

*Avrom Goldfaden and the modern Yiddish theatre*



A. GOLDFADEN

# The Bard of Old Constantine



by Joel Berkowitz

Avrom Goldfaden may be the most influential Jewish artist you've never heard of. Sholem Aleichem ranked him among the finest Yiddish writers of the late nineteenth century; the novelist's eponymous hero, Yossele Solovey, dreams of stroking his true love's hair while she sings the Goldfaden poem, "*Der malekh*" ("The Angel"), which they used to sing together as children. Mark Warshavsky, composer of such beloved songs as "*Oyfn pripetshik*" ("By the Fireplace"), wrote that he modeled his songs on Goldfaden's. And writer Alter Kacyzne recalled I. L. Peretz exclaiming, "Those fools [the critics] think my *rebbe* was Mendele. It's a lie. Avrom Goldfaden is my *rebbe*!"

Millions shared this esteem for Goldfaden. His plays, ranging from broad farces to "historical operas," were ubiquitous on Yiddish stages from Moscow to Johannesburg to New York. Countless parents rocked their children to sleep singing Goldfaden songs like "*Rozhinkes mit mandlen*" ("Raisins and Almonds") – the lyrics of which, Goldfaden remarked, he inserted in the published version of his operetta *Shulamis* not because the song belonged there, but because it was so adored by the public. He was hailed as the Father of the Yiddish Theatre, and when he died in New York in 1908, thousands of admirers lined the streets to pay their respects.

If Goldfaden had done nothing more than organize the first stable professional Yiddish theatre company and lay the foundation of the Yiddish dramatic and musical-theatre repertoire, then *dayenu* – that would have been enough to earn him an honored place in history. But his contribution to Jewish culture did not end there. He had a comparably profound impact on Yiddish song. In the words of his friend Yitskhok Perkof, "Goldfaden's songs

penetrated his people's heart, where their melodies grew like a version of '*Kol Nidre*.'" It would be artificial to try to separate his songwriting from his playwriting, since the text and the song were so intertwined for him. Goldfaden himself liked to say, "When I have a song, I have a play."<sup>1</sup> He was a prolific and accomplished poet as well, with one volume of Hebrew verse and a dozen books of Yiddish poems to his name. Somehow he also managed to found three short-lived but respected newspapers, get involved in Jewish politics, and direct several theatre companies.

If Goldfaden's significance stopped there, we might again say *dayenu* – that seems enough for three lifetimes at least. Yet his impact extends even further, for a couple of important reasons. One is the light his work sheds on his era, for to read Goldfaden's *oeuvre* from start to finish is to relive the course of Eastern European Jewry from the 1860s to the early twentieth century. The other is his impact on subsequent eras, for just as Goldfaden continually reexamined the Jewish condition throughout his lifetime, subsequent generations have reinvented his plays and music to suit changing aesthetic outlooks and social and political situations.

## The artist as a young man

He was born Avrom Goldenfodem in Old Constantine, Ukraine, in 1840. Like his three younger brothers, he worked as an apprentice to his father, Khayim-Lipe, a respected watchmaker whom he later described as "the only craftsman in the shtetl who enjoyed opening a Jewish book, and did not spare his last hard-earned penny to teach [me] Hebrew." Khayim-Lipe's letters to the editor were occasionally published in the Hebrew press, and in

<sup>1</sup> Yekhezkel Dobrushin, *Di dramaturgye fun di klasiker* (Moscow: Melukhe-farlag Der Emes, 1948), 10.

1868, Avrom's brother Yidl was published in the important Yiddish literary journal, *Kol mevaser*. Avrom got an earlier start. By the age of seven, he claimed, he was composing rhymes so cleverly that his father nicknamed him "Avrey-mele badkhn" – little Avrom the jester. By the time he left home at the age of seventeen, his songs had become popular in Old Constantine and in neighboring *shtetlekh*.

