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Jews, Theater, Performance in an Intercultural World

By David Y. Chack

David Y. Chack was recently honored by being chosen as one of the semi-finalists of the The Charles R. Bronfman Visiting Chair in Jewish Communal Innovation at Brandeis University. Chack is a graduate of NYU/TSOA and did graduate work at Tufts University with Laurence Senelick and at Boston University with Elie Wiesel. He is consulting on a number of projects that take him between Chicago, Louisville, New York, Boston, and Israel. He has worked with JCC's, Hillel Foundations in Boston and Virginia, Virginia Humanities Foundation, Kentucky Shakespeare Festival, Louisville Orchestra, Hillels Around Chicago, Jewish Theatre Ensemble at Northwestern University, and the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School of Hebrew University. He is on the boards of All About Jewish Theatre, the Association for Jewish Theatre (AJT), The International Institute of Jewish & Israeli Culture, and is an alumnus of the Mandel Teacher Educators Institute in Israel. He is currently writing about Jews in performing arts in America and creating multi-cultural theatre through parables and midrash. Email Address: chack@iglou.com

On remarking about the 1988 premiere of his play Speed-the-Plow on Broadway and the acting performance of the late Ron Silver, David Mamet remarked that Silver's performance was like "exploding synagogues." I don't know if that is what **Edna Nahshon, Associate Professor of Hebrew at JTS** had in mind when she organized the conference on "**Jews, Theater, Performance in an Intercultural World**" **February 22 - 24, 2009**. But by having it at the Jewish Theological Seminary she was indeed exploding a taboo, be it mythical or not, between the seriousness of Jewish studies and the perceived frivolity of theatre.

The Jewish Theological Seminary of America is a training ground for rabbis, cantors, and scholars. As one wanders the halls of this august institution in its landmark building in Morningside Heights of New York City, comfortably folded between Riverside Church and Columbia University, one thinks about the great leaders and scholars of Judaism who walked these halls -- Abraham Joshua Heschel, Louis Ginzberg, and of course Solomon Schechter, the founding chancellor.

So, it seemed a bit incongruous for theatre and performance studies people to gather at a conference about the relationship between Jews and theatre in the history of Jewish culture. Questions such as: What is theatre and performance in a Jewish context? Is the only authentic Jewish theatre from an indigenous Jewish culture? Do Jews inordinately perform and create theatre in contrast to their small population? Does catastrophe and the "outsider" in society play a special role in Jewish inflected theatre?

Clearly the scope of a conference with a title "Jews, Theater, Performance in an Intercultural World" will tell you the breadth of its mission, which for a first conference was quite daunting. But what emerged from the conversations was the incredible energy

and vitality that Jewish theatre - or Jews-in-theatre- have given to world theatre and performance.

This was echoed numerous times, from the Provost and Professor of Bible **Alan Cooper**, who greeted the participants, to the opening presentation on the Bible as Theatre and Music -- which was followed up by two singular sessions on Yiddish Theatre and Mizrahi Theatre. Cooper reported to me later, "From my point of view, the theatre conference was a great success. All one has to do, as you observe, is look at the stellar roster of presenters and performers."

Tom Oppenheim, the grandson of the iconoclastic Stella Adler, one of the great stars from the Yiddish theatre and a co-founder of the 1930's **Group Theatre**, greeted the conference at the opening dinner. Oppenheim, (who was there with his mother Ellen Adler – Stella Adler's daughter) and the director of the **Stella Adler Studio of Acting**, spoke about the tremendous legacy of the Yiddish theatre on American theatre and held the crowd in rapt attention as he told story after story of the Adler family and other Yiddish theatre greats and their tremendous impact on New York theatre. Stella (which is how all her students familiarly referred to her), is best known as the founding director and acting teacher par excellence of the prestigious Adler Studio, and had Marlon Brando as one of her many star pupils.

Over the two and a half days, session topics covered: In the American Mainstream; The Merchant of Venice and Holocaust Memories; Jews and the German Stage, Jewish Refuseniks, Comics, and Idealists; From the Field; Experimental Theater; Israeli Theater; On Jews, Jewishness, and the American Musical Theater; Jews on East European Stages; Theater of the Shoah; : Representation of Women / Representation of War on the German Stage; Hebrew Drama; and theatrical presentations including a screening of A Japanese Dybbuk; Rebecca Joy Fletcher's Jewish Cabaret; and the Ruth Kanner Theater Group from Israel.

About 60 scholars presented, not including session chairs, with an immense range of institutions represented including from Israel: Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, Haifa University, and several other colleges. In the U.S. & Canada - from NY to California: Columbia, CUNY, NYU, Harvard, Boston College, Princeton, Yale, Tufts, University of Washington, UCLA, University of Texas, and Vanderbilt. From Europe: University of Sienna, University of Munich, and the University of Latvia. In addition attendees came for individual sessions and overall about 200 people attended various events and panels.

Professor Cooper held high hopes for the new direction and vision set by **the new chancellor, Arnold Eisen**. "We are making much more effort to put JTS on the "cultural map" than we have in the recent past. As for theater, Edna and I already are discussing a possible program for next year. It is international and interfaith in scope, and would involve components of both study and performance. That's just to whet your appetite, with details hopefully to follow soon."

In some ways, Edna reminded me, this is also a return for JTS, because back from 1944 - 1989 they sponsored some of the most powerful dramas on The Eternal Light on NBC radio and occasionally on television. They included dramas on Jewish themes with the some of the best actors and notables of the day such as Alan Arkin, Joseph Cotton, Ralph Bellamy, Theodore Bikel, Gene Saks, Maureen Stapleton, Elie Wiesel, and Joseph Wiseman.

The lead sponsor was the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and other sponsors included the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, the Office of Cultural Affairs of New York City, and the Consulate General of Israel in New York.
