

From Jester to Gesture:  
Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Re-imagination of Folk Performance

By  
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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the rise of folk performance as a national and social(ist) symbol in modern Eastern European Jewish culture, focusing on the wave of fascination with the *badkhn* (rhymester/jester), the folksinger, the *klezmer*, and above all the *purim-shpiler* (player in the traditional Purim play) between the two world wars. This upsurge of interest, I argue, marks a radically modern turn to the past which aims to construct an alleged lineage of secular Jewish culture. Investigating such varied fields as literature, film, theater, memoirs and historiography, I look into the ways in which traditional types of Jewish performance were reclaimed and used as tropes, cultural symbols and models for alternative poetics.

To provide the historical context for the innovations of the interwar era I examine in the first chapter the ways folk performance was imagined by the *Haskala* movement of the nineteenth century, the starting point of modern Jewish culture. Notwithstanding their contempt for traditional Jewish performance, the *Haskala* writers, I claim, introduce the performer into the realm of art, rather than folklore, and thus constitute the first phase in the modern project of reclaiming traditional performance as the roots of- and a model for- modern Jewish culture.

In chapter two I investigate the fervent and highly politicized scholarly discourse that evolved around traditional forms of Jewish performance, which provided the essential theoretical framework for the dramatic, literary and cinematic appropriations of folk performance. Through the writing and cultural production of Zigmunt Turkow I strive to corroborate my claim about the interconnections between scholars, artists and other cultural activists, who together contributed to the construction of Jewish folk performance as cultural heritage.

Usually perceived as oppositions, modernist high-art and popular mass culture of the interwar period are discussed in this study as interlinked arenas of cultural production that address the same modern challenges of secularization, urbanization and immigration. I thus look at the experimental reclaiming of the *purim-shpil* and the *broder zinger* in the modernist poetry and drama of Moyshe Broderzon alongside the commodified appropriations of folk performance in Yiddish cinema of the late thirties, including the films *Yidl mitn fidl*, *Der purim-shpiler* and *Der dibuk*. By exploring the various ways in which Eastern European Jewish folk performance was re-imagined, be they rejection, veneration, mimicry or reproduction, I shed new light on the modern Jewish project of self-reinvention and self-remodeling, as well as on the complex relationship between modernism, mass culture and folk creativity.

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## Introduction: Rediscovering Folk Performance

“I am a *purim-shpiler*,” states Yiddish artist Moyshe Broderzon in a 1919 expressionist poem by that name, articulating the revolutionary spirit in the aftermath of the Great War and the Soviet Revolution. Eighteen years later and in a more playful tone, Yiddish modernist poet Itsik Manger reclaims the *purim-shpil* in his 1936 poem cycle *Megile-lider* (Songs of The Scroll of Esther), “a kind of mischief-making on the model of Purim players in every age.”<sup>1</sup> Shortly thereafter filmmaker Joseph Green recruits Manger to write the dialogue for his second Yiddish film, *Der purim-shpiler* (*The Jester*, Poland, 1936). Hoping to fulfill what he envisioned as the new commercial and aesthetic potential of this carnivalesque tradition, Green stages a cinematic reproduction of a *purim-shpil*, in which he combines, perhaps unwittingly, nostalgia with social critique.

Suddenly, the *purim-shpiler* and other characters such as the *klezmer* and the *badkhn* (rhymester, jester and master of ceremonies in the traditional Jewish wedding) have an immense appeal for Yiddish film and literature.<sup>2</sup> Modern cultural producers, working in the urban environments of interwar Poland and addressing audiences from Moscow and Warsaw to New York, turn to traditional Jewish performance; film producers reproduce the *purim-shpil* in the modern cinematic medium, and modernist writers model their innovative work on this often notorious folk practice. What is the nature of the relation that modern and modernist works establish towards their re-imagined subject, folk performance? What is the attitude towards the past, but also towards the present and the future, that the appropriation or re-imagination of folk performance seeks to establish?

In a departure from recent studies that attempt to document the actual nature of Jewish folk performance, whether in pre-modern times or in the interwar era, this dissertation focuses on the discourse that evolved around and the artistic re-imagination of folk performance between the two World Wars.<sup>3</sup> The dissertation examines the ways traditional types of Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> This quotation is from Manger’s introduction to his *Megile-lider* (*Megile* is the Yiddish term for a scroll, also the shorthand for the scroll or Book of Esther in the Bible). See Itsik Manger, *Megile-lider* (Warsaw: Aleyenyu, 1936). For the English see Itsik Manger, *The World According to Itzik: Selected Poetry and Prose*, trans. and ed. Leonard Wolf (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout the dissertation I use the word “*klezmer*,” as in Yiddish, as both singular and plural. Whereas in contemporary English the word “*klezmer*” usually refers to a type of music, in Yiddish it designates the musician(s). The Yiddish “*klezmer*” has two other plural forms: “*klezmerim*” and “*klezmers*.” Similarly, I use “*purim-shpiler*” as both singular and plural, although the plural form “*purim-shpilers*” also exists. Also, the word “*badkhn*” is usually pronounced in Yiddish as “*batkhn*.” I chose to transliterate it as “*badkhn*” to retain the relation to the Hebrew “*badchan*.”

<sup>3</sup> For studies of Eastern European Jewish Folk Performance see Ahuva Belkin, *ha-Purim shpil: 'iyunim ba-te'atron ha-yehudi ha-'amami* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2002); Ahuva Belkin, “The 'Low' Culture of the *Purimshpil*,” in *Yiddish Theater: New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz (Oxford; Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003); Ariela Krasney, *ha-Badchan* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1998); Ariela Krasney, “The *Badkhn*: From Wedding Stage to Writing Desk,” *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 16 (2003): 7-28. Ya'akov Mazor, “The *Badkhn* in Contemporary Hasidic Society: Social, Historical, and Musical Observations,” *Polin* 16 (2003): 279-296. For an overview of the *klezmer* tradition see Joel Rubin and Rita Ottens, *Klezmer-Musik* (Kassel: Bärenreiter; München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 19-39, 67-178; see also the translation and re-

performance are reclaimed and used—as tropes, cultural symbols and models for alternative poetics—in modernist Yiddish poetry and drama on the one hand, and in popular film on the other. In this project I investigate such varied fields as literature, theater, film, and even historiography, thus revealing a joint endeavor to construct folk-performance as an origin of and a model for modern Jewish culture. My research project explores a radically modern turn to the past which aims to construct a genealogy, an alleged lineage that reclaims Jewish folk performance as its heritage.

The process through which a cultural practice becomes detached from its original and often obsolete context and gets reclaimed as “tradition” is quintessentially a modern one, always motivated by political, social and aesthetic goals. Eastern European Jewish culture is no exception to this rule. In fact, as early as the *Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment), Jewish artists projected various fantasies, concerns and aspirations onto traditional Jewish performance. This imagined folk performance became an arena where anxieties regarding the value of Jewish art and its cultural heritage were expressed, and where tensions between cultural continuity and break were enacted and negotiated. In the fervent interwar period, on which the dissertation focuses, with its modernist aesthetics and vibrant popular culture, this process became further intensified and politicized. Nostalgic or ironic, lowbrow or sophisticated, the re-invention of folk performance in the interwar period engaged some of the major concerns of the modern Jewish revolution. Socialist scholars and artists turned to folk performance to prove the alleged folkish nature of Yiddish culture and contrast it with decadent bourgeois culture.<sup>4</sup> Thus, they reclaimed as folk heroes figures such as the Hebrew and Yiddish poet and bard Velvl Zbarzher (birth name Benjamin Wolf Ehrenkrantz) or the founding father of Yiddish theater, Avrom Goldfadn, while downgrading the *maskilic* motivations of these cultural figures.<sup>5</sup> Some Yiddishists even presented traditional performance as the only authentic and continuous culture of the Jewish people, and contrasted it with the imagined ties that Zionist ideology claimed to have had with a Biblical civilization of two thousand years earlier.<sup>6</sup> For Yiddish nationalists of different political

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publication of the work of Ukrainian Jewish ethnomusicologist Moshe Beregovski (1892-1961): Moshe Beregovski, *Jewish Instrumental Folk Music: The Collections and Writings of Moshe Beregovski*, eds. and trans. Mark Slobin, Robert A. Rothstein and Michael Alpert (Syracuse, NY : Syracuse University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Salient examples of the Soviet discourse on folk performance can be found in the folklore section of the Minsk journal *Tsaytshrift* (Periodical; 1926-1931) or in its full name *Tsaytshrift far yidisher geshikhte, demografye un ekonomik literatur-forshung, shprakhvisnshaft un etnografye* (Periodical for Jewish History, Demography and Economic Literary Research, Linguistics and Ethnography). See the series of articles on folk performers in the first volume of *Tsaytshrift*: B. Slutski, “Yidishe badkhnim-shoyshpieler,” *Tsaytshrift* 1 (1926): 257-260; Nokhem Oyslender, “Tsu B. Slutskis 'badkhnim-shoyshpiler,’” *Tsaytshrift* 1:261-263, Izi Kharik, “Leyzer Sheynman—der badkhn fun zemin,” *Tsaytshrift* 1:264; Nokhem Oyslender, “Arum a geshtalt fun a folkzinger,” *Tsaytshrift* 1:265-266; For a discussion of *Tsaytshrift*, “possibly the most impressive Yiddish scholarly journal issued in the Soviet Union in the 1920s,” and of the so-called “Jewish National Center” in Minsk see Elissa Bemporad, “The Yiddish Experiment in Soviet Minsk,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 37:1 (2007), 91-107. See also Robert Adler Peckerar, “The allure of Germanness in modern Ashkenazi literature: 1833—1933,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2009) ProQuest (AAT 3411185), 81-91.

<sup>5</sup> Soviet scholars rediscovered in this period the folkish “roots” of modern Yiddish culture in a variety of fields, from the so-called “*shpilman*” (alleged Jewish medieval bards) to folk performance to *shund* (pulp) literature. As Robert Adler-Peckerar writes: “By expanding the scope of Yiddish literature to the Middle Ages and including the *shund* writers neglected by Yiddishists, the Soviet critics proposed that. . . modern Yiddish literature owed more to popular culture than to the elitist *maskilic* writers.” See Robert Adler Peckerar, “The allure of Germanness.”

<sup>6</sup> See my discussion of the historiography of folk-performance in chapter three.

affiliations folk performance came to signify Jewish uniqueness and creativity, a reaction against what was perceived as the derivative and imitative affiliation with Western models exhibited by both Jewish high-culture (e.g. the impressionist poetry of *Di yunge*) and mass culture (e.g. the ubiquitous *shund* literature, often plagiarizing German or French sensational novels). Finally, traditional performance was re-imagined by modernist artists of the interwar period as an alternative aesthetic sphere, where human experience once resided in its living immediacy, before it became inaccessible due to processes of modernization, as Walter Benjamin has argued about the performative practice of the storyteller. By reconnecting with this ever receding realm of experience, Benjamin claimed, modern artists were consciously “making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.”<sup>7</sup>

To provide the necessary historical context for the innovation of the interwar era I explore in the first chapter the ways folk performance was imagined by the Eastern European *Haskala* movement of the nineteenth century, by all accounts, the starting point of modern Jewish culture. The *Haskala/Haskole*, in Hebrew and Yiddish respectively, typically regarded traditional performance as a degraded form of popular entertainment. However, while the *maskilim* (promoters of the *Haskala*) distanced themselves from the supposed inferiority of performative culture which they viewed as representative of a backwards traditional world, their writing, I argue, discloses deep ambivalence towards traditional folk performance, and especially towards the much despised figure of the *badkhn*. A close reading of *maskilic* texts reveals that in spite of themselves, the *maskilim* enjoyed and even admired good *badkhones* (a *badkhn*'s performance). Moreover, while looking down with contempt on the *badkhn*, they also drew parallels between him and themselves, troubled but also intrigued by the apparent similarities between the *badkhn* and the *maskilic* poet. The *maskilim* were also envious of the *badkhn* for his popularity among the folk, for having the flexible Yiddish language at his disposal rather than their stiff Hebrew, and for benefitting from the advantages of live performance. Furthermore, in judging the *badkhn* according to European aesthetic standards, the *maskilim* unwittingly shifted the *badkhn* from the realm of folklore to the sphere of art. Thus, notwithstanding the bitter irony in the *maskilic* references to folk performance, the *Haskala* constitutes the first phase in the modern project of reclaiming traditional performance as the imagined roots of modern Jewish art.

Following generations of Hebrew and Yiddish writers broadened the range and tenor of the responses to traditional folk performance. Thus, for example, in “*A bletl viduy*” (“A Page of Confession,” 1890) the Yiddish, Russian, and, to a lesser extent, Hebrew poet Shimen Frug bewails his fate as a poet. Frug, himself a master of rhyme, reiterates the *maskilic* complaint that the *badkhn* has corrupted the taste of the people, and adds a Zionist edge to the argument. Unlike the *badkhn* who provides mere entertainment, the true poet, proclaims Frug, should express the hardships of his people, and sing the holy song of Zion.<sup>8</sup> Hence, for the Zionist poet, the *badkhn* comes to signify not only tasteless, inferior art, but also the proclivity of his fellow Jews for escapism. Whereas Frug condemns the *badkhn* as an embodiment of the Diaspora Jew, accustomed to cheap entertainment, his contemporaries Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 68.

<sup>8</sup> See “*A bletl viduy*” (1890) in Shimen Frug, *Ale Verk fun Sh. Frug* (Petersburg: Der Fraynd, 1904), 1:58-59. See also Meir Pines and Bal-makhshoves, *Di Geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur bizn yor 1890* (Warsaw: B. Shimin, 1911), 11-15.

Yankev Abramovitsh), Sholem Aleykhem (Sholem Rabinovitsh), and, most notably, Y.L. Peretz, turn towards a more favorable view of folk performance both in their Yiddish and in their Hebrew (auto-) translation. The three “*klasiker*” of Yiddish literature incorporate the *badkhn*, the *klezmer*, the *purim-shpiler*, the *nign* (folk melody) and other motifs from this realm of cultural activity into their modern Yiddish literature, ascribing new meanings and values to them. Notable examples are a *purim-shpil* staged as a play within a play in Abramovitsh's *Der priziv* (The Conscription; 1884), the three novels by Sholem Aleykhem which are centered around performance artists: a fiddler (*Stempenyu*; 1888), a cantor (*Yosele Solovey* [Yosele the Nightingale]; 1889), and a group of itinerant artists (*Blondzhene shtern* [Wandering Stars]; 1909-1911), and the figure of the radical *badkhn* in Peretz's modernist play *Bay nakht afn altn mark* (At Night at the Old Marketplace; 1907).<sup>9</sup>

However, it is only in the interwar era that folk performance becomes a powerful cultural icon and a key component in secular Jewish culture. Significantly, this transformation takes place in the realm of Yiddish culture rather than Hebrew. One does occasionally find among Hebrew writers of the time expressions of nostalgic feelings towards the folklore of the *shtetl*, including its folk performance, and gestures of “salvage ethnography.” Thus, for example, the portrayals of the Jewish wedding in Buki Ben-Yogli's (Yehuda Leyb-Binyamin Katzenelson) influential memoir “*Ma she-ra'u 'enay ve-sham'u oznay*” (What My eyes Have Seen and My Ears Have Heard) or in Sha'ul Tchernichowski's idyll “*Chatunata shel Elka*” (Elka's Wedding; 1920) attest to a strong desire to record Jewish customs which have already become obsolete.<sup>10</sup> An alternative path taken by Hebrew writers of the time was that of the *Moderna* generation. The salient poets of this modernist movement, Nathan Alterman and Avraham Shlonsky, use figures of jesters, street musicians and their instruments as universal symbols, detached from the concrete Jewish diasporic realia, even when they incorporate direct citation from Yiddish folk texts in Hebrew calque translations.<sup>11</sup> Yet neither the documenting impulse in Hebrew literature of the time nor what I would define as a universalizing tendency of the *Moderna* poets explicitly

<sup>9</sup> See Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Der priziv: a drame* (St. Petersburg: A. Tsederboym, 1884). See also Mendele's “Kabtsiel Legend,” a grotesque, fantastic tale about a group of *purim-shpiler* embedded in his *Dos vintshfingerl* (Yiddish) / *Be'emek ha-bacha* (Hebrew), the first version of which (in Yiddish) he published in 1864. Mendele Moykher Sforim, “Dos Vintshfingerl,” *Ale Verk* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1920), 4:39-44; Mendele Mocher Sefarim, “Be'emek ha-bacha,” *Kol kitve Mendele Mokher Sefarim* (Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1947), 153-155; See also Shalom Lurya's introduction in Mendele Mokher Sefarim, *Ketavim be'ibam* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1994), 9-23, and in “Purim-shpil meshubats be-machaze,” *Hulyot* 6 (2000): 91-97. For references to the various versions of *Bay nakht afn altn mark* and a discussion of the *badkhn*'s role in Peretz's play see Khone Shmeruk, “Der badkhn un zayne bagleyters in Peretzes bay nakht afn altn mark,” *Di Goldene Keyt* 69-70 (1970): 278-300. See also Avraham Novershtern and Sharon Neeman, “Between Dust and Dance: Peretz's Drama and the Rise of Yiddish Modernism Author(s),” *Prooftexts* 12, no. 1 (January 1992): 71-90. For a discussion of Sholem Aleykhem's novels see Anita Norich, “Portraits of the Artist in Three Novels by Sholem Aleichem,” *Prooftexts* 4,3 (1984) 237-251. Norich explores the three artist figures as analogical to the writer, but overlooks their being performing artists. For a discussion of Sholem Aleykhem's novels see also Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 135-158. See also Sholem Aleykhem's Purim stories: “Baym kenig Akhashveyresh,” *Ale Verk fun Sholem Aleykhem* (New York: Folksfond edition, 1915-25), 9: 53-71; “Homen un Mordkhe,” *ibid.*, 22: 225-237; and “Goldshpiners,” *ibid.*, 6:223-244.

<sup>10</sup> See Buki ben-Yogli (Yehuda leyb Katzenelson; 1846-1917), *Ma shera-u enay ve-sham'u oznay: zichronot mi-yeme chayay* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1947). See Sha'ul Tchernichowski, “Chatunata shel Elka,” *Kol kitve Sha'ul Tchernichowski* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1937), 485-519. I thank Robert Alter for the reference to this poem.

<sup>11</sup> See for example Nathan Alterman, *Kochavim ba-chutz* (Tel Aviv: Yachdav, 1938); Avraham Shlonsky, *Le-abama* (Tel Aviv: Ketuvim, 1927).

reclaim Jewish folk performance as cultural heritage and aesthetic ideal. The rise of traditional performance as a national and social(ist) symbol occurs only in the realm of Yiddish culture, in a burst of creative energy shared by scholars, artists and other cultural activists.

The upsurge of interest in folk performance in Yiddish culture of the interwar era lies at the heart of this dissertation's next three chapters, dedicated respectively to theater and historiography (chapter 2), poetry and drama (chapter 3), and cinema (chapter 4). In “The *Purim-shpil* Rediscovered: Yiddish Theater and the Quest for Origins,” I explore the fine line between history and legend, namely, the emergence of a discourse which declared the low-brow *purim-shpil* as the celebrated ancestor of Yiddish theater. This national endeavor, I argue, was common to scholars and artists alike, who, inspired by the rehabilitation of this old traditional form, appropriated it according to their own aesthetic and political agenda. Through an investigation of the interconnections between historians, artists and historical conditions, the chapter lays down the ideological foundations for the rediscovery of and fascination with folk performance in Yiddish culture of the interwar era. The chapter examines two pioneering historiographies of Yiddish theater: B. Gorin's *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater: tsvey toyzent yor teater bay yidn* (The History of Jewish Theater: Two Thousand Years of Jewish Theater; 1918) and Yitskhok (Ignacy) Schiper's three volume study *Geshikhte fun yidishn teater-kunst un drame: fun di eltste tsaytn biz 1750* (History of Jewish Theater and Drama: From the Oldest Times until the year 1750; 1923-7) and their critical reception among Yiddishists and Zionists alike. Despite significant differences between Gorin's amateurish analysis and Schiper's monumental academic study, the two works construct together a powerful narrative, reclaiming the *purim-shpil* as the origin of Yiddish and Jewish theater. These historians' synthetic narrative found an echo among their fellow Yiddishists, and eventually became the cornerstone of the current image of Yiddish theater. The figure of Zigmunt Turkow, a salient actor, theater director and producer in interwar Poland, serves to demonstrate the complex relationships between historians and artists, who together constructed the myth of the origins of Yiddish—and Jewish—theater. The chapter examines Turkow's theatrical work alongside his endeavors as a self-appointed historian in the interwar era and beyond. I look at Turkow's 1923 production of the *purim-shpil* incorporated in Abramovitsh's *Der priziv*, focusing on his attempt to modernize and appropriate this literary rewriting of folk performance. I also discuss Turkow's ongoing interest in the *Broder zinger* (the Singers of Brody), Yiddish itinerant bards who were popular in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Turkow's fascination with these performers, alternative candidates for the origins of Yiddish theater, culminated in his 1937 production *Di broder zinger*. I analyze this production within the context of the harsh circumstances in Poland on the eve of WWII and the changes in Turkow's aesthetic and political credo from the early twenties to the late thirties.

The work of the poet, playwright and theater director Moyshe Broderzon, discussed in the third chapter, constitutes a prominent expression of the interwar wave of interest in folk performance. Titled “Appropriation in Times of Revolution,” this chapter examines the experimental oeuvre and credo of the Yiddish artist who, like Yiddish literary historians of the time, identified traditional Jewish performance as the folkish source of modern Yiddish theater and of modern Jewish art as a whole. The starting point of my discussion is Broderzon's poem “*Ikh, a purim-shpiler*,” a meta-poetic declaration which appeared in the first issue of the *Yung yidish* art journal, and served as a verse-manifesto for the modernist journal and art group.

Published in 1919, the great year of international modernism, “*Ikh, a purim-shpiler*” reveals the radical potential contained within folk performance and presents the performer as an alternative artist figure, authentic yet fresh, and as a site of potential aesthetic and social transformation. Broderzon, I argue, appropriated folk performance not only as a theme but also as a model for an alternative, radical poetics. While his modernist rhetoric typically exalted novelty, it constantly strove to find precursors and ancestors. The chapter also examines two of Broderzon's poetic *dramoletn* (*playlets*): “*A Khasenke*” (A Wedding, 1920), an expressionist drama featuring the *purim-shpiler* as the Jewish Pierrot, and the more humorous *Lilisl* (written 1921, published 1926), featuring a free-spirited *Broder Zinger*. I analyze Broderzon's relation to Russian Modernism and particularly to his immediate source of inspiration, Alexander Blok, whose lyrical drama *Balaganchik* (*The Fairground Booth*, 1907) is intertextually invoked in Broderzon's playlets. By investigating the intertext of experimental Russian theater I strive to demonstrate Broderzon's unique position as a modernist artist creating within a marginal culture. Broderzon's opting for folk performance rather than high-culture progenitors was, I argue, part of a larger modernist quest for new sources of inspiration. It also, however, expressed his identification with an image of Yiddish culture as oral, folkish and dialogical in nature, a culture that possesses the potential to disrupt hegemonic power.<sup>12</sup> By examining Broderzon's neglected oeuvre (neglected because it consisted largely of undocumented stage performances), I offer a more diversified and nuanced account of modernist Yiddish appropriations of traditional performance than the ones available so far, while at the same time contributing to a recovery project of Broderzon's artistic oeuvre.<sup>13</sup>

Yiddish film, discussed in the dissertation's final chapter, constituted another significant arena for the appropriation of folk performance. The new medium showcased a variety of Jewish performances, exploiting them for a melodramatic enactment of contemporary Jewish hopes and anxieties. I argue that Yiddish filmmakers embraced characters such as the *badkhn*, the *klezmer*, the cantor, the *purim-shplier* and the itinerant actor as emblems of the “*heykish*” and “*authentic*” on the one hand, and as signifying the potential for social mobility, on the other. Folk performers thus allowed for a spectacular transformation of tradition to modernity, using melodramatic plots in which the crisis of modernization could be conceived in personal terms. Yiddish cinema often featured “*getaway plots*” linking the homey and the modern, such as the protagonist's escape from the *shtetl* with a group of actors or musicians, or the “*rags to riches*” archetypal narrative, in which the folk performer becomes a successful stage artist.<sup>14</sup> A popular, commodified cinema, Yiddish film presented an array of strategies and attitudes, from presumed

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the cultural image of the Yiddish language (focusing on the politics of gender) see Naomi Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven? The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>13</sup> The only comprehensive academic study of Broderzon to date is Gilles Rozier's *Moyshe Broderzon: un écrivain yiddish d'avant-garde* (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 1999). For a discussion of the *Yung yidish* art group see Marek Bartelik, *Early Modern Polish Art: Unity in Multiplicity* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005), 125-159. See also Seth Wolitz, “The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia,” in Ruth Apter Gabriel, ed. *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Avant-Garde Art, 1912-1928* (Jerusalem; The Israel Museum, 1987), 21-43.

<sup>14</sup> While in earlier times the *klezmer* or the itinerant actor signified a rare alternative to conventional *shtetl* life, in the thirties, after decades of rapid urbanization and immigration among Eastern European Jewry, such gateways were no longer required. The artistic imagination, however, still represented these romantic stories of “*escape from the shtetl*”. I thank Avraham Novershtern for this insight.

authenticity, as in *Yidl mitn fidl* (*Yidl with the Fiddle*, USA, 1936, dir. Joseph Green) to stylized aesthetization, as in *Der dibuk* (*The Dybbuk*, Poland, 1937, dir. Michał Waszyński) and even, I would argue, to ironic distance, as in *Der purim-shplier*, interpreted perhaps against the grain. While Yiddish cinema typically exploits folk performance to evoke nostalgia and/or patronizing feelings, *Der purim-shpiler* offers a rare critique of these capitalist fantasies, portraying the transition from the traditional Purim play to the modern stage as degeneration rather than progress.

Usually examined separately and perceived as oppositions, modernist high-art and popular mass culture of the twenties and thirties are discussed in this study together, as interlinked arenas of cultural production that addressed the same modern challenges.<sup>15</sup> Yiddish like other European cultures, saw the proliferation of producers of modernist and commercial art, who were obsessed with technology, the urban public sphere, changes in gender roles, and social mobility.<sup>16</sup> Paradoxically, it was precisely because of those modern concerns that various forms of cultural production were invested in the kind of engagement with the past that folk performance (alongside other markers of traditional Jewish life) could provide. Modern Yiddish mass culture was often conservative and nostalgic in nature, and appropriated folk performance in its struggle against rapid assimilation, or simply in order to evoke a sense of national pride. Modernist culture often also distrusted modernization processes—albeit in a different way.<sup>17</sup> Some modernist artists expressed their reactionary politics by turning to folk performance which came directly from the masses and was not produced for them to be passively consumed. Folk creativity constituted a potential aesthetic alternative for modernist artists, Yiddish and international, who allied themselves with it in reaction to the emerging mass culture, which for them denoted dangerous aesthetic degeneration, commodification and blunt politicization. Other modernist artists, on the other hand, drew on diverse sources of inspiration and materials, of which mass culture was one.<sup>18</sup> Artists appropriating commercial popular culture and those reclaiming folk performance shared a common modernist stance; both strove to destabilize the dichotomy between high- and low-brow art, and to suggest that no materials are a priori too debased for artistic expression.

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<sup>15</sup> On the analogously close alliance between nineteenth-century French modernism and popular culture see Mary Gluck, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005 [1995]). On the British context see Nicholas Daly, *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin de Siècle: Popular Fiction and British Culture, 1880-1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of Yiddish and Hebrew modernism see Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). See also Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Aesthetic modernism stood at times in an antagonistic tension to modernity; From Flaubert to Marinetti and Pound, T.S. Eliot, Céline, and Benn, some strands within modernism have been allied with political and social conservatism or even Fascism, despite its radically innovative and experimental spirit. I thank Anton Kaes for this observation.

<sup>18</sup> Certain Yiddish modernists embraced popular forms, whether by writing *shund* literature under pseudonyms (a common phenomenon in the Yiddish literary republic), under their real names, or by incorporating popular themes and genres into their own work. Modernist author Yisroel Rabon serves as an example for participation in canonized and low-brow cultural production: he was one of the few notable Yiddish writers to have published *shund* under his real name, and popular culture plays an important role in his canonized modernist novel *Di gas* (*The Street*; 1928). See Yisroel Rabon, *Di Gas*, (Jerusalem: Y.L. Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1986). On *shund* literature see Khone Shmeruk, "Le-toldot sifrut ha-shund be-yidish," *Tarbits* 52, no. 2 (1983): 325-354.