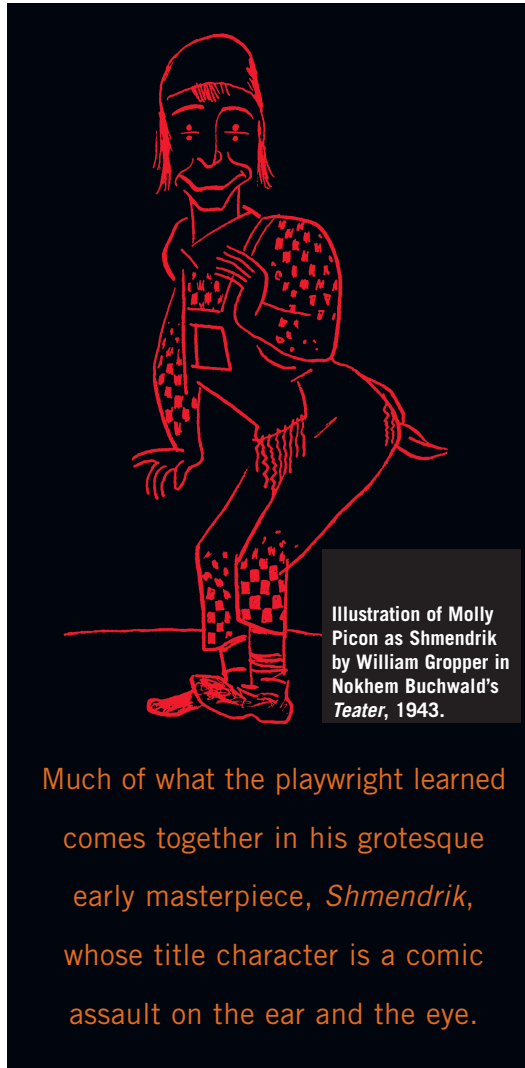
Just as formative were Avrom's school experiences: first in Old Constantine, and later at a government-run rabbinical academy in the city of Zhitomir. His teachers included writer Avrom Ber Gottlob, who remembered his student as "a very young boy who... would pay special attention when I wrote Yiddish: it was his great passion." In Zhitomir, Goldfaden befriended classmate Yitskhok-

Yoel Linetski, now best known for his wildly popular satire of Hasidic life, *Dos poylisher yingl* (*The Polish Boy*, 1869). The two friends later collaborated on several ventures, including a newspaper in the Romanian city of Jassy. While still in Zhitomir, in 1862, Goldfaden gave a triumphant performance, in drag, as the title character in a landmark student production of Shloyme Ettinger's comedy, *Serkele*.

Goldfaden continued to write as well. He published a collection of Hebrew verse in 1865, followed a year later by a volume of Yiddish poems. His next book, *Di yidene* (*The Jewish Woman*, 1869), included poetry, a brief dramatic sketch, and a three-act comedy, *Aunt Sosye* – dedicated to his wife, Paulina, whom he married in 1868. Though the play is obviously beholden to *Serkele*, it is a charming comedy, and a more than respectable first effort. It was written for the page, however, not the stage, for no professional Yiddish theatre troupe existed at the time.

### Father of the Yiddish theatre

Goldfaden's career took a turn after he found himself at loose ends in Jassy in the autumn of 1876. *Der alter*



*yisrolik*, the newspaper he and Linetski had started, was gaining a fine reputation – even being seen by some as the heir to the landmark *Kol mevaser* – but it was shut down by the government after only a few months. In the meantime, Goldfaden had achieved a degree of local celebrity, since his songs were popular among the cabaret-style performers known as Broder singers. But Goldfaden was less talented onstage. When a Broder singer named Yisroel Grodner invited Goldfaden to sing his own compositions at a local theatre, the result was a fiasco, requiring Grodner to come to the rescue and win back the affections of the restless audience.

A less confident man might have put away his pen and gone back to the family business. Goldfaden persisted, writing sketches for Grodner and Sokher Goldstein, whose boyish

face landed him all the women's roles until the troupe took on its first actress a few months later. While Goldfaden was a pioneer, he could draw upon a wide variety of sources for inspiration. In a memoir written near the end of his life, he emphasized the breadth and depth of his knowledge when he started as a playwright: he was a student of Jewish history; familiar with "practically all of Russian literature"; a frequent visitor to Russian and Polish theatres; and had seen the Shakespearean performances of the great African American tragedian Ira Aldridge, who toured widely in Eastern Europe. He also had a world of Jewish tradition behind him: both the textual tradition that provided the basis for stories, characters, and other ideas and a rich performance tradition that included the centuries-old *purimshpil*, the verses of *badkhanim* (wedding jesters) and other minstrels, and Broder singers like Berl Broder and Velvl Zbarzher. Throughout his career, Goldfaden wove the two traditions, Jewish and Western, into a rich new tapestry.

