

THE YIDDISH STAGE

By Dr. S. M. MELAMED.

THE Yiddish theatres in Greater New York, fourteen in number, opened the season of 1925-26 on the second day of Rosh ha-Shanah, the Jewish New Year—and all have played to capacity houses.

The Yiddish managers are very optimistically inclined and believe that they will do better business this season than last. Their optimism is not altogether unjustified. They know by this time that the recent immigration law has not affected and will not affect their theatres, which are frequented by the younger generation to at least as great if not to a greater extent than by the older. They rest assured in their knowledge that the Yiddish theatre has been thoroughly Americanized, that it is now a stable American institution and no longer dependent on immigration from Eastern Europe. People who can neither speak nor write Yiddish attend Yiddish stage performances and pay Broadway prices on Second Avenue—of recent years the centre of the Yiddish drama.

This surely is a remarkable phenomenon. It can only be explained by the fact that the New York Jewish community, of long civic standing, is more conscious of its Judaism today than in days gone by and takes a great interest in Jewish art, histrionic, musical and plastic. There are today in New York a large number of talented Jewish painters who draw their inspiration from topics of racial life, and find patrons for their art. The same situation is true of Jewish sculptors, musicians and writers. Jewish cultural life in New York is in full flower, and the rapid growth of the Yiddish theatre is only one of its expressions.

Next to the Yiddish press, with its seven dailies and a number of weeklies and monthlies, the idiomatic stage is the greatest power in the Jewish life of New York. Its prosperity has attracted the best talent from across the sea and it commands more genuine ability than all the Yiddish theatres in Europe combined. The Hebrew Actors' Union of America, with a membership of over three hundred, has not only placed all of its members in good posi-

tions, but it has also granted many privileges to non-members, so great was the demand for Yiddish actors and actresses long before the season set in. A great many members of the union are American-born and all of them are thoroughly Americanized. Their methods and their stage technique are American and, but for the language, they are to all practical purposes and intents American, because their plays, too, are of New World setting. They portray American Jewish life. The Yiddish press may die out gradually; it may not last longer than another decade or two; but the Yiddish theatre seems to be a stabilized institution because it is not affected by immigration.

An unexpected growth of the last few years has necessitated a division of work. Some enterprises, like the Second Avenue and the Lenox Theatres, specialize in musical comedy, others in melodrama, while yet another set of theatres concentrate upon literary plays. Such a one is the Yiddish Art Theatre. Its director, Maurice Schwartz, who has rendered great service to the stage of his community, makes the literary play his specialty.

He has opened this season with Paul Heyse's biblical play "King Saul." Paul Heyse was one of the greatest German poets of the last generation. No German producer has done more justice to it than Mr. Schwartz. Whether "King Saul" will be a financial success, as well as an artistic one, is hard to predict, but its production by Schwartz under very unfavorable conditions is certainly a credit to the Yiddish theatre and testifies to the artistic idealism and good taste of the able producer. In addition, Mr. Schwartz has succeeded in organizing a first-rate cast. Besides Mr. Maratoff, a great character actor and one of the celebrities of the Russian stage before the revolution, he has added to his cast this year Miss Leah Rosen, a well-known German tragedienne, and Bella Ballerina, an able and graceful Warsaw actress. To complete the cosmopolitan aspect of his cast, he has engaged a Hebrew actress from Jerusalem, Miss Blisehebah.

The other major houses on Second Avenue have retained their old casts,

with the exception of the Peoples Theatre. Mr. Gabel, the director, a very successful player, producer and manager, has been fortunate in acquiring the services of two able comedians, Moony Weisenfreund and Sam Kasten. Next to Ludwig Satz, the star of the Yiddish company recently at the Irving Place Theatre, Weisenfreund and Kasten are considered the best comedians on the Yiddish stage. They will share the stellar honors with Miss Jenny Goldstein and Mr. Gabel himself.

The only major Yiddish theatre on Second Avenue, where two leading women are the main attractions for lovers of comedy and drama, is the Second Avenue Theatre, formerly Kessler's. There Jenny Valliere, a Gentile German actress who has acquired a remarkable mastery of Yiddish, and dainty Miss Molly Picon, the musical comedy star, rule supreme. Both women outshine all their male colleagues in talent and stagecraft. They are, moreover, the two best paid actresses on the Yiddish stage. Molly Picon, for instance, draws a salary of six hundred a week. Considering that Yiddish actors are engaged for the entire season and need pay no commission to agents, such a salary must be a source of envy to many an actress of the American stage. The manager of the Second Avenue Theatre, Mr. Edelstein, is very proud of his new acquisitions. Both stars have played to capacity houses throughout the last season, and he is hopeful of good business this season too.