Jewish folk performance was thus a realm where high and low, traditional and modern, Jewish and Western constantly engaged in dialogue. It also served to display entertainment, music and dance-qualities which had an appeal for both high- and low-brow artists and audiences. Moyshe Broderzon, discussed in the third chapter, constitutes a salient example for this complex dialogue between high and low. Alongside canonical poetry and children's poems, Broderzon created cabaret (*kleynkunst teater*), variety shows and marionette theater, engaging with both mass and folk culture. In this sense, Broderzon was like Manger, a modernist poet and a notorious bohemian, who drew largely on folk songs and ballads, employing simple rhymes and humor.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, these two modernist poets also contributed to Yiddish cinema in its heyday: Manger wrote the dialogue and lyrics for the 1937 *Der purim-shplier*, and Broderzon wrote the screenplay for *Freylekhe kabtsonim* (*Jolly Paupers*, Poland 1937, dir. Leon Jeannot and Zigmunt Turkow). Finally, I argue, alongside low and high culture a third factor should be taken into account, that of the scholarly discourse. Through well-read and influential artists such as Turkow, Manger or Broderzon, the academic studies of people like Schiper and Max Erik reached wider circles, together creating a wave of interest in folk performance, and a *Zeitgeist* ready to embrace it, and especially the *purim-shpil*, as the origins of modern Yiddish culture.

In sum, the imagination of traditional performance played an important role in the process of cultural transformation in Jewish Eastern Europe, as a means towards finding a particular modern Jewish voice in the larger European sphere. At the same time, folk performance served to re-imagine and appropriate Jewish traditions, made obsolete by processes of modernization, secularization, urbanization and migration. Exploring the various paths this re-imagining took, whether rejection, veneration, mimicry or reproduction, sheds a new light on the modern Jewish project of self-remodeling and self-reinvention, as well as on the complex relationship between modernism, mass culture and folk creativity.

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<sup>19</sup> Manger explicitly modeled his literary persona on the *purim-shpiler* and the *broder zinger* (the Singers from Brody), as well as on the more dignified old Yiddish literature. In his collection of literary portraits *Noente geshtaltn* (Close Images; 1938) Manger constructs an alternative canon of Yiddish literature including a variety of sources: oral and the written, religious and the profane, high brow and low brow, famous alongside anonymous. Among his new canonical figures were also popular performers (e.g. Velvl Zbarzher and the *broder zinger*). See Itzik Manger, *Noentne geshtaltn* (Warsaw: H. Brzoza, 1938). This “folkish” poetics, coupled with Manger’s immense popularity, gave rise to his public persona as a folk poet, which further enhanced the tendency of contemporary and current readers to overlook his modernist affiliations. For an analysis of Manger’s public persona see Naomi Brenner, “Authorial fictions: Literary and public personas in modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008) ProQuest (AAT 3331524). For a discussion of Manger’s iconoclastic use of language see Chana Kronfeld and Robert Adler Peckerar, “Tongue-Twisted: Itzik Manger between Mame-Loshn and Loshn-Koydesh,” *Poetics Today* (Forthcoming in a special issue on Yiddish: Between Languages and Theories, edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher).

## Chapter One: The Rhymester as the Poet's Troubling Double The Paradoxical Rejection of Folk Performance in *Haskala* Literature

### A. Towards a New Understanding of the *Maskilic* Paradox

Typically presenting themselves as champions of reform, advocating their vision of a new Jewish man (and, to a lesser extent, woman), Eastern European Jewish *maskilim* (follower of the Jewish *Haskala* movement—the Jewish enlightenment) were intimately linked to the very societies they criticized so vehemently.<sup>1</sup> Even the more radical among them, who enthusiastically embraced “enlightened” European ideals, were embedded in the culture of their childhoods, oftentimes much more than they were willing to admit. Traditional Jewish society haunted the *maskilim*, both in the form of their troubling, shameful past and as a potentially imminent future. This was a movement entirely appalled by the thought of perpetuating the way of life, values and mindset of the previous generation. And yet, just as parents exert undeniable influence even on their most rebellious children, so did traditional Jewish society provide the *maskilim* with intellectual models, social values, and artistic standards. The tension between these contradictory inner currents, experienced by many as a destructive rupture, resulted in fact in remarkable creativity.<sup>2</sup> Although many *maskilim* strived to reach a balance, to form a harmonious middle way between tradition and its total abandonment, resisting radical assimilation and “false enlightenment,” their writing nevertheless discloses the inherent paradox they experienced. My close readings of *maskilic* discourse on Jewish performance, focusing on the gap between the overt and the covert, the conscious and the subconscious, seek to substantiate this comprehensive assertion, and bring to light the fundamental contradiction inherent in the *maskilim's* (largely failed) cultural revolution.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On the *Haskala* as a masculine enterprise see Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish women: marginality and modernization in nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish society* (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2004); Tova Cohen, *Ha-achat ahuva vеха-achat senu'ah: ben metsi'ut le-vidyon be-te'ure ha-isha be-sifrut ha-Haskala* (Jerusalem: Y.L. Magnes Press, 2002); Tova Cohen and Shmuel Feiner, *Kol 'alma 'Ivriyah: kitve nashim maskilot ba-me'a ha-tesha'esre* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibuts ha-me'uchad, 2006); Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish women: marginality and modernization in nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish society* (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2004); Shmuel Feiner, “Ha-ishah ha-yehudiyah ha-modernit: mikre-mivchan be-yachase ha-haskala ve-hamoderna,” in *Eros, erusin ve-isurim*, Israel Bartal and Isaiah Gafni, eds. (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1998), 253-304.

<sup>2</sup> A clear expression of the rupture in the *maskil's* soul and of his feelings of shame can be found in the two rhymed introductions to the first part of Linetski's *Dos Poylishe yingl*: “dertseyt nit is biter—es drukt dos harts vi a shteyn / dertseyt yo iz zover—a shande far zikh aleyt” and also: “vi mitshn dos darf, vi krankn dos muz, / az me veyst nit, tsi iz men dos, vos me iz? See Yitskhok Yoyel Linetski (El Katsin Ha-tskhaku'eli), *Dos Poylishe Yingl* (Vilnius: The Brothers Blotnitski, 1897), 7.

<sup>3</sup> In an earlier paper, “Look Back in Pride?—Parental Authority and Ancestral Reassurance in *Haskala* Literature” (unpublished paper, 2006), I made another step towards the concretization of this claim, as I pointed at the ways in which the *maskilim*, notwithstanding their vehement attack on the arranged marriage, held conservative ideas about the marriage institution. Not only did the *maskilim* adhere, as has been argued by David Biale, Naomi Seidman and others, to European bourgeois values, but also and often despite themselves, I argue, they were attached to traditional Jewish values such as the notion of “*yikhes*” and even the dubious institution of the *badkhn*. For a discussion of the Western models of gender roles and sexuality adopted by the *maskilim* see David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Hebrew to Contemporary America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), 149-153; See also

By examining the *maskilic* stance on the *badkhn* (rhymester and Master of Ceremonies in the traditional Jewish wedding) and the *purim-shpiler*, I seek to challenge the dichotomies promoted by the *maskilim* and echoed by future generations and to offer a more nuanced account of their project. In this I follow new tendencies in *Haskala* research, which in recent years has no longer tried to characterize the *Haskala* with a single meta-narrative of either “progress,” proto-nationalism, or a step towards assimilation but rather as a diverse phenomenon. “The *Haskala*,” write Shmuel Feiner and Israel Bartal, “is related to the main story of Jewish history in the last three hundred years—the metamorphoses of the dramatic, traumatic, and unsolved encounter of the Jews with Modernity...the modernization period was multi-directional and complex, full of contradictions and tortuous, surprising developments.”<sup>4</sup> My study follows one of these surprising turns in the largely under researched realm of the Eastern European *maskilic* discourse on Jewish folk performance.

The *maskilim* in Eastern Europe are renowned for their often vehement attacks on traditional Jewish institutions, such as the education system, early marriage, and the Hasidic court. Jewish folk performance was not a primary concern for them; other, more urgent matters in their societies were in need of reform. Accordingly, scholars of the *Haskala* paid little direct attention to this matter, even though, as I will try to show, it can shed light not only on the *maskilim's* views on Jewish folklore but also reveal the internal tensions intrinsic to the *maskilic* revolution, and illuminate such larger questions as the reclaimed origins of Jewish art, and the very possibility of self-transformation—a value central to the project of the *Haskala*. The *Haskala's* discourse concerning the Jewish performer also illuminates the *maskilim's* attitude toward the Eastern European Jewish masses. Were the *maskilim* indeed “colonial agents” as Daniel Boyarin, Michael Gluzman and other recent scholars embracing the postcolonial perspective have suggested?<sup>5</sup> Or did they perhaps assume, as I argue, a more hybrid position?

When Eastern European *maskilic* authors do write about Jewish folk performance, they usually do it as part of their “self-ethnography,” in the form of detailed descriptions of the *shtetl* life they left behind, or what has been termed “salvage ethnography,” practiced by the more optimistic among them, who believed that all those primitive customs and social arrangements were soon to vanish from the world, and thus were willing to “save” them, although only in the cultural memory.<sup>6</sup> Typically, the *maskilim* regard traditional Jewish performance type

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Paula Hayman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995). See also Naomi Seidman, “Theorizing Jewish patriarchy in extremis,” in *Judaism since Gender*, Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 40-48.

<sup>4</sup> Israel Bartal and Shmuel Feiner, eds., *Ha-Haskala le-gevaneha: 'iyunim chadashim be-toldot ha-Haskala uve-sifruta* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), vii. (Translation is mine – Z.S.)

<sup>5</sup> For postcolonial interpretation of Eastern European Jewish *Haskala* (alongside Zionism and other modern Jewish movements) see for example Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1997), 187-312; Michael Gluzman, *Ha-guf ha-tsiyoni: le'umiyut, migdar u-miniyut ba-sifrut ha-yisre'elit ha-chadasha* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibuts Ha-me'uhad, 2007). Chanan Chever, Yehuda Shenhav, David Ochana and Chamutal Tsamir interpret Zionism as a Postcolonial enterprise throughout their work.

<sup>6</sup> The term “Salvage ethnography” was coined by Jacob Gruber in the 1960s in reference to and criticism of British colonialism. Gruber referred to the fact the ones who conquered and destroyed native peoples were also the ones who document them. Gruber also criticized the tendency of European ethnographers to “save” only a few artifacts, without their culture. See Jacob Gruber, “Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology” *American*

(*badkhones*, *klezmer*, *purim-shpil*) as a degraded form of popular entertainment, as yet another expression and product of the unrefined and even vulgar Jewish way of life. The *badkhn*, above all, served as their punching bag as they scorned him for his trite and sentimental sermons, coarse jokes, crude rhymes, and slapstick humor. In addition to this criticism, based mostly on newly discovered European artistic standards, the *maskilim* also condemned the *badkhn* for his involvement in the traditional Jewish wedding, emblematic of the much-despised institution of early, arranged marriage. Being the master of this ceremony and often its main speaker, the *badkhn* often became the metonymy for the entire disastrous event, viewed by the *maskilim* as a conspiracy against the all-too-young couple.

Although at first glance the *maskilic* view of the *badkhn* may seem like a categorical rebuke, my research reveals that an inherent ambivalence accompanies (as a persistent undertone) the *maskilic* rejection of folk performance. At the same time that the *maskilim* distanced themselves from what they perceived as an inferior element of the traditional world, they were also making implicit and explicit associations between folk performers and themselves.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding their often passionate rejection of folk performance, or the sarcastic tone of their analogies between, for example, the *badkhn* and the “true” poet, the *maskilim* were still the first to link folk performance with a thematic concern with Western artistic criteria. Paradoxically, therefore, they constitute the first phase in the modern project of reclaiming traditional performance as the origin of modern Jewish art.<sup>8</sup>

To substantiate this claim I will consider three works written by three major *maskilic* writers; two of them are famous autobiographies: Mordechai Aharon Ginzburg’s *Aviezer* (Vilnius, 1863) and Abraham Baer Gottlober’s *Zichronot mi-yeme ne’uray* (Memoirs from My Youth, written in 1859 and published in Warsaw 1880), and the third is Yehuda Leyb Gordon’s little known short story, “*Melekh tipesh*” (*Stupid King*, published in *Ha-melits* in the 1880s).<sup>9</sup>

## **B. The *Maskilic* Autobiography and the Mimicry of the *Badkhn***

As was the norm in *maskilic* autobiographies, both Ginzburg's and Gottlober's memoirs often take the form of an ethnographic account rather than a personal reminiscence. The following paragraph from Gottlober's *Zichronot mi-yeme ne'uray* provides an instructive example:

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*Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 72, No. 6 (December 1970), 1289-1299. See also Gabriela Safran's use of the term in relation to Sh. An-Ski's work: Gabriella Safran, “Dancing with Death and Salvaging Jewish Culture: Austeria and *The Dybbuk*,” *Slavic Review* 59, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 762.

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, they were not unlike 20th century Yiddish artists, as I show in the next chapters.

<sup>8</sup> This project can also be understood in terms of “inventing tradition.” See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Tradition,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1-14. Hobsbawm argues that “traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented,” (*ibid.*, 1) and that “it is the change between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant that makes the “invention of tradition” so interesting.” (*ibid.*, 2). For a clear summary of the claim that tradition is inevitably invented see Jocelyn S. Linnekin, “Defining tradition: variations on the Hawaiian identity” *American Ethnologist* 10, No. 2 (May, 1983): 241.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Baer Gottlober, *zichronot mi-yeme ne'uray* (Warsaw: A. Alafin, 1880). Although published as a book only in 1880, Gottlober published parts of his memoirs earlier on, in his *maskilic* periodical *Haboker Or* (Lemberg, 1876-1886).

אז יחלו הכלי-זמר לנגן נגינות אבל ומספד מר לעורר את הנשים לבכייה (אף שהן מתעוררות מאליהן, וכל אחת הביאה הנה נגע לבבה, לזאת יחסר לחם חוקה, ולזאת צער גידול בנים, ולאחת אגרוף בעלה נגד עיניה תמיד, המכה בלי חמלה – סוף דבר כל אחת מוכנת לבכייה) ויעמוד הבדחן, אשר ברגע הזה הוא הדורש והמוכיח, ויקרא בקול גדול: 'הס!!' ותיכף תרוממנה הנשים את קולן ביתר שאת ועוז. ויקרא הבדחן המוכיח את תוכחת מוסרו בחרוזים שרוע וקלוט, בלשון העם, לא תואר ולא הדר להם, לא שכל ולא דעת, כי אם מלים בעלמא בלי טעם וריח, על דרך משל יספר להכלה: שהיום אצלה יום הכיפורים, וראוי לה לבקש רחמים שתינצל מפני הייסורים, והלילה הזה לה ליל שימורים, ובן גילה הוא היפה בבחורים, על כן תרים כשופר קולה בבכי ומספד תמרורים, לבקש מאל, שיהיו לנצח שניהם צרורים וקשורים; על כן תשמח היום בתולה במחול ובחור בשירים (ותוך כדי דיבור שכח שהתחיל באבל ומספד מר ופתאום נהפך מיגון לשמחה) וכדומה לדברים אלה שמרבים הבל, ותמיד הוא מסיים במילתא דבדיחותא (כי בדחן הוא!) על דרך משל: שיעשה החתן את כל אשר תגזור עליו הכלה, אף אם תשלח אותו לעבור במו אש ישמע לקול דברה על כן תשמע היא בקולו להביא במים את בשרה (ער וועט דיך פאלגן אין פייער אבי דו אים אין וואסער). וכהתימו לדרוש יתחילו תיכף הכלי-זמר לנגן נגינות מחול, וייהפך פתאום לב הנשים עליהן מאבל כבד לשמחה, ותפזזנה ותכרכרנה בכל עוז סביב הכלה, בטרם מחו עוד דמעותיהן מעל פניהן, ויש אשר גם מיץ נחיריהן יזוב עוד מרוב בכיין.<sup>10</sup>

Then the musician would start playing mournful and elegiac tunes to rouse women into tears (though they are easily roused on their own; each one of them brings along the affliction of her heart, this one lacks her daily bread, the other suffers the ordeals of raising children, and yet another always sees before her eyes her husband's fist, hitting her without mercy. In short, each of them comes ready for a good cry) and the *badkhn* would rise, he who at that moment is a preacher and a moralizer, and call out in a loud voice: "Hush!" and the women immediately would raise their voices with redoubled vigor and force. Then the *badkhn* would deliver his moralizing sermon in rhymes either redundant or lacking, in the language of the folk, which have neither beauty nor stature, neither wisdom nor sense, but only empty words, bland and insipid; for instance, he would tell the bride that today, as on Yom Kippur, she's fasting / and for God's mercy she should be asking / so she can avoid suffering / This night she should abstain from sleeping / so handsome is her mate – no one quite like him / therefore she should raise her voice like a *shofar* crying / pray to God that their marriage remain binding / therefore a maid shall go dancing and a young man – singing. (In the midst of his oration he would forget that he started with a mournful and elegiac tone and would suddenly switch from sorrow to joy) and similar things that pile on insipid blabber, and he always concludes with a joke (for he's a joker!). For example: "That the groom should obey the lady of the house / even if she says: 'through flames shalt thou walk, my spouse.' / Therefore she'd consent to frequent the bath house." ([In Yiddish:] He'll follow you in fire [*fayer*] / as long as you follow him in water [*vaser*]). And as soon as he would finish preaching, the

<sup>10</sup> Gottlober, *Zichronot mi-yeme ne'uray*, 31.

*klezmer* would start playing dance tunes, and the women's mood would revert from weighty grief to joy, and they would prance and cavort with vigor around the bride even before wiping the tears off their faces; at times their noses would still be running from all their sobbing.<sup>11</sup>

Parodying his subject matter and adjusting his style to it, Gottlober's account of the dialogue between the performers and their audience is rather comical, as for example in the call "Hush!," which in fact results in the women raising their voices even louder or the running noses of the dancing women in the closing lines of the paragraph. The performance, and the entire wedding celebration of which it is a part, becomes in Gottlober's account a pathetic, grotesque spectacle. He quotes the *badkhn's* crude rhymes (which he translates from the Yiddish) as proof of their poor quality, or in his hyper-Biblical Hebrew having: "neither beauty nor stature, neither wisdom nor sense, but only empty words, bland and insipid." Above all, Gottlober mocks the *badkhn* and his audience's abrupt transition from sadness to joy, which he attributes to the *badkhn's* carelessness (he "forgot" that he started with mourning and grief). These "senseless" sudden switches also serve as proof of the manipulated nature of the emotional responses the *badkhn* evokes in the women.

The ultimate proof of the performer's inferiority seems to be his popularity, especially among female spectators. The women, a collective entity characterized as one body with one emotional disposition, are described as easily excited by the music and the *badkhn's* didactic sermons and rhymes, sobbing at first but then switching to joyful ecstatic dancing. According to Gottlober, the women arrive at the ceremony already emotionally overwrought. In other words, they are concerned with their own misery rather than the bride's—though since they have good reasons to be miserable, which the writer specifies in some detail, this disposition can be excused. The excitable female audience thus expects the catharsis that this dramatic event promises to provide, and all the performers, the *badkhn* and *klezmer* need to do is conduct the women's responses. Although this narrative considers the performer to have a more elevated status than the women whose emotions he steers, it also aligns him with them. Gottlober's account makes the *badkhn* and the *klezmer's* art seem as emotional, incoherent and tasteless as the responses of their female audiences.

Moreover, the *badkhn* is complicit in one of the most notorious Jewish institutions—or crimes, from a *maskilic* perspective—the early marriage. The *badkhn's* implication in this tradition is featured most prominently in Ginzburg's *Aviezer*. In his autobiographical account of his own wedding, Ginzburg affiliates the performers, and most notably the *badkhn*, with the corrupt traditional world, which conspired against the fourteen-year-old groom who narrates the story:

ואחרי אכלנו מנת הצהריים ונשבע מנוחה איזה שעות, רחצתי פניי וידיי פשטתי בגדי הדרך ואלבש מחלצות כחתן מכהן פאר, והנה קול המולה כקול מחנה כבד מאנשים הבאים בעגלות צב ובמרכבה מרקדה בתוך ובחליל ובכל מיני זמר לשחר פני, יהי הלולים הלולים, האורחים מקדמים פני בשלום, הכינור מנגן, התוף מכה—והבדחן—איש נקלה המוכר בכסף כבוד - מחלק כבוד מלוא חופניים, המחוננים היו לו רוזנים וסגנים, הבאים לשחר פני, רואי פני המלך הבאים לעטור את ראש החתן היושב בתוך, כמלך עתיד לכידור לבוש

<sup>11</sup> Unless stated otherwise all translations are mine. I thank Chana Kronfeld for her generous help in translating from the Hebrew and Yiddish.

מכלולים—הוי מלך בחלום חזיון לילה—ומשרתי אבי מחלקים מגדנות, ויהיו כולם שבעי עונג ונחת, אך אני אשר בשלי כל הכבוד הזה ישבתי מרעיד כי היה לבי חרד לכל המראה הזה.<sup>12</sup>

And after we had our mid-day portion and we were satiated by several hours of rest, I washed my face and hands, took off the travel clothes and donned my flamboyant attire, like a groom presiding over glamour. And lo, the sound of bustle, like the sound of a camp of people in turtle slow carriages and a coach, prancing with fife and drum and all manner of song to seek my presence, let it be praise upon praise, the guests are welcoming me, the fiddle is playing, the drum is beating, and the *badkhn*—that abject man who sells honor for money—hands out honor by the handful. The in-laws became his dukes and lieutenants seeking my presence as those seeking king's face, who have come to adorn the head of the groom, who sits in the midst of it all, like a lavishly dressed king ready for battle—o thou art king only in dreams or visions of the night—and my father's servants serve sweets, so all are filled with pleasure and satisfaction; but I, the cause for all this honor, sat atremble, for my heart shuddered at this scene.

The common *maskilic* critique of early marriage, described as the *maskil's* doom in numerous contemporary autobiographies, lends bitter overtones to Ginzburg's account of his own wedding, marking the groom as the innocent victim of the ostensibly merry spectacle. Ginzburg interpolates the judgmental stance of the mature *maskil* into the perspective of the naive child by parenthetically exclaiming: "O thou art king only in dreams." Only from his adult perspective, does he become acutely aware that this "king for a day," led to the *khupe* in great, royal honor, is in fact only a pawn in the disastrous scheme of his arranged marriage. The performers, most notably the *badkhn*, who orchestrates the entire ceremony, epitomize in Ginzburg's narrative the deceptive nature of the "crowning" spectacle, as professionals who provide a show, or, in Ginzburg's words, "an abject man who trades honor for money," (*ish nikle ha-mocher be-chesef kavod*). The *badkhn's* status as hired labor also points to the real essence of the arranged marriage—as a financial transaction between the bride and groom's parents.

Ginzburg, however, condemns the *badkhn* for more than being complicit in the social apparatus of traditional Jewish life. He also addresses the performance itself, disparaging it, as many other *maskilim* do, as vulgar and tasteless. In *Aviezer*, as in Gottlober's *zichronot mi-yeme ne-uray*, Ginzburg mocks the *badkhn's* popularity, especially among women. In the intellectual circles of the *haskala*, the performer's success among large audiences only confirms his low status—somewhat ironically given the *maskilim's* frustration with their own unpopularity (at least in the case of Hebrew writers), most famously expressed in Gordon's poem: "For Whom do I Toil?" (*le-mi ani amel?*). Moreover, whereas the audience's judgment serves as proof of the *badkhn's* low artistic standards, it is also perceived, in turn, as shaped by his performance. Ginzburg holds the *badkhn* responsible for the degeneration of aesthetic taste in Eastern European Jewish culture:

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<sup>12</sup> Mordechai Aharon Ginzburg, *Aviezer* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1967 [a copy of the first edition, Vilnius, 1864]), 69-74.

ככה התקלקל טעם האנשים האלה בכל דבר כקטן כגדול, ירגישו טעם מעדנים בריר חלמות ויתפעלו מדברים חסרי רעיון חילוק ובילוק כאלה, והמה ביד הבדחן כחומר ביד היוצר אל כל אשר יחפוץ יטם, אם יתן קולו בשירים כאלה וחיתה רוח הנשים בגללם, ואם ישנה פניו לדרוש להכלה ולרעותיה חרוזי מוסר, ויגעה כשור "הילילו בנות חת, כי חושך בשת", וירדו עיניהם פלגי דמעות, הוי! מי ישמע ולא יצחק.

These people's taste has thus completely deteriorated in small and big things alike. They perceive disgusting, slimy dishes as tasty delicacies and adore such senseless, mindless things; in the hands of the *badkhn* they are like clay in the hands of the potter, he can sway them in any direction as he wishes. If he sings songs of this kind he revives the women's spirit, and if he switches to moralizing homiletics for the bride and her women friends, than he bellows like an ox: "Woe to ye daughters of Heth's side, for darkness dwells in your backside," at which their eyes begin to shed rivers of tears. Oy! Who could hear this without laughing.

The strong association of traditional Jewish performance with female audiences, in Ginzburg's and Gottlober's autobiographies as in many other sources, is probably based in actual cultural practices in Jewish Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this feminization also constitutes a rhetorical move, helping to marginalize the performance and distance it from the masculine elite circles of *maskilic* writers and readers.<sup>14</sup> This "othering" goes hand in hand with the direct attack on the style, form, and content of the performance. The women's admiration of the *badkhn*'s skills serves as evidence of their low aesthetic standards and simultaneously proves the lowly nature of the performer's art.

Gottlober's and Ginzburg's repudiation of the *badkhn* is vehement, and at first glance may indeed seem all-complete and rather predictable. It surely fits well with the *maskilic* attacks on traditional Jewish customs and is in line with the then-prevalent contempt of the male intellectual for lowbrow, feminized culture. A closer look, however, reveals a more complex set

<sup>13</sup> Numerous sources extol the *badkhn*'s special influence on women and girls. Thus for example, in his article about "der berisover badkhn" (The *badkhn* from Berisov), B. Slutzki writes: "Di meyd lakh un yunge vayblakh flegt er shrekleh gefeln. Zey flegn khaleshn nokh im." (The girls and young women used to adore him. They used to go wild about him). See B. Slutzki, "Yidishe Badkhonim-shpyshipler," *Tsyatshrift* 1 (1926): 258. Another example is Mordkhe Spektor's story "Velvl der Shiber" (Velvl the Baker's Assistant), where the women and girls who work at the bakery admire Velvl's singing: "Un di ale meyd lakh mit di vayblakh. . . hobn fun Velvl's troyerik zingen geveynt mit bitere trern oder fun zayne freylekhe lider hoben zey gepuket far gelekhter." (And all the girls alongside the women. . . cried with bitter tears from Velvl's singing or split their guts laughing from his merry songs." See Mordkhe Spektor, "Velvl der Shiber," *Der Tog* (Petersburg) 14 March 1904 (no. 63), 15-17. In his memoirs Yekhezkel Kotik (1847-1921) describes a talented *badkhn* named Tudrus who made everybody, ("except for those made of iron") cry, and especially the women: "di vayber flegn prost tsegeyen fun geveynen, biz men hot gebetn Tudrusn un Shepsln, zey zoln makhn an ek, vorum di vayber hobn shoy'n nisht keyn koyekh tsu veynen" (the women simply melted from crying, and one had to ask Tudrus and Shepsel (the klezmer – Z.S.) to stop – the women have no more strength to cry." See Yekhezkel Kotik, *Mayne zikhroynes* (Berlin: Klal-farlag, 1922), 39. The *badkhn*'s special relation to women has probably to do with the fact that girls are encouraged to express emotions openly, while men are expected to save face.

<sup>14</sup> Although, as Iris Parush and more recently Tova Cohen and Shmuel Finer have shown, female readers- and even writers did exist, albeit on the margins. See Tova Choen and Shmuel Finer, *Kol Alma Ivriya* on *maskilic* women writers, and Iris Parush, *Nashim Kor'ot* on readers.

of attitudes and casts doubt on the totality of their rejection. The first indication to draw our attention (or raise our suspicion) is the fact that while Ginzburg and Gottlober mockingly describe the *badkhn's* rhymes as “senseless and mindless” (Ginzburg) or “bland and insipid” (Gottlober), or later characterize their rhymes as “a wild mixture of erudition and far-fetched numerology (*gimatria*—Z.S.) that all would despise,” they nevertheless quote at length the *badkhn's* jokes and verses.<sup>15</sup> Both Ginzburg and Gottlober rise to the challenge of translating or imitating the vivid and flexible Yiddish rhymes, which intertwine colloquial language with the elevated register of Jewish sources in *loshn koydesh* (Hebrew and Aramaic). Both strive to recreate these “bland and insipid” rhymes in the archaic, unyielding Hebrew of their times, heavily steeped in biblical idiom and replete with the *melitsah* and the *shibuts* (flowery biblical quotations and allusions, which constitute the Hebrew poetic diction typical of the *haskala*). In one instance, Gottlober even provides the Yiddish in parentheses, thus indicating his dissatisfaction with his own Hebrew translation, which is indeed much loftier and lengthier than the terse Yiddish original.<sup>16</sup>

While disparaging the *badkhn's* performance, Gottlober and Ginzburg partly also assume the *badkhn's* position, competing with and impersonating him. Both of these prominent *maskilic* authors clearly take pride and pleasure in translating *badkhones* or rather creating their own Hebrew version of it. The more absurd the text, the more they enjoy the task, giving in to the sheer pleasure of creating nonsense verse. Thus, for example, Ginzburg comes up with a farcical rhyme of his own, which he puts in the mouth of the hypothetical *badkhn*, who “bellows like an ox: ‘Woe to ye, daughters of Heth's side/ for darkness dwells in your backside’” (*heytilu bnos cheys, ki choyshech bashyesh*). Even such a grotesque rhyme, he suggests, is guaranteed to arouse another torrent of tears in the women.