The fact that a young artist like Goldfaden could straddle these different traditions was made possible by the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment. The movement

began in the late eighteenth century and called for Jews to balance their religious practice and education with secular learning. *Maskilim* (enlighteners) like Goldfaden argued that striking such a balance – being “a man abroad and a Jew in your tent,” in the words of one thinker<sup>2</sup> – would encourage Gentile society to be more accepting. The spread of Jewish emancipation in Europe from the end of the eighteenth century throughout much of the nineteenth seemed compelling evidence for that view.

One of the favorite targets of the *maskilim* was arranged marriages – a staple of comic playwrighting since Roman times, and a symbol for the *maskilim* of all that was wrong with traditional Jewish society. Over the first half-dozen years of his career, Goldfaden churned out a parade of plays in which desirable marriages take place despite numerous obstacles, while potentially disastrous couplings are averted. In these early comedies – let’s call them the Goldfaden Variations – the playwright spun this idea into material for a sometimes triumphant, often controversial tour of the Pale of Settlement. Goldfaden derived a variety of comic effects by adding some new touch in each play to one or more of the main ingredients: the desirable young lady, the ideal young man, the parental obstacle, the matchmaker, and the undesired potential bride and groom.

Much of what the playwright learned by working through the Goldfaden Variations comes together in his grotesque early masterpiece, *Shmendrik*, whose title character is

fifteen years old, not tall, a *yarmulke* on his head and two long, straight earlocks, in red underwear that buttons in back. A long string of lead amulets, parchments, and wolf’s teeth hangs around his neck, and a silver hoop in one ear. His foolish face is framed by large black eyebrows, with redness around his nose and various scratches scattered about his face and neck. He says “s” instead of “sh” and “t” instead of “k.”<sup>3</sup>

Shmendrik is a comic assault on the ear and the eye, and his mother’s effusive praise cannot mask the fact that he is an imbecile as well. If we are in any doubt about his compat-

ibility as a mate for the girl his mother has selected for him, the young couple’s first meeting should dispel such notions:

*Rivke*. What good would a bride do you? What do you need a bride for?

*Shmendrik*. What do you mean, what good would a bride do me? Get a load of her, the crazy girl! My rebbe bought me a dreydl, so I’ll play dreydl with her! Heh heh heh – ...

*Rivke* (Cries). Oh, all is lost!

*Shmendrik* (Also cries). Mommy, where is my Mommy?!<sup>4</sup>

Fortunately, Rivke’s true love comes to the rescue, and the play ends with a riotous double wedding where Rivke switches places with another girl. All ends happily as Shmendrik snacks on the rice thrown by the guests.

Goldfaden further refined his mastery of farce with his sensational success of 1880, *Di tsvey Kuni-Lemls* (*The Two Kuni-Lemls*). Goldfaden allegedly “borrowed” the plot from a comedy by rival playwright Joseph Lateiner, who in turn adapted *his* play from a German novel. It would be Goldfaden’s version that achieved renown throughout the Yiddish-speaking world. Reb Pinkhesl, a wealthy Hasidic merchant blinded by his desire for a prestigious match for his daughter, plans to marry her to Kuni-Leml, “a twenty-year-old Hasid – blind in one eye, lame in one foot, and with a stutter.”<sup>5</sup> To Reb Pinkhesl, these traits are less important than the young man’s impressive lineage. Besides, as the matchmaker asks, “So he can’t see through one eye and can’t walk on one leg; so show me, Reb Pinkhesl, where is it written in our holy books that a Jew has to see with both eyes, or walk equally well on both legs?”<sup>6</sup> Once again, a clever boyfriend comes up with a plan – this time by disguising himself as his rival – which is so successful that it fools even the real McCoy:

*Kuni-Leml*. Reb Kuni-Leml?

*Max*. W-what is it now?

*Kuni-Leml*. I m-meant to ask.... For example, if I walk down the street and someone c-calls out to m-me, “Reb K-kuni-Leml! Reb K-kuni-Leml!” should I answer or not?

*Max*. (With an angry tone.) No, you m-mustn’t

<sup>2</sup> Judah Leib Gordon, “*Hakiza ami*” (*Awake, My People!*, 1866), trans. D. Goldman, in *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 384.

<sup>3</sup> Avrom Goldfaden, *Shmendrik* (Odessa: Ulrikh, 1879), 3.

