

DOVID HERMAN THEATRE CIRCLE AT THE KADIMAH IN MELBOURNE

BY CHAIM ROSENSZTAJN

At the end of 1942, the Second Australian-Jewish Almanac appeared. It included my work 'Yiddish Theatre in Australia', which was responsible for telling the history of Yiddish theatre on the most distant continent.

At that time, 1942, Jewish Australia counted approximately 30,000 souls, half of whom were assimilated Jews of English-German descent; Jews who did not have any connection with the Yiddish language, and of course not with Yiddish culture.

That which we can and need to call Jewish life, as we understand it, was until then carried out by not more than several thousand Yiddish oriented Jews, spread out over the four big Australian cities: Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Brisbane. In order to be more exact, the first three cities come to mind because Brisbane only showed a sign of (organized) Jewish life for a few years and especially about Yiddish theatre. In time, when the Jewish emigration-stream strengthened after the Second World War, most settled in the two biggest cities, Perth also fell off the ticket of Yiddish-Jewish activeness and only Melbourne and Sydney remained. Of the two cities, Melbourne deals right out front with all aspects of Jewish life, especially in the Yiddish sector. It would not be an exaggeration to say that without Jewish Melbourne, with her current almost 20,000 Yiddish speaking Jews, it would be hard to speak about a Yiddish cultural activeness in Australia.

The above is said not as an expression of local patriotism, but as a statement of where and by whom our Yiddish work is now carried out. Because there, where there are good intentions and initiative, there is a place for widely branched Yiddish cultural work, even on such a far away continent, like Australia.

My work in the second Australian Jewish Almanac was called: *Yiddish Theatre in Australia*, but since the end of 1941, there has been little to write about Yiddish theatre in other cities outside of Melbourne, and therefore, the name of this article is *Dovid Herman Theatre Circle at the Kadimah*, whose activities we will discuss this here.

The founders of the circle, whose first chairperson was, for many years, Yankev Ginter, and at the time, the very active Mordkhe Schaechter, took on the responsibility of performing good Yiddish theatre. In the specific immigration-conditions, especially in a small Jewish community, it was easy to take on such a decision, how to carry it out. Because good Yiddish theatre needs a special audience: An audience that understands and has a need for this type of performances.

In a big Jewish community, there is an audience for all types of Yiddish theatre, but in a small community, this type of segregation is a difficult matter. By the way, we know from long experience that theatre-goers, in all nations, look for, first of all, entertainment in the theatre, and won't like to watch a serious performance. Jewish Melbourne, in this case, could not be an exception, and even so, the Dovid Herman Theatre Circle, until now, has succeeded in carrying out activities, that are almost an exception in the Yiddish theatre world.

Both the repertoire and the standard of the performances stood mostly on a high level, which a Yiddish theatre circle, after the Second World War, rarely achieved elsewhere.

These words of recognition for this circle are as such, for her two leading directors: the artists Yankev Waislitz and Rokhl Holzer, as well as for the two-three thousand sworn Yiddish theatre-goers, who helped to uphold good Yiddish theatre here. Let a name be mentioned here, to be remembered amongst more names of people to whom we owe many thanks, if we are talking about Yiddish cultural work in Melbourne. This is the Kadimah, the very worthy Yiddish cultural organization, thanks to which it was possible for Yiddish theatre to continue all these years in far off Australia. The official name of the theatre circle about which we are talking is: Theatre Circle named after Dovid Herman at the Kadimah. Without the Kadimah home, good Yiddish theatre would probably not be able to exist in Melbourne (read: Australia).

We have also had during the years covered by this report, a series of honourable Yiddish theatrical guests from other countries. Zigmund Turkov with his wife Roza performed here for a whole season. Ida Kaminska performed two plays here and also an evening of one-acters. Together with Mme. Kaminska, these artists came from the Yiddish State Theatre in Poland: Meyer Melman, Ruth Turkow-Kaminska and Karol Latowicz. KhayeLe Grober premiered her play 'On Peaceful Ground' here. Yoysel Shejn performed three plays here. Shimon Dzigal performed three review programs. Together with Dzigal, Israeli singer Kochava Harari performed. Each of the mentioned guest-artists, in their own way, donated something unique to the local theatre work, contributed colour and energy.