While Ginzburg criticizes the *badkhn's* vulgarity, he is also “infected” by it—not unlike other *maskilim* who skillfully parodied their traditional (often Hasidic) sources. I’ve borrowed the term “infected” from Baruch Kurzweil, and yet use it somewhat differently. Writing about Yosef Perl’s first Hebrew novel *Megale Temirin*, Kurzweil argues that though utopian and didactic in aspiration, the novel is nevertheless “infected” by the skeptical spirit with which it attacks the *Hasidim*, the object of this wild parody.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Kurzweil, who contends that the satirical motif

<sup>15</sup> “*Ha-gramen hem kulam hevel ma'ase ta'atu'im, ta'arovot kharifut ha-lomdim banuy al kav toho ve-avne bohu, balul be-shemen ha-mekubalim berahe-tevot ve-sitre tora ve-gimatriot vehakol asuy be-shirim va-kharuzim asher takuts kol nefesh bahem.*” Gottlober, *zichronot mi-yeme ne'uray* (Warsaw: A. Alafin, 1880), 33. Interestingly, Gottlober’s 1859 memoir contains two different layers of attack on the *badkhn*, the more radical one was written by him at the age of 24, namely in the year 1834. Gottlober criticizes himself for being too extreme in his criticism, but nevertheless chooses to include his parodic early poem titled “*mishte ve-yom tov la-yehudim*,” (a feast and a good day for the Jews) “so that the reader can see how much his ideas have changed.” (*ve'ra'ita ma mize nishtanu ra'ayonay bu-yeme ne'uray*). *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Gottlober’s translation is in fact a prime example of the clumsiness of *maskilic melitsah* (flowery phrase), and although both biblical and modern Hebrew are synthetic and therefore allow for concise phrasing much more than Yiddish, Gottlober’s explanatory rendition takes a very different path from the original.

<sup>17</sup> Baruch Kurzweil, “*Ha-motiv ha-satiri madbik et ha-satira atsuma*,” in *Bama'avak al erche ha-yahadut* (Jerusalem: Schocken Press, 1969), 77-79. Kurzweil shows how although Perl's satire shows ambivalence toward the old traditional utopia, it still relies on it for its future utopia. (Kurzweil uses both terms, satire and parody, interchangeably). Ken Frieden has written about the way Perl's Hebrew is influenced by the underlying Yiddish of his opponents. Following Kurzweil and Frieden, Riki Ophir has shown how Perl's text, which exposes the sexual corruption and promiscuity of the Hasidic court, becomes in itself no less sexually obsessed than the object of its parody (“Passion and Deception in Joseph Perl's *Megale Temirin*”, unpublished paper, 2006).

infects the satire itself, I argue that it is rather the parodied text that “infects” parody itself, as apparent in Ginzburg’s and Gotlober’s mimicry of the *badkhn*’s speech. As in other *maskilic* parodies of traditional texts, Hasidic or other, the ironic mimicry draws the critics closer to their rhetorical targets, thus creating a hybrid stance more complex than their explicitly declared purely oppositional one.

Like other *maskilim*, and almost in spite of himself, Ginzburg again and again draws parallels between the Hebrew poet and the *badkhn*. This ambivalent position is especially apparent in what might be called Ginzburg’s “poetics of *badkhnones*.” Following his account of the wedding, Ginzburg proceeds to contemplate and theorize at length good and bad rhymes, which to him mark the difference between first-rate and second-rate poetry. Although he clearly classifies the *badkhn*’s rhymes in the latter category, he nevertheless reaffirms the *badkhn*’s participation in the realm of artistic creativity of which he himself is part as well.

Ginzburg’s introduction to his translation of the *badkhn*’s speech reveals this double gesture, which entails ridiculing the *badkhn* while validating his poetic creativity:

אם תאבו לשמוע את השירים אשר שוררו משוררי הזמן על מלך היום ההוא, ואעתיק לכם על טהרת  
לשון הקודש שיר חרוזי אשר רחש לבב אחד המשוררים המכובדים בשם בדחנים, עלי ועל מולדתי,  
וחזיתם גדולות, והיתה לכם השירה לעדה כי לא אלמן ישראל ממליצים ומשוררים.

If you wish to hear the poems<sup>18</sup> that the poets of that period sang about the king of that day, I’ll render for you into pure Hebrew a rhymed poem that one of the poets honored with the title *badkhnim* invented, about me and my hometown, and you’ll see how great it is, and this poetry will be your witness that Israel should not despair, as it still includes poets and versifiers.

Ginzburg’s grandiloquent, praising tone, along with his self-proclaimed effort to translate four whole verses, might (mis)lead the naive, first-time reader, to think that the writer expresses here his genuine appreciation of the *badkhn*. Subsequent paragraphs, however, make clear that the mock-epic tone parodies the *badkhn*’s poetic skills and especially his absurd rhymes. Ginzburg is especially irritated by the *badkhn*’s fourth and last couplet, where he rhymed the Biblical word *dishant* with *Salant*, the name of Ginzburg’s hometown:

ומה אמרתי אני בלבי לשמע השירים האלה! ובייחוד החרוז הרביעי הזה? חסדי השם הזכרתי  
אשר לא קרא שם אבי אלקנה ואשר לא נתן את משכנו בזאגער. כי איה מצא המשורר מקום  
בכתבי הקודש לחרוז את השמות האלה בברכה? ומה יכול לעשות כאשר החל רוח השיר  
לבעתו אם לא לחרוז את שמו בפסוק יהיו בניו יתומים ואשתו אלמנה ושם עירו בברכת  
תעקר ותשבר ותמגר—והדברים יגעים.

And what did I say in my own heart at the sound of all these verses! And especially this fourth rhyme? I invoked the grace of God for not having called my grandfather **Shmayf** and not having him live in **Shmund**. For where in the holy scriptures would the poet find a rhyme for these names in a blessing?

<sup>18</sup> The Hebrew word “*shir*” signifies both “poem” and “song.” In fact, one could argue that the lack of distinction between the terms in the language have contributed to the very affinity between the singer/performer and the poet, expressed in these texts.

What could he have done when the spirit of poesy possessed him if not to rhyme these names with the verse: “His children shall be orphans and a widow—his **wife**” and his town’s name [he will rhyme] as blessed “to be destroyed, decayed, and **ruined**.” And all this is trite and wearisome.<sup>19</sup>

Ginzburg’s concluding words, “And things are trite and wearisome” (*vehadvorim yegeim*), echoing the cynical, indifferent tone of Ecclesiastes 1:8, *kol hadevarim yege'im*), cannot conceal the clear enjoyment this *maskilic* writer takes in creating ridiculous rhymes. Rather, this concluding rejection can be interpreted as an active gesture of repression. Ginzburg feels obligated to subdue the sheer pleasure he takes in his own *badkhones* as he follows the (inferior) example of the *badkhn* and rhymes a Biblical Hebrew word, “*temoger*” (in its Ashkenazi pronunciation), with a Yiddish word of German origin, “*zoger*.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, he undoubtedly delights in the cruel content of his verse. By means of his ostensibly nonsensical rhymes, Ginzburg is able to kill his father and destroy his home town – the ultimate repressed *maskilic* fantasy?

By creating a hypothetical *badkhones* text for his own wedding and at the same time evoking the fantasy of being born under a different name and in another place (albeit as the comic-fantastical Elkone/Zoger), Ginzburg assumes the role of an alternative *badkhn*. He thus claims an authorial position over the text, which at first marked his helplessness, turning the *badkhn*’s speech on its head by cursing the groom instead of blessing him. This is indeed in line with the very act of writing a *maskilic* autobiography, or any autobiography for that matter: a gesture of authorial control and empowerment; by arranging one’s life into a master narrative, a certain degree of mastery over the author’s life-story can be attained.

Ginzburg’s reference to the *badkhn* as “a poet” is undoubtedly ironic, even provocative. However, the mere suggestion that the folk performer can be viewed as a poet (albeit a miserable one) is quite meaningful as is the reference to the existence of a real (though aesthetically inferior) poetic environment in contemporary Jewish society—or rather, as the ironic subtext suggest, to its lack. By dismissing the artistic value of the *badkhn*, Ginzburg unwittingly acknowledges his being an artist. This is also apparent in Ginzburg’s reference to the negative influence of the *badkhn* on his audience: “People’s taste has thus completely deteriorated in small and big things alike.” Ginzburg constructs an opposition—but also implies interconnections—between the lowbrow culture of the *badkhn* on the one hand, and high (namely European) culture on the other, suggesting that people who grow with this kind of “poetry” and “theater” may become less able to appreciate the subtleties of “true” art. This, I argue, is also the reason for the vehement attack on the abrupt transitions from sadness to joy (mostly apparent in Gotlober’s account). These sudden shifts in disposition stand in direct opposition to common Western literary conventions and genres, in the new-classical interpretations of the comedy/tragedy binary of classical Greek theater, which served as a model for the enlightenment as well as for future generations of Jewish writers. Furthermore, the

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<sup>19</sup> For the sake of the rhyme I changed the names in Ginzburg’s text (Elkone, Zoger), to the strange, artificial names of Shmayf and Shmund, drawing on the Yiddish (and Yinglish) convention of X shm-X, as in the popular joke: “Oedipus *shmedipus*, just as long as he love his mother.”

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, according to other artistic standards, rhyming words with distant etymological origins is considered a great skill. This, for example, was one of the well known talents of the great medieval Yiddish poet Eliyahu Bokhr (Elia Levita).

*badkhn*'s typical versatility of performative practices (as rhymester, comedian, master-of-ceremonies, musician, dancer, and acrobat) and his intertwining of sadness and joy set Jewish performance apart from Western artistic conventions.<sup>21</sup> Rather than generating admiration for its versatility, Jewish folk performance was repudiated by the *maskilim* as unprofessional and inappropriate.<sup>22</sup>

Gottlober and Ginzburg display the ambivalence typical of *maskilic* writers, and subsequently of writers of *Ha-Techiya* generation, including David Frishman and Nahum Sokolow. These *maskilic* writers strongly disparage the *badkhn*'s banal and artificial rhymes, his abrupt alteration of moods and his role in ceremonies based on objectionable cultural practices. At the same time, they also link their own writing to his performance by judging the *badkhn* according to artistic ideals as well as by quoting, mimicking, and translating him. The typical *maskilic* position thus implies an inherent paradox, as the rejection of traditional performative practices entails its recognition as art rather than folklore. Often implicit, this ambivalence nevertheless constitutes a significant contribution to the modern Jewish project of reimagining the Jewish past and rediscovering or reinventing the lost "roots" of Jewish artistic traditions.

### C. Gordon's *Stupid King: the Purim-shpiler's Myth of Origin*

The short story was not among the most common *maskilic* genres and usually ranks low in scholarly discussions of *maskilic* literature in general and in discussions of Gordon's oeuvre in particular. Nevertheless, "Stupid King" uncovers the creative potential of *maskilic* fiction in concentrated form by combining the *maskilic* literary tools of satire and parody.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the *maskilic* autobiographies, in which the groom occupies the center of the story and the *badkhn*

<sup>21</sup> Thus for example, David Frishman (1859–1922), the Yiddish and Hebrew writer and literary critic, compares Jewish theater to a performance of *badkhones*, criticizing the abrupt mood switches and the many performative practices of the actor:

והאקטור בעצמו? לו גם יהיה בעל-כשרון כאחד הגדולים, הלא עליו לצאת מדעתו לרגלי חזיונות כאלה, אשר אין בהם שום הכרח הגיוני, אלא שהכל נעשה במקרה. במשך חמשה רגעים עליו לעבור את כל הסקלה הארפה של כל רגשות האדם יחדו: קנאה ושנאה ואהבה ושמחה ויגון וכעס ותחנונים—וכל אלה במשך חמשה רגעים. ברגע אחד עליו לעמוד באותה פוזה של המלט בשעת המונולוג, וברגע השני – והוא בדחן כאחד הבדחנים בשעת החתונות. ואם יודע הוא במקרה את מחול „קאמארינסקי“, אז עליו לחול פתאום גם את זה. . . . האפשר לאיש, שיש לו איזה כשרון, שיפתח את כשרונו זה ושיבוא לידי איזו תכלית בתנאים כאלה.

And the actor himself? Even if he has as much talented as the great actors, he'd become insane from these shows which have no logical necessity, but rather all in them is done randomly. Within five minutes he should go through the whole wide range of of human feelings all together: jealousy, hate, love, joy, sorrow, anger, and pleading – and all this within five minutes. One moment he is required to stand in to pose of Hamlet in his monologue, and in the next moment he's a *badkhn* like one of the *badkhonim* in the weddings. And if he happens to know the Kamerinski dance, he needs to dance this one too all of a sudden. . . . is it possible that a person who has any talent would develop his talent and achieve anything under such conditions?

See David Frishman, "Ha-te'atron ha-yehudi," in *Kol kitve David Frishman* (Warsaw, New York: Lili Frishman Press, 1929), 3: 89.

<sup>22</sup> In the twentieth century, the lack of distinction between what in the West are different performative disciplines has become a source of admiration for many Western theater directors, who have found inspiration, for example, in traditional multi-disciplinary Asian theaters. See Patrice Pavis, ed., *The Intercultural Performance reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>23</sup> The short story, for example, is not one of the many genres discussed in: Moshe Pelli, *In Search of Genre: Hebrew Enlightenment and Modernity* (Lanham, Md. : University Press of America, 2005). On the difference between satire and parody see Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

serves as one of the many characters orbiting him—often the most despised one—Gordon’s short story *Stupid King* (*Melekh tipesh*) situates the performer, ironically named Melekh (meaning “king”), at its very heart. Narrated from the perspective of an anonymous narrator, Melekh’s childhood acquaintance, this fictional work interestingly opens with a depiction of the performer’s mother, Tsippe, then goes on to portray Melekh as a child, before finally recounting a coincidental re-encounter of the narrator with his old friend years later when Melekh has become a “monarch” by impersonating Ahasuerus in a *purim-shpil*. All the stages of this plot are embedded in a playful frame story in which the narrator himself dons a costume, assuming the role of a mock-*magid* (preacher) and mimicking a *droshe* (a sermon based on an interpretation of Biblical verse) in a cheerful Purimesque manner about King Ahasuerus. Gordon’s *maskilic* story thus functions also as traditional text: a *Purim-toyre* (or a *Purim-torah*), a parody of a liturgical or another sacred text, customarily recited on *Purim*.<sup>24</sup>

Both a *badkhn* and a *purim-shpiler*, Melekh constitutes the quintessential folk performer, and the story can hence be regarded not only as an ars-poetics *Bildung* narrative, but also as an inquiry into traditional Jewish performance in general. Thus, though Gordon’s story makes no pretense to historical accuracy, it is in a sense more ambitious than the autobiographical narratives I discussed above, not only does it strive to portray “the Jewish condition” rather than an individual case (this is true of the autobiographies as well), but it also provides a myth of origin, a meditation on the modern performer’s genesis and ancestry. The story raises and answers questions such as: What are the origins of the modern Jewish performer in terms of lineage, innate talent, and sources of artistic inspiration? What characterizes and motivates him? How did he evolve over the years? *Stupid King* also functions as an etiological tale, in the style of Rudyard Kipling’s *Just So Stories*, which recount how this or that creature came to acquire its characteristic trait. Gordon provides a psychological and sociological etiology of the performer’s development, considering his family background, birth (including a pseudo-Biblical prophecy announcing his royal status), education, childhood behavior, youthful adventures, and finally, his mature career. Beyond the individual “portrait of the artist” these circumstances serve to explain the typical characteristics of the Eastern European Jewish performer, ranging from knowledge of traditional Jewish sources, charisma, ability to play different roles, love for the audience, to a strong desire for honor and fame.

Since no pretensions to realism or ethnography are at play in *Stupid King*, the satiric mode allows the *maskilic* writer to fantasize about the meta-artistic aspects of the performer. Gordon indeed provides a more comprehensive, imaginative, and humorous consideration of the *badkhn* than is found in the Hebrew autobiographies, which typically recount disastrous life stories and where the wedding—the *badkhn*’s glorious moment—inaugurates a dramatic turn to the worse. Even when “infected” by the *badkhn*’s humor, the autobiographies’ perspective of doom and gloom hovers over the portrayal of the performer, coloring it with shades of dark sarcasm. The tone of *Stupid King*, on the other hand, is cheerful, aptly culminating in the protagonist performing a joyous *purim-shpil* and concluding with a witty epilogue.

The humorous frame narrative in *Stupid King* comprises a prologue, an epilogue, and a few interjections throughout the story; it combines the erudite characteristics of the *badkhn* (or

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<sup>24</sup> For a description of contemporary Hasidic celebrations of Purim, including a *purim-shpil* and *purim-toyres* see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet, “Performance of precepts: precepts of performance: Hasidic celebrations of Purim,” in Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 109-117.

*magid*, preacher) with the carnivalesque spirit of the *purim-shpiler*. With its second person narration and the didactic-dialogical tone typical of both, this *Skaz*-like narrative mimics the folk performer's style, thus echoing the theme of the principal story. The epilogue illustrates the mock-erudite nature of the narrator's voice, a citational mode which pre-figures Sholem-Aleykhem's compulsively misquoting Tevye:

שאלה קדומה היא ומחלוקת ישנה בין הסופרים וכבר נתחבטו עליה קדמוני הקדמונים ועד היום לא נתבררה כל צרכה: אחשוורוש – מלך טפש או מלך פקח היה? [...] חד אמר משום בית מדרשו של סובאָרין: אחשוורוש מלך פקח היה, לפי שנאמר "ונשלוח ספרים להשמיד להרוג ולאבד את כל היהודים". ואידך? שפיל לסיפא דקרא: "אשר נתן המלך ליהודים להשמיד להרוג ולאבד את כל חיל עם ומדינה הצרים אותם". וחד אמר: אחשוורוש מלך טפש היה, לפי שנאמר "להראות העמים והשרים את יפיה" ונקטינן "כל הטפשינן נשותיהם יפות" ואידך? משום הא לא אריא, שהרי נאמר "ורחל היתה יפת תואר ויפת מראה" – ומי חכם כיעקב שבעודו "בבטן עקב את אחיו". ואידך? זה היה קודם מתן תורה ואין מכאן ראיה. והנה במקום שיש פירוד הדעות כזה ולפי שהשאלה הזאת גדולה היא ליהודים וכבוד בית ישראל תלוי בה, לכן אהיה דעי אף אני ואביא ראיה לדברי לא מן התורה ולא מן הנביאים ולא מן הכתובים כי אם ממעשה שהיה וקרה בימינו, כי אין לך ראיה מִכֶּרְחַת ומופת חותך כמעשה שהיה.

It is an ancient question and an old dispute among writers, and the most ancient of the ancients pondered over it, and the matter hasn't been settled to this very day: Ahasuerus – was he a stupid or a wise king? [...] One sage said, in keeping with Suborin's school of thought: Ahasuerus was a wise king because it is said: "The letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews." What can one learn from this? Consider the end of the text: "Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them." And another sage said: Ahasuerus was a stupid king, for it is said: "to show the people and the princes her beauty," and we hold: "All stupid people have beautiful wives." What can one learn from this? This is not evidence, for it is said: "Rachel was beautiful and well favored"—and who was wise as Jacob, who "took his brother by the heel in the womb"? What can one learn from this? This was before the giving of the Torah, and therefore no evidence can be found here. Hence, in a place of such disagreement and because this question is so important for the Jews and the honor of Israel depends upon it, I will express my opinion and bring evidence not from the Torah, the Prophets, or the Scriptures but from a story that really happened and took place in our own days, for no evidence is conclusive, no miracle as decisive as a true story.

By overusing Talmudic logical connectives to incorporate irrelevant quotations and construct illogical deductive arguments, the frame narrative satirizes the traditional learning practices of "unenlightened" Jewish educational institution in Eastern Europe. In a typical *maskilic* gesture, it mocks the Talmudic rhetoric by taking the logic of traditional Jewish hermeneutics ad absurdum. Although satirical, the false leap from this particular Melekh to any king (followed by another fallacy: the inference from the general case to Ahasuerus) is well suited to the story as a whole, which aims to address the general by way of the particular, presenting Melekh as the

prototypical Jewish folk performer, a grotesque, carnivalesque “king for a day.”

This interpretative style, typical of the study hall and the rhetoric of a learned preacher, characterizes not only the story’s prologue and epilogue but also the elaborate interjections throughout the text, as is evident, for example, from the narrator’s imaginative interpretation of Tsippe’s common nickname, “Tsippe the Tandetnitse:”

ידעתי כי פה יקום הקורא האוהב להפנס לתוך דברי חברו וישאלני פירכא גדולה כקורת בית הבד:  
"והלא כל בר בי רב דחד יומא יודע כי טנדעטניצה פירושו אשה המוכרת בגדים מוכנים ולא אשה  
החפצה לשבת טן דו? ולמה אתה מעוות עלינו את פירוש המלות?"—על זה אענה ואומר לו: השמר  
והשקט, ידידי; אלו ואלו דברי אלהים חיים. פשוטו של דבר לחוד ודרושו לחוד.

I know that here the reader who likes to interrupt his interlocutor’s speech will rise and posit a refutation, large as a beam in the olive press: “But every first-day-student knows that ‘*Tandetnitse*’ means a woman who sells clothes rather than a woman who wishes to sit *tan-du* (in tandem—Z.S.). Why then do you distort the meaning of the words?”—I will answer this question by saying: let thy mind rest, my friend; both these and those are the words of the living God. The literal meaning is one thing, and the homiletic exegesis is another.

The narrator here engages in dialogue with the reader, whom he envisions as a fellow Yeshiva student or an argumentative listener eager to refute the speaker. By means of this posited attack, in fact a self-attack or an interior dialogue, the speaker subverts his own authoritative voice—especially since the answer he provides to the justified question is no more than a series of Talmudic clichés.<sup>25</sup> The narrator’s weak line of reasoning, which comes across as a series of worn-out excuses for his obvious over-interpretation, continues beyond this example; its contemplation of ever more senseless etymologies eventually digresses completely from the topic and becomes absurd. Combined with the prologue and epilogue, these interruptions position the pseudo-scholarly speaker as an unreliable narrator and present the story as a parodic-didactic parable rather than as a realistic description or an account rooted in autobiographical events.

Considering its moralistic and metaphoric nature, Gordon’s *Bildung* narrative offers a surprisingly mixed portrayal of the artist. On the one hand, the performer, Melekh, possesses certain talents: a kind heart, personal charm, and even charisma. He is also endowed with good learning skills, though he exhibits them in the study hall rather than in everyday life. On the other hand, Melekh is flighty and foolish, bound to get himself and others into trouble. He displays an aptitude for making people laugh, though it is not always clear if people are laughing with him or at him. These qualities, the advantageous as well as the detrimental, seem to prepare him for his future career as a *badkhn* and *purim-shpiler*. In this dual career as a performer, even his unfavorable traits prove useful. Thus, for example, the flip side of his fickle nature (to the point of lacking self identity) seems to be versatility, a real asset for an actor. Similarly, his

<sup>25</sup> The narrator is also skillfully playing here with the two components of the Yiddish language: the Slavic, where the word “tandetnitse” originates (from *tandet* – old clothes, also bungling work), and the *loshn-koydesh*, in this case Aramaic, “tan-du,” (tandem) as in the famous Talmudic saying: “*Tav lemeytav tan-du mi-lemeytav armelu.*” See *Babylonian Talmud*, Yevamot 118a, Ktuvot 85a, Kidushin 7a. He thus changes the word “tandetnitse” to “tandutnitse.”

extreme adaptability also accounts for his ability to please different kinds of people. Even Melekh's propensity for getting into trouble, for which he pays dearly with a long imprisonment, ends up aiding his career, as his encounter with government and court officials eventually helps him play better the role of minister and king. Melekh's heterogeneous nature is in line with the *badkhn's* performance, criticized in *maskilic* circles for mixing moods, genres, and skills. As we have seen in Ginzburg's and Gotlober's autobiographies, the *badkhn* was especially infamous for making abrupt transitions from joy to mourning and from erudite (or pseudo-erudite) preaching to crass jokes. Melekh's instability, his lack of solid identity, and his inconsistent and haphazard nature provide a psychological explanation for this heterogeneity. Gordon thus turns the social into the personal, and interprets Jewish performance norms as the *badkhn's* contingent shortcomings.

People's reactions to Melekh are no less contradictory than he himself is, evoking as he does both trust and distrust, like and dislike—even within the same person. Occasionally, Melekh serves as a leader, but he ultimately proves to be an unreliable one. An episode from his early years helps elucidate his problematic leadership skills: he participated in a children's game in which he would let the other boys "ride" him, only to lead them into thorns and bushes. This childhood memory not only offers a vivid image and exemplifies Melekh's dubious leadership abilities but could also serve as a metaphor for the notorious steering abilities of the performer. While it appears that he's serving his audience, it is in fact he who directs his spectator's emotions, making them laugh or cry according to his whims. The image of horse and riders also links "Melekh Tipesch" to the Scroll of Esther, where the question of who rides the horse—Haman or Mordechai—becomes a crucial political matter. It thus further enhances the story's self-presentation as a *Purim-toyre*, as it links "Stupid King" to Purim not only by means of the frame narrative and the *purim-shpil* episode but also through this scene from Melekh's childhood.

The contradictions in Melekh's character could hardly amount to a believable psychological image. This didactic and witty parable, however, should not be judged according to the conventions of literary realism but rather appreciated for its mischievous Purimesque atmosphere, evident not only in the parodic frame narrative but throughout the story, such as in the grotesque description of Tsippe's four husbands, and especially their deaths. The story's array of Jewish male types (a Hasid, a *misnaged*, a *maskil*, and a licentious rogue who deserts his wife and leaves her an *agune*), is evidently too exemplary for a realist narrative, and is in line with the standard didactic *maskilic* tale. The Purimesque quality of this moral fable is, however, revealed only in the sarcastic description of the deaths of the first three husbands. The *misnaged* dies for lack of food—a reference to his austere lifestyle and worldview; the *hasid* dies for lack of booze—obviously mocking his passion for alcohol; and the *maskil*—of tuberculosis, inflicted upon him by great poverty (Gordon echoes the autobiographies here, which typically depict the *maskil* as a loner and a victim).<sup>26</sup> As this example illustrates, the narrator of *Stupid King* does not even pretend to be reliable but rather assumes a light comical tone, similar to that of the *badkhn* or the *purim-shpiler*.

The great disparities between Tsippe's husbands further emphasize Melekh's heterogeneous character and, furthermore, account for it, as his varied upbringing contributes to the adaptable

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<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, however, Gordon puts the *maskil* under the same satirical light that is supposed to pour scorn on Hasidism.

nature he inherited from his mother. Moreover, the multiplicity of husbands presents Tsippe as a woman of dubious morality—in her own society and in the eyes of the narrator and his implied reader. In addition to the general prejudice against women with numerous sexual partners (even when she is lawfully wedded to all of them), Jewish law, originating in the Talmud, considers a serial widow a “deadly woman” (*Isha katlanit*) and forbids her to remarry, under the presumption that she somehow caused the deaths of her husbands.<sup>27</sup> Since the deaths of her two first husbands suffice for granting her this dubious title, Tsippe’s social status as a third time widow is all the worse. Indeed, the narrator presents the death of her fourth husband as Tsippe’s punishment: “Tsippe, the ‘tandemist’ who desires to dwell in tan dem was finally punished for her flightiness” (*Tsipe ha-tandutnitsa ahser chaftsa lashevet tandu sof sof ne'ensha al kalut da'ata*). Her flightiness, mentioned earlier on, is directly linked to her immediate remarriage: “And after a few days when her mourning days were complete, she took off her widow’s clothes and grasped another man, whomever she could get hold of, to find comfort and shelter under his wings” (*ba'avor yeme mispar ve-shalmu yeme evla ve-hesira et bigde almenuta me'aleha ve-hechezika be-ish akher mi-kol ha-ba le-yada levakesh nichumim u-machase tachat knafav*). Tsippe is thus immoral in numerous ways: in moving too hastily from one man to the next, in insisting on remarrying for the third and even fourth time, and presumably also in causing the deaths of her husbands.