<sup>4</sup> Goldfaden, *Shmendrik*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Avrom Goldfaden, *Di tsvey Kuni-Lemls* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.), 1.

<sup>6</sup> Goldfaden, *Di tsvey Kuni-Lemls*, 10.

answer, since you're not K-kuni-Leml! Now r-run along home!

*Kuni-Leml*. So he r-really is Kuni-Leml, and I am...me.<sup>7</sup>

As is typical of *Haskalah* literature, reason and logic prevail; even the heroine's father admits that his enlightened children have taught him a valuable lesson about the dangers of religious fanaticism.

### The grand sweep of Jewish history

Even before 1881, when the tide of liberalism in Eastern Europe reversed itself with a wave of pogroms following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, a nationalist strain ran through much of Goldfaden's work. This comes across powerfully in *Shulamis* (1880), an opera set in ancient Palestine during the Second Temple period. The work was based on a Talmudic legend that had been retold in the Old Yiddish *Mayse-bukh* as well as in a modern Hebrew novel by Goldfaden's father-in-law, Eliyohu Werbel. Early in the story, Shulamis gets lost in the desert and falls into a well. When she is rescued by the soldier Avisholem, they sing a stirring duet and vow their undying love for one another. Though Avisholem soon breaks his vow and marries someone else, Shulamis remains loyal. In one of Goldfaden's most sublime arias, "*Shabes, yontev, un rosh khoydesh*" ("Sabbath, Festival, and New Moon"), she describes her predicament with Jewish imagery:

*Shabes, yontev, un rosh khoydesh*  
*Davn ikh mir aleyn far zikh.*  
*Ikh hob mir aleyn mayn ornkoydesh*  
*Es beyt nit keyner in im – nor ikh!*

Sabbath, festival, and new moon  
I pray all by myself.  
I have my own Holy Ark –  
No one is invited into it but me!

*Mayn tkhine iz gemakht far nekeyves*  
*Vos s'hot zey getrofn dos vos mikh!*  
*Zey kenen ale rosheteyves,*  
*Dort leyenen shnel azoy vi ikh!*

My Yiddish prayer is made for women  
Who have experienced what I have!  
They know all the abbreviations,  
And can read them quickly, just like me!...<sup>8</sup>

The heroine sings this inversion of communal prayer *andante* and in a minor key. For a Jewish audience, what could be a more heartrending expression of unwanted solitude than having to perform all the religious functions of a community on one's own?

Avisholem has brought a curse on himself and his family by breaking his vow. He finally remembers it – with the help of an angelic apparition that Tony Kushner might describe as "very Steven Spielberg" – when both of his children die tragically in infancy, prompting him to leave his wife and make his way back to Shulamis in an epic journey of repentance. When the lovers' journey culminates in a spectacular finale in the Temple in Jerusalem, it becomes clear that their tribulations and triumphs symbolize those of the entire Jewish people. Avisholem's repentance is Israel's as well; the couple's bright future can be shared by Jews everywhere.

That hopeful outlook had darkened by 1883, when Goldfaden's opera *Bar Kokhba* premiered. If a Jewish nationalist is a *maskil* who has been mugged, then the mugging had come in the forms of the pogroms of 1881 to 1882. In the years that followed, many *maskilim*, including Goldfaden, reconsidered the optimistic forecast of the *Haskalah*, and his plays and poems reflect his new thinking.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in *Bar Kokhba*, which retells the story of the Jewish zealot who led a suicidal last stand against the Romans from 132 to 135 C.E. Bar Kokhba has the fierce loyalty of his followers but enrages those who feel that political compromise with Rome is the only way to survive. In spite of his physical and military prowess and his tremendous charisma – we even see him charm a lion in the Roman arena! – Bar Kokhba ultimately succumbs to his enemies. His uprising, however noble, is a dismal failure in practical terms:

The entire Jewish army comes running across the ramparts. They are met by the Roman forces. The battle begins: swordfights, stabbings, screams. We hear the clanging of swords and the creaking of walls. The BeTar Fortress is aflame, and all its towers tumble and break apart. Several Roman soldiers run to the central gate and rip it open. Through this gate we see a terrible scene: one Roman soldier murders a child in its mother's hands as she kneels, pleading for his life; another Roman hero holds an old Jew by his hair, raising his

<sup>7</sup> Goldfaden, *Di tsvey Kuni-Lemls*, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Goldfaden, *Shulamis*, 27-28.

sword above him; still another holds a Jew to the ground with his foot, and runs him through with a spear. The entire scene is illuminated by green light from behind the gate and red light from above the ramparts. During the tumult, the curtain falls slowly.<sup>9</sup>

*Bar Kokhba's* audience, in the wake of the pogroms, was seeing itself in a distant mirror.

