Leksikon*; Zalmen Zylbercwieg, vol. 1, 408.

⁴³⁷ Gordin adapted another play by Ostrovsky, *Grakh da beda na kogo ne zhivyot* (*No one is born in sin and sorrow*) under the title *Dvoyrele meykheses* (*Dvoyrele, the Aristocrat*) in 1897 (See "Jacob Gordin, *Yiddish Leksikon*). On the influence of Ostrovsky on Gordin see Nina Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution," 27.

⁴³⁸ Cynthia Marsh, "Realism in the Russian Theatre, 1850-1882," *A History of Russian Theatre*, Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 147-157.

⁴⁴⁰ See Chapter Two, Section IB1.

and paved the way for Stanislavsky and his teachings. These included Samoilov, Sadovsky, Shumsky, Ermolova, Fedotova, Savina and Strepetova.⁴⁴¹

Realism brought the intelligentsia to the Russian theater for the first time, and it quickly became the driving force behind drama. Theater began to be patronized by radical writers and students as well as by other less politically active groups and individuals, distinguishing it considerably from the “aristocratic” theater that had existed before the emergence of realism.⁴⁴²

In the 1860s and 70s, realistic plays comprised less than ten percent of the repertoire of the two Imperial theaters, the Maly Theater in Moscow and the Aleksandrinsky Theater in St. Petersburg. Of the 1227 plays performed in the two Imperial theaters between 1862 and 1881, 607 were translations or adaptations of foreign plays. Of the remaining 620 Russian plays, 500 were popular vaudeville pieces or the work of unimportant and forgotten dramatists. Of the 120 plays that remain, 30 were classics from a former era; 49 were written by Ostrovsky, sometimes in collaboration with others; and approximately 40 were written by other realistic writers.⁴⁴³ Despite it being only a small part of the repertoire, realism was the artistic ideal of the intellectuals of the times. The City Theater of Odessa that both Jacob and Sara Adler attended in the 1870s was recognized as one of Russia’s great theaters, second only to the Imperial theaters of St. Petersburg and Moscow. It also housed the companies of the Imperial theaters which toured the provinces on occasion.⁴⁴⁴ There can be no doubt that they were exposed to Russian realism in their Odessa City Theater, and it influenced their dreams of a future Yiddish theater.

The realistic writers who came after Ostrovsky – Zola, Ibsen, and Chekhov, who forged what is commonly considered “realism” – were not known to the Adlers before they emigrated to America. These playwrights aspired to write plays whose ideal was not romantic high drama but the exploration of human relations, presenting life with its ugliness and blemishes, attempting to explore all the different aspects of human existence. Zola called the art movement he was interested in promoting “naturalism.” This movement gave birth to a more

⁴⁴¹ Marsh, 159-160.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 157.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 162.

⁴⁴⁴ Rosenfeld’s comments on Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 26-27. See also Herlihy, 141.

daring realism than had ever existed before. This was a realism in which actors could turn their back to the audience and there were no monologues and no “asides” made by the actors. Because the characters of naturalistic drama could come from the lower classes, a method of acting that was not grandiose and would feel comfortable for a person of the lower classes was necessary. This new realism, developed in France beginning in the 1850’s and championed by Ibsen beginning in 1877, was explored by André Antoine at the *Théâtre Libre* in Paris beginning in 1887, Otto Brahm and the *Freie Bühne* in Berlin beginning in 1889, J.T. Grein at the Independent Theatre in London beginning in 1891, and Constantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Society for Art and Literature, which later developed into the Moscow Art Theater, beginning in 1888.⁴⁴⁵ Stanislavsky in particular explored and extensively documented the naturalistic acting method necessitated by plays like those of Chekhov.

The naturalistic approach to theater was expressed in other ways besides those of playwriting and acting. Three-dimensional sets including actual furniture replaced one-dimensional scenic painting. Acting companies began gearing themselves to ensemble acting as opposed to productions that centered on a single star.⁴⁴⁶ And as we have previously noted, the director emerged as an independent force in the theater, with artistic control over all aspects of the entire production, as opposed to the formerly prevalent actor-manager who had been at the center of most companies and productions.⁴⁴⁷

All four of the actors in our study made their theatrical debuts before the rise of naturalistic theater and the independent director, both of which began in the years 1887-1889. Jacob Adler made his theatrical debut in Russia in approximately 1879⁴⁴⁸ and Sara Adler made hers in approximately 1881.⁴⁴⁹ Boris Thomashefsky’s first appearance on stage was in New York in 1882. Although Bessie Thomashefsky’s theatrical debut was in 1888,⁴⁵⁰ the same year

⁴⁴⁵ Martin Esslin, “Modern Theatre 1890-1920,” *The Oxford History of the Theatre*, ed. John Russell Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 342-343.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 343-344, 362, 368; Helen Krich Chinoy, “The Emergence of the Director,” *Directors on Directing*, eds. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy (New York: The Bobs-Merrill Co., 1963), 29-30.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 1-78. See Part II of this chapter, Section A, where I elaborate on the subject of the actor-manager.

⁴⁴⁸ Rosenfeld’s comments to Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 81.

⁴⁴⁹ Britannica website, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sara-Adler>; accessed Dec. 21, 2021; Prabook website, <https://prabook.com/web/sara.adler/3764727>, accessed Dec. 21, 2021.

⁴⁵⁰ “The Timeline,” *The Thomashefskys Official Website*, <http://www.thomashefsky.org/timeline.html>, accessed June 1, 2021.

Stanislavsky began the Moscow Society for Art and Literature, and a year after Antoine established the *Théâtre Libre*, there can be no doubt that innocent fifteen-year-old Bessie Kaufman from Baltimore had no knowledge of these developments in the world of theater.

Boris Thomashefsky admired Edwin Booth and claimed to have seen him on stage in *Hamlet* as many as fifty times. Though this is undoubtedly an exaggeration,⁴⁵¹ it does indicate that he was probably familiar with the realistic acting of the times. Bessie Thomashefsky wrote that when she was fourteen she would go to the Brooklyn Academy of Music every Saturday to see a play. There, she too saw Edwin Booth perform. But she mentions Booth alongside two much lesser actors, who were then very popular but are now largely forgotten, Marie Henderson and Margaret Mather. It would seem that Bessie Thomashefsky was exposed to realistic acting, but her lack of sophistication at the age of fourteen kept her preoccupied with fame more than acting style. In any event, all four actors were exposed to a form of realistic acting, but none witnessed the actual beginnings of naturalism before beginning to perform onstage.

On the other hand, by the time they wrote their memoirs, between 1914 and 1939, the innovations of the independent directors were most likely known to them. When Jacob and Sara Adler presented Tolstoy's naturalistic drama, *The Power of Darkness*, in 1904, they may have been aware of the production of that play by André Antoine at the *Théâtre Libre* in 1888⁴⁵² and it is likely that they knew of Stanislavsky's production of the same play presented at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1902. Jacob Adler makes no mention of these productions, but in his writings we hear echoes of naturalistic approaches to acting, especially that of Stanislavsky, as we shall see in the ensuing chapter. When Sara Adler directed herself and Rudolph Schildkraut in Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* at the Novelty Theater in 1912, she was aiming at creating a Yiddish art theater, and was almost certainly aware of the activities of the Moscow Art Theater over the past decade.

⁴⁵¹ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 300. He wrote there that he traveled from Baltimore to Washington the night before his premiere in *Hamlet*, in order to see Edwin Booth play Hamlet. Edwin Booth performed Hamlet for the last time in 1893. Boris Thomashefsky played Hamlet in 1903. Another claim of Thomashefsky's that is undoubtedly a fabrication was that he and Booth became friends.

⁴⁵² John Russell Brown, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Theatre*, 342-344; Cole and Chinoy, 211.

In the following chapter we will explore what the various actors in our study wrote about acting. We will try to understand what their style of acting was, and how it related to the history of acting, both before and after them. Although the argument between Henry Irving and Coquelin about emotionalism in acting may be seen as the cultural background against which our actors acted onstage, the teachings of directors like Antoine and Stanislavsky may also be considered when analyzing what they wrote about acting, as their autobiographies were for the most part written decades after the period under discussion in their memoirs. Though he never mentioned Constantin Stanislavsky, it is difficult to read Jacob Adler's descriptions of his acting techniques without thinking of this great director who revolutionized acting. In the following chapter, we will analyze what the various characters in our study wrote about acting and directing in their autobiographies, and see how what they wrote relates to larger questions in theater history, noting the parallels between what they wrote about acting and ideas that appear both before and after the period in which they appeared onstage, particularly in the writings of Constantin Stanislavsky.



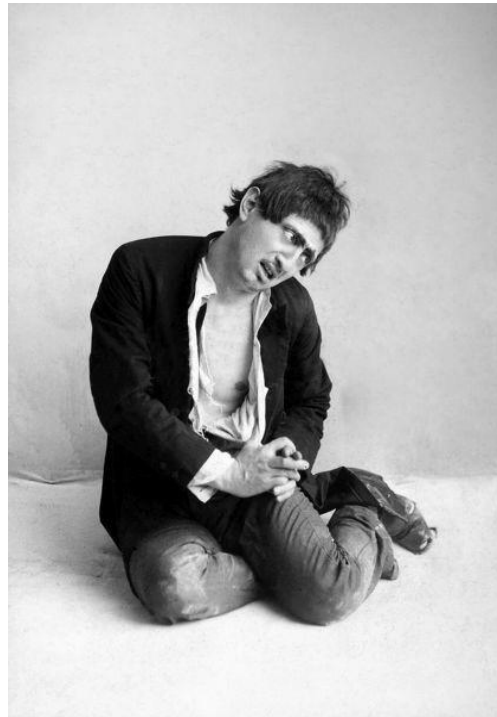
Sara Adler, Courtesy of YIVO Library



Bessie Thomashefsky

B. Their Approach to Acting

1. Jacob Adler



Jacob Adler in *The Wild Man*

Mikhail Shchepkin, the father of realistic acting in Russia, acted in the Imperial Theater of Moscow from 1823 until his death in 1863. The Maly Theater in which he appeared became known as the “House of Shchepkin” because of his great influence on the acting style of his contemporaries in the company. He taught that an actor must “crawl under the skin” of the character he is playing.⁴⁵³ Shchepkin's ally in bringing realism to the stage was the writer Nikolai Gogol (1809-52). Adler's approach to acting was probably influenced by Shchepkin's school of acting, which was still dominant when Adler visited the theater as a youth. Lehrman, the critic of the *Yelisavetgradskaya Novosty* may have imparted some of the principles of this school of acting to Adler in their meetings in Yelisavetgrad, in the incident referred to above in which he tried to give Adler pointers in becoming a serious actor.⁴⁵⁴

The first of Adler's performances that he describes in detail is his title role in a Yiddish translation of Karl Gutzkow's 1847 blank verse tragedy *Uriel Acosta*. This German play, based

⁴⁵³ Cole and Chinoy, 482-483.

⁴⁵⁴ See Introduction, Section E1 above.

on the life of the freethinking Jewish heretic excommunicated by the Spanish-Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam during the seventeenth century, was the first translation of a classic European play produced on the Yiddish stage. It is no wonder that Adler devotes so much attention to it in his autobiography. It was his only opportunity at that time to play the lead role in a classic drama, and it allowed him to explore his capabilities as a serious dramatic actor. The play was very popular among Yiddish theater audiences, probably because its protagonist symbolized the proud freethinking Jew that many wanted to emulate in those days.⁴⁵⁵

Adler first starred in *Uriel Acosta* in Lodz in 1881. He wrote of his preparation for the part even before he was officially awarded the role by Rosenberg, the director: "My soul was full of Uriel. My heart pounded with Acosta's monologues. My blood pulsed with his language."⁴⁵⁶ Adler here described the essence of the Shchepkin-Gogol school, a method of acting in which the actor feels that he has merged with the character until, in the words of Gogol, "the thoughts and yearnings of his character seem to be his own and remain constantly in his mind over the course of the performance."⁴⁵⁷ As we have seen, this approach was not born with Shchepkin and dates back far before him, beginning with Aristotle and continuing through to Charles Macklin (1697?-1797) and Sarah Siddons (1755-1831). However, Shchepkin was the link in this realistic acting tradition that had the most direct influence on Adler.

A deeper look into Adler's writings about acting reveals an uncanny resemblance to another revolutionary force in twentieth century acting, Constantin Stanislavsky. Stanislavsky's productions at the Moscow Art Theater between 1898 and 1921, including landmark productions of Chekhov and Ibsen, left an indelible impact on the theater world with Stanislavsky's new conscious and systematic approach to realistic acting.⁴⁵⁸ He later documented his acting system in his autobiography, *My Life in Art*, whose first publication was

⁴⁵⁵ See Seth A. Wolitz, "Translations of Karl Gutzkow's *Uriel Acosta* as Iconic Moments of Yiddish Theatre," in *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage*, eds. Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 87-115.

⁴⁵⁶ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Aug. 3, 1918, 3; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 201.

⁴⁵⁷ Jean Benedetti, *Stanislavsky*, 10, quotes from Nikolay Vasilevich Gogol, *The Theater of Nikolay Gogol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 169-170.

⁴⁵⁸ For a complete list of the productions of the Moscow Art Theater, see the appendix to Constantin Stanislavsky, *My Life In Art*, translated by J. J. Robbins (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1924), 577.

in English in 1924. Another volume of Stanislavsky's writings on theater, *An Actor Prepares*, was published in 1936,⁴⁵⁹ with several other volumes appearing posthumously. The similarities between Adler's descriptions of his acting technique and Stanislavsky's "system" are quite startling. In the coming pages I will illustrate some of these parallels, as well as parallels between Adler and Shchepkin. These examples are merely illustrative and by no means exhaustive. As Norris Houghton states in *Moscow Rehearsals*, Stanislavsky only codified ideas that had existed before him in the world of acting.⁴⁶⁰ According to this principle, the acting techniques found in both Stanislavsky and Adler's writings probably predated both of them. Besides bringing to light the parallels between Adler and Stanislavsky, I will also make reference to some of the actors whose acting techniques resonate in both of their writings.

The first parallel between Adler and Stanislavsky relates to Adler's abovementioned performance in *Uriel Acosta* in Lodz in 1881. Adler did not immediately receive the lead role. Initially, Rosenberg had planned to cast Spivakovsky in the role of Acosta. According to Adler, Spivakovsky demonstrated to Rosenberg how several well-known actors had played various scenes in the play. Adler wrote:

Spivakovsky's Acosta would not be his own but a copy. A little Kozelsky, a drop of Sonnenthal, a bit of Levinsky but very little Spivakovsky. And how I did not envy him then that he had seen all the great tragedians. I was happy with my provincial ignorance. And I said to myself: 'Wait, wait, I will someday play Acosta and it will be my Acosta, mine and no one else's.' [...] The gifted artist will always play a part differently than anyone else, will always give it another nuance. Why? Because he lives it through in himself, in his temperament, and it is not possible for any man to imitate another's temperament, enter another's life experience. [...] Better mediocre acting of your own than a magnificent imitation.⁴⁶¹

The view of acting presented here as being a melding of the personality and the life experience of the actor and the character he is playing echoed Stanislavsky's position that the source of a good performance is the actor's "ability to fit his own human qualities to the life of

⁴⁵⁹ Constantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Art Books, 1936).

⁴⁶⁰ Norris Houghton, *Moscow Rehearsals; An Account of Production in the Soviet Theatre* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1936), quoted by Michael Redgrave in "The Stanislavsky Myth" (London: *New Theatre*, Volume III, Number I, June 1946), 16-18.

⁴⁶¹ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Aug. 3, 1918, 3; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 201-202.

this other person, and pour into it all of his own soul.”⁴⁶² Adler perceived Spivakovsky as being an example of what Stanislavsky called “false actors,” who “are strong in technique and clichés but who did not work these out for themselves, they merely have acquired them from other actors of other times and countries.”⁴⁶³ Like Stanislavsky, Adler viewed acting as a creation and not an imitation.⁴⁶⁴ When speaking of actors using their own life experience when preparing a part, Adler echoed Stanislavsky's “emotional memory” technique, which demanded that the actor use his own life experience in order to connect with the character he portrays.⁴⁶⁵ Later in his autobiography he gave an example of his own use of emotional memory. When writing of the death of his first wife, Sonya Oberlander, he wrote: “Do you remember my frightful cry, a lamentation as if from a wounded, dying animal – the wail of Mordecai Hertz in the last act of ‘The Stranger’? That is not artifice, not acting – no. That is only an echo that I drew out of the memory-well of my soul, my tearful wail by Sonya’s bedside [...]”⁴⁶⁶

The role of Acosta eventually went to Adler when Spivakovsky left the company three days before the premiere of the play. Adler was very successful in the role but sometimes his realistic acting techniques didn't suit the Yiddish theater audience. At the first performance of *Uriel Acosta*, he delivered his first act curtain speech, which ends with the words “Truth will come even from under the earth and justice fall from the heavens,” not with an electrifying roar, but quietly and pensively, as befits the character. When the curtain fell to a silent audience, he concluded that he should have bowed to the conventions of the Yiddish stage and shouted the words to the rafters, which would have elicited thunderous applause. This story echoes a well-known one told by Shchepkin of how the concept of realistic acting occurred to him. He had witnessed a performance by the amateur actor, Prince Dmitri Meshchersky in

⁴⁶² Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, 14. The melding of an actor and the character he plays appeared before both Adler and Stanislavsky in *The Memoirs of Hyppolite Clairon*, first published in 1798. Clairon stated that an actor must identify with the character he represents, absorbing the idea of his own existence in the miseries of an assumed character (Hyppolite Clairon, quoted in Cole and Chinoy, 172).

⁴⁶³ Stanislavsky, *Building a Character*, translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Art Books, 1948), 20.

⁴⁶⁴ Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, 20-21.

⁴⁶⁵ Jean Benedetti describes it thus: “If the actor could define the emotion that was required of him at any given moment and then stimulate analogous feeling from his own experience then his interpretation could attain a new level of reality and the gap between the actor as individual and the actor as performer could be bridged. The actor and the character would become one.” (Benedetti, *Stanislavsky*, 32).

⁴⁶⁶ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, June 6, 1925, 5.

which he spoke in a simple style, as befitted the character he played, instead of declaiming, as was the custom onstage. Shchepkin initially thought that this break with convention was a mistake, revealing an inability to act properly. Only afterward did the performance continue to intrigue him and cause him to rethink his approach to acting.⁴⁶⁷ Quiet, pensive acting was a quality that also characterized the acting of Edwin Booth, who was still performing in New York when Adler first arrived there in the late 1880s.⁴⁶⁸

Of the 1881 performance of *Uriel Acosta* in Lodz, Adler told how he lost himself in the part. In the dramatic scene during which the heretic is trampled by the members of the Spanish-Portuguese Amsterdam Synagogue as punishment for his heresy, Uriel must cast himself from the high altar to the ground in the synagogue, telling the congregation “And I lay myself here on the threshold that all may trample me!” Adler recalled getting so carried away that he flung himself down on the ground with abandon, fainting temporarily in a pool of blood. He awoke some minutes later and carried on with the performance.⁴⁶⁹ The melodramatic cast of this episode reflects Adler’s perception of an actor living his role with a totality that makes him forget caution while performing. Adler’s story is quite congruent with the goal that Stanislavsky set for himself as a young actor in 1889, “to forget one’s self [...] to throw one’s self wholeheartedly into one’s part.”⁴⁷⁰ Stanislavsky wrote in *An Actor Prepares*: “The very best that can happen is to have the actor completely carried away by the play. Then regardless of his own will he lives the part, not noticing how he feels, not thinking about what he does, and it all moves of its own accord, subconsciously and intuitively.”⁴⁷¹ In this instance, Adler seemed to have taken Stanislavsky’s approach a bit too far. But the dilemma Adler described began long before him or Stanislavsky. Plutarch related that the Roman actor Aesop, while playing Atreus deliberating the revenge of Thyestes, “was so transported beyond himself

⁴⁶⁷ Benedetti, *Stanislavsky*, 6-7.

⁴⁶⁸ See Cole and Chinoy, 557-558.

⁴⁶⁹ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 12, 1918, 5; Oct. 19, 1918, 3; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 208. When I directed the Israeli actor Itay Tiran, he told me a story of how he once got carried away as a young acting student, and actually cut his finger with a knife in rehearsal instead of simulating it, and had to be rushed to the hospital.

⁴⁷⁰ Cole and Chinoy, 488, quoted from Stanislavsky’s *Art Notes from 1889*.

⁴⁷¹ Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, 13.

in the heat of action that he struck with his scepter one of the servants who was running across the stage, so violently that he laid him dead upon the place.”⁴⁷²

If Adler’s account of how he awoke from unconsciousness in a pool of blood onstage appears to be an exaggeration, a similar story he told about the totality of his acting sounds more credible, and is quite moving in its portrayal of his relationship with his wife, Sara Adler. He wrote of the epilogue to Gordin’s play *The Russian Jew in America*, in which the Russian Jew dies while imagining Russian fields, forests and houses and singing of his beloved Moscow:

I carried through the scene with such deep, tearing inner feeling that my wife, Sara Adler, became fearful I would cause some injury to my heart, long since a broken one. [...] Sara stood behind the paper wall of the Windsor Theater, and all along as I played the death of the Russian Jew, called out to me: ‘Adle-e-r! Adle-e-e-r!’⁴⁷³

Various actors and acting theoreticians have searched for a way to combine “living the part” with an external eye that observes oneself at one and the same time. Francois-Joseph Talma (1763-1826), the French actor whom Lee Strasberg called one of the greatest actors of all times, wrote that sensibility⁴⁷⁴ must be tempered with control and intelligence.⁴⁷⁵ William Archer, in *Masks or Faces: A Study in the Psychology of Acting*,⁴⁷⁶ wrote of sympathetic contagion as a means by which an actor can reproduce the feelings of the character he plays without the risk of losing control of himself. Jacob Adler had his own way of accomplishing this – through his wife Sara. The story Adler told here, intended to illustrate the totality of his acting, also illustrates, unintentionally, the depth of his connection to Sara. This connection, not evident in his autobiography which ended before their marriage, and in which Sonya Oberlander played the role of “the love of his life,” was based on their mutual devotion to the theater. The Yiddish theater was the glue that held the two together, but there was a mutual respect and understanding in this area that reflected a peculiar sort of love that was possible only because of the great love both of them had for that theater.

⁴⁷² Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans*, translated by John Dryden and revised by Arthur H. Clough (New York: Modern Library, Random House), 1043.

⁴⁷³ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, June 6, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 288. Sara Adler referred to Jacob Adler in her autobiography by his surname. Apparently, she also did so in real life. See Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, March 15, 1925, 15, where Adler wrote of looking out his window on the Riverside Drive of New York and imagining he was in Moscow.

⁴⁷⁴ A deep empathy with the role being played.

⁴⁷⁵ Cole and Chinoy, 623.

⁴⁷⁶ Archer, 195-210.

Sara Adler told a story about Adler's acting that reinforces the image he created for himself as the total "method actor" who became lost in his role. In Gordin's *The Tree of Knowledge*, Adler played a father who strangles his daughter when he discovers that she is amorously involved with a non-Jewish count. Sara was advised by Adler and others to wear a blouse made of heavy cloth so that it wouldn't tear when Adler strangled her. Sara Adler wrote:

Adler had a nature to go around in such scenes in great anger. [...] More than one actor got real blows from him in such moments. Things like tearing a *kapote*,⁴⁷⁷ tearing off a beard or moustache that was not glued on properly, or pulling a dress or a blouse - such things happened with him quite often.

On the evening of the opening of *The Tree of Knowledge*, Sara Adler forgot to wear her heavy blouse and Adler's realism reached greater heights than usual. She wrote that when he attacked her, he tore her blouse to pieces, leaving her half-naked. He then began to strangle her with such fury that she became faint. Since the character was supposed to die anyway, Sara Adler lay down on the stage, faint. When the lights came up, Leon Blank, who was onstage with them during the scene, covered her up with his coat. The audience thought it was all intentional and was very enthusiastic.⁴⁷⁸

The scene described by Sara Adler in her autobiography, reminiscent of her husband's exaggeratedly dramatic stories of himself, also recalls a well-known scene near the end of the British film *Stage Beauty* (Richard Eyre, 2004) in which the actor playing Othello strangles Desdemona so realistically during a performance that no one is sure whether she is truly dead or not, until she opens her eyes. The actress whispers to the actor, "You almost killed me!" to which he replies, "Finally got the death scene right!"⁴⁷⁹ This remarkable scene is one that might have been staged by Jacob and Sara Adler. It is completely in line with their self-images as actors.

Adler recalled another performance of *Uriel Acosta* in London several years later. Of the

⁴⁷⁷ Chassidic garb.

⁴⁷⁸ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 3, 1938, 3.

⁴⁷⁹ The scene can be viewed on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8liXufWd420&pbjreload=101> – accessed July 6, 2020.

climactic scene in the synagogue in which Uriel confesses to heresy and then, breaking, accepts humiliation and punishment, Adler wrote:

It is quite usual for an actor to be a bit hit making a heroic pose - in a situation of flared up rage, of great activity, of a fight against everyone. To evoke a storm with silence, with submissiveness, with repressed, suffocated inner feeling, [...] with self-control, with self-restraint alone – this demands another level both of the art of acting and of understanding on the part of the audience.⁴⁸⁰

Acting, then, for Adler, is a state of inner being that projects outwardly and is experienced simultaneously by actor and audience. This state of being can be transmitted even in silence. The Moscow Art Theater would later become famous for its long stage pauses that were similarly designed to convey emotion in silence. Stanislavsky wrote:

A great and inveterate mistake made by actors, is to believe that only what is visible and audible to the public, in the wide expanse of the theater building, is of scenic quality. But does the theater exist only to cater to the eyes and ears of the public? Does everything that passes through our soul lend itself only to words, sounds, gestures, and movements? The irresistibility, contagiousness, and power of direct communion by means of invisible radiations of the human will and feelings are great. [...] [A]ctors can fill whole auditoriums with the invisible radiations of their emotions. [...] Let the actor pour out the radiations of his emotions, when he is silent or motionless, in the dark or in the light, consciously and unconsciously. Let the actor believe that these are the most effective, irresistible, subtle, powerful means to convey the most important, superconscious, invisible things which cannot be put into words by the playwright.⁴⁸¹

Sara Adler, too, learned this secret of good acting known to both Jacob Adler and Constantin Stanislavsky. When speaking of her performance in Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, she wrote:

Here it must be said that the unusual success of the play came from the fact that during the summer I first began to see the real secret of acting in the theater. Until then I believed, like every actor, that the more you speak on stage, the better. Like all other actors I wanted to act in roles with big monologues, with much action. As Katyusha there was enough to say on stage, however, not as much as other heroines that I had previously played. Every time I thought how little Katyusha had to say in certain scenes, I understood that the unsaid is more important than

⁴⁸⁰ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 2, 1925, 14; Jacob Adler, *A Life on Stage*, 271

⁴⁸¹ Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, ed. Hermine I. Popper (London: Methuen Drama, 1983), 106.

that which is said. Not only that, but the actress must bring this out with her silent acting, with her moods, her nuances and tones.⁴⁸²

Of course, the use of silence in acting was known to others besides Jacob and Sara Adler and Constantin Stanislavsky. Julia Marlowe, in her article "The Eloquence of Silence" wrote of Edmund Kean (1787-1833) and Thomas Betterton (1635-1710) as actors who knew how to express themselves in silence by using their eyes. She also refers to the great Yiddish actress Bertha Kalich's use of silence in her performance in Jacob Gordin's *The Kreutzer Sonata*.⁴⁸³ As far back as 1728, the Italian actor Luigi Riccoboni (c. 1675-1753) wrote in "Riccoboni's Advice to Actors" of the importance of silence in acting.⁴⁸⁴

Another major role that Adler performed during his London years was the title role in Goldfajn's *Dr. Almasado*, a historical operetta set in Palermo during the fourteenth century. Almasado is an elderly Jewish doctor who saves the Jews of Palermo from banishment when he cures the governor's daughter of a fatal illness.⁴⁸⁵ Adler, approximately thirty at the time, often played characters much older than he, to great effect and acclaim, such as the lead roles in *The Odessa Beggar*, *The Jewish King Lear*, and *The Merchant of Venice*. In this, he was unlike Thomashefsky, who always played the young romantic hero. Although *Dr. Almasado* is an operetta, which required him to sing, not Adler's forte, he half sang and half spoke the songs, acting out the songs to compensate for his poor singing voice.⁴⁸⁶ Adler recalls how he played the role, the prototype of his "Grand Jew," a category which later included Dovid Moishele in *The Jewish King Lear* and Shylock, among others:

My Dr. Almasado was a patriarch, a dignified, beautiful old man, and something majestic emanated from every one of his wrinkles, from every hair of his grey, Moses-like beard.

Tall, thin, proud, dignified in his gait, moderate, judicious in his speech, a man with the richest personal and national experience, and with a high intellect, which restrains him, commands him to look at things with intelligence, as if through glasses of eternity, keeping him calm and sedate.

⁴⁸² Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 18, 1938, 3.

⁴⁸³ Julia Marlowe, "The Eloquence of Silence" (New York: The Green Book Magazine, Volume IX, Number 3, March 1913), 393-401.

⁴⁸⁴ Luigi Riccoboni, "Riccoboni's Advice to Actors," translated and paraphrased from *Dell' Arte rappresentative* (1728) by Pierre Rames (Florence, Italy: *Mask Magazine*, Volume III, April 1911), 175-180.

⁴⁸⁵ For a description and analysis of the play, see Ze'ev Goldberg, "Ha-deramah 'Doktor Almasado' leAvraham Goldfajn," *Masad* 4 (2006), 33-46.

⁴⁸⁶ The technique he described in great detail is very similar to how Rex Harrison sang the role of Henry Higgins in *My Fair Lady* seventy years later.

An exalted, dignified calmness, underneath which lies, deep and still, a giant power; a power whose owner is determined never to arouse it unless there is no other choice, unless a great event will require that he release it from its hiding-place. Calm, but with a calmness that reminds one of a volcano that desires a brief time to enjoy its own quiet.⁴⁸⁷

Here, Adler discloses an interesting acting technique of creating a psychology for the character that includes elements not found in the text. The inner power that Almasado has sworn never to use unless all else failed is an invention of Adler's, a psychological center he brings to the role that is entirely his own interpretation of the part. Since the inner life of the character or his history cannot usually be found in the text, that which is missing from the text must be supplied by the actor, "driving his inventive faculties on," in the words of Stanislavsky, "to make a more and more definite picture of a make believe existence."⁴⁸⁸ "His job is not to present merely the external life of his character. [...] The fundamental aim of our art is the creation of this inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in an artistic form."⁴⁸⁹ In order to play the role in this way Adler must connect to his own inner power, a force that can be found beneath one's calm exterior. He drew on this power not only in creating Dr. Almasado but also in creating the archetype of "The Grand Jew," which became his trademark. It was possibly this sense of inner power that made him so magnetic a force on stage.⁴⁹⁰ I shall be discussing the nature of this "Grand Jew" further in Chapter Three, Section E of this study.

Adler ends the section on the role of Dr. Almasado with the following words: "[...] so I played the first prototype of my gallery of great Jews. And my inner joy and pride overflowed to my audience and united us, and that was our mutual triumph."⁴⁹¹ In these words he revealed his view of acting as a kind of mystical merging of the consciousness of the actor with the consciousness of the audience. He does not create his performance on his own. His inner

⁴⁸⁷ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 2, 1925, 14; Jacob Adler, *A Life on Stage*, 274.

⁴⁸⁸ Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*, 66.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁹⁰ Harold Clurman said of him: "The man's size – I do not refer to his physique – imposed a sense of peril. Grandeur always inspires a certain shudder at life's immeasurable might and mystery." See Harold Clurman, "Introduction," *Bright Star of Exile*, by Lulla Rosenfeld, xiv. Y. D. Berkovitch said that Adler aroused trepidation in people. See Y. D. Berkovitch, *Rishonim kivnei adam: sipur zikhronot al Shalom Aleichem unvnei doro, Kitvei Y. Berkovitch*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishing, 1959), 152.

⁴⁹¹ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 2, 1925, 14; Jacob Adler, *A Life on Stage*, 341.

joy and pride spreads to the audience and unites him and them. The performance he creates as a result of this mergence is the “mutual triumph” of himself and his audience.

Adler's descriptions of the inner processes that he used as an actor present him as an actor who is conscious of the ways in which he approaches a part. If one takes Adler's descriptions of his acting technique seriously, one can understand why Jon C. Hopwood, who wrote Adler's biography on the Internet Movie Data Base website, called him “one of the great American stage actors, ranking with Edwin Booth, John Barrymore and Marlon Brando.”⁴⁹² Stanislavsky claimed that he himself was trying to put into conscious words various techniques that great actors such as Salvini or Duse used instinctively.⁴⁹³ It is possible that Adler was also one of those greats, and that his reflections on acting were an attempt to put into words techniques he developed intuitively.⁴⁹⁴ Tom Oppenheim, Stella Adler's grandson and the director of the Stella Adler Studio of Acting in New York today, affirms that Stella, who studied with Stanislavsky, saw a connection between her father's acting and Stanislavsky's teachings. Speaking of his grandmother, Stella, Oppenheim said, “I remember her saying in class that he would be amazed that the work he, Jacob Adler did, was systematized [by Stanislavsky – Y.F.].”⁴⁹⁵ The implication of Stella's words is that Adler was not aware of Stanislavsky's teachings but acted according to them intuitively. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, who edited the wonderfully informative book *Actors on Acting* wrote, “The principles Stanislavsky elaborated are fundamentally those which great actors of all times have utilized.” It would seem that Adler was one of those actors.

It must be said, however, that by the time that Adler committed his thoughts to writing, between 1913 and 1916, Stanislavsky was already well known, even if still unpublished. Furthermore, the London section of his autobiography was written in 1925, a year after the publication of Stanislavsky's *My Life in Art*. When writing the London section of his

⁴⁹² Jon C. Hopwood, “Jacob P. Adler Biography,” *Internet Movie Data Base*, http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0012169/bio?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm, accessed Aug. 23, 2015. Y.D. Berkovitch, who saw Adler act on stage, said that he had seen some of the famous Russian actors, and had seen Sarah Bernhardt on stage, but Adler seemed to him to be greater than them all (Y. D. Berkovitch, 152).

⁴⁹³ Benedetti, *Stanislavsky*, 2.

⁴⁹⁴ Lee Strasberg, whose version of Stanislavsky's teachings is known as “The Method,” said that “Method acting is what all actors have always done whenever they acted well.” See “The Lee Strasberg Theatre and Film Institute” website, “What is Method Acting,” <https://strasberg.edu/about/what-is-method-acting/>, accessed July 21, 2020.

⁴⁹⁵ Interview with Tom Oppenheim, New York, Aug. 15, 2017.

autobiography, Adler had almost certainly seen the Moscow Art Theater perform in its celebrated tour of America in 1922-1923. Stella Adler even speaks of a meeting between her father and Stanislavsky in New York, at Stanislavsky's initiative, because he was preparing to play a role in Russian which Adler had played in Yiddish, and wanted to know how Adler had played certain things.⁴⁹⁶ All this strengthens the assumption that at least the London section of Adler's autobiography was written after he was quite familiar with Stanislavsky's approach to acting, and he may have recreated his own memories under its influence. This may be the reason Adler didn't mention Stanislavsky's name in his autobiography. He may have been trying to obfuscate the degree to which he borrowed Stanislavsky's teachings and anachronistically attribute them to himself.⁴⁹⁷ On the other hand, if Stanislavsky initiated the meeting with Adler that Stella speaks of, that would seem to indicate that Adler was held in high esteem by Stanislavsky, which would lend credence to Adler's descriptions of his own acting methods.

Adler's connection to Stanislavsky may also be explained in a third way. It is quite possible that both Adler and Stanislavsky were influenced by an important theatrical personality who preceded both of them historically – Alexander Ostrovsky, whose company, the Maly Theater, visited the Odessa State Theater of Adler's youth periodically. "When one compares Ostrovsky's and Stanislavsky's system of stage presentation there is very little to distinguish them from each other," David Magarshack wrote. [...] "Ostrovsky's view on scenery, gesture, and stage diction are in all essentials identical with those of Stanislavsky."⁴⁹⁸ Stanislavsky himself wrote that the Maly Theater, largely the creation of Ostrovsky, influenced his spiritual development more than any other school. Ostrovsky's writings on acting, written up in memoranda he submitted to the Russian theatrical authorities during the last five years of his life, have not been published in English. Magarshack quoted from them. Among these quotes we find the Stanislavsky-like concepts that the actor must learn how "to live on the stage" and that "inner truth" is the key to effective acting. He viewed the actor, and not the

⁴⁹⁶ Stella Adler, *Stella Adler: The Art of Acting*, compiled and edited by Howard Kissel (New York: Applause, 2000), 52. Kissel, in his afterword, wrote that Stella had often said that the role was in Tolstoy's *The Living Corpse* (ibid., 260).

⁴⁹⁷ This would not explain why he didn't mention Shchepkin. It is possible that he wanted to be considered a completely independent intuitive actor, who invented his own style of acting.

⁴⁹⁸ David Magarshack, "Alexander Ostrovsky: the founder of the Russian Theatrical Tradition," 8, 12.

playwright or the director, as the central figure in the theater, an approach that would certainly have appealed to Jacob Adler.⁴⁹⁹ Indeed, one of Magarshack's citations of Ostrovsky is more reminiscent of Jacob Adler than it is of Stanislavsky:

A performance of a play can be said to be true to life only if it is true to that ideal representation of reality which is inaccessible in the ordinary spectator and is perceived only by the creative imagination. The spectator is overcome by a feeling of intense elation only because the creative artist has raised him to that high pinnacle from which life appears very different from what he knows it to be from his own experience of life.⁵⁰⁰

Stanislavsky, in general, strived for life-like truth onstage. Jacob Adler sought to bring the spectator to an ideal reality inaccessible to him except through the imagination of the artist onstage. It is possible that Adler was more of a student of Ostrovsky than he was a forerunner of Stanislavsky.

In any event, it is also quite possible that whether through Ostrovsky or through his own actor's instincts, Stanislavsky's ideas reverberated in Adler in places that were already familiar to him. He might have identified in Stanislavsky's teachings things that he had sensed previously, though possibly never verbalized. The Stanislavsky-like descriptions in his autobiography would then be the result of his identifying elements of his own style of acting in Stanislavsky's teachings. This approach could explain the attraction both Stella and Luther Adler, two of Jacob and Sara Adler's children, felt toward Stanislavsky. Both were very involved in the influential acting company of the 1930's, "The Group Theater," which helped bring Stanislavsky's approach to acting to the forefront of contemporary American theater.⁵⁰¹ We will explore the influence of Jacob and Sara Adler on their daughter, Stella, at greater length in our Discussion and Conclusion.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 8-9, 12-13.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid. 9.

⁵⁰¹ Chinoy, 74-76.

ADLER, JACOB R



דער פארשטארבענער יעקב פ. אדלער, נאכדעם וואס ער איז נאך זיין קומען אהער.
THE LATE JACOB P. ADLER, as he appeared shortly after his arrival in this country.

פ' 1111
[1930]

Jacob Adler as a Young Man, Courtesy of YIVO Library

2. Sara Adler



Sara Adler in *Without a Home (On a Heym)*
Courtesy of YIVO Library



Sara Adler, Studio Portrait
Courtesy of YIVO Library

Sara Adler's writings about acting resemble different schools of acting throughout the generations. Some sections are reminiscent of Diderot, or of classical British stage acting which, like Diderot, emphasizes technique over emotionalism, while others seem to be more similar to approaches like that of Talma which combine emotionalism and technique.

I will begin with a very un-Stanislavsky-like section of Sara Adler's autobiography, where she discussed playing love scenes. Her words were reminiscent of the anti-emotionalist school of Diderot:

Playing love scenes in the theater has nothing to do with feeling real love. There are couples in love who play love scenes together but many of them awake no special passion in the theater. That is simply because they are insufficient artists. They lack the talent to create the proper impression in the correct moment. They can't artistically lead to a "climax," they don't have the actor's craft to create the atmosphere in which a kiss excites.

The truth is that many talented actors, when it comes to playing love scenes, feel no love in real life. They never were and never will be intimate. In real life such actors are quite far from each other. It never would occur to them to kiss in real life. However, they make the deepest

impression with their love scenes. Such a relationship existed between me and Silberman. I can't remember one moment when I had the slightest feeling towards Silberman as a woman, or when he showed me the slightest feeling as a man. However, night after night we kissed in front of the public and they clapped "Bravo" for us, as if we were really head over heels in love.⁵⁰²

The ability of actors to form the impression of love in their love scenes despite experiencing no feelings of love, while those who feel love can often leave the audience cold, is precisely the paradox of acting discussed by Diderot in his work of that name. It is possible that this work influenced Sara Adler, as it did so many actors in the nineteenth century. But as we have seen, this belief was held by many actors over the generations, in various countries. These actors included the English actors Susanna Mountfort (1667-1703), also known as Mrs. Verbruggen, and David Garrick (1717-1779); the French actors Hyppolite Clairon (1723-1803) and Benoit Constant Coquelin (1841-1909); and the German actors Friedrich Ludwig Schroeder (1744-1816) and August Wilhelm Iffland.⁵⁰³ But the passage, like others in Sara Adler's biography, resonates not only with the actors that preceded her but with others who came after her.

This passage by Sara Adler, reflecting sensibilities far from those of "The Method," is reminiscent of a well-known story told of when Laurence Olivier, the great British stage actor, played opposite the virtuoso Method actor, Dustin Hoffman, in the film *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976). Hoffman told Olivier that he had stayed awake for 72 hours in order to play a scene in which his character had done the same. Olivier turned to Hoffman and said, "My dear boy, why don't you just try acting?"⁵⁰⁴

The British school of acting, often known as "classical acting," as personified by Olivier, maintains an unbroken tradition in acting that can be traced at least as far back as the late seventeenth century. This school of acting is not opposed to manipulation and does not require a constant sense of identification of the actor with his role, as in "Method Acting." British

⁵⁰² Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Jan. 22, 1938, 12.

⁵⁰³ Cole and Chinoy, 115, 132, 135, 149, 276, 278.

⁵⁰⁴ Michael Simkins, "Method acting can go too far – just ask Dustin Hoffman," *The Guardian*, Mar. 31, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/31/method-acting-dustin-hoffman-meryl-streep> accessed July 20, 2020; New York Film Academy website <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/method-to-the-madness-3-actors-that-took-method-acting-to-the-next-level/> accessed July 20, 2020. John Schlesinger, who directed the film, tells a slightly different version of the story (See John Schlesinger, Interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=itz5kArG538>, accessed Aug.6, 2020).

realistic acting is based on carefully observed mimicry of social behavior “from the outside,” and opposed to acting “from the inside” as required by Stanislavsky. The British school of acting is pragmatic and prefers practice proven by experience to abstract theory. As a result, Stanislavsky’s teachings had very little impact on the British theater until the 1960’s. The British style of acting with its emphasis on technique is typified by actors such as John Gielgud, Kenneth Branagh, Helen Mirren, and Maggie Smith. British theatrical institutions are rooted in the tradition of “respect for the text.” The actors train on Shakespeare, where the text is quite central, perfect elocution is necessary, and no improvisation of the text, or even slight change in it is possible. Furthermore, the characters often express their emotions in words.⁵⁰⁵ All this does not lend itself to “Method Acting” where the actor “searches around and under words – in pauses, in gestures, in grunts and mumbles, even in silence – for a sense of truth.”⁵⁰⁶ Joseph Mankiewicz told that he had to work hard to stop Brando from mumbling his lines when he directed him in the film adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*.⁵⁰⁷ Although the British school also aims for a feeling of realism and not for theatrical histrionics, they are aware, like Sara Adler in her description of playing a love scene, that at times a sense of over-identification of the actor with his role can be harmful.⁵⁰⁸ Of course, not all British actors oppose Method Acting. Michael Redgrave, the acclaimed British actor, was a follower of the Stanislavsky school. In his article “The Stanislavsky Myth,” he was critical of the British acting of 1946, when the article was written, saying audiences would often rather see an actor who is obviously “acting” than one playing the part naturally without concession to convention.⁵⁰⁹

Unlike Diderot or David Garrick, actors like Laurence Olivier admit that an actor must, on occasion, draw on his psyche in order to connect with the character he is playing. Olivier acknowledged that in order to play Othello, he had to find the “easily released or closely guarded animal” within himself.⁵¹⁰ Sara Adler also, on occasion, would speak of connecting

⁵⁰⁵ Robert Gordon, *The Purpose of Playing – Modern Acting Theories in Perspective* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 71, 141- 142, 146-147, 169.

⁵⁰⁶ Claudio Roth Pierpont, “Method Man,” *The New Yorker*, Oct 20, 2008.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ See John Schlesinger, Interview.

⁵⁰⁹ Michael Redgrave, “The Stanislavsky Myth” (London: *New Theatre*, vol. III, Number I, June 1946), 16-18, quoted in Cole and Chinoy, 407.

⁵¹⁰ Kenneth Tynan interviews Laurence Oliver in *Great Acting*, edited by Hal Burton. (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967), 23-32, quoted in Cole and Chinoy, 415.

with the role on an emotional level, but like Olivier, it was not the primary emphasis of her approach to acting.

In an interview I had with Stella Adler's daughter, Ellen Adler Oppenheim, Ellen called her grandmother, Sara Adler, "a technical actress" and emphasized how she "was technically so completely able to do anything." Ellen recalled how Harold Clurman would bring Sara Adler to perform a scene from Gordin's *Without a Home* (*On a heyim* – 1907) before the Group Theater, "to show them how to act." Part of the genius of the acting was the way she began to quiver her lip at a certain point in the scene, in order to arouse tears in her eyes later in the scene.⁵¹¹ This technique, somewhat technical in nature, is much more along the lines of the British school of acting, or the ideal of Diderot, than what is usually considered Stanislavsky or Method Acting. It also brings to mind the great Russian and Soviet director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) who emphasized the need for an actor to be in control of every muscle in his body.⁵¹² Sara Adler did not dredge up the memory of a tragic moment in her life in order to cry, or even imagine the tragedy in the life of the character she played. Instead, she quivered her lip.

If Sara was not averse to using techniques of manipulation in acting, it was all in the name of realism. She declared that her ideal for all of her career was to be a realistic actress in every word and gesture. She said of her acting, "I was attracted to naturalism, to that which is in theater-language known as realism. I wanted in my roles to reflect the natural life, instead of making a doll of myself and speaking with tones and manners that were never used in real life."⁵¹³ Still, one wonders, if Gordin's highly melodramatic dramas were considered "realistic" at the turn of the century, what did Sara Adler mean when she referred to "realism"? When her daughter Stella's star student, Marlon Brando, appeared on stage and later on screen, beginning in the late 1940's, a new brand of realism was born. Brando brought a raw lifelike earthiness to his performances that had never been seen before on stage or screen. The

⁵¹¹ Ellen Adler Oppenheim, Personal Interview: "Harold, my stepfather, Harold Clurman used to have her do that scene for the Group Theater actors to show them how to act. [...] Apparently she could get her lip moving twenty minutes before she cried." (Later in the interview, when she repeated the story, the number of minutes was changed to five.)

⁵¹² Chinoy, 55.

⁵¹³ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, July 13, 1937, 5; Jan. 20, 1938, 2.

acclaimed director Elia Kazan, a member of The Group Theater who directed Brando on both stage and screen, defined his unique talent as an ability to “live onstage.”⁵¹⁴

A story told to me by Ellen Adler Oppenheim sheds light on how Sara Adler perceived the acting style of Stella’s star student, and how far she was willing to go with her devotion to “realism.” She recounted how her grandmother, who lived with them at the time, had been against her going out with Marlon Brando, calling him a “bum,” until she saw him act on stage. Once Sara Adler saw Brando perform, she didn’t want Ellen to go out with anyone except him. After that, when he would come to call on Ellen, Sara Adler and Brando would spend hours talking.⁵¹⁵ Theatrical legend relates that after seeing Brando perform onstage in *Truckline Café*, Sara Adler went over to him and said to him “If you want, you can change your name to Adler.”⁵¹⁶

But for Sara Adler the road to realism is not through remembering your own experiences but through imagination:

The more lively one’s imagination is, the more one can think into a situation that exists only in the conception of the playwright. Such a situation may be similar to life. The spectator in the theater can think that the writer recorded a real life experience, that he has led people onto the stage who have really lived through the joys and sorrows they portray. But in truth, the entire action with all the characters and their speeches are all made up. A talented writer can make everything so similar to life that the spectator suffers and rejoices with the heroes [...] almost as if it happened in reality. Such an illusion or delusion can be created only when either the writer or the actor are by nature gifted people – meaning, simply, people with a rich imagination, that can live inside another’s feelings and thoughts, and artistically express them for the audience.⁵¹⁷

The great English actress, Ellen Terry (1848-1928), Sara Adler’s contemporary, also spoke in her memoirs of imagination as the quality most necessary for success upon the stage. Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), another of Sara Adler’s most famous contemporaries, hailed the quality of imagination as one that must be assimilated by the actor in order to equal the poet in creative power.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁴ Pierpont.

⁵¹⁵ Ellen Adler Oppenheim, Personal Interview.

⁵¹⁶ “All Mothers Are Not Created Equal Part II: On Stella’s Mother with a Word from Arthur Miller.”

⁵¹⁷ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 25, 1937, 10.

⁵¹⁸ Ellen Terry, *Ellen Terry’s Memoirs* (New York, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1932), quoted by Cole and Chinoy, 360;

The combination of technical acting, which de-emphasizes the importance of the actor's feelings while playing the role, and the ideal of "living inside another's feelings and thoughts" through imagination, which Sara Adler also spoke of, is reminiscent of the approach of the French actor of the Comédie Française, Francois-Joseph Talma (1723-1826), who viewed acting as a combination of sensibility and intelligence. Michael Redgrave defined Talma's requisites for good acting – sensibility and intelligence – as a combination of "the power to apprehend emotionally the entire content of character and action," and "the power to reduce that emotional experience to a technical formula which can be repeated at will."⁵¹⁹ The American actor, Joseph Jefferson, also searched for a way to combine emotionalism and anti-emotionalism, saying, "For myself, I know that I act best when the heart is warm and the head is cool."⁵²⁰ It would seem that Sara Adler, too, was an actress striving for this kind of synthesis.



Sara and Stella Adler in *The Kreutzer Sonata*

Sarah Bernhardt, *The Art of the Theatre*, translated by H.J. Stenning (London: G.Bles, 1924), quoted in Cole and Chinoy, 209.

⁵¹⁹ Françoise Joseph Talma, *Reflexions on the Actor's Art* (1825), (New York: Dramatic Museum of Columbia University, 1915); Cole and Chinoy, 178-186, 406.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 552.

3. Bessie Thomashefsky



Bessie Thomashefsky in *The Green Boy*



Both Jacob and Sara Adler wrote about acting with a kind of self-awareness that typified the acting profession after Stanislavsky, and was shared by rare actors like Talma, David Garrick, and Hyppolite Clairon before the Stanislavsky era. Neither Boris nor Bessie Thomashefsky had similarly incisive, in-depth descriptions of his/her acting processes. Bessie Thomashefsky seemed more self-aware than Boris, but used her ability to analyze acting styles and capabilities more in relation to others than in relation to herself.

In her autobiographical writings, Bessie Thomashefsky presented herself as striving to be a realistic actress. She recalled that at sixteen, when playing Yehudis opposite Thomashefsky in *Uriel Acosta*, she didn't want to play the role like a prima donna, as Annette Finkel did, but as a person.⁵²¹ Bessie's ideal of acting was similar to the emotionalist school led by Henry Irving during the period in which she began to appear onstage. She very possibly was influenced by the female idol of that period, Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), who wrote that if an actor "does

⁵²¹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-gechikhte*, 90.

not temporarily escape from the fullness of his existence in order to throw himself wholeheartedly into the most acute crises, he will move nobody. How can he convince another of his emotion, of the sincerity of his passions, if he is unable to convince himself to the point of actually becoming the character that he has to impersonate?"⁵²² Bessie Thomashefsky referred explicitly to Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who believed in "living the role," as a source of inspiration for her as an actress.⁵²³

In various sections of her first autobiography, she spoke about "living the part." She wrote that even during her first performance on stage in Boston at the age of 15, when she sang the role of Shulamis, she cried from the depths of her heart when singing her third act aria of love for Avshalom. "I was Shulamis and not Bessie Kaufman," she wrote. When the play was over, she did not want to take off her costume. Shulamis had become a real person for her and "she wanted to enjoy being with her love, her Shulamis."⁵²⁴

She wrote of playing Manichka, years later in New York, in Gordin's early play *The Pogrom in Russia*. The role is that of a Jewish girl who falls in love with a non-Jew, refuses to marry him, and then is murdered by him. She wrote, "It seemed to me that I knew Manichka from the shtetl where I was born, Tarashchka. Reading my role, I saw Manichka alive and I would be that very living Manichka."⁵²⁵

Bessie Thomashefsky was the first Yiddish actress to write an autobiography. Her first autobiography was serialized in *Di varhayt* in 1916, when she was only 43 years old. When she spoke of "living the part" she was most likely echoing attitudes towards acting voiced during her times by actors like Beerbohm Tree and Sarah Bernhardt, rather than the teachings of Stanislavsky. Although Stanislavsky founded the Moscow Art Theater in 1898, his first publication, *My Life in Art* did not appear until 1924, eight years after Bessie Thomashefsky's autobiography. She may have heard of him and his teachings, but it is not likely that at this early stage she was trying to imitate something that was not yet common knowledge in the unsophisticated theater world that Bessie Thomashefsky lived in. On the other hand, it is

⁵²² Sarah Bernhardt, *The Art of the Theatre*, translated by H.J. Stenning (London: G. Bles, 1924), 103-106.