Tsippe’s questionable reputation and turbulent life affect the status and reputation of her son as well. Although the identity of his biological father is not a secret, many who lack this information wonder who his “real” father was and therefore call him “Melekh tsipes” (Tsippe’s Melekh, which literally reads also “Tsippe’s King” or “The King of Tsippe”) after his mother.<sup>28</sup> The story implies that, like his mother, Melekh was also influenced by these contradictions and adapted to her different lifestyles and ethical world views. Melekh’s hybrid portrayal extends to gender therefore and relates to the versatility of the Jewish performer—his ability to identify with and embody different types and genders, and to irreverently mix genres, moods, and skills.

Melekh’s close rapport with his mother, who functions throughout his childhood as the only stable parental figure, later becomes part of his public persona, as indicated by his name “Melekh Tsippes.” Only as a result of his foolish mischief is this matronymic distorted into the derogatory “Melekh tipesh.” The mother–son symbiosis also serves to explain his effeminate nature, as he is often described not only as feminine but more specifically as resembling his mother. Melekh’s femininity is most notable in his voice and intonation and is especially evident when he recites the Talmud—the text that used to be forbidden to women—in a singsong manner that resembles his mother’s calling when peddling rags.<sup>29</sup> His giddy nature, in which he also takes after his mother’s flightiness, is constructed as feminine quality as well, since women

<sup>27</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*, Yevamot, 64b.

<sup>28</sup> The custom of naming a son after his mother (and even after his mother-in-law) was not uncommon in Eastern European Jewish society. Many family names attest to this tradition, such as Beylin and Beylinson (from Beyle), and Sorkin (from Soreh). Several modern Yiddish writers reclaimed this custom, especially when choosing their pen-names. Thus, for example, Aaron Glants opted for the pseudonym A. Leyeles, (Leyele’s son), and Isaac Bashevis Singer adopted his mother’s maiden name, Bas-Sheva. See Erika Timm and Gustav-Adolf Beckmann, *Matronymika im aschkenasischen Kulturbereich: ein Beitrag zur Mentalitäts- und Sozialgeschichte der europäischen Juden* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> The constant reference to Tsippe’s occupation and specifically to her loud voice calling her merchandise on the street is in line with the *maskilic* critique of women in the market. Under the influence of Western European Bourgeois standards, Eastern European Jewish *maskilim* began to perceive this norm as improper. See

are often considered frivolous in Jewish tradition (“*nashim da'atan kala*”)<sup>30</sup>. Even Melekh’s features are somewhat feminine, and his fellow Yeshiva students therefore mockingly wonder if he is an androgyne. This derogatory term refers to the odd and disharmonic overplay of the Talmud, the quintessential masculine text, with a female peddler’s singsong. This combination introduces into the study hall not only feminine qualities but also notions of trade and seductive pleading: “It looked as if he was trading in all the various oils that our sages in the *Mishna* mentioned and offering them to the buyers” (*hoyo niro ke'ilu soycher hu be-chol ha-shemanim she-manu chachomim ba-mishno u-martse otam lifney hakonim*). This androgynous quality is well suited to the dual gendering of the *badkhn* in *maskilic* discourse; a masculine figure in regards to his knowledge of traditional Jewish sources, the *badkhn* also maintains close rapport with his female audiences and their powerful emotions, and is often depicted or a metonymy for this audience.

The analogy between Tsippe and Melekh goes beyond his effeminate or androgynous nature. Both extensively rely on their verbal abilities. In Tsippe’s case, loudly promoting the merchandise constitutes an essential part of her trade, and gossiping, a pivotal part of her fame. Moreover, both mother and son visit the houses of rich people as part of their trade—rags in Tsippe’s case, *purim-shpil* in Melekh’s—and both excel at flattery. Lastly, the fact that Tsippe also works as a matchmaker aligns her with her son, the *badkhn*, a figure notoriously involved in the traditional Jewish wedding. The analogy between Tsippe and Melekh carries significant implications in regards to the Jewish performer. It accords with the view of performance as dishonorable commerce, which echoes Ginzburg’s accusation of the *badkhn* who “trades honor for money.” Moreover, it draws a parallel between the performer’s worthless merchandise, his crude and worn out rhymes and jokes, and Tsippe’s inferior rags.

Melekh’s affiliation with his mother carries with it further derogatory connotations, as the story subtly implies a connection between Tsippe’s lowly profession and prostitution. It does so most notably by drawing a parallel between Tsippe’s house inside the city wall and the house of the most famous biblical harlot, Rahab, which was also built into the city wall. Gordon uses almost identical phrasing: “*be-gav ha-choma*” compared with “*be-kir ha-choma*” in the book of Joshua.<sup>31</sup> Other factors may also link Tsippe to harlotry: she is a woman without a man by her side (and too many men in her past), she works from home and wanders in the streets and into people’s houses, her business is illegal (not reported to the authorities in order to avoid paying taxes), and yet everybody knows where to find her. While I am not arguing that Gordon presents Tsippe as a prostitute, I do maintain that the story plays with these cultural associations, assigned to Tsippe in order to reinforce her dishonorable position, pointing at her peddling as an inappropriate profession for a woman and at her many marriages as morally deficient. Tsippe’s ignoble reputation casts suspicion on her son, Melekh, his origins and upbringing, and more generally, on the Jewish folk performer. It positions the Jewish folk performer at the boundaries of social norms—though not quite outside of them—a liminal position also reflected in the family’s physical location at the city wall.

Furthermore, Rahab, Tsippe’s biblical parallel, is known not only as a prostitute but also as a person of dual loyalty, in fact a traitor to her people. Her liminality is therefore not merely a

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<sup>30</sup> *Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbat, 33b.

<sup>31</sup> See Joshua 2:15: “*Ki Beta be-kir ha-khoma u-va-khoma hi yoshevet*” (for her house was upon the town wall, and she dwelt upon the wall (KJV)).

geographical matter but also a sociopolitical one. The accusation that Melekh spied against the Czarist government relates directly to this position of dual loyalty. Even though the story makes clear that the accusation was false and even absurd, as the poor fellow merely wanted to make use of his Russian reading skills, his knowledge of Russian does put him in a unique position in the Jewish society of the small *shtetl*. Melekh's polyglot abilities become part of his public persona, especially after he pays a heavy price for it and is sent to prison. More broadly, the familiarity with non-Jewish cultures constitutes part of the performer's persona, as he was sometimes hired across ethnic lines. His typical interaction with the non-Jew, which can evoke envy and suspicion on the part of other Jews, characterizes him as a liminal figure in traditional Jewish society.

Mocking both the traditional *droshe* and the *maskilic* formula of the didactic tale, Gordon's story eventually constructs a modern *Purim-toyre*, nonsensical and yet deeply rooted in traditional Jewish sources as well as in the Purim traditions parodying them. Gordon seems to share with other *maskilim* a contemptuous view of the performer, but rather than criticizing the performer directly, he does so by way of fantasy and humor, metaphors and analogies, which together constitute a carnivalesque myth of origins. Mocking the performer by way of mimicry, the frame narrative in *Melekh Tippesh*, much like the autobiographies, is finally "infected" by the performer's style and inadvertently expresses a veiled admiration of his talents.

#### **D. From Folk Performance to Modern Jewish Literature**

Whether mimicking the lofty style of *responsa* literature, rabbinical *haskome* (letter of approbation), intimate correspondence between members of the Hasidic court, the folkish style of the *badkhn's* rhymes (Gordon and Ginzburg), or the convoluted logic of Jewish hermeneutics (Gordon), the *maskilic* parody always implicates the *maskil* himself in the very tradition he seeks to undermine. However vehemently the *maskilim* reject them, these traditional discursive modes to a large extent render *maskilic* literature possible. The traditional texts are not only the context in which the proclaimed *maskilic* revolution develops, they are also the cultural sphere in which the *maskil* can excel, since they are written in a style with which he feels at home (much more so than the Biblical language which the *maskilim* formally adopted to various degrees of success). Finally, these traditional discursive formations constitute the *maskil's* source of revisionary artistic motivation and inspiration.<sup>32</sup> Whereas the traditional sources may seem to function only as malleable raw material open to manipulation, their role is in fact less passive, and the relationship between the parodist and the his parodic target is not unidirectional. The *maskil* finds himself obsessed with the traditional sources, which become "infectious" and in *dybbuk*-like manner speak through him. This "infection," despite it being perceived as dangerous from a *maskilic* stand point, nonetheless serves as a creative force, comparable to and even more fruitful than their imitations of European models. The revisionary and contemptuous encounter with and mimicry of the traditional texts result in the creation of a modern Jewish literature that is not pre-inscribed.

When it comes to the performer, the reciprocal relationship between the parodist and his

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<sup>32</sup> See the chapter in Gottlober's memoirs that precedes the one about the *badkhn*, where the author attributes his creative urge and vivid imagination to the Yiddish books he read as a youth, such as *Tsenture Venture*. See Gottlober, *Zichronot mi'yeme ne'uray*, 27-29.

parodic target is even more complex and involves competitive as well as self-reflective dimensions. The *maskil's* mimicry of the *badkhn* or the *purim-shpiler* is indeed an impersonation of the performer, identifying while also competing with him. This rivalry challenges the alleged cultural superiority of the erudite and enlightened *maskil*, since the *badkhn* clearly possesses certain qualities that work to his advantage, such as his ability, as a performance artist, to use his voice, body language, charisma, and music as opposed to language alone. Whereas the Hebrew *maskil* struggles with the unyielding, lofty Biblical language, the *badkhn* makes virtuosic use of the vivid Yiddish language with its wide array of registers—from colloquial idioms all the way to quotations of Jewish sources in Hebrew and Aramaic. (Rather than frustrating the *maskil*, this particular challenge seems to strengthen his ambition as he strives to re-create the *badkhones* rhymes in his own “*farhebreisht un farbesert*” version.) Finally, whereas the *badkhn* addresses a large and devoted audience (including a crowd of impassioned women, at once inclined to weep and to laugh), the Hebrew *maskil* knows that his work will at best reach only small circles of male Jewish society.

The *maskilic* discourse on the folk performer is essentially meta-poetic. When Ginzburg discusses what constitutes good and bad rhymes and the appropriate and inappropriate responses they should evoke in readers and listeners, he also defines what counts as poetry, hence initiating what might be called the poetics of folk creation. When he sarcastically writes that “Israel should not despair, as it still includes poets and versifiers” (*lo alman yisra'el mi-melitsim u-meshorerim*), even in viewing the *badkhn* as inferior and negative model, he nonetheless admits him into the realm of literature. Gordon, in writing the *purim-shpiler's* myth of origin, also creates a “portrait of the artist,” investigating artistic talent, creativity, and inspiration. By assuming the role of a mock-*magid* giving a Purim-*toyre*, the narrator of *Stupid King* aligns the *maskil* writer to some extent with his childhood friend, the *purim-shpiler*.

The discourse on Jewish folk performance in the generations that followed the *Haskala* illuminates continuing the transformation of Eastern European Jewish culture. As I show in my dissertation, in the next wave of Hebrew authors, in fact even in later work of the very same writers, the vehemence of the rejection of the performer abates. The more distant the traditional world becomes, on the cultural and personal levels, the more cultural antagonism recedes and notions of salvage ethnography and nostalgia intensify, of which Sha'ul Tshernikhovski's *Elka's Wedding* may serve as a prime example. Gottlobler himself illustrates the typical evolution during the *maskilim's* lifetime when upon publishing his memoirs at the age of fifty, he apologetically introduces his fierce anti-*badkhn* song, written some twenty five years earlier.<sup>33</sup> Yiddish writers of the same period, including the three “*klasiker*” Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh), Sholem Aleykhem (Sholem Rabinovitsh), and, most notably, Y.L. Peretz, take another step towards the integration of folk artistic expression into the realm of modern Yiddish literature by incorporating folk performance and motifs into their work, ascribing to them new meanings and values. In the stormy interwar period, this process was further intensified and politicized, and the reinvention of folk performance reached its high point. Socialist scholars and artists turned to folk performance to prove the alleged folkish nature of Yiddish culture and its opposition to decadence, capitalism and Zionism; Yiddishists relied on traditional performance to legitimize the burgeoning modern Yiddish culture and to prove Jewish uniqueness and

<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, the 1976 *Mosad Bialik* edition sides with Gottlobler's later stance, and the editor chooses to omit this hateful song.

creativity;<sup>34</sup> And modernist artists turned to folk performance as an alternative aesthetic realm where human experience once resided in its living immediacy before becoming inaccessible due to processes of modernization, as Walter Benjamin has argued regarding the performative practice of the storyteller. Whereas the *maskilim* attempted to outgrow folk culture, the interwar artists wished to reconnect with this ever-receding realm of Jewish experience and “make it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.”<sup>35</sup> Once the *maskilim*’s dream of a modernized Jewish society became a reality, their ironic reference to folk performance as the origin of Jewish creativity or as an alternative Jewish poetics was explored again—in ways the *maskilim* could probably have hardly imagined.

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<sup>34</sup> A reaction against what was perceived as the derivative and imitative affiliation with Western models exhibited by both Jewish high-culture (e.g. the impressionist poetry of *Di yunge*) and mass culture (e.g. the ubiquitous *shund* literature, often plagiarizing German or French sensational novels).

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 68.

## Chapter Two: The *Purim-shpil* Rediscovered Yiddish Theater and the Quest for Origins

### A. How to Begin the Story of Yiddish theater?

The history of Yiddish theater typically starts with Avrom Goldfadn, commonly known as “the father of Yiddish theater,” who in 1876 formed in Iași (Jassy)—seemingly out of nowhere—his pioneering troupe, in which he functioned as dramaturg, director, composer, set designer, acting instructor, and impresario.<sup>36</sup> This narrative conveniently provides Yiddish theater with a date and a place of birth—none other than Romania, a frontier of *Yiddishland*, associated in the Yiddish imagination with earthiness and folklore. Even more importantly, the Goldfadn tale endows the Yiddish stage with a paternal figure and satisfies the need for continuity and legacy.<sup>37</sup> Though some short-lived attempts at professional theater preceded the Iași group, most notably in Warsaw of the 1830s, none of them was as successful as Goldfadn's theater, which in the years following its establishment evolved and professionalized rapidly, broadening its repertoire from comedies and vaudeville to melodramatic operettas and operas. Furthermore, Goldfadn's plays quickly achieved the status of Yiddish classics, and were continually performed on the Yiddish stage over the next decades.<sup>38</sup>

While Goldfadn's appeal as founding figure of Yiddish theater is clear, alternative narratives are also available. One could, for example, begin the story with the *maskilic* comedies written in the first half of the nineteenth century by Aaron Halle-Wolfssohn, Yitskhok Euchel and Solomon Ettinger.<sup>39</sup> Although these early plays were not professionally performed at the time of their creation, they nevertheless mark the beginning of Yiddish drama, and possibly also of Yiddish theater.<sup>40</sup> To start the story with the *maskilic* comedies means to give preference to the text over the actual production and to emphasize the literary and sophisticated aspect of Yiddish theater. It also entails associating the dawn of the Yiddish stage with the elitist circles of the

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<sup>36</sup> Pioneering professional theater performances took place in Warsaw in 1838, as Joel Berkowitz, based on evidence from newspapers of the time, argues. Yet Berkowitz agrees that: “Most students of the Yiddish theater have settled in a firmer date, some four decades later, for the birth of the professional Yiddish stage, and have seen Avrom Goldfadn as its “father.” This narrative can be traced back to the first attempt to write a history of Modern Yiddish theater in Moyshe Zeifert's article in the collection *Di yidische bine* (The Yiddish Stage), published in celebration of the twenty year anniversary of Goldfadn's theater. Berkowitz contends also that “Goldfadn himself played no small part in creating the legend of those early performances” (ibid. 5). See Joel Berkowitz, “Introduction: Writing the History of the Yiddish Theater,” in *Yiddish Theater: New Approaches*, 5, 10-11.

<sup>37</sup> For a recent re-evaluation of Goldfadn's contribution to Jewish Culture see Donny Inbar, “A Closeted Jester : Abraham Goldfaden between Haskalah Ideology and Jewish show Business,” (PhD diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2007) ProQuest (AAT 3289181).

<sup>38</sup> In his article on Yiddish theater in the YIVO Encyclopedia Michael Steinlauf writes: “Goldfadn's legacy was the creation of a theatrical tradition. Fifty years after their debut, Goldfadn's plays were still being staged in their original versions; a director would encounter opposition even to an attempt to move a table from its “traditional” location, which had attained the status of what one observer called “a Torah from Sinai.” See Michael C. Steinlauf, “Theater: Yiddish Theater,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/Yiddish\\_Theater](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/Yiddish_Theater).

<sup>39</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of *maskilic* drama from a socialist perspective see Max Erik, *Etyudn tsu der geshikhte fun der haskole* (Minsk: Melukhe farlag far vaysruslendisher kultur, 1934).

<sup>40</sup> See Berkowitz, *Yiddish Theater*, 3.

*Haskala* movement, with its related secularization processes and with the influence of German bourgeois culture associated with them. Alternatively, one could tell the story of Yiddish theater focusing on actual performance, and start with traditional Jewish performers such as the *magid* (preacher), the cantor or the *badkhn*.<sup>41</sup> Such a choice would indicate a preference for the folkish over the learned, the traditional over the modern, the religious over the secular, and the distinctively Jewish over the assimilationist or acculturationist. Rejected since the early days of the *Haskala*, as I demonstrated in the first chapter, this narrative largely remained on the margins of the quest for origins of Jewish theater, except for a short-lived interest among Soviet Yiddish scholars.<sup>42</sup>

In fact, even when adhering to the common Goldfadn myth, one could tell the story in different ways, underlining different aspects of this legendary figure: the *maskilic* poet or the producer of popular theater, the critic of Hasidism or conservative nationalism. Furthermore, Goldfadn's life story – mythologized to a great extent by the artist himself in his autobiography – offers a variety of potentially proleptic moments for future narrators to choose from according to their desired image of the Yiddish theater. One could, for instance, start with the story about *badkhonim* which Goldfadn heard in his childhood and the name his father gave him: “*Avremale badkhn*,” thus emphasizing the patrilineage of “the father of Yiddish theater” and his reliance on traditional folk performance. Alternatively, one could focus on Goldfadn's *maskilic* context, and begin with the years he spent as a student in the Zhitomir Rabbinical academy, where one of his teachers was the *maskil* Avrom-ber Gotlober, the author of the satire *The Bridal Canopy, or Two weddings in One Nights (Der dektukh, oder tsvey khupes in eyn nakht)*, and where, according to the often-told story, Goldfadn had his first theatrical experience, playing the leading role in an amateur production of Ettinger's famous *maskilic* play, *Serkele*.<sup>43</sup> Yet another possibility would be starting with the events immediately prior to the establishment of the Iasi troupe. One could thus tell the story of Goldfadn's first solo performance in Shimon Mark's wine garden, in which he recited one of his poems and was booed by the audience, and describe the relationship between Goldfadn and the “*broder zinger*” Israel Grodner, who started out as his rival and ended up as an actor in the newly founded troupe. This story places the emphasis on the more immediate background to Goldfadn's theater – the so-called *broder zinger* (or “The Singers of

<sup>41</sup> Berkowitz argues that the epithet “father of the Yiddish theater” “implicitly erases the centuries of Yiddish performance tradition that predated Goldfadn,” by which the writer refers to the *badkhn*, the *magid* and the *purim-shpil*, with whom he himself starts his brief historical overview. Ibid. 4, 1-2.

<sup>42</sup> For Soviet scholarship on the *badkhn* see footnote no.4 in the introduction to this dissertation. See also Shatzky's critique of Schiper, who only in his discussion of the eighteenth century brings in the cantor/bard: “. . . *der khazn, der farvayler. Im kumt a greserer plats in a yidisher teater-geshikhte*.” Yankev Shatzky, “Di ershte geshikhte fun yidishn teater,” *Filologishe shriftn* 2 (1928): 226. See also Mukdoni's critique of Yiddishist historiographies of Yiddish theater later on in this chapter.

<sup>43</sup> Shloyme Ettinger, “*Serkele*,” *Geklibene verk* (Buenos Aires: Literatur gezelschaft baym YIVO, 1957), 77-254. For a recent discussion of *Serkele* in its ideological context see Robert Adler Peckerar, *The allure of Germanness in modern Ashkenazi literature: 1833–1933* (PhD diss., Berkeley: University of California, 2009) ProQuest (AAT 3411185). See Nokhem Oyslender and Uri Finkel, *A. Goldfadn, Materyaln far a byografye* (Minsk: Institut far vaysrushisher kultur, 1926), 17-18. The writers of Goldfadn's biography, however, claim that the production of *Serkele* in Zhitomir was only a little episode in Goldfadn's life: “*Ober di forshetlung fun Serkele is geven nit mer, vi a kleyner epizod*.” (Ibid., 18). Rather than emphasizing this one symbolic event, they portray Goldfadn's multifaceted *maskilic* background, from his father's *maskilic* tendencies (although the father was an artisan), through his relation with Gottlober and his early *maskilic* poems. This path leads in this narrative directly to Goldfadn's early plays, such as *Tsvey kuni-lemels*, which were popularized *maskilic* satires.

Brody,” Yiddish: *Di broder zinger*), semi-professional entertainers who wandered through eastern Europe, performing in wine cellars and beer gardens with songs often presented in costumes and accompanied by dances and short skits. The link to the *broder zinger* associates Goldfadn, and more broadly the Yiddish theater for which he serves as a metonymy, with popular and commercial entertainment. Direct and easy to corroborate, this connection might be less welcome for those striving to present Yiddish theater as sophisticated and intellectual, or alternatively, as rooted in authentic Jewish traditions. Since the *broder zinger* were clearly also in dialogue with cabaret-style performances in their non-Jewish environments, this third narrative could call into question the notion that Yiddish theater evolved from a purely Jewish lineage. Interestingly, almost no one starts the narrative with Goldfadn's encounter with non-Jewish theater, although his productions, as Seth Wolitz writes, were clearly based on the romantic operettas of his time.<sup>44</sup> There seems to be an undeclared agreement that the question about Goldfadn's debut— and more broadly, about the origins of Yiddish or Jewish theater — needs to be answered in Jewish terms.

Yet another significant tale of origins missing from our discussion so far is the one concerning the *purim-shpil*. Staged only once a year, and typically amateur, largely improvised and abounding with vulgarities, this humble folk performance has nevertheless come to carry the burden of heritage, and is often presented as the roots of Yiddish and more broadly Jewish theater. It was above all Yiddishist scholars, devoted to the notion of a folkish culture, who presented the *purim-shpil* as the genuine expression of the Jewish folk, and were keen on constructing and adopting a genesis myth around it. The emergence-out-of-the-*purim-shpil* myth supports the portrayal of modern Jewish theater as a grassroots phenomenon. The *purim-shpil*'s appeal to the secular and nationalistic Yiddishist scholars lies also in its dual nature as a performance rooted in a traditional religious holiday, and yet parodistic and carnivalesque as befitting Purim. This folk performance hence signifies tradition, i.e. authenticity and Jewishness on the one hand, and on the other — a limited rebel against religious authorities, whose famous opposition to theater no doubt played a major role in the belated appearance of Jewish theater.

To contemporary sensibilities the *purim-shpil* is perhaps the most compelling candidate for the alleged roots of Yiddish theater—and indeed in recent times the narrative presenting the *purim-shpil* as the origin of Yiddish or Jewish theater has grown in popularity, and may have even surpassed the tale of the legendary Goldfadn troupe.<sup>45</sup> In current-day academic discourse, where performance studies has largely established its challenge to the field of theater, and where the influence of Bakhtinian theories celebrating the carnivalesque refuses to recede, a narrative rehabilitating folk performance and connecting it to modern drama is surely appealing. Yet the construction of the *purim-shpil* as heritage emerged, I argue, in another era—the interwar years,

<sup>44</sup> As Wolitz writes: “Some critics see the influence of *purim-shpils* (Purim plays) in his work, but most see Goldfadn following the conventions of Romantic opera libretti.” Seth L. Wolitz, “Goldfadn, Avrom,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Goldfadn\\_Avrom](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Goldfadn_Avrom).

<sup>45</sup> Thus, for example, Joel Berkowitz mentions the *purim-shpil* and the *badkhn* on the very first page of his introduction. See Berkowitz “Introduction,” in *Yiddish Theater*, 1. In the YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe the *purim-shpil* and other forms of traditional performance are discussed at length in the article “Theater — an Overview,” while Goldfadn features more prominently in the entry “Yiddish Theater,” both by Michael Steinlauf. See Michael Steinlauf, “Theater: An Overview,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/An\\_Overview](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/An_Overview); Michael Steinlauf, “Theater: Yiddish Theater,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/Yiddish\\_Theater](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/Yiddish_Theater).

and in a different context—that of a quest for specifically Jewish origins, for the authentic and the folkish, for cultural continuity and self-sufficiency. On the basis of limited evidence about the historical *purim-shpil*, Yiddishist scholars of the 1920s and 1930s constructed broad and sweeping generalizations which appealed to many of their contemporaries, and eventually became a corner-stone of the current image of Yiddish theater. To what extent Yiddish theater was indeed influenced or inspired by the *purim-shpil* is a question that exceeds the limits of the current discussion, though I suspect the answer to this question is: very little. My investigation in this chapter focuses not on actual traces of the *purim-shpil* in modern Yiddish theater, but rather on the emergence of a discourse that argued for an organic connection between the two. Typically, the historians of Yiddish/Jewish theater themselves did not find it necessary to prove an actual dependence of Yiddish theater on the traditional *purim-shpil*. Instead, they explored the ancient form, and wove their findings into a narrative of progress, assuming continuity between past and present on the basis of a presumption of cultural unity.

This intellectual endeavor did not remain within academic realms, but rather reached wider circles of theater enthusiasts and Yiddishists. Moreover, it inspired artists, who took an active part in the rehabilitation of the ancient form, appropriating it according to their aesthetic and political agendas. The *purim-shpil* thus indeed had an impact on modern Yiddish theater, but its influence, I contend, was mediated through scholarly research and well-informed artists motivated by the same force – the will to appropriate the *purim-shpil* as origins of Yiddish and Jewish theater.

In what follows I analyze the interwar Yiddish discourse on the *purim-shpil*, its findings, methodologies, assumptions and fallacies, alongside the interwar theatrical production and the later historical narrative of Turkow, a salient example of a historically informed Yiddish artist, at times even a self-appointed historian. I strive to demonstrate the complex interrelations between research and artistic creation that gave birth to a common myth of origins.

I conclude the chapter with yet another candidate for the origins of Yiddish theater: the *broder zinger*. These popular entertainers are much less dominant in the narrative of Yiddish theater than the *purim-shpil*, partly because, born in the 1850s and disappearing by the late 1880s (or, by a broader definition, by WWI), they cannot offer a sense of cultural continuity. Their lowbrow popular shows were not folk performance in the strict sense of the word, as we often know the names of the performers and even those of the authors of their songs, many of whom were *maskilim* with didactic and often anti-Hasidic intentions. Although closer in time and style to modern professional performance, the *broder zinger* are nevertheless included in the current discussion because in popular Yiddish discourses, as well as in the neo-folkist Yiddish literary modernism, these small-scale entertainers were regarded as folkish models for modern Jewish culture. This is in line with a broader tendency in Yiddish and Hebrew culture to view popular songs as “*folkstimlekh*,” thus belonging to the people and expressing its spirit, and overlook the fact that they were written—and at times even published—by known authors.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> In fact, the fear of plagiarism, on stage and elsewhere, was a main motivation behind publishing these songs, as apparent, for example, in Velvl Zbarzher's (Wolf Ehrenkrantz) *Makel No'am*. The book also exemplifies the common and on-going tendency in Yiddish culture to use the term “folk-song” in reference to a popular song sung by the people rather than an anonymous one. Printed in Lemberg in 1869, *Makel No'am* is subtitled “*Volklied*,” and in his introduction, the author himself speaks about his songs as “folk-songs.” Zbarzher clearly uses the term “folk song” as parallel to “drinking song” or “song of amusement.” See Benjamin Wolf Ehrenkrantz, *Makel no'am* (Lemberg: Berl Lorje, 1869). See also Nokhem Oyslender, “Tsu B. Slutski Badkhonim-shoyshpiler.” In their

Since my research is concerned with discursive practices I am only concerned here with the cultural significance of the invention of the broder zinger as another folkish phenomenon that can be construed as the origins of Yiddish theater. Once again Turkow demonstrates the interrelation between historical research, amateur in this case, and artistic creation, and how the two jointly construct yet another myth of origins.