Goldfaden ultimately wrote some sixty plays, ranging from one-act vaudevilles and burlesques to sweeping, six-act epics. He wrote dramas in verse and prose, from the lightest fluff to the grimmest tragedies. His plays surveyed the grand sweep of Jewish history, from the *Tanakh* (*The Binding of Isaac*, *King Ahashuerus*) to antiquity (*Shulamis*, *Bar Kokhba*) to the Middle Ages (*Doctor Almasado*, *Rebbe Yozlman*) to modern times (*The Sorceress* and other comedies and dramas). He even made an attempt, in a short play about King David, to lay the foundation for the modern Hebrew theatre. Had he done so as a young man rather than in his last years, which were plagued by constant poverty and illness, he might well have succeeded.

### A Zionist ending

When Yiddish theatre was banned in the Russian empire in 1883, Goldfaden was one of many who made their way westward. In 1887, after a sojourn in Warsaw, he headed for New York, which had become the world's foremost center of Yiddish theatre. But Goldfaden's main rivals, Moyshe Hurwitz and Joseph Lateiner, established themselves in New York first, and Goldfaden would never enjoy the success as a theatre director in the United States that he had in Eastern Europe. Stung by his failure to reassemble a loyal troupe of actors in America, he moved to London in 1889 and spent much of the next fifteen years moving back and forth among several European cities. He

returned to New York for good in 1904.

Goldfaden wrote *David b'milkhamah* (*David at War*) for amateur actors in the Dr. Herzl Zion Club in New York, who performed the piece in 1906. The fact that Goldfaden



Tumianov, an actor from Lodz, in a performance of *Bar Kokhba* in Copenhagen, c. 1905.

was inspired to return to writing in Hebrew at this point, after a four-decade hiatus, reflects his growing involvement in Zionist politics. He had served as a delegate from Paris to the World Zionist Congress in London in 1900,

<sup>9</sup> Avrom Goldfaden, *Bar Kokhba (der zun fun dem shtern), oder, di letste teg fun yerushalayim* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.), 80.

and his characters sometimes embrace Zionism as well. *Meshiekh's tsaytn?! (The Messianic Era?!, 1891)* takes its main characters from a Russian shtetl to Kiev to New York before they ultimately find safe haven in Palestine. Goldfaden sent a similar message in his last play, *Ben Ami*, loosely based on George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. In a dream-like sequence in the finale, the hero inspects the Jewish soldiers of various armies and urges them to fight for a Jewish homeland. The vision ends in Palestine, with a throng of Jews crowded around the rebuilt Temple, as if in a coda to *Shulamis*.

As *Ben Ami* began its run at the People's Theatre in New York, its author lay dying, receiving visits from Jewish leaders like Nathan Birnbaum, Chaim Zhitlovsky, and Judah Magnes. When he passed away on January 8, 1908, Yiddish and English-language newspapers paid tribute and noted the impact his death made on the Jewish street:

It is said that about twenty-five thousand turned out to do honor to the memory of the poet. As early as seven o'clock, the street in front of his home on 11th Street was filled with mourners. The crowd increased in number until about eleven o'clock, when the body was taken from the house. Following the hearse were about 100 carriages. Among the organizations represented were a number of Zionist societies, the Actors' Union, the Variety Actors' Union, the Theatrical Tailors' Union, the Bill-posters and Ushers' Union and the Abarbanel Lodge. All the Yiddish theatres were draped in black. The Hebrew Actors' Club was draped in mourning, and had the Zionist flag at half-mast.

In his final moments, Goldfaden is said to have repeated to friends gathered around him, "Zion is the true home for the Jews."