⁵²³ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 22, 1935, 5, repeated verbatim on Nov. 2, 1935.

⁵²⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 68-69. It was important to her to mention that when she cried, while singing a lullaby in Z. Liben's "The Dreamer," "she crie[d] real tears" (ibid., 287).

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 201.

altogether possible that the significant other whom she was echoing was no other than Jacob Adler. Adler played a central role in Bessie Thomashefsky's autobiography. Of the time before she met Adler, Bessie Thomashefsky wrote:

The wonder and legends that were told about him before he came to America were enough to make me imagine things that only fantasy can draw. I thought Adler wasn't an earthly actor but a god from heaven. [...] Often, when I would hear that Adler plays naturally as in life, I used to wonder, 'What does it mean to act as in life?' You have to act! Straight speaking like everyone is no feat! But I answered myself with one word: Adler.

After meeting him for the first time she wrote:

Adler's appearance in private life was always different than that of other people. This was the impression Adler made on me when I first saw him. In his every move, in his every look, there was something that only Adler and no one else possessed. His bearing was unintentionally impressive. He aroused wonderment in all. He was (and remains) majestic.⁵²⁶

Her opinion of him hadn't changed almost 20 years later, in 1935, when she wrote her second autobiography. She wrote: "There was something kingly, majestic in Adler's persona, in his whole figure, in his way and pose, in his every gesture."⁵²⁷ It is most probable that if Bessie Thomashefsky wanted to sound realistic and "feeling" in her approach to acting, she was echoing Jacob Adler himself more than any of the actors who may have previously influenced him.

While Bessie's first autobiography contains examples of classic Shchepkin/Staniislavsky "losing yourself in the role," her second autobiography contains a very moving example of "emotional memory," the technique spoken of by Staniislavsky which was the source of conflict between Stella Adler and Lee Strasberg. Bessie told of her final performance with Boris Thomashefsky, years after they had separated, when they were reunited for one performance of Kobrin's *Paradise Lost*:

It is impossible for me to describe the shock to my soul when I saw him by my side and heard his voice, his words, after all the years. My entire life in that minute passed before my eyes. I lived through not only the drama of Kobrin's characters but also my own drama. Possibly, I lived my own drama a lot sharper than that which I had to portray onstage. I played the tragedy of Kobrin's *Paradise Lost* but from my own lost paradise. And that which I went through was

⁵²⁶ Ibid., 133-135.

⁵²⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 22, 1935, 5.

transmitted like an electric current to the hundreds of men and women who filled the theater from wall to wall. [...]

I will never forget the faces I saw that evening. They were not the faces of regular theater-goers; no, the impression of those faces that I met that night carried worlds of experience in me. I looked in the people's eyes and they in mine. Many had tears in their eyes. The air was full of electricity. It seemed as if the entire theater was on the verge of hysterics.⁵²⁸

Not only did Bessie Thomashefsky bring an example here of her using the "emotional memory" technique, in which the actor conjures up an experience from his own life through which he plays a scene or a role, she also alluded to another idea described by Stanislavsky. When she spoke of how her experience "was transmitted like an electric current to the hundreds of men and women who filled the theater from wall to wall," she was unknowingly echoing the teaching of Stanislavsky we quoted earlier in relation to Adler: "[Actors] can fill whole auditoriums with the invisible radiations of their emotions."⁵²⁹

These passages notwithstanding, such reflections are relatively rare in Bessie Thomashefsky's two capacious autobiographies. At best, it can be said that unlike her husband, Bessie seemed to be aware of the difference between high quality acting and histrionics or parading around the stage like a peacock. She wrote of seeing Feinman, Finkel, Paulina Edelstein and Mogulesco on stage in Philadelphia, the first professional Yiddish actors she witnessed acting, after having played with her tutor-husband Thomashefsky for over a year on the road:

I saw that the Yiddish theater was not just playing for jokes. I saw real actors. [...] My husband was then my greatest authority in the Yiddish art of acting. However I quietly understood in my heart that the New York actors, especially Mogulesco, were the real artists. At home, by us, naturally, I didn't speak of this.

Throughout both of her autobiographies, Bessie Thomashefsky was reluctant to criticize or malign people openly. Her criticisms were usually hinted at rather than expressed directly. Here she intimated that at least at that point in their careers, Boris Thomashefsky was not an actor of the stature of "the real artists" from New York. Her capacity to recognize "the real

⁵²⁸ Ibid., Dec. 27, 1935, 7.

⁵²⁹ Stanislavsky, *Creating a Role*, 106.

thing” when she saw it, was evident in her descriptions of Mogulesco. She was full of admiration, awe, and love for the man, both before and after she worked with him. She wrote:

I remember that I felt I would soon cry out from ecstasy as I drank in his face and followed his movements. I never saw such a thing in my life. When he played a role everything in him acted, every wrinkle in his face, every movement, every turn of his nose, every circle with his lips, every wrinkle in his forehead, every movement of his hand, every move of his ankle, every wink of his eye – everything was a separate part of that wonderful acting, and each one separately had its separate face, its unique interpretation, its individual charm, and just like the various sounds a composer brings out are mixed together by him harmoniously in a spell-binding composition, so all the expressions on Mogulesco’s face, the smiles, wrinkles, movements and gestures, come together in him in a harmonious play, in one piece of fresh life – the life of the protagonist that he is playing.⁵³⁰

Bessie wrote of the first time she saw Mogulesco perform on stage: “With his entrance onstage in the first act as ‘Nullman’ we saw the great artist, the Godly talent. I sat in the theater as if in an enchanted castle and before my eyes onstage there played a magician who could transform dead skeletons into living men.” After seeing him perform a second time, she said, “He is blessed with such a charm which is sent from God to man only once in a thousand years.”⁵³¹

Bessie Thomashefsky is the only one of the four personalities in this study who went into such detail about the acting of another actor whom she admired outside her family circle. From her description of Mogulesco we can comprehend her understanding of great acting. She wrote of him:

He never repeated himself. Every time he appeared in an old role, he brought something new to it, gave it a new characteristic, put new blood in it. It was hard to recognize Mogulesco from one role to the other. Not only the audience didn't recognize him, but even actors who were in the audience used to rub their eyes and ask themselves: Is that Mogulesco or someone else?⁵³²

She wrote how her wish to act with him kept her going through dark hours on the stage and finally came true.⁵³³ Of the first time she acted with him she wrote:

Standing with Mogulesco onstage, I feel that the other actors and I are standing next to a great sun shining and we are lit by its rays... Mogulesco’s charm delighted not only the audience but

⁵³⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 23, 1935, 3.

⁵³¹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 118-119.

⁵³² Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 23, 1935, 3.

⁵³³ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 119.

also the actors onstage. I, in any case, felt like under a magnet when acting with Mogulesco. It made me want to act with all my heart, with all the fire of my soul, acting for the sake of acting itself.⁵³⁴

A phrase like “acting for the sake of acting itself” is not typical of Bessie Thomashefsky’s writing about acting. More typical are sentences like “Until today – onstage I forget everything and have nothing in mind except finding favor in the eyes of the spectator.”⁵³⁵ Or else: “The stage is a battlefield for the actor. He fights and fights. If he loses – he loses his life. If he wins – his whole gain is the applause of the audience. This is the actor’s life.”⁵³⁶ In these and similar passages, applause and finding favor in the audience’s eyes seem to be the goal of acting. Not “acting for the sake of acting itself.” But Bessie Thomashefsky had two sides to her. She had the side that was Boris Thomashefsky’s wife and counterpart, viewing success and fame as the main goal of an actor. And she had the side that aspired to something greater, that was aroused when placed in contact with great artists, as can be seen in the way she viewed Mogulesco.⁵³⁷

Similar feelings were aroused in her when she appeared opposite Rudolph Schildkraut, a Jewish actor well known in Vienna and Germany, who was a central figure in Max Reinhardt’s acting troupe in Berlin, and emigrated to the United States in 1915, spending some time on the Yiddish stage before moving over to English-language American stage and film.⁵³⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky considered him to be the only actor to appear in Yiddish theater with the greatness of Mogulesco. Appearing next to him made her “lose herself in the role” the way she perceives a true actress should. She wrote:

When we played together in Shomer’s *Ikele Mazik*, I used to get torn up from his strong acting, so that when the curtain came down and rose again, instead of me bowing before the public, I kept looking at Ikele, thinking that I am really Leno and Ikele is really Ikele, not Schildkraut.⁵³⁹

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 186.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁵³⁷ I must note that Boris Thomashefsky also held Mogulesco in great regard. He published an article in the *Forverts* about his first meeting with Mogulesco in Europe, when he was a *meshoyrer* singing with Nissan Belzer, and his last meeting with Mogulesco, shortly before his death in 1914. In the article he displayed great love and regard for Mogulesco as a person and as an actor – not common in Boris Thomashefsky’s writings (Boris Thomashefsky, “Mayn ershte un letste bagegenish mit Mogulesco” [My First and Last Meeting with Mogulesco], *Forverts*, Feb. 15, 1914, 4, 7).

⁵³⁸ Rudolph Schildkraut, *Internet Media Data Base*, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0771585/bio?ref=nm_ov_bio_sm, accessed Aug. 12, 2020.

⁵³⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 299-300.

In relation to Schildkraut, Bessie Thomashefsky's cynicism about the Yiddish theater-going public and the Yiddish theater stars emerged. Despite Schildkraut's greatness as an actor, his reserved and understated style of acting was not a good fit for the New York Yiddish theater public, which had a fondness for the highly dramatic, and he was driven away from the Yiddish stage after a short while.⁵⁴⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky wrote of this: "When a real actor finally comes, he is altogether a short while on the Yiddish stage, and it appears that the public and critics alike forget themselves only in the 'suns' and the 'stars' and they say 'Schildkraut – feh! [...] how do you come here? Go back to the Germans.'"⁵⁴¹ It is a tribute to Bessie Thomashefsky's sensitivity as an actress that she appreciated the subtle and understated acting of Schildkraut, so foreign to the Yiddish stage at the time.

Bessie's criticism of the Yiddish stage's attitude toward Schildkraut implied that the stars of the Yiddish theater were not quite "real actors." Bearing in mind that Boris Thomashefsky was one of Yiddish theater's greatest stars, one begins to feel that Bessie Thomashefsky was not overly impressed with her husband's acting skills. We have seen two references to Boris Thomashefsky's acting skills that seem to imply criticism, but in her first autobiography she did not openly write about what she thought of him as an actor. In her second autobiography she was much more open about Boris Thomashefsky than in her first, and expressed her thoughts of him as an actor.

According to Bessie Thomashefsky, Boris was not only the most good-looking man she had ever seen either onstage or off but also one of the most talented actors on the Yiddish stage. With successes that came to him too easily, however, he did not have the will to work. She wrote:

In order to be a great actor, you have to work a lot, expending a lot of energy and often making sacrifices. You have to work, first of all, on yourself, meaning on your own development; you have to educate yourself and study because an actor that is behind the times, who learns nothing and knows nothing, can never be great. And you have to work a lot on the role that you are playing. You must take every role with a deep seriousness, you must carry on yourself the great responsibility you have when you appear before a public. There are actors who become sick when they study a role. They invest so much work in it and they get so deeply carried away

⁵⁴⁰ On Schildkraut's acting style, see "Rudolph Schildkraut," *Museum of Family History*, <http://www.museumoffamilyhistory.com/mfh-st07-rschildkraut.htm>, accessed Aug. 12, 2020.

⁵⁴¹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 300.

in the part. They tell of the immortal actor Sir Beerbohm Tree, who after every time that he played Hamlet, would afterwards be sick and broken all day. Once, when he had played Othello, it cost him so much effort, that afterwards he lay in bed for a few weeks. Boris, however, didn't want to work. He always went after things that came easily, light-heartedly, about which you didn't have to waste a lot of energy and feelings. [...] Therefore, he always appeared in light plays, in melodramas, for which he didn't have to exert himself. He had in himself all the capabilities to also act in better plays, and he showed this in the few plays by Gordin, Kobrin, Lieben, Avrom Shomer, Osip Dymov in which he appeared with great success. Nobody has any doubt that he could have been a great actor; but for this it would be necessary for him to work, and Boris didn't want to work.⁵⁴²

Bessie Thomashefsky differentiated between the great actors like Mogulesco and Schildkraut, and those whose careers were based on their magnetism. She put both Boris Thomashefsky and Adler in the latter category.

There are actors that make an impression as soon as they appear on stage. It is something that exists in their impressive figure, in their manner, their movements, their steps, which immediately draw the attention for the audience. Of such actors it is said that God blessed them with the right figures, because the first impression is often dependent on their figure, their physical appearance, their "geshtel" (demeanor) as we say in common Yiddish. Such an actor was Adler and many others; also, Thomashefsky, at whom it was simply a pleasure to look. And when such actors have talent, besides their figure and demeanor, the impression they make upon their first entrance becomes stronger and stronger. The longer they stay on the stage, their effect on the spectator grows and he falls entirely under their spell.⁵⁴³

In Bessie's view then, even if some of the magnetic actors also had talent, their primary strength came from their appearance and the aura they exuded. Not so the greats like Mogulesco and Schildkraut, whose ability to become the characters they played was the source of their greatness.

Most of Bessie Thomashefsky's views on acting were expressed in relation to other actors and not in relation to her own acting. She could tell the difference between a great actor and a non-great one. She believed that Boris Thomashefsky did not become a great actor because he did not want to work and that Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky were both given physical appearances that cast a spell on the audience. But we do not know what she thought

⁵⁴² Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 22, 1935, 5, repeated verbatim on Nov. 2, 1935.

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, Nov. 23, 1935, 3.

of her own acting. Was she capable of greatness like those she admired? Was she willing to put in all the work necessary, unlike Boris Thomashefsky? How much of her success was dependent on her looks, her aura?

When she compared herself to Mogulesco, whom she idolized, she referred to herself negatively as an actress. When Mogulesco lost his voice while playing Feitl Pavloya in *The Jewish Immigrants*, Bessie Thomashefsky was called in to take his place. She felt that replacing him in that role was like innocently being sent to the electric chair. She did not want to do the role but felt she has no choice. Of her performance, she wrote: "My Feitl was Feitl the way Kuni Leml is Hamlet."⁵⁴⁴ From among the four autobiographers we are studying, this type of self-parody is found only in the writings of Bessie Thomashefsky. She was the only one to admit to real human weaknesses and doubts as to her own greatness as an actor. She did not belittle herself, but neither did she delude herself that she stood beside Mogulesco and Schildkraut, two truly great actors in her eyes. She said of her attitude toward critics, "I never belonged to the theater-people who always complained about the critics. I was thankful for their good, warm words, and if they sometimes were critical and told me off as it should be, I took it like a sport..."⁵⁴⁵

In general, Bessie Thomashefsky showed greater honesty in her autobiography than the other actors in this study. She spoke of her failure in her debut at the Romanian Opera House in New York with a candor not found elsewhere. She wrote, "I didn't conquer the world. No. I acted that evening like someone with a toothache: My voice was stale, my brain was like buckwheat, and I made a nice amount of 'slips' [mistakes in the text - Y.F.]."⁵⁴⁶

When speaking of the way Boris Thomashefsky brought the Russian Jewish actor Morris Morrison to the Yiddish stage, she wrote:

Boris deserves credit for bringing Morrison to the Yiddish stage, just as he later did with the immortal Schildkraut. The Yiddish theater will always be in debt to Boris for being the only one who had the ambition to bring the best talents from other stages to our stage. This great debt even his enemies can't deny. With this he compensated for a lot of the artistic sins which he committed as a theater director and as an actor.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 265-266.

⁵⁴⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec 21, 1935, 9.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., Dec. 15, 1935, 3.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., Dec. 10, 1935, 5.

She tried to be fair to Boris Thomashefsky and commend him for bringing the best talents from other stages to the Yiddish stage. But that did not blind her to the fact that he committed many “artistic sins” both as a theater director and as an actor.

Bessie Thomashefsky saw Morrison as another one of the great artists who crossed her path, from whom she learned of the higher aspects of the acting profession. When speaking of how Morrison went out to work as a farm laborer, wood chopper, and other menial jobs in order to see life firsthand, she quoted Morrison as saying:

The problem with many artists is that they are torn from reality. They don't know life, and therefore when they come to give a picture of everyday life, to portray reality as it is, present living, naked people with all their suffering and natural inclinations, with their light and shadows – when that artist comes to present all this, it comes out as a caricature rather than a living likeness.⁵⁴⁸

She then added: “For many his words rang a little strangely, he was speaking ‘above the heads’ of the people who surrounded him. For me it only later became clear how true his words were.” Morrison seems to be a forerunner of total Method actors like Daniel-Day Lewis, who confined himself to a wheelchair throughout the entire shooting period of *My Left Foot*, or learned how to live off the land, make canoes, and hunt and skin animals when filming *The Last of the Mohicans*.⁵⁴⁹ Bessie expressed her recognition of the truth of his words. An actor must know life in order to act convincingly.

And yet, despite what would seem to be a fine appreciation of the art of acting, Bessie Thomashefsky often spoke of acting in a superficial way that treated acting not as a serious art but rather as a profession whose goal is to be successful and find favor in the eyes of the audience. There is a story she told about her New York debut at Poole's Theater in the role of Vayzusu, Haman's son, in the play *Ahasuerus, or Esther and Haman*. Jacob Adler and Sara Heine were playing Ahasuerus and Esther, the King and Queen in the Purim story. Bessie's role as Vayzusu was a role made famous by Mogulesco, a difficult act to follow. For the first three acts the audience reacted very coldly to Bessie's performance. She wrote: “I felt a frost coming from the audience. The frost entered my soul and froze my bones. My courage fell and I acted like

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., Dec. 9, 1935, 7.

⁵⁴⁹ Daniel Day Lewis, *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/daniel-day-lewis>, accessed July 29, 2020.

someone tied up with string.”⁵⁵⁰ At the end of the third act she was alone onstage singing a couplet. Adler, the director, sensed the audience’s coldness and was impatient with her singing. He whispered to her from backstage to stop singing and get off the stage. When she did not listen, Adler brought down the curtain on her. She bent down and crawled in front of the curtain and finished her song. She then had no way to get off the stage, so she jumped into the prompter’s box. The audience responded with an uproar and enthusiastic applause. Bessie wrote, “From that moment on, I was declared a great success and my reputation in New York became established.”

This story was told in great detail in her first autobiography and retold in even greater detail in her second.⁵⁵¹ She was very proud of the determination, chutzpah, and initiative that enabled her to create such a moment and become a great success. But she betrayed no awareness that an inspired moment onstage cannot turn a poor performance into a good one. She seemed unaware of the lesson Jacob Adler taught his wife Sara: “I believe that every detail is important. In order for one to live inside his role, he has to play it well from beginning to end.”⁵⁵²

Another indication that Bessie Thomashefsky’s view of acting was of a profession based on ego can be found in her statement that “Jealousy is as necessary for the actor as air is for breathing. One actor must be jealous of the other in order to survive. If the actor has no more artistic jealousy, it means that he has no more ambition, and he may leave the stage. In any event, he will no longer achieve anything.”⁵⁵³ This vision of the actor as someone who must be driven by jealousy is far from the idealized definition of what it means to be an actor that Bessie attributed to Adler. She recalled joining Adler, Thomashefsky, and their acting troupe at a dinner in Chicago in their early acting days, before they all began appearing in New York. She wrote that Adler spoke at the dinner, waving his hand majestically as if he was in front of a large audience, and speaking dramatically: “We are artists – yes artists. Not ordinary people, but artists, chosen by God and endowed with a gift, which no ordinary people possess, and as

⁵⁵⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 1, 1935, 3.

⁵⁵¹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 158-159; *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 1, 1935, 3.

⁵⁵² Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, April 5, 1938, 3.

⁵⁵³ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 188.

artists we therefore are happy, because if we are sad we cannot create [...].”⁵⁵⁴ The speech she put in the mouth of Adler was quoted by her decades after it took place and seemed to have made an impression on her. But it was only part of the picture for Bessie Thomashefsky. She seemed to be an actress who understood that acting can be an art connected with human greatness, but oftentimes she herself was caught in the smaller sides of the profession. Her writing about acting reveals that she gave much thought to the subject, but her level of abstraction in understanding the principles of good acting did not reach those of either Jacob or Sara Adler.

Despite Bessie’s efforts to present herself in her autobiography as a serious, realistic actress, it is doubtful that this is an authentic representation of her acting career. Bessie’s specialty for much of her career was playing either comic supporting roles, including men, which she played in a caricature-like vein, or the comic musical lead, the soubrette, but not the dramatic prima donna. Comic roles in those days were usually played in a more formalistic style than a realistic one. It may be that in the dramatic roles of which she was proud, her approach was more realistic. Indeed, the roles in which she claimed to have become the character she played – *Shulamis*, Yehudis in *Uriel Acosta*, or Manichka in Gordin’s *The Pogrom in Europe*, are all dramatic ones. In comic roles, like that of Feitl Pavloya in *The Jewish Immigrants* or Vayzusu in *Ahasuerus, or Esther and Haman*, both roles originated by Mogulesco, she viewed herself as a poor imitation of the great original.⁵⁵⁵

Sara Adler mentioned Bessie Thomashefsky as an actress who usually played light roles and therefore could not cope with a great dramatic role such as Katyusha Maslova in Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*. She wrote that because of this Boris Thomashefsky did not consider her when looking to cast someone opposite himself in the production of *Resurrection* he wished to direct and star in.⁵⁵⁶

A complete outsider’s view of Bessie Thomashefsky as an actress and the roles she usually played, is presented in the anonymous “Editor’s Introduction” to Bessie Thomashefsky’s second autobiography, published in *Der tog* on Oct. 12, 1935. The writer, who seems to have

⁵⁵⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 27, 1935, 5.

⁵⁵⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 21, 1935, 9; Dec. 1, 1935, 3.

⁵⁵⁶ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 1, 1938, 2. The Adlers stole the idea of presenting *Resurrection* from Thomashefsky, and the latter never presented his version of the play.

known her personally, called her “the great actress, who has excelled onstage in many comic roles [...]” He wrote that she was “one of the best soubrettes that the Yiddish theater produced, although she also excelled in dramatic roles.” He was very complimentary of Bessie and quite critical of Boris Thomashefsky, writing: “In her days as an actress Bessie acted in cheap plays. The roles in which she appeared were often even vulgar. Those roles were not entirely to her liking. But she had no choice, because she had to act with Boris, and Boris had no desire for ‘literature.’ The plays with the Torahlach and the white-blue flags made more of an impression on him.”⁵⁵⁷ Although the roles were vulgar, this writer averred, Bessie always acted with a charm that captivated the audience. It would therefore seem that the realism that Bessie claimed to have striven for was an ideal not often achieved in her career as an actress. Vulgar comic parts in cheap plays would appear to suit formalistic acting more than realism. This might explain why so much of Bessie’s examination of first-rate acting related to others, like Mogulesco and Schildkraut, and less to her own performances.



Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky

⁵⁵⁷ “Editor’s Introduction” to *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 12, 1935, 4. The reference to Thomashefsky’s love of “Torahlach and white-blue flags” is the exact derogatory description of Thomashefsky given by the head of the Hebrew Actors’ Union, Yosef Barondess, quoted in *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 7, 1935, 4. Barondess, who was a friend of Bessie Thomashefsky but was very critical of Boris Thomashefsky, may possibly have been the author of this Introduction. Another possibility is the theater critic William Edlin, who wrote theater criticism for *Der tog* in 1935 when the autobiography began to appear. She wrote fondly of Edlin in *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 21, 1935, 9, but wrote that “on a few occasions he did not stroke Boris or my cheek.”

4. Boris Thomashefsky



Boris Thomashefsky as Hamlet (1894)



***The Broken Violin* (1918)**

Boris Thomashefsky did not analyze his own acting style or speak of any specific acting technique. He rarely discussed what he experienced while acting. His discussion of acting was usually quite external. At most he would speak critically of actors who did not memorize their roles, such as Spivakovsky or Sophie Karp.⁵⁵⁸

Concerning his own performances, he emphasized how he looked and the use he made of his body, whether it be in the role of *Alexander, Prince of Jerusalem*, about which he wrote: “People said that I was so good looking in the lead role as ‘Alexander’ that when they saw me in the role, they fell in love with me”; or his role in Lateiner’s *The 400 Years* where his wet body attracted a large audience, especially of women; or his costume in *Kuzari* as a Jewish Cherkasy (Ukrainian Cossack) that he claimed brought a large audience of prostitutes to the theater.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 208, 333-338.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 281, 316-317, 380.

There was only one occasion on which Thomashefsky referred to “living the role he played.”⁵⁶⁰ When he had to play a father whose child had died, in Hurwitz’s *Yifas Toar*, shortly after his daughter Esther died, he told how he broke down crying on stage and they had to lower the curtain.⁵⁶¹ This incident is so exceptional in Thomashefsky’s writings that it only emphasizes how his writings generally lacked any mention of feelings or experience while acting. The one time he actually felt something while acting, it disrupted the play rather than enhancing it.

Thomashefsky seemed to be working hard to show the reader how successful he was as an actor. He repeated the words “great success,” apropos his various appearances on the stage, quite compulsively, suggesting a lack of security concerning his value as an actor.⁵⁶² He may have founded the first Yiddish theater in New York, but that theater was an amateur one, and he left New York to appear in other cities when professional troupes from Europe began arriving in New York. Although Thomashefsky did not openly admit that this was the reason for his decision to leave New York, he was honest enough to say that he felt threatened by the arrival of the professional actors from Europe. Upon hearing of their planned arrival, during the intermission of a performance of *Koldunya*, in which he played the female lead with his boy soprano, he experienced anxiety which caused his voice to crack, and he could not reach the high C. Afterward he had to stop performing until his voice finished changing. When later he read in the newspaper that “real Yiddish actors” were arriving in New York, he became sick for three weeks.

Later on, when Boris Thomashefsky saw a European troupe perform, he was critical of various aspects of the company. He called the leading man, Silberman, a weak actor, and his wife, who played a minor role, “looked helpless on stage,” though he praised Sara

⁵⁶⁰ In regard to other actors’ performances, we do see that when performing in Odessa with Esther-Rochel Kaminska’s Yiddish Art Troupe in 1913, he hailed the natural acting of Kaminska and the actors in her troupe, saying that “each actor lived inside his role, in the scenes, and also in the whole play.” (Boris Thomashefsky, “Interesante yidishe shoyshpiler in Ades [Interesting Yiddish Actors in Odessa]”, *Forverts*, Dec. 7, 1913, 3). He wrote that Kaminska acted “naturally, like life itself.” (“Thomashefsky’s geshprekh mit Mendeley Moykher Sforim [Thomashefsky’s Talk with Mendeley Moykher Sforim]”, *Forverts*, Dec. 14, 1913, 5).

⁵⁶¹ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 303. This incident is reminiscent of the aforementioned story of Polus playing Electra in fourth-century Athens while carrying his son’s ashes.

⁵⁶² Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 88, 124, 162, 221, 237, 241, 242, 245, 274, 275, 279, 281, 297, 302, 303, 329. On page 301, he spoke of *Hamlet* as having an “incredible success.” Then, he admitted that “the success didn’t last long” because the audience preferred lighter material.

Heimowitz⁵⁶³ in the lead role of Shulamis. When he later met the company, he wrote that they “made a little fun of my troupe.” He defended his company and claimed they had nothing to be ashamed of alongside The Oriental Opera Company. Both he and his acting troupe, Thomashefsky assured the reader, were first class and not mere amateurs. However, his description of the threat he experienced upon the arrival of the actors from Europe and his memory of their supercilious attitude towards him and his company, disclosed a lack of security on his part.⁵⁶⁴ Although he was only seventeen at the time of his meeting with them, and could not be considered the equal of the older, experienced actors, and there is no question that over the years his abilities as an actor improved greatly,⁵⁶⁵ still his insecurity as well as his inability to admit to any weakness is very apparent in this passage.

There is one place where Thomashefsky openly admitted to being less than professional during the earlier part of his career. Several years later, after having already appeared onstage with Jacob and Sara Adler, when he hosted The Romanian Opera Company, in which Mogulesco, Kessler, Feinman, and Finkel all appeared in his theater in Chicago during the summer, he admitted:

Acting with them, I felt I was among real actors. I felt more assured in my roles. I felt that the Yiddish theater is not a free-for-all where every scoundrel can go up on stage and do whatever occurs to his scoundrel’s head. Now, for the first time my eyes were opened. I saw that for years I had been stumbling, lost. And to tell the truth, if I hadn’t looked around, if I hadn’t caught on in time, who knows where I would have stumbled to ... The public had a different opinion of me than I had of myself. Note how they came to my theater in great masses when I played with my fellow amateur actors. Without “attractions,” without Adler, without Spivakovsky and the other talented Yiddish artists, I still made good business with my poor troupe.

I came home from the train station after parting with my colleagues greatly disturbed. My mind began working: When and how will I unite with such artists as Mogulesco, Kessler, Feinman, Finkel and the others? I was sure that when that would happen, my name would grow.⁵⁶⁶

In a rare moment of self-criticism, not only did Thomashefsky admit to feeling amateurish, as a young actor, alongside his more professional colleagues, he even called his own troupe “my fellow amateur actors.” One can also sense his aspiration to a higher level of

⁵⁶³ Later Sara Adler.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 129, 131, 156-159.

⁵⁶⁵ See Abe Kahan, Foreword to Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, V; Edna Nahshon, *New York’s Yiddish Theater, From the Bowery to Broadway*, 122.

⁵⁶⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 263.

artistic expression than he previously had attained. It seems significant to me that even in this rare expression of self-doubt, self-criticism, and aspiration to work with “real actors” and improve himself as an artist, he summarized his desires with the statement that if he were able to connect with greater artists than in the past, his “name would grow.” Even here, his momentary preoccupation with art for art's sake was amended, and he returned to his usual pragmatic desire for fame and fortune.

Thomashefsky's design in writing his autobiography was to establish himself as the founder of the American Yiddish theater. When he began acting in plays in New York, no other Yiddish theater company existed in America. He wanted the reader to be well aware of this. It was important for him to downplay the degree to which his early theater troupe was an amateur one in order to build himself up as Father of the American Yiddish Theater. As late as 1888, six years after Thomashefsky had begun performing, and after both The Oriental Opera Company and The Romanian Opera Company were well-established in New York, Adler still referred to Thomashefsky's company as “for the most part amateur Yiddish actors in Chicago.”⁵⁶⁷ Thomashefsky wanted that narrative to be obscured.

Even later in Thomashefsky's career, when he was an established star and no longer an amateur by any means, questions as to the artistic value of his productions were raised. We have seen how even Bessie Thomashefsky herself spoke of “the artistic sins which he committed as a theater director and as an actor.”⁵⁶⁸ Because of this question of his artistic value as an actor, both in his own eyes and in the eyes of others, when Boris Thomashefsky heard that Adler had slandered him onstage after announcing that he would play *Othello* by insinuating that Shakespeare is beyond the reach of Thomashefsky,⁵⁶⁹ he decided that he would play *Hamlet*. He would prove that he could do Shakespeare if he chose to. Then, although he had directed *Alexander, the Crown Prince of Jerusalem* himself, and would continue to direct all his future productions on the Yiddish stage, Boris Thomashefsky decided to hire another director to direct him in *Hamlet*. And that director was not from the Yiddish theater but a German director from the Irving Place Theater named Walter who “explain[ed] Shakespeare's

⁵⁶⁷ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, July 11, 1925, 11; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 297, see Rosenfeld's footnote there. See also Nahshon, *New York's Yiddish Theater*, 26.

⁵⁶⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 10, 1935, 5.

⁵⁶⁹ See Chapter One, Section C above.

intent to him.”⁵⁷⁰ The hard work he told of in learning the part paid off and he apparently succeeded in his desire to prove that he too could be a serious actor, applauded by both the critics and the public.⁵⁷¹ Boris Thomashefsky’s need to prove his value as an actor was very pronounced in this story, and his decision to take a non-Jewish director to direct him was indicative both of what he thought of his own capabilities and of the state of the Yiddish theater at the time.

In his foreword to Thomashefsky’s autobiography, Abe Cahan cited the latter’s development from matinee idol to serious actor.⁵⁷² Jacob and Sara Adler both clearly charted a similar journey they made during their career – Jacob Adler, from matinee idol to serious actor while still acting in Russia,⁵⁷³ Sara Adler, from “soubrette” in operettas to dramatic actress.⁵⁷⁴ Boris Thomashefsky’s journey, alluded to by Cahan, was mostly camouflaged in Thomashefsky’s version of his life story, because of his need to constantly assert his own talent and success.

How Thomashefsky hid his failures can be seen when comparing two versions of the story of his New York premiere in the lead role in Hurwitz’s *David ben Jesse*. The story was told by both Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky in their autobiographies. In both of their versions, he was informed on the same day that he arrived in New York that he must appear in the lead role that evening. Abba Schoengold, who usually played the part, was angry at the company for bringing in a new romantic lead and refused to appear. From there on, their narratives part ways.

According to Boris Thomashefsky, he was a resounding success in the role of King David, thanks to his good looks. Feinman and Hurwitz called him “the best-looking romantic lead in the world,” he boasted, and “the newspapers loved my good-looking appearance.”⁵⁷⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky told a different story. According to her, the actors in the Romanian Opera House spoke *Daytshmerish*,⁵⁷⁶ which Thomashefsky was unfamiliar with. As a result, he sounded ridiculous when he spoke on stage and was met with laughter from both the audience and the

⁵⁷⁰ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 298-299.

⁵⁷¹ Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, 84-86.

⁵⁷² Abe Cahan, Foreword to Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, V.

⁵⁷³ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Mar. 23, 1917-April 5, 1917; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 129-133.

⁵⁷⁴ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Mar. 19, 1938, 8.

⁵⁷⁵ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 268-274.

⁵⁷⁶ See footnote 373 above.

actors on stage.⁵⁷⁷ Referring to this experience in her second autobiography, she wrote that Boris Thomashefsky's unexpected performance in the role "was a fiasco, an ugly failure. This story cost me much health, and Boris was ashamed to lift up his eyes for a few days. He walked around glum and angry at the world and people."⁵⁷⁸ He may have looked gorgeous, but it did not turn his performance into the resounding success he said it was.

The question of the value of Thomashefsky's acting seems to hover over his autobiography and can explain why "success" as measured by fame and money seemed to be his primary goal, as opposed to artistic merit. If he aspired to nothing more than popularity based on good looks and sex appeal, and to monetary success, then he could omit all mention of his acting or his debacle with the Romanian Opera Company.

Bessie Thomashefsky, as we recall, spoke openly of what she thought of Boris Thomashefsky as an actor, with a mixture of admiration and criticism. Jacob Adler, who was a central figure in the autobiographies of both Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, almost completely left Boris Thomashefsky out of his autobiography.⁵⁷⁹

In her autobiography, Sara Adler mentioned Boris Thomashefsky a few times, usually without being condescending or overtly critical, but there is again a marked difference between the place given to him, and that given to David Kessler, whom she called a "great artist."⁵⁸⁰ She first wrote of Thomashefsky concerning Heine's company's attempted premiere in its own theater in *Koldunya* in New York in 1884, an event disturbed by the Jewish Immigration Committee. Sara Adler related the tale similarly to the way Thomashefsky wrote of the disruption of his performance of the same play two years before. She wrote of him respectfully, but admitted that his plays had a dilettantish character: "Boris Thomashefsky at that time was no novice. He already had a certain amount of experience putting on plays in New York. Although they all had a dilettantish character, his experience could have saved us from much worry and bother."⁵⁸¹ Later, when they joined forces in Chicago, she called Thomashefsky "our partner" and wrote of his having a much better understanding of how to deal with people than

⁵⁷⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 176-177.

⁵⁷⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 12, 1935, 8.

⁵⁷⁹ I will elaborate more on this point in Chapter Three, Section B1.

⁵⁸⁰ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Feb. 24, 1938, 3.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, Jan. 6, 1938, 3.

Adler, but she did not address his artistic merit.⁵⁸² In later years, when Adler, Kessler, and Thomashefsky became the three leading male figures in Yiddish theater, she referred many times to Kessler, usually with great regard,⁵⁸³ but rarely to Thomashefsky. She did not speak of the partnerships of Adler and Thomashefsky in New York, nor did she mention the two couples being neighbors, matters that were emphasized by both Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky in their autobiographies. Kessler was spoken of not only as a great actor but also as a great friend, numerous times.⁵⁸⁴

There can be no question that in terms of the public, Thomashefsky was as important and popular a figure in the Yiddish theater as either Adler or Kessler. His minor role in the autobiographies of both Jacob and Sara Adler seems to indicate that his own self-doubt about the artistic value of his stage appearances was shared by the Odessa sophisticates, Jacob and Sara Adler. We have seen that the Adlers both strove for realism, whether of a kind that emphasized “living the role,” or of a type that depended largely on technique. They probably perceived Thomashefsky as an actor leaning towards formalism, as is often the case with actors who are charismatic and lean heavily on their physical presence in order to have an effect on the audience. Besides the question of acting style, it was undoubtedly the crass and vulgar nature of most of Thomashefsky’s productions that caused the Adlers to try to distance themselves from him in their autobiographies, although in real life they were strongly connected.

Thomashefsky appeared onstage in America shortly after the period in which the idol of the American stage was Edwin Forrest (1806-1872). In the biography of Edwin Forrest written by Montrose J. Moses, the American author and drama critic, we find a description of that actor that is startlingly similar to the picture we have of Thomashefsky, based on his writings and those of his wife, Bessie Thomashefsky:

The silence of Forrest regarding the art of the actor, save a casual reference here and there, would indicate that his own practice was outward rather than inward. In fact, so outward that he sought to ‘fix’ the impression in pictures. His acting was himself – depths of voice, pauses, starts, glances, display of biceps, firmness of leg muscles ... outward expression and pose of

⁵⁸² Ibid., April 28, 1938, 2.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., May 14, 1938, 7: “the distinguished actors like Adler and Kessler [...]”

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., July 28, 1938, 3; Aug. 23, 1938, 3; Jan. 10, 1939, 3; Jan. 12, 1939, 5; Jan. 24, 1939, 3; Feb. 23, 1939, 2; March 9, 1939, 2; March 11, 1939, 7 et al.

majesty and power were there, with cavernous depths within, but there seemed to be lacking those qualities of mind and spirit which are a measure of the greatest acting.⁵⁸⁵

Both Forrest and Thomashefsky were silent in their autobiographical writings concerning the art of the actor, and both relied on their voices and on their physical presence, including “firmness of leg muscles” for their power over the audience. It would appear that, in general, the phrase “his acting was himself” suited Thomashefsky as well as Forrest. It is interesting to note that a terrible rivalry developed between Edwin Forrest and William Charles Macready, who in opposition to Forrest’s emphasis on externals, stressed, like Jacob Adler, the ability of the actor to feel the character’s “finest quiverings of emotion, to comprehend the thoughts that are hidden under words, and thus possess one’s-self of the actual mind of the individual man.”⁵⁸⁶ There was also an element of class struggle at play in their rivalry. Forrest appealed to the lower class and Macready to the upper one. So, too, Thomashefsky bragged about how he attracted prostitutes to his performance in *Kuzari*. Of Adler, he noted that “in general, Adler’s fans were from the Jewish-Russian intelligentsia.”⁵⁸⁷ It is possible that class differences played a role, too, in the rivalry between the *patriotn* (fans) of Thomashefsky and Adler. The rivalry between Forrest and Macready fans resulted in a riot at the Astor Place Theater in New York in May, 1849, which led to the death of over 20 people. The rivalry between the *patriotn* of Adler and Thomashefsky caused disturbances that included broken bones, according to Bessie Thomashefsky, but never resulted in the loss of life.⁵⁸⁸

As we have seen, outside sources seem to differentiate between Thomashefsky’s matinee-idol performances in historical operetta and his more serious roles in realistic plays. Abe Cahan said that in the former he capitalized on his looks but did not display real acting ability, whereas in the latter, he revealed himself as a fine artist, showing “artistic intelligence

⁵⁸⁵ Montrose Jonas Moses, *The Fabulous Forrest: The Record of an American Actor* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1929), quoted by Cole and Chinoy, 544-545.

⁵⁸⁶ Cole and Chinoy, 354.

⁵⁸⁷ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 316-317, 374.

⁵⁸⁸ Robert McNamara, “The Astor Place Riot of 1849,” *ThoughtCo*, <https://www.thoughtco.com/astor-place-riot-1773778>, accessed July 7, 2021; Cole and Chinoy, 544; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 23, 1935, 7.

greater than that of Kessler.”⁵⁸⁹ Kobrin had a similar view of him, as we recall, portraying him like a split personality. We similarly have seen that Hutchins Hapgood was critical of Thomashefsky in his heroic roles but admitted that he was excellent when he played an unsentimental character instead of a hero.⁵⁹⁰ The two sides to Thomashefsky’s acting would not be apparent if we based our understanding of his acting ability only on the autobiographies of the personalities in this study. Jacob and Sara Adler’s omission of Thomashefsky from their memoirs, despite their long professional relationship with him, makes him seem to be a lesser talent than is reflected in these other sources. Bessie, too, who said that he did not live up to his potential because of laziness, did not paint the picture of a theatrical great. And Boris’s portrayal of himself, with its underscoring of his good looks and financial success, gave the impression that he himself did not acknowledge his two sides as an actor, and related to his own performances quite superficially. Yet there is much evidence that he was capable of skilled and nuanced performances when acting in realistic drama.⁵⁹¹



Boris Thomashefsky, Courtesy of YIVO Library



Boris Thomashefsky

⁵⁸⁹ Zylbercweig, vol. 2, 833. Cahan voiced a similar opinion in his Introduction to Thomashefsky’s autobiography. See Abe Cahan, “Introduction,” Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-gechikhte*. iv-v.

⁵⁹⁰ Kobrin, vol. 2, 127; Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto*, 139-140, 156-159. See Introduction, Section E2.

⁵⁹¹ See above Introduction, Section E2, where we refer at greater length to the praise his artistic side received from both Kobrin and Gorin. See Chapter Three, Section B2 on Thomashefsky’s artistic aspirations and how they may have influenced the way he was viewed as an actor.

II. Directing

A. Introduction

The role of the director as an independent entity who guides the play toward fulfilling his artistic vision developed significantly in Western theater during the twentieth century. The first acknowledged modern director who took control of every aspect of production was George II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, who brought his amateur troupe to Berlin in 1874.⁵⁹² He was followed by André Antoine at the Théâtre Libre in Paris beginning in 1887, Otto Brahm at the Freie Bühne in Berlin beginning in 1889, J. T. Grein at the Independent Theatre in London beginning in 1891, and Constantin Stanislavsky at the Moscow Society for Art and Literature, which later developed into the Moscow Art Theatre, beginning in 1888.⁵⁹³ These directors laid the foundation for the realism that dominated European and American stages in the twentieth century in the areas of acting, sets, and props, and their work also helped guide the theater towards ensemble acting. But beyond these important contributions they reinvented the role of the director and endowed it with much greater status than it had previously.⁵⁹⁴

Plays in the nineteenth century were not “directed” as we understand that term in the present day. The nineteenth-century actor was more or less his or her own master, having played a great many parts in a relatively short time, and taken responsibility for the interpretation of all of them. For example, Henry Irving (1838-1905) reputedly played 428 different parts in his first two and a half years on the stage.⁵⁹⁵ No director could have prepared him for so many roles in such a short time. The vast majority of actors specialized in general character types, such as the hero or heroine, the villain, the comic, etc. Each character was a kind of variation on the general stereotype, and each actor had characteristics of speech, facial

⁵⁹² Chinoy, 22. Although George II is usually credited with revolutionizing the role of the director, there is evidence that much of the success of his acting company was due to his Jewish stage director, Ludwig Chronegk, who was the one responsible for converting each supernumerary into an independent force in the company’s famous crowd scenes. See Isodore Singer and Edgar Mels, “Chronegk, Ludwig,” *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4369-chronegk-ludwig>, accessed June 29, 2021.

⁵⁹³ Esslin, 342-343.

⁵⁹⁴ The mystique surrounding the director was intensified greatly by the change in the understanding of the role of the director in film during the second half of the twentieth century, beginning with the emergence of the Auteur Theory by François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard and others in *Cahiers du cinéma* in the 1950s.

⁵⁹⁵ Booth, 331.

expression, costuming, deportment, and general behavior at his command in playing his own stereotype, and needed no director to aid him. Furthermore, in classical acting styles there were traditional ways of acting the passions, such as grief, remorse, anger or jealousy. There was a pictorial code understood by performers and audience alike, and it was acted as a universal passion felt identically by all men, without changing how it was expressed from character to character. A director was not needed to help find the grief or jealousy particular to a specific character.

As we have seen, until the second half of the nineteenth century, the populations of cities were not large enough to support long runs, and the theaters had to make frequent changes in their repertoires in order to keep the relatively small potential audience of a city or town satisfied. Under such circumstances, even major theaters could not have extensive rehearsals.⁵⁹⁶ The few rehearsals they did have consisted only of going hastily through the dialogue, emphasizing cues, and arranging exits and entrances and relative positions on stage. There were no “rehearsals” as we understand them today. What took place was primarily focused on technical aspects of the staging and not on understanding or interpreting character, or on the meaning of the play and how to best bring it out.

Practically speaking, until the 1880s, plays reached the stage without the services of a director. In England and America, a rehearsal was conducted by the manager, or the leading actor who frequently acted as combined actor-manager, or the deputy manager, or the stage manager, or any combination of these. In Europe, reading rehearsals were common, and there were large directorial staffs who paid much attention to visual arrangements – exits and entrances, blocking, lighting, and sometimes clarity of speech. What was missing both in Continental Europe and in England and America was a director working with actors to develop character, the interpretation of a role, and the interpretation of the play itself.⁵⁹⁷

The director’s role in the theater developed greatly between the 1880s, the period in which the careers of the actors in this study began, and 1914-1916, when Bessie Thomashefsky wrote her first autobiography, or 1916-1925, when Jacob Adler wrote his. Certainly, the role of the director in the theater was understood entirely differently by 1935, when Thomashefsky

⁵⁹⁶ See Chapter One, Section A, above.

⁵⁹⁷ Booth, 329-332.

began publishing his autobiography and Bessie Thomashefsky published her second memoir, or by 1937 when Sara Adler began to publish hers. When Sara Adler wrote her autobiography between 1937 and 1939, her children Stella and Luther were already active participants in The Group Theatre, where directors like Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman took firm control of the ensemble productions complete with realistic acting and sets, and a Stanislavsky-influenced conception of the production as a whole. When reading what the various characters write about directing in the Yiddish theater, the differences between the theater culture of the past which they were writing about and the contemporary theater reality at the time of their writing must be taken into account.

If one of the differences between the theater before the emergence of the independent director and afterward was the amount of rehearsal time that was given to a play, the Yiddish theater undoubtedly reflects the situation of theater before the emergence of the independent director, when plays were rehearsed for only a few days before they were presented to the public. One of the advantages that enabled George II, the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, to reach the level of complete control that he had over his productions was that he was working with amateur, unpaid actors and had almost unlimited time to rehearse. Similarly, André Antoine worked with amateur actors at the *Théâtre Libre* and so was able to put more time into rehearsal.⁵⁹⁸ The first theater that Stanislavsky founded, the Art and Literary Society, in 1888, was an amateur one. Even the Washington Square Players of New York, who brought the high artistic ambitions of directors like Antoine and Brahm to the American theater beginning in 1914, although professionals, performed in a small theater in Washington Square and later in the provinces in Provincetown, Massachusetts as the “Provincetown Playhouse” and not in a mainstream Broadway theater.⁵⁹⁹

Yiddish theater was a professional, commercial venture. The actors depended on the theater for their living, and the theaters were dependent on income from selling tickets. The Yiddish-speaking population of New York could not support a theater like Antoine’s *Théâtre Libre*, or Stanislavsky’s “Art and Literary Society.” This must be taken into account when

⁵⁹⁸ Chinoy, 22-26.

⁵⁹⁹ Cole and Chinoy, 485; Esslin, 352.

examining the various evaluations of the actors in this study of the directing ability of various figures in the Yiddish theater.

Another area of theatrical history that must be understood before analyzing the approaches of our various actors to directing is the subject of the actor-manager. The actor-manager was the leading actor in his own theatrical company, choosing his or her own plays, handling business and financial arrangements, and often taking over his or her own theater and functioning in the role we now call director. The tradition of the actor-manager dominated the nineteenth-century stage in England and America, with male stars such as William Charles Macready, Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Sir George Alexander, Henry Irving, and Edwin Booth. Though less common than their male counterparts, there were also female stars who served as actor-managers, such as Lucia Elizabeth Vestris, Laura Keane, Sarah Bernhardt, and Louisa Lane Drew.⁶⁰⁰ The phenomenon was not confined to England and the United States. In nineteenth-century France one of the dominant figures in the theater was the actor-manager Constant-Benoit Coquelin and nineteenth-century Italy boasted the important actor-manager Cesare Rossi, who discovered Eleonora Duse.⁶⁰¹ The tradition of the actor-manager dates back to long before the nineteenth century. The first actor-manager known to us was Lope de Rueda (d. 1565) in Spain, whose company was described by Cervantes. In sixteenth-century Italy, a Jewish actor-manager, Leone di Somi (1527-1592), headed a company in Mantua that supplied the nobility of Mantua with most of its entertainment. The acknowledged greatest German actor of the eighteenth century was the actor-manager Friedrich Ludwig Schroeder (1744-1816), known as "The Great Schroeder."⁶⁰²

In England the tradition continued to dominate the stage until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. In America, the actor-managers began to dwindle in number and importance during the last decade of the nineteenth century, disappearing almost entirely in 1896 with the emergence of the Theatrical Syndicate which organized the management of theaters and touring companies for commercial benefit.⁶⁰³ Like their contemporaries in England, the actor-

⁶⁰⁰ Frances Annesley Donaldson, *The Actor Managers* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970).

⁶⁰¹ Cole and Chinoy, 190-202, 441.

⁶⁰² Ibid., 44-49, 67-68, 276-277. Di Somi also composed poetry in Hebrew and Italian.

⁶⁰³ Hesketh Pearson, *The Last Actor-Managers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950), Introduction, V; Mona Rebecca Brooks, *The Development of American Theatre Management Practices Between 1830 and 1896*, (Ph.D

managers of the New York Yiddish Stage, Jacob Adler, Boris Thomashefsky, and David Kessler, continued to rule over the Yiddish stage, directing themselves in leading roles in companies they formed and managed even after their counterparts had disappeared on the American stage. After they separated from their husbands, both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler became actor-managers in their own rights, managing their own theaters and companies for a period of time, and choosing and directing the plays they presented.

Very often actor-managers placed themselves and their own performances at the center of the production, using the play as a showcase for their own talents, and were not very concerned with ensemble playing.⁶⁰⁴ Furthermore, they were usually not overly concerned with the intentions of the playwright and saw the playwright's creation as a springboard for their own acting. George Bernard Shaw, who saw important actor-managers like Henry Irving and Herbert Beerbohm Tree perform, said that "Irving's Shylock was a creation which he thrust successfully upon Shakespeare's play; indeed, all Irving's impersonations were changelings." As a result, said Shaw, the actor-manager was anathema to master authors. He therefore had to confine himself either to the works of dead authors who could not interfere with him, or else, very occasionally, live authors who needed him because otherwise they could not have their works produced. Herbert Beerbohm Tree, Irving's rival and successor, also "felt that he needed nothing from an author but a literary scaffold on which to exhibit his creations," in the words of Shaw.⁶⁰⁵ This was the approach that Jacob Gordin tried to eradicate in the Yiddish theater when he brought his plays to the New York Yiddish stage beginning in 1891.

In the following section, we will analyze the places in which our respective actors related to the art of directing and their views on it.

diss., Texas Tech University, 1981); Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz, *The Living Stage – A History of World Theater* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1955), 386.

⁶⁰⁴ Pearson, 13, 17.

⁶⁰⁵ George Bernard Shaw, "From the Point of View of a Playwright" in *Herbert Beerbohm Tree: Some Memories of him and of his Art*, collected by Max Beerbohm (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1920), 240-243.

B. Their Approach to Directing

1. Jacob Adler and Directing in the New York Yiddish Theater

As actor-managers, Adler and Thomashefsky both served as directors as well as actors in the various plays their companies presented. Although Adler wrote eloquently and analytically about his approach to acting, he was completely silent on the art of directing. This disparity raises questions as to his understanding of the importance of a good director. These questions are compounded when we see how our other protagonists related to him as a director, both openly and indirectly.

Both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler intimated that Adler was not a good director. “Until Gordin came,” Bessie Thomashefsky wrote in her second autobiography,

it was not known on the Yiddish stage what “directing” was, meaning putting up a play with a plan, which was previously worked on, and where every detail, every little thing that had to do with the play, beginning with studying the roles, developing every character and ending with the scenery and props, was thought about in advance. [...] We Jews didn't even know that such a creature existed that is called a “director.” [...] Years ago, the custom was for the “star” to be the director. He was the boss who would distribute the parts, show the actors how to act and also had a say in what scenery we should have, what costumes the actors should wear, or what music should be prepared. But you have to have in mind that someone can be a very good actor and not have the faintest idea how to direct a play. The only Yiddish actor who had a little bit of an idea about the art of directing was Boris. He had an inborn talent for it. The other “stars” didn't understand a thing about putting on a play.