The various tales regarding the emergence of Yiddish theater (or Goldfadn's alleged sources of inspiration) do not necessarily contradict one other, and the debate is a matter of interpretation rather than fact. As with any historical narrative, telling the story means choosing which facts to use. In the words of E.H Carr: “the historian will get the kind of facts he wants.”<sup>47</sup> This is surely the case with Eastern European Jewish culture, where in lack of a state art became a vehement public sphere. “Much of what has been written about Yiddish theater,” Joel Berkowitz contends, “has tended to recycle half-truths, unconfirmed anecdotes, misconceptions, and perhaps even outright lies. The result is a kind of modern mythology[...] Furthermore, artistic, and ideological agendas have driven much of the research on the subject.”<sup>48</sup> Narratives of ancestry, which typically carry symbolic meaning, are particularly susceptible to the historian's bias and to the mythologizing drive. Yiddish theater's various myths of origins were created to serve different wishful images of Yiddish culture—as rooted in liberal and elitist enlightenment, in traditional Jewish life, in the carnivalesque spirit of the folk and its resistance to religious constraints, or in the social processes of secularization, urbanization, immigration and industrialization, and the urban Jewish masses that evolved out of them. Exploring the key myth of descent from the *purim-shpil*, and touching upon the alternative story of the legendary broder zinger, I strive to shed light in this chapter on the role of folk (or allegedly-folk) performance in the genesis stories of Yiddish or Jewish theater and their reverberation in Yiddish culture.

## B. The Artist as Historian: Zigmunt Turkow and the Discovery of the *Purim-shpil*

און אַט פראַלט זיך אויף די טיר, ס'פאלט אַריין די פריילעכע כאַליאַסטרע און מען גיט אַ שליינג אַראָפּ אין איין אַטעם: אַ גוטן פורים—מלאך, / ווי איך גיי פאַל-אַך, / די באַרד איז מאַ לאַנג, / ס'ווייב איז מאַ קראַנק, / נעמט דער טאַטע אַ פייא-טאַפּ, / מאַכט דער מאַמען אַ לאַך אין קאַפּ, / זאָגן די קינדערלעך: אוי-אוי-אוי, / זאָגט דער טאַטע: גוט אַזוי.

אַז ס'איז אַ רייכער טיש, ווערט נאָך צוגעגעבן אַ סצענקע פון אחשוורוש-שפיל, ווייל פאַר אַ קלענערן פדיון איז אַ שאַד צייט, ס'וואַרטן דאָך נאָך ייִדישע הייזער אין שטאַט. . . און אַט בעטן זיך טאַקע אונדזערע פורים-שפילער: “האַנט איז פורים, מאַרגן איז אס / גיטס מאַ אַ גראַשן און וואַרפֿן מאַך אַראָס”.

introduction to a collection of Yiddish songs Peysakh Marek and Sha'ul Ginzburg address this propensity in Yiddish culture, and clarify that they, as serious ethnomusicologists, insisted on collecting true folk-songs rather than so-called folk songs (“*Di merhayt fun di dozike lider iz take zeyer populer tsvishn der yidisher bafelkerung, ober mir zaynen farinteresirt zikh tsu bakenen mit der folksshafung, mit di lider vos es zingen di yidishe masn.*”) See Dov Noy, Saul M. Ginsburg, and Peysakh Marek, *Yidische Folkkslider in Rusland* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan university, 1991), 26-27.

<sup>47</sup> In his classic study *What is History?* Carr famously phrases his relativist outlook thus: “The facts are [...] like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend [...] mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use.” Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History* (New York: Knopf, 1962), 24.

<sup>48</sup> Berkowitz, *Yiddish Theater*, 12.

און לויפן ווייטער פון הויז צו הויז, ביז אין דער שפעטער נאכט, טראָגן פרייד און געלעכטער, לצנות און פאַרגעסנקייט פאַר די צעווייטיקטע, פאַרדאָגהטע געמייטער.  
ווייסט איר, אַז אַט די דאָזיקע פריילעכע, פרימיטיווע און אָפטמאַל געשמאַקלאָזע פאַרוויילונגען זענען אַן איבערבלייב פון אַן אייגנאַרטיקער טעאַטער-קונסט וואָס איז געווען איינזעלע וואָקסן אין ייִדישן לעבן אין משך פון יאָר-הונדערטער און וועגן איר איז געשאַפן געוואָרן אַ באַדייטיקע ליטעראַטור און געשיכטע?

And here the door swings open, and a joyful gang falls in and gulps down in one breath:  
“Good Purim—angel, / Wherever I go—I fall / My beard is long / My wife is sick /  
Daddy takes a pot / Gives mommy a hole in her head, / The children say: Oy-oy-oy!/  
Daddy says: It's good just so.”

And wherever a rich table could be found, one would add a scene from an *Akhashveyresh-shpil*, because it would be a waste of time [to do it] for a smaller sum of money, there are more Jewish houses in town after all. . . And indeed our *purim-shpiler* request like this: “Today is Purim, tomorrow it won't stay / Give me a penny / and throw me away.” And [they] run along from house to house, until late at night, bringing happiness and laughter, clowning and forgetting to the wretched, anxious souls.

Do you know that these joyful, primitive and often tasteless forms of entertainment are a remnant of a unique theater art which was part of the fabric of Jewish life for centuries and about which a significant literature and history was written?<sup>49</sup>

This excerpt from Turkow's *Shmuesn vegn teater* (Conversations on Theater; 1950) attests to a basic paradox in the historiographic discourse on Jewish folk performance. It is by claiming the origins of lowly ancient Jewish forms of entertainment that Turkow and others aim at gaining a respectable ancestry. While Turkow himself regards the *purim-shpil* tradition as “primitive and often tasteless,” he nevertheless describes it in detail, quoting at length and insisting on the text's non-normative—hence oral and “authentic”—pronunciation. Following historical research rather than his own personal acquaintance with the form, Turkow deems this folkish entertainment a unique art form – albeit in a degraded form, and ultimately construes it as the neglected origins of Jewish theater. The above cited paragraphs introduce a long discussion of the *purim-shpil*, its significance and special place in the history of Jewish theater, aimed at absolving and ennobling this notorious form of folk performance, and incorporating it into a narrative of continuity and progress.

Subtitled “Historical Overview, Thoughts and Experiences,” Turkow's book discusses basic dramatic concepts and outlines the history of world theater, focusing on Jewish theater up until Goldfaden's times—all interwoven with the personal memoirs of the then 54 year-old film and theater actor and director.<sup>50</sup> The third and longest chapter of the book, entitled “Theater

<sup>49</sup> Zigmunt Turkow, *Shmuesn vegn teater: Geshikhte iberblik, gedanken un derfarungen* (Buenos Aires: Undzer bukh, 1950), 63-64. The text of the *purim-shpiler* is transliterated here in the “low” Polish dialect as presumably pronounced by them, thus adding alleged authenticity to the description. In fact, the folkish diction of the *purim-shpiler*, adding liveliness and directness to his account, may serve to compensate for the fact that Turkow draws here on scholarly research rather than his own experience. An echo of Turkow's assertion, broadening the novelty from to Yiddish theater, can be found in Berkowitz's introduction: “That the Yiddish theater is not only worth of academic study, but has a long and complex history that can contribute to our understanding of Jewish civilization may come as a surprise to many readers.” Berkowitz, “Introduction,” *Yiddish Theater*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> The book was published in Buenos Aires (Turkow was already living in Brazil at the time). Turkow also published his memoirs in Zigmunt Turkow, *Di ibergerisene tkufe* (Buenos Aires: Unión Central Israelita Polaca en

among the Jews,” is dedicated mainly to the *purim-shpil*, the fourth to the *maskilic* drama, the fifth to the *broder zinger* and the sixth to Goldfadn. While covering almost all possible narratives about the beginning of Jewish Theater – except for the one about the *badkhn*, who is left, as usual, behind—it is the *purim-shpil* that Turkow presents as the true pioneer of Jewish theater, as a dramatic art “cultivated in Jewish life for centuries.” Addressing his readers in phrases such as: “Do you remember that day [Purim] in the old home?” (*Dermont ir aykh dem tog in der alter heyim?*), Turkow clearly expects his Yiddish readers to know the Eastern European Jewish customs he describes. He therefore doesn't explain what a *purim-shpil* is, but rather reminds his readers of the basic features of this tradition, explicating its social function in sentimental national terms as “bringing joy to the suffering Jews.” The author does not, however, anticipate that his readers would also understand the historical significance of this folk performance for the origins of Jewish folk performance. This indicates that the rehabilitation of the *purim-shpil* and its establishment as the origins of Jewish theater was a long process which was by no means complete in the interwar era—the time in which “the significant literature and history” to which Turkow refers were written, and was still ongoing in 1950 the year *Conversations on Theater* was published.

Turkow doesn't take credit for discovering the role of the *purim-shpil* in Jewish history. Rather, he aligns himself with his readers, who, on the basis of their first-hand acquaintance with the *purim-shpil*, may fail to realize that this joyful and often vulgar form of entertainment should be regarded seriously, and who, drawing on their experience with modern Yiddish theater, may see no relation between it and the *purim-shpil*. Only through the help of the scholarly literature written on the topic can one realize that Yiddish theater – and perhaps also Jewish theater in general actually came into being before 1870:

זענען מיר דאך געוויינט צו טראכטן, אַז דאָס יידישע טעאַטער איז אַ קינד פון די לעצטע 70-80 יאָר און איז געבונדען מיט גאַלדפאַדן, גאַרדין, קאַברין, פינסקי, הירשביין, אַש און אַנדערע מיטצייטלעך אונדזערע. און אַט קומען פאַרשער און געפינען דעם אורשפּרונג פון אונדזער טעאַטער אין דער טיפּער פאַרגאַנגענהייט. און אַט קומט אַרויס דער ניו-יאָרקער טעאַטער קריטיקער ב. גאַרין מיט אַ געשיכטע פון יידישן טעאַטער, וואָס איז פאַרזען מיט אַן אונטערקעפל: "צוויי טויזנט יאָר טעאַטער ביי יידן". . . און אַט קומט אַרויס דער היסטאָריקער ד"ר שיפּער מיט זיין מאָנומענטאַלער "געשיכטע פון יידישער טעאַטער-קונסט און דראַמע פון די עלטעסטע צייטן ביזן יאָר 1750.<sup>51</sup>

We are used to thinking that Yiddish theater is the child of the last 70-80 years and is connected with Goldfadn, Gordin, Kobrin, Pinski, Hirshbeyn, Asch and other contemporaries of ours. And along come researchers and find the source of our theater in the deep past. And along comes the New York critic B. Gorin with a history of Jewish theater that carries the subtitle “Two Thousand Years of Theater Among the Jews. . . and here comes historian Dr. Schiper with his monumental *History of Jewish Theater Art and Drama from the Earliest Times until the Year 1750*.

While Turkow's assertion that Yiddish or Jewish theater originates in the *purim-shpil* may be

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la Argentina, 1961).

<sup>51</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 64.

disputed or modified, the author is no doubt correct in pointing out that the history of Jewish theater is a product of scholarly investigations, the conclusions of which often counter popular belief. The narratives about the origins and evolution of Jewish/Yiddish theatre, as Turkow reminds us, have a history of their own that can be traced back to the interwar period, which saw a rapid emergence of the historiography of Yiddish theater, characterized by broad and inventive discourses about the faraway and little documented Jewish theatrical past. Indeed, the year 1918, in which Gorin's *The History of the Jewish Theater* was first published, can serve as the starting point for this historiographic endeavor, which counts as a particularly interesting case of ideologically motivated historiography, bordering on myth-making.<sup>52</sup>

At a time in which the interest in Yiddish theater was on the rise, the influence of historical discourse was not limited to an academic milieu, but rather infiltrated into broader circles of Yiddish culture.<sup>53</sup> As the rapidly evolving Yiddish theater came to play a major role in Eastern European Jewish culture and its immigrant community in the United States, the studies of its history reached large circles of fans of the Yiddish stage, from theatergoers to writers and actors.<sup>54</sup> Sharing the scholars' motivations and drawing on their historical discourse, Yiddish theater artists became self-appointed historians or ethnographers. Indeed, Turkow himself is a salient example of such an artist-turned-historian. Long before he published his *Conversations on Theater*, Turkow, together with his wife at the time, Ida Kaminska, initiated a theater museum and embarked on a pilgrimage in the footsteps of the *broder zinger*—another potential “folkish” ancestor of modern Yiddish theater. And, as early as 1923, he also trumpeted what he regarded as an authentic *purim-shpil* text he discovered in a play by Mendele Moykher-Sforim – in a production which will be discussed below.

Following the paragraph quoted above in Turkow's book comes a popular summary of Yitskhok (Ignacy) Schiper's three volume *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame: fun di eltste tsaytn biz 1750* (History of Jewish Theater and Drama from Earliest Times until 1750; 1923-1928), supported by references to B. Gorin's more dilettantish *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* (History of Jewish Theater, 1918), and by occasional comparisons with various non-

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<sup>52</sup> See B. Gorin, [Yitskhok Goydo], *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater: Tsvey toyzent yor teater bay yidn* (New York: Literarisher farlag, 1918). The only precedent to Gorin's monograph is the humble anthology *Di yidishe bine*, published in New York in 1897, to celebrate the twenty years anniversary of Yiddish theater (“*aroysegebn tsum 20 yerigen yubileum fun dem yidishn teater*”). See Khonen Minikes and Yehuda Katsenelbogen, eds. *Di yidish bine* (New York: Y. Katsenelbogen, 1897).

<sup>53</sup> Several factors attest to the popularity of these studies. Thus, for example, Gorin's book was published in a second edition (1923) and a third one, published by the *Forverts* publishing house after the author's death (1929)—no doubt a rarity for a book of this sort. For more information see my discussion of the reception of Gorin's book later on in this chapter. Another example: a humorous text published by “Der Tunkeler” (Yosef Tunkel, 1881-1949), imitating Schiper's style in his “Geshikhte fun yidisher teater kunst un drame” attests to the popularity of Schiper's work. See Der Tunkeler, “Di Anshteyung fun purim-shpil fun Dr. Schiper,” in *Sefer ha-humoreskot ve-ha-porodyot ha-sifrutiyot be-yidish*, ed. Yechiel Szeintuch, (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1990), 213-214. One should also bear in mind that in pre-WWII Yiddish culture a detached academic sphere was hardly in existence, due to the lack of academic positions in this field—except for a few in YIVO, and to the intense social and political engagement typical of Yiddish scholars of the time.

<sup>54</sup> Not only the above mentioned *purim-shpil* theories reached wide circles, but also the competing narratives about Abraham Goldfadn's pivotal role as “the father of Yiddish theater” (as he was called from an early stage.) While Gorin and Schiper were writing the pre-Goldfadn history of the Yiddish theater, other scholars of the time, and most notably Soviet ones, emphasized the historical significance of Goldfadn. See Oyslender and Finkel, *A. Goldfadn*. See also Nokhem Shtif, *Di elttere yidishe literatur* (Kiev: Kultur lige, 1929), 247-279.

Jewish theatrical traditions, where the renowned director draws on his broad knowledge of the European and Latin American dramatic field. Like his sources, Turkow's cites in his overview lengthy sections of early *purim-shpiln* and praises the folkish nature of this tradition and its close relation with non-Jewish cultures.

Turkow clearly refers to Schiper and Gorin as sources of objective knowledge. However, by drawing attention to the ambitious titles of these pioneering studies, he may also call to mind their apparent ideological framework. These two pretentious histories, covering a very broad time span, attest to the strong motivation to locate the origins of Jewish theater in the faraway past, and to construct a continuity between those ancient beginnings on the one hand, and modern Jewish or Yiddish theater on the other. In their studies of Jewish theater Gorin, Schiper, and their followers, such as Yankev Shatzky, Yisroel Tsinberg or Turkow tackle what they regard as a problem anchored in viewing Jewish theater as a modern phenomenon. How can it be, they wonder, that Jewish theater made its appearance so late in history? Shatzky's essay on Old Yiddish Theater in the *General Encyclopedia (Algemayne Entsiklopedye, 1940)* opens with the declaration: "In the theater art Jews were significantly underdeveloped in comparison with other nations." (*In teater-kunst zeynen yidn geven shtark hintershtelik in farglaykh mit andere umes.*)<sup>55</sup> Similarly, Turkow explains: "when other theaters were in their heyday, Yiddish theatre was still in its infancy."<sup>56</sup> Shatzky and Turkow admit frankly, and certainly more openly than Gorin and Schiper, that in the realm of drama the Jews lagged behind other nations. They are, however, no less motivated than their forerunners in first justifying this delay, and then complicating the picture by uncovering the early stages of Jewish theater.

The studies on which Turkow relies, as well as his own discussion, are thus apologetic in nature. Both Gorin and Schiper react against an alleged Jewish deficiency, and respond to essentialist outlooks that associate the belated appearance of the Jews in the history of world drama with inherent Jewish qualities. The range of these views varied from anti-Semitic judgments that the Jews are an unimaginative race—a well-known anti-Semitic accusation—to theories often pronounced by Jewish nationalists, which attributed the underdevelopment of Jewish theater to their text-centered culture.<sup>57</sup> In contrast to these views, Gorin and Schiper strive to show that the Jews, like other nations, had a long and multi-layered history of theatrical activity. The Jews, they argue, had "normal" dramatic impulses and talents just like everybody else. These drives, however, had to constantly resist the prejudice of their religious authorities, and therefore could not lead to a full-scale flourishing theater.

In all of these historical accounts, from Gorin's 1918 *History of Jewish Theater* to Turkow's 1950 *Conversations on Theater*, the *purim-shpil* played a pivotal role. This traditional folk performance helped the writers expand the imaginative span of Jewish theater. It also enabled them to link Jewish drama to world theater in various ways. Thus, for example, arguing that the *purim-shpil* started in a religious custom of burning Haman in effigy, Gorin argues that, like in other cultures, and most famously Greek theater, Jewish drama originated in ancient sacred rituals.<sup>58</sup> He also pointed to analogies between the *purim-shpil* and Christian biblical

<sup>55</sup> Yankev Shatzky, "Teater: geshikhte fun yidishn teater," *Algemayne entsiklopedye: Yidn* (Paris: Dubnov fond, 1935), 2:389.

<sup>56</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Schiper gives a paraphrase of such anti-Semitic views: "Yidn. . . zenen "beteyve" nisht feik gaystik tsu kontsentrirn. Deriber felt bay zey oykh di dramatishe shafung." Schiper, *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> See Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, 21-22. Joel Berkowitz reiterates this claim arguing that "like the roots

plays, as well as the German *Fastnachtsspiel*, a direction Schiper developed significantly, comparing the *purim-shpil* to a variety of European sources, from medieval mystery plays to Italian Commedia dell'arte. The *purim-shpil*'s folkish and carnivalesque nature further enhanced its appeal to the two Yiddishist historians, who narrated the story of Yiddish theater as part of the rise of secular Yiddish culture. The resistance which the *purim-shpil* often encountered among religious authorities opened up the possibility of telling its history in almost heroic terms.<sup>59</sup>

The fact that later generations of scholars, from Shatzky, Tsinberg and Weinreich in the interwar period to Turkow in 1950 to contemporary scholars largely rely on Schiper's pioneering study, and to a lesser extent on Gorin's more amateurish work, surely reflects the limited development of the research on Yiddish theater. Even within the confined realm of Yiddish studies, Yiddish theater remains a marginal field, which emerged only after the First World War, and was doomed to decline by the time of the Second World War.<sup>60</sup> Yet the frequent references to Schiper's and Gorin's early studies cannot be explained away by the field's modest scale. Rather, they testify to the power of the claims made by these interwar scholars, who offered a broad and comparative perspective, and above all constructed an image of cultural continuity that spoke and still speaks to the hearts of many.

While most of Turkow's examples in *Conversations on Theater* are derived from Gorin's and Schiper's studies, he also relies on an earlier source: Mendele Moykher Sforim (Sholem Abramovitsh) play *Der priziv* (The Conscription; 1884), which incorporates a long *purim-shpil*. Referring to Mendele's play as historical evidence, Turkow quotes the entire *purim-shpil* scene in order to give his readers, as he explains, "a sense of the text and of the production of such *purim-shpiln*."<sup>61</sup> This *purim-shpil* scene, Turkow recounts, interpolating personal memories of his theatrical career into a review of the *purim-shpil* tradition, caused him to stage Mendele's *Der priziv* at the *Tsentral* theater in Warsaw in 1923. A very free adaptation of Mendele's play, Turkow's production challenged Mendele's melodramatic-realism through humor and modernist self-references.<sup>62</sup> The *purim-shpil* scene, which plays only a limited role in Mendele's drama, becomes the center of Turkow's modern adaptation. Turkow added to the production "authentic wedding *klezmer*" who played "suitable folk music," and the whole play, he explains, was thus "transformed into a theatricalized *purim-shpil*" (*di gantse pyese iz geven farvandelt in a teatralizirter purim-shpil*).<sup>63</sup> The act containing the folk performance was "organically woven

of the modern theater as a while, Yiddish performance initially grew out of religious rituals and festivals." See Berkowitz, *Yiddish Theater*, 1.

<sup>59</sup> See for example Schiper, *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame: fun di eltste tsaytn biz 1750* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1923-1928), 1:206-208. Schiper writes against the "fanatics" and the "puritans" who objected theater throughout history among Jews and non-Jews alike, and clearly sympathizes with the art of drama which continued to flourish despite all its persecutions. ("Trots di ale redifes"). See also Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, 25-27, 55-56.

<sup>60</sup> "During the interwar period in Eastern Europe, with the emergence of a small group of trained Jewish historians, only a handful devoted their attention to theater." Michael Steinlauf and Jeffrey Veidlinger, "Theater: Criticism and Scholarship," YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.

[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/Criticism\\_and\\_Scholarship](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/Criticism_and_Scholarship). As Berkowitz writes: "Much of what has been written about the subject (Y theater) has tended to recycle half-truths, unconfirmed anecdotes, misconceptions, and perhaps even outright lies. The result is a kind of modern mythology." Berkowitz, "Introduction," *Yiddish Theater*, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 83.

<sup>62</sup> See footnote no. 9 in the introduction to this dissertation.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 86

into a *purim-shpil*’ (*organish ayngvebt in a purim-shpil*), including a messenger (*loyfer*)—a typical figure in the traditional Purim play—who scoffs at Mendele’s characters.<sup>64</sup> The *loyfer* thus drew the scene nearer to the traditional *purim-shpil*, and simultaneously served as a modernist self-referential interjection—along the lines, one could even say, of Brecht’s epic theater. Another such intervention was the use Turkow made of the area between the stage and the theater hall, constructing “a bridge between the stage and the viewer” that worked against the “fourth wall” convention (or the “effect of reality,” to use Roland Barth’s literary term), central to realist theater—including Mendele’s 1884 play as envisioned by its author.<sup>65</sup> The solutions provided by the *purim-shpil*’s tradition to the rudimentary conditions of performance were hence transformed in Turkow’s play into a modernist challenge to what Turkow calls the theatrical illusion, or the attempt “to deceive the audience.”

The model for his anti-realistic stages, recounts Turkow, came from Vsevolod Meyerhold with his experimental theater in the first decades of the twentieth century. Meyerhold was himself inspired by Moliere’s rebelling against the norms of high-brow Renaissance theater and by Japanese theater of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and especially its use of the *kurambo*—the proscenium attendants, who arrange the set, fix the actor’s costumes, etc. in front of the audience. In his production of *Der priziv* Turkow strive to activate this legacy of non-realist theater through the traditional *purim-shpil*: “Our comedians, in their own way, tried to introduce these elements in presenting the *purim-shpil*.”<sup>66</sup> In so doing, Turkow also rehabilitated Jewish folk performance, presenting it as a source of artistic inspiration, much like Moliere’s theater and the Japanese theater, both contemporaries of the *purim-shpil*’s golden age.

While discussing the bridge between the stage and the audience Turkow argues: “This bridge could be best created by the *purim-shpil*, the Jewish commedia dell’arte” (*ot di brik hot ambestn gekent bashafn di purim-shpil, di yidishe komedye del arte*).<sup>67</sup> In his reference to the Commedia dell’arte Turkow links the *purim-shpil* to yet another form of alternative theater which inspired modern experimental theater. In fact, as I argue in Chapter three, in early twentieth century the Comedia dell’arte came to signify a model for modernism and an alternative to realism. Following the Russian fascination with commedia dell’arte and its appropriation in the name of the revolutionary “theatricality,” Yiddish artists of the interwar era such as Turkow, or the poet, playwright and director Moyshe Broderzon, found their equivalent within Jewish tradition: the *purim-shpil*.<sup>68</sup>

It is probably no coincidence that Turkow staged his *purim-shpil* in 1923, the year Schiper published the first volume of his groundbreaking *History of Jewish Theater and Drama*, also in Warsaw. Deeply involved in Yiddish theater and highly enthusiastic about the history and

<sup>64</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 85.

<sup>65</sup> Turkow’s discussion of the role of the proscenium, the area between the stage and the theater hall, brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s discussion of the orchestra pit in his “What is Epic Theater.” According to Benjamin, the orchestra pit, which he describes as the abyss that separates the actors from the audience, creates art’s aura. In modern times, however, the orchestra pit has been eliminated. See Walter Benjamin, “What is Epic Theater,” *Illuminations*, ed. Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 147-154. Benjamin’s aura is vital for differentiating art from empirical reality, thus making the audience realize the theater as illusion.

<sup>66</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 90.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>68</sup> To what extent Turkow was influenced by Schiper’s research in viewing the *purim-shpil* as the Jewish commedia dell’arte remains an open question, as his *Der priziv* production and Schiper’s *History of Jewish Theater and Drama* were produced and published in the same year.

theory of drama, Turkow most likely read Schiper's *History of Jewish Theater and Drama* at the time of its publication, and perhaps also Schiper's earlier articles on the topic, which appeared in various Yiddish journals in the years 1921-1923.<sup>69</sup> He may have also read Gorin's study, published in New York five years earlier, or its second edition, testifying to the book's extraordinary success, published in 1923. Turkow was in all likelihood impressed by the "discovery" of a Jewish theater preceding Goldfadn's troupe in Iași in 1870, a finding which went against the canonization of Goldfadn's group as the beginning of Yiddish theater. Gorin's and Schiper's publications, with their emphasis on the *purim-shpil*, must have inspired the young director to contribute to the rehabilitation of this unique folk performance, now reclaimed as Jewish heritage, and create his "theatrical *purim-shpil*." The analogy, promoted most prominently by Schiper, between the *purim-shpil* and the Commedia dell'arte, must have given extra impetus to his creation, in the midst of a European and especially Russian craze with the Italian folk performance. Whereas Mendele's 1884 play, which Turkow clearly regarded as a historical source, endowed the production with an aura of authenticity, the analogy to the Commedia dell'arte, promoted by the historical research, provided a European flair, and inspired Turkow's modernist appropriation.

It is important to note that nowhere in *Conversations on Theater* does Turkow claim to have been influenced by the *purim-shpil*. Rather, he deems this folk performance a suitable expression of modernist ideas originating elsewhere—in Meyrehold's experimental theater. Thus, just as the modernist Russian appropriation of commedia dell'arte took the liberty of using this form and transforming it according to a new set of norms, so does Turkow play freely with the norms of the *purim-shpil*, appropriating the *loyfer* and using him to mock Mendele's characters. There is, however, an important difference between reclaiming the *purim-shpil* in interwar Yiddish culture and its most direct source of inspiration—the fascination with *Commedia* in modern Russian culture. In Yiddish culture, the serious scholarly research, the playful artistic appropriation and the reclaiming of the *purim-shpil* as national heritage all occurred at one and the same time, within the same culture, and often by the very same people. Thus, Yiddish artists of the interwar period, such as Turkow, incorporated the radical spirit of Russian modernism alongside the nationalist ethos of renewing Jewish theater and reclaiming its specifically Jewish heritage. Paradoxically, the way to renew Yiddish theater and incorporate principals of European modern drama into it passed through a traditional and folkish dramatic form, namely the *purim-shpil*; and the way to claiming Jewish artistic heritage went through a "foreign" model, that of the commedia dell'arte.

Turkow's 1923 "theatricalized *purim-shpil*" was aimed both at renewing Yiddish theater through breaking melodramatic-realistic conventions and at rehabilitating this lowly form of Jewish performance. These subversive dispositions had, however, to be incorporated into a respectable play by one of Yiddish literature's most acclaimed writers. This fact is indeed quite revealing, as it indicates that the rehabilitation of folk performance was an on-going struggle. One couldn't simply rely on the audience's support. Rather, the author or director had to constantly educate the viewers about the "true nature" of what they have probably considered tasteless forms of entertainment.

<sup>69</sup> See for example Yitskhok Schiper, "Fun der geshikhte fun teater-kunst bay yidn," in *Almanakh tsum 10-yerigen yubileum fun Moment* (1921): 209-242; Yitskhok Schiper, "Teater-kunst bay yidn," *Der khoydesh* ([Warsaw: Haynt] January 1921): 83-96 and February 1921, 77-87; Yitskhok Schiper, "Di eltste yeater-shpilm af yidish," *Ringin* [Warsaw] 1, no. 5-6 (May 1921): 212-220.; 2, no. 7-9 (Dec. 1921): 73-86.