### Reinventing Goldfaden

Pick a Yiddish newspaper from any time between the 1880s and World War II, turn to the theatre advertisements, and you will probably find at least one Goldfaden play on the bill. The audiences who went to these productions knew what to expect. Actor and theatre historian Jacob Mestel remarked that "wherever Goldfaden was performed 'as written,' wherever a Goldfaden play was presented simply because the audience loved a Goldfaden play – there Goldfaden remained like the Torah handed down from Mount Sinai, like the tune of a prayer; there the thousandth Goldfaden production in Buenos Aires or

Johannesburg was in essence always similar to the first production in Jassy or Odessa, because Goldfaden to this day remains a bit of Yiddish theatre tradition."<sup>10</sup> This tradition could be as comfortable as old jeans or as stale as old bread. One critic's lament over a 1924 production of *Kuni-Lemls* undoubtedly applied to many Goldfaden productions by then: "The play is usually presented in the Yiddish theatre for people who will watch anything, and who have no understanding of what is being performed. The actors thus treat the play at such performances as something cheap and vulgar."

Some artists, however, were finding ways to infuse the old material with new life – that is, not just reviving the plays as they had always been performed but staging them in ways that reflected the latest developments in theatrical art. Mestel described some of these productions too, such as a *Two Kuni Lemls* with two pairs of Kuni Lemls, or a gender-bending *Shulamis* with the women's roles played by men, and vice versa. This was not your *zeyde-bobe's* Goldfaden!

A watershed in the reinvention of Goldfaden occurred in 1922, when director Alexander Granovsky and the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre (GOSET) used *Di kishemakherin (The Sorceress)* to launch a new aesthetic. The operetta is on one level a conventional fable of an evil stepmother, an innocent and persecuted stepdaughter, and a wicked witch. In Goldfaden's hands, it is also an assault on superstition, for the witch perpetrates her evil deeds only because people's backward ideas lead them to believe in her powers, which she readily admits are a sham. In the end, the stepdaughter, Mirele, is rescued by her beloved Marcus, with the help of the unscrupulous but good-hearted merchant, Hotsmakh. The evil characters are hoist by their own petard – or as the final couplet has it, "*Ver es grobt a grub af yenem, / Falt aley n arayn!*"<sup>11</sup> ("He who digs another's grave falls into it himself").

*The Sorceress*, as traditionally performed, epitomized the old style of Yiddish theatre. Its songs were sung not only on Yiddish stages but in Jewish homes throughout the world. (To this day, birthday parties at which Yiddish speakers gather continue to reprise the opening song, "*Tsu dayn geburtstog.*") If this most old-fashioned of Yiddish plays could provide fuel for the avant-garde, then what couldn't be modernized? GOSET's approach was apparent even before a note was sung, for the set featured platforms and ladders on which the actors raced up and down throughout the performance, giving the sense of constant movement.

Granovsky did not rely on design alone to make a

<sup>10</sup> Jacob Mestel, "Goldfaden als traditsye af der bine," in *Goldfaden-bukh*, ed. Dr. Jacob Shatsky (New York: Yiddish Theatre Museum, 1926), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Avrom Goldfaden, *Di kishemakherin* (Warsaw: P. Kantorowicz, 1930), 63.



A dancer in Maurice Schwartz's production of *The Tenth Commandment* at the Yiddish Art Theatre (NY), 1926. Courtesy of the New York Public Library.

statement. Yekhezkl Dobrushin's text added a scene that was in itself a manifesto. As rain falls in the marketplace, we hear voices calling out:

- Charity saves from death!
- Died? Who?
- The old Yiddish theatre!
- *Barukh dayan emet*.<sup>12</sup>

Granovsky and company thus used a staple of the old Yiddish theatre to tear that theatre down and build a new one out of its ashes. In the process, the reworked play also took swipes at traditional Judaism, with the peddler

Hotsmakh lamenting the loss of one of his *peyes* in a singsong evoking the chanting of the Book of Lamentations, and the witch working her magic to the tune of *Kol Nidre*.