The only thing that the “star” knew was that he had to take the main role for himself and if he had a wife or a lover then she would get the main female role. The rest didn't matter to him.⁶⁰⁶

As we recall, the primary male stars of the Yiddish stage who were also actor-managers, during the early years of the Yiddish stage in New York, were Boris Thomashefsky, Jacob Adler and David Kessler. Clearly, according to Bessie Thomashefsky, only Boris Thomashefsky's role as a director was worth mentioning. She put her finger on the problematics of the actor-manager as a director – he was concerned primarily with his own role in the play and possibly with that

⁶⁰⁶ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebn's-geshikhte*, Dec. 18, 1935, 5.

of his “wife or lover.”⁶⁰⁷ Furthermore, he might not know how to direct a play, although he was a good actor. When she said that “we Jews didn't even know that such a creature existed that is called a ‘director’,” she failed to take into account that in the period parallel to that she was writing of in the American theater, they also “didn’t even know that such a creature existed that is called a ‘director’.” Indeed, one of the few important independent directors of the early twentieth century in New York was Arthur Hopkins, who directed the English-language production of *The Merchant of Venice* with Jacob Adler on Broadway in 1904.⁶⁰⁸

Bessie Thomashefsky credited Gordin with bringing the concept of the director to the Yiddish stage. Although Gordin brought certain norms of the independent directors to the Yiddish theater, particularly faithfulness to the written text without ad-libbing, he was not, indeed, a director, but more in the category of the author-manager, in the tradition of Molière.⁶⁰⁹ The author-manager used his abilities as a director in order to serve the text he had written, just as the actor-manager used the text in order to serve his performance. In the history of theater, the tradition of author-manager preceded that of the actor-manager. The independent director was not merely at the service of the text. He was an artist in his own right, interpreting the text through all the theatrical means at his disposal. He either translated the author’s text to the realm of theater, creating a separate phase of one and the same intellectual operation begun by the author, such as in the theater of Jacques Copeau (1879 – 1949), or else created a work of art in which the author’s text was used to service the vision of the director, like in the theater of Gordon Craig (1872–1966) or Adolphe Appia (1862-1928).⁶¹⁰ Gordin’s insistence on loyalty to his text was not as a director but as a writer, and reflects not only a battle he waged with Yiddish actors of his times, but a battle George Bernard Shaw waged at the time with actor-managers such as Henry Irving and Herbert Beerbohm Tree, as we have previously demonstrated.⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁷ Probably an allusion to Boris Thomashefsky’s showcasing of his lover, Regina Zuckerberg, in his productions after separating from Bessie. When Sara Adler began starring in Jacob Adler’s productions, she was his lover and not yet his wife. David Kessler was known for being faithful to his wife. He often starred opposite Bertha Kalich on stage.

⁶⁰⁸ Chinoy, 73.

⁶⁰⁹ See Cole and Chinoy, 375.

⁶¹⁰ Chinoy, 42-48.

⁶¹¹ See Chapter Two, Section IIA, above.

Sara Adler echoed Bessie Thomashefsky's sentiments on the subject of directors in the Yiddish theater in New York:

Our theater, in her time of creation and development, produced a whole row of giant talents, great artists, who can be compared with the famous actors of Russia and many other lands. Neither were we lacking in talented Yiddish playwrights. In one detail we were always weak, almost helpless. We never evaluated enough the importance of a director – a man who usually occupied the place of honor in theaters by all other nations.

The Yiddish theater and especially the American Yiddish theater, developed with such a stormy momentum, that before we had the time to look around we already had the star system, and managers and "box offices." [...] The star's word becomes like a law. He executes everything. He was the dictator. All the actors and all the details of the scene are always subjected to the caprices of one or another famous actor or actress. Who knows if this was not one of the main reasons that the time of our dramatic glory passed so quickly?⁶¹²

It is clear that Sara Adler's harsh criticism of the Yiddish theater stars who functioned as directors included the star to whom she was married. She wrote that the Yiddish theater had "a whole row of giant talents, great artists, who can be compared with the famous actors of Russia and many other lands." Jacob Adler would most certainly be one of the great artists she spoke of. But when these same great talents also served as directors, the result was harmful to the Yiddish theater, in her eyes, and may have caused its time of glory to pass quickly.

Like Bessie Thomashefsky's criticism, Sara Adler's too seemed somewhat anachronistic. The trend toward a director who occupied the place of honor in the theater began with the appearance of Stanislavsky, who only rose to prominence in the Moscow Art Theater in 1898, with the production of *The Seagull*. Directors who were venerated in the world of the theater at the beginning of the twentieth century, like Max Reinhardt (1873-1943) or Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), were rarities until the 1930s, when the Yiddish theater declined not because of a lack of directors, but because of the lack of a Yiddish-speaking public. In retrospect, in 1937, after witnessing her children Stella and Luther blossom at the Group Theater under directors such as Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman, who emphasized ensemble acting, Sara Adler diagnosed the problem of the Yiddish theater as a lack of directors.

⁶¹² Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, July 13, 1937, 5.

While Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler did not openly criticize Adler as a director and only intimated as to his insufficiency, we can see direct criticism of him in the writings of Yiddish playwright Leon Kobrin. In his memoirs, Kobrin praised Adler as an actor of magnetic attraction to the audience, who was constantly trying to improve his performance even after months in a role, and who brought something new to the performance every night. But he also opined that Adler “never was a real director, in the true sense. [...] True, he devoted himself seriously to the production of a play, but he always had his own two eyes held on his role.” He described how Adler would come to rehearsals with a large notebook full of notes on how the play should be performed, but the vast majority of the notes had to do with his own part. He didn’t understand that a supporting cast directed properly could actually improve the quality of the performance of the main character. He related how Adler would suddenly seem confused in the middle of rehearsals, call to his right-hand man, and give him instructions concerning a detail in his own performance, such as having a new beard made for him by the wigmaker. His preoccupation with his own performance harmed the quality of his productions in general, and it appears that the plays only held up because he worked with first-rate actors alongside him.⁶¹³

Kobrin agreed with both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler that the Yiddish theater in general lacked good directors. His explanation of this phenomenon was as follows:

The Yiddish stage never had an artistically cultivated director. And how should it? Where would he be taken from? The wine cellars and the cantors’ small synagogues (*shtiblech*), where the path to the Yiddish stage began, were not the atmosphere which could generate an artistically cultivated director.⁶¹⁴

Kobrin cited Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, and Gordon Craig as examples of the kind of “artistically cultivated directors” who were lacking in the Yiddish theater.⁶¹⁵ Like Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler, he did not take into account that directors of their kind did not exist in either Russia or England when Adler and Thomashefsky began directing their plays. But from his perspective, writing in 1925, Kobrin accurately lamented the fact that directors of major stature did not appear in the Yiddish theater even after Adler and Thomashefsky ceased appearing on that stage.

⁶¹³ Kobrin, vol. 2, 70, 79-82.

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., 77.

Like Kobrin, Boris Thomashefsky was openly critical of Adler as a director. He told how when trying to direct Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, Adler couldn't get along with the actors and couldn't convince them to cooperate with him. In a state of despair, he asked Thomashefsky to help him direct the play. Thomashefsky described a comical scene, with Adler shouting, "You're not actors, you're shoemakers. A policeman should do rehearsals with you. A Russian Cossack with a whip is what you need!" To which the actors shouted back, "No such idiot as you should be a director. We need a human being with clear thoughts, not crazy thoughts like you have!"⁶¹⁶ Although it is clear that Thomashefsky was trying to illustrate his own superiority as a director and friend of his actors, it is probable that this anecdote has some credence and that Adler, as Kobrin stated, was more of an actor than a director. In all fairness, it must be stated that this was the case with many actor-managers. Hesketh Pearson, who personally knew all the ten actor-managers he wrote of in his book, *The Last Actor Managers*, about the last generation of actor-managers in England, wrote that a theater during rehearsals at the turn of the century "frequently resemble[d] that of a zoo with most of the wild animals at large." Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree, the great English actor-manager who was the contemporary of both Adler and Thomashefsky, is reputed to have had rehearsals that were both chaotic and exhausting, viewing his performance as the only really significant thing about the production.⁶¹⁷

In any event, it would seem that Thomashefsky's view of the director's role was to be someone who could get along with the actors, more than someone who could instill his artistic vision into the production. When it came to the latter, Thomashefsky admitted to Adler's being an artist. Though he described a person with "crazy thoughts" who could not seem to communicate them to the other actors, when he finally put his vision across, he achieved what even Thomashefsky acknowledged to be a work of art far beyond the standard level of the Yiddish theater, one that would even draw members of the Russian intelligentsia to attend the Yiddish theater.⁶¹⁸

Sara Adler also praised Jacob Adler's artistic vision as a director when discussing *Resurrection*. She believed that his idea to have the non-Jewish characters say phrases and

⁶¹⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 357-359.

⁶¹⁷ Pearson, 13-14, 27.

⁶¹⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 374.

certain sentences in Russian instead of in Yiddish was an important contributing factor to the great success of the play.⁶¹⁹

2. Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler

Both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler told stories of how a good director could have a great impact on an actor or a production. Bessie Thomashefsky told how Leon Kobrin's *The Doctors' Wives* was not successful with the audience, and the producer, Edelstein, wanted to close it, until Kobrin took over the direction of the play himself:

At night, Kobrin came to the rehearsal and said to the actors: "Folks, let's get to work!" Kobrin began studying the play with us from the beginning. He worked for hours and hours. The rehearsal lasted almost until morning. He acted out the play himself, playing every role, addressing himself to every detail, going over again and again the functions he wanted to bring out. We were all worn out and couldn't catch our breath. But Kobrin had got us caught up in his fervor. He lit us all up. We forgot about sleeping, about eating. We suddenly saw a new play before our eyes. Kobrin had created a wonder in front of our eyes. The play looked entirely different with every role ringing differently than yesterday. Then I saw not only Leon Kobrin the dramatist, but Leon Kobrin the fine director, the impresario to the tips of his fingers. The result was *The Doctors' Wives*, one of the greatest successes of the Yiddish stage and one of the greatest triumphs in my life as an actress.⁶²⁰

Kobrin's miraculous transformation of *The Doctors' Wives* took place in one all-night rehearsal. Although his interpretation may have greatly aided the actors in understanding the play and playing their roles effectively, one all-night rehearsal can hardly be an example of a play properly directed.

Bessie Thomashefsky was often appreciative of the various talented people that she had worked with and attributed part of her success in roles to them. Sara Adler, too, spoke appreciatively of a director who influenced her acting greatly: Berger, the stage director of Shomer's acting troupe, which was managed by Heimowitz in Russia. He was her first director

⁶¹⁹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 15, 1938, 11. Similarly, Arthur Laurents added Spanish dialogue and lyrics to his revival of *West Side Story* on Broadway in 2008. Steven Spielberg continued with this approach in his 2021 film adaptation of *West Side Story*, in which the Puerto Rican characters spoke Spanish to each other, which was not translated on screen.

⁶²⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 20, 1935, 4.

on the Yiddish stage, and she attributed part of her development as an actress to him. Sara Adler wrote of Berger, that he was:

one of the first creative spirits in Yiddish theater, and partly thanks to his talent as a director, already in the first days of my artistic life, the career of which I am proud was determined. Then my ideal began to be formed; and the ideal to which I strove in the course of all my years in theater was to be a realistic actress and not a melodramatic one. Not just with every role but with every word that I had to say onstage, with every gesture, I always looked faithfully and sincerely to reflect real, everyday life. I always felt that I had to act like a real woman and not a made-up one. For that I have a lot to thank my first teacher, my deeply evaluated Berger, whose figure stands before my eyes to this day.⁶²¹

Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler both expressed their understanding of the importance of a good director. Both women, later in their careers, ran their own theaters.⁶²² The former ran The Bessie Thomashefsky Theater, and the latter ran The Novelty Theater in Brooklyn. It would appear that both of them became actor-managers themselves, as was the case, in general, with actors who ran their own theaters. But neither of them wrote anything in her autobiography of the experience of directing. Altogether, very little was told in either autobiography about this period in their lives, the period that seems most fascinating to a contemporary reader. From a present-day perspective, Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler's successes when they separated from their husbands and set out on their own would appear to be the high point of their stories. This is not the way either of them perceived her life story, however. Sara Adler's autobiography ended with Jacob Adler's death, as if he were its hero. We are told nothing of her role as a director and hear nothing about any play presented in her theater aside from *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Was she different as a director than the stars she criticized who did not know how to direct? Bessie Thomashefsky spoke of Boris Thomashefsky as being a talented director and of the problem of a lack of good directors in the Yiddish theater, but said not a word about her own work as a director when managing The Bessie Thomashefsky Theater after leaving her husband. Sadly, therefore, we must conclude that these women who so impress us with their abilities and their independence still played second

⁶²¹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, July 13, 1937, 5.

⁶²² Another example of the female lead opposite a major actor-manager who parts from her partner and becomes an actor-manager in her own right is Ellen Terry (1848-1928), who played opposite Henry Irving for many years, parting from him in 1903 to manage her own theater. See Cole and Chinoy, 360.

fiddle to their husbands, even after many years of living or working apart; and second, that the importance of the director was not completely internalized by those working in the Yiddish theater, even among the actors who professed to have some understanding of the subject.

4. Boris Thomashefsky

Of the four personalities in this study, the only one to discuss his own directing experiences, even if only minimally, was Thomashefsky, who was the most silent about his acting techniques. He related that as a director he instituted the practice of doing the final rehearsal before the first performance of a play as if the company was performing before an audience. Previously, in Yiddish theater, they ran through the play in rehearsals, leaving the serious acting for the actual performance.⁶²³

As a director, Thomashefsky also emphasized production values, believing that poor production values could seriously damage a play. He was critical of the opera company Hurwitz brought over from Europe, saying that “cheap costumes, scenery, and a small orchestra made it a farce even though there were good singers.”⁶²⁴ He was critical of the Oriental Opera Company doing *Shulamis* with an orchestra of only six, and was proud of presenting Hurwitz’s *King Solomon* with a 28-piece orchestra and a chorus of 30. He attributed his own financial success to his understanding of the importance of “gold and silver artifacts, and electric lights of all colors.”⁶²⁵

In this, Thomashefsky seemed to be following in the footsteps of two renowned English actor-managers of his times: Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1852 – 1917) and Sir George Alexander (1858 – 1918), who staged lavish historical spectacles for the English stage with an extravagant superficial realism. Tree rode onstage on horseback in *Richard II* the way Thomashefsky did in *Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem*. And he filled the stage with water in *The Tempest*, the way Thomashefsky did in *The 400 Years*. Tree visited the United States in

⁶²³ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 374.

⁶²⁴ Ibid., 332.

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 155, 245, 296.

1895 and 1896 and some of his productions may have been seen by Thomashefsky.⁶²⁶

Thomashefsky spoke critically of Morris Finkel's directing at the Romanian Opera House:

When they used to have rehearsals, he sat on a chair near the prompter and didn't allow the actors to talk nonsense. He also didn't allow the actors to smoke during rehearsals, but to instruct the actors as to how to position themselves, tell them how to bring out feelings, suffering, happiness, love, hate – these things Finkel didn't show them. All the actors used to line themselves up like recruits and repeat what the prompter said.⁶²⁷

Only a few decades earlier, the actor-manager William Charles Macready had written similarly of the leading London actors, whose custom was “to do little more at rehearsals than read or repeat the words of the parts, marking on them their entrances and exits, as settled by the stage manager, and their respective places on stage.”⁶²⁸ Though actor-managers in London like Macready, Samuel Phelps and Charles Kean did much to advance the art of directing during the coming decades, certainly the practice had not yet vanished by the end of the century, and at worst, the late nineteenth-century Yiddish theater resembled the mid-nineteenth-century British theater. Not much time had elapsed since the period when British theater, too, had not understood that, in the words of Thomashefsky, the director's job was to instruct the actors in “how to bring out feelings, suffering, happiness, love, hate.” Although he seems to have had an understanding of the director's role, Thomashefsky gave no clue as to how it should be accomplished, neither here nor anywhere else in his writings.

Bessie Thomashefsky quoted Goldfadn, who praised Thomashefsky's gift as a director who “understands more than any other theater director the soul of our masses, and knows how to move the strings of the Jewish soul [...]” On the other hand, she quoted the head of the Hebrew Actors' Union, Joseph Barondess, who ridiculed “Thomashefsky with the Torah'le” wrapped in a prayer shawl and the Zionist flag.⁶²⁹ Thomashefsky seems to have known how to

⁶²⁶ Cole and Chinoy, 324; Pearson, 10-11. Bessie Thomashefsky mentioned Tree in her writings, but Boris did not. See Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 22, 1935, 5.

⁶²⁷ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 292. Finkel later married Thomashefsky's younger sister Emma, when he was 37 and she was 16, against the wishes of Thomashefsky and his parents. Finkel ended up shooting and partially paralyzing her and killing himself when Emma took a lover, approximately ten years later, in 1904. (See Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte* 283-293 and Faith Jones, “Stage Killing: Solving an Attempted Murder-Suicide”, *Forverts*, Oct. 13, 2006). It is therefore entirely plausible that personal animosity lay behind Thomashefsky's critical view of Finkel's directorial skills.

⁶²⁸ William Charles Macready, *Reminiscences*, quoted in Chinoy, 20.

⁶²⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 5, 1935; Nov. 7, 1935.

move the soul of the Jewish masses. It appears to be a matter of opinion as to whether this ability was connected with an artistic talent beyond his evident talent for kitsch.

III. Conclusion

Jacob and Sara Adler revealed a deep awareness of their acting techniques in their autobiographies. Boris Thomashefsky showed no similar awareness of his approach to acting in his autobiographical writings and gave us no clue as to how he approached a role. Bessie Thomashefsky was more conscious of the subject than her husband and made several references to the fact that “living the role” was her ideal, but, on the whole, she showed much less awareness of acting technique than the Adlers.

Jacob Adler’s autobiographical writings revealed a deep connection to Stanislavsky. The many parallels that existed in their approaches to acting were quite evident. Though the ideas that Adler spoke of existed before Stanislavsky, the cumulative effect of seeing all that Adler wrote about his acting processes and comparing his words to the teachings of Stanislavsky, leaves the impression that either Adler incorporated ideas that he had heard in the name of Stanislavsky into the autobiographical writings he published between 1913 and 1925, or that he was an actor who intuitively used very similar acting techniques to those taught by Stanislavsky, who believed that all of history’s great actors had acted according to the principles he codified. Another possibility is that Adler was influenced by Ostrovsky, whose views on acting were very similar to those of Stanislavsky, according to David Magarshack.

In general, Jacob Adler belonged to the “feeling” side of the “feeling-imitating dichotomy,” which emphasized playing a part “from the inside out,” requiring the actor to experience the emotions of the character being played. This approach was epitomized in earlier generations by actors such as Elizabeth Barry (1658-1713), Charles Macklin (1697-1797), and Mikhail Shchepkin (1788-1863), and in Adler’s times by Henry Irving (1838-1905), Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1852-1917), and Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), among others.

Sara Adler’s approach to acting was different from her husband’s. She explicitly stated that when playing love scenes, the actors should not feel love for each other but rather

understand how to generate that impression on the audience without feeling love themselves. This approach was similar to that voiced by Diderot in *The Paradox of Acting* (1773). Diderot believed that experiencing the emotions of the character being played could harm the performance of an actor. Others who shared that belief were David Garrick (1717-1779), Hyppolite Clairon (1723-1803), Friedrich Ludwig Schroeder (1744-1816) and Benoit-Constant Coquelin (1841-1909). Unlike the extreme school of Diderot and Garrick, Sara Adler's opposition to "living the role" was expressed only in relation to love scenes. In most of her writings, her emphasis was on techniques that bring the actor closer to understanding the world of the character being played but do not necessarily cause a strong sense of identification with that character. She emphasized techniques such as studying the speech and movement of someone similar to the character being played, and analyzing the historical, social and economic background of the character. All of the above techniques could be employed both by the Garrick/Coquelin anti-emotionalist school, and by the actors and acting theoreticians who emphasized simultaneously living inside and outside the character – Francois-Joseph Talma (1763-1826), Joseph Jefferson (1829-1905) and William Archer (1856-1924). The latter approach, which combined emotionalism with technique, was more popular during the nineteenth century than the anti-emotionalist approach presented by Diderot. Sara Adler's approach to acting also resonated with British classical acting, especially as represented by Laurence Olivier, who worked primarily "from the outside in," emphasizing technique, but was not averse to using his own psyche in order to live the character he was playing more fully, when necessary.

Sara Adler, too, believed in experiencing the emotions of the character being played and not only in mimicking them externally. She spoke of this in a passage in praise of imagination, where she said that people with a rich imagination could live inside another's feelings and thoughts, and artistically express them for the audience.⁶³⁰ Here she revealed that although she emphasized technique in most of her writings about acting, she did believe in "living the role," albeit not through one's own life experience but rather through the use of the imagination. This

⁶³⁰ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 25, 1937, 10.

would point to the fact that Sara was closer to the Talma school, which combined emotionalism and technique, than to the Diderot school that believed only in technique.

Bessie Thomashefsky presented herself, too, as striving to be a realistic actress, and spoke of “living the role” as her artistic ideal, an ideal she achieved on several occasions. But she was less consistent in showing self-awareness about her acting processes than either Jacob or Sara Adler. Often she judged acting externally, not in terms of truth or realism but in terms of the “success” she enjoyed and the amount of applause she received. She seemed quite aware of the difference between great acting, like that of Mogulesco or Rudolph Schildkraut, and lesser acting, like that of her husband, Boris Thomashefsky, who she claimed didn’t want to work hard and so never fulfilled his potential as an actor. She did not use her critical ability to analyze her own acting techniques, but it is clear that she did not view herself as an actress in the category of “the greats.” Bessie Thomashefsky is the only character of the four in this study who was often critical of her own acting.

The anonymous writer of the “Editor’s Introduction” to Bessie’s autobiography when it was serialized in *Der tog* in 1935 referred to her as primarily a comic actress. He wrote that she often played vulgar roles in cheap plays, roles that were chosen for her by Boris Thomashefsky. In her autobiographic writings, Bessie emphasized the dramatic roles she played and presented herself as striving to be a realistic actress in them. In the comic roles she played, especially in the “cheap plays” the editor of *Der tog* referred to, she appeared to have leaned toward caricature in her acting, a type of acting that tends to be formalistic.

Boris Thomashefsky never entered into discussion of the techniques he used as an actor. His evaluation of his own performances was always external, emphasizing “success,” applause, how much money the production made, how he looked in the part, and how he made use of his good-looking body in the role. Thomashefsky’s emphasis on his success, including concealing moments of failure, would appear to disclose a lack of security on his part in relation to the quality of his acting. He began as an amateur in an amateur theater and was eager to convince the reader that he became one of the theater greats alongside Adler and Kessler. Adler, on his part, praised Kessler heavily in his autobiography but hardly even mentioned Thomashefsky. It would seem that Adler did not acknowledge Thomashefsky as his equal, the

way he did Kessler. Thomashefsky hardly ever admitted to any weaknesses or deficiencies as an actor, and so when he told of his journey as an actor he did not include how he developed from an amateur to a matinee idol to a more serious dramatic actor. He presented himself as being consistently great and beloved by the public. The absence of any mention by Thomashefsky of his acting techniques leads one to believe that he was not conscious of them. He alone, of the four actors in this study, did not assert that he strived for realism. It is quite possible that, like his wife, Bessie, his acting leaned toward formalism, as is often the case with actors whose personal charisma and physical presence is the basis for their acting. Sources outside our actors' autobiographies reflect a dual nature to Boris Thomashefsky's acting: In melodramas and operettas aimed at mass appeal he was stiff and affected, and in more realistic dramas he gave nuanced performances full of soul and passion.

If Boris Thomashefsky was the least self-conscious of the four actors in terms of his acting style, he was the most outspoken about his own directing. He alone discussed aspects of his directing experience, telling how he instituted a full final dress rehearsal before the first public performance of a play, and how as a director he emphasized production values. He was very critical of Morris Finkel, director of the Romanian Opera Company, who only read through the plays with the actors, and of Jacob Adler as a director, claiming Adler couldn't get along with his actors. He related in great detail how Adler enlisted his aid as director during the final rehearsals of Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, when he lost control of the actors. Criticism of Adler as a director was insinuated more indirectly by both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler. Both of them were critical of the lack of strong directors in the Yiddish theater in general, and claimed that it was a major flaw in that theater that may have been responsible for its early demise. Neither of them took into account that the independent director only began to develop in Western theater toward the end of the nineteenth century and was not prevalent in the theater in general until the 1930s. The type of actor-manager approach to directing plays that was used in the Yiddish theater by Thomashefsky, Adler, and Kessler was typical of the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries, and not only on the Yiddish stage. Actor-managers, in general, put an emphasis on their own performances and built the play around it. Only after the demise of the actor-manager did serious directors who took responsibility over every aspect of

a production eventually become the norm. By the time this occurred in Western theater, the Yiddish theater was failing to bring in an audience because of the gradual demise of exclusively Yiddish-speaking audiences and not because of a lack of directors.

Although both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler emphasized the importance of the director, they wrote nothing of their own experiences in directing when they ran their own theaters. These very strong and impressive women seemed to view themselves, until the very end, as being in the shadow of their famous husbands, even after leaving them and entering into independent careers as actresses and theater managers.

Bessie Thomashefsky had positive words to say about Boris Thomashefsky as someone with a natural feeling for directing, but these words were not substantiated by deep insights into directing in Boris Thomashefsky's own writings. It would seem that the Yiddish theater did indeed suffer from a lack of strong directors, but this must be viewed in the proper historical perspective, without judging the theater of the late nineteenth century based on norms that appeared in the theater only decades later.



Jacob Adler



Sara Adler, Courtesy of YIVO Library

Chapter Three: Jewish Theater or Russian Realism? Artistic Aspirations and National and Religious Identity

The artistic aspirations and national and religious identities of the personalities in this study would seem to be two distinct, unconnected matters. But the identity politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries connected these two seemingly separate issues. In the eyes of the radical Jewish intellectuals of the times, an extremely influential section of society responsible for much of the contemporary literary and theatrical criticism, establishing a Yiddish literature and theater that could stand beside the major European ones of those times, and having that theater espouse progressive, cosmopolitan, and secular values, as opposed to traditional, nationalistic, and religious ones, were one and the same matter. For example, the socialist *Forverts* declared that only readers of the Orthodox press frequented *shund* and opposed realistic plays. In an atmosphere in which political issues were recast as aesthetic ones, “the theater columns became the space in which to work them out.”⁶³¹ In the words of Steven Cassedy, “nowhere did one’s views on art more clearly reflect one’s entire worldview so much as in the wars waged in the Yiddish press [...] over the Yiddish theater.”⁶³² In the following chapter, we will explore the artistic aspirations, as well as the national and religious identities, of the four theatrical personalities in our study and then examine whether, indeed, the two were connected, or whether we can, as Nina Warnke suggests, create “a more nuanced picture” of the nature of the New York Yiddish Theater, “beyond the prism of the intellectuals.”⁶³³

A. Introduction: The Radical Jewish Intellectuals vs. the Immigrant Masses

During the early years of American Yiddish theater, a battle was waged by Russian Jewish intellectuals who had emigrated to the United States and wished to turn the Yiddish theater into a theater artistically similar to the Western theaters they admired, while at the

⁶³¹ Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater,” 4, 9.

⁶³² Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 133-134.

⁶³³ Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater,” 288.

same time using the theater as an instrument with which to educate the immigrant masses in the ways of modernization and secularization.⁶³⁴ This elitist group of Jews, which had culturally and linguistically assimilated in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century, comprised less than one thousandth of the Jewish population, and had to varying degrees rejected Judaism as a religion, and in some cases even Jewishness as an ethnic identity.

Before the series of pogroms that followed the assassination of the czar in 1881, the Russian Jewish intelligentsia tended to have a cosmopolitan political view, attaching no importance to ethnic distinctions between people. As supporters of the Russian revolutionary movement, they assumed that in a just political order there would be little room for petty rivalries between the various ethnic groups that made up the population of the Russian Empire. The pogroms after the assassination of the czar caused many of these culturally and linguistically assimilated Russian Jewish intellectuals to reassess their Jewish identities and join the massive Jewish emigration to America.⁶³⁵ There, they identified themselves as Jewish socialists, with many dedicating themselves to the labor movement. They discovered that the Yiddish language could both enable them to educate their fellow Jews and help them earn a living in America more easily than their beloved Russian. Among these Russophiles were the founders of a large segment of the Yiddish press in New York: Abe Cahan, Philip Krantz, Morris Hillquit, and Louis Miller. Both Cahan and Krantz had written for Russian-language Jewish newspapers before emigrating.⁶³⁶ At first, they treated the New York Yiddish theater with disdain because of what they considered its low artistic level. In 1890, when Abraham Cahan was asked why the recently founded *Arbayter tsaytung* (Workman's Paper) did not print theater reviews, he answered: "Most of the plays on stage do not deserve serious reviews."⁶³⁷

⁶³⁴ This battle, as waged through the radical Yiddish press, has been well documented in Bettina (Nina) Warnke's incisive dissertation, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," to which I will refer frequently in the following pages.

⁶³⁵ Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 9-14, 49-56; Steven Cassedy, *Building the Future, Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and the Making of Tsukunft* (New York/London: Holmes and Meier, 1999), 2, 5-6.

⁶³⁶ Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 12-13, 77-80. See also Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 69-70.

⁶³⁷ Abraham Cahan, *Arbayter tsaytung*, April 11, 1890, quoted by Warnke "Theater as Educational Institution," 27; "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 81, who in turn referred to Nora Levin, *While Messiah Tarried: Jewish Socialist Movements, 1871-1917* (New York: Schocken, 1977), 143.

The artistic ideal of this group was Russian realism, and the New York Yiddish theater scene was far removed from that.

This situation began to change in 1891, when a member of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, Jacob Gordin, emigrated to America and began writing for the Yiddish stage. Gordin had written only in Russian when living in Russia but in America he became a Yiddish playwright. He took upon himself the task of reforming the American Yiddish theater, transforming it from the type of theater the Russian Jewish intellectuals derogatorily called *shund* which presented primarily historical operettas and melodramas on Jewish themes for an unsophisticated audience of immigrants — and remodeling it to resemble the theater of Russian realism on an artistic level and, at the same time, disseminate progressive values.

Gordin and the radical Jewish intelligentsia to which he belonged sought to create a cultural consensus between themselves and the masses through realistic theater. Their concept of realism was as an art form that combined being natural and true to life with encouraging activism for social reform. To the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, novelists, poets, playwrights, and literary critics were social commentators, and literary activity was a type of political activism. They mixed the aesthetic and the political in ways that made it difficult to differentiate between the two.⁶³⁸ Among the areas that required social reform, in their eyes, was the attitude of the masses toward traditional Judaism, which they viewed as a restrictive and anti-progressive force, especially in matters of marriage and women's rights.

Accordingly, many of Gordin's plays are severely critical of traditional Judaism and its adherents.⁶³⁹ In his first play, *Siberia*, the most pious Jew in the play was a villainous informer, the lax Jews were good, and the most honorable character was a gentile. Upon hearing the play read for the first time, Mogulesco accused Gordin of being an anti-Semite.⁶⁴⁰ In Gordin's first popular success, *The Jewish King Lear*, the selfish daughters and their spouses who betray the hero are religiously observant, whereas the youngest daughter and her spouse, who remain faithful to him, are *maskilim*.⁶⁴¹ In subsequent plays, religiously observant Jews are depicted as

⁶³⁸ Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, xxi-xxii, 71; Barbara Henry, *Rewriting Russia*, 22, 67-81.

⁶³⁹ Henry, *Rewriting Russia*, 127.

⁶⁴⁰ Kaplan, 45.

⁶⁴¹ Jacob Gordin, *The Jewish King Lear*. Though it is possible to differentiate between those who favored Russification and *maskilim*, there are definite parallels that exist between them.

arsonists (*The Golden Calf*, 1895), pimps (*Dvoyrele the Aristocrat*, 1896) or venal industrialists (*God, Man and Devil*, 1900), to mention only three examples of his many negative Orthodox characters.⁶⁴² The most common characteristic of Gordin's Orthodox characters, like Molière's Tartuffe and the villain of Wolfssohn's *Frivolity and Religiosity*, is hypocrisy. In his negative depiction of religiously observant Jews, he was following the general path of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, who "when not expressing open hostility to Jewish ritual, attempted as much as possible to ignore it."⁶⁴³

But Gordin also wanted to educate the masses aesthetically. Besides educating the public in matters such as gender equality and the evils of capitalism, his theater also emphasized the importance of realistic acting, was set in modern times, reflecting contemporary realities, and used colloquial Yiddish onstage as opposed to the stylized *Daytshmerish*.⁶⁴⁴

The radical Jewish intellectuals rallied around Gordin and took up his theater as their banner. The more traditional Orthodox press, which felt threatened by his progressive values, attacked him systematically, and a war developed between the two different sides of the New York Yiddish press. In the progressive *Forverts*, the conservative publisher of the *Tageblatt*, Kasriel Sarasohn, was derogatorily referred to as "Yarmulke," which means "skullcap." His caricature was drawn as a pig wearing a skullcap.⁶⁴⁵

Another member of the Russian Jewish intellectuals whose views on Yiddish theater were quite influential was the first historian of the theater, Bernard Gorin, whose views on what should and should not be considered art were unfailingly in line with the sector of society

⁶⁴² Henry, *Rewriting Russia*, 127.

⁶⁴³ Cassedy, *Building the Future*, xxiii. On the animosity of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia toward traditional Judaism, see Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 12-13.

⁶⁴⁴ Henry, *Rewriting Russia*, 4; Warnke, "Theater as Educational Institution," 28.

⁶⁴⁵ Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 176, 182. Warnke quoted from articles by both Abe Cahan and Louis Miller. See Louis Miller, "Tseylem, yarmulke un kunst," *Forverts*, October 21, 1903, and "Tsum kampf gegen tseylem un yarmulke," *Forverts*, October 22, 1903; Abe Cahan, "Yankev Gordins tares hamishpokhe," *Forverts*, September 4, 1904. On the battle between the Orthodox Yiddish press and Gordin see Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Stage," 143-147, 166-185.

to which he belonged. Gorin referred to Orthodox Jews as “the *shvartse khevre*” (the black gang), because of their custom of wearing black clothing.⁶⁴⁶

But the New York Yiddish theater was not the creation of the Russian Jewish intellectuals, and they did not comprise the masses of theatergoers who supported it. The masses of immigrants who flooded New York between 1880 and 1917 did not turn to America as a means of escaping the narrowness of traditional Jewish life in Eastern Europe and adopting a more secular lifestyle. It was an emigration primarily motivated by economic considerations, as well as a response to rampant Eastern European anti-Semitism. A large percentage of the Jewish immigrants came from the *shtetl*, and had no previous exposure to theater, certainly not to Russian realism. The New World held economic opportunities and a lack of oppression that were preferable to the situation in the Old Country, but that did not mean they viewed the Old Country and its ways with disdain. They missed the world they had left behind and sought to find it again in the New York Yiddish theater. It didn’t have to meet any external artistic standards; it had to suit their emotional needs. As opposed to the East European Yiddish theater, which was visited primarily by young and modern Jews and avoided by traditional ones, the American Yiddish theater attracted a much wider audience, including traditional Jews.⁶⁴⁷

Sara Adler described this situation in a conversation she recalled having with an acquaintance shortly after Sara’s arrival in America. He said to her of the Jewish American immigrants, “They dream day and night about familiar Jews with beards and earlocks, about Jewish women and girls, who they left behind in their old home. Give them a theater that will mirror their past and they will shower favors on you. They yearn for it like someone hungry for food, like someone thirsty for water.”⁶⁴⁸

In keeping with this, we find that contrary to the intellectuals’ ideal of “Yiddish theater as a secular educator of the masses,” so well presented by Nina Warnke,⁶⁴⁹ Nahma Sandrow

⁶⁴⁶ Gorin, “Yankev Gordin,” *Teater zhurnal* 1:5, December 1, 1901, 16. Quoted by Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater,” 171. He was referring there to the members of the Orthodox press who attacked realism in the name of morality.

⁶⁴⁷ Hoberman, 16.

⁶⁴⁸ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 25, 1937, 7.

⁶⁴⁹ Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater”; “The Child Who Wouldn’t Grow Up: Yiddish Theatre and its Critics”; “Theater as Educational Institution: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and Yiddish Theater Reform.”

presents the New York Yiddish theater from the point of view of the Jewish immigrant masses. The Yiddish word *shul* has two meanings. It is both school and synagogue. Both the intellectuals and the masses viewed the Yiddish theater in America as a new kind of *shul*. The intellectuals saw it as a school in which to educate the masses. The masses saw it as a substitute synagogue. Sandrow wrote that the Yiddish theater in America:

substituted in subtle ways for the older communal institutions that had been the basis for centuries of Eastern European Jewish life. It was a meeting place, an arbiter of fashion, a common passion. It provided, in the form of actors, popular folk heroes. [...] For some, it took the place of organized religion, by publicly affirming a cultural-ethnic Jewishness that was elastic and didn't require any observance or piety. And it also, in a sense, reinforced organized religion by assuming many of its values.⁶⁵⁰

The theme of the theater as the alternative religion of the New York immigrants can be seen throughout Sandrow's depiction of the history of Yiddish theater in New York. She wrote of how the immigrants used the theater building as a meeting place, just as their fathers had used the little synagogue back home to study, gossip, pray, drink schnapps, and eat black bread and butter. Of the fans who waited for actors outside the stage door in order to carry them on their shoulders through the city streets, Sandrow wrote, "For them the actor was a cultural institution with an almost religious hold on their imagination." She compared the way in which fans sometimes became part of the actor's household to the way in which disciples clustered at a Chassidic Rebbe's court.⁶⁵¹ Beth Kaplan wrote of the New York Jewish immigrants: "These Jews had lost country, language, ritual, family, even the bedrock of the synagogue, which many no longer attended. [...] The Yiddish theater, for a few hours, replaced all those losses."⁶⁵²

Rhoda Helfman Kaufman, who seems to differ from Sandrow in the emphasis she places on the secular character of the ritual that the New York Yiddish theater created, nevertheless acknowledged that it also "reaffirmed traditional Jewish values and solidarity" while providing "an alternative to the synagogue as a means of collective self-expression and exploration."⁶⁵³

The direction pointed to by the above scholars and researchers, of the Yiddish theater as a substitute synagogue, explains why many of the Jewish immigrants, even if they did not

⁶⁵⁰ Sandrow, 77.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 91, 94, 101.

⁶⁵² Kaplan, 43.

⁶⁵³ Kaufman, 8, 30, and Abstract.

continue a strictly traditional lifestyle in America, wanted the Yiddish theater they turned to as a reminder of the Old World to function as a continuation of that world and its traditions, and not a break from it. This did not include observance of the Jewish Sabbath on the part of the Yiddish stage in America. The New York Yiddish theater included quite profitable performances on Friday nights and Saturday matinees, performances in which all the actors of the Yiddish stage participated, including the four actors researched in this study. Indeed, often the Friday night performances would include the opening of new production performed before a fully paying audience, unlike the benefit performances often presented on weekdays.

In the following pages, I will examine the autobiographic writings of our four actor-managers, in order to understand their positions regarding the abovementioned matters. To them, was the Yiddish theater in America a kind of school or a kind of synagogue? We will begin by exploring the various actors' artistic aspirations including their attitudes toward the popular theater of the masses, their dedication to Russian realism, and their dedication to the Jewishness of the Yiddish theater. After analyzing the degree of importance each of them placed on the Jewishness of the Yiddish theater, we will then delve into the various actors' national and religious identities as revealed in their autobiographies, and try to decipher whether or not they, like the radical Jewish intelligentsia, believed that creating a first-class Yiddish theater required adapting progressive and cosmopolitan values and opposing traditional ones.

B. Artistic Aspirations

1. Jacob Adler – *Shund* vs. Russian Realism

In his writings, Jacob Adler tried to impress his readers with his early commitment to combatting *shund* in the Yiddish theater. He depicted himself as a young man enamored of the Yiddish theater, who experienced an early crisis of faith when attending a performance in Odessa of the prototype of what later became known as *shund*. The play was Goldfadn's *Shmendrik*, the first great success of the first Yiddish acting company in Russia, founded by

Yisroel Rosenberg and Yakov Spivakovsky in Odessa in 1879.⁶⁵⁴ One of the actresses in Rosenberg's company was Sonya Oberlander, who was to become Adler's first wife. Full of excitement, Adler invited his parents and his Uncle Arke, the theater connoisseur,⁶⁵⁵ to see Goldfaden's *Shmendrik*. But his parents and Uncle Arke were appalled by the tasteless, crude stupidity of what occurred onstage. "Is there a crumb of truth in all of this?" asked Uncle Arke.⁶⁵⁶ The rest of the audience was wild with enthusiasm, but Adler was aware of the truth in the opinions of his parents and his knowledgeable uncle. "I love the Yiddish theater," he confided to Sonya Oberlander. "I would want to give it my life, make the stage my career. But what kind of theater is it? Everything is so vulgar, so coarse, so raw and tasteless. [...] To bind my life to it is to crawl in mud."

Sonya, however, saw things in a more historical perspective. She spoke of the Shakespearean theater. "No scenery. Instead of a forest, an ocean, the courtyard of a castle, stood a sign with a title on it. [...] No actresses, and the roles of Juliet, Ophelia, Cordelia, Lady Macbeth, and Cleopatra were played by young boys [...] because no respectable intelligent woman would crawl in such mud." Sonya reminded him that in Molière's times the actors roamed the countryside like vagabonds. The Greeks smeared their faces with grape juice and played under the empty sky. "If by these nations the poor, small, and shameful theaters slowly developed to beautiful and lofty ones, why should the same not happen one day to the poor Yiddish theater?" she asked Adler.⁶⁵⁷

Jacob Adler set his standards quite high, but his points of reference were all outside Jewish culture. He wanted to see Yiddish theater as on par with the works of Shakespeare, Molière and the Greek classicists, whose theater transcended their sordid and lowly surroundings and became a source of higher beauty. He saw the vulgarity and crassness in *Shmendrik*, and wanted to go beyond it, to be the Messiah who redeemed the Yiddish theater.

⁶⁵⁴ The year 1879 was the one given by Zylbercweig (Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 14). The year according to Adler was 1877 (Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Sept. 20, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 82) which is doubtful. The Russo-Turkish War ended in March of 1878, and only after that did Rosenberg and Spivakovsky's theater company fall apart, causing them to look to Odessa for their future.

⁶⁵⁵ Uncle Arke, who was a Chassid with an appreciation of Russian culture, was a great influence on Adler's life. Adler wrote that he modeled the hero of *The Yiddish King Lear* after him and called him his "Rebbe". (Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, May 14, 1916, 9; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 10).

⁶⁵⁶ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Nov. 5, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 96-97

⁶⁵⁷ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Nov. 19, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 100-101.

Here, Adler set up Goldfadn's *Shmendrik* as his nemesis and allied himself with the greats. This episode, then, revealed the dual consciousness of storyteller and protagonist, as Jacob Adler described his evolution from a stage-struck young man to a discerning artist.

This saga of artistic coming-of-age continued as he told how he began to perform with the company on the road, and soon became a matinee idol among the young people. He cared for his appearance meticulously, sporting gloves, a walking stick and a white cravat, “as befits a god. [...] But more than anything,” he wrote, “I liked my hair, which I wore in a lock over my brow, a lock that lightly and graciously waved about with every movement of my head.”⁶⁵⁸ In Yelizatevgrad, when the company did Goldfadn's *Brayndelee Cossack*,⁶⁵⁹ with Adler as the male lead, the audience was very enthusiastic. But Lehrman, the drama critic for the *Yelisavetgradskaya Novosty* ignored the play, despite the interest he had shown in the company.⁶⁶⁰ When the actors and critic met at a local club the next day, Rosenberg asked him what he thought of the play. The critic was appalled by both the play and the actors, who in his opinion all tried to make themselves as foolish as possible, without adopting a serious attitude toward their roles. He said to them, “Even in melodrama one can and should portray a human being! You are clowns, not actors, and Rosenberg the worst clown of all! Throw away the buffoonery! I will not visit the club again until I am told you deserve to be reviewed.”⁶⁶¹

Adler took the criticism to heart. He wrote:

No, clowning around is not for me. If it was to be acting, let it be the real thing. Had I acted until now? I am afraid not. True, I had had some success but not from my art, not from my inner talents. The success came from my youth, my good looking head of hair, my top hat, my dandyish airs. Away with that! [...] Enough playing around, enough foolish pretending! Now, let's become an actor!⁶⁶²

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 129. Adler went to great lengths to describe the “magnetic spell” the lock held on his feminine admirers, and how he spent hours before the mirror cultivating it with the aid of “the most expensive perfume and the finest almond oil.” He lamented, with a mixture of pride and embarrassment, “Well, only once is one young, and only once so divinely empty!”

⁶⁵⁹ About a woman who drives five husbands to suicide, and then meets her sixth.

⁶⁶⁰ See above, footnote 147.

⁶⁶¹ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, March 30, 1917, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 131-132. Interestingly, the position maintained by the critic, in Adler's memory, expressed an approach to melodrama similar to the attitude which Stanislavsky expressed years later. See Constantin Stanislavski, “Why and When Play Melodrama,” in *Stanislavski's Legacy*, edited and translated by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1958), 138-147.

⁶⁶² Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, March 30, 1917, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 132.

Adler shed his fancy matinee-idol clothes and changed his vain hairdo. He went to his harshest critic to receive instruction in acting. They became friends and through Lehrman, Adler met the serious Jewish intellectuals of the city, who had high hopes for the future of Yiddish theater, despite its present state. "They gave me courage to remain on the stage," he wrote, "and to obtain a place there."⁶⁶³

Philippe Lejeune, in *L'autobiographie en France*, claimed that autobiography has been influenced by novels told in first person by the protagonist, such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1721).⁶⁶⁴ Adler built his story like a novelist. His protagonist was a young matinee idol who discovered that theater is more than vanity. In his attempt to become a serious actor, he connected himself with the Russian Jewish intellectuals, and gained a serious perspective on theater from them. Having presented himself as a hero who had struggled with the angel of *shund* and vanquished him, Adler was now ready to transform himself into a prophet of a new age. Of the first performance of the Yiddish theater in Odessa, Adler wrote:

As if a Godly force took me by the hair and lifted me high, very high. [...] Something like a spirit of prophecy filled me. My eyes, my spiritual eyes opened, and I saw far, far into the future. A thought knocked on my head – no, not so clear, a mood, a dream it was – that there will come a time that from this rouge, this make-up, from these smeared, dirty faces will grow a big, honorable Yiddish theater... Who knows? Maybe in time to come this poor scene will be written of with great inspiration, with flaming-fiery words about the beginning of a magnificent epoch...⁶⁶⁵

Adler wanted not only to be the redeemer of Yiddish theater, he wanted to be its prophet, its visionary. He portrayed himself in lofty language, not as an actor or fashionable man about town. He was establishing himself in the eyes of the reader as a mythic figure. But he was in need of a significant other in his attempt to redeem the Yiddish theater from its

⁶⁶³ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, April 5, 1917, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 132-133. Unfortunately, Adler did not go into greater detail about what he learned from Lehrman about acting, except that it is to be treated seriously.

⁶⁶⁴ Phillippe Lejeune, *L'autobiographie en France* (Paris: A. Colin, 1971), quoted by Moseley, 7. Nineteenth-century classics such as Dickens' *David Copperfield* and Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* followed in the tradition begun by Defoe.

⁶⁶⁵ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 1, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 87.

vanity and weakness. He would find his great partner years later, in 1891, in America – Jacob Gordin.⁶⁶⁶ He called Gordin the writer in whose plays his talent blossomed “like the petals of a rose in the rays of the sun.”⁶⁶⁷ He wrote how Gordin came to them “like through a miracle [...] our immortal teacher and trail-blazer, our architect, the supervisor of our theater. [...] And he, Yakov Gordin, opened everyone’s eyes to see the difference between *shund* and art. [...] Instinctively, I felt how necessary we were for each other.”⁶⁶⁸

Adler said that he met with Gordin on the advice of the editor of the *Arbeter tsaytung*,⁶⁶⁹ Philip Krantz. Adler suggested that Gordin adapt a German play into Yiddish, to which Gordin replied, “If I write a play for you, it will be a Yiddish play, not a German play with Yiddish names.” A week later Gordin brought Adler the manuscript of *Siberia*, which he said he had written in one unbroken wave of inspiration, feeling “like a scribe at work on the holy Torah.”⁶⁷⁰ The play was a realistic drama about an innocent man convicted of a crime and sent to Siberia. It had no music⁶⁷¹ or nationalistic speeches and was set in a drab setting. The characters spoke a simple, ordinary Yiddish. The actors in the acting troupe opposed putting it on, saying the audience would not accept it, but Adler did so anyway. “I believed in it,” he wrote. The play, which opened on December 3, 1891, was a success with the press but a failure with the audience. Despite the play's failure, Adler said of it: “I knew from the first that a giant step had been taken, a step from which there was no turning back.” He further said of that play: “That was the beginning of Jacob Gordin and the beginning of a new Yankev Adler.”⁶⁷²

⁶⁶⁶ Joel Berkowitz compared Gordin and Adler in their own self-presentations to Moses and Aaron: “If Gordin was to be the Moses to lead the Yiddish theatre out of its bondage to melodrama and operetta, he would need an Aaron to convey his message. He found his first spokesman in actor Jacob P. Adler.” (Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005, 37.)

⁶⁶⁷ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 14, 1925, 23; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 378.

⁶⁶⁸ Jacob Adler, “Erinerungen vegn Keni Liptsin,” *Di varyhayt*, Oct. 3, 1918, 5.

⁶⁶⁹ A socialist Yiddish newspaper published in New York.

⁶⁷⁰ Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 317, 321. We will later see that such religious imagery surrounding theater was typical of Jacob Adler himself. It is interesting to find it here in the writings of the very Russified and secular Jacob Gordin.

⁶⁷¹ Adler and others placed much emphasis on the way Gordin wrote plays without music, as opposed to the Yiddish plays before him that typically contained singing and dancing. The original manuscript of *The Yiddish King Lear* contained much more singing and dancing than would be common in non-musical dramas performed today. It is possible that Gordin understood that it was impossible in the Yiddish theater not to incorporate song and dance and did so in *The Yiddish King Lear*, helping it to become a popular success. The singing and dancing flow relatively seamlessly into the drama, and possibly this is part of the “realism,” as opposed to the singing and dancing in *shund* which often appears almost arbitrarily. See Jacob Gordin, *The Jewish King Lear*.

⁶⁷² Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, July 3, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 317-321.

Adler's next play with Gordin, *Two Worlds*, was an even greater failure with the audience. Then, despite the opposition of his company, he put on a third play by Gordin, *The Jewish King Lear*, which Adler claimed, "was then and still remains the greatest success of the Yiddish theater."⁶⁷³ Adler and Gordin ushered in a new era in Yiddish theater, an era in which contemporary drama with social messages could find its place on the Yiddish stage. In Adler's narrative, his hero had reached the apex of his development. Nowhere in Adler's writings did he address himself to the content of Gordin's plays, or to the desire to educate the Jewish immigrant masses in the ways of progressive thinking. He always gave the impression that the entire issue was only a matter of high culture versus low culture. Never was the question of what that culture stood for addressed. The entire discussion centered on a dichotomy in which *shund* equaled poor taste and lowbrow culture while realism equaled good taste and highbrow culture. Adler placed himself firmly on the elitist side of the battle, fighting *shund* alongside Gordin.

Though Adler admitted to having to perform in *shund*, the legacy he tried to leave in his autobiography was of someone who strove to raise Yiddish theater up.⁶⁷⁴ He painted a heroic picture of himself evolving into an artist and coming to an understanding of what differentiates art from *shund*, yet admitted that he could only be partially successful in his role as the redeemer of Yiddish theater. His writing was introspective and even had a confessional quality about it when he admitted to his failure to defeat his nemesis, *Shmendrik*. He bemoaned the way in which *Shmendrik* clung to him all his life, despite all his efforts, for "from *Shmendrik* himself there was no escaping. The audience wanted him. He could not be rooted out of the repertoire. [...] That same bitter *Shmendrik* was our livelihood. He brought money into the troupe, money we could not be without." At a memorial performance of *Shmendrik* in 1912, on

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 323.

⁶⁷⁴ Adler presented his preference for drama as a matter of principle more than a practical issue. According to Zylbercweig, since Adler couldn't sing, it was critical for him that serious drama rule the stage, and so he hooked up with Gordin. He quoted Leon Kobrin as saying that in the song-repertory Adler couldn't take an eminent place. This, together with his weakness for the Russian intelligentsia, caused him to latch on to Gordin (Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 20). Sandrow added that aside from not being able to sing well, Adler also had no talent for low comedy (Sandrow, 153).

the anniversary of Goldfadn's death, he wondered, "Why *Shmendrik*? Goldfadn has written better things." He wept, swallowed his tears and cursed the fate that bound them together.⁶⁷⁵

Other sources, however, reveal that Adler actually performed in *shund* much more than he was willing to admit. During the 1888-1889 season, after an unsuccessful attempt to move to New York, Adler appeared in Warsaw. The critic of the local *Yiddishe folks-blatt*, who saw Adler perform in two operettas, Shomer's *Treyfenyak* and *The Usurer*, criticized them as being of an unusually low and vulgar nature, much inferior to Goldfadn's later operettas, like *Shulamis* or *Bar Kochba*.⁶⁷⁶ It is possible that Adler completely skipped over the time he spent appearing in Poland in his autobiography out of embarrassment over the quality of plays he appeared in there.