The arduous rehabilitation process, however, was not without its results. In 1937, fourteen years after his production of *Der priziv*, Turkow revisits the *purim-shpil* by playing the lead role in the Yiddish film *Der purim-shpiler*, which like Mendele's play features a *purim-shpil* performance.<sup>70</sup> That Joseph Green, the film's producer, regarded the title as attractive to Yiddish-speaking audiences bears witness to the advancement in the status of the *purim-shpil*. Green, who aimed to produce commercial musical films with “a little humor and a little *Yidishkayt*,” as he explained in an interview, was no doubt encouraged by the success of Manger's 1936 *Megile-lider* (Songs of the Book of Esther), a volume of poems narrating the biblical story in a contemporary Eastern European setting and yet “in the style of the *purim-shpiln* of all times” (*afn shteyger fun di purim-shpiler in ale tsaytn*), as the poet writes in his introduction.<sup>71</sup> The Warsaw-born producer and director even invited Manger to write dialogue and lyrics for his film, and the poet's signature style is evident in *Der purim-shpiler*, especially in the wonderfully rhymed *purim-shpil* scene. Manger himself was probably inspired by scholarly works on the *purim-shpil* and other early Yiddish traditions, as evident, among other things, in his second Introduction to the *Megile-lider*, written in pseudo old-Yiddish style, yet another example for the interrelations between scholarly research and artistic endeavor.<sup>72</sup>

Almost three decades after Turkow's *Der priziv* production, Schiper's and Gorin's historiographies motivated him once again to delve into the genesis of Jewish theater. In an effort to spread and popularize the scholarly findings and make devotees of Yiddish theater appreciate its alleged beginnings, Turkow dedicates most of his amateurish historiography to pre-Goldfaden times. Turkow's quest for the origins of Yiddish theater, which started with reading Gorin's and Schiper's historical narratives and continued in his 1923 “*purim-shpil* production” concludes in the post-war era with his own amateurish historiography of early Yiddish theater.

Reclaiming Eastern European Jewish folk performance, and most notably the *purim-shpil*, was thus a complex undertaking that crossed genres and media, moving from the academic to the artistic and migrating in turn from poetry to popular film. The process, which began immediately after World War I, culminated in the years just prior to World War II, when growing nationalist sentiments among increasingly oppressed Jewish populations contributed to the rise of interest in a specifically Jewish heritage in the realm of performance as in other fields. I would like to turn now from Turkow to his scholarly sources, exploring the historiographies which gave the impetus to artistic creativity and the ideological drives behind them.

### C. The Orphan and the Bastard: The Yiddishist Invention of the *purim-shpil*

איך ווייס ניט ווער עס האָט געשאַפן דעם ייִדישן טעאַטער, צי גאַלדפּאַדן, צי ב. גאַרין. אפּשר, איז דאָס ייִדישע טעאַטער געוואָרן ערשט אַ טעאַטער, ווען ב. גאַרין האָט אָנגעשריבן זײַן געשיכטע.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> The film, and especially the *purim-shpil* scene, is analyzed at length in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>71</sup> In fact, anachronism has always characterized the *purim-shpil*, and in this sense Manger indeed follows the style of the historical *purim-shpil*. However, his anachronism, no doubt an homage to that of the old texts, is a self-consciously modernist gesture. Among other things, it differs in that the modern setting, including socialism, union strikes and venomous anti-Semitic propaganda become more important than the biblical story.

<sup>72</sup> Since the few surviving old Yiddish texts could typically be found only in special libraries, and new printings of them were not available in the 1930s, it is only through academic studies that Manger could have learned about the ancient texts he mimicked and appropriated.

<sup>73</sup> A Mukdoni, “B. Gorin,” *Teater* (New York: A. Mukdoni Yubiley Komitet, 1927), 178.

I don't know who created Yiddish theater, whether it's Goldfadn or B. Gorin.  
Perhaps Yiddish theater became a theater only when B. Gorin wrote its history.

Aleksander Mukdoni's ironic remark simultaneously praises and criticizes Gorin, underlining his pioneering role in the historiography of Yiddish theater and yet possibly hinting—at least for those familiar with Gorin's work—at his sweeping and often uncorroborated generalizations. Mukdoni's criticism, as we shall see later on in this chapter, was aimed not only at Gorin but also at Schiper, and was rooted in a vehement ideological debate between the fervent Zionist Mukdoni and the Yiddishist scholars. More than in the mixture of praise and irony, the wit of the remark lies in obscuring the borderline between history and historiography, between actual dramatic production and critical discourse that describes it, a blurring which points at the constructed nature of Gorin's historical account. As is often the case, there is certain truth to the joke. Especially when it comes to the *purim-shpil*, Gorin's historiographic discourse not only gives an account of this ancient form of performance, but also conjures and imagines it, reclaiming it to suit the author's ideological agenda.<sup>74</sup>

Yitskhok Goydo, who published mainly under the pen name B. Gorin, was one of the leading critics of American Yiddish theater around the turn of the century and up until his death in 1925. Born in 1868 in Lida, a small town near Vilnius, he immigrated to the United States in 1893 and became a regular contributor to the Yiddish press in New York, including *Di Tsukunft*, *Arbayter Tsaytung*, *Ovent-blatt*, *Forverts* and *Morgn-zhurnal*. He also occasionally published in the English press—in *New York Evening Post*, *New York Tribune* and other newspapers and magazines. In addition, Gorin translated Russian, English and German literature into Yiddish, published short stories and plays in Yiddish, directed several theater performances, edited various periodicals, and produced the short-lived *Teater zhurnal* (*Theater Journal*, 1901-1903).<sup>75</sup> Like many scholars of Yiddish theater, Gorin had no academic credentials, but rather was a cultural activist, who was personally acquainted with theater actors and directors, and was involved in productions as playwright or producer.<sup>76</sup> Like almost every reviewer or chronicler of the Yiddish theater, Gorin was an aficionado, a “patriot,” as a devotee of the Yiddish stage used to be called, and simultaneously a severe critic, who constantly deemed Yiddish theater in need of reform.<sup>77</sup> Thus, for example, in the introduction to his *Teater zhurnal*, Gorin declares his intention “to fight all that is tasteless, all that is disgusting, all that has neither taste nor smell in Yiddish literature and on the Yiddish stage.” (*Tsu bakemfen alts vos iz geshmakloz, alts vos iz*

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<sup>74</sup> Phrases such as “One can easily imagine how the *purim-shpil* started developing” (*men ken zikh gring forshkeln, vi azoy dos purim-shpil hot zikh genumen antviklen*) testify most directly to the constructed and at times forced nature of Gorin's generalizations. See Gorin, *Di geshikhte*, 23.

<sup>75</sup> In April 1902, after 14 issues, *Teater zhurnal* ceased to appear. It re-appeared in October of the same year under a different name: *Teater zhurnal un familyen fraynd* and offered a slightly broader view, combining discussions of theater and literature.

<sup>76</sup> As Berkowitz writes: “. . . numerous amateur and professional students of the Yiddish theater have undertaken the task of documenting some facets of its history” See Berkowitz, “Introduction,” in *Jewish Theater*, 12. Thus, for example, Michael Vaykher, who wrote the book “Teater,” was a theater director. Zalmen Zylberweig, the initiator and editor of the monumental *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (1931-1967) was an actor and directed a troupe, and Jacob Mestel, who co-edited the first three volumes of the *Leksikon*, was also an actor and theater director.

<sup>77</sup> On the critical-patronizing attitude of the American Yiddish critics towards Yiddish theater see Nina Warnke, “The Child Who Wouldn't Grow Up: Yiddish Theatre and its Critics,” in Berkowitz, *Jewish Theater*, 201-216.

*ekhlaf, alts vos hot keyn tam un keyn reyakh in der yidisher literatur un af der yidisher bine*).<sup>78</sup>

Of his many cultural enterprises, Gorin is mostly remembered today as the author of the two-volume *History of Jewish Theater*, commonly regarded as the first study on the topic. A lifelong dream based on decades of collecting materials, the book was finally published in 1918, and was substantially based on articles Gorin published beginning in 1911 in *Di tsukunft* (The Future), *Amerikaner*, and other Yiddish periodicals.<sup>79</sup> The style of the book, as Gorin himself admits, had “more of the intimate character of articles than the cold tone of a strict historian.”<sup>80</sup> Loyal to his reputation as an exacting reviewer of Yiddish theater, Gorin offered his readers no heroic story of constant progress, but rather a narrative of growth followed by gradual decline. The only exception to this rule, the single ray of light the harsh critic found in contemporary Yiddish theater, was Moris Schwartz’s *New York Yiddish Art Theater*. Gorin’s goal was clearly didactic in nature. By educating his readers about the history of Yiddish theater Gorin was hoping to influence American Yiddish Theater of his time, providing positive examples and potential sources of inspiration for Yiddish theater activists. Gorin’s book, however, only loosely fulfills the promise of its title: “The History of Jewish Theater” and even less so that of its ambitious subtitle: “Two Thousand Years of Theater among the Jews.” In fact, as Schiper justly complains in the introduction to his *History of Jewish Theater among the Jews until 1750*, a mere eighty pages of Gorin’s study are dedicated to the first 1900 years of Jewish theater, and the rest of the 511 pages in the book follow Yiddish theater from the Haskole period onwards. Moreover, the second volume is dedicated mostly to Yiddish theater in the United States, attesting to the specific perspective and interest of the New York-based writer, rather than providing a balanced review of Yiddish theater of the time in its various locations.

Though more amateurish and less comprehensive than the title seems to promise, Gorin’s historical overview of the pre-*maskilic* era nevertheless sets the agenda for future research on the beginning of Yiddish theater, most notably in its emphasis on the *purim-shpil* tradition, to which two of the three chapters on the pre-*maskilic* period are dedicated. While future scholars refuted many of Gorin’s sweeping assertions, most scholars, from Gorin’s contemporaries to current-day academics, largely accept his view of the *purim-shpil* as the most significant expression of Jewish dramatic energies in the pre-modern era, and, most importantly, as the origin of Jewish theater. One can thus agree with Mukdoni that the *purim-shpil* became theater only when Gorin wrote its history. Prior to that, no one had considered the *purim-shpil* a dramatic form that belonged to the realm of art, but rather to the realm of folklore.

Drawing on sporadic evidence of ancient Purim customs, Gorin goes as far back as fifth-century Rome, where he discovers the origins of the *purim-shpil* in the custom of burning or hanging an effigy of Haman on the holiday of Purim. This precarious leap into the distant past is subsequently severely criticized by Schiper, Gorin’s immediate follower and critic, who provides a series of convincing arguments against Gorin’s attempt to establish these customs as the roots of the *purim-shpil* tradition. Schiper points to the differences between this ritual and the *purim-*

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<sup>78</sup> See “B. Gorin,” *Leksikon*, 464.

<sup>79</sup> According to his wife Elizabeth, Gorin started writing the history of Yiddish theater in 1913, and began collecting materials much earlier. He was disappointed that in all those years no one else rose to the challenge of writing the history of Yiddish theater. When he finally turned to writing the book he did so with a feeling of urgency, concerned that his valuable informants were dying away, and worried about his own deteriorating health. See Elizabeth Gorin, “B. Gorin—zayn lebn un literarische teitkayt” in B. Gorin, *Gezamelete Shriftn*, 69.

<sup>80</sup> See Gorin’s introduction to his book. Gorin, “mayn vayb un bestn khaver lize a matone,” *Di geshikhte*, 4.

*shpil* performance, and to the huge time span between the fifth century, to which this ritual can be traced, and the fifteenth or sixteenth century, where we find the first evidence of *purim-shpil* – as performances made of dramatic monologues and dialogues. Gorin was indeed aware of these methodological problems and tried to address them by constructing a distinction between the early *purim-shpil* and the “complete” (*fartik*) one. He also explained what he defined as the “extremely slow development” of the *purim-shpil* from the fifth to fifteenth century by the sluggish development of theater in this period in other European cultures.<sup>81</sup>

The historiographic difficulties involved in tracing the *purim-shpil* to the fifth century were clearly outweighed by Gorin's strong motivations, and most significantly, his fervent nationalist ethos. In presenting the *purim-shpil* as “a child of Exile, born in the study house or in the synagogue’s yard,” and as “almost as old as the Exile,” Gorin constructs this tradition as an integral part of Jewish life in Europe, accompanying the Jews from their very first steps on European ground.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, expanding the geographical and temporal span of the *purim-shpil*—and of Jewish theater in general—was for Gorin a matter of national pride.<sup>83</sup> In an apologetic response to the late appearance of Jewish drama, which he describes as “a national embarrassment” (*a natsyonale bushe*), Gorin goes as far as to argue that Jewish drama, in its primitive form of the *purim-shpil*, is in fact more ancient than other European theaters which according to him, didn't evolve until the tenth century. The Jews, he contends, were actually *more* advanced than their neighbors, and it was among them that “the first kernel of a new kind of play appeared, after the old classic drama found its spirit buried in the grave. The Jews were the pioneers of modern drama [i.e. post-classical—Z.S.] and in dramatizing the Book of Esther, which occurred in the ninth or tenth century, was such a great achievement the like of which the European nations weren't even dreaming about. . . .”<sup>84</sup> Comparing the Easter parades—the first performances among the Christians—to the Jewish dramatizations of the Book of Esther, Gorin concludes that the *purim-shpil*, “however awkward and trite it may have been,” was the more developed theatrical form.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, Gorin describes the *purim-shpil* as “the weapon of the weak—making fun of the enemies under their noses” (*der kli-zayin fun dem shvakhn—khoyzek makhn fun di soynim unter di oygn*), thus establishing a connection between the satirical Jewish theater and the marginal position of the Jews in Europe. By connecting the *purim-shpil* to the burning of Haman’s effigy, a custom that ultimately led to the 415 blood libel against the Jews, Gorin associates the *purim-shpil* with Jewish resistance and martyrology. In Gorin's melodramatic words: “The *purim-shpil*. . . paid a heavy price and was soaked in Jewish blood.” (*Dos purim-shpil hot. . . getsolt a shvern prayz un durkhgeveytikt gevorn mit yidishn blut*).<sup>86</sup> In short, in Gorin's account the *purim-shpil* becomes a national theater, a direct product and expression of

<sup>81</sup> “*di vayterdike antviklung fun dem dozikn shpil iz tsugegengen zeyr, zeyr langzam.*” See Gorin, *Di geshikhte*, 24.

<sup>82</sup> Gorin, *Di geshikhte*, 22.

<sup>83</sup> Although Gorin dedicates the first chapter to Jewish theater in the time of King Herod, he doesn't consider this Hellenized theater to be as Jewish as the *purim-shpil*.

<sup>84</sup> “. . . iz di tsayt fun dem finftn biz dem tsentn yorhundert nit geven mesugl far drame. Un yidn zaynen efsher geven di eyntsike bay vemen in der doziker langer tsayt hot zikh gevizn dos ershte kerndl fun a nayem sort shpil, ven di alte klasishe drame hot ir ruakh gefunen in keyver. Di yidn zaynen geven di payonern in der moderner drame un di dramatisierung fun Megiles Ester. Vos iz gemakht gevorn in dem nayntn oder tsentn yorhundert iz geven aza groyse oyftu, fun velkhn di eyropeishe felkler hobn demolt afle nit gekholemt.” Gorin, *Di geshikhte*, 24

<sup>85</sup> Gorin, *Di geshikhte*, 25.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

the Jewish people, its hardships and desires.

His nationalist fervor notwithstanding, Gorin openly admits the influence of other European dramatic traditions on the *purim-shpil*. Thus, he argues that the character of Purim, as “the Jewish carnival,” was taken from the neighboring people, and specifically from the *Narrenfest* – in itself a residue of the Roman *saturnalia*.<sup>87</sup> In relating the *purim-shpil* through the *Narrenfest* to the Saturnalia, Gorin connects Jewish folk performance in yet another way to the Hellenized world, thus establishing its status as a classical theatrical form. In arguing that Jewish theater originated in religious ritual, Gorin links it to the prestigious Greek theater, “the first and the finest theater in the world,” which started, as he explains didactically with the Dionysian celebrations.<sup>88</sup> Gorin thus sets the *purim-shpil* in a comparative framework, and situates his own work within the field of theater studies, exploring not only written drama, but also performance in the broader sense of the word.<sup>89</sup>

Gorin's historical account skips over long spans of time and moves from one culture to another: from the Purim rituals of the fifth and ninth century to *purim-shpiln* performed in Germany and Holland in the fifteenth century, and to the serious plays written in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Italy in Italian and Hebrew. A common denominator of all these Jewish dramas was the biblical theme, which linked them to the most ancient and highly-regarded source of Il. This framework helps Gorin rehabilitate the typically crude and low-brow *purim-shpil*, presenting it as part of a respected on-going tradition of Jewish biblical theater.

Although Gorin—as was perhaps suitable for a theater critic of his time—clearly favored high-brow theater, he nevertheless condemned Jewish Renaissance drama in Hebrew, Spanish and Italian, to which he devotes thirteen pages in his two chapters dedicated to the *purim-shpil* (“The Beginning of the *purim-shpil*” and “The Oldest Yiddish *purim-shpiln*”):

דאָס ייִדישע טעאַטער האָט געזוכט צופרידן צו שטעלן אַ געשמאַק וואָס האָט זיך אַנטוויקעלט אויף דער חכמה און קונסט פון יפת, דעם העכערן קלאַס ייִדן, און האָט קיין זאך ניט געהאַט צו געבן דעם פרומען ייִדן און ניט דעם פּראָסטן ייִדן. דער ייִדישער טעאַטער מיט זיין רעפּערטואַר וועלטלעכע דראַמען איז געשאַפן געוואָרן נאָר פאַר איין קלאַס און האָט פאַר דער ייִדישער נאַציאָנאַלער דראַמע קיין זאך ניט געקאָנט טאָן. . . . צוליב זיין אָפּגעשלאָסענע קייט, אָפּגעזונדערקייט האָט ער ניט געקאָנט ציען די זאַפט פון דעם גאַנצן פּאָלק און האָט ניט געקאָנט האָבן קיין איינפלוס אויף דער אַנטוויקלונג פון דער ייִדישער דראַמע. . . . דאָס שלעפּן אין פאַרשיידענע ריכטונגען און דאָס שפּאַלטן אין פאַרשיידענע לשונות האָט קיין גוטס ניט געקענט טאָן דער דראַמע ביי ייִדן. שוין צוליב דעם אַליין האָט זי זיך ניט געקענט רירן פון אַרט. נאַציאָנאַלע קרעפטן, וואָס זיינען פּעהיק געווען צו שאַפן אַ דראַמע און אַ טעאַטער ביי ייִדן זיינען צוברעקעלט געוואָרן. אַנשטאַט צו אַרבעטן האַרמאָניש און ווירקן איינע אויף דער אַנדערער, האָט איינע געשטער דער צווייטער. דער טעאַטער אַלס אַ פּאָלקס אינסטיטוציאָן איז נאָך פאַר זיין געבורט פאַר'משפּט געוואָרן צו אַ ביטערער, שווערער, טרויעריקער עקזיסטענץ.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>88</sup> “*der doziker yontev. . . iz geven an iberblaybsel fun der rusisher saturnalya.*” Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Interestingly, Schiper, the more professional historian, follows him Gorin in the sense that his narrative too begins with the Second Temple period and its Hellenistic theater. See Schiper, *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst*, 15-16. Both Gorin and Schiper strive to construct a connection – albeit a short-lived one – between (Hellenized) Jewish theater and the prestigious Greek drama. In his *Shmuesn vegn teater* Turkow goes even further than his two forerunners and opens the history of Jewish theater with the first temple and the singing of the Levites. See Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 55. Turkow thus adds the flair of biblical pedigree to his history. Turkow's choice may have to do with a Zionist tendency to begin any narrative of Jewish history in a time when the Jews lived in Palestine.

The Jewish theater tried to satisfy the taste that developed based on the wisdom and art of Japhet [=the European – Z.S.], that of the higher-class Jew, and had nothing to give the religious or the simple Jew. The Jewish theater with its repertoire of secular drama was made only for one class and couldn't do anything for the Jewish national drama. . . . Being so closed off and separate, it couldn't “draw the juice” out of the whole nation, and could have no influence on the development of the Jewish drama. . . . Pulling in different directions and splitting into different languages couldn't do the Jewish drama any good. This alone made Jewish drama unable to move from its place. The national energies capable of creating drama and theater among Jews were fragmented. Instead of working harmoniously and influencing each other, one hampered the other. Already prior to its birth, the theater as a folk-institution was sentenced to a bitter, hard and sorrowful existence.<sup>90</sup>

It is in this cul-de-sac of elitist Jewish theater that the *purim-shpil* reappears in Gorin's account as the savior of Jewish Drama:

די איינציקע ישועה וואָס אַ טעאָטער ביי ייִדן האָט געקענט ערוואַרטן איז געווען פון דעם פורים שפּיל. זיין געבורט אויפן שול-הויף און די הסכמה פון דעם גאַנצן עולם האָט עס געמאַכט פאַר אַ פּאַלקס אינסטיטוציאָן.

The only salvation that theater among the Jews could expect was the *purim-shpil*. Its birth in the synagogue and its acceptance by the entire public made it a folk-institution.

Yet although Gorin describes the *purim-shpil* as a direct expression of the folk, and strives to establish its relation to biblical drama and its pioneering role in the history of Jewish drama, Gorin's rehabilitation of this folk performance is far from complete. Once and again Gorin refers to the *purim-shpil*'s “crude, cynical and clumsy appearance” (*grob, tsinishn un umgelumpertn ponem*,” 28), which he relates apologetically to the influence of the surrounding nations on the one hand, and to the many obstacles the religious authorities put in its way on the other. Gorin constructs a complex narrative of rapid progress from the ribald *purim-shpil* to more refined forms inspired by the rise of Christian biblical drama, followed by a decline which was triggered by the rabbis' persecutions and especially the burning of a *purim-shpil* text in Frankfurt.<sup>91</sup> Eventually, he argues, two kinds of *purim-shpil* existed side by side—the “better drama” (*besere drame*) among the Yeshiva students, and the more folkish kind (*folks-shtik*), vulgar and rudimentary, among the rest of the people. According to Gorin, it is this latter kind of performance that the Jewish masses admired, and still do:<sup>92</sup>

אַבער צווישן פּאַלק איז דווקא אַנגענומען געוואָרן דעם אַחשוורוש שפּיל, וואָס איז פאַר'משפּט געוואָרן צו שרפה אין פּראַנקפורט, דאָס הייסט דער גייסט פון יענעם פורים שפּיל. אַלע וואַריאַציעס וואָס זיינען דערגאַנגען ביז צו סאַמע אונזער צייט האָבן זייער יניקה געצויגן פון אים. . . . דער הומאָר איז אומעטום אַ גראַבער, די המצאות אַטמען אויב ניט מיט אַזא נבול פּה איז מיט מער קללות, די אויפפאַסונג איז די זעלביגע האַמעטנע, מרדכי אַ נידריגע בריאה, אַ מנוול, און אסתר אַ מיאוסע אונריינע באַשעפעניש.

<sup>90</sup> Gorin, *Di geshikhte*, 38-40.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-63.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

Among the folk more popular was the kind of *Akhashveyresh-shpil* that was sentenced to fire in Frankfurt, which was the spirit of that *purim-shpil*. All the variations until our own days draw on it. . . . the humor everywhere was crude, the inventions breathe vulgarities if not curses, the production is trite, Mordechai is a lowly creature, a villain, and Esther is an ugly and impure creature.<sup>93</sup>

Ultimately, Gorin regards the *purim-shpil*, “the only dramatic entertainment among the Jews until the last quarter of the nineteenth century,” as a crude theatrical form, “close to the heart of the *folk-mentsh* (the folk-person)”.<sup>94</sup> In his discussion of *maskilic* drama in the following chapters Gorin writes:

די יידן, וואָס האָבן געלעקט די פינגער פון אַ פורים-שפּיל זיינען פֿאַר קיין טעאַטער נישט געשאַפן געוואָרן. ווייטער פון דעם פורים-שפּיל האָבן זיי געקאָנט גייען. עס האָט זיך געפֿאַדערט אַ גאַנצע ענדערונג אינעם ייִדישן בליק אויפן לעבן, אז יידן זאָלן קאָנען זיין טעאַטער-גייער.

The Jews, who adored the *purim-shpil*, were not made for theater. They couldn't go any further than the *purim-shpil*. A whole change in the Jewish way of life was required in order for the Jews to become theatergoers.<sup>95</sup>

Gorin sets a barrier between the *purim-shpil*, with its rudimentary aesthetics and dubious morality, and real theater, which could only be born in modern times, when “a demand for worldly pleasures” rose among the Jews, and with it large audiences indifferent to the prohibition on “*moyshv leytshim*” (a gathering of idlers/scorners).<sup>96</sup> Gorin praises the *purim-shpil* for being a national institution, giving voice to the taste and interests of the folk. Yet he cannot absolve this traditional performance from the sin of belonging in the “synagogue yard.”<sup>97</sup> Rooted in traditional Jewish life and heavily shaped by such religious restrictions as the prohibition on female actresses and general prejudices against performance and entertainment, the *purim-shpil* could only develop in a limited way.<sup>98</sup> Over many centuries, religious constraints did not allow the merry performance to exceed the time frame of Purim—the carnivalesque holiday or to enable it to go beyond the realm of popular entertainment.

For Gorin, the true beginning of Jewish theater remains Goldfadn's theater, to which he dedicates the last three chapters of the first volume. Resisting the myth of a creation *ex nihilo*, Gorin contends that by the time Goldfadn establishes his troupe, all three required elements for a Jewish theater already exist—the poet who could create a stage drama, the folk-singer who produced little performances, and an audience free of religious prohibitions. In other words, the *maskilic* drama, the *broder zinger* and secularization were the three conditions of possibility for a Goldfadn. The *purim-shpil* plays no role in this scheme; it thus bears no claim to preparing the ground for the accomplished Jewish theater.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 56-57, 62.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>97</sup> “Dos purim-shpil, a kind fun goles, geborn in bes-hamedresh oder afn shul-hoyf.” Ibid., 22.

<sup>98</sup> “*Der zelibiker shul-hoyf un der zelibiker frumer oylem hobn afn purim-shpil gelegt aza shtempl, velkhn es hot fun zikh keyn mol nit gekent opraybn.*” Ibid., 40.

Ultimately, the highest praise the author bestows on the *purim-shpil* in its most advanced manifestations is as follows: “if only this theater would have developed further, it could have reached who-knows-what a stage.”<sup>99</sup> Rather than an actual dramatic achievement, the *purim-shpil* signifies for Gorin an unfulfilled potential. Failing to refine theatrical abilities or sensibilities among the Jews, the *purim-shpil* nevertheless serves as proof of the Jews' hypothetical capacity for the theater.

Gorin's *History of Jewish Theater* was harshly criticized by more serious Yiddish scholars. In the introduction to his own book on Jewish theater until the year 1750, Schiper ridicules Gorin's pretense to cover “two thousand years of the history of Jewish theater,” where in fact his emphasis and field of expertise was American Yiddish theater. Describing Gorin's work as amateurish, Schiper declares his intention to refute Gorin's many errors in his own book.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, at least according to Shatzky, Schiper also draws occasionally on Gorin.<sup>101</sup> Shatzky, a leading scholar of modern Jewish history and of Yiddish culture, was probably Gorin's most severe critic. In a book review published in the New York-based journal *Dos naye lebn* on the occasion of the book's second edition, Shatzky rails against the great pretensions of the book as far as historical coverage is concerned – the symbolic two thousand years – and critiques its goal offer a synthesis of all forms of Jewish theater in different languages and lands. Shatzky mocks the gap between these great aspirations and what the author actually offers.<sup>102</sup> Gorin's sweeping generalizations, Shatzky contends, are actually based on very few sources: “A few anecdotes from Schudt about the *purim-shpil*, a few encyclopedia articles, a few memoirs of amateurs and actors, a few monographs—and that's all! Can this be a basis for a history of Jewish theater? Certainly not!”<sup>103</sup> Moreover, there is an abundance of materials that Gorin overlooks; indeed, enough for years of preparation work. “I myself,” Shatzky confesses, “for the past three years, have been collecting materials for a history of Yiddish theater in the nineteenth century. . . and have already found a great deal.” Shatzky also blames Gorin for overlooking the religious sources of Jewish performance, such as the Passover Seder, the traditional wedding and especially the *badkhn* and the *klezmer*. Attacking the mishmash of periods and cultures in Gorin's historical account Shatzky says: “no method. . . all is mixed, chaotic, dilettante.” He ultimately proclaims the work to be so full of flaws and errors that he can not even praise it, as others have done, as a pioneering endeavor.<sup>104</sup> “The book,” he concludes, “can only serve as a warning that it is too early to write a history of Jewish theater, . . . an illustration of how one shouldn't write.”<sup>105</sup> Gorin's furious response appears alongside Shatzky's venomous attack. Shatzky, argues the offended author, writes out of jealousy and competitiveness, frustrated that Gorin preceded him in publishing a history of Yiddish theater.<sup>106</sup> While Gorin exaggerates in ascribing Shatzky's

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>100</sup> Schiper argues, for example, against Gorin's attempt to date the *purim-shpil* back to the fifth century. See my discussion later on in this chapter.