GOSET's marriage of traditional text and modernist technique quickly made its way westward. At the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York, Maurice Schwartz staged the same play in 1925 – minus the strong ideological slant of GOSET but clearly inspired by the Moscow company's style. The New York production featured half-beards, crooked doorways, and incongruous colors to establish the play's carnivalesque atmosphere. The acting, as

<sup>12</sup> "Blessed be the True Judge" – in a Sephardic pronunciation that poked fun at the Hebrew-speaking *Habimah* company.



reported by critic B. Gorin, was similarly non-naturalistic: “Here the actors speak like wooden figures from a carnival, and they try with all their might to perform so that one will clearly see that none of it is as in real life.” Advocates of experimentation like critic Nokhem Buchwald approved,

insisting that “a Goldfaden play can now be produced only in the spirit of revival. And ... we can adorn it with all sorts of modernistic trimmings and enjoy ourselves with a pretention to seriousness.” Other critics maintained that the only way to stage new works was to do so the way they had always been performed. Abraham Cahan, editor-in-chief of the *Forverts*, detested the production’s “crazy outfits... musicians with monkey faces; a man with a beak instead of a nose,” calling such touches “an abomination.” Audiences were not so

troubled; the production’s success at the box office carried the company for the entire season.

The practice of reworking Goldfaden to suit various political and aesthetic agendas continued. In the 1930s, Goldfaden’s plays became vehicles for responding to both Communism and Nazism. GOSET again led the way, in the wake of its controversial 1936 production of Moyshe Kulbak’s *Boytre*, a tale of the Jewish underworld in Tsarist Russia. The Soviet authorities used the production as a pretext to condemn Kulbak and the company for presenting uniformly negative portrayals of Jews. The young and talented Kulbak was arrested and perished in the gulag. To placate the authorities after this tragic turn of

events, GOSET turned again to Goldfaden – or more precisely, to Goldfaden via poet Shmuel Halkin. Halkin rewrote the texts of *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhba*, emphasizing the heroic and idyllic aspects of both operettas. This strategy was adopted in 1938 by the Warsaw Yiddish Art Theatre (VYKT), whose director, Zygmunt Turkow, sought to counter the racial anti-Semitism of the Nazis and to lift the spirits of beleaguered Jews in Lemberg and Warsaw by presenting “examples of the positive side of Jewish life, creativity, and history.” According to one historian, VYKT’s *Shulamis* succeeded in giving “beautiful examples of higher human ethics,” while its *Bar Kokhba* “sowed confidence in worried Jewish hearts.”<sup>13</sup>

Time and again, writers and directors called upon Goldfaden for many reasons and in a variety of formats. There were children’s productions of *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhba* in Poland in 1907; radio performances of those plays in New York in 1929; countless recordings of his songs; screen adaptations such as the enormously successful Israeli comedies, *Shney Kuni-Leml* and *Kuni-Leml b’Tel Aviv*; and even original plays inspired by Goldfaden. Mikhl Weichert’s delightful *Trupe Tanentsap* (*The Tanentsap Troupe*), for example, depicts a performance of *The Two Kuni-Lemls* in a Galician shtetl in the late 1800s, while Itzik Manger’s *Hotsmakh-shpil* (*Hotsmakh Play*), an equally charming reinvention, foregrounds the peddler Hotsmakh, one of Goldfaden’s most popular characters. Indeed, Manger liked Goldfaden’s fast-talking peddler so much that his play features not one Hotsmakh, but three!

### Living testaments

So ingrained did Goldfaden become in Yiddish culture that he added new words to the Yiddish vocabulary, and his best-known songs were often perceived as Yiddish folklore. Though not included in standard Yiddish dictionaries, words like *shmendrik* and *Kuni-Leml* entered Yiddish slang. They also turn up in Leo Rosten’s *The Joys of Yiddish*, which offers six different meanings of *shmendrik* and illustrates the usage of a *Kuni-Leml* with the saying, “He is the kind who looks for a notch in the saw.” Meanwhile, Goldfaden songs like “*Rozhinkes mit mandlen*” – itself inspired by a folk song – seemed to spring spontaneously from a thousand years of Yiddish cultural expres-



Title page from the Warsaw edition of Goldfaden's *Di tsvey Kuni-Lemls*, 1887.

<sup>13</sup> Mordkhe Shinar, “Varshever yidisher kunst-teater,” in *Yidisher teater in eyrope tvsishn beyde velt-milkhomes: poyln*, ed. Itsik Manger, Jonas Turkow, and Moyshe Perenson (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1968), 69-70.