In the second Almanac, I wrote: "We did not hold it necessary to stop to question success of this or that play. And this, therefore, because in local conditions where a play is not performed more than two times, is objectively hard to insist which play had success and the reasons for its success". Today the situation is different. A play is now performed no less than 4-5 times, and if it's liked, it is even performed ten times. The number of visitors of every performance wavers between one thousand to over two thousand. Some plays are renewed after several years and are performed again with a meaningful success.

On average, the theatre circle has two premiers a year. But, our theatre-audience would like to enjoy even four performances a season. Two basic difficulties influence the limited number of premiers:

(A) The lack of appropriate repertoire.

(B) The limited performance opportunities of the theatre circle as a result of the specific local conditions. To prepare a play takes several months, not to mention other unexpected problems.

With that said, it was not my intention to reduce the worth and meaning of the so important theatre work of the Dovid Herman theatre circle. I am just intending to show the uniqueness of the local conditions that complicate to a great measure the activeness of the Yiddish theatre in Melbourne. And because theatre activity is so complicated, one needs even more to underline the worth of the Kadimah theatre circle that so loyally reflected the name – Dovid Herman – one of the best builders and creators of good Yiddish theatre.

In the second Australian Jewish Almanac, I ended the report on theatre repertoire at the end of 1941. That was the time when the Japanese entered the war and brought the front lines of the war close to the shores of Australia. The country heatedly began preparing for war at home. Men, up to the age of 40 years old, went away to the army and middle age Jews who were not citizens were pulled into special backstage issues. Horrible news also arrived here from far away Europe about the Nazi murder of the Jewish population. Under these conditions, it was hard for the theatre circle to continue with its' work. Performances seldom took place. Some of the theatre activity that did occur was dedicated to different Jewish and not-Jewish war-help-funds and appeals. This situation continued until the late 1940s. The new immigration-stream of those who were saved from the Hitler-hell, also brought here a group of talented amateurs, who joined the theatre circle. The Dovid Herman group, which was already strong and mature, renewed its activity. Also the periphery of Yiddish theatre audience became a lot bigger than before the war.

The repertoire-report, which we continue here, relates only to the activities of the Dovid Herman theatre circle at the Kadimah and takes in the years 1942-1965.

The chronological list of the performances is supported by/based on the materials, which I gathered successfully.

Some of the performances mentioned here were performed by the Dovid Herman theatre circle in Sydney, mostly just one performance.

The activeness of the circle also takes in one-acters and review evenings, performances in the local old aged home and concerts in benefit of different aid institutions. The circle also took part in different memorials, all kinds of jubilee celebrations, Purim evenings and other undertakings. It would take too much space to count all events that bring in so much festivity to local Jewish life.

We consider it necessary to bring a list of the active circle members, whose efforts to uphold Yiddish culture in Melbourne is extremely important. Women, according to alphabetical order: Franka Ajnhorn, Stella Brustman, Rochl Beker, Leah Blusztejn, Tobe Ginter, Chava Zilberman, Gitl Zejdner, Chana Leyt, Rochl Levita, Ida Lustik, Chava Miletski, Rita Mandelboym, Yehudis Silman, Mira Frejman, Leah Tsuker, Paula Kochen, Chana Kotlitz, Dora Rotman, Miriam Rochlin, Chayele Sztorch, Chava Szwiatlo.

Men: Yankev Blusztejn, Zygmund Brustman, Zvi Gershov, Yankev Dessauer, Shmuel Hochgelernter, Avrom Wygushin, Shia Tigel, Yankev Levin, Berl Lustik, Shmuel Migdalek, Yankev Milchman, Fayvl Sivak, Yeshaya Podem, Mayer Ceprow, Avrom Cykert, Shimon King, Berl Rosenberg, Israel Rotman, Symcha Rajchszejn, Sholem Schwartz S, Shmuel Schwartz, Mendl Szmernling, Mordkhe Schaechter, and Yasha Sher, the chairperson of the theatre circle.

At this opportunity one must mention the name of the architect Robert Rosh, the creator of original decoration-projects, as well as the names Aron Gurvich and Mordkhe Schaechter for their very interesting decoration work for a series of performances of the Dovid Herman theatre circle.

The very talented dancer Ruth Bergner performed a series of choreographed numbers for different performances. She also performed at several Kadimah events and appeared in her own dance concerts.

Whoever attentively reads this list of performers must come to the conclusion that the Dovid Herman theatre circle deserves a space by the Eastern Wall of good Yiddish theatre.