Bessie Thomashefsky told of a play that the Adlers and the Thomashefskys performed in together at the Windsor Theater in 1903. It was a historical opera called *Nero, or the Kingly Horse*. Adler played a comic role and had to dance before the horse. Bessie wrote that "he cursed the author for writing such a horsey masterpiece." Fortunately, according to Bessie, Adler came to life when he acted in *Othello* shortly afterwards.⁶⁷⁷

Boris Thomashefsky also told of an appearance made by Adler in *shund* that same year, before appearing in *Othello*. However, it was not opposite Thomashefsky, but rather, opposite Kessler, who also vocally expressed his hatred for *shund*. The unnamed play was written by Hurwitz and was a failure because, in Boris Thomashefsky's telling, it could not compete with his appearance in *Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem*.⁶⁷⁸ There was no mention in Adler's autobiography of this play, nor of *Nero, or the Kingly Horse*.

Sara Adler also wrote of Jacob Adler appearing together with her in productions aimed at mass appeal. Before Jacob Gordin began writing for the Yiddish theater:

We presented plays on our stage that Abe Cahan didn't even find necessary to criticize. Those were usually Lateiner's and Professor Hurwitz's hodgepodes, which we actors from the very

⁶⁷⁵ Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 365-366.

⁶⁷⁶ Zalmen Zylbercweiz, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 19. Adler himself discussed the merits and flaws of Shomer as a playwright and considers him in general to be inferior to Goldfadn, except for his humor and his humorous characters who are more human than those in Goldfadn's comedies. He was critical of Shomer but did not treat him with disdain as he did Lateiner (Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 14, 1925, 12). See also *ibid.*, April 25, 1925, 11, where he discussed Shomer's popularity, productivity, and speed in an uncritical tone.

⁶⁷⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 244.

⁶⁷⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 297.

beginning called *shtick*. *Shtick* was the only proper word for the plays in which we were forced to appear in the first years of the Yiddish theater in America.⁶⁷⁹

As we will see later, Sara Adler's attack on what she considered to be lowbrow theater focused on the playwrights Lateiner and Hurwitz. But she openly spoke of how she and Jacob Adler often appeared in their plays out of necessity. Though it is clear that Adler appeared in his own share of *shund*, we have seen how Gorin described both Adler and Kessler as always doing so with a scowl, giving the audience the impression that they were not enjoying themselves, whereas Thomashefsky always treated *shund* earnestly.⁶⁸⁰

In the same way that Adler painted an idealized version of himself, downplaying his appearances in plays that pandered to the masses and identifying himself with the more elitist ones, he also described Jacob Gordin as the redeemer of the Yiddish stage without reference to Gordin's participation in writing *shund*. Gorin wrote that Gordin made attempts to compete with Lateiner and Hurwitz by writing his own plays aimed at mass appeal, like *Mohammed*, *The Three Princes*, and *Murder at Madison Square*. Other plays of Gordin's, like *The Jewish Priest* and *The Luria Brothers* may not have been actual *shund* but had little literary value.⁶⁸¹ He even used the alias "Professor Yakobi in London" for plays he was reportedly embarrassed to have written.⁶⁸²

In any event, Adler downplayed the degree to which he appeared in *shund*, though he admitted that it was necessary, and emphasized the great efforts he took to change the face of Yiddish theater by producing realistic theater with artistic integrity. In aspiring to "realism" in his theater, he was echoing the dominant aesthetic preference among intellectuals during the period in which he grew up in Odessa, the 1860s and 1870s. This was a group that Adler admired but never really belonged to, lacking the proper education and political stance.⁶⁸³ Nevertheless, Bessie Thomashefsky wrote that:

⁶⁷⁹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, May 14, 1938, 7.

⁶⁸⁰ Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, vol. 2, 105-106. See above, footnote 192.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁶⁸² "Jacob Gordin," *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*. See Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 111, footnote 18, 139.

⁶⁸³ Cassedy, *To the Other Shore*, 23-25, 129-145. See also Jacob Gordin, "Realism and Romanticism" (1904), in *Building the Future*, ed. Steven Cassedy, 81-90. The Russian Jewish intelligentsia identified in America as socialists, and many were involved in forming workers' unions. Adler, the capitalist, did not look favorably on the

When Adler was favorably disposed, he would speak Russian. He had a great weakness for the Russian language. If someone turned to him for a favor in Russian, he could get Adler's soul from him. There were some who knew it and used it on him. Adler also had great respect for someone who spoke Russian. If you spoke Russian with the right "r", with a sharp, flinty Moscow accent, with every word coming out like a piece of oiled steel – such a person was in Adler's eyes the most intelligent man on earth, the greatest intellectual. The most famous professor couldn't compare with such a person.⁶⁸⁴

Adler described his youth before discovering theater as having been spent in boxing rings and street gangs – far from the upbringing of a Russian intellectual.⁶⁸⁵ But the former boxer and member of the street gang known as "Buff's Army" yearned for the recognition and approval of the Russian intellectuals. He vowed to make Yiddish theater in the spirit of realism that was their banner, a theater that was antithetical to the kind of theater that Boris Thomashefsky was often associated with, condescendingly called *shund* by the intelligentsia. During their lifetimes, Adler had a close relationship with Thomashefsky, was frequently his partner in the theater, shared an apartment with him in Chicago, and was his neighbor in New York. During the 1912-1913 season, they were codirectors of the new Yiddish theater built on Houston Street and Second Ave, called "The Adler-Thomashefsky National Theater" for the duration of that season.⁶⁸⁶ The closeness of the two couples was attested to by both Bessie Thomashefsky and Boris Thomashefsky and, to a lesser degree, by Sara Adler. Jacob Adler was the most important supporting figure in Boris Thomashefsky's autobiography, appearing more than twice as often as anyone else, including his wife, Bessie. Thomashefsky wrote articles on Jacob Adler for both the New York Yiddish daily *Morgen zhurnal* and the Paris Yiddish daily, *Parizer haynt*.⁶⁸⁷ In contrast, Thomashefsky was almost completely absent from Adler's

Hebrew Actors' Union, and found himself in conflict with them on more than one occasion. See Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 256-257; Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 29, 1938, 3.

⁶⁸⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 29, 1935, 7.

⁶⁸⁵ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, June 7, 1916, 5; June 11, 1916, 7; June 14, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on Stage*, 20-22. In Adler's earlier "Mayn lebensbashraybung," his description of this period was softened and he described himself as a youth more as an up-and-coming intellectual. See Jacob Adler, "Mayn lebensbashraybung" *Der teater zhurnal* 2, Oct. 15, 1901.

⁶⁸⁶ Adler left the partnership after one season. See advertisements in *Forverts*, Sept. 24, 1912, of the opening of the theater, with both of them performing in one evening, in separate plays, and then on Sept. 21, 1913, when Adler advertised that he was leaving the partnership with Thomashefsky, Wilner, and Edelstein and opening his own theater, Adler's Dewey Theater. See also *Forverts*, Nov. 2, 1913, when the original theater began to be called Thomashefsky's National Theater.

⁶⁸⁷ *Morgen journal*, April 7-26, 1926; *Parizer haynt*, Feb. 10-11, 1929.

autobiography.

During the last year of his life, when he was seventy, Adler wrote the following: “Of all the companions, all the pioneers, who together with me laid the foundation of our stage, only I remain.” He listed these companions and pioneers and wrote about them – Goldfaden, Mogulesco, Gordin, Keni Liptzin and David Kessler. Now he remained alone, “the last of my generation.”⁶⁸⁸ He ignored the fact that Boris Thomashefsky was still alive at the time.

The three acknowledged male stars of the Yiddish stage in America at the beginning of the twentieth century were Adler, Thomashefsky, and Kessler.⁶⁸⁹ Of Kessler, whom he called “my eternal colleague” he wrote: “Despite our competing with each other, we loved each other, valued each other, and so well, so deeply – better than anyone else – we understood each other’s talent.”⁶⁹⁰ Thomashefsky was overlooked by Adler both as a founder and a pioneer of the Yiddish Theater, and as a friend, colleague or even competitor. Thomashefsky was only briefly referred to in Adler’s autobiography – once in a comic anecdote that illustrated the competition that existed between Adler, Thomashefsky, and Kessler, and once in relation to his production of *Hamlet*.⁶⁹¹ Neither time was there any evaluation of Thomashefsky as an artist, nor was there any suggestion of their friendship. True, his autobiography chronologically ended before he met Thomashefsky. But the fact that the New York years are not retold in the autobiography did not deter him from expressing his great regard for Kessler, nor his high esteem for Sara Adler as an actress, although their relationship also began after he emigrated to New York.⁶⁹²

In his autobiography, Adler clearly wanted to build himself up as the man who brought artistic integrity to the Yiddish theater. In order to do this, he distanced himself from the man

⁶⁸⁸ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 14, 1925, 23; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 378.

⁶⁸⁹ See Gay and Glazer, “Yiddish Theater in America,” 92, and Sandrow, 95. It is interesting to note that when Y.D. Berkovitsh recounted his attempt to sell Sholem Aleichem’s play, *The Treasure*, to each of these three actor-managers, there was a clear hierarchy among them in his eyes. Though he was critical of his character, it is clear that he considered Adler to be the greatest actor of the three. He quoted Sholem Aleichem as saying that he was a great actor but a small person. Berkovitsh admired Kessler for both his human qualities and his acting skills. His meeting with Thomashefsky was recounted very perfunctorily, as opposed to the great elaboration given to his contact with Adler, and the brief but highly respectful description of his meetings with Kessler (Berkovitsh, 151-170).

⁶⁹⁰ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 14, 1925, 23; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 378.

⁶⁹¹ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 23, 1925, 4; May 23, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 250, 329.

⁶⁹² Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 26, 1925, 4, Adler called Sara “the world-famous realistic romantic heroine and tragedienne of the Yiddish stage”.

most associated with operettas that pandered to the masses, Boris Thomashefsky. Artistic integrity in Adler's eyes was whatever comes closest to Russian realism. And "Thomashefsky, with the *Torah*'le wrapped in a *tallis* and a Zionist flag"⁶⁹³ was the furthest thing from that elitist Russian culture to which Adler so aspired. Adler cut the man who helped him during his first appearances on the American Yiddish stage out of his autobiography in order to distance himself from his kind of theater.⁶⁹⁴ As we have seen, Adler had plans for how to eliminate *shund* from the Yiddish theater – by producing translations of Tolstoy and Ostrovsky, which would elevate the Yiddish audience and pave the way for a new kind of Yiddish playwright, who had adopted the style of Russian realism.⁶⁹⁵ Though Adler showed great love for the Yiddish theater, and hoped to bring it to great artistic heights, the heights he imagined were created in the image of Russian realism. He did not express a desire to teach the values of secularism, feminism, and anti-capitalism, like his partner, Gordin. He longed for the aesthetic world of Russian realism. That was his artistic goal.

2. Boris Thomashefsky – Master of *Shund* or of Jewish Theater?

Boris Thomashefsky, in marked contrast to both the Adlers, moved to America at the age of twelve. He had no previous cultural homeland to which he was attached, except possibly the synagogue, whose music he incorporated into his theater.⁶⁹⁶ In terms of actual theater, America was where he gained his tastes and understanding, and his theater reflected this. He first arrived in America in 1881, a year after the first chain of vaudeville theaters was established.⁶⁹⁷ He began his professional career in a vaudeville house in New York, starring in a half-hour Yiddish sketch with musical parts alongside an English-language program, an act

⁶⁹³ A quote of Joseph Barondess, in Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 7, 1935, 4.

⁶⁹⁴ See Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 209-211; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 133-136; Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, April 28, 1938, 2.

⁶⁹⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Mar. 22, 1938, 3. See footnote 435 above.

⁶⁹⁶ Thomashefsky tried to build up his enamorment with the Kiev Opera in his autobiography, but he lived in Kiev with his parents for only a short period of time, between the ages of nine and ten or eleven, and the importance of the Kiev Opera in his development is questionable. See Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 16-19.

⁶⁹⁷ Hughes, 304.

meant to cater to both Jews and gentiles.⁶⁹⁸ Although vaudeville programs strung together a series of performances that were not connected by a storyline, and Thomashefsky's subsequent Yiddish theater work always presented a play with characters and a plot, the hodge-podge of singing and dancing, comedy, and melodrama that was typical of many Thomashefsky productions had a vaudeville-like quality to it.⁶⁹⁹ Thomashefsky himself never referred in his autobiography either to the vaudeville houses or to standard Yiddish theater fare as *shund*.

Upon the arrival of a Moyshe Heimowitz's professional Yiddish theater company in New York from Eastern Europe, following the ban on Yiddish Theater by Alexander III in 1883, Thomashefsky took to the road.⁷⁰⁰ If Adler's autobiography showed his evolution as an artist as an internal process, Thomashefsky depicted his evolution as related to action, as befits a memoir.⁷⁰¹ He appeared in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Baltimore, where he met his future wife, Bessie.⁷⁰² Thomashefsky made much of his tremendous popularity in the American Yiddish theater, without making an issue of the quality of that theater. Thus, when Thomashefsky appeared with his company in Baltimore in 1887, Yankev Gartenstein showed up one day with a more professional company. To compete with Thomashefsky, they appeared in Shomer's *The Penitent* and in *Uriel Acosta*, both dramas. But the public wasn't interested in Gartenstein's performances, and the company left Baltimore a failure. Thomashefsky explained why:

⁶⁹⁸ At Michael Yumin's National Theater, see Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 120-124. Preceding this, he appeared with his own amateur Yiddish acting company called "Boris Thomashefsky's Yiddish Operetta Troupe" which he claimed to have founded at the age of fourteen. Among other places, they appeared in a theater below a brothel (Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 85-100).

⁶⁹⁹ Actual vaudeville only became a part of the world of Yiddish theater beginning in 1901. It flourished for a little more than a decade, before making way for moving pictures. Both these forms of entertainment harmed the popularity of the legitimate Yiddish theater. See Judith Thissen, "Liquor and Leisure: The Business of Yiddish Vaudeville," in *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage*, eds. Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry, 184-201. Thissen compared Hurwitz's operettas to the style of the music hall out of which vaudeville grew (Thissen, 191). She related that in 1902, Thomashefsky and Adler were partners in a vaudeville house adjoining their People's Theater (Thissen, 188).

⁷⁰⁰ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 154-161. Performing Yiddish theater "on the road," meaning outside of New York, was actually an important contribution of Thomashefsky's to the development of Yiddish theater in America. He did not seem to be aware of this in his autobiography. It would appear that in his mind, the theater of New York was primary, and his performances out of it were made of necessity and not with the intention of furthering Yiddish theater in America, which indeed they did.

⁷⁰¹ Marcus Moseley, *Being Myself Alone, Origins of Jewish Autobiography*, 7-8.

⁷⁰² Bessie was only fourteen at the time. Thomashefsky was nineteen.

Baltimore Jews cried: 'What kind of Yiddish theater is this without singing, without dancing! A whole night they mumble! Feh! With Thomashefsky they sing, they dance, you see pretty girls, pretty women; a lot of musical instruments play, it makes your heart happy.'⁷⁰³

Thomashefsky was completely unapologetic, and he took pride in knowing how to give the public what it was looking for.

The unapologetic tone of his autobiography in relation to his popular theater also prevailed whenever he referred to capitalizing on his looks. Unlike Adler, Thomashefsky seemed quite undisturbed by that prospect. This is evident in his discussion of his first starring role in New York in Lateiner's *David ben Jesse*. After playing the provinces for several years, Thomashefsky returned to New York and joined the Romanian Opera House, which David Kessler had recently left, creating a need for a romantic male lead. Thomashefsky filled Kessler's place as the lead in Lateiner's *David ben Jesse*, a historical operetta about King David. Though he claimed to have joined the company in order to reach a higher artistic level, he attributed the success he presumed to have had in the role to his looks. He wrote that when he put on his costume as King David there was great excitement among the actors because of his appearance. Sophie Karp told him that if he acted like he looked, he would take New York by storm. He bragged that Feinman and Hurwitz called him "the best-looking romantic lead in the world," and that the newspapers loved his appearance. He made no mention of his acting ability.⁷⁰⁴ This preoccupation with his own looks continued throughout the memoir.⁷⁰⁵

Thomashefsky prided himself on what he considered to be high professional standards such as lavish sets and costumes. He wrote of the tights he wore in *Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem* as being as important to that production's great success as the Cherkasy costume he wore in Hurwitz's *Kuzari*.⁷⁰⁶ But the literary value of the play was not central to his vision for Yiddish theater.

All of the things Thomashefsky was proud of – the singing and dancing in his productions, the lavish sets and costumes, the way in which he flaunted his sexuality with his

⁷⁰³ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 188-189.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid., 272-274. We have seen in Chapter Two, section IB4 that Bessie Thomashefsky said the performance was a dismal failure.

⁷⁰⁵ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 28, 282-283.

⁷⁰⁶ Ibid., 316-317.

tight pants – were elements criticized by the radical Jewish intellectuals as the epitome of the vulgar, lowbrow nature of the Yiddish stage.⁷⁰⁷

In his memoirs, Thomashefsky seemed proud of his legacy. In contrast, in the series of vignettes on Yiddish theater which he published in 1908, *Teater shriftn*, he took a different approach. There, he proudly proclaimed that “the Yiddish actors have long ago thrown off the golden silk shirts.”⁷⁰⁸ Similarly, in the chapter in *Teater shriftn* entitled “*Vu nemt men a pyese af peysekh*” (“Where Will We Find a Passover Play?”) he treated popular theater that pandered to the masses with sarcasm and ridicule, even writing parodies of its lyrics. He wrote sarcastically about having to mix a few cantorial pieces into the tragicomic opera performed on Passover.⁷⁰⁹ He also ridiculed the artistic quality of many Yiddish plays in the article, “*A yold brengt a pyese in idishn teater*” (“A Fool Brings a Play to the Yiddish Theater”) and denied the necessity of incorporating music and dance into all Yiddish performances.⁷¹⁰ In the series of articles he wrote for the *Forverts* in 1913 about his trip to Europe, we also find sarcasm regarding Yiddish operettas. When he saw what he considered an atrocious production of *Dos pintele yid* in Warsaw, he wrote of it: “God, have mercy on me! What I saw and heard there, I don’t even wish on an operetta writer...” He even displayed self-mockery concerning the play which was his greatest success. He wrote that when the renowned Yiddish and Hebrew writers Y.L. Peretz, David Frishman and Mordecai Spector came to see him perform in Warsaw in Kobrin’s *Lost Paradise*, they came to his dressing room after the performance, and after complimenting him on his acting, said to him “Write whatever you want, but please, no more ‘Pinteles’.”⁷¹¹

To understand the disparity between the different attitudes Thomashefsky expressed toward populist theater in these various writings, we must note at what point in his life he wrote each of them. *Teater shriftn* was written in 1908, when he was forty years old, and in mid-career. He had by then appeared in much that critics called *shund* but had also played serious roles such as *Hamlet* and Gordin’s *Dovid’l Meshoyrer*. The battle he was fighting against

⁷⁰⁷ Warnke, “Theater as Educational Institution,” 29-30; Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater,” 90.

⁷⁰⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, *Tomashevski’s teater shriftn*, 55.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 28-34. He uncharacteristically even used the word *shund* (pg. 28), a word not mentioned in his later autobiography.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., 23-28, 55-56.

⁷¹¹ Boris Thomashefsky, “Tomashevski un di Varshevar teater velt” (Thomashefsky and the Warsaw Theater World), *Forverts*, Nov. 9, 1913, 4.

the Hebrew Actors' Union, and his disappointment with the slump Yiddish theater had entered during the later part of the first decade of the twentieth century, allowed him to be critical of Yiddish theater in general, and of what was considered *shund* in particular. Similarly, in 1913, when he toured Europe, he was still appearing in works such as *Lost Paradise* and Libin's *Justice*. He could afford to mock his unsophisticated operettas. By the time he wrote his 1935 memoir, he had spent the last years of his career performing almost exclusively in his own operettas, and he was associated in people's minds with that genre. In this later autobiography he wanted to build himself up as the founding father and one of the pillars of the American Yiddish theater. He was nearing seventy, wanted to solidify his historic legacy and was not about to slander the genres that had brought him fame. On the contrary, he wanted to capitalize on any possibility he had of gaining some immortality through his memoir and so he granted all the various genres he had appeared in equal respect and dignity.

Furthermore, when "the Gordin years" ended toward the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, and the Yiddish theater turned its back on the kind of theater the radical intelligentsia aspired to, returning to the mass-appeal theater epitomized by Thomashefsky's *Dos pintele yid*, Thomashefsky, who had earlier done more realistic-style plays by Gordin and Kobrin, was attacked by the theatrical critics for "selling out" to popular taste, and sacrificing the artistic quality of the Yiddish theater for monetary gain.⁷¹² In his autobiography, he defended himself from that attack. His ideal was not Russian realism like that of the radical intelligentsia or Jacob Adler. His aspiration was not to maintain a dialogue with European and Russian culture. He aspired to a theater that would be Jewish in its style and content, and address itself to issues relevant to the Jewish people. Thomashefsky asserted "that the Yiddish theater must be Jewish. It must present plays from Jewish life. The music must be genuinely Jewish, the melodies should penetrate the Jewish hearts of the public."⁷¹³

In asserting the importance of the authentic Jewishness of the Yiddish theater, he was not only separating himself from the ideal of Russian realism on the Yiddish stage promoted by Adler and the Jewish intelligentsia; he was also drawing a line between his own operettas and the historical operettas written by Lateiner and Hurwitz at the end of the nineteenth century.

⁷¹² Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 262-263.

⁷¹³ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 332.

The plays of Lateiner and Hurwitz were attacked not only by critics who belonged to the radical Jewish intelligentsia like Cahan and Miller. They were criticized, too, by critics associated with the more conservative, nationalistic Orthodox newspapers, run by Kasriel Sarasohn, the *Tageblatt*, *Morgen zhurnal* and *Abend post*. Men like Moyshe Seiffert, Johann Paley and Khonen Minikes wrote that the “historical operettas” of Lateiner and Hurwitz lacked any historical basis. They were Jewish only in name, but not in spirit, and contained no connection to actual Jewish history. The music in these plays was often unacknowledged adaptations of European repertoire such as *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Aida*, *Trovatore* and *Rigoletto*.⁷¹⁴

Thomashefsky, in insisting on the importance of the authentic Jewishness of Yiddish theater, was siding with the conservative critics, and defending the theater he himself created, as opposed to the plays of Lateiner and Hurwitz in which he did not participate. There are, indeed, critics who see Thomashefsky’s operettas as being more well-crafted and logically constructed than those of Lateiner and Hurwitz, with dialogue and individual scenes much more realistically written than those of Lateiner and Hurwitz.⁷¹⁵

Continuing to contrast his operettas with Lateiner and Hurwitz’s, Thomashefsky asserted that along with the subject matter, the Jewishness of the music was quite crucial to him. As a former *meshoyrer* and as the grandson and son of cantors, Thomashefsky had traditional Jewish synagogue music in his blood. In the series of articles he wrote for the *Forverts* about his visit to Europe in 1913, he wrote of Nissan Belzer, the cantor to whom he was apprenticed in Berdichev:

My whole childhood I believed that there was no greater composer, no greater and more beautiful singer in the whole world than Nissan Belzer. His melodies, his harmony, his compositions, followed me and rang in my ears for many years. And today, I still delight in Nissan Belzer’s compositions, which were really Jewish. I doubt it there will ever be such a Jewish genius as Nissan Belzer.⁷¹⁶

When discussing the music of *Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem*, Thomashefsky said that it was “put together from melodies and compositions of cantors like Nissan Belzer and

⁷¹⁴ Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater,” 111-112.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., 262.

⁷¹⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, “Tomashevski fort keyn Ades un farblondzhet keyn Berditshev” (“Thomashefsky Travels to Odessa and Wanders into Berditchiv”), *Forverts*, Nov. 16, 1913, 4.

Yerucham Katan, Velvel Shestapuler, and Nissan Blumenthal.”⁷¹⁷ Not only was the music taken from cantorial pieces but also the way in which it was sung was influenced by the traditional cantorial style. When Thomashefsky taught the Jewish tenor from the Russian opera, Medvedev, his role in *Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem*, he noted that the Russian tenor did not sing the role like him, “with *yidishe dreydlekh*” (artificial tremoring of the voice). Those “*yidishe dreydlekh*” are the style that Thomashefsky used when singing cantorial music, which he transferred to his theatrical appearances.⁷¹⁸

Thomashefsky did not openly criticize Gordin anywhere in his writings. He had a good relationship with him, and successfully performed in several of his plays. But when he described his visit with the great Yiddish writer, Sholem Yankev Abramovich (*Mendele Moykher Sfarim*) in Mendele’s summer home outside Odessa in 1913, Thomashefsky quoted Mendele as saying that Gordin ‘converted’ the Yiddish stage. But the Yiddish stage, in his opinion, did not have to be converted:

Yiddish theater has to be Jewish, not ‘borrowed’ and not remade. The Yiddish theater has to carry the Jewish spirit in it, in a lighter and more understandable form. You can’t philosophize with the people, because we have few philosophers. We must come close to the masses and not get far away from them.

And when I see or read things written for the Yiddish stage and these things are not our own, but ‘borrowed’, used or remade Fausts, Hamlets, remade things based on Suderman’s and Hauptman’s works, I don’t like them, and neither can the ordinary Jew like them. Because a Jew immediately feels that which is not Jewish.⁷¹⁹

⁷¹⁷ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 323. Also see *ibid.*, 280, where Thomashefsky identified the composer responsible for the score as Giacomo (Yankele) Minkowski. See Robboy, 234, who claimed the score was strongly influenced by Italian opera. (Robboy, 225-250).

⁷¹⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 326. The connection between cantorial music and the Yiddish theater was not particular to Thomashefsky. Hoberman wrote that in America, cantorial music became a staple of the Yiddish theater. See Hoberman, 259. Joel Berkowitz, too, wrote how the religious upbringing of Yiddish theater personalities directly affected the music of the Yiddish theater. He quoted musicologist Mark Slobin as saying that the leading musical figures of the movement were all trained in the synagogues as upholders of liturgical music. (Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs*, Urbana and London: University of Illinois Press, 1982, 3). Aside from Thomashefsky, extremely popular stars such as Sigmund Feinman and Sigmund Mogulesco, received their first musical training as *meshoyrerim*. Feinman, like Thomashefsky, was also a prolific composer for the Yiddish theater. Many of the first Yiddish theater companies in Romania and Russia used former *meshoyrerim* in their ranks. See Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*, 12-13.

⁷¹⁹ “Thomashefsky’s geshprekh mit Mendele Moykher Sforim” (“Thomashefsky’s Talk with Mendele Moykher Sforim”), *Forverts*, Dec. 14, 1913, 5. Thomashefsky’s rendering of Abramovich was quite romanticized compared to the actual writer, who was quite critical of the Jewish society of Eastern Europe, and whose literary career was “shaped by the cosmopolitan world of the press.” (See David Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing, The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 65-66.

Thomashefsky was using Mendele's voice to express his own view of Yiddish theater, and his own preference for what he considered authentically Jewish theater, light and understandable to the masses, to plays like Gordin's reworking of *Faust* (*God, Man and the Devil*) or *King Lear* (*A Jewish King Lear*). He was also writing his own defense against the criticisms of the radical Jewish intelligentsia.

When Thomashefsky wrote in his 1908 *Teater shriftn* of "realistic actors who became like gentiles from [performing] gentile realism; [...] vulgar people playing Jewish theater without a Jewish soul or Jewish feeling or spirit,"⁷²⁰ he was expressing both a criticism of Adler and his school, who strove to imitate Russian realism, and his own belief in the importance of the Jewish character of the Yiddish theater. Even though this was written before the period in Thomashefsky's life when he produced primarily operettas of his own making on Jewish themes, he was clearly familiar with the opinion of the critics of his times and felt the need to pen a defense. He was telling the intellectuals that he had a different goal than they, one he was able to achieve in plays that had tremendous mass appeal, because they spoke the language of the people, the Jewish language which was not a translation from Russian or any other foreign culture. Unlike Gordin or Adler, his goal was not to elevate the people or educate them. He wanted to celebrate being Jewish with them.

It is no wonder that Thomashefsky gave his operettas names like *The Soul of Our People*, *Dos toyrele* (*The Torah*) or *Dos pintele yid* (*The Jewish Spark*), and that he directed works like Zolotorefsky's *The Jewish Flag*, or *My Nation*, or Goldfadn's Zionist *Ben Ami*. And indeed, most of these plays were highly successful. Up until 1909, *Dos pintele yid* was the most successful Yiddish play to appear on the American stage.⁷²¹ He wrote of it that he knew it was no literary work, but "simply a folk's play with music, written for my Jewish folk, meaning for my theater goers, who I know well, better than all the other Yiddish operetta writers." He claimed to have put "secrets" into the operettas that he wrote, acted in, and directed himself, secrets about which others who produced his works couldn't possibly know.⁷²²

⁷²⁰ Boris Thomashefsky, "Ben ami's shikzal," *Thomashevski's teater shriftn*, 78-79.

⁷²¹ Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 1, 820.

⁷²² Boris Thomashefsky, "Thomashefsky un di Warshavar teater velt" (Thomashefsky and the Warsaw Theater World), *Forverts*, Nov. 9, 1913, 4.

Though his autobiography stressed mostly externals such as his financial success, his good looks, and his success with women, when his autobiographical works are examined as a whole, what emerges is a desire to create a Yiddish theater that would resonate within the Jewish soul of the masses. This self-presentation may have been an exercise in self-justification aimed at his critics among the radical Jewish intelligentsia.⁷²³ But quite possibly, this was Thomashefsky's true artistic goal. Like the Yiddish theater described by Sandrow, he was interested in a Yiddish theater that was more of a substitute synagogue than a school of education.

3. Sara Adler, the Russophile

Sara Adler used the word *shund* sparingly, usually when referring to the words or opinions of others like Adler or Abe Cahan.⁷²⁴ But she was very critical of popular Yiddish theater, and unlike her husband, who did not speak openly against any of the Yiddish playwrights, Sara Adler wrote critically of the plays written by Lateiner and Hurwitz, and of the problem of the centrality of both of those figures in early American Yiddish theater.

Until the premiere of *The Jewish King Lear* in 1892 and the ensuing years in which Gordin dominated the New York Yiddish stage, Lateiner and Hurwitz had a virtual monopoly on new plays. Sara Adler wrote of that period:

In a relatively short time two drama dictators had consolidated: Lateiner and Hurwitz, who couldn't create any serious works. And because they knew their weakness as dramaturgs, they decided not to allow in any new talent. And the circumstances were then so that it was not hard for them to achieve their goal.⁷²⁵

Sara Adler repeatedly called Lateiner and Hurwitz "dictators" because of the way they protected their turf and did not allow any new young writers to write for the Yiddish stage. They organized the actors to ridicule any new playwrights who came to read their plays, which

⁷²³ Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 277, wrote that Thomashefsky received the least respect from the critics among the Yiddish star actors.

⁷²⁴ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Mar. 22, 1938, 3; Oct. 15, 1938, 11; Oct. 18, 1938, 3. In the latter the specific plays criticized as *shund* are Thomashefsky's *The Green Boy* and *The Green Girl*.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, May 14, 1938, 7.

kept newcomers out of the business. Sara Adler credited herself, Jacob Adler, and their “assistants” in helping to create “a situation where writers like Gordin, Kobrin, Libin, and other talents could come to the Yiddish theater without fear of being insulted and laughed at.”⁷²⁶ In this, like her husband, she took credit for enabling the Yiddish theater to reach higher artistic levels.

Sara Adler described Lateiner’s first hit as a *shtick* made up of four acts:

To any more or less intelligent spectator it was clear as day that one act didn’t fit the other. There was no connection between the acts. You could end the play at the second or third act and nothing would be missing. In the middle of every act the actors would suddenly fall into song and dance.⁷²⁷

As critical as Sara Adler was of Lateiner and Hurwitz, she was totally uncritical, like her husband, of the man whom some considered their counterpart in Russia, the playwright and author Shomer, whom she treats with great respect. Shomer was the pseudonym of Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitch (1849?-1905). Shomer had also written novels, which were severely criticized as being of extremely poor literary value in Sholem Aleichem’s vicious attack on him, *Shomers Mishpet* (Shomer’s Trial).⁷²⁸ We have already noted that his operetta, *The Treyfenyak*, the very play in which Sara Adler made her stage debut, was criticized as being of an unusually low and vulgar nature by the critic for the *Yiddishe folks-blatt*.⁷²⁹ Shomer was responsible for Sara Adler first appearing on the Yiddish stage in Russia. He was just putting together his Yiddish theatrical troupe when young Sara (then Levitzky) decided to join the Yiddish theater in Odessa. She decided to approach Shomer about joining his troupe. When her mother heard the news, her immediate response was: “Oh, he is a great writer. All the women read his novels. His novels make our Dina (the cook) cry.”⁷³⁰

⁷²⁶ Ibid., May 14, 1938, 7; May 17, 1938, 3; May 19, 1938, 5; May 21, 1938, 2.

⁷²⁷ Ibid., May 19, 1938, 5.

⁷²⁸ Sholem Aleichem, *Shomers Mishpat* (Berdichev: Yakov Sheftl Press, 1888) available online at <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-SHOMERSMISHPET/sholem-aleichem-shomers-mishpet-by-sholem-aleichem-1888>. Concerning this work, see Justin D. Cammy, “Judging *The Judgment of Shomer*, Jewish Literature Versus Jewish Learning” in *Arguing the Modern Jewish Canon, Essays on Literature and Culture in Honor of Ruth R. Wisse*, eds. Justin D. Cammy et al. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009), 85-127. An annotated translation of the work also appears there, *ibid.*, 129-185. See David G. Roskies “The Medium and Message of the Maskilic Chapbook,” *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 41, no. 3/4, 1979, 285, who said that Shomer’s name “became synonymous with *shund*.”

⁷²⁹ See Chapter Three, section B1 above.

⁷³⁰ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, July 3, 1937.

Sara Levitzky's father's friend, a rich Odessan Jew named Krick, spoke to Shomer of the young actress' great talent and arranged a meeting between her and Shomer. Contemplating the difficulty of parting with her beloved daughter, her mother said:

I know that you have to go away from us for who knows for how long? But I have one consolation – that you have nothing to do with cheap comedians. If the writer Shomer has to do with them, they will probably be decent people. You know, the usual actors who travel around the world are like gypsies. But if a man like Shomer is the organizer then it's different. Go, my child, to Shomer, and G-d should lead you well.⁷³¹

Sara Adler presented Shomer as the height of dignity and integrity. When she went to see him, he accepted her into his troupe despite her young age based on Krick's enthusiastic recommendation. "So, you are the actress who will conquer worlds," he said to her. She thought very highly of him: "He was a rare, hearty, good-hearted man with a cheerful face. A warm goodness streamed from his eyes. He was one of those rare people whose words always seemed sincere."⁷³² He introduced her to two people who would play very important roles in her life: Berger, her first director, from whom she learned much about acting, and Moyshe Heimowitz, the company's manager, who later became Sara's first husband. It is possible that the very positive light in which Sara Adler portrayed the writer so maligned by Sholem Aleichem was related to the age at which she met him and the very important and positive role he played in her life. And possibly it is because she met him and performed in his company in her beloved Odessa, meeting him through her father's cultured friend Krick. A play of questionable quality like Shomer's *The Treyfenyak* that they acted in during that distant period had a different flavor to Sara Adler than the plays of Lateiner and Hurwitz in which she later performed in New York. In her mind, Shomer was a part of the towering Russian culture and not the cheap New York one.⁷³³

In her love of Russian culture, and her dream of transferring it to the New York Yiddish stage, Sara Adler resembled the radical Jewish intelligentsia more than any of the other

⁷³¹ Ibid., July 6, 1937, 5.

⁷³² Ibid.

⁷³³ It should be noted that Warnke did see a difference between Shomer and Lateiner or Hurwitz and wrote of Shomer's own criticism of the early popular Yiddish theater as being too non-realistic. Shomer demanded that even within the conventions of melodrama, a playwright should maintain certain realistic traits. See "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 47-57.

personalities in this study. Her dream for Yiddish theater was of a theater that could put on the classics of world theater, particularly the Russian theater. She even went beyond Gordin, who wanted to create a dialogue between Yiddish theater and the European classics, in a way that reinterpreted them from the point of view of the modern Jewish experience.⁷³⁴ She wanted to present European plays that were as close as possible to the original, only in Yiddish.

When the actor Dubinsky, who acted as a liaison between Sara (then Heimowitz) and Jacob Adler, when the latter was in London and the former in New York, told her of Adler's plans of playing classical works together with her, he quoted Adler as saying: "If I will have such an actress [as Sara], I will take a Jew [...] and translate Tolstoy and Ostrovsky and other classics for him. Believe me, the intelligent Yiddish public will be delighted. We will play in the best world plays in Yiddish translations." Sara Adler then wrote: "Dubinsky repeated those words to me tens of times, and they rang like music in my ears [...] Playing a role in a classic play is for me much, much more important than driving in carriages and wearing rich clothes."⁷³⁵

Sara Adler dreamt of playing in the classics. We would expect to hear her speak of acting in plays by Shakespeare and Molière, maybe Euripides. But for her, the Russophile, "the best world plays in Yiddish translations" meant primarily Tolstoy and Ostrovsky, the most respected contemporary Russian novelist and playwright, respectively.⁷³⁶

So, it is not surprising to read of her excitement when, in the spring of 1903, she began to accomplish her dream and planned a production of Moyshe Katz's adaptation of Tolstoy's *Resurrection* together with Adler. But when she and Adler brought the written play to their manager, Edelstein, he was unenthusiastic.

He was Rumanian and couldn't be expected to share our enthusiasm for a serious Russian work. He couldn't free himself from the deeply ingrained conviction that you can only make money with "trash," with buffoons, light songs and rubbing the audience's eyes with cheap melodramatic onion tears...⁷³⁷

⁷³⁴ Barbara Henry, *Rewriting Russia*, 7, 75, 108, and elsewhere. This is the premise that lies at the foundation of her book.

⁷³⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Mar. 22, 1938, 3.

⁷³⁶ Of Ostrovsky's dominance of the Russian stage between 1853 and 1886, see Chapter Two, Section 1A above. Of the status of the Odessa City Theater of Sara and Jacob's youth, see Lulla Rosenfeld's notes to Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 27-28.

⁷³⁷ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 3, 1938, 3.

Sara prided herself greatly on her appreciation of Russian culture. In her eyes, Edelstein, the Romanian, could not possibly understand the greatness of Tolstoy or believe in the possibility of it succeeding on the Yiddish stage. Sara quoted Edelstein as saying to Adler “You want literature, art! ... You forget that all they [the public] want is a *Green Boy*, a *Green Girl*,”⁷³⁸ referring to those productions by Thomashefsky as the kind of vulgar and unsophisticated entertainment the public demands. When Edelstein refused to stage *Resurrection* but encouraged Jacob and Sara Adler to sign a contract to do Gordin’s *The Tree of Knowledge*, Sara Adler told him that playing *Resurrection* is more important to her than a contract. She said to Edelstein that Adler could do what he wanted, but she was not signing unless he wrote in the contract that no one would do *Resurrection* in his theater aside from them.⁷³⁹ He agreed. They signed the contract and the Adlers first staged Gordin’s *The Tree of Knowledge*, and then Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*.

Sara devoted four chapters of her autobiography to the production of *Resurrection*. She quoted Adler as saying that “*Resurrection* must make a revolution on the Yiddish stage. It will be a performance that will surpass anything New York has seen.” Of the first day of rehearsal, Sara wrote: “Never have I seen a troupe in such an elevated mood. The joy that reigned when we gave out the parts was indescribable. That day we left the theater with light hearts. We felt that every actor felt it an honor to act in Tolstoy’s work.” Of the rehearsal process she wrote: “We worked day and night, but this was a work about which I had long dreamed. [...] I felt like a fish in water.”

She described in detail her approach to performing several of the major scenes in the play. No other role she played was described with so much detail. Of the opening performance of the play, she wrote: “That night a storm of feeling brewed in our theater that swept us all into it.” She wrote of the audience’s enthusiastic and ecstatic response to the performance: “I had never seen anything like that until then in America.”⁷⁴⁰

It is clear that performing in *Resurrection* was a major event in Sara’s life. She had finally achieved her dream of appearing in an authentic Russian drama. She and Adler began

⁷³⁸ Ibid., Oct. 18, 1938, 3.

⁷³⁹ They had heard that Thomashefsky planned on doing a production of it, and wanted to make sure he did not beat them to it.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., Oct. 3, 1938, 3; Oct. 15, 1938, 11; Oct. 18, 1938, 3.

appearing in *Resurrection* during the fall of 1903. Nine years later, in the fall of 1912, when Sara decided to rent The Novelty Theater in Brooklyn, and to become artistically independent of Jacob, the play that she chose to do at this moment of “declaration of independence” was an adaptation of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*. What better suited Sara's own personal coming of age as an independent artist than a truly Russian work?

The Kreutzer Sonata had previously been adapted by Gordin in 1902. Gordin's very successful adaptation had Judaized the work, moving it to Jewish New York, and added more melodrama, such as two illegitimate pregnancies, a double homicide, and a thwarted conversion to Christianity. It also contained timely features such as immigration and trade unions. The differences between the original work and Gordin's adaptation were so marked that the connection of his adaptation to the original was commonly questioned.⁷⁴¹ Barbara Henry maintained that these alterations were consistent with Gordin's view that the classics should be reinterpreted for the Yiddish stage, and in her view his *Kreutzer Sonata* was indeed a reinterpretation of the original in a Jewish context.⁷⁴² In Barbara Henry's opinion, Gordin's adaptations were “sustained critical dialogues with his source works, which assert Jewish continuity with European literature through its re-inscription as popular Yiddish drama [...]”⁷⁴³ As she pointed out, his belief in constant reinterpretation of the literature of the past did not change from his days in Russia, where he headed the organization he called the Spiritual Biblical Brotherhood, which was dedicated to reinterpreting the Bible for modern-day Russian Jews in a more Protestant fashion, including renouncing the Talmud and Jewish law.⁷⁴⁴

Sara Adler was much more loyal to the original source. Her *Kreutzer Sonata* was a genuine stage adaptation of a literary source, and not a complete reinterpretation. She returned to the original Russian text, and produced an adaptation not Judaized, but like the original, set in Russia, with non-Jewish characters. Like Gordin, she was in love with Russian

⁷⁴¹ Barbara Henry, “Jacob Gordin's Dialogue with Tolstoy: Di Kreytser Sonata (1902),” *Jewish Theatre: A Global View*, ed. Edna Nahshon (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), 25-48; Barbara Henry, *Rewriting Russia*, 106.

⁷⁴² *Ibid.*, 106-126,

⁷⁴³ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8. On Gordin and the Spiritual Biblical Brotherhood, see Henry, 45-66, 86-95. Gordin's connection with this organization, which appears to have promoted an amalgamation of Judaism and Christianity, was the source of much criticism aimed at Gordin by the Orthodox Press, as well as others among the immigrant population.

culture and wanted to create a dialogue with it on the Yiddish stage. Unlike him, she did not want to “rewrite Russia,” in the words of Barbara Henry, but only to translate it into Yiddish.

Sara dedicated seven chapters of her autobiography to her production of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and to the intrigues that surrounded it.⁷⁴⁵ It is the only production from the period she spent at the Novelty Theater of which she wrote. Although Sara spoke of wanting Yiddish theater to produce the great plays of the world, it is clear which culture actually was the real, true one in her eyes – Russian culture.

But unlike the radical Jewish intellectuals, whose love of Russian culture had strong roots in ideology, and who wanted to use the theater primarily as a tool to educate the masses in progressive values, Sara Adler’s love for Russian culture appeared to stem from a personal, emotional place. It stood for her childhood, her beloved Odessa, the world she knew and loved and left. Its theater was the wonderful theater of her youth. She was so in love with Russian culture that even when the work was imbued with a very religious Christian tone, like *Resurrection*, or a Christian attitude toward sex, like *The Kreutzer Sonata*, to Sara these were works that epitomized the greatest culture possible – the Russian culture, and she was extremely proud of bringing them to the Jewish stage. Interestingly, though, Sara did not speak of ideology in her writing. One can detect a strong feminist streak in her character, but she did not try to present herself as an artist promoting political agendas. She loved art for art’s sake, and not as a means of promoting an agenda. In all her autobiography, there is no criticism whatsoever of Jewish tradition and values. They were not an important part of her life, but they were an important part of the life of the mother she loved and to whom she was devoted. Though Sara may have outdone Gordin in her desire to bring Russian culture to the stage, her autobiography displays an actress who did not want to reform the New York Yiddish stage for ideological reasons but rather, like her husband, for reasons of aesthetics. In her own self-presentation, her love of Russian realism was a love of a theatrical style, not of an ideology. Sara’s great love was the theater. It was the center of her life.

⁷⁴⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Aug.3, 1939 - Aug. 17, 1939.

4. Bessie Thomashefsky – An Eclectic Approach

In contrast with Sara Adler, Bessie Thomashefsky handled the subject of Lateiner and Hurwitz, and the theater they represented, with cynical humor. Rather than being openly critical of their plays, she used sarcasm and innuendo. For example, of Lateiner's *The 400 Years*, she wrote:

My husband put on a work of art by Lateiner named *The 400 Years*. [...] Real live ducks swam in water onstage, and Thomashefsky jumps in a little water and 'swims' in Lateiner's prose. ... But the public delighted in it and it brought in the dollars from which we artists could certainly delight.⁷⁴⁶

In case anyone had any doubt that she was calling it a "work of art" sarcastically, the description of Thomashefsky swimming in Lateiner's prose and even more so the addition "But the public delighted in it and it brought in the dollars" revealed her satiric stance. She did not hold the Yiddish theater-going public in great regard, and often spoke of them in highly critical terms.⁷⁴⁷

Of Lateiner's *The Lost Soul*, which Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky presented together with Jacob and Sara Adler in Chicago around the turn of the century, she wrote: "Our repertoire was not a high one. We presented, for example, a 'masterpiece' like Lateiner's *The Lost Soul*. But the Chicago Jews liked it a lot, and the theater was packed in every performance." She commonly called plays written by either Hurwitz or Lateiner "masterpieces," either in quotation marks or without them. Among the "masterpieces" she wrote of are Lateiner's *Eyshes Khayil*, and Hurwitz's *Yifas Toar*.⁷⁴⁸ Of Hurwitz's *The Johnstown Flood*, which Sara Adler openly called "monstrous," Bessie Thomashefsky sarcastically wrote: "In New York, Professor Hurwitz had written a 'heart-rending drama' about the Johnstown flood." She did on at least one occasion openly call the plays of Lateiner and Hurwitz "trite" but did not malign them in the manner of Sara Adler.⁷⁴⁹

⁷⁴⁶ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 255.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid., 142, she wrote: "Who is guilty that between the Yiddish public and the Yiddish actors there hasn't formed a friendly, warm esteem and respect [...] ? Why is there scorn in their relationship?" See also Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 24, 1935; Nov. 26, 1935; Dec. 17, 1935, 4.

⁷⁴⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 193, 223.

⁷⁴⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 29, 1935, 7; Dec. 3, 1935.

This cynicism was not limited to Lateiner and Hurwitz, but as we said above, extended to all plays and performers whose artistic value Bessie questioned. She wrote how they presented a play called *Gavrieliki* alongside “other masterpieces” until a strike at the People’s Theater “stopped the art factory.” She poked fun at Thomashefsky’s amateur company, which advertised in Philadelphia in the late 1880s that “the great artist Pinchas Thomashefsky, father of the great artist Boris Thomashefsky, will appear in splendor and glory for the first time in the role of Ekanam in the masterpiece by Shomer, *The Convict*.”⁷⁵⁰ As opposed to both Jacob and Sara Adler, who treated Shomer with the utmost respect, Bessie Thomashefsky seemed to side with Sholem Aleichem. It mattered not to her whether the writer was an Odessa gentleman, or a ragamuffin ex-missionary like Hurwitz. To her *shund* was *shund*.

Neither did Bessie spare her sarcasm when speaking of her husband. Of a play they staged in Pittsburgh, around the turn of the century, she wrote: “We put on a masterpiece called *The Green Shoemaker, or the Matron*, a drama in 4 acts by Boris Thomashefsky. I don’t remember what the Pittsburgh Jews liked more, the green shoemaker, or the matron. I only remember that they came to see us act and we made a few dollars.”⁷⁵¹

In all of the above examples, we see that Bessie’s compromise on artistic integrity was accompanied by an acknowledgment of the financial success of the enterprise and of the necessity of pandering to the audience’s wishes. But the sarcastic tone gave the game away. Bessie, as she portrayed herself, would have preferred to be a real artist like the artists she so admired. But life did not serve her that deal. She occasionally was able to reach the heights of a serious actress in a serious work of art. Usually, she had to deal with the kind of unsophisticated plays her husband brought to the stage as their vehicles. She wrote that after the breakdown she suffered because of Thomashefsky’s affair with Regina Zuckerberg, the doctor who took care of her told her that she could develop and go much further in her art if she were in a better atmosphere and surrounded by other people. “It hurt him to see the coarseness and vulgarity that I often had to bear.”⁷⁵²

⁷⁵⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 255, 104.

⁷⁵¹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 24, 1935.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, Nov. 10, 1935, 3.

Bessie Thomashefsky had a very low opinion of most of the people working in the Yiddish theater, artistically and on a human level. The exceptions to that rule were the few people she looked up to as real artists. They usually received her unadulterated praise. These included Abraham Goldfaden, Jacob Gordin, Sigmund Mogulesco and Rudolph Schildkraut.

She called Goldfaden “a real artist.” She spoke with pride of how he kissed her on the forehead after she played Leibele in *The Two Kuni Lemels* in Boston at the age of sixteen, and said to the actors: “Children, this young girl is a talent; she will one day be a great Yiddish actress.”⁷⁵³

Jacob Gordin was portrayed, as in Jacob Adler’s autobiography, as a Messiah who came to the Yiddish stage. She spoke of “the Gordin years” in the Yiddish theater thus: “With every new play by Gordin, the Yiddish theater grew in stature, and the actors became more artistically ambitious. [...] All this was created by one man – Jacob Gordin.” She wrote that “Gordin’s period was the most important in the history of Yiddish theater. Our greatest Yiddish actors and the greatest talents that the Yiddish theater produced spun around Gordin like the stars around the moon.” She said that Gordin was “more than the creator of some of the best dramatic works in our literature. He was also a teacher of actors, an educator, and his influence as such was enormous.” Her admiration of him often seemed to know no bounds. She wrote that “Gordin was a remarkable personality, the greatest figure of the Yiddish stage and also the greatest figure of his time.” She did reveal a critical sense surrounding his plays when she wrote that Kobrin accused him of treating the moral lesson of his plays with greater importance than the joys and sorrows of the characters, the piece of life he portrayed. “The characters spoke in his plays like a gramophone and not like living natural people; they didn’t walk on their feet but on stilts.” Though she seemed to be hiding behind Kobrin by placing this criticism in his mouth, and not voicing it as her own, she revealed that she agreed with Kobrin when she went on to say that “Kobrin was completely different. He also sought to bring out an idea in each of his plays. But to him it was also important to show the experiences of the characters, their joys and sufferings, their hopes and yearnings.”⁷⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that although she showed

⁷⁵³ Ibid., Dec. 3, 1935; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 75.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid., 251; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec 7, 1935, 2; Dec. 18, 1935, 5; Dec. 19, 1935, 5; Dec. 20, 1935, 4.

extreme admiration for Gordin, her own views on matters of Jewish identity are very far from his, as we will see later.

From the first time she saw Mogulesco on stage, Bessie dreamed of acting with him. She wrote how this wish kept her going through dark hours on the stage, and then finally came true.⁷⁵⁵ She stated that "it was enough to see Mogulesco on the stage once, to feel that before you was a divinely blessed artist, an extraordinary talent, one you rarely came upon not only on the Yiddish stage but also on the non-Yiddish stage."⁷⁵⁶

Bessie noted of Rudolph Schildkraut that, except for Mogulesco who was a genius in his genre, no actor who acted in Yiddish could measure up in talent or greatness to the actor-artist Rudolph Schildkraut. She didn't feel capable of speaking about Schildkraut, or of evaluating him, she merely said "Bless you, you great actor, Rudolph Schildkraut."⁷⁵⁷ She called him "the greatest actor who ever set foot on a stage" and was very flattered that she was able to act with him, and that he complimented her acting, saying that "if Bessie would be on a non-Yiddish stage, the world would ring with her. She is one of the few actresses who can be both a charming light soprano (soubrette) and a serious dramatic actress..." Bessie wrote that Schildkraut "would often shudder from that which he saw on our stage."⁷⁵⁸

Another actor who got the stamp of "artist" from Bessie Thomashefsky was Moritz Morrison, a well-known German Jewish actor whom Boris brought to the Yiddish stage between 1903 and 1906. Bessie wrote of him:

He loved the Yiddish theater and had the ambition to raise its level higher. There were moments, though, when the Yiddish theater drove him to despair and he cursed the day that he came to the Yiddish theater. "It is barbarism, Buzy! It is barbarism!" He especially was pained by the cynicism he ran into in the Yiddish theater. The cheap attitude toward theater, the lack of artistic self-consciousness that is so thrown in your eyes when you come in contact with Yiddish actors. He believed that the Yiddish stage was rich in talent, that there were presently actors and actresses on the Yiddish stage who could take a prominent place in any other theater. He used to say to me: 'The Yiddish theater lacks culture! It has the smell of a cheap pub!'⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 118.