<sup>101</sup> Shatzky, “A naye yidish teater-geshikhte,” 28-32.

<sup>102</sup> Yankev Shatzky, “Tsvey toyzent yor yidish teater,” *Dos Naye Lebn: Monatliker zhurnal far kultur un gezelschaftlekhe fragn* 10 (July-August 1928): 62-66.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 63. The collection *Jüdische Merkwürdigkeiten* (1714), by the German orientalist Johann Jakob Schudt (1664-1722) was one of Gorin's and Schiper's main sources. See Johann Jakob Schudt, *Jüdische Merkwürdigkeiten* (Frankfurt ; Leipzig : Miltzer, 1714).

<sup>104</sup> Shatzky, “Tsvey toyzent yor yidish teater,” 65.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>106</sup> The editors of *Dos Naye Lebn*, the acclaimed Yiddishist Khayim Zhitlovski and the critic Sh.Niger, strongly

criticism to market-style competition (“Don't buy her water. It's poison. Buy better my *kvass* (a fermented drink—Z.S.),” Gorin mocks Shatzky by turning him into a market woman), he rightly realizes that Shatzky's assault on *History* derives from his deep engagement with the field of Yiddish theater. Rather than jealousy, Shatzky's fervor probably expressed his disappointment with the low standards of the long awaited historical survey of the Jewish theater. Interestingly, from the vehement debate we learn that Shatzky, to whom we owe the monumental *Archive*, had also considered writing a historical account of Yiddish theater, a dream he never fulfilled. This fact is revealing of Shatzky's personal enthusiasm and, more generally, the growing academic interest in Yiddish theater studies in the early twenties.<sup>107</sup>

A journalist and a devotee of the Yiddish theater, Gorin was indeed no academic scholar, and Shatzky and Schiper are no doubt right in regarding his work as amateur and in criticizing his reckless use of sources and his uncorroborated conclusions. Their justified criticism testifies to Gorin's immense drive to create a comprehensive narrative on the basis of partial evidence. Shatzky's most relevant argument in the context of our current discussion is that Gorin fails to address potential religious sources of Jewish performance. Shatzky reminds us that one needs to consider also what was left out of the discussion—in this case due to the writer's secularist position. As I aimed to show earlier, Gorin's anti-religious bias shaped his judgment of the *purim-shpil* as a limited theatrical expression. Gorin, who believed that only freedom from religious constraints would allow real theater to develop among the Jews, could not fully rehabilitate the *purim-shpil*, which he viewed as rooted in religious tradition. Yet the carnivalesque spirit of the Purim-play, which allowed for a loosening of religious restrictions, and could even signify resistance to religious authorities, evoked in Gorin a certain sympathy. The *badkhn*, on the other hand, associated with the religious wedding ceremony—a foundation of traditional Jewish life—could not be redeemed so easily, and other candidates for potential dramatic heritage, such as the *khazn* (cantor), the *magid* (preacher), or religious rituals themselves even less so. Shatzky's mentioning of the religious roots of Jewish theater, “the road not taken” by Gorin and Schiper, brings to mind the fact that the answers to the questions about the origins of Yiddish culture, much like the inquiry itself, are ideologically driven.

Despite the sweeping generalizations, and perhaps thanks to them, Gorin's *The History of Jewish Theater* was a great success. The first edition (2000 copies) was sold out in less than two years, and was reviewed in many Yiddish newspapers and periodicals as well as in the *Tribune* and other English newspapers.<sup>108</sup> An expanded second edition appeared in 1923—“a rarity in the conditions of our culture,” (*a fakt a zeltener in undzere kultur badingungen*), writes Shatzky — and a third one, in fact a reprint, was published by the *Forverts* in 1929.<sup>109</sup> The growing interest

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objected to Gorin's response, protesting against the attempt to blame their reviewer of such bias.

<sup>107</sup> “*Koyft nit ir vaser: dos iz sam. Koyft beser mayn kvas.*” Interestingly, Gorin turns to female gender when mocking Shatzky, portraying two female sellers who address each other.

<sup>108</sup> See Elizabeth Gorin, “B. Gorin, zayn lebn un literarishe teitkayt” in B. Gorin, *Gezamelte shriftn* (New York: Elizabeth Gorin, 1927), 1:69. See also Zalmen Zylberweig, ed., “Gorin, B.” *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, (New York: Elisheva, 1931) 1:465.

<sup>109</sup> In his review of Schiper's *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst* in 1924 Shatzki writes about Gorin's work “*di dozike geshikhte iz dershinen in a pasiker tsayt, ven der interes tsum teater in Amerike iz gevaksn un derfar hot es gehat an erfolg—azoy az in yor 1923 is dershinen a tsveyte oyflage, a fakt a zeltener bay undzere kultur badingungen.*” (This history was published in a suitable time, when the interest in theater in America rose, and therefor it had such a success—so much that in 1923 a second edition was published, a rare fact in our cultural conditions.” See Yankev Shatzki, “A naye yidische teater geshikhte,” *Tealit: Teater un literatur* 3 (January 1924):28.

in Yiddish theater in the United States, to which Shatzky relates the popularity of the book, can only partially explain the book's success. The broad appeal of *The History of Jewish Theater* depended probably also on its offering the wider public for the first time a history of the pre-Goldfaden era in Yiddish theater. The partial rehabilitation of the *purim-shpil*, namely the construction of this popular performance as an ancient tradition with a complex history and more sophisticated manifestations, may have also drawn the public's attention. The provocative subtitle mocked by Schiper, "Two Thousand years of theater among the Jews," certainly helped to market the book as comprehensive and authoritative. A separate flier attached to the second edition promised the reader a statistical approach, and although this title bears hardly any relation to the book's content, and indeed irked Shatzky a great deal, it nevertheless attests to that which the publisher at least assumed the readers to be hungry for a truly scientific history of Yiddish theater. While the promise of a statistical analysis was hard to fulfill, a more professional chronicle of Yiddish theater was indeed published in the very same year Gorin's second edition came out – Schiper's *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame*.

If Gorin's *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater* was the first historical study of Jewish and particularly Yiddish theater, Schiper's book constituted the first academic monograph dedicated to the pre-*maskilic* era. In fact, until this very day Schiper's three volume study, published between the 1923 and 1927, remains the only comprehensive account of early Yiddish theater. Unlike Gorin who was a journalist, translator, and occasional theater activist, Schiper was a professional historian who had published on different aspects of Jewish life in Poland. His studies went as far back as the Middle Ages, and applied what was then innovative economic and sociological methodologies.<sup>110</sup> Schiper was interested in various aspects of Jewish communal existence, including the Jews' economic, social and cultural conditions, and always emphasized the secular expressions of Jewish life. The prominence of the worldly facets of Jewish history in Schiper's work, explains Yisroel Halpern, expressed the author's feeling that the study of the spiritual history of the nation and its leaders—"the Sabbath-Jew with his extra soul," in his words—had been exhausted.<sup>111</sup> More significantly, however, Schiper's secular bias emerged from his complex political stance as a socialist Zionist and an advocate of Jewish autonomy in Poland, and his desire to provide secular content to Polish-Jewish identity.

Born in 1884 in Tarnów, Galicia, Schiper received a basic traditional Jewish education, followed by Polish gymnasium and law studies, at the Jagellonian University in Krakow and at the University of Vienna. His first book, on the beginnings of capitalism among the Jews of the Western world, came out in German as early as 1907, when Schiper was merely 23 years old. Schiper continued publishing historical studies in German, Polish and Yiddish until the late thirties, when the war interrupted what was meant to be his greatest historical study, his work on the economic life of the Jews. Like other Jewish-Polish scholars of Jewish culture and history (such as Meir Balaban), Schiper, a graduate of two renowned European universities, never held a position at a Polish university.<sup>112</sup> Upon the founding of the Institute of Jewish Studies (*Ha-*

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Described on the cover page as an expanded edition, the second edition of Gorin's *The History of Jewish Theater* was identical to the first, with the addition of one new chapter in the end.

<sup>110</sup> See Yitskhok (Ignacy) Schiper and Shlomo Eidelberg, *Yitshak Shipper: ketavim nivcharim ve-divre ha-'aracha* (New York: Ogen, 1966).

<sup>111</sup> See Israel Halpern, "Schiper, Yitshak", *Enc. Judaica*, second edition, vol. 18, 137.

<sup>112</sup> Moses Schorr, the third important Galician Jew who conducted research on the history of Jews in Poland, did receive a professorship at Lwow and Warsaw Universities, but as a Near Eastern Scholar (Assyriologist) rather than

*machon le-chochmat Yisrael*) in Warsaw in 1928, Schiper became a lecturer at the institute, but quit after a few years. Though involved in his youth in Polish-socialist organizations, Schiper later became a prominent Zionist activist, and in the years 1922-1927 represented *Po'ale Tsiyon* and then *Al Ha-mishmar* in the Sejm (the Polish parliament).<sup>113</sup> He remained engaged in politics up until the Nazi occupation, when he was part of the leadership of the Warsaw Ghetto, and eventually died in a German concentration camp near Lublin in 1943.

Schiper's life and work were characterized by constant tensions between divergent and even contradictory tendencies and beliefs: he was a supporter of the Polish socialist movement and simultaneously an advocate of Jewish autonomy in Poland as well as Zionism; a law graduate who chose to become a historian; a scholar of historical materialism who was dedicated to cultural matters no less than to social and economic structures; a native Polish speaker and also a fervent Yiddishist and one of the founders of the historical section at YIVO; a Zionist who claimed that Polish Jews originated from the Khazars, and who was refused membership in the Zionist Organization because of his resistance to what he defined as secular Jewish nationalism; a man who constantly collected historical documents, and yet had little patience for archives.<sup>114</sup>

As a historian, Schiper was known for his innovative insights, which were not always well-grounded in documentary evidence. One could admire, as did Raphael Mahler, his younger colleague, Schiper's ability to construct whole accounts of the Jewish dramatic production from bits and pieces. Alternatively, one could criticize Schiper, as many of his colleagues have, Shatzky among them, for his propensity for sweeping generalizations.<sup>115</sup> Schiper himself was proud of his tendency to synthesize, and often contrasted his own method with that of Prof. Meir Balaban, who in his dedication to detail, to "laying down deep roots for the house," never "completed more than one wall." Schiper himself, according to his own account, always strove for the coherent, comprehensive whole. "In the building I construct," he used to say, "the roof may be leaking, the walls aren't always painted – but you can see the whole building."<sup>116</sup>

The pioneering work of writing a history of the Jewish theater was thus suitable for Schiper, who in his *History of Jewish Theater and Drama*, much like his other historical studies, constructed a synthesis, imposing a structure upon the relatively few materials available to him – more responsibly than Gorin yet not unlike him.<sup>117</sup> Shatzky, who in his review of Gorin's *The History of the Jewish Theater* argues that it is too early for a synthetic history of Jewish theater, nevertheless admires Schiper's synthesizing skill. In his review of Schiper's first volume, published only six months after his review of Gorin's book, Shatzky, apparently impressed by Schiper's ability to create "a sociological history of the Jewish theater, as a collective phenomenon and in the context of forms of the general theater," is convinced that an integrative

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a historian of Polish Jewry.

<sup>113</sup> At the time of the major split in the *Po'ale Tsiyon* movement, the multifaceted Schiper joined the Right part ("Ahdut ha-avoda").

<sup>114</sup> See Hillel Seidman, "Khayav shel doktor Yitschak Schiper z"l," in *Yitschak Shiper: ketavim nivcharim*, 10-28. According to Seidman, Schiper couldn't ignore cultural matters even when discussing economy.

<sup>115</sup> See Raphael Mahler, "Yitschak Shiper u-mekharav ha-historiyim," in *Yitschak Shiper: ketavim nivcharim*, 41-42.

<sup>116</sup> Oral testimony of Prof. Avraham Weiss quoted in Shevach Adan, "Ha-machon le-madae ha-yahadut be-varsha," in *Mosdot Tora be-'Eropa be-vinyanam uve-churbanam*, ed. Samuel Kalman Mirski (New York: Ogen, 1956), 574.

<sup>117</sup> Shatzky, who generally favors Schiper's book, argues that Schiper's second volume relies on no more than thirty *purim-shpiln*, of which the most are fragments. He also contends that more sources are available and were overlooked by the author. See Shatzky, "Di ershte geschikhte fun yidishn teater," 238.

narrative of Yiddish theater is indeed possible, and argues that thanks to Schiper's good method and masterly interpretation he was able to construct such an impressive synthesis out of so few sources.<sup>118</sup> In the absence of preliminary studies, he now argues, the historian is “simultaneously the collector, the inventor, the analyst and the synthesizer,” or, in metaphorical terms, “the carrier of the building blocks, the architect and the builder – all at once.”<sup>119</sup> Though not all the blocks are as stable as we'd like them to be, Shatzky concludes, the method is still good and clear– and so is the construction as a whole.<sup>120</sup>

At the heart of *History of Jewish Theater and Drama* lies, first, the claim that a vibrant Jewish theatrical art existed prior to the nineteenth century, and second—that this dramatic culture should be regarded as the roots of modern Jewish theater. These overarching theses were clearly motivated by Schiper's nationalist fervor, which endowed the three-volume work with a sense of urgency. As with Gorin's amateurish work, Schiper's academic historiography displays explicitly its apologetic drive. Through a narrative of progress and continuity, more comprehensive and determined than that of Gorin, Schiper provides a stronger response to the belated appearance of theater among the Jews, refuting the accusation rather than apologizing for this alleged fault.

Since Schiper ends his narrative in the year 1750, later potential candidates for the roots of Yiddish theater, such as the nineteenth-century *maskilic* drama or the *broder zinger*, do not compete with the *purim-shpil* for a claim to the legacy, and this folk performance indeed plays a key role in Schiper's narrative of origins. In fact, it is in order to remain within the realm of purely folkish creativity that Schiper chooses to conclude his history in the year 1750, as he explains:

ביז אן ערך דער מיט 18טן י"ה האָט געבליט די אַנאַנימע ייִדישע פּאַלקס-דראַמע און דאָס אמתע ייִדישע פּאַלקס-טעאַטער. אויבן-אָן שטייט די דיכטונג, ווייט אין הינטערגרונד – דער דיכטער. . . . [שפּעטער] די דיכטונג הערט-אויף צו זיין אַנאַנים, דאָס ט' הערט אויף צו זיין אַ דערגאַנצונג צו דער שול אָדער שולע, עס ווערט דער שפיגל פון נייע ייִדישע מענטשן, וואָס דערווייטערן זיך אַלץ מער פונעם אַלטפּרענקישן, פּרומען ייִדישן לעבן.<sup>121</sup>

Until around the middle of the eighteenth century the anonymous Jewish folk-drama and the true Yiddish folk-theater flourished. Poetry was on top, and faraway in the background – the poet. . . . [later on] poetry ceases to be anonymous, and the theater is no longer a supplement to the synagogue or the school. Rather, it becomes the mirror of the new Jewish persons, who keep moving away from the old-fashioned and religious Jewish life.

Indeed, Schiper goes much further than Gorin in rehabilitating the *purim-shpil*. Whereas Gorin

<sup>118</sup> “*Banutsendik mit aza zeyer un zeyer dasheydenem visnshaftlekhn aparat hot Schiper, a dank der guter metode un geshikter interpretirung fun drm dozikn material gegebn un interesant arbet, vos fit undz arayn tsum ershtn mol in der velt fun yidish teater shager, un di enge geslekh fun di getos, vu es hot zikh geshpint an eygener kunst-fodem.*” See Shatzky, “*A naye yidishe*,” 29.

<sup>119</sup> Shatzky, “*A naye yidishe*,” 31-32. Shatzky writes similarly in his review of the second volume where he also compares Schiper to an adventurous sailor, who “went out to the sea without a compass.” See Shatzky, “*Di ershte geshikhte fun yidishn teater*,” 262.

<sup>120</sup> Shatzky, “*A naye yidishe*,” 32.

<sup>121</sup> Schiper, *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst*, 13.

presents the *purim-shpil* as a basic experimentation in theater, while associating “real” theater with modern times, Schiper establishes the *purim-shpil* as an art form in its own right which can be justly claimed as heritage. In the Introduction to his book, Schiper, like Turkow, addresses the common view according to which Jewish theater is a modern phenomenon. He expresses his objection to this belief through rhetorical questions:

ס'איז אָנגענומען בײַ אונז—די ייִדישע טעאַטער-קונסט און דראַמע צו באַטראַכטן אַלס די כאַראַקטעריסטישע אויסדריקן אויסשליסלעך פֿון דער נײַסטער אַנטוויקלונג, ווען אויפֿן הימל פֿון דער ייִדישער ליטעראַטור האָבן אויפֿגעשײַנט די שטערן פֿון פרץ, אַש, הירשביין, פינסקי, אאז״וו, און אויף דער ייִדישער גאַס האָבן זיך אַלץ מער פֿאַרשפּרייט די טרופּעס פֿון ייִדישע אַקטיאָרן. צי איז דאָס מעגלעך, אַז די גרויסע צווייטויזנטיעריקע גלות-געשיכטע זאָל ערשט אין דער נײַסטער צײַט האָבן באַקומען אַן אויסדרוק אין דער טעאַטער קונסט? צי באמת הויבט זיך אָן די געשיכטע פֿון דער ייִדישער טעאַטער-קונסט און דראַמע ערשט אין 19טן יאָר-הונדערט?<sup>122</sup>

We are used to regard Jewish theater art and drama as the characteristic expressions of the newest development only, when Peretz, Asch, Hirschbein, Pinski, etc. have illuminated the skies of Jewish literature, and groups of Jewish actors have increasingly proliferated on the Jewish street. Is it possible that only in the latest times has the great two-thousand-year history of exile found expression in the art of theater? Does the history of Jewish theater and drama really start only in the nineteenth century?

As implied in these questions, Schiper cannot accept the idea that Jewish art-drama was born as late as the nineteenth century. At stake is much more than Jewish achievements in the field of drama. To Schiper, Jewish theater is no marginal realm of Jewish culture, but rather a key expression of national creativity, since Schiper regards the theater as a public sphere that has the potential to create a sense of community:

אין דער אַטמאָספּער פֿון טעאַטער שאַפט זיך אַ גײַסטיקער קאָלעקטיוו פֿון יחידים, וואָס שטרעבן צו אַ העכערן באַוווּסזיניקן אויסדרוק פֿון זײַער זײַן. די בינע שאַפט פֿאַר זיי אַט דעם צונויפֿבינדנדיקן באַוווּסזיין פֿון דער כאַאָטישער מאַסע יחידים, וואָס געפֿינען זיך בײַ אַ טעאַטער-פֿאַרשטעלונג, ווערט אַ דאַנק דער בינע-קונסט געשאַפֿן אַ גאַנצקײַט, אַ קאָלעקטיוו, וואָס איז אַראַגאַניש פֿאַרבונדן מיט דינע פעדים פֿון בשותפותדיקע איבערלעבונגען—עס ווערט געשאַפֿן דער קאָלעקטיוו—דאָס פּובליקום.

The atmosphere of the theater creates a spiritual collective of individuals, who strive for a higher conscious expression of their being. The stage creates for them the connecting consciousness. The chaotic mass of individuals present at a theater production becomes, thanks to the art of the stage, a totality, a collective which is organically linked with thin threads of common experiences—a collective is created—the audience.

A certain tension can be felt in the text between modernist fragmentation and socialist

<sup>122</sup> Schiper, *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst*, 9. Interestingly, Schiper mentions Peretz, Asch and other late nineteenth and early twentieth century writers, rather than Abraham Goldfaden, usually considered the father of the Yiddish theater, or the early *maskilic* playwrights, who were the first to compose Yiddish plays. One possible reason could be Schiper's preference, as a Polish-Jew, for artists who were born in Poland or who are strongly associated with it.

collectivity. On the one hand the author describes the collective through the metaphor of the “thin threads of common experiences,” and argues that it can only be achieved through a certain spiritual process – which the theater enables. On the other hand, he also uses the stronger metaphor of the organic connection. The text seems to oscillate between a realistic account of the dramatic experience and a utopian vision of an almost mystical unity, created by the specific performance and yet transcending it. Schiper doesn't speak in this paragraph directly about the folk or the nation, but his description of a collective sharing a common consciousness echoes accounts of nation formation. Schiper's ambivalent imagery and his phrasing of “a spiritual collective of individuals” may reveal the writer's inner tension between his ethnic commitment and a resistance to authoritarian nationalism.

The next sentence, however, articulates explicitly the connection between Jewish national needs and the theatrical experience. Once again, Schiper employs a rhetorical question, this time pointing towards the answer:

צי איז דאָס דאָזיקע באַדערפעניש—זיך צו זוכן אינעם שפיגל פון טעאַטער קונסט און געפינען אין די קאַלעקטיווע איבערלעבונגען פונעם פובליקום—אויפגעקומען ביי ייִדן ערשט אין די נייַסטע צייַטן, אָדער צי האָט עס זיך דערוועקט שוין אין אַ גאַר ווייטער פאַרגאַנגענהייַט?<sup>123</sup>

Did this need—to look for oneself in the mirror of theater art and to find oneself in the collective experiences of the audience—arise among Jews first in modern times, or did it awaken already in a faraway past?

The theater and its ability to create an audience out of solitary, searching individuals function in Schiper's account both as a metaphor for nation formation, and the actual means of establishing a collective identity among the Jews, to create a unity out of the “chaotic mass of individuals.” The theater, the “conscious and elevated expression” of one's being, serves as the mirror in which the nation can see itself. The question about the origins of Jewish theater thus unites with a broader riddle—the emergence of a Jewish national consciousness—and the ongoing development of Jewish drama testifies to the cultural continuity of the Jewish people. Ultimately, as Schiper himself explains, the history of the Jewish theater—the topic of his lengthy study is only an example of larger historical processes:

זענען מיר דען נישט—נישט דאָס לעצטע און נישט דאָס ערשטע רינגעלע אין דער גאַלדענער קייט פון לאַנגע, היסטאָרישע שאַפונגס-פראָצעסן? אָט דעם אמת וועלן מיר אין אונזערע איצטיקע פאַרשונגען, וועלכע מיר גיבן-איבער דער עפנטלעכקייַט, אילוסטרירן מיטן בייַשפּיל פון דער ייִדישער טעאַטער-קונסט און דראַמע.<sup>124</sup>

Aren't we then neither the last and nor the first link in the golden chain of long historical processes of artistic creation? In our current studies we will illustrate this truth with the example of the Jewish art theater and drama.

A Socialist and a Yiddishist, Schiper's nationalism clearly favors the folkish expressions of Jewish theater over more elitist and intellectual ones, and Yiddish—the language of the folk—over other languages. In the Introduction to his book Schiper explains that the emphasis of his

<sup>123</sup> Schiper, *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst*, vol. 1, 7.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

research is on drama and theater in Yiddish, yet in order to contextualize his study he had to broaden the framework of the discussion and consider also Jewish drama in Hebrew and “foreign languages,” as well as “Jewish activity in foreign theaters.”<sup>125</sup> When discussing Jewish theater of the Renaissance period Schiper, like Gorin, places the *purim-shpiler* higher in the hierarchy of creativity than Jewish drama in other languages:

די יידישע דראַמאַטיקער אין איטאַליען שרייבן זייערע פיעסן אין איטאַליעניש אָדער שפּאַניש. דאַקעגן דייטשע און סלאַווישע ייִדן זאָפן זייערע "פּאַלקס-שטיק" אין דער שפּראַך פון די ייִדישע מאַסן, אין ייִדיש. דאַרט—אַ שקלאַפּישע נאַכמאַכונג, דאָ—אויב מען קען אַזוי זאָגן—דער וועג צו זיך, מיט דער הילף פון דער דייטשער פּאַלקסליטעראַטור און פּאַלקסקונסט. מיט איין וואָרט—דאַרט—קינסטלער און געקניצלטקיניט, דאָ—נאַיווע פּאַלקסקונסט, פּרימיטיוו.

The Jewish dramaturges in Italy write their plays in Italian or Spanish. On the other hand German or Slavic Jews create their “folk-pieces” in the language of the Jewish masses, in Yiddish. There—a slavish imitation, here—if one can say so—the way to oneself, with the help of German folk-literature and folk-art. In a word—there—artist and artificiality, here—naïve folk art, primitive.<sup>126</sup>

Though primitive and naïve, the folkish nevertheless signifies immediacy and authenticity, and can thus potentially promote the nation—personified here as a psychological self (“the way to oneself”). The more complex forms of art, and Schiper plays here on the grammatical link between art and artificial (in Yiddish “*kunst*” and “*gekintself*”) are suspected of inauthenticity and, at least in the Jewish case, dependent and rooted in inferiority complexes. The paragraph quoted above attests also to the author's complex relation with aesthetic encounters between the Jews and their surrounding cultures. While Schiper resists what he sees as the practice of “slavish imitation” in a southern European (and primarily Sephardi) context, he nevertheless welcomes drawing inspiration from the German Ashkenazi context, which may even help the Jewish people find its true self.

In fact, the art and custom of the non-Jewish environment plays a major role in Schiper's book, which to a large extent relies on what Schiper calls “the comparative method” (*farglaykhender metod*)—analyzing Jewish theater through inference from equivalents in the surrounding cultures.<sup>127</sup> While the principle itself is reasonable and common in such investigations, Schiper's extended use of the comparative method is problematic, since it involves a somewhat circular logic. Schiper uses the non-Jewish sources for establishing their influence on the Jewish one, and also for dating the Jewish plays—based on the assumption of the influence of their non-Jewish equivalents.<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, as Shatzky reminds us, not every similarity attests to an influence, and not every influence is direct—a rule which Schiper often

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>127</sup> In his introduction to the book Schiper explains that often the general history was the “most important and almost only way” to date a Jewish drama or explain the nature of the theater where it was produced. Ibid., 11.

<sup>128</sup> Shatzky describes the comparative method thus: “There, where he had no Jewish source, he based himself on a source from the general culture, assuming that the Jewish ghettos of the time could only be like their neighboring environment, perhaps with little changes to suit the Jewish conditions.” Shatzky, “*A naye yidische*,” 28.

ignores in his haste to draw his far-reaching conclusions.<sup>129</sup> The comparative method which guides *History of Jewish Theater and Drama* is indeed a strategy used rather freely to compensate for the scarcity of sources. More often than not, Schiper simply presumes that certain kinds of performance among non-Jewish culture had to exist also in Jewish culture. A salient example of this kind of inference is the famous “*Shpilman theory*,” which Schiper developed on the basis of L. Landau's analysis of the *Artus Roman* and bequeathed to Max Erik and Max Weinrich, who further expanded it. According to this theory, Yiddish knightly tales in the late medieval and early modern period were spread by wandering singers, whose profession was “*zingen un zogn*” (singing and reciting). Such *Spielmann* existed in German culture, and Schiper, on the basis of practically no supporting evidence other than his general “comparative method” and Landau's hypothesis, concludes that they existed also among the Jews.<sup>130</sup>

Another method Schiper relies on, no less dubious from a philological point of view, is his reliance on “traditional sources,” namely late sources which presumably contain traces of the old *purim-shpil*.<sup>131</sup> Thus, Schiper often uses nineteenth and even twentieth-century sources to discuss the early modern *purim-shpil*.<sup>132</sup> This method is based on an overarching assumption that an oral *purim-shpil* tradition existed (and perhaps still did) throughout many centuries. This assumption relates to a broader thesis that “in the current Jewish folk-physiognomy one can find the same lines and wrinkles that historical life engraved and creased.”<sup>133</sup> The notion of a cultural continuity among the Jews, expressed here once again through organic metaphors, is thus a postulate on which Schiper's *History of Jewish Theater and Drama* is based, and at the same time a hypothesis the book seeks to validate.

The *purim-shpil* is no doubt the great hero of Schiper's *History of Jewish Theater and*

<sup>129</sup> See Shatzky, “*Di ershte geshikhte fun yidishn teater*,” 238, 244.

<sup>130</sup> For the *shpilman* theory see L. Landau, “Arthurian Legends, or, the Hebrew-German Rhymed Version of Legend of King Arthur,” in *Hebrew-German Romances and Tales* (Leipzig, E. Avenarius, 1912); Max Erik, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur fun di elteste tsaytn biz der haskole-tekufe* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1928), 202-225; Max Erik, *Vegn altyidishn roman un novele: fertsnter-zekhtsnter yorhundert* (Wasaw: M. Rayz, 1926), 16-28; Max Weinreich, *Bilder fun di yidisher literatur geshikhte* (Vilne, 1928), 60, no1. Jean Baumgarten, *Introduction to Old Yiddish Literature*, trans. Jerold Frakes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141-142. For a well-reasoned attack on the *shpilman* theory see Khone Shmeruk “Tsi ken der keymbridzher manuskript shtitsn di shpilman-teorye in der yidisher literatur?” in *Prokim fun der yidisher literatur geshikhte* (Tel Aviv: Y.I. Peretz and Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1988), 97-120. See also Robert Adler Peckerar's recent discussion of the *shpilman* theory in its political context : Robert Adler Peckerar, “The allure of Germanness in modern Ashkenazi literature: 1833—1933,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2009) ProQuest (AAT 3411185), 65-74.