It's not my job, nor is there room, to give even a short overview of the artistic worth of the performances mentioned here. The great majority of them were mature quality Yiddish theatre.

My work would not be finished if I didn't, even in a few words, tell in short about the activities of the Dovid Herman theatre circle at the Kadimah for the last 22 years.

Theatre, even the best, never goes on a straight line. Because of different reasons it must somewhere, sometimes, be interfered with. It can't be different. The activities of a theatre circle, of course, do not go on a straight line. There are endlessly more reasons for all kinds of interference. But when one takes into account that despite all the difficulties and disturbances, and these exist at every step, when a theatre circle succeeds in upholding a meaningful artistic height, that means that it has achieved a lot - that it fills a very important cultural function.

Jewish cultural life in Melbourne would be a lot poorer and sadder if not for the Dovid Herman theatre circle – the carrier of the living Yiddish word; if not for the actors – the loyal congregation of our beautiful holy folk book.

Above we had broadly stopped on the activities of the Dovid Herman theatre circle, but the picture of Yiddish theatre work in Melbourne would not be full if we did not mention a series of performances by the following artists:

Moyshe Potaczynski and Mila Waislitz, both saved from concentration camps, performed several cabaret evenings after arriving in Melbourne. Potaczynski also performed in a play and a review with the circle. Both artists took part in performances with the Dovid Herman theatre circle in a series of Kadimah events.

Sarah and Nosn Ginter and Yehuda Grinchojz, professional actors, performed their own reviews and song evenings as well as in a few plays.

Avrom Brejzblat and Fayvl Sivak, the last from 'Young Theatre' in Warsaw, performed a series of work and song concerts. A. Brejzblat also performed a Goldfaden play with the circle.

Raya Zamina, Ruven Szwiatlo and Danny Kleinman performed concerts of Yiddish and Hebrew songs. Szwiatlo and Zamina also performed entire song evenings.

The guest artist from America, the well-known singer Sidor Belarski, performed with great success in a series of song concerts.

The pianist Miriam Rochlin, a long-time loyal friend of the Dovid Herman theatre circle, worked with them on a whole series of performances.

The accordion and piano accompanist, Frida Wilenski, took part in different concerts and theatre evenings.

Reviews about Yiddish theatre performances were written by:

M. Balberitski, H. Bergner, A. Zbar, H. Muntz, L. Fridman, Y. Kahan, Y. Kersh, Y. Rapaport and G. Szajak.

I'll end with a word about the 'Habima Players', a theatre group that performed a series of plays with Jewish themes in English. Amongst others, they performed: 'Home of the Brave' by Arthur Lawrence and 'Molly' by Gertrude Berg, both directed by Rokhl Holzer.

This was a group of young talented performers. After several years of theatre work, the 'Habima Players' circle fell apart. It was a shame. It's characteristic that nobody from that group, I mean those who spoke Yiddish well, moved over to the Yiddish theatre.

Melbourne, January, 1966.

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Theatre circle by the name 'Yiddish Stage' in 1930

From right to left (in front): Rochl Zaks, Sh. Fodem, Shoshana Zaks

(First row): Yehudis Silman, Chaya Segal, Yankev Ginter, Berl Rosenberg, Leyb Zabinski, Yoysef Wajt, Chasya Zaks.

(Second row): Fayvl Jedwab, Nechama Berenson, Shloyme Mendelson, Shprintse Silman (Nejhojz), Rosner, Shmul Aloni, Cypris, Manya Rosenblat, Chaya Barg.

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Dovid Herman Theatre Circle in the beginning of the 1940s

First row (from right to left): Roze Ubor, Rochl Levita, Dora Rotman, Feyge Mrocki, Mila Waislitz, Yokheved Waislitz, Yankev Waislitz, Rochl Holzer, Yankev Ginter, Sonia Rosenberg-Davidowicz, Motl Rotfarb.

Second row: Marian Dombrowski, Zigmund Brustman, Yehudis Silman, Shmul Migdalek, Zvi Gershov, Yisroyel Rotman, Yisroyel Kravat, Chava Milecki, Shmul Hochgelernter, Chana Lejt, Dovid Waislitz, Chaim Rosensztejn, Toybe Ginter, Leah Zucker, Louie Jedwab, Miriam Rochlin.