⁷⁵⁶ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 23, 1935, 3.

⁷⁵⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 299.

⁷⁵⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 25, 1935, 7.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 10, 1935, 5.

The words that Bessie put in Morrison's mouth reflected Bessie's super-ego. But her ego participated in the popular theater aimed at mass-appeal which her husband helped cultivate, and so she was forced to put her criticism of the Yiddish stage in the mouths of others, the "artists" she so admired, Rudolph Schildkraut and Moritz Morrison.

Bessie's admiration for Goldfadn, Gordin, Mogulesco, Schildkraut and Morrison were for the men as well as the artists. By contrast, she admired Jacob Adler not as a person, only as an actor. On a personal level, she questioned his honesty and implied that he did not know his limitations.⁷⁶⁰ But her description of his acting in her eyes as a young woman was full of awe:

I would sit in the theater and couldn't take my eyes off of Adler. I thought that there was no other actor like him in the world. His appearance alone on stage was enough to leave you feeling bewitched. His persona, the image of an Eastern-prince, his way, his pose, his gestures and furthermore his voice, like a whole organ played in his throat. It was enough for him to open his mouth and say the simplest words, for you to become drunk as from a wonderful melody. And it was enough for him to walk across the stage without saying anything, but only gesture with his hand, or give a look with his big eyes, making a grimace, a look, a movement, a twitch of the shoulder; to silently, without words, create an entire world of expression for the spectator, bringing out an ocean of feeling, longing, joy and suffering, despair and ecstasy. Such an actor was Jacob Adler.⁷⁶¹

Of the time that the Adlers began appearing in Philadelphia at Boris Thomashefsky's invitation, in the early 1890s, she wrote: "I used to sit in the theater and marvel at these two divinely blessed actors. It didn't bother me that because of them the Philadelphia Jews forgot that Boris and I existed."

Even though Bessie called Jacob and Sara Adler "divinely blessed actors," when writing in detail about Sara Adler, she only described her great beauty, and not her acting talent. She wrote, "I then thought that she was the most beautiful woman in the world. For no one more beautiful than she did my eyes ever see."⁷⁶² She continued to describe Sara's beauty in great detail but said nothing of her acting. This would seem to be a gender issue and more indicative of the way in which women were perceived in those days than of any lack of acting talent in Sara Adler. On the other hand, though she also described Keni Liptzin's beauty at great length,

⁷⁶⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 153-155, 252-253.

⁷⁶¹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 22, 1935, 7.

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, Nov. 22, 1935, 7.

she called her “the greatest dramatic actress of our times” and described her portrayal of Gordin’s Mirele Efros as showing “such artistic thought into every detail that Gordin painted, with such fine, wonderful understanding of the proud Mirele Efros with her cane, that whoever saw her didn’t forget it his whole life.”⁷⁶³

Another actor of the Yiddish stage who receives Bessie’s stamp of “artist” is David Kessler “one of the greatest stage-artists that we have produced. To talk about Yiddish theater and not to mention David Kessler is like, for example, a Chassid speaking about Chassidism and not mentioning the Baal Shem Tov...” Similar to her attitude toward Adler, Bessie acknowledged Kessler’s talent but was critical of him as a person. She faulted him for often insulting other actors, even in front of the audience.

Kessler was a crude, primitive person, and had little intelligence, but he possessed a big talent. He was able to feel a role, permeating the role with the fiber of his soul, and he would live in it as if it had become a part of him. He no longer was Kessler the man, not even Kessler the actor, but Shloymele Charlatan, Hershele Dubrovner, or the other immortal personalities of his repertoire.⁷⁶⁴

Despite Bessie’s criticism of Kessler, she said that his death left a void that would probably never be filled.

Bessie Thomashefsky’s view of the inevitability of commercial compromise in the Yiddish theater colored much of what she wrote. While she and Boris Thomashefsky were performing in Shomer’s *The Jewish Immigrants* at the People’s Theater and “creating riches,” David Kessler, Keni Liptzin and Bertha Kalich were “creating their fame” in Gordin’s plays at the Thalia. “But soon they were jealous of our great conquests and they cast aside the art on the shelves, sent ‘God, Man’ to the ‘Devil’⁷⁶⁵ and began ‘delivering the goods’ to Moyshe, to the worthy public that is.”⁷⁶⁶

In terms of Yiddish theater, Bessie believed that it reached its highest level with the plays of Gordin, Kobrin, and Libin written at the beginning of the twentieth century. She said

⁷⁶³ Ibid., Dec. 3, 1935.

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid., Dec. 22, 1935. 5.

⁷⁶⁵ A reference to Gordin’s important play, *God, Man and Devil*, in which David Kessler and Bertha Kalich starred at the Thalia Theater in 1900.

⁷⁶⁶ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 264. Bessie was referring to Gordin’s adaptation of the Faust story, *God, Man and the Devil*. “Moyshe” is the derogatory term Yiddish actors used for the uncouth Yiddish theater audience.

that these three playwrights were “the powerful pillars that the better Yiddish theater was built upon.”⁷⁶⁷ Writing in 1935, she said that their plays remained fresh in the twenty-five years that passed since they were written.

You find that Gordin’s, Kobrin’s and Libin’s plays with a strong social theme speak to the people of our times as strongly as they did a few decades ago. The social and economic conflicts and their dramas are more actual and timely today than they were once.”⁷⁶⁸

She considered these three men to be the forerunners of the type of “proletarian drama” that the Group Theater was doing in the 1930s, with works by playwrights such as Clifford Odets.⁷⁶⁹ She believed that what was then considered “social realism” was the proper artistic aspiration for the Yiddish theater. The fact that these playwrights were no longer produced in 1935 was, to her, an indictment of the Yiddish theater of that period. Unlike Sara Adler, whose artistic ideal was performing Russian realism, Bessie saw creating a form of realism specific to the Yiddish stage to be the goal of the Yiddish theater. In this she was similar to Jacob Adler, but unlike Adler, she stressed the importance of dealing with social and economic conflicts relevant to the times. Not only did she go beyond her husband in insisting that theater must supply more than nostalgia for New York’s East European Jews, she went beyond the Adlers in wanting that theater to be relevant on a social and economic level. But this idea was not well-developed in her writings, and appeared only intermittently.

Despite Bessie’s belief in social realism as the proper goal for Yiddish theater, even when she ventured out on her own, after separating from her husband, she remained in the realm of popular culture which appealed to the masses. When writing about Sara Adler’s invitation to her to appear at the Novelty Theater in Brooklyn, when she and Schildkraut were performing there but business was bad, she related that “they invited me to appear in a play of my own and bring my audience with me.” She was aware that Sara Adler’s and Rudolph Schildkraut’s elitist approach to theater was not bringing in enough of an audience. She would bring “her

⁷⁶⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 21, 1935, 9. “The better plays” is a phrase commonly used by the Jewish intellectuals such as Bernard Gorin and Leon Kobrin. As Nina Warnke pointed out, “Gordin and his imitators were usually not labeled ‘good’ but ‘better’ dramas, implying that they were not yet truly ‘good’ like European drama but merely ‘better’ than the ‘bad’ plays of the Yiddish stage (Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater,” 88).

⁷⁶⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 3, 1935.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Dec. 18, 1935, 5.

audience” with her and be more successful. She wrote of her great success in *Khantshe in America*:

I speak not here about the value of *Khantshe in America* as a dramatic work, it was one of the plays that people who have a taste for literature and place high demands on the stage will not be delighted with. But the play had one part, the part of Khantshe, which gave an actress an opportunity to do something with it. It was a healthy, vigorous role, which had a lot of humor in it, and not a little pathos. I thought over the role well, poured myself into her blood, and made her into a living person. It was one of the roles in my repertoire I was most connected to, and I was strongly accepted by the public.⁷⁷⁰

Bessie Thomashefsky acknowledged the difference stressed by critics of her times between what they perceived to be art and lowbrow entertainment, but she also knew her strengths, and the taste of the audience. She did not glorify everything she did, like her husband. But she did take pride in being able to bring her talent into a good role, even if it was not considered “literary theater.” She would pour herself into the blood of Khantshe, make her into a living person, and be beloved by the public for it. This was enough for Bessie Thomashefsky, but she felt it did not make her an artist on the level of Mogulesco, Rudolph Schildkraut, or even Jacob Adler or David Kessler. They were the real greats, in her eyes.

Unlike the Adlers, Bessie’s view of good art was not based entirely on its “realism.” She could revel in the Yiddish comic actor Mogulesco as much as she did in the realistic German Rudolph Schildkraut.⁷⁷¹ She had great admiration for both Goldfadn and Gordin. Unlike her husband, Boris Thomashefsky, she did not disregard the literary value of a play and look only at the question of whether it touched the soul of the Jewish masses or was financially successful. Her approach to art was much more personal and non-ideological. She knew artistic greatness when she saw it, no matter what form it might take.

Bessie wrote both of her autobiographies after separating from her husband, Boris, and both display her need to forge a place for herself in the history of the Yiddish theater that was independent of her husband’s career. Her critical approach to many of the plays that brought them their fame, and her allying herself with figures such as Rudolph Schildkraut and Moritz Morrison were part of her declaration of independence from Boris. Her first autobiography was

⁷⁷⁰ Ibid., 1935, 3.

⁷⁷¹ In truth, it must be acknowledged that Mogulesco’s genius was also acknowledged by Jacob Adler, who called him “the greatest, most inspired Yiddish comic.” (See Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 13, 1917, 5)

less harsh with respect to Boris than her second. It seems as if the years gave her the courage to publicly face up to his womanizing behavior. Her first autobiography went into detail concerning her childhood and the process of her becoming an actress, as befits an autobiography. Her second autobiography had more of a memoir-like quality to it, going into great detail in her evaluations of other artists with whom she worked in the Yiddish theater. It was written years after she retired from the stage, and like Sara Adler's autobiography, a fear of being forgotten hovers over it. In both of Bessie's autobiographies, she appeared to be an honest person and a conscientious artist, who knew her place in the Yiddish theater, and did not take on airs. The people she placed on a pedestal were those she considered true artists. Neither she nor her husband was on that list.

While Jacob and Sara Adler and Boris Thomashefsky, in their writings, all seemed to be participating in the same debate that went on in the newspapers for years over the merits of "literary theater" versus "*shund*," either siding with the Jewish intelligentsia on the side of realism and against *shund*, or else defending *shund* as more authentically Jewish, Bessie Thomashefsky was not part of that discussion. Her opinions were her own, and not borrowed from the Russian Jewish intelligentsia. She admired Mogulesco as much as she admired Rudolph Schildkraut. She admired Goldfadn as much as she did Gordin. She was not participating in a debate rooted in identity politics. She was giving her own heartfelt and somewhat myopic assessment of what was great in the world of Yiddish theater.

C. Jewish Theater

In the Yiddish language, the word "Yiddish" means "Jewish." So, Yiddish theater literally means Jewish theater. But was the Yiddish theater always Jewish? We have seen that Boris Thomashefsky claimed to have striven to make a theater that was Jewish in content. What were the other actors' positions on the Jewishness of the Yiddish stage?

In general, when Jacob Adler spoke of his goal to create a more serious Yiddish theater, and not one of silly operettas without a well-written libretto, he did not differentiate between

Jewish and non-Jewish content. He was the first to bring Shakespeare to the Yiddish stage.⁷⁷² He was proud of also being the first to present Schiller in Yiddish, when he staged *The Robbers* in London. He understood that for the most part the Yiddish audience was looking for plays relating to Jewish life and therefore, he looked for plays of literary value concerning Jewish life. As a result, Karl Gutzkow's *Uriel Acosta*, translated from German, and Scribe's *La Juive*, translated from French, were two staples in his repertory throughout his career.⁷⁷³

In one place in his autobiography, he expressed regret over the fact that the Yiddish theater did not attract a large Orthodox audience. He recalled his troupe's production, in Russia, of the play *Rashi* by Katzenellenbogen, about the great medieval commentator on the Talmud and the Bible. The play attracted an Orthodox Jewish audience, including rabbis, whose enthusiastic words in praise of the production were published by Adler on the plays' posters. Adler wrote:

And it was an honor to me that many rabbis, great and small, came to me to the theater to see the play. And I really received much satisfaction from seeing the rabbis sitting in their skullcaps with their big beards and their wives in their bonnets, enjoying what occurred onstage. [...] If after that play had come others of its kind, with time maybe the Orthodox would have become friends of the Yiddish theater.⁷⁷⁴

He understood that often, changes had to be made to non-Jewish plays in order for them to be presented before a Jewish audience. Adler told of the changes that had to be made when presenting *The Robbers* on the Yiddish stage. References to Greek gods and to Greek mythology were omitted as were several deeply Christian speeches and expressions.⁷⁷⁵

⁷⁷² According to Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 297-301, Adler's *Othello* with him and Kessler alternating as Othello and Iago, preceded Thomashefsky's *Hamlet*, in both its conception and its premiere. Thomashefsky planned his production after hearing that Adler, in a stage speech about his upcoming *Othello*, claimed that Thomashefsky could not do Shakespeare. Interestingly, Adler wrote that Thomashefsky's *Hamlet* preceded his *Othello* (Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 23, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 329).

⁷⁷³ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, July 27, 1918, 3; May 23, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 29, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 200, 276, 311-312.

⁷⁷⁴ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Sept. 1, 1917, 2.

⁷⁷⁵ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 28, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on Stage*, 281.

Sometimes, all that was necessary in order to “Judaize” a play was to change its setting, such as *The Odessa Beggar*, which Herman Fiedler, who also adapted *The Robbers*, transferred from Paris to Odessa.⁷⁷⁶

But these were cosmetic changes made to suit the play to the audience. Adler also expressed a deeper side to himself as a Jew, which he wished to voice in his theater. He wrote:

I have during my long career played all kinds of Jews. I have played simple Jews, coarse Jews, sad ones, poets and also ultra-religious ones, naïve ones, hard-luck ones. But great happiness and true pleasure, the proud joy of the creative artist, I have felt when I was successful in creating a type of great, beautiful Jew, with a high intellect, with a proud consciousness, with a grand character.

Such is my perception of the Jew. I am no historian, no philosopher. Far from it. But my idea of the Jew in history is such: He is a patriarch. He is a lofty being. His character is the collective inheritance, the accumulated power of generations, and it shines through in his speech, in his bearing, in his appearance, in his figure, in his walk. There is something grand in the Jew, the triumph of long endurance, of intellect, of a character that an endless row of soul suffering and high traditions have been his teachers. The Jew, who has seen everything, experienced and lived through everything, possesses a high fortitude – and his beauty shines through on his countenance – and gives him many lives. Not only can the Jew endure a lot, but he has grown up strong, rooted in life. He has much love of life, much blood in him. [...]

So is my understanding, sometimes in my mind, sometimes in my blood, of the historical, the archetypical Jew, and so have I played him and so I have made myself happy playing him.⁷⁷⁷

Nowhere in all the various actors’ autobiographies we have studied did any of the actors wax poetic like this, or speak with such depth, on the subject of being a Jew. Boris Thomashefsky expressed love for the Jewish people, and Bessie wrote of herself as a good *Yidene*. But neither of them expressed what it was in the nature of being Jewish that appealed to them. To Sara Adler, being Jewish was something you sacrifice yourself for, by not converting out of the faith, but her Jewishness did not seem to have any positive value. Here, Jacob Adler not only described what it meant to him to be a Jew but brought this vision to his acting roles, causing him “true happiness.”

Though in his writings Adler made no reference whatsoever to any connection to formal religion, and he had no relationship with the synagogue as did Boris Thomashefsky, he

⁷⁷⁶ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, April 18, 1925, 6; Jacob Adler, *A Life on Stage*, 244. See Introduction, Section E1 and Chapter One, Section E above.

⁷⁷⁷ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 9, 1925, 14; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 341.

frequently used religious imagery when discussing the theater. We will illustrate this with a number of examples:

He wrote that in the definitive history of the Yiddish theater that will be written in the future, the London Yiddish theater clubs of the 1880's will be presented "as Mount Sinai, where the Moses of those days studied the Torah of Yiddish theater art with the elders and the priests." ⁷⁷⁸

Of the first performance of Yiddish theater in Russia, Adler wrote:

That night is written in my heart and in my memory with letters of fire. Always does it burn in my feelings and thoughts. It will be extinguished only when my eyes will be extinguished and covered with small shards. [...] Inside the hall of Akiva's restaurant was a pre-Yom Kippur sadness and restlessness. [...] If in the audience it was a holiday, here among the actors reigned a kind of religious ecstasy, as if everyone was blessed with an additional historical soul. If the atmosphere in the audience was like before Yom Kippur, backstage it was real Judgment Day. A great fear together with a feeling of religious repentance fell upon the actors. Their mood was like that of good, devout Jews in an old French synagogue at the beginning of Yom Kippur prayers. The people knew that not only they were standing trial but the entire Yiddish theater was standing trial [...] ⁷⁷⁹

The image of the high holidays in relation to the theater recurred in his writings when he first performed *Uriel Acosta* in Lodz. He wrote: "The high holidays were upon us. Pious Jews of Lodz shivered in the synagogue, confessed their sins, and took the measure of their lives. And in my soul, I too, shivered in these Days of Awe." ⁷⁸⁰ The first rehearsal took place during the days of *Slichos*, the pre-High Holiday prayers. Adler remembered going to *Slichos* with his grandfather and seeing the morning star, a memory that returned to him many times throughout life, and always aroused a special feeling of holiness in his soul. "And now, during that early morning, when I couldn't sleep, before rehearsal, I felt that entire feeling of mystery, that holiness, those religious *Slichos* before-morning chills. 'God, God!' my lips whispered, 'God help me! Do not leave me!'" ⁷⁸¹ Hours before the performance began, he compared his feelings

⁷⁷⁸ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 26, 1925, 4. In this metaphor, he seemed to imply that he was Moses. As if to affirm this, later on in the same chapter of his autobiography, he wrote that he taught young actors the "halachas" of theater in his London theater club. The term "halacha" is for religious law only.

⁷⁷⁹ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 1, 1916, 5; Oct. 4, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 87-88.

⁷⁸⁰ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Sept, 14, 1918, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 204.

I quote Rosenfeld's concise paraphrase here..

⁷⁸¹ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Sept, 14, 1918, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 205.

to those of “a devout Jew before leading the congregation in the prayer of Kol Nidre.” Then, remembering Rosenberg’s story about how he immersed himself in a ritual bath before going onstage for the first time, he suddenly heard an inner voice commanding him: “Into the *mikveh*!” He sought out the local ritual bath, and before immersing himself in its water, he silently prayed, “God, help me!”⁷⁸² The performance was a tremendous success, and when the second act curtain later went down twenty times to thunderous applause, Adler wrote of how “the Divine Presence rested on Roseberg’s face.”⁷⁸³

When preparing to play Uriel Acosta for the first time, he compared playing this role to studying the Talmud and its high-level commentary, Tosefos, as opposed to his earlier roles, which were more like studying the alphabet in *cheder*. When preparing to play it in London he wrote that “though I was far, far, from being a ‘frumock’, I begged God and fasted.”⁷⁸⁴

A kind of ecstatic religious experience and theater connected for Adler when he described the morning before the company's first performance in Kishinev in 1879, when upon awakening, he saw the court below their window filled with sleeping men, women and children who had camped out all night in order to acquire tickets for their performance. Adler exclaimed:

I carry this picture in my heart and mind already for forty years. Thousands of times in my difficult and despondent moments it has stood by me and given me strength. That picture lives for me now in its most minute detail, it shines out at me as if from the bottom of a fountain – the fountain of eternal youth?

Dear God! With the last glitter of my eye, before it will be extinguished forever, let me see that picture again!⁷⁸⁵

Religious imagery surrounding the theater is something that Adler may have learned from his mentor, Yisroel Rosenberg, a complex figure whom Adler first met as an eighteen-year-old young man when Rosenberg worked as a lawyer without a diploma in Odessa. Adler wrote of him:

⁷⁸² Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Sept. 21, 1918, 5. This story is quite ironic, considering the play concerns a heretic, excommunicated from the Jewish people for non-belief in matters considered to be the foundations of Judaism. See also *ibid.*, Oct. 5, 1918, 5, where he attributed pre-Kol Nidre feelings to the entire cast; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 204-206.

⁷⁸³ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 12, 1918, 5.

⁷⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, Aug. 3, 1918, 3.; Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 15, 1925,

⁷⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Feb. 18, 1917, 7; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 122-123.

Yisroel Rosenberg was one of the most interesting, one of the most remarkable people that I have met in the two parts of the world in which I have lived. In all the countries I have been to, in all the years that I have been on the earth. At times I think he was indeed the most interesting [...]. When I met him I was still a young boy while he was already a man. [...] He began leading me on the paths of life, both open and concealed, and I drank his Torah (teachings) with pleasure.⁷⁸⁶

Of the time that they first met, Adler wrote, “Rosenberg’s business was simply swindle, and he himself was a small operator.” Later on, he was a central figure in the founding of the Yiddish theater in Russia. Rosenberg then told Adler how the theater reformed him: “Stands before you no longer the old Rosenberg, the charlatan, the bum.”⁷⁸⁷

It is hard to overestimate the influence Rosenberg had on Adler. The latter attributed his becoming an actor to Rosenberg, who was sure that Adler would be an actor even before Adler himself knew.⁷⁸⁸

Adler’s autobiography is replete with stories that illustrate the religious sensibilities of the man who despite his cynicism had “deep feelings for holiness and beauty.”⁷⁸⁹ One takes place the evening of the first performance of Yiddish theater in Russia, before Adler began acting with the company. Adler related that Rosenberg told him of having immersed himself in a ritual bath before his first performance on stage “‘Nobody saw my tears,’ he said, ‘Only myself and my God.’” Rosenberg continued: “When I approach a play, no matter how foolish or unnatural it is, I remember Avrom Goldfaden wrote it, and every page becomes holy. [...] I will go hungry with my wife, I will borrow, beg favors and work hard to repay, but I will not allow the name of my theater to be stained!”⁷⁹⁰ In this passage, staining the name of the theater is parallel to the prohibition of staining the name of God, and Goldfaden is parallel to Moses.

⁷⁸⁶ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 23, 1925, 11. Even Adler’s usage of the term “Torah” for what Rosenberg taught him, framed Rosenberg in a religious context. Like the holy Torah, Rosenberg’s teachings had both an open side and a secret, concealed side.

⁷⁸⁷ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, July 16, 1916, 5. Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 38.

⁷⁸⁸ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Sept. 13, 1916, 5. The chapter in Yiddish is entitled “Rosenberg Prophesizes,” again framing Rosenberg in a religious context. Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 80. Of Adler’s guilt feelings over abandoning Rosenberg when moving to London, see Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Feb 22, 1919, 3, where he called it a stain on his soul. See also *Jacob Adler, Mayn Leben*, Mar. 21, 1925, 17, final paragraph.

⁷⁸⁹ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 23, 1925, 11.

⁷⁹⁰ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 4, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 88. In the installment of his autobiography published two years later, on Sept. 21, 1918, Adler told how he mimicked his teacher, and immersed himself, too, before performing for the first time in Uriel Acosta, as we related above, footnote 782.

Adler related that Rosenberg had a custom to stand in the wings on the evening of a play's first performance, and bless each actor before he went onstage, with the blessing with which the Kohen, the Jewish priest, blessed the public in the Temple in Jerusalem, and later on, in the synagogue on holidays. He would place his hand on the head of each actor and bless him "with great intent": "May God bless you and preserve you. May God's face light your way and may you find favor. May God turn His face toward you and bring you peace." He then would kiss the actor before he went onstage.⁷⁹¹

The theater as a temple and its actors as priests was a motif of which Adler was fond. He spoke of the London Yiddish theater in Whitechapel in the 1880s as the Tabernacle in the desert which preceded "the Temple of the Yiddish theater."⁷⁹² He defined an actor as "the priest of the big, broad, heartfelt, [...] soul-cleansing, and soul-transporting art of acting."⁷⁹³ He said of the restaurant owner who hosted Adler's Yiddish Theater Company in Whitechapel: "Because he loved Yiddish theater, he loved us too, his Kohanim." ⁷⁹⁴

The image of the *Kohen*, the Priest, is of special significance to Adler. Although his family descended from Kohanim, they had lost their pedigree when in a previous generation, one of his forefathers had married a divorcee. Adler wrote in great detail of how his father and grandfather "stayed in their places, humiliated, offended," while the other Jews of priestly descent stood before the congregation and blessed them.⁷⁹⁵ Perhaps he tried to retrieve his pedigree by becoming a secular priest in the theater.

The motif of religious imagery surrounding the Yiddish theater was so common in Adler's autobiography that it was quite certainly intentional. He did not want to create the

⁷⁹¹ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 5, 1918, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 107. Rosenfeld related the story told by Adler about his debut in *Uriel Acosta* in Lodz in 1881 when writing of his earlier debut in Kherson in *Breindele Cossack*. In Adler's newspaper account of the performance in Kherson he said that Rosenberg "blessed him" but did not give details of the blessing. (See Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Dec. 3, 1916, 5.) But Adler explicitly stated in *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 23, 1925, 11, in a chapter devoted to Rosenberg's place in his life, that Rosenberg began the custom of blessing his actors with the blessing of the Kohanim at Adler's debut in *Uriel Acosta*.

⁷⁹² Ibid., April 26, 1925, 4.

⁷⁹³ Ibid., April 18, 1925, 6.

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid., May 9, 1925, 14; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 270. Adler also told a story about how he and Rosenberg gained entry into a synagogue in Riga when they wanted to hear a famous cantor sing there. After they were denied entry to the synagogue, they claimed they were Kohanim who had to bless the public, and were then allowed to enter. (Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 23, 1925, 11, April 18, 1925, 6).

⁷⁹⁵ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 18, 1925, 6.

image of a secular Jew but of a religious one, whose religiosity centered on the Yiddish theater. It is not surprising that in referring to his appearance on the Russian stage, in Chernigov in 1881, in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*, and to the offer he received afterwards to become a part of the Russian theatrical company there, he wrote of his "almost conversion to becoming a Russian actor."⁷⁹⁶ It is interesting to note that despite his religious attitude toward theater, he was reluctant to have their company act in the synagogue of Spolya, when it is suggested they do so by the Count of Spolya's Jewish steward, in 1881.⁷⁹⁷

If Jacob Adler tried to draw the picture of a Jew who expresses his religiosity in his theater, Sara Adler's approach to the Jewishness of the Yiddish theater was purely pragmatic. She would be happy to bring authentic Russian culture to the Jewish stage, but she was aware that this was not simple. She wrote:

The Yiddish stage is different than all other stages in its Jewishness. We, Jews, have no army, no uniforms, no cloisters and no crucifixes, and if we want to be realistic and play in non-Jewish plays, it sounds strained. A French officer dresses differently than a Russian one, but he is an officer, and when a play like *Resurrection* is done in French, it sounds more natural than in Yiddish. When it comes to performing a priest or a Russian non-Jew onstage, whoever speaks is in trouble. No Jew has ever heard a non-Jewish Russian speaking Yiddish.⁷⁹⁸

For Sara, Jewish theater meant the necessary adjustments that must be made to the original non-Jewish play in order to keep it within the realm of realism despite the fact that it was being performed in Yiddish. She did not express any further ideas or conditions that might be necessary for the creation of a uniquely Jewish theater. Like her husband, her attitude toward theater may be called "religious" because of its totality and its supremacy as a value in her life, but she did not use religious imagery to describe it, as he did.

Bessie Thomashefsky did not dwell on her feelings about the Jewishness of Yiddish theater, but she did speak of creating a theater as a kind of holy mission, in which they were writing "a chapter in the history of the Jewish people."⁷⁹⁹

⁷⁹⁶ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Dec. 29, 1917, 5. He used the Yiddish word "shmad," used for an apostate who leaves the Jewish faith, although no religious conversion would be involved in Adler's moving to the Russian stage, only a change in the language in which he would perform, and the audience before whom he would appear.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid., Oct. 16, 1917, 7.

⁷⁹⁸ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Oct. 15, 1938, 11.

⁷⁹⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 146.

We felt that we had a great vocation, the vocation of artists, of Jewish artists, who could give the people something, who carried something in their Jewish hearts... [...] What then held us to the Yiddish stage and gave us strength to bear everything? Our love for Yiddish theater, our consciousness that we were creating a great thing.⁸⁰⁰

In another place Bessie wrote: “We felt like builders of a great institution, like pioneers, and we were lit with a holy fire.”⁸⁰¹ Here and in other places, like Adler, she used religious imagery surrounding the theater. In 1935, when she was 62 years old and her career was over, she remembered the days “when the Yiddish theater bloomed and when every Yiddish theater ‘star’ was an idol to the public. Those beautiful, naïve years were long ago; now the public had lost its former almost religious relation to the stage and the veneration of its actors.”⁸⁰² In another place she spoke of the “nameless heroes” of the Yiddish stage who helped the Yiddish theater in times of crisis. They were fans who “treated the ‘star’ with a religious devotion, because they loved the Yiddish theater with a passionate love, and the ‘star’ was the high priest of their Temple, and their god whom they served.”⁸⁰³ These passages are reminiscent of the way Adler spoke of the actor of the Yiddish stage being a priest in the Temple,⁸⁰⁴ but Adler wrote more consistently in this fashion, and gave the impression that he was trying to create an aura around himself, as opposed to Bessie, who one feels is doing so simply because religious images abound in her speech in general, and she did not seem to be using this image for any ulterior motive.

In the following section we will see how the various actors in this study referred to religious experience outside the realm of the theater.

⁸⁰⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 24, 1935.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid., Nov. 30, 1935.

⁸⁰² Ibid., Nov. 5, 1935, 3.

⁸⁰³ Ibid., Nov. 26, 1935.

⁸⁰⁴ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 5, 1918, 5; Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 26, 1925, 4; April 18, 1925, 6; May 9, 1925, 14; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 270.

D. National and Religious Identity

1. Jacob Adler

Adler did not limit his religiosity to the world of the theater. Despite his completely secular lifestyle, he often gave the impression of someone rooted in Jewish tradition and history. For example, when writing of Rosenberg's troupe appearing in Spolya, he called the town "the home of the Grandfather of Spolya," referring to the great Chassidic rabbi and disciple of the Baal Shem Tov who once lived there.⁸⁰⁵

One occasion on which he told of personal religious experience took place after his first wife, Sonya, died at the age of twenty-seven, a month after giving birth to a son, Abram. Adler conversed with God while contemplating suicide: "Long, long days, standing by the banks of the Thames, looking into the abyss, nodding my head to Someone, speaking with Someone."⁸⁰⁶ Elsewhere, he posed the following question: "How be an *apikorus* (a heretic) and not believe in divine providence, in miracles, when with one turn the Highest One turns around the whole circle from happiness to misery and back to happiness again?"⁸⁰⁷ When remembering the first performance of Rosenberg's troupe, he turned to God and said: "Lord of the Earth, how great is the power of memory! And what of all your miracles could compare to the beauty of being young again..."⁸⁰⁸

The religious side of Adler's nature was startling in a secular actor of that period. The newspaper in which his memoirs were published was a secular newspaper, *Di varhayt* (1905-1919), which began as a socialist newspaper, and later began to cater to the literary and liberal reader to avoid competing with the *Forverts*.⁸⁰⁹ Adler's religiosity, therefore, was not a ploy to ingratiate himself with his very secular readers but probably had its basis in his nature. His religious bent appears to have been connected to the pious grandfather who lived with him and his parents, and whom he refers to with reverence and love, saying that

⁸⁰⁵ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 6, 1917, 7.

⁸⁰⁶ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, June 6, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 289.

⁸⁰⁷ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Apr. 6, 1917, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 186. (translation my own). See also Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, May 18, 1918, "God had seen our sorrow and had mercy on us. A miracle, a miracle from heaven!"

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, Oct. 1, 1916, 5.

⁸⁰⁹ Charles A. Madison, *Jewish Publishing in America: The Impact of Jewish Writing on American Culture* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1976), 124-126.

he filled the home with a beautiful serenity through his singing, studying, knowledge, and learning. Adler related that he and his grandfather, who taught him to read, pray, and make a blessing, were very close until he died when Adler was thirteen.⁸¹⁰ He mentions his grandfather often, especially at moments when he feels spiritual elation. For example, on the evening of the first performance of Rosenberg's theatrical troupe, he remembered being blessed on the evening of Yom Kippur by his grandfather.⁸¹¹

He wrote of a pious Jew whose home he lived in when appearing in Tulya Goldfadn's troupe in Yeketerinaslav, after his engagement to Sonya, whose religious study, prayer, and singing reminded him of his grandfather:

How good I used to feel in the mornings, when the father of the family would wrap himself in his prayer-shawl, walking around the house and praying with deep religious intent. If someone had then ordered me to, I myself would have stood up and prayed.

And like a true idyll, when he used to sit by his table over a religious text, his quiet, loving, sweet tune of longing would drift over to my alcove.

I never spoke of it to him, but let me tell you, dear reader, that not once, lying in my bed, I was reminded of my grandfather, may he rest in peace, of his beautiful, lofty, patriarchal stance, of his religious books, of his religious study and prayer, of the love that he gave me, of the fatherly Jewish education that he gave me, and my eyes would fill with tears.⁸¹²

Although Adler had a close relationship with and admiration for Jacob Gordin, who expressed anti-religious stands, and though among Adler's greatest roles were famous heretics such as Uriel Acosta and Alisha ben Abuya, Adler's own writings revealed a deep cynicism toward atheists. He told a lengthy story of a neighbor in London who considered himself a heretic and an atheist. But when the neighbor suspected that his home was plagued by demons, he allowed Adler to make an exorcising ceremony in which both he and Adler wore a *tallis* (prayer shawl), *tefillin* (phylacteries), and a white Yom Kippur caftan and they recited Hosannas from the Jewish prayerbook. As the neighbor cried, Adler thought to himself, "Let's see you in the future not believe in God and curse Him!" The tone of this story was very derisive and cynical, and the main subject of his ridicule is the heretical neighbor, whose non-belief was

⁸¹⁰ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, May 14, 1916; June 4, 1916, 7; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 7, 19.

⁸¹¹ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 1, 1916, 5.

⁸¹² Ibid., Aug. 18, 1917, 3. He also expressed admiration for the Orthodox couple whose boarding house the company stayed in, in Pereyaslav, in 1881 (ibid., Nov. 24, 1917, 3).

presented in a ridiculous light, though the exorcism was also presented as a farce.⁸¹³ Adler may not have been a simple, devout Jew, but he was far from being a free-thinking non-believer like many of the Russian intellectuals of his times whom he seems to have admired.

Religious language and imagery are more dominant in Adler's autobiography than expressions of nationalism. But there is no doubt that he viewed the Yiddish theater as an important contribution to the spiritual and cultural life of the Jewish people. Referring to the role of the Yiddish theater in the lives of the Jewish people, he wrote of it as "the rose that bloomed in that desolate, dried-up desert, the fresh spring that gushed out of hard stone – our poor Jewish nation that lived in its long exile!"⁸¹⁴ Yiddish theater to Adler was an important part of a Jewish cultural renaissance, a fresh spring gushing out of hard stone in the desert of Jewish diaspora.

He learned this approach from his first wife, Sonya Oberlander, and her family. He described, with great admiration, the nationalistic motivation that she and her family brought to their involvement in the Yiddish theater. He quoted his brother-in-law, Alexander Oberlander, as saying that we had "a nationalistic obligation to fight for the future of the Yiddish theater." His father-in-law told him how he got down on his knees before Goldfadn when he first met him, and bowed before the man who gave the Jewish people their own theater. Of Sonya herself, he wrote that it was remarkable to him how a girl from assimilated circles, during a time when Jewish youth in Russia were "crazy over everything that was non-Jewish and European," understood the importance of Yiddish theater for the Jewish people. He wrote that it was Sonya's dedication to the Yiddish theater, and her belief in its future, that brought him to the decision to dedicate himself for life to that same cause. To "firmly hug the Yiddish stage, firmly embrace it. Forever, forever!"⁸¹⁵

⁸¹³ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 1, 1925, 5.

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, April 4, 1925, 8.

⁸¹⁵ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Nov. 19, 1916, 5.

2. Boris Thomashefsky

Boris Thomashefsky's autobiographical writings reveal a sense of identification with being Jewish but completely lack any expression of religious experience. He displayed a respect for knowledge of *Torah* sources that was not found in any of the other actors in this study. He told with pride that his father-in-law, Bessie's father, was a *ben Torah* – one knowledgeable in the ways of the *Torah*.⁸¹⁶ He wrote of Feinman and Weinblatt as being the two biggest *Torah* scholars among Yiddish actors.⁸¹⁷ In his 1916 memoirs in the *Forverts* he wrote of manager Yankev Gartenstein's learnedness in Jewish scholarship as being one of his good attributes that caused Thomashefsky to be attracted to him "as a colleague, a friend, a brother, and maybe even more."⁸¹⁸ This respect for *Torah* scholarship is probably rooted in his warm relationships with his grandfather and with Cantor Nissan Belzer, both of whom played important roles in his childhood.

Of all the actors in this study, Boris had the most intimate connection to, and knowledge of, the synagogue. In an article written for the Jewish Ministers Cantors Association of America entitled "*A por verter fun a gevezenem meshoyrer*" ("A Few Words from a Former Choirboy"), Thomashefsky wrote: "If destiny had not torn me away into the stream of the theater, I would today be a colleague of cantors instead of a colleague of actors. Many times I have been sorry about this."⁸¹⁹ Though one may doubt the sincerity of this statement, and suspect that he is flattering his hosts or readers, still it is clear from his writings that the possibility of becoming a cantor in a synagogue instead of an actor on stage was very present in his life.

Bessie's parents, whose home aroused a desire in Boris to become part of "such a fine family," tried to pressure him into leaving the theater and becoming a cantor in their

⁸¹⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 175. In Boris's depiction of his father-in-law, he was much more the traditional Orthodox Jew than in his depiction by Bessie in her autobiography. It probably suited Thomashefsky's dramatic flair to tell the story of how he fell in love with a fourteen-year-old girl from a strictly Orthodox family, and brought her to the theater against her parents' wishes. He called her "the *frum* (traditionally Orthodox) daughter of very *frum* Jews" (ibid., 183).

⁸¹⁷ Ibid., 203.

⁸¹⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, "A Idishe teater milkhome," *Forverts*, Dec. 10, 1916, 8. Thomashefsky himself proceeded to tell, with no irony intended, how within a short time they became bitter rivals, when Gartenstein slighted him by omitting his name from their joint company's theatrical posters.

⁸¹⁹ Boris Thomashefsky, "A por verter fun a gevezenem meshoyrer," *Di geshikhte fun khazones*, ed. Aaron Rosen (New York: Pinsky-Messel Press, 1924), 60.

synagogue in Baltimore. His predicament was very similar to that of the character played by Al Jolson in the first talking picture, *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927). But Boris wrote that he explained to her parents that their daughter, Bessie, would not be a cantor's wife. "I have other plans for my career."⁸²⁰

Despite Boris's strong connection to the synagogue, there is scarce evidence of this institution's connection with God in Thomashefsky's writings. When Boris wrote of singing in the synagogue, it is quite clear that he was performing before the public, and not praying to God. When he fell in love with a young girl who came to the synagogue services when he was a choirboy with Nissan Belzer in Berdichev, he wrote: "Since then I no longer sang my solos for the Berdichev public but for Bashka alone."⁸²¹ He wrote of meeting Sigmund Feinman as a young man, when he sang in Nissan Belzer's choir, and claimed that Feinman was jealous of him. "He also wanted to sing so that the women and men would delight in him the way they did in me." Once, when the congregation applauded at the end of one of Thomashefsky's solos, Reb Nissan shouted, "This is not a theater!"⁸²² But apparently, to Thomashefsky it was a theater, and it was his preparation for a career on the stage. Thomashefsky made much use of his background in the synagogue in his Yiddish theater, as we have seen. But to him, the synagogue and its music were folklore more than a religious experience. It is interesting to note that he did not object to performing Yiddish theater in a church, in Boston, when he had no other venue available.⁸²³

On two rare occasions, Boris expressed a form of religious experience, but they were the exceptions that prove the rule. One was when he unknowingly ate non-kosher food (oysters) for the first time, and wrote: "I cannot relate how bad I suddenly began feeling, when I understood what kind of a food I had eaten."⁸²⁴ The other was when early in his career, he was stranded in Chicago with Adler, penniless and unable to bring the other actors in his troupe over from Philadelphia. Adler was despondent, and Thomashefsky

⁸²⁰ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 177-178, 182-183, 198.

⁸²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸²² *Ibid.*, 360, 40.

⁸²³ Boris Thomashefsky, "Siz nit laykht tsu shpiln yidishn teater in a kirkhe," *Forverts*, April 1, 1917, 8.

⁸²⁴ *Ibid.*, 168. Compare this to Sara Adler's totally guiltless telling of how she ate caviar with Spivakovsky, this despite her claim that her parents' home was kosher. Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Aug. 7, 1935, 9.

assured him that God will help. In the end God's help arrived in the form of Sara's jewelry, which they pawned in order to raise the money to get the theater troupe going.⁸²⁵

Nowhere in his autobiography did Thomashefsky discuss his feelings for the Jewish people, but he did refer to them in his earlier writings. Upon arriving in Lodz in 1913, he wrote that his "heart was happy, seeing such a big Jewish city with so many Jews." After seeing all the streets full of Jews and Jewish enterprises, he traveled to his hotel "saturated with a heart full of joy and Yiddishkeit."⁸²⁶ He also expressed pleasure at seeing the abounding Jewishness of Chernowitz, where "no one, G-d forbid, hides his Jewishness, but everyone displays it outwardly with his whole heart whether in his clothing or in his bearing."⁸²⁷ In *Tomashevski's teater shriftn* (1908) he referred sarcastically to an article in the newspaper about how President Teddy Roosevelt saved a street cat attacked by two dogs. Thomashefsky wrote that President Roosevelt's heart had mercy on the poor cat, but he felt no such mercy for the Jews of Bialystok who were murdered and plundered in a pogrom in 1906. Neither, he wrote, did the humanistic and progressive world. The article referred to "the old, old, beautiful, proud Jewish city" of Bialystok with an intimacy and a sense of identification that is uncommon in the writings of the actors in this study.⁸²⁸

3. Bessie Thomashefsky

Bessie Thomashefsky seems, of all the actors in this study, to have been closest to traditional Judaism. Boris talked much about the importance of the Yiddish theater conveying the spirit of the Jewish people but showed very little personal leaning toward religious feelings or practice. Jacob Adler expressed much religious sentiment but no inclination to any religious practice. Sara did not address herself to the issue. It would seem not to have been a part of her world. But it was very much a part of Bessie's. Yet unlike Adler, for whom the theater was the foremost area in which he expressed his religiosity, for Bessie, religiosity often seemed like a rival to the theater.

⁸²⁵ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 218.

⁸²⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, "Tomashevski in Rusland," *Forverts*, Oct. 5, 1913, 4.

⁸²⁷ Boris Thomashefsky, "Tomashevski in Tshernovits," *Forverts*, Jan. 18, 1914, 4.

⁸²⁸ Boris Thomashefsky, *Tomashevski's teater shriftn*, 68-71.

When 16-year-old Bessie left her parents' home against their will in order to join the theater, and later traveled from Boston to New York on a milk train to meet Boris in New York, she heard the train whistle like a voice from heaven asking, "Why did you leave your parents?"⁸²⁹ When Boris vanished from Boston after fighting with Annette Finkel before they were married, leaving Bessie alone, she thought that she was being punished by God for disobeying her father and going off with Boris to join the theater.⁸³⁰

In her first autobiography, Bessie told of a fantasy she had while in the Catskills during the period before the disintegration of her marriage with Boris. She was carried into the heavenly spheres where the gods rule. The god of the theater speaks with pride of his "small great ones stepping on the laws, [...] they make no difference between right and wrong. They have smeared morals on their faces with make-up [...] they blaspheme sexual modesty." But there are those who are furious with this behavior. "Those who serve God from ancient times, they lead family lives, value decency [...]" They will not allow this behavior to continue, and they demand that those who act so be punished.⁸³¹

In Bessie's fantasy someone was sent to destroy her marital bliss with Boris, as a result of the way in which they (or maybe just he) defied morality and decency. The marital breakdown in this fantasy seemed to be a punishment for Boris's sexual escapades ("they blaspheme sexual modesty") but also for the low level of morality that existed in the theater in general ("they make no difference between right and wrong"). Bessie wrote her first autobiography during the period following her separation from Boris, probably as a kind of therapy to affirm her life as an actress despite the breakup of her marriage. In it she expressed all her disappointment and sorrow over the failure of her marriage. There was much resentment aimed at members of the Yiddish theater for not remaining loyal to her during this period. It was a bitter period in her life, and the autobiography contained much more bitterness than those of all the other personalities in this study. As a part of this bitterness, she aimed her criticism in this section at the moral norms prevalent in the theater, which she blamed for her failed marriage. This criticism was couched in a religious

⁸²⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 54.

⁸³⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁸³¹ *Ibid.*, 284. Her naiveté was evident in this description which evidently intended to express religious sentiment but did so in a way that echoed non-Jewish mythologies about gods, and had a pagan-like quality to it.

(albeit somewhat pagan-sounding) context. The part of her that still retained a connection to the old religious Jewish way of life (“those who serve God from ancient times, lead family lives, value decency”) condemned the Yiddish theater for turning its back on those ways.

Although all the actors in this study were critical of various aspects of the Yiddish theater, including matters of moral conduct,⁸³² this section is the only place in all their autobiographies in which a severe condemnation of the morals of the Yiddish theater was made on a religious basis. It is no wonder that the actress who did so is Bessie Thomashefsky, whose home was the most normatively Orthodox of the four actors in this study, and whose own perspective on life contained the most traditional Jewish characteristics.

Bessie mentioned God quite often in her writings, much more so than either Boris Thomashefsky or Sara Adler. Like Jacob Adler, she lived with God as a part of her life. A new actor that joined the company was “a present from God.” Mogulesco was “blessed with a charm that is sent from God to man only once in a thousand years.” When Boris and Jacob Adler had no money to rent a theater in Chicago “God suddenly sent them a savior in the form of a Jew with the name of Montinband.” Even a breeze could be perceived by her as “a present from God.”⁸³³

Like Jacob Adler, and unlike Boris and Sara, Bessie also spoke to Him. When her first daughter, Esther, was born sickly “she has one request from God – that Esther should live.” When her first son was born after Esther died, Bessie asked God to let her son grow up healthy. And when she felt disillusioned when her marriage failed, she turned to God and asked, “Why, my God, is joy in life so short, happiness such an illusion, and hope so deceptive?”⁸³⁴

When referring to a production of Goldfaden’s *The Sacrifice of Isaac* at the Thalia that she and Boris participated in early in their careers, Bessie wrote how a theater critic called it an immortal work that “puts a golden crown on our actors’ heads and the living soul into

⁸³² Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, July 10, 1937, 9; Sept. 4, 1937, 9.

⁸³³ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 101, 119, 273; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 26, 1935.

⁸³⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 110, 229, 245.

our holy Bible.” He called Goldfadn the Yiddish Isaiah. When writing of this critic, Bessie noted that “today’s critics are terrible heretics. They don’t even believe in the truth of the stories of Genesis. The old-time critics didn’t know [much], but they believed. Today’s critics don’t believe either.”⁸³⁵

Another example of how Bessie continued to view herself as a traditional Jewish woman is found in her description of the Sabbath meal of fish, chicken soup, and chicken that she prepared for Boris on Friday night. She wrote: “My home is like a little ‘Holy Temple’ for me. [...] A true mood of the holy day of Sabbath reigns in my soul.” She described the traditional Sabbath candles that she lit and the white tablecloth placed on the table.⁸³⁶ It is hard to believe that the woman writing this was a famous star of the stage, and the meal she had prepared took place following a performance she and her husband had given in the theater, a performance that is considered by Jewish law to be a desecration of that same “holy day of Sabbath” whose mood Bessie claimed reigned in her soul. But though we may suspect her of exaggeration and self-fashioning, her autobiographical writing still strikes the reader as relatively sincere.

Another way in which Bessie’s Jewish identity is more evident in her autobiography than those of the other actors is in her relationship to Zionism. She wrote how when she and Boris circumcised the child who was born to them the day after Herzl’s death, they decorated their house with Zionist flags for the circumcision, and named the child Theodore Herzl. The whole People’s Theater orchestra played at the event. On another occasion they hosted many distinguished guests from a Zionist convention in the Catskills in their villa.⁸³⁷ Although Boris was party to these initiatives, he did not tell of them with pride in his autobiography the way Bessie did in hers.⁸³⁸

Bessie also told two variations of a story surrounding the death of Goldfadn, stories that impute nationalistic feelings to him and therefore arouse a sense of identification in

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 238.

⁸³⁶ Ibid., 151; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 21, 1935, 5.

⁸³⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 272, 279.

⁸³⁸ In a newspaper article published in the *Forverts*, Boris did tell of hosting the English Jewish writer and Zionist leader Israel Zangwill together with the Zionist poet and author of “Hatikva,” Naftali Hertz Imber, for a Friday night meal in his home, proudly showing them his infant son, named after Theodore Herzl. But the emphasis in Boris’s article was on his pride in hobnobbing with such well-known figures, and less on his own Zionist sentiments. See “Tomashevski geyt mit Zangviln zen Zangvil’s a pyese,” *Forverts*, April 19, 1914, 4.

her. One is about how a group of children from the Dr. Herzl Zion Club founded by Goldfadn came to his bedside and sang him nationalistic songs that he had written, a few days before his death. Both Goldfadn and Bessie were very moved by the scene.⁸³⁹ The other story is about how, on the day of Goldfadn's death, the doctor told him that the children have arrived. He did not open his eyes, but his lips mouthed the word "Hatikva" (the hope) – the name of the Zionist anthem, Israel's national anthem to this day.⁸⁴⁰ However apocryphal these stories may be, they attest to the nationalistic feelings of the woman who remembered and retold them, Bessie Thomashefsky.

4. Sara Adler

When nationalistic feelings appeared in the writings of Sara Adler, they were related to Russia. As opposed to Jacob Adler and Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, for whom the possibility of returning to live in Russia never arose even once in all their writings, Sara continuously longed for Russia, especially for her hometown, Odessa, and she often thought of returning and joining the Russian stage, even after achieving fame and appearing in lead roles on the New York Yiddish stage.

Sara described the day she left Odessa to travel to London as one of the most awful days she lived through. "The evening before we left I was overtaken with an indescribable longing for my birth-city. The thought that I may never again see my dear Odessa troubled me incessantly and didn't allow me to be calm."⁸⁴¹ Of the moment they approached the Russian border when leaving Russia, she wrote:

My entire being was suddenly seized with a delicate and passionate longing for my birthland; the land where I was from childhood on was endlessly beloved and dear: the air, the earth, the trees, the grass, the sea; the land whose language always rang in my ears like a divine symphony; the land whose folksongs enchanted my young life.⁸⁴²

⁸³⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 5, 1935.

⁸⁴⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 288.

⁸⁴¹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 9, 1937, 9.

⁸⁴² *Ibid.*, Oct. 14, 1937, 7. It is interesting to compare Sara's feelings toward Russia expressed when nearing the border to those of Jacob Gordin. In an essay published in *Di varhayt* in 1907, he described shedding tears when looking at Russia from across the Austro-Hungarian border, unable to return to his beloved homeland. See Jacob

As we have noted, Sara's very lengthy autobiography is not full of religious experience. Unlike her husband, Jacob, she did not reveal a deeply religious nature. Neither did she refer often to religious tradition, as did Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky. Nevertheless, her religious side was aroused in relation to Mother Russia. When leaving Russia for London, as a passenger cried that they are approaching the border, she wrote that his cry reminds her of the *shofar* (ram's horn) blowing that she heard as a child on *Rosh Hashana* (The Jewish New Year) in their synagogue.

I suddenly felt in a state of a kind of religious ecstasy. In that blink-of-an-eye I entirely forgot the difficulties we went through from the last decrees on the Jews and especially on the Yiddish theater. Just like someone in love, when she parts with her beloved, forgets at that moment all her fights and jealous scenes that she went through because of him, so did I at that moment by the border forget all my difficult experiences, which I often went through in Russia.⁸⁴³

Despite her secular nature, love for Russia awakened "a state of a kind of religious ecstasy" in her. The Russian language was a "divine symphony" for her. Russian tradition and literature often relate to "Mother Russia" and its "holy soil" with a religiosity similar to the way in which the Jewish people refer to The Holy Land.⁸⁴⁴ Sara shared that sensibility and attributed sanctity to Russia and its language.

Given her great love for Russia and especially Odessa, it is no wonder that Sara repeatedly considered returning to Russia, including several decisions to go back that were thwarted or abandoned for one reason or another. Soon after arriving in London, she told her first husband, Moyshe Heimowitz, that she wanted to return to Odessa. "Russia is my home, I want to go home," she said to him. After arriving in New York, when their attempts to establish a theater there were met with difficulties, she again seriously contemplated returning to Russia, and she wrote home and told her parents that she was thinking of returning and working in the Russian theater. Later, when difficulties in the New York theater were compounded by marital

Gordin, "A yidishe shtetl baym rusishen grenets" *Ale shriften fun Yankev Gordin*, 3: 220-221) quoted by Barbara Henry, *Rewriting Russia*, 159.