<sup>14</sup> See, respectively, Paola Bertolone, “The Text of Goldfaden’s *Di kishefmakherin* and the Operetta Tradition,” and Seth L. Wolitz, “*Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhba*: Renewed Jewish Role Models in Goldfaden and Halkin,” in *Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), 77-86 and 87-104; and Alyssa Quint, “The Botched Kiss: Avraham Goldfaden and the Literary Origins of the Yiddish Theatre” (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 2002).

sion, lending itself to variation as well. Soviet Yiddish propagandists turned the lullaby into an anti-religious march, while Isaiah Spiegel commented on conditions in the Lodz Ghetto by inverting that song's optimism: "Nisht keyn rozhinkes un nisht keyn mandlen / Der tate iz nisht geforn handlen" – no raisins, no almonds, Daddy hasn't gone to market.

Goldfaden continues to make his presence felt among performers and scholars concerned with the cultural legacy of the modern Jewish theatre. Recent scholarship connects Goldfaden to the broader operetta tradition, examines Soviet productions of his works, and esteems not only Goldfaden's popular appeal but the literary quality of his work as well.<sup>14</sup> Outside of academia, a theatre festival in Iasi (or Jassy), the site of those historic early performances. Meanwhile, New York's *Folksbiene* Theatre has offered concert performances of several Goldfaden operettas, including a recent staging of *Akeydes Yitskhok* (*The Binding of Isaac*, 1887), one of the playwright's few major popular successes written after the early 1880s. Such endeavors, on the stage and the page, are living testaments to ways in which we can continue to enjoy the rich material Goldfaden has left us.

Goldfaden's influence on the development of the professional Yiddish theatre is well known to students of Yiddish culture, but enormous as his impact was, there is an even larger story to tell: a story of a theatrical culture grappling with the most profound issues of its day and conveying them to a passionate audience worldwide. Goldfaden's work is a microcosm of the development of the modern Yiddish stage, and the events portrayed on the modern Yiddish stage are in many ways a microcosm of the modern Jewish experience. PT

---

*Joel Berkowitz is assistant professor of Modern Jewish Studies at the State University of New York at Albany. He is the author of Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage, editor of Yiddish Theatre: New Approaches, and founding editor of the Yiddish Theatre Forum, an online discussion group. All translations are his unless indicated otherwise.*



**Boris Aronson's costume design for *The Tenth Commandment* at the Yiddish Art Theatre (NY), 1926.**

## Bibliography

- Berkowitz, Joel. "The Tallis or the Cross: Reviving Goldfaden at the Yiddish Art Theatre." *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50 (Spring 1999), 120-38.
- Dobrushin, Yekhezkel. *Di dramaturgye fun di klasiker*. Moscow: Melukhe-farlag Der Emes, 1948.
- Goldfaden, Avrom. *Bar Kokhba (der zun fun dem shtern), oder, di letste teg fun yerushalayim*. New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.
- . *Di kishefmakherin*. Warsaw: P. Kantorowicz, 1930.
- . *Shmendrik*. Odessa: Ulrikh, 1879.
- . *Shulamis oder bas-yerushalayim*. Warsaw: P. Kantorowicz, 1925.
- . *Di tsvey Kuni-Lemls*. New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, n.d.
- Gottlober, Avrom Ber. "Zikhroynes (erinerungen iber yidische shrayber un sfotim)," *Yidische folks-bibliotek* (1888), 1:255.
- Kacyzne, Alter. "Tsu kharpe zol unz zayn!" *Literarische bleter*, 95 (26 February 1926), 136.
- Manger, Itsik, Jonas Turkow, and Moyshe Perenson, eds. *Yidisher teater in eyrope tvsishn beyde velt-milkhomes: poln*. New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1968.
- Mlotek, Eleanor, and Malke Gottlieb, eds. *We Are Here!* New York: Educational Department of the Workmen's Circle, 1983.
- Oyslender, N., and U. Finkel. *A. Goldfaden: materyaln far a biografye*. Minsk: Institut far vaysruslendisher kultur, 1926.
- Perkof, Yitskhok. *Avrom Goldfaden: mayne memuarn un zayne brief*. London: Jouques Printing Works, 1908.
- Rosten, Leo. *The Joys of Yiddish*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1968.
- Shatzky, Jacob, ed. *Arkhiv far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame*. Vilna: YIVO, 1930.
- . *Goldfaden-bukh*. New York: Yidish teater-muzey, 1926.
- . *Hundert yor Goldfaden*. New York: YIVO, 1940.
- Turkow, Zygmunt. *Shmuesn vegn teater*. Buenos Aires: Farlag Unzer Bukh, 1950.
- Veidlinger, Jeffrey. *The Moscow State Yiddish Theater*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.