Third row: B. Goldstzejn, Chava Estrajch, Avrom Wald, Sam Fodem, Nosn Fogel, Rochl Wald, Isaac Langzam, Shmul King, Yasha Sher, Berl Rosenberg, Yisroyel Bluthal. (In the picture Shloyme Win).

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Zigmund and Roza Turkow upon arrival in Melbourne in 1955.

From right to left: Leah Zucker, D. Nisenbojm, Sh. Hochgelernter, Sh. Tigel, Ts. Gershov, Zigmund Turkow, Roza Turkow, Y. Rotman, M. Ceprow, Yasha Sher, Rochl Beker.

Yiddish artists from Poland at a welcome evening at the Kadimah in 1960.

From right to left: Karol Latovicz, Y. Waislitz, R. Holzer, Meyer Melman, S. Burstin, Ida Kaminska, Ruth Kaminska.

Yoysef Shejn upon arrival in Melbourne in 1964.

From right to left: Rochl Levita, S. Burstin, Yoysef Shejn, B. Wiener, Sh. Tigel, Toybe Ginter, Y. Sher.

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Rochl Holzer

A sign from 'Shmates' (rags) by H. Leyvik, performed for Leyvik's first yortsayt by the Dovid Herman Theatre Circle. Director: Rochl Holzer.

At the welcome evening for Shimon Dzigan and wife and Kochava Harari in 1965.

Sitting (from right to left): L. Laski, Kochava Harari, Y. Rejmer, Shimon Dzigan, Mrs. Dzigan.

Standing (from right to left): Sh. Tigel, Rochl Holzer, Y. Sher, L. Fridman, S. Burstin, Y. Lewitan, Y. Szperling.

Played performances	Yiddish	Director	Writer	Play	Year
2	Ch. Rosensztejn	Rochl Holzer	D. Nikodemi	The Shadow	1942
1		Yankev Waislitz	V. Katayev	A Million Worries	1942
1		Yankev Waislitz	Sholem Aleichem	Hard to be a Jew	1943
1		Yankev Waislitz	H. Bergner	The Flood	1944
1		Yankev Waislitz	Sholem Aleichem	200, 000	1944
5	Ch. Gurt	Yankev Waislitz	A. Ashman	Our Land	1945
2	Ch. Gurt	Yankev Waislitz	A. Ashman	Our Land	1947
1		Yankev Waislitz	Sholem Aleichem	Hard to be a Jew	1947
2		Rochl Holzer	A. Strindberg	The Father	1947
4		Rochl Holzer	Y. Gordin	Mirele Efros	1948
3		A. Brejzblat	Goldfaden-Manger	The Sorceress	1948
2	Ch. Rosensztejn	Rochl Holzer	L. Vernil	Lady Lawyer	1948
4		Y. Grinhozj	Y. Gordin	God, Man and Devil	1949
1		A. Brejzblat	Goldfaden-Manger	The Sorceress	1949
2		Mordkhe Schaechter	Perets Hirshbeyn	Green Fields	1949
7	L. Suchowolski	Rochl Holzer	Y. Mosinzon	On the Land of the Negev	1950
1		Y. Grinhozj	Y. Gordin	God, Man and Devil	1950
1		Moysh Potaszynski – M. Waislitz		Review evening	1950
2		Yankev Waislitz	Sholem Aleichem	200,000	1951
2	Ch. Gurt	Yankev Waislitz	A. Ashman	Our Land	1951
1		Rochl Holzer	Y. Gordin	Mirele Efros	1951
3	Ch. Rosensztejn	Rochl Holzer	Moron-Chepkovska	Three Ladies	1952