⁸⁴³ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 14, 1937, 7.

⁸⁴⁴ See Michael Cherniavsky, "Holy Russia: A Study in the History of an Idea," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 63, No. 3 (Apr., 1958), 617-637.

problems, she decided to return to Russia and even purchased a ticket to sail from New York to Odessa, with her child and without her husband.⁸⁴⁵

Her plans to return to Russia were due not only to difficulties in the theater and in her marriage but also because of two men with whom she had romantic relationships at different points in her life. These men were the professed two great loves of her life; acclaimed Russian Jewish artists who performed in Russian for non-Jewish audiences. Neither of them were the men she married. They were the Russian Jewish actor Yakov (Yasha) Spivakovsky, who was active in the early years of Yiddish theater in Russia⁸⁴⁶, and then went on to perform in Russian after the czar's ban on Yiddish theater in Russia in 1883, and the Russian Jewish opera singer, Mikhail (Misha) Medvedev.

Sara had two affairs with Spivakovsky – one in Russia before her marriage to Heimowitz, and the other during her third season in New York, after her religious divorce from Heimowitz but before her civil divorce from him. She told of both these affairs in great detail.⁸⁴⁷ During the course of her second love affair with Spivakovsky, she seriously considered returning to Russia with him. But in the end, he returned alone.

Several years later, when Sara was married to Jacob Adler, she had an extramarital affair with Medvedev, who was then visiting New York.⁸⁴⁸ She returned to Russia together with him, leaving her children and husband in New York. During her extended visit with him to Russia, she performed in Russian in Moscow in an adaptation of a Chekhov story at the Hermitage Garden, and received a proposal to join a Moscow theater.⁸⁴⁹ Again, Sara gave serious thought to the possibility of remaining in Russia with Medvedev. But in the end, she returned to New York, to her family, and to the Yiddish theater.

⁸⁴⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 30, 1937, 9; Nov. 2, 1937, 5; Jan. 20, 1938, 2; Jan. 25, 1938, 3; Jan. 29, 1938, 7.

⁸⁴⁶ See above Introduction, Sections A and E; Chapter Two, Section IB1 and other places in this paper.

⁸⁴⁷ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Aug. 3, 1937 - Sept. 2, 1937 (14 chapters) and Feb. 22, 1938 - Mar. 5, 1938 (6 chapters). Jacob Adler, too, wrote of Spivakovsky's amorous affairs, primarily in relation to the latter's courting of Adler's first wife, Sonya Michelson, when the three of them performed together in Russia. See Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, July 21, 1917 - Aug. 18, 1917 (5 chapters).

⁸⁴⁸ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, June 18, 1938 - Sept. 22, 1938 (discussed during the course of 42 chapters). See Introduction, Sections E1 and E2.

⁸⁴⁹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Sept. 10, 1938, 7.

Given her great love of Russia and the Russian language, and the many times she seriously contemplated returning there, why did she consistently choose to remain outside of her beloved homeland? What prevented her from returning to the language and the culture that she felt so passionately about? She answered this question explicitly numerous times throughout her autobiography. The czar's ban on Yiddish theater in Russia lasted from 1883 to 1905. This ban was the background against which Sara left Russia in 1883, together with her husband, Moyshe Heimowitz, and his acting troupe. Returning to Russia during those years would have meant either giving up the theater or working in the Russian theater. In order to work in the Russian theater, Sara maintained that she would have had to convert to Christianity. This was not a possibility for her. Neither was giving up the theater. Her only possibility was to remain outside of Russia, in a country where she could work as an actress in the Yiddish theater. She referred to this state of affairs numerous times throughout the autobiography. Sometimes it seems that the impossibility of converting to Christianity was related more to the effect of such an action on her mother than to her own personal sensibilities. At other times, she represented this as her own issue.

The first time the subject arose was in a conversation between Sara and her husband Moyshe, in London, after Sara had said that she wanted to return to Russia. He responded by saying that as a Jewess she would be able to play only small roles in a provincial Russian troupe. In order to play lead roles in theaters in places like St. Petersburg, Moscow or Odessa, she would have to be baptized. Sara wrote:

The thought of converting to Christianity was always immensely far away from me. Other Russian women I knew used to think about it quite seriously. At that time, converting helped ambitious Jews in various fields. Through converting, a Jew in Russia could reach the highest level both in art and in science. [...]

For me personally, converting to Christianity was precluded. True, I was brought up in a purely Russian spirit, and did not read one word of Yiddish as a child. But my mother was a deeply religious, though superstitious, Jewish woman. Not only did she attend synagogue and observe the Jewish dietary laws, she also adhered to various old Jewish customs and charms. Following the loss of eight children, the conversion to Christianity of a ninth child would certainly be a death blow for her. There, in Russia, I never thought of it. But here, at that moment, when the question of going home was seriously in the air, I understood that Moyshe was right. The most I could expect of the Russian stage was to join a provincial Russian troupe and to travel with them; here today, there tomorrow, always short on money, considered by the provincial Russian

merchants and functionaries as a whore, with whom one can permit himself all kinds of liberties.⁸⁵⁰

In the above section it was her mother's religious beliefs and the effect that Sara's conversion might have on her that acted as a check. The alternative, remaining a minor actress in a provincial troupe, would mean not only relinquishing her dream of playing lead roles but accepting a social status that she compared to that of a whore. On another occasion, when Sara had decided to return to Russia together with Spivakovsky, her mother, who had by then moved to New York, refused to allow it because of her fear that Sara would not be able to withstand the temptation of the Russian stage, and would convert to Christianity.⁸⁵¹

Conversion to Christianity was not always presented by Sara as impossible because of her mother. At times, her resistance to taking that course was presented as Sara's own sensibility. But rather than expressing this sensibility in terms of values or beliefs, Sara presented it as primarily an emotional issue. Speaking of her first years in New York, Sara wrote:

Often, when I was alone, I would raise the question if it wouldn't be better to go back home and act on the Russian stage. The only thing that held me from taking that step in those days was the fear of apostasy, the thought of such recourse would throw me into a state of indescribable fear. I knew that such a step would be the worst misfortune for my poor mother, for our whole family and also for me.⁸⁵²

From this and other sections of her autobiography, it appears that what drew Sara to the Yiddish theater in the first place was not a great love for all things Jewish, as she expressed at the beginning of the autobiography, but an emotional fear that arose in her when she contemplated becoming Christian. Certainly, the story she told of how she fell in love with a Yiddish singer at her sister's engagement party, and then decided to join the Yiddish theater, seems to be a childish and romanticized narrative that ignores the much more basic question of her relationship with her mother, and her instinctive fear of conversion to Christianity that she never fully explained on a rational level. Even though she maintained that the possibility of conversion never entered her mind, it would appear that her attraction to the Yiddish theater

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., Nov. 2, 1937, 5.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid., Mar. 3, 1938, 3.

⁸⁵² Ibid., Jan. 20, 1938, 2

was stronger in its negative motivation than in its positive one.⁸⁵³ For all the other actors in this study, Yiddish theater was the default choice. Yiddish was their mother tongue, and the language in which they were most comfortable. Sara Adler actively chose the Yiddish stage not necessarily out of love for it but more out of fear of the consequences of choosing her greater love – the Russian stage.⁸⁵⁴ As we have stated, she did not reveal a religious nature, but did use religious terminology to speak of her love for Russia. In one other place she made use of religious terminology – when speaking of Berger, her director, teacher, and mentor when she was a young, beginning actress in Shomer's theatrical troupe. She said of him: "I believed in Berger as a person the way a religious Jew believes in God."⁸⁵⁵

Marcus Moseley defined autobiography as a genre in which the significance of the other is determined by the role he plays in the formation of the self, regardless of social standing.⁸⁵⁶ In accordance with this precept, Jacob Adler presented us with his most significant "other" – Yisroel Rosenberg, the man "who taught him everything he knew," including a religious attitude toward theater. Adler called Rosenberg an "eternal mix of devil and angel" and "a warm Chassidic Jew and at the same time a cunning cynic."⁸⁵⁷ Over fifteen chapter headings in Jacob's autobiography bear the name of Rosenberg, Adler's teacher and mentor – more than any other character. Sara also had a significant other in her autobiography who played a similar role for her. He too is a forgotten figure connected with the beginning of the Yiddish theater – Berger, whom she considered the greatest director that the Yiddish theater had in its early years, and whom she credited with teaching her the basics of stage acting, and causing her to become a realistic actress.⁸⁵⁸ It is no wonder that the man who taught her to be a serious, realistic actress became her own personal god. Although Sara did not have a religious nature, if she had a religion, it was the theater.

⁸⁵³ Ibid., July 1, 1937, 7; Nov. 11, 1937, 7; Sept. 10, 1938, 7; July 21, 1938, 3.

⁸⁵⁴ Sara was not the only Yiddish actor for whom conversion to Christianity in order to act on the Russian stage loomed in the background of his or her mind. Mark Slobin wrote of conversion as a temptation which Russian Yiddish actors Mogulesco, Dinman, and Zilberman all dealt with.⁸⁵⁴ (Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982, 35, referred to by Quint, *The Rise of the Yiddish Theater*, 132-133, footnote 8.) Adler made no mention of any such temptation.

⁸⁵⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Aug. 14, 1937, 9.

⁸⁵⁶ Moseley, 8.

⁸⁵⁷ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, June 22, 1918, 3.

⁸⁵⁸ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, July 6, 1937, 5; July 13, 1937, 5. See Chapter Two, Section IIB2.

The expression “theater as religion” was used by *New York Times* theater critic Ben Brantley in relation to Stella Adler, Jacob and Sara’s daughter.⁸⁵⁹ Theater as religion was something Stella breathed in her home. In Jacob Adler’s writings, the religious attitude toward theater is obvious and appears to have been conveyed intentionally. In Sara’s autobiography the religious terminology surrounding theater is less overt than in Jacob’s, but the place theater played in her life is similar to the place religion plays in the life of the religiously devoted. Her dedication to it was the first priority in her life, and dictated her most important decisions in life, including whom to marry. She gave up her two greatest loves, Spivakovsky and Medvedev, for the sake of the theater. She claimed to have married Heimowitz not for love but out of gratefulness for all that he did for her in bringing her into the Yiddish theater and giving her leading roles when she was still inexperienced.⁸⁶⁰ The way she told the story of her marriage to Adler gives the definite impression that they married each other because it was clear to them that they had to perform together onstage, and that together they could revolutionize the Yiddish theater. Their marriage appears to have been arranged by them to consolidate power and serve the needs of the Yiddish theater rather than for romantic love, similar to the way kings and queens arrange their marriages, or the way heirs to Chassidic dynasties marry between themselves.⁸⁶¹ We may discern from Sara’s writings that her relationship with Jacob Adler undoubtedly included love, unlike her relationship with Heimowitz, but it is clear that their initial marriage was an arranged marriage of the sort that is often maligned in Yiddish theater, both by Goldfadn and by Gordin. So, although Sara Adler did not have a religious nature oriented toward God, like that of Jacob Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky, religious feelings and a religious attitude toward life were aroused in her in two areas – toward Russia, and toward the theater.

⁸⁵⁹ See Ben Brantley’s review of *Stella Adler on America’s Master Playwrights*, *New York Times*, Aug. 30, 2012.

⁸⁶⁰ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Sept. 9, 1937, 7.

⁸⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Mar. 19, 1938, 8; Mar. 24, 1938, 3.

E. Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, the radical Jewish intelligentsia in America endeavored to bring realism to the Yiddish stage. Their concept of realism, forged in Russia during the 1860s and 1870s, was of an art form true to life which was dedicated to social change. For them, this change included progressive values in the arenas of female emancipation, political change toward socialism or anarchism, and a critical attitude toward traditional Judaism and its conservative values. Jacob Gordin was their representative on the Yiddish stage between 1891 and his death in 1909. The radical Jewish intelligentsia, through important journalists such as Abe Cahan and Louis Miller, as well as critics and playwrights such as Bernard Gorin and Leon Kobrin, tried to create a change on the New York Yiddish stage by moving it away from what they called *shund*, mostly escapist historical operettas and melodramas, to a more literary-centered and realistic approach to theater, which would also promote a more progressive worldview among the Jewish immigrants who attended the Yiddish theater.

Jacob and Sara Adler were firmly on the side of the radical Jewish intelligentsia in their effort to bring realism to the Yiddish stage. Jacob Adler made a very impassioned presentation in his autobiography of his hatred for *shund* and his struggle all his professional life to make the Yiddish stage more realistic. He did not refer to the many times he himself participated in *shund*, out of financial necessity. He referred to Jacob Gordin in very admiring and appreciative terms and presented himself as Gordin's partner in a joint effort to bring what he considered a more artistic and realistic approach to performance, production and repertory. Nowhere in his autobiography did he refer to the controversial subject matter of many of Gordin's plays, such as progressive attitudes toward marriage and family life, and negative portrayals of traditional Jews and their way of life. When discussing the greatness of Gordin and what the two of them achieved together, his subject was "realism" as an artistic aesthetic, without the political connotations that the radical Jewish intelligentsia attached to that term. Moreover, he went to great effort to impress on the reader that he was a man with strong religious feelings whose Jewishness was quite central in his life. Those religious feelings did not express themselves around ritual or a traditional Jewish life. They expressed themselves primarily in an intimacy with God, and in a religious attitude toward theater, expressed in Jewish terminology. He would

use images of *Kol Nidre*, *Slichos*, and the High Holy Days in relation to theatrical performance. He described bringing “the Grand Jew” to the stage in plays such as *The Jewish King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Dr. Almasado* as an experience that brought him “great happiness, true pleasure, and the proud joy of the creative artist.” This “Grand Jew” was Adler’s understanding of the Jew in history – a higher being with the strength of generations in him, rooted in life, who possessed a learned intellect and strong character, derived from both suffering and tradition. Adler’s words rang with pride in his Jewishness, a far cry from the position of the cosmopolitan Russian Jewish intellectuals forced back to their Jewishness by anti-Semitism.

Similarly, Adler made an effort to portray the early Yiddish actors in Russia as having strong Jewish identities, and not rebelling against religion. He wrote how when the theatrical troupe he belonged to with Rosenberg in Europe – before emigrating – arrived by train in Yelisavetgrad, they were “unwashed and unprayed. (In those years we still prayed and if we ever skipped a prayer we felt remorse.)”⁸⁶² He told of how Rosenberg brought him to see renowned Chassidic rabbis in various towns in Russia, approached the sainted “Good Jew of Nezhin” to ask him to bless their theatrical troupe and fell on the ground before him,⁸⁶³ and immersed himself in a ritual bath before going onstage for the first time.⁸⁶⁴ Of himself, he stated: “On our trips in Russia in many places, I have in times of trouble turned to rabbis and they didn’t shame me. They always showed us tolerance and even friendship. And there were instances when they really helped.”⁸⁶⁵ When describing the “Good Jew of Nezhin,” whom he saw at the train station when fleeing Nezhin during the pogrom there in 1881, he called him “a tall, old, patriarchal Jew, with a satin-white Godly face, a high, glowing forehead, and big,

⁸⁶² Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, March 14, 1917, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 128. See also Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Nov. 24, 1917, 3, how the actors all prayed in a quorum together with the owner of the boarding-house in which they stayed, in Pereyaslav, in 1881.

⁸⁶³ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, June 22, 1918, 3; Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 23, 1925; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 196-197.

⁸⁶⁴ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 4, 1916, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 88.

⁸⁶⁵ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 30, 1925, 14; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 235. He was critical of German Jewish rabbis, like his uncle Dr. Hillel Nissim Adler, chief rabbi of London, who were antagonistic toward Yiddish theater because it treated Jewish ritual lightly and cast a negative light on Jews in the eyes of Christians. See Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 1, 1925, 5, where he called them “frumocks”, meaning overly pedantic in relation to Jewish ritual. He used this derogatory term toward Jews who were critical of the Yiddish theater for religious reasons in other places, too, such as Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, April 4, 1925, 8.

staring eyes lost in thought in faraway worlds [...].” When he first saw him at the station, he said of himself, “I had been trembling, and suddenly I stood up tall like a soldier in front of his general.” When standing before him in private, he felt “as if he was caught in a net of love and great respect.”⁸⁶⁶ All of this appears to have been a concerted effort on his part to differentiate between his own attitude toward organized religion and religiosity and that of the radical Jewish intelligentsia, including Gordin. It was apparently not an attempt to ingratiate himself in the eyes of the reader, because he was writing for *Di varhayt*, a secular newspaper with socialist leanings. It was also probably not the influence of his ghostwriter, Joel Entin, who was himself a member of the radical Jewish intelligentsia. It would seem that to Adler it was important to impress on his readers that he fought with all his heart for a better and more realistic Yiddish stage for artistic reasons, but he did not participate in the battle against traditional Judaism that characterized many of his compatriots who wanted to forward realism.

Sara Adler was closer in her identity and aspirations to the Russian Jewish intelligentsia. Like them, she had very strong feelings of identification with Russia and Russian culture. She expressed her love of Russia numerous times in her autobiography. Her artistic ideal for Yiddish theater was to bring it as close to Russian realism as possible, presenting plays by writers such as Tolstoy and Ostrovsky. She preferred that the plays be adapted only minimally, to make them accessible to a Jewish audience, but not totally reinterpreted like the plays of Gordin. She was very critical of Lateiner and Hurwitz, but even Gordin and Kobrin were not her ideal. They did indeed write “better” plays, but the “real thing” was actual Russian realism, in which she felt she reached her highest acting achievements.

Despite Sara Adler’s similarity to the radical Jewish intelligentsia in these areas, she did not share their political goals. Her writings did exhibit an affirmation of her autonomy as a woman, maybe prefiguring feminism, such as when she unashamedly related her extramarital love affairs, or was proud of achieving artistic independence, but she did not express her opinions on feminism explicitly, only by example. She showed no interest in socialism and displayed no criticism of traditional Judaism and its ways. Unlike her husband, who openly displayed a deep sense of religiosity and clearly expressed tolerance for traditional Judaism, she

⁸⁶⁶ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, June 22, 1918, 3.

took no stand whatsoever on religious matters. Other than speaking of her mother's religiosity, and of her own love for her mother, we see no expressions of religiosity on her part, or of identification with Jewish tradition. She did, however, refer to the impossibility of her converting to Christianity that prevented her from making a career in the Russian theater, something that suggests a gut level sense of Jewish identity. She used religious imagery surrounding her feelings toward Russia, and toward Berger, the director who taught her to be a realistic actress, but never in any Jewish context. Neither did she express any criticism of the traditional Jewish world. She seemed to be completely divorced from it, as if it did not concern her. If she displayed any type of religiosity, it was toward the theater. But for her, the Yiddish theater was not an ideal but more of a means to work in theater without converting to Christianity. She would have been happier to work in the Russian theater had she been able to. Therefore, the Jewishness of the Yiddish theater was not an issue for her. But neither did she view it critically, provided that it was performed in a realistic fashion.

Jacob and Sara Adler were partners with Gordin and the radical Jewish intelligentsia in bringing realism to the Yiddish stage but not in their desire to use the theater to advance progressive and anti-traditionalist values among the immigrants. This position was expressed by them when the *Forverts* asked both of them to support Jacob Gordin after he was attacked by the Orthodox *Tageblatt*. Nina Warnke wrote that although they defended Gordin and the morality of his plays, they did not criticize the Orthodox press, and seemed clearly uncomfortable with the request of the *Forverts* to do so.⁸⁶⁷ Though this may have been motivated by a desire not to offend traditionally-oriented theatergoers, this cannot be the reason they persisted in this direction in their autobiographies, which were published many years later in socialist newspapers, after they had retired from the stage.

It must be stated that Jacob Adler's self-presentation as being religiously-oriented and tolerant of traditional Judaism stands in clear opposition to some of his most famous roles on stage, such as the heretics Uriel Acosta and Elisha ben Abuya who were ostracized by the rabbinic leadership of their generations, or to plays in which he made his fame, such as *The Jewish King Lear*, in which the negative characters are all Orthodox, and the positive ones, other

⁸⁶⁷ Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 176.

than the hero, *maskilim*. It is hard to understand what lay behind Adler's self-presentation, but he clearly wanted to draw a line between himself and the plays that he appeared in.

Boris Thomashefsky was strongly criticized by the radical Jewish intelligentsia for presenting and promoting *shund*. He was so strongly associated with this genre that Jacob Adler hardly mentioned him in his autobiography, despite their having been partners in the theater for many years, good friends, and neighbors. Adler wanted to disassociate himself from the man most associated with *shund*. But although Thomashefsky spoke of "success" as the main goal of his theater, and placed much emphasis on costume and spectacle, singing and dancing, there was an additional prism through which he presented his artistic aspirations. Despite what the critics said, he did not merely want to give the audience what it wanted, even at the expense of artistic integrity. He wanted to create a theater that was authentically Jewish, presenting Jewish life with authentic Jewish music. He wanted to present plays "with a Jewish soul" that would "carry the Jewish spirit" in them. This goal was reiterated both in his early writings for the *Forverts*, and in his later autobiography. He also quoted the "grandfather" of Yiddish literature, Mendele Mokher Sforim, as saying that this was the proper goal of Yiddish theater. In Thomashefsky's opinion, creating popular theater did not necessarily mean that one had lowered oneself to the level of the masses, as was the view of the radical intellectuals. Popularity among the masses could be a sign that, as Goldfaden said of Thomashefsky, one "understands more than any other theater director the soul of our masses, and knows how to move the strings of the Jewish soul [...]"⁸⁶⁸ Though Thomashefsky did not directly criticize Adler by name, he did call his company "a few realistic actors who became like gentiles from [performing] gentile realism," and quoted Goldfaden's wife as referring to them as "vulgar people playing Jewish theater without a Jewish soul or Jewish feeling or spirit."⁸⁶⁹

Despite his self-presentation as someone who placed great value on "the Jewish soul" and "the Jewish spirit," Thomashefsky did not reveal a religious nature in his writings similar to that displayed by Adler. Except for a few expressions of love for the Jewish people in his earlier writings, his writings about himself did not reflect the artistic aspirations he set for his theater. He had nothing significant to say about being Jewish, nor did he show any real connection to

⁸⁶⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 5, 1935

⁸⁶⁹ Boris Thomashefsky, "Ben ami's shikzal," *Thomashevski's teater shriftn*, 78-79.

Jewish tradition. His connection to the synagogue, which greatly influenced his theater, was through his participation in a synagogue choir as a child. Whenever he described that experience in his autobiographical writings, he gave the impression that it was about performing, not praying. Thomashefsky clearly put himself in a different camp than that of the radical intellectuals, but he did not substantiate that position with stories that revealed a deep connection to Jewish tradition or culture in his private, adult life.

Bessie Thomashefsky, on the other hand, presented herself as being strongly connected to both Jewish nationalism and religious tradition. She is the only one of the four actors in this study that spoke not only of religious experience and a connection with God, but of keeping Jewish traditions such as lighting candles on Friday night, or of religious beliefs such as the truth of the stories of Genesis. She wrote with pride of how she and Boris named their son, born the day after Herzl's death, Theodore Herzl, and how they decorated the room in which he was circumcised with Zionist flags. In her own self-presentation she described the young girl she once was in her shtetl, Tarashche, as her "spiritual self," and for many years after she became an accomplished actress part of her continued to believe that she was still a young girl, living temporarily in America, and waiting to return to Tarashche with her parents.⁸⁷⁰ This emphasis on her connection to her *shtetl* roots is in direct contrast to her husband, who barely mentioned the shtetl he was born in, Asitnayshka, in his autobiography, and chose to emphasize the years he lived with his parents in Kiev, later in his childhood.⁸⁷¹

Bessie Thomashefsky presented her Jewish identity as very definite, positive and traditional. One would never consider connecting her to the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, whose identities, like Gordin's, were often more Russian than Jewish.⁸⁷² It is therefore surprising to discover that her ideal for Yiddish theater was not "Jewish theater" like that of her husband, but "social realism" such as that of Gordin, Kobrin and Libin.⁸⁷³ She thought that Yiddish theater should be dealing with social and economic conflicts that reflected those of the

⁸⁷⁰ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 10, 298.

⁸⁷¹ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 16-26. In his earlier memoirs in the *Forverts*, he did speak with love of Asitnayshka. (Boris Thomashefsky, "Mayn bezukh in Eyropa," *Forverts*, Sept. 21, 1913, 6; "Thomashevski in Kiev," *Forverts*, Dec. 28, 1913, 6.

⁸⁷² Beth Kaplan said of her grandfather, Jacob Gordin, that he "was a Jew second and an American last. Always, in his ardent soul, Yakov Mikhailovich Gordin was a Russian." (Kaplan, 7)

⁸⁷³ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 3, 1935.

audience that came to the plays. Surprisingly, Bessie Thomashefsky was the only one of the four actors in this study who identified on any level with socialism.⁸⁷⁴ Though she presented “social realism” as the ideal of the Yiddish theater, she admitted that only a small part of her own work was in plays of that sort. Most of her performances were in what she sarcastically called “masterpieces” by playwrights like Hurwitz and Lateiner or in light comedies of limited artistic value.

Though she was proud of her husband’s ability to “move the strings of the Jewish soul,” she did not see him as her ideal artist in the Yiddish theater. Those she most admired were largely champions of realism, such as Rudolph Schildkraut, Morris Morrison,⁸⁷⁵ and Jacob Gordin. But not only champions of realism could enter her hall of fame. She admired Mogulesco and Goldfadn as much as she did the realists, for they were great artists in her eyes, regardless of the “school” to which they belonged. Bessie Thomashefsky is the artist in our study who is least easily categorized, and the one who most defied the type of categorization that the radical Jewish intellectuals wished to make in society. She admired social realism, not for its aesthetics alone, like the Adlers, but for its role in helping society deal with its conflicts. On the other hand, she identified with traditional Jewish values. She admired both Gordin, the cosmopolitan Russophile, and Goldfadn, the Jewish nationalist. She also understood that there was a place in the Yiddish theater for actors like her, who knew what the audience wanted and could help to make the Yiddish theater the kind of substitute synagogue or home-away-from-home referred to by Sandrow. She is the actor least easy to categorize but she was also the most believable in her self-presentation.

If the Russian Jewish intellectuals tried to present their battle as one of literary-centered theater vs. *shund*, from the autobiographies of Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky another dichotomy emerges – that of Russian realism vs. Jewish theater, with Adler epitomizing the

⁸⁷⁴ She sided with the Hebrew Actors’ Union when Adler and Thomashefsky tried to prevent its formation for monetary reasons, (Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 7, 1935, 4) and referred with pride to a speech given by the head of the clockmaker’s union at a benefit performance, in which Boris and she were part of the “people” as opposed to the capitalist leeches. (Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 163)

⁸⁷⁵ Morrison went to work as a farmhand and woodchopper in order to increase his life experience and allow him to act more realistically, like the ultimate “Method” actor, Daniel Day Lewis (Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky’s lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 9, 1935, 7).

former and Thomashefsky the latter. Sara Adler was even more strongly on the side of Russian realism than her husband, aspiring to present plays of that genre as closely as possible to the original. Bessie Thomashefsky had an eclectic approach to Yiddish theater. She appreciated realism, especially “social realism,” but she also believed in the value of “moving the Jewish soul.” She appreciated those she considered great artists, no matter what their mode of expression was, realistic or otherwise. And she could see the value in theater that was not “high art” but satisfied the desires of the audience.

Despite their differences, none of the actors neatly lined up with the categorization laid down by the radical Jewish intelligentsia, in which supporting realism automatically included advocating progressive thinking, including a critical approach to traditional Judaism. Though Boris Thomashefsky’s description of his theater, including its dedication to Jewish content, does enforce the picture painted by Nahma Sandrow of the Yiddish theater in New York as an alternative synagogue, often enforcing traditional religious values, the other autobiographies reflect the “more nuanced” approach advocated by Nina Warnke. In Sara’s writings, and even more so in the writings of Jacob Adler, we see that in America, a desire to reform the Yiddish theater and make it more realistic did not demand embracing all forms of progressive thinking and/or blanket criticism of traditional Judaism or religious experience. In the writings of Bessie Thomashefsky, we see that affirming tradition and supporting a Yiddish theater with a Jewish character did not necessitate rejecting realism as an art form. And it could even go hand-in-hand with believing in the importance of bringing about social change through theater.

Joel Berkowitz wrote of how the American Yiddish theater took a critical attitude toward the rapid pace of acculturation of American Jews because the Americanization process was drawing Jews away from all forms of Jewish identity. American Jews concerned with preserving a sense of Jewish identity turned to Yiddish drama as a means of doing so.⁸⁷⁶ This may also have contributed to the attitude toward Jewish identity exhibited in our actors’ autobiographies, mostly written for the Yiddish-speaking public at a time when the Americanization process had already advanced greatly.

⁸⁷⁶ Joel Berkowitz, “This is Not Europe, You Know: The Counter-Maskilic Impulse of American Yiddish Drama,” in *Yiddish in America – Essays of Yiddish Culture in the Golden Land*, ed. Edward S. Shapiro (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press, 2008), 136, 165.

But even outside the boundaries of America and the process of Jewish acculturation there, Alyssa Quint referred to a lack of a disquisition on the *Haskala* in the memoirs of early Yiddish actors in Europe, mirroring a secularism that was cultural rather than philosophical, and that included patterns of ambivalent, paradoxical and partial Jewish practice.⁸⁷⁷ Our research shows that this is also true of the memoirs of actors in the early American Yiddish theater. Actually, the Jewish identities revealed in their autobiographies were not a far cry from the homes they grew up in. Although all four homes were described as traditional by the actors in their autobiographies, upon closer examination, none appear to have been conventionally Orthodox. “Ambivalent, paradoxical and partial Jewish practice” seems to have characterized their lives since childhood. A close reading of the actors’ autobiographies reveals that the battle of the radical Jewish intelligentsia to reform the New York Yiddish theater around the turn of the century never received more than partial support from that stage’s actors. For the actors, aesthetics and politics were two separate issues.



Jacob Adler, *The Jewish King Lear*



Sara Adler

⁸⁷⁷ Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 10.

Discussion and Conclusion

1. The Results of This Research

A. Artistic Standards and Practice

The New York Yiddish theater between 1881 and 1917 was an actor-centered theater catering primarily to a lower-working-class audience. These two characteristics were responsible for many of the practices prevalent during this period, which were later criticized by the actors in their autobiographies.

Since the actors were at the center of the theater, not the playwright or a director who was independent of the cast, the scripts were not given prominence. Texts were not always fixed, and the actors improvised and ad-libbed freely. Even when texts were written in their entirety, the plays, being of secondary importance for both the actors and the audience, were usually of a poor literary quality. Among the actors, the stars, who usually also served as the theater managers, were very much in the limelight. They gave long curtain speeches that echoed both their centrality in the eyes of the audience, and the way in which they treated the theater as an extension of their homes. Their fans, called *patriotn*, treated them with a fanatical loyalty, and rivalries existed between the *patriotn* of the various stars.

In 1890 the Yiddish-speaking population of New York numbered 135,000 and in 1900 it reached 300,000.⁸⁷⁸ The relatively small Jewish immigrant population during those years made it necessary to change the repertoire frequently. Rehearsals were few and actors often relied on a prompter.

Many of the above practices were viewed by the actors in their autobiographies as being unprofessional. But often the situation was not so different from that of contemporary non-Yiddish professional theater. Before the advent of the long run, when rehearsal time was very limited, it was difficult in general for actors to memorize their roles. In the late nineteenth century, in many European theaters, the actors relied on a prompter. In general, the quality of plays in commercial theater, especially that of America, was not high around the turn of the century. The American theater, like the Yiddish one, presented primarily melodramas with

⁸⁷⁸ Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 242.

sensational plots, much spectacle, and topical subjects aimed to attract a large audience.

Another practice prevalent in the early American Yiddish theater about which the actors were highly critical was the “borrowing” of plays from other sources. This, too, was common practice in America in the late nineteenth century, where well-respected playwrights like Augustine Daly and David Belasco “borrowed” plays from other sources without always acknowledging their origins. Like their Yiddish counterparts, they also adapted plays from foreign cultures to suit the American one.

The audiences of the American Yiddish theater were quite unruly, but not more so than other theaters of the lower classes, such as the boulevard theatre in Paris of the nineteenth century, or the British music halls of that time, or even the American theater audience up until the mid-nineteenth century. The informality of the audience in the Yiddish theater was an expression of the way the theater was a kind of second home to them. To the actors, their theaters were so much an extension of their homes that they even used them as wedding halls.

One area of performance practice typical of the Yiddish theater, which was not prevalent in other Western theaters of the late nineteenth century, was the degree to which actors ad-libbed and improvised. This practice, too, was not unique in theatrical history but harked back to a practice prevalent in the *commedia dell’arte* in the Renaissance. *Commedia dell’arte* was an actors’ theater, much like the New York Yiddish one, and it stressed the performances rather than the texts that were performed. The ability of the actors to improvise their parts was looked on as a sign of their professionalism, and not as a flaw.

This approach, which considered the improvisations of the actors of the Yiddish theater to be a sign of vibrancy, was expressed by the Yiddish poet Itzik Manger, who wrote of a dynamic power that was expressed in the actors’ improvisational acting:

The liberated playing energy in the Jewish folk-masses dynamized the Yiddish theater. Without theater studies, without acting academies, they acted. I would say that aside from Goldfaden’s theatrical material they even played without theatrical texts, because what kind of texts were the scribbles of a Lateiner and a “Professor” Hurwitz? They played ‘by heart,’ and it was good, better than good. It was acting for the sake of acting, theater for the sake of theater. They ignored the ‘texts,’ made fun of the ‘authors.’ Instinctively they felt that they were free, and in their freedom, they overturned all the stupidities of the ‘authors.’ They improvised freely on the

stage and the improvisations were filled with charm. Much, much more than was found in the texts of the Lateiners and Hurwitzes.⁸⁷⁹

Like the actors in our study, especially Sara Adler, Manger was critical of the writings of Lateiner and Hurwitz. But unlike Sara Adler, who claimed that the Yiddish actors encouraged the Lateiner-Hurwitz monopoly in order to allow them to do whatever they wanted on stage, Manger claimed that the actors ridiculed the authors while performing their plays. For him Lateiner and Hurwitz's concoctions did not form the basis for the Yiddish theater. It was the actors who were the basis of that theater and they rose above the material they were given. The weakness of the scripts afforded them a greater opportunity to use their own ingenuity and creative energy, as Manger continued:

The repertoire of the Yiddish stage, apart from Goldfaden's plays, lived only because of the acting-dynamics of the Yiddish actors. The actor stood in the center of the Yiddish stage. Around him everything moved. People didn't go to see this or the other concoction, only how the actor played his role. And the actors played. They transformed their material into something greater. In the theatrical absurdities of the so-called "dramatists" they entered into the realm of their own ingenuity. [...] The actors' improvisations stood at the center of the stage. They ruled over it with the dynamics of their acting.⁸⁸⁰

The positive light in which Manger viewed the improvisations of the actors, as opposed to the negative way in which they were presented in the actors' autobiographies, reflects the fact that sometimes people who were not directly involved with the early Yiddish theater in America viewed it more positively than those involved in it. Boris Thomashefsky wrote that Sunday performances in New York Yiddish theater were attended by many American actors who enjoyed watching Yiddish performances.⁸⁸¹ He cites the well-known American actor, Arnold Daly, as expressing jealousy toward Yiddish actors and the plays in which they appeared, in comparison to the plays in which he was forced to appear in the American theater. He also

⁸⁷⁹ Itzik Manger, "Introductory Words" in *Yidisher teater in Eyrope tsvishn beyde velt-milkhomes*, Itzik Manger, Yonas Turkov, Moyshe Perenson, eds. (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1968), 13. This view of the work of the Yiddish actors suited Manger, who himself was a kind of Yiddish folk bard, most significantly in Warsaw between 1927 and 1938, creating "stylized folk-art designed to be performed." It is no wonder that he appreciated the improvised performed folk-art of the Yiddish actors. See David Roskies, "Call it JewSpeak: On the Evolution of Speech in Modern Yiddish Writing," *Poetics Today*, vol. 35, no. 3, Fall 2014, 274. See also Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing*, 230-265.

⁸⁸⁰ Itzik Manger, "Introductory Words," 14.

⁸⁸¹ Boris Thomashefsky, "Vi azoy men hot gegangvet."

quoted David Belasco as urging American actors to attend Yiddish theater in order to see acting that was “faithful, sincere, and beautiful.”⁸⁸² Hutchins Hapgood, the American journalist who wrote a book about the Jewish “ghetto” on the Lower East Side in 1902, when describing the New York Yiddish theater, wrote that “the Yiddish players, even the poorer among them, act with remarkable sincerity. [...] To be true to nature is their strongest passion, and even in a conventional melodrama their sincerity, or their characterization in the comic episodes, often redeems the play from utter barrenness. [...] the art of the Ghetto, theatrical and other, is deeply and painfully realistic.”⁸⁸³ Despite the shortcomings he saw, such as the crudeness in form of its plays, he viewed the New York Yiddish theater as “refreshing to persons who have been bored by the empty farce and inane cheerfulness of the uptown theatres.”⁸⁸⁴ Hutchins Hapgood’s older brother, the well-known journalist and drama critic, Norman Hapgood, cited the New York Yiddish theater as having audiences more receptive to art than those of the American theater at the end of the nineteenth century.⁸⁸⁵ Lacking the perspective that outsiders had, insiders in the Yiddish theater often viewed their own theater unduly harshly.

Another possible reason for the overly critical approach of the actors to their own theater may be the influence of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, whose views were represented by journalists such as Abe Cahan, Louis Miller or earlier, Getsl Zelikovitsh.⁸⁸⁶ These journalists ridiculed the kind of Yiddish theater beloved by the masses, and demanded that the Yiddish theater in America stop pandering to the masses and begin to participate in educating them in the ways of modernity. The scorn that these men heaped on the Yiddish theater, such as Cahan’s claim in 1890 that he did not review Yiddish plays in the *Arbayter tsaytung* because “most of the plays on stage do not deserve serious reviews,”⁸⁸⁷ probably had an effect on the

⁸⁸² Boris Thomashefsky, “Englishe actyorn vos zaynen mekane di yidishe” (English Actors Who Were Jealous of the Yiddish Ones), *Forverts*, March 15, 1914, 6.

⁸⁸³ Hutchins Hapgood, *The Spirit of the Ghetto: Studies of the Jewish Quarter in New York* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1902), 137-138.

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 149.

⁸⁸⁵ Norman Hapgood, *The Stage in America, 1897-1900* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1901), 141-142.

⁸⁸⁶ Editor of the pro-labor weekly *Folksadvocat* from 1888-1889, he considered the American Yiddish theater to be lacking in artistic merit and social value, and tried to arouse the other newspapers of the time to demand that the Yiddish theater begin to educate its audience. See Warnke, “Theater as an Educational Institution,” 26.

⁸⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 27 quoted Abraham Cahan, *Arbayter tsaytung*, April 11, 1890.

actors and the way in which they perceived their work. The Russian Jewish Intelligentsia had a strong influence on Jewish society, despite their being a small minority.

B. Acting and Directing Style

Jacob and Sara Adler both presented themselves as realistic actors. They were introspective about their acting techniques, discussing them in detail. Both of them gave the impression of actors very much aware of their acting processes.

Jacob Adler's writings about his acting very much resemble the writings of Stanislavsky. We have brought many parallels between them. This is startling when we consider the fact that the vast part of his autobiography was published in *Di varhayt*, between 1916 and 1919, at least five years before Stanislavsky published his first written work, *My Life in Art*, in 1924. It is possible that Adler had heard of Stanislavsky's Method, or that he had been influenced by Ostrovsky, who had a similar approach to acting to Stanislavsky and predated him. But it is equally possible that his approach to acting was instinctively similar to that of the eminent Russian director, who himself claimed that all great actors had always intuitively acted according to his principles. What is interesting in Jacob Adler's case is the degree to which he was conscious of his Stanislavsky-like acting processes. If indeed Jacob Adler acted according to Stanislavsky's principles, then he could be seen as an early example on the American stage of an actor using the acting principles that would transform twentieth-century acting in America and in the Western world, both on stage and in film. The fact that an early Yiddish actor seems to have used identical methods to that of the master who changed the face of twentieth-century acting is an exciting and important discovery made possible by the careful examination of Adler's autobiography.

Sara Adler was equally conscious of her acting processes. Though her writings about acting resembled Stanislavsky's to a lesser degree than her husband Jacob's, her descriptions of her acting techniques resonated greatly, not only with the writings of great actors who preceded her but with important schools of acting that came after her. Her approach, which emphasized technique and the actor's complete control over his body, but also prescribed living

inside another's feelings and thoughts through imagination, is reminiscent of the great French actor a century before her, Talma. Her contention that an actor cannot play a love scene properly "from within" but must rely on his craft to produce the effect of love, is reminiscent of eighteenth-century actors David Garrick, Hyppolite Clairon, and Friedrich Ludwig Schroeder but also reverberates with the British school of acting still taught today, as personified by Sir Laurence Olivier. Sara was not less realistic in her acting than her illustrious husband (some claim she was more so), but she did not demand that the actor act "from the inside." She believed that meticulous mimicry "from the outside," with practice proven by experience, could often be more effective than acting "from the inside out."

Between the two of them, Jacob and Sara Adler combined two important and primary approaches to realistic acting that continue to be used on stage today – the Stanislavsky Method and the British School of Acting. Their discussions about acting are relevant to contemporary actors, and not just a matter of history. Only through examining their autobiographies carefully has this become evident.

The Thomashefskys were much less conscious of their acting processes. Boris said practically nothing about his own methods, and he did not display an awareness of the difference between his style of acting in realistic drama – which drew the praise of many critics – and his acting style in historical operetta and melodrama, which seems to have been more stylized and declamatory. This is probably because of his reluctance to display any self-criticism in his autobiography because of his desire to establish himself, through it, as the Father of the American Yiddish Theater.

Bessie Thomashefsky showed an awareness of the difference between her realistic dramatic performances, in which her goal was "to live the role," and her more stylized, formalistic acting, of which she was less proud. But in neither case did she display the kind of acute awareness of her acting processes that one sees in the writings of the Adlers. She recognized greatness in other actors, but she did not feel that she or her husband belonged in the category of the greats. If Boris Thomashefsky was the least modest of the personalities in this study, his wife Bessie displayed the most self-criticism and modesty.

In the area of directing, both women bemoaned the lack of any great directors in the American Yiddish theater and maintained that the stars, as actor-managers, thought mostly about their own roles, and not about directing the production effectively. The Thomashefskys and Sara Adler seemed to agree that Jacob Adler was a poor director. Bessie praised Boris as a director, though she admitted that in general, directing was a sore spot in the American Yiddish theater. In truth, the place of the director as an independent force in the theater was not understood on the American stage until much later than the period under discussion, 1881-1917. As in other areas, the actors seemed to be criticizing their theater based on norms that developed in the theater only decades after the period of which they were speaking.

It is interesting to note that both actresses became directors themselves when they managed their own theaters during the second decade of the twentieth century. Not only was very little said about this period in their lives in either autobiography, nothing at all was expressed by either of them concerning the actual experience of directing a play. No understandings about the nature of the role of the director were expressed, while they both discussed themselves extensively as actresses. It could be that they did not believe such things would interest the reader, but this did not prevent them from speaking of how the Yiddish theater lacked good directors in general, expressing their recognition of the director's importance. We will return to this matter later.

C. Jewish Theater or Russian Realism? Artistic Aspirations and National and Religious Identity

Jacob and Sara Adler aspired to bring realism to the Yiddish theater. Their model was the Russian realism they saw on the stage in Odessa in their youth. Sara's ideal was actual Russian realism – Tolstoy and Ostrovsky. When she acted in faithful adaptations of Tolstoy she felt she was fulfilling herself as an actress. Jacob Adler found a partner in Jacob Gordin in bringing the style of Russian realism to the Yiddish stage, but within a context that brought it closer to the immigrant Jewish audience, such as Gordin's *The Jewish King Lear*. He was willing to make the

necessary adaptations in order to bring realism to a Jewish immigrant audience, and he believed passionately in the value of this goal.

Both Jacob and Sara Adler expressed an intense dislike of the popular theater for the masses that was prevalent on the Yiddish stage, commonly called *shund*. They did not elaborate on the degree to which they, too, were often forced to work in this genre. Jacob included in this category even early plays by Goldfaden, such as *Shmendrik*. His desire to distance himself from *shund* in his autobiography was so intense that he barely mentioned Boris Thomashefsky in his writings, even though they were partners for many years and had a close working relationship. Sara focused her criticism on the plays of Hurwitz and Lateiner.

Although the Alders' desire to promote Russian realism on the New York Yiddish stage was similar to that of the radical Jewish intellectuals, they did not share that group's tendency to be very critical of traditional Judaism, and did not speak of any desire to promote progressive values through their theater, as did both Gordin and the radical Jewish intellectuals. Their focus was on the aesthetic, and not on the political. On the contrary, in various stories, Jacob Adler stressed a lack of conflict between the early Yiddish theater and the Orthodox world, and emphasized his own religiosity (most often non-ritualistic), often using religious terminology in relation to the theater. He seemed to relish displaying familiarity with traditional Judaism and its texts, quoting them often.⁸⁸⁸ He also spoke of the great satisfaction he had when bringing the Grand Jew, his ideal of what it means to be a Jew, to the stage. Though he did not explicitly say so, he seemed to desire to distinguish between his own attitude toward his Jewishness and that of the radical Jewish intellectuals.

Sara Adler did not reveal a religious nature similar to her husband's, nor did she express a desire to bring statements about Jewish identity to the stage. Her great loves in life were the theater, her homeland, Russia, and Russian culture. Only in relation to them did she express any type of religious feeling. She would seem to be closer to the ideology of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia than Jacob. But like her husband, she too refrained from making any statements that reflected critically on traditional Judaism. She expressed a desire for a cultural change

⁸⁸⁸ See for example, Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, May 23, 1925, 12, where he quoted the Sages and April 4, 1925, where he referred to a halachic term not so commonly known – the *heter iska*, a contract which circumvents the prohibition on giving or taking interest. In many places he alluded to verses of the Bible, such as Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Oct. 26, 1918, 3; Jan. 5, 1919, 3; Sept. 29, 1917, 5.

toward appreciation of realism on stage rather than any desire to promote social change through her theater.

Boris Thomashefsky was attacked by critics for promoting the return of vulgar and unsophisticated historical operetta to the New York Yiddish stage during the period after Jacob Gordin's death. He did not apologize in his autobiography for his desire to give the audience the entertainment it was seeking, whether in the form of spectacle, emphasis on singing and dancing, or even through flaunting his own sexuality. In his earlier writings he seemed more ambivalent toward this matter, sometimes referring sarcastically to the popular theater forms to which he often contributed. But one attitude that was expressed consistently in both his autobiography and his earlier writings was his insistence on wanting to create a theater that was Jewish both in content and in spirit. The Jewishness of the Yiddish theater, including its music, was critical to him in his own self-presentation. He criticized the advocates of realism as being gentile-like in their tastes and lacking in Jewish soul.

From a close reading of the autobiographical writings of Jacob and Sara Adler and Boris Thomashefsky, an understanding of the opposing forces in the early New York Yiddish theater emerges that is different from the oft-repeated binary distinction of "*shund*" vs. "literary-centered theater." We suggest substituting this old binary with a new one – Jewish theater vs. Russian realism. The new binary has several advantages over the old one. For one thing, contemporary critical theory no longer ascribes any importance to the differentiation between "highbrow" and "lowbrow." Postmodern thought, in the words of John Docker,

does not ascribe to popular culture phenomena any single commanding meaning or purpose. It does not assume an easily explicable relationship between popular culture and its audiences, and it does not see audiences as transparent in their desires and consciousness (or their unconscious). It does not wish to install and police a hierarchy of genres in culture in general.⁸⁸⁹

Another reason for jettisoning the old binary is the preference of contemporary scholars of theater history to view dramatic texts as living and breathing texts for the stage, rather than as literary works. Because a play is not viewed as literature but rather as a basis for dramatic stage interpretation, it is easier today to revive plays by Goldfaden in modernistic interpretations

⁸⁸⁹ John Docker, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture, A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), Introduction. See also pages 247-253 concerning the stage melodrama.

than it is to revive most of the plays of Gordin. The latter once seemed realistic, but neither complies with today's understanding of that word, nor lends itself with equal ease to modernistic interpretations.⁸⁹⁰ And so, we are left instead with the dialectical tension between "Jewish theater" and Russian realism.

Despite his insistence that the Jewishness of the Yiddish theater was crucial, Thomashefsky's autobiographic writings were not strong on religious sentiment. Even his strong connection to the synagogue, as a former *meshoyrer*, is expressed as pride in being a performer of cantorial music, and not as a participant in any form of religious prayer. Jewish culture was important to Boris Thomashefsky, with much talk of the "Jewish spirit" and the "Jewish soul," but he imparted nothing spiritual, religious, or ideologically meaningful surrounding the meaning of being a Jew. His wife, Bessie, displayed strong religious feelings and a strong connection to both Jewish tradition and the Jewish people. She told stories that include participation in religious rituals such as candle-lighting on Friday night, expressions of Zionism such as naming her son Theodore Herzl, and religious beliefs such as the truth of the stories of Genesis. God was a central figure in her narrative, and she expressed a code of morality connected to Him and a belief in divine retribution.

However, her religious side did not express itself in her attitude toward theater. She saw a value in the kind of theater Boris did, one that can "move the strings of the Jewish soul," but her own theatrical ideal was social realism, such as the plays of Gordin, Kobrin, and Libin. Though this was her ideal, she admitted that much of her own performing was done in vehicles with mass appeal, whose artistic merits were doubtful. Unlike her husband, she did not try to glorify these plays, but she did recognize that they fulfilled the needs of the public. Neither did she require that great art conform to a certain aesthetic ideal such as realism. She knew greatness when she saw it, no matter what form it took, be it Mogulesco, Rudolph Schildkraut, Avrom Goldfadn, or Jacob Gordin. Bessie Thomashefsky's artistic ideals lay somewhere between those of her husband and those of Jacob Adler. She was the most traditional of the four actors in this study in terms of her Jewish identity.

⁸⁹⁰ Of modernistic interpretations of Goldfadn, see Joel Berkowitz, "The Bard of Old Constantine," *Pakn Treger*, Winter 2004, 16-18.

The dichotomy we earlier spoke of, of Jewish theater (Thomashefsky) vs. Russian realism (the Adlers), can be seen as one which was reflected not only in these actors who were so significant on the stage of the early American Yiddish theater, but also in the two most important playwrights of that era, Avrom Goldfadn and Jacob Gordin. Gordin's connection to Russian realism, and his desire to remain faithful to its style and ideals in a Jewish context, was discussed in Chapter Three. The subject is much elaborated on in Barbara Henry's *Rewriting Russia*. I would like now to examine Avrom Goldfadn's concept of "Jewish theater" and consider its connection to Boris Thomashefsky.

When Avrom Goldfadn formed the first professional Yiddish theater in Jassy in 1876, he remained loyal to *haskala* values in his early plays by portraying traditional Jews in a grotesque fashion. In fact, during his first years in Russia, after leaving Romania in 1878, Goldfadn was attacked in the newspapers by Jewish reviewers for denigrating Jews.⁸⁹¹ But Goldfadn did not remain a harsh critic of traditional Judaism. With the founding of the *Hibat Zion* movement in 1880, Goldfadn became an ardent Zionist, later serving as a delegate to the World Zionist Congress in 1900, and many of his works, beginning with *Shulamis* (1880), reveal a strong connection to Jewish nationalism and a sense of identification with all things Jewish.⁸⁹² Some claim that this turn in his orientation was caused by the pogroms in the southern Russian provinces in 1881 and 1882,⁸⁹³ while others think that his patriotic plays were a means of cleansing his name after being criticized for his negative portrayal of Jews in his early plays.⁸⁹⁴ Alyssa Quint sees his patriotism as an exercise in self-fashioning aimed at establishing himself as a "man of the people" worthy of the title "Father of Yiddish Theater," but others, such as Joel Berkowitz and Seth Wolitz, take it quite seriously and do not believe it was merely a public relations move.⁸⁹⁵ The actors in this study appear to have admired Goldfadn and felt indebted

⁸⁹¹ Alyssa Quint, "Avrom Goldfadn's *Sheygets Theater*," in *Leket: yidishe shtudyes haynt (Yiddish Studies Today)*, eds. Marion Aptroot et al. (Dusseldorf: Dusseldorf Press, 2012), 243.

⁸⁹² Berkowitz, "The Bard of Old Constantine," 15; Joel Berkowitz, "Avrom Goldfadn's Theatre of Jewishness," in *Religious Perspectives in Modern Muslim and Jewish Literatures*, eds. Glenda Abramson and Hilary Kilpatrick (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 279; Miriam Kachinsky, "Avraham Goldfadn, avi hateatron beyidish vehibat tsiyon," *Khuliyot* 8, Winter 2004, 347-358.

⁸⁹³ Uri Finkel and Nokhem A. Oyslender, *Goldfadn: materyaln far a biografye* (Minsk: Institut far Vaysruslendisher Kultur, 1926), 70. Quoted by Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 115.

⁸⁹⁴ S. Ansky, referred to in Quint, "Ha-makhaze *Bar Kochba* shel Avraham Goldfadn." See also, Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 115.