The National Theatre, formerly Thomashefskys, managed by Messrs. Goldberg and Sachs, pursues a different policy. Both stars are male, Leon Blank, a powerful character actor and Lebedoff, a musical comedy star. They, too, draw vast audiences, and can well compete with Second Avenue Theatre.

I lay so much stress on the stars of the major Yiddish houses because of the general though-mistaken view that the Yiddish stage is not dominated by the most successful Yiddish impresario star. It is, and perhaps to a much greater extent than the American. The above mentioned houses would not survive two weeks without their stars. Maurice Schwartz has made an attempt to replace the star system by the ensemble—he has been only partly successful. The Yiddish Art Theatre may get along without stars, but no other Yiddish theatre can. The rest all have to

continue the system because of a lack of able regisseurs to organize and train an ensemble.

In the Bronx and the upper west side there are this season four Yiddish theatrical concerns: The Lenox given over to musical comedy; the McKinley Square Theatre, devoted to melodrama, and presided over by Joe Kessler and Miss Schnitzer; the Rudolph Schildkraut Theatre, of which Ossip Dymow, the well-known Russian and Yiddish playwright and short-story writer, is the director, and the Prospect Theatre, where Yiddish vaudeville will be played in the middle of the week and "legitimate" on week-ends.

Brooklyn, this season, has four Yiddish theatres. The Amphion, an old house, where Yiddish is being played for the first time; the Liberty, the Lyric and the Hopkinson. The most important of the four, from the point of view of talent, is the Amphion. Its artistic leaders are Samuel Goldenburg and Celia Adler, two of the most talented on the Yiddish stage. Mr. Goldenburg is a versatile actor, and was for a time the star of the Second Avenue Theatre. Miss Celia Adler, a daughter of Jacob P. Adler, is best known for her work in Peretz Hirschbein's idyll of Russian-Jewish life. She is American-born and should command respect and admiration on any stage. Mr. Goldenburg and Miss Adler intend to play melodrama at the beginning of the season, but they will switch over to literary plays as soon as they can get in contact with their audiences. The main attraction of the Lyric Theatre is Mr. Michalesco, a player of varied gifts, who can enact heavy and light parts with equal skill.

And at the Lyric Theatre there is Joseph Schongold, an able tragedian and a tuneful singer with a trained voice, who rules supreme. He shares headline histrionic honors, however, with Frances Adler, the eldest daughter of Jacob P. Adler. Both have just returned from a visit to Buenos Aires, where they played in Yiddish for a period of three months to capacity houses.

The new "legitimate" stage on the lower east side is the Grand Theatre on Grand Street. For years the Grand was devoted to vaudeville, but this year an attempt will be made to transform it into a legitimate house. Like most of the Yiddish stages, the Grand, too, is chiefly devoted to melodrama, and the able cast, headed by Mr. Goldberg and Miss Finkel, may attract large audiences and bring back to the house the old glories of the days when Jacob P. Adler was the chief attraction.

The Grand, the Amphion and the McKinley are the three new additions this year. They should be able to last the season. New houses will be opened next year in new Jewish neighborhoods. There will be no telling to what an extent the Yiddish theatre in Greater New York may develop within the next few years. If the view taken by the managers are sound and based on facts, we may have next year twenty Yiddish theatres in Chicago and New York, and the Yiddish stage may become a serious competitor of the American. It is obvious that if 300,000 families in New York regularly attend Yiddish performances, they cannot all patronize the American theatre as well.

A word about the Yiddish play. While the New York Yiddish theatre has developed rapidly in technique and organization and has produced notable histrionic talent, the Yiddish play has not kept pace with the growth of its stage. Among the Yiddish actors and actresses there are many who cannot read or write Yiddish, and more artists than familiar portraitists of Jewish life. Mere artistry, however, will not do in the writing of a Jewish play. To write successfully one must possess accurate information in addition to talent, and that is a rather scarce combination. The old-fashioned Yiddish melodrama is not popular with the younger generation and the Messiah of modern demands has not yet appeared.

In consequence the Yiddish play finds itself now in a stage of transition. A new style has not been produced as yet and the old is somewhat out of date as a result of the Americanization of the Yiddish stage. The managers are in an embarrassing position—they know not exactly what to do. Last year's crop, too, was meagre and most of the Yiddish houses have opened the season with melodramas of dubious literary merit. And thus there is the fact that the managers talk more about their stars than about their plays.

DOWN IN GRAND STREET

It turns out that the first production of the new season at the Neighborhood Playhouse will be "The Dybbuk," long well known on the Yiddish stage. The date, however, is unset, for the "Grand Street Follies" continues to be highly prosperous.



Margaret Lawrence, Who Leaps Seventeen Years as the Mother in "The Pelican," the New English Play at the Times Square.