6		Yankev Waislitz	Sholem Ash	Sanctification of God's Name	1952
2		Yankev Waislitz	Y. L. Peretz	Peretz Performance	1952
6		Yankev Waislitz	Ch. Gottesfeld	Earning a Living	1952
7	Ch. Rosensztejn	Rochl Holzer	G. Zapolska	Madame Dulaska	1953
4	Ch. Gurt	Yankev Waislitz	Moyshe Shamir	House of Hillel	1953
4		Yankev Waislitz	L. Kobrin	The Village Boy	1953
2		Yankev Waislitz	H. Leyvik	The Poet Became Blind	1953
7		Yankev Waislitz	Y. Gersenson	Hershele Ostropoliye	1954
8		Rochl Holzer	L. Mlach	With Open Eyes	1954
6		Zigmund Turkow	Sholem Ash	Uncle Moses	1955
10		Zigmund Turkow	Zigmund Turkow	Sing My People	1955
7		Zigmund Turkow	Y. Bar Yoysef	On the Walls of Jerusalem	1955
2		Zigmund Turkow	Sholem Aleichem	Sholem Aleichem Acts	1955
9	Ch. Rosensztejn	Rochl Holzer	A. De-Benedeti	Red Roses	1956
4	Y. Taub	Yankev Waislitz	Y. Sle	Shrage Fayvish Goes to the Negev	1956
3		Yankev Waislitz	Sholem Aleichem	200,000	1956
6	A. Cimerman	Yankev Waislitz	Sh. Anski	The Dybbuk	1957
5		Chayele Grober	Chayele Grober	On Holy Ground	1957
7	Y. Metsker	Yankev Waislitz	L. Goldberg	The Countess of the Palace	1957
8		Moyshe Potaszynski	Dovid Pinski	The Treasure	1958
10		Yankev Waislitz	E. Morris	The Wooden Bowl	1958
5		Yankev Waislitz	Sholem Aleichem	Tevye the Milkman	1959
9		Yankev Waislitz	Arthur Miller	The Death of a Salesman	1960
2		Ida Kaminska	A. Kasana	Trees Die Standing	1960
3		Ida Kaminska	Y. Gordin	Mirele Efros	1960
2		Ida Kaminska		One-acter evening	1960
7	Ch. Rosensztejn	Rochl Holzer	Michael Bret	A Lucky Strike	1961
10		Yankev Waislitz	A. Gilner	Bekleyn Centre	1962
11		A. Brejzblat	Goldfaden-Manger	The Sorceress	1963
8		Rochl Holzer	H. Leyvik	Rags	1963
8		Yoysef Shejn	Efraim Kishun	His Name Speaks for Itself	1964

12		Yoysef Shejn	Sholem Aleichem	The Wandering Stars	1964
7		Yoysef Shejn	Avrom Goldfaden	Two Kuni Lemls	1964
9		Rochl Holzer	L. Verneil	Lady Lawyer	1965
3		Shimon Dzigan	Review	Good Yontef	1965
3		Shimon Dzigan	Review	Fresh, Healthy and Crazy	1965
3		Shimon Dzigan	Review	It Should be for the Best	1965

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Ruth Bergner dances at a ball for the theatre circle.

Sh. Tigel and Sh. Migdalek in 'Two Kuni Lemls' in 1964. Director: Yoysef Shejn.

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A part of the Dovid Herman Theatre Circle and a few friends of the circle together:

First row (from right to left): M. Rochlin, Ch. Kotlaz, T. Ginter, Rochl Holzer, Yoysef Shejn, G. Zajdman, R. Ceprow, Sh. Tigel.

Second row: L. Fridman, H. Bergner, Kh. Rosensztejn, S. Migdalek, Sh. Hochgelernter, Y. Milchman, Sh. Scwvartz, Z. Brustman, M. Ceprow.

Third row: Y. Sher, Sh. Sher, Sh. Migdalek, Ch. Lejt, G. Tigel, A. Wygushin, R. Levita.

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Participants in 'The House of Hillel' by Moyshe Shamir.

(Translation: Ch. Gurt).

Performed in 1953.

Director: Yankev Waislitz.

From right to left: Yankev Levin, Mila Waislitz, Yankev Waislitz, Rochl Beker and Yasha Sher.

A scene from 'A Lucky Strike' by Michael Bret in 1961.

Translation: Ch. Rosensztejn

Director: Rochl Holzer.

From right to left: Paula Kochen, Shia Tigel, Rochl Holzer and Yasha Sher.

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This picture appeared the daily newspaper 'Melbourne Herald' in 1964, in connection with the 50th anniversary of the Dovid Herman Theatre Circle.

This picture shows one of the long-time performers of the theatre circle, Yasha Sher, with one of the young members of the circle, Eva Zilberman, in Sholem Aleichem's 'The Wandering Stars'. Director: Yoysef Shejn.

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Above: A huge sign outside the Palais Theatre about the performances of Shimon Dzigian and Kochava Harari with the performers of the theatre circle. At the side: Kochava Harari.

In the middle: A part of the participants in the performances: (from right to left) Sh. Tigel, D. Kleinman, R. Levita, Sh. Dzigian, R. Mandelbaum, Sh. Migdalek.

Below: Shimon Dzigian.