⁸⁹⁵ Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater*, 34-35, 115-116, and elsewhere in the book.

to him. Jacob Adler referred to Goldfadn as “my Rebbe, who taught me about the stage and acting.”⁸⁹⁶ Sara Adler wrote of Goldfadn, “Through all the years we didn’t stop taking pride in him and being true and loyal to him.”⁸⁹⁷ Bessie Thomashefsky, who often expressed a reverence for Goldfadn, quoted a friend as saying, “Goldfadn’s plays are the best nationalist propaganda, they awake reverence and love for the great Jewish past; they ignite a feeling of pride in the heart of the Jewish spectator.” She told a moving story that expressed his love for the Jewish people even on his deathbed.⁸⁹⁸ And Boris Thomashefsky, who supported Goldfadn during his last destitute years, alongside Jacob Adler, requested that Goldfadn’s funeral procession pass outside his window when he was sick with pneumonia, so that Thomashefsky could pay tribute to Goldfadn.⁸⁹⁹

Whether Goldfadn’s patriotism was authentic or a means of self-promotion, it is clear that it did not begin with *Shulamis* but can be traced to an earlier period in his life, before he became a playwright. In one of his poems, entitled ‘Dos pintele yid’, he wrote: “Whether Yisrael, Israel, Ivri, or Yevrey/ Whether Yankev, Yakov, Jude, or Yid/ I love you even by the name Zhid!”⁹⁰⁰ This epic poem was written ten years before he began performing in Yiddish theater, yet it echoes the sentiments found in his later, nationalistic works for the theater.

In his memoirs, playwright Leon Kobrin quoted Goldfadn as saying of Gordin: “What has he done to my child! He took my beloved child, my Jewish child, my Benjamin, and converted him! He defiled my holy of holies. He’s just a missionary, how does he come to Yiddish theater?”⁹⁰¹ This sentiment is reiterated in a letter Goldfadn wrote to a friend in 1904,

Joel Berkowitz “Avrom Goldfadn’s Theatre of Jewishness,” 226-247; Seth Wolitz, “Shulamis and Bar kokhba: Renewed Jewish Role Models in Goldfadn and Halkin,” in *Yiddish Theatre - New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 87-105.

⁸⁹⁶ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, Mar. 14, 1925, 23; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 378. See also Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Dec. 22, 1917, 5, where he again wrote that he looked upon Goldfadn with the respect a Chassid shows his Rebbe. This alleged reverence didn’t prevent him from organizing a strike against Goldfadn and then suing him in court when he wasn’t paid as promised (Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Mar. 9, 1918, 5; Mar. 16, 1918, 5; Mar. 23, 1918, 7; Mar. 18, 1918, 5, Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 185-186).

⁸⁹⁷ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, May 19, 1938, 5.

⁸⁹⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky’s *lebns-geshikhte*, Oct. 27, 1935; Dec. 6, 1935; *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 288. See above Chapter Three, Section D as to the two versions of the story.

⁸⁹⁹ Sandrow, 68; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 289; Bessie Thomashefsky’s *lebns-geshikhte*, Dec. 6, 1935, 8.

⁹⁰⁰ Avraham Goldfadn, *Dos yidele* (Warsaw: Lidski, 1903), 5. The collection was originally published in 1866. Translation from Joel Berkowitz, “Avrom Goldfadn’s Theatre of Jewishness,” 259.

⁹⁰¹ Kobrin, vol. 2, 158. Quoted by Quint, “Avrom Goldfadn’s *Sheygets Theater*,” 242.

in which he blamed “Jewish-authors-anti-Semitic apostates who have sought to make the stage gentile” for the many foreign adaptations performed on the Yiddish stage.⁹⁰² With these words, Goldfadn was presenting himself not only as Father of the Yiddish Theater but as Father of the Jewish Theater. Thomashefsky wanted to succeed him in that role, and fill both those positions in the American Yiddish theater. It is not by chance that his most popular vehicle, *Dos pintele yid*, which he staged and received credit for writing,⁹⁰³ had a title identical to that of Goldfadn’s ode to the Jewish people. He wanted to continue in Goldfadn’s tradition of singing the praises of the Jewish people, creating works that inspired Jewish patriotism in the audience. Indeed, the same year Thomashefsky’s play was produced, 1909, a collection of Goldfadn’s poetry was published in New York, under the title *Dos pintele yid*.⁹⁰⁴ His poem of that name is the poem that begins the book.

The expression “*pintele yid*” means the inner spark in the Jewish soul, the place in which authentic Jewish identity remains intact despite exposure to other cultures and ways of life. Goldfadn and Thomashefsky both wanted to portray themselves as men who embodied the inner spark of the Jewish soul, despite their very worldly manners and non-traditional way of life. The idea of “*dos pintele yid*” was a reassuring one to the Jews of America, who were quickly becoming Americanized but felt some ambivalence about abandoning age-old traditions. This concept offered reassurance that no matter how far you may stray from the ways of your fathers, you still retain an inner spark of Jewish soul that ties you to the collective unit. This was the message of the play Thomashefsky presented by that name, which was warmly welcomed by American immigrant Jewry, who wanted to feel Jewish even while becoming increasingly removed from traditional religious practice and old-world customs.

⁹⁰² Quint, *The Rise of the Yiddish Theater*, 112. Gordin was accused of being a missionary because of his involvement in the “Spiritual Biblical Brotherhood.” The use of the plural, “apostates,” refers to Hurwitz, who was actually a former missionary. Two other major figures in the early Yiddish theater also were baptized (for practical reasons of assimilation) in Russia: Osip Lerner, who staged over a dozen Yiddish plays in Odessa in 1880, aspiring to a higher artistic standard than Goldfadn, was baptized in 1990. Benedict Ben-Tsiyon, who converted to Christianity in 1863 in Europe in order to study medicine, and spent time as a missionary in Odessa, emigrated to the United States around 1880, where eight of his plays for the Yiddish stage were produced by Kessler, Thomashefsky, and Adler, among others. Jacob Adler wrote of him critically. See Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Feb. 1, 1919, 3.

⁹⁰³ Actually, it was written by Moyshe Zeifert. See Sandrow, 108; Halpern, “Boris Thomashefsky, Matinee Idol,” 122.

⁹⁰⁴ Avraham Goldfadn, *Dos pintele yid* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1909). The poem “Dos Pintele Yid” opens the collection, *ibid.*, 3-10.

It is interesting to note that it was the tremendous success of *Dos pintele yid* that signaled the end of the Gordin era to the radical Jewish intelligentsia, and the return to *shund*.⁹⁰⁵ This emphasized the way Thomashefsky's notion of "Jewish Theater" was in opposition to that of Jacob Gordin, champion of Russian realism, and the radical Jewish intelligentsia that backed him.

When Thomashefsky obtained Goldfadn's final play from Adler, the Zionist *Ben-Ami* based on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, and produced it after Adler had refused to do so, he viewed this as his symbolic victory over Adler, proving him to be the true heir to Goldfadn. He referred to Adler's company as realistic actors who had become like gentiles through performing in realism.⁹⁰⁶ Adler may have been partners with Gordin, but Thomashefsky would follow in the ways of the Father of Yiddish Theater, Avrom Goldfadn. Whether both were great patriots, or both masters of self-fashioning, they spoke of the same goal, a Jewish theater.

Another explanation for the move away from Gordin and his type of theater was given by Judith Thissen. While Gordin and the majority of Russian-Jewish intellectuals of his generation continued to associate Judaism with backwardness, the growing solidarity among New York Lower East Side Jews in the face of Russian anti-Semitism turned the Yiddish theater audience away from the cosmopolitan, universalist approach of the Russian-Jewish intellectuals. Similar to the description Nahma Sandrow gave of the New York Yiddish theater as a substitute synagogue, Thissen wrote that they "expected the Yiddish theatre to function as a forum for ethnic expression, communal solidarity, and loyalty to Jewish traditions."⁹⁰⁷ Furthermore, as the twentieth century progressed, more and more American Jews were able to enjoy English-language theater, and they came to the Yiddish theater for a taste of *Yiddishkeit* (Judaism). In the 1930s, when most of the autobiographies in our study were written, "Jewish theater" had become the mainstay of commercial Yiddish theater.⁹⁰⁸

⁹⁰⁵ Warnke, "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 260.

⁹⁰⁶ Boris Thomashefsky, "Ben-Ami's shikzal," *Thomashefski's teater shriftn*, 78.

⁹⁰⁷ Judith Thissen, "Reconsidering the Decline of the New York Yiddish Theatre in the Early 1900s," *Theater Survey*, Nov. 2003, 184; Gerard Sorin, *A Time for Building: The Third Migration 1880-1920* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 112. Gorin, a Russian-Jewish intellectual, believed in a Hegelian concept of "progress" and would not have been able to accept that the public rejected progressive universalism in favor of nationalism and so he explained the change through the new wave of mass immigration and the appearance of the music hall, vaudeville, and the nickelodeon.

⁹⁰⁸ Nahshon, "Maurice Schwartz and the Yiddish Art Theater Movement," 160.

In the New York Yiddish theater after Gordin's death, Thomashefsky and Goldfadn defeated Gordin. Jewish theater vanquished Russian realism. The Adlers, seemingly Gordin's allies, took pains in their autobiographies to assure the public that though they had been his ally in desiring a more realistic theater, it was not for love of progressive universalism but for love of good theater.

D. Gender Differences

The four actors' autobiographies revealed a strong gender bias – in their personal lives, in their professional lives, and in the picture they painted of the Yiddish theater of that period.

The men were presented as playing a much more central role in the autobiographies of their wives than the women were given in the writings of their husbands. Boris Thomashefsky completely dominated both of Bessie's autobiographies, even when she wrote of the period after their separation. She appears to have written both her autobiographies, to varying degrees, as a kind of self-therapy following her separation from Boris, and although she expressed much resentment of him, especially in the second memoir, her tone was usually much more loving than resentful. It is clear that she never really got over their separation. Jacob Adler was at the center of Sara Adler's autobiography once he entered her narrative (one third of the way through it, in Chapter 110), and remained there until the very end. Her memoir ended with his death, which occurred over a decade before the memoir was written. On the other hand, Sara Adler, whose marriage to Adler took place after the events that were primarily related in the memoir, was mentioned only in passing in Jacob's autobiography, and Bessie Thomashefsky, though mentioned often, was not nearly as central a character in Boris's story as he was in hers.

Thomas Postlewait listed various characteristics of women's theatrical autobiography as opposed to men's.⁹⁰⁹ One of them is that women present themselves as being dependent on men, whereas men present themselves as being independent. This is true of the autobiographies in our study. The one exception is Jacob Adler's description of his marriage to

⁹⁰⁹ Postlewait, "Autobiography and Theatre History," 260-268.

Sonya Michelson, in which he appeared to be quite dependent on her, in contrast to the other relationships with women that he described. Unlike any of the descriptions of Boris Thomashefsky's relationships with women, which usually bear a very physical nature, Adler described his relationship with Sonya Michelson as one of soulmates.

When speaking of marital infidelity, there was a tremendous gap between the attitudes of Boris Thomashefsky and his wife Bessie. Boris flaunted his extra-marital affairs as if he was not a married man.⁹¹⁰ Bessie, on the other hand, was more cautious than Boris, even when discussing his infidelities to her. In her first autobiography she alluded to other women being attracted to Boris but explicitly portrayed Boris's infidelity only in the case of his affair with Regina Zuckerberg, which broke up their marriage. This situation changed in her second autobiography, where she openly wrote of his inability to control himself with women, and of the affairs he had throughout their marriage.⁹¹¹ But she was still more apologetic about Boris's infidelities than he was about them. In terms of her own infidelities to him, until the time they separated she insisted that she never betrayed him in the physical sense. Her long love affair with her doctor, which was described in great detail, and which caused much jealousy on the part of Boris, was described as being platonic.⁹¹² All the other suitors she told of did not lead to an actual love affair, according to her account. This is consistent with Postlewait's claim that women's autobiographies emphasize their moral honor and rectitude.

Sara and Jacob Adler told a different story. He was less open about his love affairs than Boris, even obscuring the love affair with Jenny Kaiser, who mothered his son, Charles. Though he wrote about it explicitly, he did not mention her name or acknowledge that this affair took place while he was married to Sonya Oberlander.⁹¹³ Of his later love affairs, which we hear of in Sara's autobiography, such as his young lover, Polya, or the millionairess who produced *The Merchant of Venice* for him, Jacob was silent. Sara, on the other hand, wrote in great detail of her love affairs, including the one with Medvedev that took place while she was married to

⁹¹⁰ Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 212, 231-233, 283-284, 369-371.

⁹¹¹ The difference between the memoirs may be attributed to the stage of life she was at when she wrote them – her first autobiography was written when she was forty and her second at sixty; or maybe it was because of the difference in what was acceptable for a woman to write in 1916 and 1935.

⁹¹² Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 27, 1935.

⁹¹³ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, June 15, 1925, 5; June 16, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 291-295.

Jacob.⁹¹⁴ Though she said she began the affair as a reaction to Jacob's affair with Polya, she did not deny that she was unfaithful to him. She also wrote about flirtations with other men while she was married that involved kisses but did not develop into actual affairs.⁹¹⁵

Another area in which Sara Adler seems to have been more independent and "liberated" than both Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky was in the area of jealousy. Bessie Thomashefsky spoke of her great jealousy of Boris's lovers, especially Regina Zuckerberg, and of her inability to bear the sight of them. She told of Boris's great jealousy of her (platonic) lover, the doctor. Though Sara spoke of her jealousy, she did not distance herself entirely from Jacob's lovers. She was involved in trying to save the life of his lover, Polya, when she tried to commit suicide. She agreed to travel to the home of the millionairess producing *The Merchant of Venice*, although she suspected her of being Adler's lover.⁹¹⁶

Another arena of inequality is in the matter of curtain speeches. We hear often of the male actors and other male figures, such as the playwrights Gordin and Hurwitz, giving curtain speeches. Neither actress told of giving a curtain speech, nor do we hear of any other woman giving a curtain speech.

We also find a serious inequality in the area most important to an actor – the roles each of them played on stage. Both Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky were actor-managers, and the productions in their respective companies circled around them. As a result, the feminine parts in the plays they presented were most often not leading roles but supporting ones.⁹¹⁷ Both Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler had many fewer leading roles than did their mates. Their way to secure leading roles for themselves was by becoming actor-managers themselves, in their own theaters, when separated from their husbands. Sara Adler did this for six months, when she ran the Novelty Theater in Brooklyn during the 1912-1913 season. Bessie Thomashefsky did it for three entire seasons between 1915 and 1918, at the People's Theater, which she renamed the Bessie Thomashefsky People's Theater during her second season there.

⁹¹⁴ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Feb. 22 – Mar. 1, 1938, June 18, 1938 – May 16, 1939, for many of the chapters during this long period.

⁹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, Oct. 19, 1937, 5; Nov. 16, 1937, 5.

⁹¹⁶ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, July 30, 1938, 2; Dec. 10, 1938, 10.

⁹¹⁷ A similar state of affairs continues to this day in Hollywood, where the vast majority of the starring roles belong to men, and the vast majority of the directors are men. Keni Liptzin and Bertha Kalich, who were not married to actor-managers, appear to have received more leading roles, though they did not achieve the level of dominance that Adler and Thomashefsky reached, nor that of Kessler. This is a subject that deserves greater research.

Though the management of these theaters appeared in both the women's autobiographies, the topic did not receive the prominent place one would expect in the writings of either one of them. Neither actress described the period in great detail. In Bessie Thomashefsky's first autobiography it received only two sentences in the last chapter.⁹¹⁸ In her second autobiography, after briefly presenting her accomplishment in running her own theater as "revenge on Boris," she became sidetracked into telling stories about Boris and herself and never circled back to tell anything significant about running her own theater. Her affair with the man she hired to manage the theater was described in much greater detail than the experience of directing an acting company.⁹¹⁹ Sara Adler gave more room to describing the experience. She devoted five chapters to how she rented the Novelty Theater and presented Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* there, with Rudolph Schildkraut as the male lead.⁹²⁰ But after that, she also was sidetracked into a story about a conspiracy against her organized by Adler's relatives, or possibly Adler himself, and never wrote anything about her experience running the theater subsequently. Her narrative soon turned back to her relationship with Adler, and how she returned to act alongside him.

Any woman writing her life story today would present the event of running her own theater in a much more celebratory tone, viewing it as a kind of coming-of-age into independence. It would be the climax of her autobiography. Not so in any of the autobiographies under discussion. The celebratory tone is only minor, at best. The facts of what Bessie and Sara did in their theaters are not told in detail. We hear nothing of how they developed as actresses, or of their experience as stage directors. The narrative quickly returns to their relationships with their celebrated husbands. This curious state of affairs reflects the degree of dependency that the women had on their mates, even as they lived independent lives. Even when their actions were similar to those of liberated women a century later, their states of mind and self-perceptions were not. Their celebrated husbands remained at the center of their story, even when they had taken the brave step of moving toward artistic independence.

⁹¹⁸ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 303.

⁹¹⁹ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 11, 1935, 7; Dec. 26, 1935, 7.

⁹²⁰ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Aug. 1, 1939 – Aug. 10, 1939.

A similar lacuna can be found in the autobiography of Sarah Bernhardt, who managed the Renaissance Theater in Paris between 1893 and 1899, directing all the productions there herself. Bernhardt did not discuss this critical period of her life in her autobiography, which ends in 1881, after her return to Paris from her first triumphant tour of America. She painted a picture of herself as a very independent-minded woman, and expressed her opinion of the various manager-directors with whom she worked. But she chose to end her autobiography before the period of her career which would seem to a modern-day reader to be the most fascinating, when she herself became an actor-manager.⁹²¹ Evidently, what would be most interesting to a contemporary reader was not what interested readers in 1907, when she published her autobiography.

The period during which Sara Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky ran their own theaters was a time period when women took center stage more than ever before on the New York Yiddish theater scene. Nina Warnke related how between 1912 and 1918, six Yiddish actresses ran their own theaters for one to five seasons. Besides Sara Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky, Malvina Lobel, Regina Prager, Keni Liptzin, and Rosa Karp all managed their own theaters during that period. Warnke explained that it was a period in which the old order was slowly disintegrating, and during this period of instability and transition, women were given room for unprecedented involvement in heading theaters. Unfortunately, their experiences were not well documented, and none understood that their actions would be a matter of interest to future generations.⁹²²

If we compare the autobiographies in question to the findings of Postlewait, then Boris Thomashefsky appears to have been an alpha male, epitomizing everything that characterizes male autobiography, while Bessie Thomashefsky's writings epitomized female autobiography. The Adlers were less polarized. Sara Adler's writings sometimes contained qualities that are considered masculine, and Jacob Adler's writings sometimes revealed qualities that lean toward the feminine.

In keeping with Postlewait's conclusions, we see that Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler both emphasized ties with, and breaks from, family more than their mates did. The family is distinctly a more important element in their stories than in the stories of their mates.

⁹²¹ Bernhardt, *My Double Life*.

⁹²² Warnke, "Women on the Immigrant Yiddish Stage: Paths to Stardom."

Whether it be leaving their homes as young women to enter into the world of the theater, or leaving their spouses when faced with incessant infidelity, leaving home or the contemplation of it was a major subject in both of their autobiographies. This subject was not addressed in the autobiographies of either man. Both women stressed their connection to their family of origin. Bessie Thomashefsky also stressed her connection to her children, Sara Adler much less so. But even Sara Adler described her choice of Jacob Adler as a mate through a story that expressed his promise to be a loyal father to her children, and her doubts as to Spivakovsky as a fitting mate were expressed through a parallel story that expressed his coldness to her children.⁹²³ In contrast, neither man was very vocal about his role as a husband or father. Both women described their mates as fathers more elaborately than the men themselves did.⁹²⁴

An area in which Bessie Thomashefsky adhered to Postlewait's conclusions more than did Sara Adler was with respect to being a wife and mother. Bessie was quite defensive of herself as a wife and mother, trying to present herself in the best light possible in both these roles. A few examples from among many: She wrote apologetically that she left two of her three children with Boris when they separated because this was what the children chose.⁹²⁵ She told of how she ran to her invalid son's bedside and took care of him for years after he was paralyzed in a lover's quarrel, writing that her life ended together with his.⁹²⁶ She described the traditional Friday night meals she cooked for Boris and how he could make an issue and storm out of the house if there was no horseradish with the fish.⁹²⁷ Sara was much less concerned with presenting herself as a model wife and mother. She did not apologize for thinking of leaving her children in America and going to live in Europe with Medvedev. She explained her ultimate choice not to do so as stemming from her love for the theater, and not from her duty to her husband or children.⁹²⁸ Her description of herself as a wife was often of a strong,

⁹²³ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Mar. 24, 1938, 3; Feb. 22, 1938, 3.

⁹²⁴ See Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 16, 1935, 7; Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Jan. 14, 1939, 7.

⁹²⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebens-geshikhte*, Nov. 3, 1935, 3.

⁹²⁶ *Ibid.*, Oct. 12, 1935

⁹²⁷ She told this story in both autobiographies. *Ibid.*, Nov. 21, 1935, 5; Bessie Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebns-geshikhte*, 151-152.

⁹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Sept. 13, 1938, 3.

independent woman with a mind of her own, and not of someone subservient to her husband.⁹²⁹

Neither man tried to present himself as an ideal husband or father, though both described their anguish upon losing a child.⁹³⁰ Adler painted a picture of his marriage to Sonya Michelson in an idealized fashion. But, in general, they did not elaborate much on the subject of themselves as husbands or fathers, and the picture that emerges from their writings in this area is far from an ideal one, especially as mates.

Postlewait maintained that women's theatrical autobiographies relate important turning points that occur upon meeting a grand man of the theater. In keeping with this was Bessie's meeting with Boris Thomashefsky, and Sara's meeting with Shomer and his director Berger, or with Heimowitz and later, Adler. In general, the various men Sara encountered helped determine her career, whereas Bessie Thomashefsky's life was determined largely by her meeting with Boris, in comparison to whom all other men were most definitely secondary. Boris Thomashefsky, on the other hand, did not present his life as having been determined by any meetings with others. He was the driving force behind his own life, similar to the model presented by Postlewait, in which men present themselves as being self-made and not dependent on others. Adler was somewhere in the middle, describing several significant others who influenced his development – his Uncle Arke; the critic from a Russian newspaper in Yelisavetgrad, who taught him about quality theater; Yisroel Rosenberg, who brought him into the world of the theater and was his mentor during his first years on stage; his first wife, Sonya Michelson, who was his inspiration and partner in dreaming of a first-rate Yiddish theater; and Jacob Gordin, whose plays gave him the opportunity to display the kind of acting of which he dreamed. Sara Adler, his wife for half his life, and mother of six of his children, was not even hinted at as being on that list of significant others.

Though both women emphasized the role of men in their lives, Sara presented her life as a result of her own determination, and not something determined by others. Bessie presented herself as a more passive person, often responding to initiatives made by Boris.

⁹²⁹ See for example Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, April 19, 1938, 7.

⁹³⁰ Jacob Adler, *Mayn Leben*, June 3, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 285; Boris Thomashefsky, *Mayn lebens-geshikhte*, 303.

The autobiographies also uphold Postlewait's principle according to which women differentiate between their public and private selves and men do not. Thomashefsky tried to paint a picture of himself as a great lover, similar to the role he played onstage. Adler presented himself as a person of grand stature, similar to his stage persona. Bessie Thomashefsky had no similar pretensions in her self-presentation. Her stage persona and her private self were two very different beings. She did not play the clown in real life or exemplify the liberated woman she often played onstage. Sara Adler's self-presentation offstage was of a woman who loved the theater, and enjoyed embodying various types of personalities onstage as a dramatic actress. She did not pretend that there was any connection between her real self and the characters she appeared in on stage.

Both Sara Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky could easily be presented by a biographer as women who displayed strong feminist tendencies in their lives and careers. Both women, as we have seen, ran their own theaters for a period of time. Sara displayed a strongly independent nature regarding marital fidelity, unlike most women of her times, and openly placed her career and personal life before her role as wife and mother. Bessie, too, was a groundbreaker in some areas. Her stage depictions of independent women running for mayor (*Jennie Runs for Mayor*), dressing as a man in order to become a chauffeur (*Khantshe in America*), or choosing to reject the man who taught her how to act like a lady (*Doctors' Wives*), connected her to a much later age of feminism. Her trouser roles, depicting wisecracking women dressed as men, can be seen as forerunners of Mollie Picon in *Yidl Mitn Fidl* and Barbara Streisand in *Yentl*. But despite these proto-feminist elements in their lives and careers, both of the women's autobiographical writings show the limitations to their independent feminist spirit.

Bertha Kalich, a leading actress on the New York Yiddish stage in its early years, also wrote an autobiography, published in *Der tog* in seventy installments, in 1925.⁹³¹ Her husband, Leopold Spachner, was her manager and worked as a manager in the Yiddish theater, but did not act in it. It would be interesting to view the degree to which the gender differences that characterized Bessie Thomashefsky and Sara Adler's autobiographies, as opposed to those of their husbands', held true for that of Bertha Kalich.

⁹³¹ Bertha Kalich, *Mayn lebn*, *Der tog*, March 7, 1925 - Nov. 14, 1925.

E. The Styles of the Autobiographies

Jacob Adler's autobiography and Bessie Thomashefsky's first autobiography had acknowledged ghostwriters. This is not surprising, as both of these autobiographies have a novel-like quality to them, with the protagonist going through an evolution told in the first person. Jacob Adler evolved from a vain matinee idol to a serious realistic actor. Bessie Thomashefsky evolved from a young, innocent Jewish girl from an East European shtetl to an important actress on the Yiddish stage, first dependent on her star-husband, and then (seemingly) independent of him. Sara Adler's autobiography, 337 chapters long, also describes her metamorphosis from light soprano in comic operetta to serious dramatic actress. But unlike the aforementioned memoirs, which to a degree have novel-like structures, hers is very sprawling, uneven, and lacking in structure, discipline, or an overarching artistic concept.⁹³² Bessie Thomashefsky's second autobiography is even more poorly structured, suffers from many repetitions, and seems pieced together haphazardly chapter by chapter. Of her tendency to say that she would write about something in the next installment, but then proceed to write about something else, Bessie admitted that she wrote "like the nature of we poor women, who begin with one thing and forget in the middle where they are in the world and end up driving somewhere else."⁹³³

Both Sara Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky in her second memoir went into great detail about secondary characters. Sara Adler devoted four whole chapters to the story of her friend, Ella, who was a reformed prostitute.⁹³⁴ Bessie Thomashefsky wrote at length of the personalities she admired such as Mogulesco, Keni Liptzin, Moritz Morrison,⁹³⁵ and others. Though these digressions may be viewed as characteristic of a memoir as opposed to an autobiography, they detract from the reader's experience of the women's life stories. In general, Sara Adler's secondary characters are better integrated into the main storyline than those in Bessie Thomashefsky's second memoir. But the lack of clear structure in both these

⁹³² Lulla Rosenfeld's abridged adaptation of Adler's autobiography made it more novel-like than the original, but even the original is more disciplined and concise in style than Sara's autobiography.

⁹³³ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebns-geshikhte*, Nov. 30, 1935.

⁹³⁴ Sara Adler, *Di lebns-geshikhte*, Dec. 4, 7, 9, 11, 1937.

⁹³⁵ Bessie Thomashefsky, *Bessie Thomashefsky's lebns-geshikhte*, Nov. 23, Dec. 1, 3, 8, 9, 10, 1935.

memoirs probably indicates that they were not written with a ghostwriter and can explain why they were never published in book form. Both also appear to have been written on the go, with installments written shortly before their publication. The styles of the other three full-length memoirs in this study, which are much better structured, do not reveal whether or not they were written in full before publication. But the long period of time over which they were serialized, and the varying intervals between installments, may indicate that they were not finished works when publication began.

Boris Thomashefsky, the only one of the four personalities in this study who wrote many plays himself,⁹³⁶ was a more natural writer than the others. The number of articles he published throughout his life, even before publishing his full-length autobiography in 1937, testifies to his facility as a writer. His writing flowed smoothly, and he had an instinct for storytelling. But of all the writings examined in this study, his memoirs often seem the most farfetched and distant from reality. His earlier writings, before his 1937 autobiography, have a more authentic tone to them. His desire to claim the title of “Father of the American Yiddish Theater” hovered over the later work, and caused it to be more self-promoting and exaggerated than his earlier works.

In general, the women’s writings seem more authentic than the men’s. Bessie may have exaggerated in her self-presentation as a simple shtetl girl and an ideal wife and mother, but the details of the stories usually strike the reader as being closer to the truth. Sara Adler may have idealized her own feminist independence, something her choices in life did not always reflect, but the stories she told seem less farfetched than many found in the autobiographies of Jacob Adler and especially Boris Thomashefsky. Both men seem to have indulged the dramatist in themselves when telling their life stories to a greater degree than their wives did.

Both Sara Adler and Bessie Thomashefsky were also much humbler than their male spouses in the way they portrayed themselves. Unlike Jacob Adler, who saw the changes in the world of Yiddish theater as his own personal triumph over *shund*, Sara Adler presented her story as a totally personal one. She was not the redeemer of Yiddish theater like her husband. She was a woman in love with the theater, with a strong sense of aesthetics and an understanding of what creates quality theater, who tried to bring her talents to the Yiddish

⁹³⁶ Sara Adler wrote a play about her own life-story which was never published. It is available in manuscript form at the Harry Ransom Library in Texas in the Stella Adler-Harold Clurman collection.

theater in the best way possible. Jacob Adler wanted to be remembered as a prophet who brought dignity to the Yiddish theater. Sara Adler had more modest expectations. She might not have redeemed the Yiddish theater almost singlehandedly, but she believed that she played her part in raising the artistic level of that theater, and she wanted to be remembered for it.

Similarly, we find no self-criticism in Boris Thomashefsky's autobiography. He was not apologetic about the questionable artistic quality of much of his theater and presented all his stage appearances as being tremendously successful. He presented himself both as Father of the American Yiddish Theater and as a pillar in its history for the first three decades of its existence. Bessie was sarcastically cynical about the artistic quality of many of the plays she appeared in alongside Boris. She tried to present herself as a serious actress, with successful appearances both in comedy and in drama, but she did not build herself up as a great lady of the stage or as a pillar of Yiddish American theater. She was proud of much of the work she did there but did not refer to herself in mythic terms. Her self-image was of a simple *Yidene*, and not of a *grande dame*.

In terms of what Pascal called the "design" of the autobiography, Jacob Adler's autobiography was intended to give him a place in the history of Yiddish theater as the man who fought the battle to raise the artistic standards of that theater and make it more realistic. As a result, he emphasized all the areas in which he accomplished that and obscures all the areas in which he was a partner to the kind of theater he professed to despise. An article he published in *Di Varhayt* on Oct. 25, 1918, independent of his autobiography, called "The Crisis in the Yiddish Theater" shows the background against which he wrote his autobiography, then being serialized in the same newspaper. He described the slump into which the Yiddish theater had sunk, with most of the plays being *shund and* the others being mediocre, and how the critics placed the blame on the "Old Guard" for this state of affairs. He rallied to his defense, writing how "were it not for the 'Old Guard', the Yiddish theater would still be today what it was twenty-five years ago – an old-fashioned burlesque house."⁹³⁷ His autobiography was his attempt to prove this.

⁹³⁷ Jacob Adler, "Der krizis inem yidishn teater," *Di varhayt*, Oct. 25, 1918, 4.

Sara Adler wanted to be remembered at his side as a woman with a similar banner – turning the Yiddish theater of America into a stage that could sometimes stand beside the great Russian realist tradition. She acknowledged the various styles of theater in which she participated, while displaying pride in those productions she saw as most fully accomplishing her goal. Written between 1937 and 1939, years after she retired from the stage, her autobiography was also an expression of her desire not to be forgotten.

Boris Thomashefsky, as we have stated, wanted to present himself as the Father of the American Yiddish Theater, an American variation on Goldfaden. He emphasized the ways he continued Goldfaden's theater of Jewishness, and mythologized his own contribution to the beginning of Yiddish theater in America. Any form of self-criticism, which sometimes crept into his earlier writings, is absent from his autobiography, in order to secure his place as a mythic figure in the Yiddish theater. Bessie Thomashefsky's design in her first autobiography was to affirm her independent existence after separating from her husband, by telling her story from her point of view. Her second autobiography was a further self-justification for leaving husband and children, and an affirmation of her own career and life at a time that she had her doubts about their value.

In terms of Marcus Moseley's differentiation between autobiography and memoir, the work closest to being an autobiography is Jacob Adler's. It is introspective and reflective, and emphasizes the roles of others who helped the protagonist-writer form his "self," unrelated to their social status. Sara Adler's autobiography at times also has these qualities, but much of it is closer to memoir, as it includes many forays into matters not central to the inner world of its heroine. Its uneven nature allows it to seemingly unconsciously move from genre to genre. Bessie Thomashefsky's first autobiography has more autobiographic qualities to it than her second one, which is much more memoir-like, describing at length many famous individuals whose paths crossed her own, without emphasizing their role in her own development. Her first autobiography goes into greater detail concerning her childhood and life before meeting Boris, and also paints a clearer picture of the evolution of her "self," as befits an autobiography. Boris Thomashefsky's writing is very non-introspective, and focuses on deeds and events, as befits a memoir. Though its depiction of his childhood would appear to be in the style of

autobiography, his development is conveyed mostly through the choices he made and the actions he took, without conveying the evolution of an introspective “self,” only a consistently significant ego.

II. The Roads Ahead

A. Yiddish Theater in America after 1917

During the second decade of the twentieth century, the star system in the Yiddish theater began to wane. The stars were aging. Jacob Adler did not bring new important plays to the stage after 1911, nor did he have his own theater for most of that decade. In 1920 he suffered a stroke. That same year, David Kessler died. Two years before, in 1918, Keni Liptzin had died. After leaving her own Novelty Theater in 1913, Sara Adler, like her husband, repeated old successes, often outside New York. After Jacob Adler’s stroke in 1920, Sara performed infrequently. Boris Thomashefsky, who had appeared in operetta, melodrama, and realistic drama until 1917, began to produce only operettas aimed at appealing to the masses. In the 1920s he did not always star in the plays he produced. As the decade proceeded, he spent more and more time on the road. For Bessie Thomashefsky, the second decade of the twentieth century was a good one, of greater independence as an artist than ever before. But in the 1920s, she too spent much of her time performing out of New York, and her New York performances were often in vaudeville.

Parallel to the decline of the old stars, Yiddish art theaters that stressed ensemble acting began to spring up in New York. Two men were primarily responsible for the appearance of Yiddish art theaters – Maurice Schwartz and Jacob Ben-Ami. In 1918, Schwartz rented the relatively small Irving Place Theater (approximately 1500 seats) and announced he would open a Yiddish theater company devoted to playing “good literary works” by a company of “young artists who love beauty” and that it would also include proper rehearsal time, and involvement of the playwright in the staging. A pragmatist, he listed the type of plays that would be performed as “good dramas, fine comedies, worthy farces and nice operettas. And if a melodrama must be played, it must have interest and logic [...]” One of the actors he hired was

Jacob Ben-Ami. Ben-Ami had acted in Peretz Hirschbein's Yiddish Art Theater in Odessa from 1908-1910. He had attended Russian theater and was aware of the latest developments there. Ben-Ami was more of an idealist and a purist than Schwartz, and in his contract he stipulated that a literary play must be performed at least once a week. When the theater first opened they presented rather traditional fare for the Yiddish theater. Insisting on the literary plays stipulated in his contract, Ben-Ami took charge of directing the first "literary" production, Peretz Hirschbein's *A Farvorfn Vinkl* (*A Forsaken Nook*). It was a great artistic, critical, and popular success.

That season the company presented thirty-five plays, including Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, and both *A Doll's House* (called *Nora*) and *Ghosts* by Ibsen.⁹³⁸ But Ben-Ami did not stay in Schwartz's company beyond that first season. To him, the company was not adhering strictly enough to the principles of an "art theater." He felt that Schwartz treated himself too much like a star, and the company was not sufficiently egalitarian for him. The quantity of plays the company presented in one season did not allow sufficient rehearsal time to achieve the proper results. In addition, productions had no director external to the cast. Ben-Ami left Schwartz's company in 1919-1920, taking Jacob Adler's daughter Celia with him, and founded another Yiddish art theater called the Jewish Art Theater. There, all the principles of the art theater were upheld strictly, including an external director, Emanuel Reicher, who had worked with Reinhardt and Otto Brahm. The company had no prompter, the actors were listed in alphabetical order, and their acting style was realistic and Stanislavsky-like. The company writer was Joel Entin (the ghost writer of Jacob Adler's autobiography).

Ben-Ami had finally achieved the expressed desire of Sara Adler when she opened her Novelty Theater in Brooklyn as a theater dedicated to higher art. In fact, Ben-Ami had been an actor in Sara Adler's acting company at that theater. But like Sara Adler's Novelty Theater, Ben-Ami's Jewish Art Theater lasted only a brief time.⁹³⁹ Ben-Ami's idealistic purism didn't allow him the flexibility necessary to run a company with financial needs. All his future attempts to form

⁹³⁸ Sandrow, 208-209, 265-266, Edna Nahshon, "Maurice Schwartz and the Yiddish Art Movement," in *New York's Yiddish Theater, From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 154. Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, 266.

⁹³⁹ The company lasted two seasons – the first with Ben-Ami heading it, and the second with Rudolph Schildkraut heading it after Ben-Ami went to act on the English-language stage, primarily because of artistic differences with the financial backer of the troupe. See Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, 417-423.

Yiddish art companies, in 1926, 1939, and 1944, did not last beyond one season.⁹⁴⁰ Despite this apparent lack of success, Ben-Ami, who continued to appear in English-speaking roles on Broadway alongside Yiddish productions of plays such as *Death of a Salesman* and *Abe Lincoln in Illinois*, is referred to by David Lifson as “possibly the most important individual in the Yiddish art theatre movement.” His Jewish Art Theater is considered by scholars of the Yiddish theater to be a high point in its history, arguably its highest.⁹⁴¹

In contrast, Maurice Schwartz, who was less of a purist and more pragmatic, succeeded in keeping his company active for a remarkable thirty-two seasons, until 1950. His company received the name the Yiddish Art Theater in 1921, when it moved to the Garden Theater that had been vacated by Ben-Ami. Schwartz insisted that it was indeed an art theater, although it was as close to traditional Yiddish theater as it was to strict art theater principles. Brooks Atkinson, the critic of the New York Times, wrote in 1947 that the acting style in the Yiddish Art Theater, though “not precisely in the grand manner” still made use of “wide gestures and excitement; and you always know that you are not in a library. Without being intolerably flamboyant, Mr. Schwartz acts with boldness, using his hand continuously, wagging an eloquent forefinger and raising shaggy eyebrows to project astonishment.”⁹⁴²

Although this is not the way Jacob Adler perceived his own acting, it does remind one of the way his acting was sometimes described by others. Like Adler, Schwartz looked for a balance between what he considered “art” and what he believed the wider public would be able to appreciate. He presented plays by Gorky, Molière, Strindberg, and Chekhov alongside Sholem Asch, Pinski, Peretz, and Sholem Aleichem. But he also presented Goldfaden’s *The Two Kuni-Leml* and *Koldunye*, works Adler considered to be *shund* in his time, though Schwartz gave them stylized modernistic productions. If Jacob and Sara Adler both considered only realism to be true art, Schwartz often preferred stylized productions to realism, as he did with Goldfaden’s *The Tenth Commandment* in 1926, directed in an expressionistic style with modernist sets by Boris Aronson. His production of Ansky’s *The Dybbuk* (1924) was also influenced by the

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid., 397- 423; Sandrow, 266-270, 275.

⁹⁴¹ Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, 283, 414- 415.

⁹⁴² Brooks Atkinson, *The New York Times*, November 30, 1947, quoted by Sandrow, 270-271.

expressionism he witnessed in the *Habimah* production, and his production of Chone Gottesfeld's *Angels on Earth* (1929-1930) had a symbolist quality to it.

Celia Adler, who returned to act with Schwartz after Ben-Ami's Jewish Art Theater collapsed, critically noted that beginning in 1928, Schwartz began to prefer spectacle and scenic effects to good drama.⁹⁴³ If at its inception, Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theater seemed to be a continuation of Adler's theater, beginning in the 1930s, it could be seen as a more sophisticated variation on the theater of Boris Thomashefsky. Besides his emphasis on spectacle, which was reminiscent of Thomashefsky, in the 1930s Schwartz began favoring plays that were Jewish in content over translations of European plays by playwrights such as Shaw and Ibsen. By 1930, the Yiddish-speaking population, especially among the younger generation, already felt at home at English-speaking theater, and came to the Yiddish theater for what they couldn't receive in an American theater – a Jewish experience. The Yiddish Art Theater began to be a showcase for "Jewish Theater" including adaptations of Yiddish novels, such as *Yoshe Kalb*, and *The Brothers Ashkenazi* by I. J. Singer, which were great hits in the 1932-1933 season and the 1936-1937 season respectively, or "folk theater" such as Aaron Zeitlin's *The Wise Men of Chelm*, a "folk comedy with music and dancing," presented in 1933.⁹⁴⁴ Thomashefsky's insistence that the Yiddish theater should be Jewish in its content had become a financial necessity in the 1930s. Like Thomashefsky, Schwartz tried to interpolate a wedding scene or a traditional prayer or ritual like *kiddush* into most of his productions, because he knew it would arouse positive sentiment in the audience.⁹⁴⁵ But though Schwartz took public taste into consideration, and often produced theater with mass appeal, his theater, unlike Thomashefsky's, was not labeled *shund* by the critics.

During the 1940s, the Yiddish Art Theater was run in a style quite familiar to the audience, closer to traditional theater than to art theater. Schwartz's theater, according to Brooks Atkinson, was characterized by "story, costumes, beards, lots of scenery, music and

⁹⁴³ Ibid., Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, 349, 355-359, 377; Nahshon, "Maurice Schwartz and the Yiddish Art Movement," 158, 170-171.

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid., 160, 166. Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, 364.

⁹⁴⁵ Ibid., 375.

acting.” At the same time, he commented that the company “always produces plays in good taste.”⁹⁴⁶

A Yiddish theater that finally achieved the aspiration of the radical Jewish intelligentsia to produce an art theater that combined high artistic principles and progressive political values, while declaring war on *shund*, was the Artef, an acronym for the *Arbeter teater farband* or Worker’s Theatrical Alliance, which was associated with the communist-affiliated Yiddish Workers’ Camp. The original nineteen actors of the Artef were an amateur group of young radical workers who formed a studio for theatrical studies under the auspices of the communist newspaper the *Freiheit* in 1925. They began giving public performances in 1928. Most of the actors were sympathetic to the communist party but not actual party members, and they were more committed to artistic ideals than to political goals. Nevertheless, Artef’s political orientation and affiliation were essential to its style, and played a major role in influencing its selection of repertoire.⁹⁴⁷

If the artistic ideal of the radical Jewish intellectuals at the turn of the century had been realism, the Artef had a different artistic ideal – expressionism. The group’s first teacher was Jacob Mestel, who was soon joined by Michel Fokine as teacher of dance and movement, and Dr. Yankev Shatsky as teacher of theater history. Unlike the radical Jewish intellectuals of the turn-of-the-century, Mestel wanted to build a proletarian theater which would combine left-wing ideology with roots in the Jewish heritage.⁹⁴⁸ Benno Schneider, who had studied with Stanislavsky and worked with his student Vakhtangov in the Habimah theater in Russia, later became the company’s artistic director, directing all its fifteen productions between 1930 and 1936.⁹⁴⁹ Like Vakhtangov, Schneider’s work with the Artef emphasized ensemble acting and focused on the overall concept of the production. Schneider was influenced by the expressionist style Vakhtangov used in productions such as Habimah’s *The Dybbuk*. In general, the Artef’s aesthetics were concerned with groupings and mass movement rather than

⁹⁴⁶ Brooks Atkinson, “Romance on Second Avenue,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1946; November 30, 1947; quoted by Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, 371. Schwartz also had his critics, such as Charles Angoff, a theater critic who attacked him savagely in the *North American Review*, Winter 1938-1939. See *ibid.*, 379.

⁹⁴⁷ Nahshon, “Yiddish Political Theater: The Artef,” 178; Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre*, xiii.

⁹⁴⁸ Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, 442.

⁹⁴⁹ Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theater*, 209-213.

individual introspection. Many consider Schneider to be the finest director to ever work in the Yiddish theater.⁹⁵⁰

In the fall of 1934, the Artef began a process of semi-professionalization and moved into a permanent, 298-seat house on Broadway and West 48th Street. This was the period during which “the theater of social commitment” in America, which included the Group Theater, the Theater Union and the Theater Guild, a group in which the Artef could also be counted, produced some of its best works. The most popular achievements of the Artef were folk plays such as Sholem Aleichem’s *Aristocrats* (1930), Israel Axenfeld’s *Recruits* (1934) and Moyshe Kubak’s *The Outlaw* (1937), all directed by Benno Schneider. The theater continued performing until 1940, when it disbanded largely because of anti-communist sentiment after the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact in August of 1939. New York Jews could no longer tolerate a theatrical group associated with the communist movement.⁹⁵¹

In aspiring to artistic theater without compromise and its battle with *shund*, one can see the Artef as being a kind of continuation of the Adlers’ approach to theater. Indeed, Lifson noted that Artef’s start was prompted partially by “dissatisfaction with the Yiddish theater after Adler.”⁹⁵² But Artef differed from the Adlers’ theater on several counts. It did not believe in stars, whereas the Adlers were most definitely stars and their theater reflected this. Furthermore, the Adlers defined realism as their artistic goal whereas the Artef productions were stylized, expressionistic, and far from realistic. They were influenced more by the stylizations of Meyerhold than by the naturalistic direction of Stanislavsky. Finally, the Artef was committed to a communist agenda, very far from the world of the Adlers.

After the end of the star era, Yiddish theater with higher artistic aspirations than those found in the commercial one could often be found in the amateur theater, a movement motivated by both a love of theater and an impulse toward education among the Jewish immigrants. An important example of this is the *Folksbeine* or People’s Stage, which still performs today under the auspices of the socialist-oriented Arbeter Ring (Workmen’s Circle). It

⁹⁵⁰ Nahshon, “Yiddish Political Theater: The Artef,” 176-186; Sandrow, 278-281. Jules Dassin, the well-known film director, who worked as an actor in the Artef, said that Benno Schneider has a place of honor in his pantheon of great directors (Foreword to Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theater*).

⁹⁵¹ Nahshon, “Yiddish Political Theater: The Artef,” 186-190; Nahshon, *Yiddish Proletarian Theater*, 117, 210-213.

⁹⁵² Lifson, *The Yiddish Theatre in America*, 434, refers to *The New York Times*, Oct. 8, 1939, in footnote 8 there.

has presented at least one production every winter season since 1915. It is a troupe that claimed to choose its plays based on their literary worth, among them plays by Y.L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem and Mendele Moykher Sforim, as well as Ibsen, Dostoevsky and Eugene O'Neill. Their productions emphasized the role of the director. Although for the vast majority of the years since the company's founding, the actors were non-professional members of the working-class, they employed directors, designers and choreographers from the professional Yiddish stage. The troupe was professionalized during the 2010s.⁹⁵³ Its recent critically acclaimed Yiddish language production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, directed by Joel Grey, began a sold-out run in 2018 at the company's home at the Museum of Jewish Heritage. It later moved to the off-Broadway Stage 42 in 2019, and had a return engagement off-Broadway at New World Stages between Nov. 13, 2022 and Jan. 1, 2023.⁹⁵⁴ Its success is a sign of the continued vitality of the Yiddish theater, but also of how Thomashefsky's concept of Jewish Theater has been adopted even by a company such as Folksbeine, which claimed all the years to have only artistic ideals in mind in choosing its repertoire.

Not all Yiddish theater after 1917 had high artistic goals. There were new stars who took the place of the old ones, and new productions aimed at mass popular appeal to replace the old ones. But the new stars did not inspire the same passionate feelings among their fans, and the audiences were smaller and constantly dwindling. One of the differences between the popular New York Yiddish theater during the era of the stars and afterwards was the rise in the 1920s and the 1930s of the proportion of plays set in America as opposed to Eastern Europe.⁹⁵⁵ Among the stars of popular Yiddish theater in the 1920s were Molly Picon and her husband Jacob Kalich, and Jacob Jacobs and his wife Betty Treittler Jacobs. Important stars of the 1930s and 1940s included Aaron Lebedev, Menashe Skulnik, Jennie Goldstein, and Herman Yablokoff. Stars of the 1950s and 1960s included the couples Mina Bern and Ben Bonus, as well as Pesach

⁹⁵³ Nahshon, "Maurice Schwartz and the Yiddish Art Theater Movement," 168; Sandrow, 254-258.

⁹⁵⁴ Museum of Jewish Heritage, <https://mjhnyc.org/events/fiddler-roof-yiddish/>; Playbill, <https://playbill.com/article/yiddish-fiddler-on-the-roof-officially-opens-off-broadway-at-stage-42-february-21>; TheaterMania https://www.theatermania.com/off-broadway/news/fiddler-on-the-roof-yiddish-new-world-stages_94076.html, accessed Sept. 11, 2022.

⁹⁵⁵ Sandrow, 285-286

Burstein and Lillian Lux.⁹⁵⁶ Aaron Lebedev and Pesach Burstein were originally invited to America to appear onstage by Boris Thomashefsky.⁹⁵⁷

Most of the popular theater after the era of the stars was essentially a continuation of Thomashefsky's theater, featuring much lightweight musical comedy within a Jewish context.⁹⁵⁸ Very little has been written of popular Yiddish theater in New York after 1917.⁹⁵⁹ In terms of artistic aspirations, the art theater of that period would appear to have grown out of the Adlers' efforts, and the popular theater out of the Thomashefskys'. But as we have noted, as the Americanization process deepened, even the art theaters had to accept Thomashefsky's premise of Jewish theater in order to survive, so that in the end, his approach to theater in many ways became the dominant one in the Yiddish theater after the era of the stars, with the exception of the amateur Folksbeine, the semi-professional Artef, and Jacob Ben-Ami's short-lived attempts at Yiddish Art Theater.

Yiddish theater in America concerned itself with the lives of the Yiddish-speaking public. When American Jews ceased to be immigrants, and English became their native language, the theater lost its audience and declined. As a result, it never made an important contribution to American Jewish identity once American Jews became acculturated. It primarily helped the immigrants during their transitory years. Since the late 1970s, when few American Jews spoke Yiddish outside the Chassidic world, Yiddish theater continued to exist on a limited basis only as nostalgia for something that had passed. Its ability to persist and to contribute to American Jewish identity has relied on productions such as Joel Grey's Yiddish *Fiddler on the Roof*.

⁹⁵⁶ Ibid., 288.

⁹⁵⁷ Nahshon, *New York's Yiddish Theater*, 304-312.

⁹⁵⁸ Herman Yablokoff, like Thomashefsky, sang in a synagogue choir in his hometown in Eastern Europe, Grodno, before beginning to perform on the Yiddish stage. See Herman Yablokoff, *Der Payatz, Around the World with Yiddish Theater*, translated by Bella Maysell Yablokoff (Silver Spring, Maryland: Bartleby Press, 1995), 30-31.

⁹⁵⁹ Art theater is addressed in Edna Nahshon's *Yiddish Proletarian Theatre*; David Lifson's *The Yiddish Theater in America* devotes over 300 pages to the Yiddish art theaters after 1918, and nothing whatsoever to the popular theater of this period. No scholar has written of the popular Yiddish theater of this period. There are autobiographies by Herman Yablokoff (*Der Payatz, Around the World with Yiddish Theater*, translated by Bella Maysell Yablokoff, Silver Spring, Maryland: Bartleby Press, 1995) and Pesach 'ke Burstein (*What a Life, The Autobiography of Pesach 'ke Burstien Yiddish Matinee Idol*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), and a documentary film about Pesach Burstein and Lillian Lux, (*Der Komidiant*, directed by Arnon Goldfinger, Lama Productions, 2002).

B. At the Movies

There is a direct connection between Yiddish theater and Yiddish film. J. Hoberman writes that Yiddish cinema was “less the cousin of world cinema than the child of the Yiddish stage. The first Yiddish movies recorded the Yiddish theater; well over half the Yiddish films released during the 1930s were also adaptations, while most of the remainder employed the stars, writers, and conventions of the Yiddish stage.”⁹⁶⁰

The first Yiddish films were silent ones filmed in Poland or Russia, documenting productions of well-known Yiddish plays performed onstage. These included more elitist productions like Gordin’s *The Stranger*, *Khasye*, *the Orphan*, and *Mirele Efros* or Sholem Asch’s *God of Vengeance*, alongside populist ones such as Lateiner’s *The Wedding Day* and Thomashefsky and Zeifert’s *Dos Pintele Yid*. None of these early Yiddish silent films have survived in their entirety. Only small bits of a few of them remain.⁹⁶¹

In America, stars of the Yiddish stage appeared in silent films. In 1915, Boris Thomashefsky starred in three short silent Yiddish films adapted from his plays and directed by Sidney Goldin: *Hear Ye, Israel* (an adaptation of Osip Dymov’s *Shma Yisroel*), *The Jewish Crown* (an adaptation of Thomashefsky’s operetta of 1912 with music by Perlmutter and Wohl) and *The Period of the Jew* (apparently an adaptation of *Dos Pintele Yid*). Thomashefsky was very unhappy with the results.⁹⁶² In 1914, Sara Adler starred in an American silent film called *Sins of the Parents* directed by Ivan Abramson.⁹⁶³ That same year, Jacob Adler starred in a non-Yiddish adaptation of Jules Verne’s *Michael Strogoff*, directed by Lloyd B. Carleton.⁹⁶⁴ Of all the films, only Jacob Adler’s has survived. In it, Jacob Adler strutted around the set waving a sword and making heroic poses. We see nothing of his “realistic” acting ability. Most probably this was a result of his understanding of silent movie acting, and not a reflection of his stage acting. Indeed, Sara Adler quoted Adler as saying of movie acting:

Have you seen how the actors act scenes for the camera? As talented as the actor may be, he can’t bring anything there. He can only make faces for the camera men. The director says to him

⁹⁶⁰ Hoberman, *Bridge of Light, Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds*, 16.

⁹⁶¹ Ibid., 16-20.

⁹⁶² Ibid., 36, IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0859690/?ref=fn_al_nm_1, accessed Sept. 13, 2022.

⁹⁶³ See IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0004598/?ref=fn_al_tt_3, accessed Sept. 13, 2022.

⁹⁶⁴ Ibid, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0004328/?ref=nm_knf_t1, accessed May 21, 2022.

“cry!” He wrinkles up his face and pretends to be sad. “Laugh!” – He spreads his cheeks like someone who laughs with his whole heart. The truth is that he doesn’t laugh and doesn’t cry. He can’t do so because in the studio he is nothing more than a machine.⁹⁶⁵

A critic writing in 1914, W. Stephen Bush, in *Moving Picture World*, acknowledged Adler’s commanding presence in *Michael Strogoff*, but thought him “plainly hampered by a lack of camera experience. He talks too much and too vehemently ... Emphatic elocution before the camera is worse than wasted.”⁹⁶⁶ Indeed, Adler often seemed to be declaiming in the movie, as if unaware that his voice won’t be heard.

After the advent of sound, Yiddish movies were made primarily in America, and on a very low budget, which usually resulted in films of poor quality, both cinematically and artistically. The first full-length Yiddish sound movie was a musical comedy starring the popular stage comic Ludwig Satz, *His Wife’s Lover* (1931), an adaptation of his stage success by that name. The vast majority of the Yiddish movies before 1935 were considered to be the cinematic offspring of *shund*, although musical comedy was less common on screen than it had been on stage.⁹⁶⁷ Beginning in 1935, the *shund* movies were joined by filmed versions of classic Yiddish plays, some of which had originally starred the actors of the New York Yiddish theater’s golden era. Often these plays were poorly filmed, mostly in indoor studios. Among them was a production of *The Jewish King Lear* filmed in 1935, by Joseph Seiden, which is basically a filmed play, documenting the production of the play staged by Harry Thomashefsky, Boris’s son, for the Federal Theatre Project’s Yiddish Drama Unit. The production had been performed in New York at Jewish Community Centers, YMHAs, Talmud Torahs, and rest homes prior to its filming, and its movie version is marred by poor sound and a static camera.⁹⁶⁸ It apparently was not a prestigious production to begin with and does not give us insight into the furor caused by Jacob Adler’s original production of it.

Another play originally staged by Jacob Adler and later adapted for film was Gordin’s *Without a Home (On a heym)*, whose heroine had been one of Sara Adler’s most famous roles. The filmed version, shot in Poland in 1938, starred Ida Kaminska. It had a good cast of actors

⁹⁶⁵ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte fun Sore Adler*, *The Forward*, Jan. 10, 1939, 3.

⁹⁶⁶ Quoted by Hoberman, 22.

⁹⁶⁷ Ibid, 16, 159-161.

⁹⁶⁸ Ibid., 209-211.

but was filmed entirely in the studio, and was quite claustrophobic. America, where much of the play took place, was represented by stock footage and by an interpolated picture of the George Washington Bridge. The movie version does a good service to Gordin's play but gives us no glimpse of how its original stars played their parts.⁹⁶⁹

Other classics of the Yiddish stage brought to the screen in a static, theatrical style include two plays by Gordin: *Mirele Efros*, filmed in 1939 with Berta Gersten, and *God, Man and the Devil*, filmed in 1950. Two adaptations of classic Yiddish plays that are more cinematic in style are Peretz Hirschbein's 1916 *Green Fields*, filmed almost completely outdoors in America in 1937, and Maurice Schwartz's production of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye, the Milkman*, filmed in 1939. The last two were great critical and popular successes, and are considered to be among the high points of Yiddish film.⁹⁷⁰

Though the films that were based on classic Yiddish plays can give us a feeling of what Yiddish theater may have been like, they do not shed light on the particular talents of the actors in this study, nor are their specific influences apparent in them. On the other hand, a filmed example of a later work for the stage by Boris Thomashefsky, *Bar Mitzvah*, produced in 1935 and based on his 1927 play of the same title, does allow us to see his work firsthand, although he was sixty-nine in the movie, and well past his prime. The film itself was understandably called *shund* by J. Hoberman.⁹⁷¹ Thomashefsky's acting in *Bar Mitzvah* seems stilted and exaggerated and his speech declamatory. The movie's screenplay, which was based on the story he wrote, was heavy-handed and very contrived. The singing and dancing entered into the plot in ways that were extremely non-fluid and unnatural. One character would invite the other to sing or dance, and he or she would then proceed to do so. The movie moved back and forth between low comedy and melodrama. In keeping with Thomashefsky's expressed desire to create theater with a Jewish character, the movie began with a scene that included a *tallis* (Jewish prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries), and later included bar mitzvah dances and a

⁹⁶⁹ Ibid., 294-295.

⁹⁷⁰ Ibid., 247-253, 308-309.

⁹⁷¹ *Bar Mitzvah*, 1935, directed by Henry Lynn, Produced by S. and L. Film Co., Screenplay by Henry Lynn from a story by Boris Thomashefsky, starring Boris Thomashefsky and Regina Zuckerman. Available through the National Center for Jewish Film; Zylbercweig, vol. 1, 830; Hoberman, 206.

speech in which the bar mitzvah boy vowed to always remain loyal to the Jewish people.⁹⁷² But in between these “expressions of Jewishness” we see Anita Chayes openly vamping Thomashefsky Mae West style while he, in the words of J. Hoberman, “lets his mouth gape in a leer of erotic enchantment.”⁹⁷³ The movie affirms both the common descriptions and criticisms of *shund*, alongside Thomashefsky’s assertion that his goal was to create theater of a Jewish character, though it must be stated that its “Jewish character” was quite superficial and external.

Outside the realm of *shund*, two movies which carried Thomashefsky’s stamp starred the cantor Moishe Oysher. They told the stories of cantors, and included cantorial music in them, of the kind Thomashefsky enjoyed bringing to his plays. They also evoked nostalgia for the Old World, and affirmed a strong sense of belonging to the Jewish people and an affirmation of Jewish values, as Thomashefsky often did. The first of them was *The Cantor’s Son* (1937), whose story was an inversion of Al Jolson’s famous film of 1927, *The Jazz Singer*. Oysher, after leaving his hometown, Belz, as a young boy, and subsequently succeeding on the non-Jewish stage in America, is emotionally pulled back to Belz, where he marries his childhood sweetheart and again becomes cantor in the synagogue. This was the first time in Yiddish culture that a hero returned to the *shtetl* after living successfully in America.⁹⁷⁴

The second movie was *The Vilna Town-Cantor (Der Vilner Shtot Khazn)* adapted by Osip Dymov from Mark Arnshteyn’s play *Der Vilner Balebesl*, loosely based on the real-life Vilna cantor of the nineteenth century, Yoel David Strashunsky. In the movie, Strashunsky leaves his wife and child in Vilna to become an opera singer in Warsaw. After his child’s death, he returns to Vilna the day before Yom Kippur, and collapses and dies in the synagogue during the *Kol Nidre* prayer.⁹⁷⁵ These anti-assimilationist movies echo public sentiment on the brink of World War II, which rejected acculturation in an anti-Semitic world, but they also hark back to aspects of the Yiddish theater of Boris Thomashefsky. Like Thomashefsky, they romanticize belonging to the Jewish people and revel in its music. On the other hand, Thomashefsky’s theater, though

⁹⁷² Hoberman quoted Thomashefsky in an interview to the *Jewish Theatrical News* of 1924 that the play *Bar Mitzvah* which he was then preparing would be about Jewish life and offer Jewish education on the subject of the Bar Mitzvah ceremony (ibid., 207).

⁹⁷³ Ibid, 206.

⁹⁷⁴ Ibid., 264-265.

⁹⁷⁵ Ibid., 270-272.

very proud of its Jewishness, was also strongly in favor of Americanization. In *The Cantor's Son*, Americanization is equal to assimilation. In *The Vilna Town-Cantor* the hero must choose between a successful career on stage and his Jewishness. Thomashefsky could do both.

C. Non-Yiddish Theater after 1917

1. Improvisation

When the actors in the Yiddish theater improvised their parts, they were accused of a lack of professionalism. European theater had moved from being an actor-centered one during the times of the *commedia dell'arte* to being a writer-centered one. The provinciality of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia, alongside their desire to influence the masses through the Yiddish theater, which could be done only if the texts were fixed, convinced them that only a theater that performed texts precisely as written could be a theater of true artistic integrity. This position, widely prevalent during the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, did not remain constant in subsequent years. Improvisation reappeared in the modern theater in the teachings of directors and theater theorists like Constantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold in Russia, and Jacques Copeau in France. Meyerhold (1874-1940), who wanted to revive the theater of antiquity, revived the improvisational style of the *commedia dell'arte* in post-revolutionary Russia. Stanislavsky used improvisation extensively, though not in the actual performance, but in actors' training and in rehearsal. In 1911, Gorky suggested the idea of an entire theater of improvisation, like *commedia dell'arte*, to Stanislavsky. Improvisation was also used by the Stanislavsky-influenced Group Theater in America in the 1930s.⁹⁷⁶ The well-known French director Jacques Copeau (1879-1949) used improvisation extensively during rehearsal, having the actors always improvise the situation before showing

⁹⁷⁶ Christine Edwards, *The Stanislavsky Heritage* (New York, New York University Press, 1965), 94, 188-119, 245.

them the actual text.⁹⁷⁷ Until today, improvisation is commonly used in actor training, rehearsing, and casting.⁹⁷⁸

There have also been examples of usage of improvisation during actual performances. Jerome Savary in his *Le Grand Magic Circus* tried to recreate the kind of popular theater performed by seventeenth-century French itinerant acting troupes or by the *commedia dell'arte*, traveling throughout France and Europe in a circus-like performance between 1968 and 1975, often appearing in a large tent in a public square.⁹⁷⁹ Film director John Cassavetes (1929-1989) would film sequences improvised by his actors without a script, and edit them into the actual final film in movies he made between 1959 and 1984, such as *Faces* (1968) and *Husbands* (1970).⁹⁸⁰ Actual improvisation in front of a live audience lies at the center of the technique known as Playback founded in 1975 in New York by Jonathan Fox, Jo Salas, and the original Playback Theatre company, which then spawned companies and practitioners all around the world.⁹⁸¹ More recently, we have the example of Lin Manuel Miranda and Thomas Kail's *Freestyle Love Supreme*, an improvisational hip-hop comedy musical group which began performing in 2004, and appeared on Broadway in the 2019-2020 season, winning a special Tony Award, and then again in 2021-2022. Miranda and Kail founded this improvisational group before writing and directing, respectively, the mega-hit *Hamilton*. Like Playback Theatre and *Le Grand Magic Circus*, performances include audience participation, and each performance is unique. So, when the Yiddish actors improvised their parts, rather than judging them as unprofessional, one can view them as continuing the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, and as forerunners of revolutionary directors like Meyerhold in theater and John Cassavetes in film, and of popular contemporary theater phenomena like Playback Theatre and *Freestyle Love Supreme*.

⁹⁷⁷ Maurice Kurtz, *Jacques Copeau, Biography of a Theater* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 93.

⁹⁷⁸ Maria Viera, "The Work of John Cassevetes: Script, Performance Style, and Improvisation," *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 42, no. 3, 1990, 34, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20687907, accessed Aug. 19, 2021.

⁹⁷⁹ Richard C. Webb, "Toward a Popular Theatre: Le Grand Magic Circus," in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 1976, vol. 9, Iss. 4., 840-850.

⁹⁸⁰ Viera., 35.

⁹⁸¹ See <http://www.playbacktheatre-sw.co.uk/playbacktheatre.html>, accessed Oct. 10, 2021.

2. The Influence of Jacob and Sara Adler on their Daughter, Stella

Jacob and Sara Adler's dedication to the principles of realism in acting helped promote a more realistic style of acting in the Yiddish theater of their times. Furthermore, Jacob Adler's acting principles, which resembled those of Stanislavsky, made him a forerunner of the approach to acting that changed performance in America and in the West during the course of the twentieth century. But Jacob and Sara Adler affected the course of acting in twentieth century America in an additional way – through their daughter, Stella.

Stanislavsky's approach to acting was first transferred to America by his students Richard Boleslavsky and Maria Ouspenskaya, who taught at the American Laboratory Theater between 1923 and 1929. It was there that Stella Adler was first exposed to the teachings of Stanislavsky. Two other students there, Harold Clurman (Stella's husband from 1943-1960) and Lee Strasberg, were instrumental in forming The Group Theater (1931-1941), a cooperative acting company, which produced new realistic dramas with a social consciousness that aimed to challenge contemporary society. Stella Adler and her brother Luther were both members of this theatrical troupe. The Group Theater emphasized ensemble acting and did not produce star vehicles. The approach to acting used in The Group Theater received the name "Method Acting," which Clurman said was an abbreviation of the term "Stanislavsky Method."⁹⁸² When The Group Theater disbanded, its members went in different directions, and several of them ended up heading acting studios of their own. By 1960, eighteen of the Group's former directors and actors were teaching acting. These acting teachers were probably The Group Theater's most important contribution to the American stage. Three of them – Lee Strasberg (1901-82), Sanford Meisner (1905-97), and Stella Adler (1901-92) – had their own versions of "The Method," with each claiming to be the rightful descendants of Stanislavsky's system. Strasberg's emphasis was on the psychological, Meisner's on the behavioral, and Stella Adler's on the sociological.⁹⁸³ We will be using the term "Method" here to refer to the American

⁹⁸² Harold Clurman, *The Collected Works of Harold Clurman*, eds. M. Loggia and G. Young (New York: Applause, 1994), 369. Clurman said that the system of acting used in The Group Theater was necessary to carry out their creative program but was not the reason for the founding of the company. *The Group Theater*, Dir. Nick Havinga, Writer: Stephan Chodorov, Columbia Broadcasting System, Creative Arts Television, 1967. Alexander Street, <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/the-group-theater>. Accessed 18-8-20.

⁹⁸³ Mel Gordon, *Stanislavsky in America: An Actor's Workbook* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 16-41;

continuers of Stanislavsky's approach, as represented by the various interpreters of his theories.

Stella Adler is a name better known to any student of theater or film in America than the names of either of her parents. She was one of America's foremost acting teachers, heading her own acting studio beginning in 1949, and leaving a major impact on twentieth century acting through students such as Marlon Brando, Robert De Niro, and Anthony Quinn. Brando, who revolutionized acting in America in the 1950's, said of Stella: "She taught me to be real."⁹⁸⁴ In addition to her exposure to Stanislavsky's teachings through her studies at the American Laboratory Theater, her participation in The Group Theater, and her marriage to Harold Clurman, she spent five weeks in Paris, in 1934, studying with Stanislavsky. Those weeks are considered to be critical in forming her understanding of acting.⁹⁸⁵ She herself referred to Stanislavsky frequently when teaching.⁹⁸⁶ Howard Kissel, in his afterword to the compilation of acting classes by Stella Adler he edited, added two other important influences in shaping her understanding of theater: her husband for seventeen years, Harold Clurman, co-founder of The Group Theater,⁹⁸⁷ and her father, Jacob Adler.⁹⁸⁸ In the following pages I would like to support Kissel's contention that Jacob Adler had a strong influence on Stella's acting theories, and to add the name of a woman to Kissel's list of three men – that of Stella's mother, Sara Adler.

Stella herself spoke of learning acting from her father. She said:

Now I didn't have a so-called normal childhood, because I lived with the greatest actor I've ever seen, who happened to be my father. [...] My father didn't give me a moment's peace. If we

David Krasner, "Strasberg, Adler and Meisner – Method Acting," *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge (London: Routledge, 2000), 129-130; *Stella Adler: Awake and Dream*, Dir. Merrill Brockway, WNET, RM Productions, 1989, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Yo4BLH87YY>, accessed Aug. 12, 2020; *The Group Theater*. Dir. Nick Havinga, Writer: Stephan Chodorov, Columbia Broadcasting System, Creative Arts Television, 1967, *Alexander Street*, <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/the-group-theater>, accessed August 18, 2020;

⁹⁸⁴ Claudio Roth Pierpont, "Method Man," *The New Yorker*, Oct 20, 2008.

⁹⁸⁵ Edna Nahshon, *New York's Yiddish Theater, From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 112-116; Mel Gordon, 153-154; Howard Kissel, Afterword, *Stella Adler: The Art of Acting*, compiled and edited by Howard Kissel (New York: Applause, 2000), 262.

⁹⁸⁶ Stella Adler, *Stella Adler: The Art of Acting*, 52, 116, 139, 140, 145, 235-237, among others. The book is based on classes Stella Adler gave mostly in 1982.

⁹⁸⁷ Stella herself called Clurman "the man who did the most to open up my talent and my mind, who helped me educate myself about plays. He gave significance to my life, my theatrical life." (Stella Adler, 235).

⁹⁸⁸ Kissel, 261. David Krasner cited the influence of the Yiddish theater on the entire Group Theater, and on Stella Adler, Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner in particular. See Krasner, 130, 148 footnote 6. He claimed this has been largely overlooked. This subject is well worth a study of its own. We will address ourselves here only to the influence of Jacob and Sara Adler on their daughter, Stella.

were walking in the street, he'd point to someone and say, "Look at her. Look at the way she walks. Look at him. Watch the way he uses his hands. Imitate her voice. [...] Observe! Observe! Observe!" he'd tell us. [...]

He never stopped for a minute. That's the way you become an actor. You cannot afford to confine your studies to the classroom. The universe and all of history is your classroom.⁹⁸⁹

Jacob Adler's lesson to young Stella, about the importance of observing people and the way they move and act, was a lesson she passed on to her students. She told them:

By taking elements you observe in life, you can develop qualities in your acting life that you don't ordinarily call upon in your personal life. [...] Actors are undercover agents. You must constantly spy on people, studying their character elements. You must see which are related to the character's profession or appropriate to his nationality or age. Acting is hard because it requires not just the study of books, though that can be important too, but constant study of human behavior.⁹⁹⁰

The technique of learning to act from observing people was also known to Stella's mother, Sara Adler. She wrote that what she believed was the most beautiful achievement in her acting career – the role of Katyusha Maslova in Tolstoy's *Resurrection* – was built upon observations of her close friend, Ella, a reformed prostitute.⁹⁹¹ Of course, the concept of modeling a role upon someone the actor has observed precedes the Adlers by many generations. The great English actor David Garrick (1717-1779) attributed his success in *King Lear* to observing an acquaintance who had gone mad at the loss of his child. As an actor, he was accustomed to borrowing the touches from life that made his character creations great.⁹⁹²

Further evidence of Jacob Adler's influence on Stella can be seen in a section found in Sara Adler's autobiography, about Jacob Adler's acting: "Adler was not a traditional 'star' who only had in mind the great, dramatic monologues and nothing else. [...] he had an eye for detail, for little things that other 'stars' entirely didn't notice." Sara Adler wrote how Adler once said to her:

I want you to understand, Sonya, many actors have a strange attitude to the stage and to their work. They think that the audience sits in the theater and waits for a monologue. [...] The melodramatic actors don't begin to understand that even the most tragic monologue can't have

⁹⁸⁹ Stella Adler, 52.

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid., 178-179.

⁹⁹¹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 9, 1937, 2.

⁹⁹² Cole and Chinoy, 132.

the proper effect on the spectator unless the mood is influenced by the whole previous play. Only when the entire play works in every detail, only then can a dramatic monologue or a tragic scene make a deep impression on the audience. [...] I believe that every detail is important. In order for one to live inside his role, he has to play it well from beginning to end.⁹⁹³

This belief of Jacob Adler related by his wife Sara, was echoed by their daughter Stella, when she said: "Everything the actor does has consequence. There are no 'throwaway' lines. Every line is laid down like the track of the Orient Express."⁹⁹⁴ Stella told her students about musician Pablo Casals' playing: "The difference between him and you is that he knows that nothing is small. No note is less important than any other note."⁹⁹⁵ Jacob Adler possibly was influenced in this understanding by Shchepkin, whom Stanislavsky called "our great law-giver, our artist," treasuring every fragment of practical advice culled from Shchepkin's letters. Shchepkin insisted on realistic justification of every detail and every gesture in his performance.⁹⁹⁶

Another area in which Stella Adler's teachings reflect her father's attitudes toward theater is what I have referred to as Jacob Adler's religious attitude toward theater.⁹⁹⁷ Stella Adler told her students: "You must study theatre the way a priest or a rabbi studies scripture." You can hear echoes of her father who lived theater in a mythic fashion when she claimed: "You have to understand that the theatre is epic. It's large the way The Law is large, the way Family Life is large [...]" On stage an actor "should be looking for the epic quality of any situation." After living with a father who lived both life and theater with a towering magnitude, it is no wonder that she taught her students: "You have to develop size. That is what we are here to work on. [...] Acting has to do with size. It's the name of the game."⁹⁹⁸ In one of her classes, Stella told the students:

I was married to Harold Clurman, who was the greatest man in the American theater, who practically founded the American theatre. I was married to Mitchell Wilson, who was the assistant to Enrico Fermi in the development of the atom bomb. I didn't go for the small fry. I

⁹⁹³ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, April 5, 1938, 3.

⁹⁹⁴ Stella Adler, 19.

⁹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁹⁹⁶ Cole and Chinoy, 476.

⁹⁹⁷ See Chapter Three, Section C.

⁹⁹⁸ Stella Adler, 9, 20, 30, 164.

didn't because I didn't want to live that way. I was brought up by my father, and in our home there was no small talk at all.⁹⁹⁹

Her great-grandson, Tom Oppenheim, said that "in a certain way Stella had grandeur, introduced a certain grandeur into acting" and he speculated that that grandeur might have come from her father, Jacob.¹⁰⁰⁰ The word "grand" was used several times by Stella's daughter, Ellen Adler Oppenheim, when referring to her grandfather, Jacob, in the interview I held with her. Harold Clurman also referred to Adler's grandeur.¹⁰⁰¹ In his family's eyes, Adler seems to have been "The Grand Jew" himself. His granddaughter told her students: "You must believe you deserve to dress and think like aristocrats. You wear a crown, not a baseball cap."¹⁰⁰²

There were areas in which Stella Adler did not follow her father's approach to acting but rather seems to have followed her mother's approach. For example, Stella Adler found fault with Lee Strasberg's form of "Method Acting," which she thought put too much of an emphasis on the actor's feelings, and not enough emphasis on technique.

Nowadays a lot of what passes for acting is nothing more than finding yourself in some character. That doesn't interest me. Of course, you have to bring your own experience to bear on the characters you play, but you have to realize right from the outset that Hamlet was not "a guy like you."¹⁰⁰³

As opposed to the romantic view of an actor "losing control" and being devoured by his role, similar to that presented by Jacob Adler when discussing his acting, Stella maintained that "a certain amount of what we do as actors is totally within our control. Technique is first of all a way of controlling what we do on stage."¹⁰⁰⁴ This emphasis on technique rather than "losing oneself inside the role," resembled her mother's approach to acting much more than her father's.

⁹⁹⁹ Ibid., 101. See also *ibid.*, 156: "Either through art or through science the whole quest of man is to have some size – the stature required to express to the world what you have learned about it. The whole of man is directed to this one effort, and the whole of playwriting shows that aim. Revealing means to take off the cover, to unmask your soul. It's large and epic in scope."

¹⁰⁰⁰ Interview with Tom Oppenheim, New York, Aug. 15, 2017. He also said that Stella's style of acting might be called "poetic realism" as opposed to the naturalism taught by other schools, adding that it might, too, have come from her father.

¹⁰⁰¹ Interview with Ellen Adler Oppenheim, New York, Aug. 15, 2017. She said of her grandparents: "He was grand. She was the great actress."; Harold Clurman, "Introduction," *Bright Star of Exile*, xiv.

¹⁰⁰² Stella Adler, 210.

¹⁰⁰³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Ibid., 20.

Stella Adler waged an ideological battle against Lee Strasberg of the Actor's Studio. She was opposed to Strasberg's encouraging the actor to use her own experience in order to play her part, with the technique known as "emotional memory" or "affective memory," and was in favor of using imagination in order to connect to the life of the character which was outside the actor's own experience.¹⁰⁰⁵ Like her mother, who believed that through imagination an actor could "live inside another's feelings and thoughts,"¹⁰⁰⁶ Stella believed that:

When you work creatively with your imagination there is no higher form. It will open up in you what has been closed for years. [...]

You must always fill the stage with your imagination. Surround yourself with it. [...]

Ninety-nine percent of what you see and use on the stage comes from imagination. On stage you will never have your own name and personality or be in your own house. Every person you talk to will have been written imaginatively by the playwright. Every situation you find yourself in will be an imaginary one. Every word, every action must be filtered through the imagination.¹⁰⁰⁷

She opposed drawing on "emotional memory" in acting:

You have to get beyond your own precious inner experiences now. I want you to be able to see and share what you see with an audience, not just get wrapped up in yourself. Strasberg is dead.¹⁰⁰⁸ The actor cannot afford to look only at his own life for all his material nor pull strictly from his own experience to find his acting choices and feelings. The ideas of the great playwrights are almost always larger than the experiences of even the best actors.

A great disservice was done to American actors when they were persuaded that they had to experience *themselves* on the stage instead of experiencing the play. Your experience is not the same as Hamlet's – unless you too are a royal prince of Denmark. The truth of the character isn't found in you but in the circumstances of the royal position. [...] your imagination must be equal to the play's demands.¹⁰⁰⁹

In this, Stella Adler stood in opposition to her father Jacob, who, like Lee Strasberg, believed in "emotional memory" – that an actor lives his character through himself, and his own life experience.¹⁰¹⁰ When describing the epilogue of Gordin's *The Russian Jew in America*,

¹⁰⁰⁵ Kissel, 262.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Dec. 25, 1937, 10. See Chapter Two, Section I B 2.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Stella Adler, 49, 56, 60. Emphasis on imagination is part of what differentiated Stella Adler from her fellow "Method" teachers, Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner. See David Krasner, "Strasberg, Adler and Meisner – Method Acting," in *Twentieth Century Actor Training*, ed. Alison Hodge, 139-140.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Lee Strasberg died in 1981. The classes that Kissel based his book on were given mostly in 1983.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Stella Adler, 64.

¹⁰¹⁰ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, Aug. 3, 1918, 3; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 202.

in which Jacob always got carried away as he sang out his longing for Russia while dying in America, Adler implied that what moved him so deeply in this scene, to the degree that Sara Adler had to call to him from the wings to remember where he was, was that he would remember burying his first wife, Sonya Oberlander, in England, far away from her beloved Russia. Adler used the technique of emotional memory that Stella would later argue against. He did not rely on imagination; he called upon his experience.¹⁰¹¹

Stella, like her mother Sara, who quivered her lip for minutes before she was required to cry on stage,¹⁰¹² emphasized the need for actors to be in complete control of their bodies:

As an actor you have to be acutely aware of everything about your body. You need to become muscularly facile in your work. You need to memorize what muscles control the actions you perform. Equally important, you need to learn how much muscular exertion each action requires. [...] An actor must be in control of every part of his body.¹⁰¹³

Another aspect of acting which Stella Adler may have learned from her mother is her emphasis on understanding the sociological and historical situation of the character when preparing a role. In Stella Adler's acting theory, an actor must prepare his part very meticulously, understanding to the best of his ability the kind of world in which his character's actions occur. Stella told her students: "Your curse is that you have chosen a form that requires endless study. Your job is to know what political time a play is set in, what class the characters are in, what style the play is written in." Knowing the social situation of the play was critical. "Characters come out of social situations. The social situation is what leads you into depth. Every man lives in his own time. Every man comes from a specific economic situation. [...] The social situation is what has created the human being throughout history."¹⁰¹⁴ Understanding the class that the character you are playing belongs to was one of the most important elements in preparing a role, for Stella. Another important element was profession.¹⁰¹⁵ This is what David

¹⁰¹¹ Jacob Adler, *40 yor af der bine*, June 6, 1925, 5; Jacob Adler, *A Life on the Stage*, 288. See Chapter Two, Section IB1 above.

¹⁰¹² See Chapter Two, Section IB2 above.

¹⁰¹³ Stella Adler, 86-87.

¹⁰¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84, 161.

¹⁰¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 169, 207-213, 237-241, 249-253.

Krasner referred to as Stella Adler's emphasis on the sociological as opposed to Strasberg's emphasis on the psychological.¹⁰¹⁶

Similarly, Sara Adler described her preparations when she rehearsed the role of Katyusha in *Resurrection*, a period in which they worked "day and night." She told how in order to prepare for the part she delved into the world of a "young girl in a town, a maid for Russian aristocrats, used to looking at the rich ones like supermen. And now with her whole being she is in love with he who is a kind of superman to her."¹⁰¹⁷ Her analysis emphasized the very things that Stella spoke of – the social situation, the specific economic situation, the class of the character, the character's profession. It is rare in the autobiographies of the actors that they give such a detailed character analysis of the roles they played. Sara Adler seemed to have understood that her success in the role she was most proud of was contingent on really understanding the social situation her character lived in, like the directive of her daughter years later: "Unless I know the social situation, I don't know how to think about the character. I just don't know what to do with him."¹⁰¹⁸

Another attitude toward theater common to Sara and Stella Adler was a belief that the theater existed in order to elevate the human being. Sara Adler wrote: "The circus is the place for clamor and burlesque is the home of vulgarity. One goes to the theater to see the sublime, that which is beautiful in the human soul. That is what the good actor must give over."¹⁰¹⁹ Her daughter, Stella, put it this way: "Acting requires a creative and compassionate attitude. It must aim to lift life up to a higher level of meaning and not tear it down or demean it. The actor's search is a generous quest for that larger meaning."¹⁰²⁰

Both Sara and Stella Adler wrote of the joy an actor may have while performing. Sara Adler wrote of her appearance opposite Adler in *Uriel Acosta*: "For the first time, in the role of Yehudis, did I feel that indescribable happiness, the true experience of artistic creation."¹⁰²¹ She described the period of rehearsals for *Resurrection* as a period of "indescribable joy." When that tremendous feeling of joy occurred not during rehearsal, but while performing on

¹⁰¹⁶ Krasner, 129.

¹⁰¹⁷ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 18, 1938, 3.

¹⁰¹⁸ Stella Adler, 163.

¹⁰¹⁹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, Oct. 18, 1938, 3.

¹⁰²⁰ Stella Adler, 151.

¹⁰²¹ Sara Adler, *Di lebens-geshikhte*, April 2, 1938, 11.

stage, opposite an audience, Sara Adler testified that it was a sign that the actor “is infecting the audience, and that the theater will soon be thundering with applause.” She told the story of “indescribably deep pleasure” that overcame her during a performance of the operetta *King Solomon*, when Adler came to see her perform soon after they decided to marry. Sara wrote: “My enthusiasm in acting soon had its unavoidable result. A storm of applause broke out in the audience.”¹⁰²² Stella, too, wrote how the actor has “to feel the joy is in the doing. If we do it for ourselves and for the play, the audience will be with us completely. The actor has much more fun in acting than the audience does in watching.”¹⁰²³ Again, mother and daughter seem to be in agreement.

We have seen a variety of parallels on the subject of acting between the teachings of Stella Adler and the writings of Sara Adler, who lived with her daughter Stella for many years at the end of her life.¹⁰²⁴ Each of the parallels in and of itself could conceivably seem coincidental. Similar things have been written by other actors or acting teachers concerning their art. But when taken together, these parallels suggest that Sara Adler was as much of an influence on her daughter Stella as the men listed by Howard Kissel. It must be said that there were important elements in Stella’s teachings, such as the emphasis on action as opposed to words or even emotions, which I have not traced back to either of her parents. But that does not negate the debt she owed to both of them in developing her ideas on acting.

It is also important to acknowledge that Sara Adler’s autobiography was written between 1937 and 1939. At that point in her life, two of her children, Stella and Luther, were long involved in The Group Theater. The weeks Stella spent studying with Stanislavsky took place in 1934, three to five years previously. Aspects of Sara Adler’s writings about acting may have been colored by all she had heard from her children, long after the period of which she wrote. But even so, we hear a voice addressing itself to things like the importance of technique that goes beyond understanding and identifying with the character; of an emphasis on class, historical period, and socio-economic background when doing a character study; and of

¹⁰²² Ibid., Oct. 18, 1938, 3; March 27, 1938, 3.

¹⁰²³ Stella Adler, 81.

¹⁰²⁴ Aside from living together during Stella’s childhood, Sara lived with Stella and her daughter, Ellen, for many years at the end of her life (Ellen Oppenheim Adler, Personal Interview, New York, Aug. 15, 2017).

experiences of elation when performing and what they signify. This voice, common to both Sara and Stella Adler, is not the voice typically associated with Stanislavsky.

It would seem that when Stella told her students that they were aristocrats and so “that sense of an ongoing tradition should underline the way you speak as an actor. [...] You’re a person of tradition. Don’t speak without a sense of your inheritance,”¹⁰²⁵ she was speaking of her own feelings as an actress who inherited not only 2000 years of theater history, but a personal tradition of her own from both her parents.

Jacob and Sara Adler had a profound influence on the Yiddish theater of America. But through their daughter, Stella, they also influenced the history of acting during the second half of the twentieth century. Stella Adler’s teachings continue to be used to this day in the Stella Adler Studio of Acting, which has branches both in New York and in Los Angeles. Besides acting giants like Marlon Brando and Robert De Niro, she trained major actors of previous generations like Warren Beatty, Eva Marie Saint and Harvey Keitel. Present day actors like Benicio del Toro and Salma Hayek have also emerged from the acting studio which bears her name.¹⁰²⁶ Through their daughter, Stella, the Yiddish actors Jacob and Sara Adler continue to influence acting in America until today.

3. Boris Thomashefsky and the American Musical

The American musical, arguably America’s most important contribution to the world of theater, has been largely a creation of American Jews. Ever since George M. Cohan, pioneer of the American musical, a surprising percentage of the composers and lyricists of that genre have been Jewish. In the first half of the twentieth century, all the greats besides Cole Porter were Jewish. Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, and Lorenz Hart were all born to Jewish families that had emigrated from Germany or Russia before the large emigration from Eastern Europe that began

¹⁰²⁵ Stella Adler. 210.

¹⁰²⁶ For a list of the school’s alumni see *Stella Adler Studio of Acting*, <https://stellaadler.com/alumni/>, accessed Aug. 6, 2020.

in 1880.¹⁰²⁷ Irving Berlin and George and Ira Gershwin were children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century, who grew up in Yiddish-speaking homes on the New York Lower East Side at the turn of the century. In their homes, the name of Boris Thomashefsky was certainly well known. In later generations, composers and lyricists like Alan Jay Lerner, Jerry Bock, Sheldon Harnick, Leonard Bernstein, Jule Styne, John Kander, Fred Ebb, Stephen Sondheim, Jason Robert Brown, and Adam Guettel were all born to Jewish parents. Others, like Oscar Hammerstein II and Frederic Loewe had one Jewish parent.¹⁰²⁸ This predominantly Jewish American genre may have had its roots in another Jewish American institution in which the musical thrived even before the emergence of the American musical in the 1920s – the American Yiddish theater. And among the foremost contributors to the musical in the American Yiddish theater was Boris Thomashefsky. An in-depth investigation of the influence of Boris Thomashefsky on the American musical is beyond the scope of this paper, but I think it important to raise some points on the issue that a future scholar may research more thoroughly.

Thomashefsky adapted Shakespeare to the musical stage in America, as far back as 1910, turning *The Taming of a Shrew* into a musical called *The Beautiful American*.¹⁰²⁹ This was 28 years before Rodgers and Hart adapted *The Comedy of Errors* as *The Boys from Syracuse*,¹⁰³⁰ 38 years before Cole Porter adapted that same *Taming of the Shrew* as *Kiss Me, Kate*, and 47 years before Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim adapted *Romeo and Juliet* as *West Side Story*.

According to Zylbercweig, Thomashefsky was the first to incorporate ballet into a musical in *The Broken Violin*, in 1916, twenty years before George Balanchine incorporated ballet into Rodgers and Hart's *On Your Toes*, and 27 years before Agnes de Mille is thought to have

¹⁰²⁷ “Richard Rodgers” <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/first/h/hyland-rodders.html?scp=44&sq=richard%2520lower&st=Search>, accessed Sept. 13, 2022; “Jerome Kern” <https://ffrf.org/ftod-cr/item/14167-jerome-kern>, accessed Sept. 13, 2022.

¹⁰²⁸ “Broadway and Hollywood Musicals Written by Jews,” <http://www.jinfo.org/Musicals.html>, accessed Sept. 13, 2022.

¹⁰²⁹ Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 2, 821

¹⁰³⁰ Commonly considered the first adaptation of Shakespeare to the musical stage. See “A History of Shakespeare in Musical Theatre,” <https://musicaltheatrereview.com/a-history-of-shakespeare-in-musical-theatre/> accessed June 6, 2022.

revolutionized musical theater choreography with her dream ballet in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*¹⁰³¹

Thomashefsky did not consider the world of musical theater to be limited to musical comedy, as it was usually referred to during the first half of the twentieth century. He did a musical version of the Leo Frank story,¹⁰³² quite a serious dramatic subject, in 1915, 83 years before that subject was tackled on the musical theater stage by Jason Robert Brown and Alfred Uhry in Hal Prince's production of *Parade*. Such serious musical theater, on the subject of racial or religious prejudice, can be seen as a forerunner of Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's *Showboat* or even Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story*. The ethnic nature of the musical makes it possible for it to be perceived as a forerunner of George and Ira Gershwin and Dubose Heyward's *Porgy and Bess*.

The area of the musical has been a rich one for various ethnic groups since the beginnings of Afro-American musical theater at the turn of the century, with composers and performers such as Will Marion Cook, Bob Cole, Bert Williams, and George Walker. Parallel to them, the Yiddish theater created an ethnic musical of its own in America. To this day, the Afro-American musical, such as Micki Grant's *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*, or the Hispanic musical, such as Lin Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* enrich the American musical with a particular ethnic tone. Unlike the Afro-American musical, the Yiddish musical was performed in a foreign language. Therefore, its transplant into American Jewish musical theater required a metamorphosis that included moving over to the English language. But that metamorphosis occurred in musicals such as Bock and Harnick's *Fiddler on the Roof* or, to a lesser degree, in works such as Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years* and *13* or William Finn's *Falsettos*, in which the Jewishness of the protagonists was emphasized, and Jewish musical motifs were used in the scores. Boris Thomashefsky, who created Jewish-flavored musicals with Jewish-flavored music, can be seen as a pioneer of the American ethnic musical.

¹⁰³¹ See Robert G. Dame, "The integration of dance as a dramatic element in Broadway musical theater," University of Nevada, 1995.

¹⁰³² Leo Frank, a Jewish factory superintendent in Atlanta, Georgia, was unjustly convicted of the rape and murder of a thirteen-year-old female employee in 1913. The trial was severely influenced by anti-Semitic sentiment, and Frank was kidnapped from prison and murdered by his anti-Semitic kidnappers in 1915. See "Leo Frank," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Leo-Frank>, accessed June 16, 2022.

D. Theatrical Autobiography and Academic Research

Our research has shown the usefulness of theatrical autobiography in researching theater history. Theatrical history is not a history of written texts but of living performances. We have analyzed the actors' accounts of performance practices in Yiddish theater such as improvisation, relying on a prompter, and curtain speeches, as well as the actors' descriptions of the processes through which plays evolved, and the behavior of audiences in Yiddish theater. We have also seen their descriptions of their acting techniques and their lack of awareness of directing techniques. None of these areas of theater history is understandable from reading the plays alone.

Often theater history can be colored by the views of those who write it. The Russian Jewish intellectuals who emigrated to America and became the foremost journalists who criticized Yiddish theater, such as Abe Cahan and Louis Miller, or the Yiddish Theater's historians, such as Bernard Gorin, all had a view of Yiddish theater rooted in their own worldviews, which evinced disdain for popular, lower-class, actor-centered theater. Returning to the actors' autobiographies enabled us to free ourselves of some of their prejudices, and to see, for example, the desire of Boris Thomashefsky for a theater rooted in Jewishness as an alternative to the politically-motivated, author-centered theater that the Russian Jewish intellectuals aspired to.

Similarly, after reading the Adlers' autobiographies, their artistic aspirations can be re-evaluated. Whereas the kind of theater they aspired to was commonly called "literary theater" during the time they appeared onstage, reading their autobiographies from a present-day perspective showed that it would be more appropriate to call it "Russian realism." When read at a temporal remove, autobiography can give us a new perspective on the era in theater history it discusses.

Reading theatrical autobiography from a historical perspective also invites comparisons with other theatrical traditions. For example, we saw how the early Yiddish theater resembled the earlier *commedia dell'arte*, and how its use of improvisation can be seen as predating various acting techniques used today that emphasize improvisation. We also saw how Jacob Adler's descriptions of his acting style were very reminiscent of Stanislavsky, and how both

Jacob and especially Sara Adler's descriptions of their acting styles could be seen as a major influence on their daughter, Stella. Theatrical autobiography paints a broad picture of the theater its writer was involved in, a picture in which various pieces of the puzzle of its character can fall into place. Comparisons between autobiographies of personalities who worked together, or in the same theatrical world, can also be enriching in creating a well-balanced picture of that theater.

I would like to suggest that the direction I have taken in this dissertation be continued in researching theatrical history. In the world of Yiddish theater, autobiographies and other forms of self-writing have been written by Ida Kaminska, Joseph Buloff, Shloyme Mikhoels, Alter Fishzon, Celia Adler, Bertha Kalich, David Kessler, Joseph Rumshinsky, Leon Kobrin, Boaz Young, Shimon Dzigan, Herman Yablokoff and Pesach Burstein, among others. A close examination of these works can reveal more and more layers of the story of the Yiddish theater, throughout the years of its existence on both sides of the Atlantic. But not only Yiddish theater should be examined in this fashion. Other national theaters can also benefit from research of the autobiographies of their prominent members, especially their major actors. Theater is a living, breathing creation. The life-writings of those who brought a theater to life during any given period of history are relevant to understanding what that theater was like years after its performances and productions can no longer be experienced.



Jacob Adler as Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*, Courtesy of YIVO Library



Sara Adler, Studio Portrait, Courtesy of YIVO Library



Bessie Thomashefsky, Publicity Shot, Courtesy of YIVO Library



S & L FILM CO. Presents
 (Mrs) BORIS THOMASHEFSKY in "BAR-MITZVAH"
 ? / 116 1115 11/15

Boris Thomashefsky in the film "Bar Mitzvah" (1935)
 Courtesy of YIVO Library

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תקציר

במוקד התיאטרון היידי בניו יורק בין 1883-1917, השנים שבהן התעצב, עמדו השחקנים. תיאטרון זה פנה בעיקר לקהל מהגרים מהמעמד הנמוך, והוא היה מרכז חברתי ותרבותי בעבורם. הקהל הקולני והנלהב התייחס לכוכבי תיאטרון היידיש בתמהיל של אינטימיות והערצה. בין הכוכבים הראשיים בני התקופה היו שני זוגות שכתבתם האוטוביוגרפית עומדת במרכז המחקר הזה – יעקב ושרה אדלר ובוריס ובסי טומשבסקי. מפתיהם של ארבעת השחקנים האלה, שאף היו מנהלים ובמאים בתקופות שונות בקריירות שלהם, אפשר ללמוד הרבה על הרגלי הביצוע שרווחו בתחילת התיאטרון היידי באמריקה.

בכתבי כל ארבעת השחקנים אפשר למצוא ביקורת על התיאטרון שבו עבדו והאשמתו בחוסר מקצועיות; השחקנים מתייחסים לפרקטיקות שרווחו בתיאטרון היידיש, כמו הסתמכות השחקנים על לחשן, שימוש במחזות 'גנובים' שמקורם בשפות אחרות או היעדר במאי בעל חזון אמנותי שיוביל את ההפקה.

לאמיתו של דבר, פרקטיקות אלו אפיינו את התיאטרון הכללי בסוף המאה התשע-עשרה ולא ייחדו את תיאטרון היידיש. גם השימוש הנרחב באלתור, שהיה מושא לחיצי הביקורת של השחקנים אינו מעיד בהכרח על חוסר מקצועיות. בהקשרים אחרים, כגון בקומדיה דל ארטה של הרנסנס האיטלקי, שהייתה אף היא תיאטרון שבמוקדו עמדו שחקנים, נחשבה תכונה זו לסימן היכר למקצועיות.

כתביהם של שני הזוגות הללו מאפשרים הצצה לטכניקות המשחק שלהם ולהשוואתן לטכניקות משחק שרווחו ושרווחות על במות העולם. שיטות המשחק של יעקב אדלר, שכנראה הושפעו ממיכאיל שפקין ואלכסנדר אוסטרובסקי, דומות באופן מפתיע לשיטות המשחק שקונסטנטין סטניסלבסקי לימד ואף הוריד אל הכתב רק מאוחר יותר. כמו סטניסלבסקי, יעקב אדלר הדגיש את העבודה היוצאת 'מן הפנים החוצה'. שיטות המשחק של שרה אדלר דומות לגישה של האסכולה הבריטית, דוגמת דיוויד גריק לפניה ולורנס אליביה אחריה, שהדגישה את העבודה 'מן החוץ פנימה'. הזוג טומשבסקי אינם נוטים לנתח את טכניקות המשחק של עצמם. למרבה הצער, איש מן הכותבים אינו כותב כתיבה של ממש על תפקידו כבמאי. שני הנשים מתלוננות שלא היו במאים גדולים בתיאטרון היידיש.

האוטוביוגרפיות מספקות אפשרות נדירה להתבונן בגורמים התרבותיים, הדתיים והמשפחתיים שתרמו לעיצוב תיאטרון היידיש בארה"ב בזמן שבו התפתח. יעקב ושרה אדלר באו ממשפחות מסורתיות פחות או יותר, שהיו פתוחות לתרבות הכללית באודסה. שניהם נחשפו לריאליזם הרוסי בתיאטרון הממלכתי באודסה בצעירותם. בוריס ובסי טומשבסקי נולדו אף הם למשפחות הנוטות למסורתיות, אך הם נולדו בעיירות יהודיות קטנות באוקראינה והיגרו לארה"ב בצעירותם. הסביבות השונות שבתוכן גדלו באו לידי ביטוי בתיאטרון שיצרו. יעקב ושרה אדלר ביקשו לעצב את תיאטרון היידיש על פי הדגם של הריאליזם הרוסי. לעומת זאת, בוריס טומשבסקי לא רצה לחקות מודל זה אלא ליצור תיאטרון יהודי אותנטי שיכלול מוסיקה מעין זו שלמד בילדותו בהיותו סולן במקהלת בית הכנסת. הוא ביים ושיחק באופרטות היסטוריות ומלודרמות על נושאים יהודיים שהרבו למשוך את ההמונים.

הקריאה בכתביהם של שני הזוגות מראה כי תיאטרון היידיש בארה"ב בשנותיו הראשונות היה מעין עסק משפחתי, ובו שני אסכולות: אסכולת הריאליזם הרוסי שהתגלמה בזוג אדלר, ואסכולת התיאטרון העממי

היהודי שהתגלמה בזוג טומשבסקי. חלוקה זו מאפשרת תיקון משמעותי להבחנה הבינארית של 'תיאטרון ספרותי' מול 'שונד' (– זבל) שהייתה מקובלת בעיתונות היידית הרדיקלית בת התקופה. אף שכל השחקנים הנחקרים בזה לא שמרו על אורח חיים דתי, אין למצוא באוטוביוגרפיות שלהם ביטויים לרצון עז לקדם ערכים חילוניים מודרניים, כאותם ערכים שאפיינו את האינטליגנציה היהודית הרדיקלית. בוריס טומשבסקי רצה לבטא ערכים יהודיים מסורתיים בתיאטרון שלו, ובסי טומשבסקי ניסתה ליצור רושם של מי שהייתה מסורה לערכים האלו בחייה. יעקב אדלר תיאר את הרגעים הגדולים בקריירה שלו במונחים דתיים, וגילה נטיית-נפש דתית שהתלבשה במחלצות חילוניות. שרה אדלר הייתה מאוהבת בתרבות הרוסית, ועל פי טבעה לא נטתה לחוויות דתיות, אך היא לא ביטאה יחס שלילי כלשהו ליהדות המסורתית. אכן, הזוג אדלר שיתף פעולה עם יעקב גורדין, שהיה יהודי אנטי-מסורתי מחוגי האינטליגנציה הרוסית היהודית. גורדין השתדל לערוך רפורמה בתיאטרון היידיש ברוח הריאליזם, והוא הטיף לחילוניות, לשוויון בין המינים ולאנטי-קפילטליזם. אולם מהאוטוביוגרפיות של שרה ויעקב אדלר עולה שהם תמכו באסתטיקה הריאליסטית של התיאטרון שלו, ולא בהכרח בכל מה שכללה תפיסת העולם שלו.

הבדלים מגדריים עולים אף הם מקריאה קרובה באוטוביוגרפיות האלו. כשחקנים-מנהלים, הגברים נטו לקחת לעצמם את התפקידים הראשיים, והותירו לנשותיהם בעיקר את תפקידי המשנה. מצב זה נמשך עד שהנשים התחילו לנהל תיאטרונים משלהן – פרק בהיסטוריה של תיאטרון היידיש שלא היה מוכר דיו עד כה. באופן כללי, מקומם של הגברים באוטוביוגרפיות של נשותיהם מרכזי הרבה יותר ממקומן של הנשים באוטוביוגרפיות של בעליהן.

האוטוביוגרפיות האלו היו גם תרגיל בעיצוב-עצמי. בוריס טומשבסקי ניסה לעצב את תדמיתו על פי דמותו של אברהם גודלפדן, הידוע כאבי תיאטרון היידיש, ובאוטוביוגרפיה שכתב ביקש להכתיר את עצמו 'אבי תיאטרון היידיש האמריקני'. יעקב אדלר תיאר את עצמו כשחקן ריאליסטי שנאבק באופן תמידי ועיקש נגד ה'שונד', אף שבפועל הוא השתתף בהצגות רבות השייכות לקטגוריה זו. על פי רוב הנשים רצו להיזכר ככוכבות בשמי הבמה היידית בתקופת הזוהר שלה. שרה אדלר הדגישה את תרומתה לתיאטרון היידיש כשחקנית ריאליסטית. בסי טומשבסקי השתמשה בשתי האוטוביוגרפיות שכתבה על מנת לעבד את הטראומה של הפרידה שלה מבוריס.

כאשר דעכו כוכבי הבמה הוותיקים אחרי 1917, המשיך התיאטרון המסחרי היידי בניו יורק בדרכו של טומשבסקי. נעשו גם ניסיונות להמשיך בדרכם של האדלרים בתיאטרונים אמנותיים. "התיאטרון האמנותי היהודי" של יעקב בן-עמי הגשים את שאיפתה של שרה אדלר ליצור תיאטרון אמנותי יידי, אבל שרד רק שתי עונות, בין 1919–1921. "התיאטרון האמנותי היידי" של מוריס שווארץ הוקם ב-1917 כתיאטרון ברוחו של יעקב אדלר, אבל החל ב-1930, כשהקהל דובר האנגלית הגיע לתיאטרון היידי בעיקר כדי לחוות חוויות יהודיות, התחילה להקה זו להפיק הצגות קרובות יותר לרוחו של טומשבסקי.

לאחר שיעקב ושרה אדלר ירדו מהבמה, הם השפיעו גם על התיאטרון והקולנוע האמריקני באמצעות בתם, המורה הדגולה למשחק, סטלה אדלר, שהושפעה מאוד מהוריה. הדים של ממש לכתיבה על אודות משחק באוטוביוגרפיות של יעקב ושרה נשמעים בשיטת המשחק שסטלה לימדה. אף התיאטרון המוסיקלי של

ארה"ב הושפע רבות מתיאטרון היידיש ויוצריו. יש לציין במיוחד את יצירתו של בוריס טומשבסקי, שחידושיה הקדימו התפתחותיות משמעותיות במחזמר האמריקני.

עבודה זו מראה שקריאה ביקורתית באוטוביוגרפיות של שחקנים יכולה לתרום למחקר האקדמי של תולדות התיאטרון ושל אמנות הביצוע. העיון באוטוביוגרפיות מאפשר הצצה לפרספקטיבה של היוצרים במדיום התיאטרלי החי והנושם. לקביעה זו יש תוקף מיוחד לגבי תיאטרונים שהיו ממוקדים בשחקניהם, כמו תיאטרון היידיש בארה"ב.

עבודה זו נעשתה בהדרכתם של פרופסור דוד רוסקיס ופרופסור יהודה
מורלי

שנותיו המעצבות של תיאטרון היידיש כפי שהן מוצגות בכתיבה האוטוביוגרפית של יוצריו בארה"ב

חיבור לשם קבלת תואר דוקטור לפילוסופיה
מאת
יעקב פרידלנד

הוגש לסנט האוניברסיטה העברית בירושלים
נובמבר/2022