<sup>131</sup> Once again Shatzky supports this method, saying that future generations too must collect the materials which carry the stamp of an old tradition and forms (“velkhe trogn af zikh dem shtempl fun alter traditsye un form”). See Shatzky, “*Di ershte geshikhte*,” 263.

<sup>132</sup> Schiper uses relatively recent text to learn about early ones throughout his work and rather freely. Thus, for example, in the scarcity of descriptions of the *purim-shpil* costumes, Schiper weaves his discussion of costumes from a variety of sources and from a wide range of periods including the memories of a German officer in 1796 – mentioned in a 1917 work, a book from 1923 which includes memories from the 1840ies. Shatzki supports this method of relying on “traditional sources,” i.e. relatively recent sources which give evidence to older traditions, arguing that “*oykh di frische traditsye hot undz opgehit a por ayntselhaytn mikoyekh grim un kostyumen, velkhe zenen a pasike dergantung farn altn materyal*.” See Shatzky, “*Di ershte geshikhte*,” 250-251. Shatzky even suggests using more recent memoirs, such as those of Alexander Harkavi (1835-1919), Chayim Tshemrinski (1864-1917), and Pauline Wengerof (1833-1917).

<sup>133</sup> “*In der itstiker yidisher folks-fizyonome gefinen zikh de zelibike shtrikhn un knaytsh velkhe dos historishe lebn hot oysgekristsht un oysgeknaytsht*.” See Shatzky, “*Di ershte geshikhte*,” 225.

*Drama*, and his rehabilitation of this form of art is much more complete than in Gorin's *The History of Jewish Theater*. Thus, if Gorin was the first to include the *purim-shpil* in the history of Jewish theater, Schiper is the one who introduced it into the realm of art. Unlike Gorin, who viewed the *purim-shpil* as no more than primitive experimentation, Schiper regarded it as a legitimate form of theater with its own dramatic conventions that addressed – at times in a sophisticated manner—challenges such as the lack of a proper stage. Significantly, whereas the first volume of Gorin's *The History of Jewish Theater*, dedicated to the early period of Jewish theater, features photographs of Shloyme Ettinger, Avrom-Ber Gottlober, and the largest photo of the three, Goldfadn; Schiper's book, devoted to the folkish and anonymous era, features an early copper engraving of *purim-shpiler* which dates back to the seventeenth century.

Schiper, who rejects Gorin's attempt to present the ancient custom of burning a Haman figure in effigy as the origin of the *purim-shpil*, nevertheless dedicates his first chapter to this tradition, and agrees that it constitutes a “kernel of dramatic creation.” Like Gorin, Schiper too seems eager to demonstrate that theater among the Jews, as among other nations, started with a religious ritual, or in his words with “primitive magic.”<sup>134</sup> While repudiating Gorin's attempt to date the *purim-shpil* to the fifth century, Schiper too presents this folk performance as much older than the first *purim-shpil* text available (1697) or the first mention of the term (1555), and begins his narrative with the mystery plays of the twelfth century. The comical intervals in these European medieval dramas, contends Schiper, were less troubling for the Jews than the Christian sections and could therefore permeate Jewish society. Although he admits having no data about them, Schiper nevertheless argues that the Jews too had their own “*leytsim*” or jesters, whose performance included jokes, music and acrobatics – an example of his free use of “the comparative method.” By way of analogy to the non-Jews we can deduce what these Jewish jesters were like, suggests Schiper, and speculates further: “perhaps these were *yeshive* students like the non-Jewish wandering actor.” Through the hypothesis of the Jewish jester Schiper skips from the medieval mystery plays to the fifteenth century *Narrenfest*, which according to him provided the inspiration for the custom of the Purim-king, a key component in the developing *purim-shpil* tradition.<sup>135</sup> Schiper summarizes: “no later than the fifteenth century the Ghetto adopt the style of German mystery plays and the *Fastnachtsspielen* and develops according to this model the dramatic creations known under the collective name *purim-shpiln*. This example. . . drew the attention of the primitive folk strata. It gave them in hand a wonderful key to the dramatic palace for which they searched.”<sup>136</sup> Hence, while Jewish practices such as the dramatic elements in the traditional wedding and the Purim customs prepared the ground for the *purim-shpil*, it was the “foreign” examples set by the German which enabled the creation of the Purim-play, and more broadly, of theater among the Jews.<sup>137</sup> Schiper strives to set the *purim-shpil* not only in a historical context but also in an artistic framework. Thus, whereas the first volume of his *History* follows a chronological order, the second is arranged mostly thematically, and includes chapters focusing on repertoire, acting style, masks, and various “genres” such as *zing-shpil* (singing-play), *tsvishn-shpil* (interludes), circus, clownery and opera. Schiper constructs a complex narrative depicting several stages in the development of the *purim-shpil*, from the more basic German-style clownery of the fifteenth century to the improvised monologues inspired by

<sup>134</sup> Schiper, *Geshikhte fun der yidisher teater-kunst*, Vol. 3, 14.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

the Commedia dell'arte, brought to Poland in the seventeenth century by English and Italian comedians, and through the opera craze of the eighteenth century, which inspired the German *Singspiel* and the Jewish *Akhashveyresh-shpil*.

All in all, Schiper presents the *purim-shpil* as absorbing a variety of “foreign” influences—not only German but also Polish and even English and Italian – and amalgamating them into the specifically Jewish form of the folkish *purim-shpil*. He is less keen on Hebrew sources, and although he mentions related Jewish traditions, such as the *Purim-droshe* (a parodic Purim sermon) or the *marshelik-badkhn*, and occasionally addresses Hebrew drama and poetry, these potential ancestors play only a minor role in his overarching narrative of Jewish theater and the emergence of the *purim-shpil*.<sup>138</sup> In Shatzky’s detailed analysis of Schiper’s second volume (published in YIVO’s *filologishe shriftn* in 1928), which reads like an account of how Shatzky himself would have written the history of Jewish theater, Shatzky compliments Schiper on including the *badkhn*, the klezmer and the *khazn* in the discussion, but argues that these figures deserve a greater place in the history of Yiddish theater.<sup>139</sup> Indeed, Schiper’s secular and acculturationist attitudes are apparent throughout *History*. His “comparative method” thus does not compensate for the scarcity of sources on Jewish theater, but it also allows him to establish the *purim-shpil* as a form of European performance, in constant dialogue with other ethnic traditions and taking part in general European fashions, from the commedia dell’arte to the extravagant Baroque theater, or to the Opera craze of eighteenth century.

Schiper’s *History of Jewish Theater and Drama* evoked much praise among prominent Yiddish scholars as Shatzky, Max Erik and Max Weinreich. Although these scholars noted Schiper’s tendency to overly broad generalizations, they nevertheless regarded his history as a serious scientific work, and admired its grand scale, pioneering nature and synthesizing skill. Shatzky, who dedicates a long article to each of the two volumes of Schiper’s *History of Jewish Theater and Drama*, praises the author for the important task he took on himself, and regards it as “a push forward” and “a cornerstone.”<sup>140</sup> Weinreich admires how Schiper established for us “from bits and pieces the old Yiddish theater.”<sup>141</sup> And Max Erik, in the Introduction to his *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur fun di eltste tsaytn biz der haskole tkufe* (The History of Yiddish Literature from the Oldest Times to the Period of the Haskala, 1928) explains that one reason he left the *purim-shpil* out of his book is that it was already covered by Schiper, and that “with all the difficulties in it, Schiper’s method is correct and he merits praise for his wide (though too wide and often chaotic) use of his two methods: the analogy with the European dramatic art and the reliance on late sources.”<sup>142</sup>

The fact that serious scholars like Shatzky and Erik praised Schiper’s methods of relying on non-Jewish or late Jewish sources to compensate for the lack of earlier sources demonstrate that Gorin and Schiper were not alone in feeling an urgent need for a historical narrative of

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<sup>138</sup> In his research Schiper relies quite heavily on German scholars, and at times also on their interpretations of Jewish sources such as the *responsa* literature. Schiper refers relatively little to traditional Jewish sources, such as the Purim satires. See Shatzky, “*Di ershte geshikhte*,” 223-4.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-7.

<sup>140</sup> “A shtup faroyts,” “A vinklshteyn,” *ibid.*, 263.

<sup>141</sup> Max Weinreich, “Tsu der geshikhte fun der elterer Akhashveyresh-shpil,” *Filologishe shriftn* 2 (1928): 425-452.

<sup>142</sup> Max erik, *Di geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur fun di eltste tsaytn biz der haskole tkufe* (Warsaw: Kultur lige, 1928), V-VI. Weinreich too praises Schiper for managing to build from pieces and fragments the old Jewish theater. See Weinreich, “Tsu der Geshikhte,” 426.

Yiddish theater. Interwar Yiddish scholars shared strong motivations and acute concerns such as: How, in the absence of a historical narrative, can one regard Yiddish theater seriously? How can one understand Yiddish theater when its origins are unknown? And how can we defend Jewish theater from the accusations that it is nothing but a pale imitation or plagiarism of European theater? Schiper's *History of Jewish Theater and Drama* offered a historical framework, and conveniently pointed at a concrete candidate for the origins of Yiddish theater, which in its very existence in the twentieth century seemed to prove Jewish cultural continuity—the *purim-shpil*.

Yet not everybody in the interwar period shared Gorin's and Schiper's enthusiasm for the *purim-shpil* as the newly declared origin of Yiddish theater. Theater critic Alexander Mukdoni (born Alexander Kapel, 1878-1958), a fervent Zionist, rejected endowing this low-brow folk tradition with such a key role in Jewish cultural history. Mukdoni does not mention particular names, but he is most likely referring to Schiper and Gorin when he talks about the haste to crown the new ancestors of Yiddish theater by certain "researchers." Developing a family metaphor which activates common Jewish notions of ancestry, heritage and lineage, Mukdoni mocks the quest for the progenitors of the "orphan," i.e. Jewish theater:

דאָס ייִדישע טעאַטער איז געווען אַן אונטערגעוואָרפֿן קינד אין אונזער קולטורעלן לעבן. ער האָט ניט געהאַט קיין גייסטיקן טאַטן און מאַמען. . . נעפלדיקע לעגענדעס האָבן געפירט זיין ספר היוחסין צום פריילעכן שענקל, צום פאַרפינסטערטן הינטער-געסל און צום גייסטיק-קבצנ'ישן פורים-שפיל. קיין אחיזה, קיין אינהאַלט אין דעם ייִדישן גייסטיגן לעבן, קיין קרובה'שאַפט מיט דעם ייִדישן רעליגיעזן לעבן און קיין פאַרביןדונג מיט דער נייער ייִדישער ליטעראַטור. הכלל, אַן אונטערגעוואָרפֿן קינד, אַ קולטורעלער ממזל'ל.

The Jewish theater was a foundling in our cultural life. He had no spiritual father and mother. . . Nebulous legends linked his pedigree to the merry inn, to the darkest back alley and to the spiritual-beggarly *purim-shpil*. No grasp, no hold in Jewish spiritual life, no family ties with Jewish religious life and no connection with modern Yiddish literature. In short, a neglected child, a cultural bastard.

Mukdoni rejects what he terms the "nebulous legends" promoted by certain scholars, who insist on finding the origins of Yiddish theater in the spiritually inferior *purim-shpil*, or in "the merry inn"—probably the *broder zinger*. With such dubious ancestors Jewish theater remains a forsaken child and even a bastard of Jewish culture, bearing no relation to her/his true parents the *purim-shpil*—and here Mukdoni suggests his own candidates for the origins of Jewish theater: Jewish religious life and the new Yiddish literature. In the next paragraph he complains about the rejection of religion as a potential source of influence, and reveals yet another problem with the *purim-shpil*—its alleged European nature:

און עס איז נאָר קיינעם ניט איינגעפאַלן צו זוכן די וואָרצלען פֿון ייִדישער טעאַטראַלישקייט ערגעץ אַנדערש ווי אין דעם חושך'דיגן הינטער-געסל. זוכן דעם מקור פֿון דער טעאַטראַלישקייט אין דער ייִדישער רעליגיע, וואָס האָט גע'פּסל'ט דעם טעאַטער. . . איז פֿאַר דעם נייעם דור אַ לאַגישער אומזין. . . די קורצזיכטיקע לאַגיק האָט געמוזט באַטראַכטן דעם ייִדישן טעאַטער ווי אַ צופאַל, אַדער העכסטנס ווי אַ שוואַכע נאַכמאַכונג; ווי אַן אומבאַהאַלפענע איבערקרימעניש פֿון דעם אייראָפּיישן טעאַטער. און די דערשאַקענע "פאַרשונג" אונזערע איז מיט איר דרייַסטקייט דערגאַנגען ניט ווייטער פֿון דעם פורים-שפיל.<sup>143</sup>

<sup>143</sup> A. Mukdoni, *Teater* (New York: A. Mukdoni Yubiley-komitet, 1927), 26-7.

And no one has yet considered the idea of looking for the roots of Yiddish theatricality elsewhere than in the dark back-alley. Looking for the origins of theatricality in the Jewish religion that repudiated the theater. . . is for the new generation an illogical absurdity. . . short-sighted logic had to regard the Jewish theater as a coincidence, or at most as a weak copy; as a helpless imitation of European theater. And our terrified “research” dared not go any further than the *purim-shpil*.

Mukdoni's attacks both “the new generation”—those who look down on Yiddish theater as an inferior reproduction of European theater and the “terrified” Yiddishists who respond to this challenge by inventing their dubious myths of origins. Mukdoni's discourse relies on implied rhetorical questions: Can it indeed be that such a wonderful creature as the Jewish theater was born by accident? Or, alternatively, that it originated in such a low creature—the *purim-shpil*? The direct relation to the holiday of Purim and to Biblical narratives does not suffice to elevate the *purim-shpil* in the eyes of Mukdoni, the critic who was always in search of “pure” Jewish art, both in form and in content. As a passionate Zionist, Mukdoni finally reveals who is to be blamed for the rehabilitation of the “spiritually beggarish” (*Gaystik-kabtsanish*) *purim-shpil*: the Yiddishist movement. In their eagerness to find origins the short-sighted Yiddishist scholars are willing to desert the glorious Jewish past and the aspirations to high art. Instead, they create a history of Jewish culture in the image of its folkish present:

אין אונזער טעאטער, האָט מען ניט געזען דעם שפיץ, וואָס דערגרייכט אין הימל, און מען האָט ניט געזען די טיפע וואָרצלען פֿון אַ ווייטער פֿאַרגאַנגענהייט. האָבן מיר אָנגעהויבן אונזער געשיכטע פֿון פֿורים-שפּיל. ווייטער זיינען אונזערע השגות ניט געגאַנגען. מיר זיינען געווען איבער-גליקלעך ווען מיר האָבן אַנטדעקט, אַז מיט דריי הונדערט יאָר צוריק האָבן עטלעכע ייִדישע לצים געשפּילט קאַמעדיע. האָבן מיר כאָטש אַ שטיקל יחוס-אבות, איז אונזער טעאטער ניט קיין ממזר. דער ייִדישזום, דער קורצזיכטיקער ייִדישזום, וואָס האָט געוואָלט אַדאַפטירן דעם טעאטער און מאַכן אים פֿאַר זיין געזעצלעך קינד, האָט אַליין זיין יחוס-אבות, זיין געשיכטע ניט געקאַנט דערפֿירן ווייטער פֿון דעם פֿורים-שפּיל. דער ייִדישזום האָט אַליין ניט געהאַט דעם מוט און די דרייסיקייט צו פֿאַרקוקן זיך ווייטער, ער האָט זיך אַליין דערקלערט פֿאַרן גייסטיק קינד פֿון דעם היינטיקן "פשוטן פאלק". . . דער ייִדישזום האָט אין דעם פֿורים-שפּיל געזוכט אַ ניצוץ פֿון טעאטראַלישקייט און האָט ניט געזען די טיפע ברייטע טעאטראַלישקייט אין דעם רעליגיעזן לעבן פֿון פֿאַלק. . . דער ייִדישזום הייליגט דאָס צופעליקע, דאָס לאַקאַלע און דאָס עטנאָגראַפישע.

In our theater one failed to see the summit reaching the sky, and the deep roots of a faraway past. We started our history with the *purim-shpil*. Our perception didn't go any further. We were overjoyed when we discovered that three-hundred years ago several Jewish clowns played a comedy. If we have at least a little ancestral pedigree, then our theater is no bastard. Yiddishism, short-sighted Yiddishism, which wanted to adopt theater and make it its legal child, couldn't take its own pedigree and history further than the *purim-shpil*. Yiddishism didn't have the courage to look further, it declared itself a spiritual child of the contemporary “simple folk”. . . Yiddishism sought a spark of theatricality in the *purim-shpil* and didn't see the deep and broad theatricality in the religious life of the people. . . Yiddishism sanctifies the coincidental, the local and the ethnographic.<sup>144</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 28-32.

In what follows Mukdoni offers his own candidate for the origin of Jewish theater, and suggests looking for “sparks of theatricality” in the religious life of the Jewish people, for example in the rituals and prayers of the Passover Seder, of the High Holidays *Yom-kippur*, *Rosh-Hashana*, and of the Sabbath—all endowed with “theatrical glory and deep inner experiences.”<sup>145</sup>

Mukdoni's nationalistic quest for the “purely Jewish” dismisses the *purim-shpil* as too low and detached from the Jewish spiritual heritage, but this was not all he rejected. In fact, throughout his career as a cultural critic, Mukdoni repudiated large parts of modern Jewish art, including respectable figures such as Ya'akov Gordin, as not Jewish enough, and approved only of direct appropriation of Jewish religious symbols and rituals in a Chagallesque manner.<sup>146</sup> Extreme as he may be, Mukdoni nevertheless accurately situates the discovery— or rather the invention – of the *purim-shpil* in its socio-ideological context: a Yiddishist eagerness to establish the origins of Jewish theater in the faraway past, and celebrate the Diasporic, European and folkish nature of the *purim-shpil*. Mukdoni also rightly acknowledges the anxiety of influence which motivates Yiddishist scholars, unwilling to mark Jewish theater as merely derivative. This complex indeed lies behind the passionate quest for pedigree, and behind the “over-joy” at finding evidence (at times rather frail) for a three-hundred-year-old tradition. In fact, Mukdoni the Zionist is no less motivated by the anxiety of non-Jewish influence than his colleagues and rivals, the Yiddishists. Lastly, Mukdoni rightly situates this entire heritage-construction project in the context of a larger interest in the folkish, the local and the ethnographic, and is correct in pointing at the anti-religious bias of Gorin, Schiper and their followers – scholars and artists alike – who rehabilitated the *purim-shpil* as an icon of secular modern Yiddish culture. Indeed, it was no doubt the will to find alternative sources of Jewish culture, outside the religious sphere, and yet rooted in traditional Jewish life, that led to the rise of the *purim-shpil* in interwar Yiddish culture as well as in Yiddishist historiography.

The history of Yiddish theater became in the interwar era a vivid discursive realm, in which fervent Yiddishists and passionate Zionists, certified historians and theater critics, artists, writers, “patriots” of the Yiddish theater and simple theatergoers all shared in the same debate. As early as 1923 Shatzky discerns a rising interest in the history of Yiddish theater, and the next years saw a steady stream of publications on the topic, including the second volume of Schiper's *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame*, published in 1928; Shatzky's monumental *Arkhip far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame* (Archive for the history of Jewish theater and

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 29. Interestingly, in his essay on theater in the YIVO Encyclopedia, theater scholar Michael Steinlauf echos Mukdoni, arguing: “Traditional Jewish life. . . was richly performative. This was obviously true of the complex liturgy of the synagogue, but it also applied to the Jewish life cycle and the Jewish home, where Sabbath meals and Passover Seders were only the more obvious examples of densely detailed, carefully enacted ritual performances.” See Michael Steinlauf, “Theater: An Overview,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/An\\_Overview](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Theater/An_Overview). In his article “Gilgulim” Mukdoni complains about a production of Uriel d'Acosta: “*Dos iz dos gezetslekhe kind fun dem oyberfleklakhn yidishizm, fun der yidishizm, vos hot obgehoybn di yidische geshikhte fun purim-shpil un fun folks-lidl. Azoy iz der radikaler yidishizm ariber tsu ofener asimilatsye.*” (that is the legal child of the shallow Yiddishizm, of the Yiddishizm that began the Jewish history with the purim-shpil and the folk-song. This is how radical Yiddishizm turns into open assimilation). See Mukdoni, *Teater* (New York, 1927), 34.

<sup>146</sup> Only works that engaged directly with Jewish terms and symbols, such as Marc Chagall's shtetl drawings, Goldfadn's nationalistic dramas *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhva*, or Y.L. Peretz's *Di goldene keyt*, were sufficiently Jewish for Mukdoni. See Mukdoni, *Teater*, 32.

Drama), published by YIVO in 1930; and the two chapters dedicated to Jewish folk performance and especially the *purim-shpil* in Yisroel Tsinberg's *Di gesikhte fun der literatur bay yidn* (The History of Literature among the Jews, 1935).<sup>147</sup> That major scholars of Yiddish or Jewish literature such as Max Weinreich, Max Eric and Yisroel Tsinberg integrated Schiper's account of the *purim-shpil* into their literary histories—and perhaps even echoed them in their Shpilman theory—is further evidence of the wide appeal and broad acceptance of the view of the *purim-shpil* as a complex form of Jewish art. Furthermore, the interest in formulating the history of Yiddish theater went beyond the books, articles, and book reviews that appeared in print. From a comment in Shatzky's review of Gorin's book we learn that, as early as 1920, Shatzky was planning to write a history of the Yiddish theater in the nineteenth century. From another fleeting remark in Yisroel Tsinberg's article on the *purim-shpil* published in *Tsukunft* (New York) in 1923 we learn that this prominent scholar of Hebrew and Yiddish literature, author of the monumental *Di geshikhte fun der literatur bay yidn* (1929-1937) also had in mind an entire project dedicated to “Theatrical Performances Among the Jews,” which he never realized.<sup>148</sup> The scarcity of sources documenting the oral tradition of the folk-performance made the historiography of Jewish theater a difficult task, and explains at least in part why not all those who envisioned a history of Jewish theater were able to complete their planned research project.

The quest for the origins of Yiddish theater, an endeavor common to scholars and artists of the interwar era, was a project largely apologetic in nature. It touched upon some of the core complexes of modern Eastern European Jewish life, and relates to Yiddish culture's basic dichotomies of originality vs. imitation, authenticity vs. artificiality, folkish vs. artistic, Yiddish vs. Hebrew, secular vs. religious and low-brow vs. high-brow. Cultural activists and researchers worked hand in hand to promote the idea that Jewish theater had a history – by which they meant a narrative of development within the Jewish sphere. The story told was typically non-linear, interrupted by inner and outer political, religious and economic pressures, yet an element of progress and a clear sense of continuity were always present. The popular *purim-shpil*, rehabilitated as a unique form of art with a complex history of its own, played a major role in this narrative.

While an emphasis was put on the internal Jewish evolution, the influence of non-Jewish drama, at least in ancient times, was never denied. Gorin, Schiper and others enthusiastically explored the mutual relations between the *purim-shpil* of the “Jewish Ghetto” and its European contemporaries, such as the medieval mystery play, the carnival tradition or commedia dell'arte. Influences of Polish or Russian theater on the Yiddish stage, however, were less eagerly explored. At stake was the risk of conceiving modern Yiddish theater as a mere imitator or follower of European drama, with no cultural heritage of its own. For Yiddishists of the interwar

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<sup>147</sup> Thus, in his 1923 review of the first volume of Schiper's *Geshikhte fun yidisher teater-kunst*, Shatzky notices that “In the last few years the history of Jewish/Yiddish theater has evoked interest among a series of cultural historians and simple fans of the Yiddish theater.” See Shatzky, “A naye yidishe teater geshikhte,” 28.

<sup>148</sup> See Yisroel, Tsinberg, *Di gesikhte fun der literatur bay yidn*, Vilnius: Tomor, 1929; Tsinberg, Yisroel, “Purim-shpil in Farsheydene Tsaytn—di Gilgulim fun Akhasveyresh-shpil,” *Tsukunft*, January 1923, 72-76. Tsinberg's remark is mentioned in Shatzky's review of the first volume of Schiper's *History of Jewish Theater and Drama*. See Shatzky, “A naye yidishe teater geshikhte,” 28. Shatzky's *Arkhev far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame* was published by “YIVO / Theater Museum named after Esther-Rokhl Kaminski,” which relates it to yet another historical endeavor from the interwar era, i.e. the “museum” founded by Zigmunt Turkow and Ida Kaminski. See my discussion later on in this chapter.

era the history of Jewish theater was a crucial matter involving national pride. Resisting potential identity bases such as religion or Zionist ideology, Yiddish scholars and cultural activists grounded their Jewish identity in secular culture, and considered any threat to the autonomy of this culture a serious danger.

Mukdoni's was surely not the only one to disapprove of the *purim-shpil's* low-brow and even vulgar nature, and to resist the attempt to establish this folk performance as the roots of Jewish theater. Others, from scholars to community leaders, shared his concerns.<sup>149</sup> Yet despite these objections, the *purim-shpil* did become a key element in the history of Jewish theater. The claim of a continuous and complex tradition of the *purim-shpil*, articulated by Gorin and developed by Schiper, greatly influenced their contemporaries as well as future generations of scholars. To this very day histories of Yiddish and even Jewish theater typically make the Purim play their starting point, and present the *purim-shpiler* – rather than the *badkhn*, the *khazn*, the *magid* or other Jewish folk performers – as the Jewish ur-performer.<sup>150</sup> Rooted in a religious holiday and yet subversive in nature, coarse and yet drawing on the bible and its canonical hermeneutic tradition, ancient and yet part of twentieth-century Eastern European culture, specifically Jewish yet sharing significant attributes with European traditions such as the *Narrenfest* or the carnival, the *purim-shpil* indeed had, and still has, much to offer to narratives of modern Jewish culture.

#### **D. On the Tracks of Goldfadn's Forerunners: Turkow's Appropriation of the *broder zinger***

“Esther-Rokhl was the first who told me about the *broder zinger*, their repertoire, professional ethics and manifold talent,” writes Turkow in his memoirs, bestowing a respectable pedigree on his “romance” with the *broder zinger*.<sup>151</sup> Esther-Rokhl is none other than Turkow's mother-in-law at the time, the renowned Esther-Rokhl (Ida Kaminska's mother) Kaminska (1870–1926), “canonized by adoring audiences as *Di Mame Ester-Rokhl*, the mother of the Yiddish theater.”<sup>152</sup> The legendary actress, recounts Turkow, was also a wonderful storyteller, and conversations with her were for him “a source of useful material about the birth pangs of modern Yiddish drama.”<sup>153</sup> Born in Warsaw in 1896, Turkow had no direct acquaintance with the *broder zinger* tradition, which flourished in the taverns of Galicia in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>154</sup> Only twenty six years older than her son-in-law, Kaminska nevertheless belonged to a completely different era in the short-lived history of Yiddish theater. She, who together with her husband Avrom-Yitskhok Kaminski was one of the pioneers of Yiddish theater, was personally acquainted with “the father of Yiddish theater” Avrom Goldfadn, and a few of the *broder zinger* – universally regarded as Goldfadn's forerunners. By drawing on Kaminska's personal acquaintance and oral transmission, Turkow creates a direct and respectable link

<sup>149</sup> See Ahuva Belkin, *ha-Purim shpil*, 11, 72, 83, 90.

<sup>150</sup> See for example Berkowitz, “Introduction,” *Jewish Theater*, 1-2; Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 1-20.

<sup>151</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 157.

<sup>152</sup> Michael Steinlauf, “Kaminski Family,” in *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*.

[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kaminski\\_Family](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Kaminski_Family). Turkow later divorced Ida Kaminska and married the actress Dina Blumenfeld.

<sup>153</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 156

<sup>154</sup> According to a broader definition of the *broder zinger*, performers of this kind could still be found up until the First World War.

between himself and the famous Jewish tavern singers. This connection exceeds the personal level to become a genealogy of Yiddish theater from the groundbreaking *broder zinger* in the nineteenth century to the founding generation of Esther Rokhl around the turn of the century and to himself, a major director and actor in interwar Poland.

Paradoxically, Kaminska's rich knowledge of the early Yiddish stage makes Turkow realize that one cannot rely on personal sources alone. Upon Kaminska's death, he recalls, "It became clear to me that in order to know our theater-history one needs to have a theater museum that will gather all the materials left, catalogue them and learn them systematically."<sup>155</sup> Following this vision of systematic research and public display Turkow and his wife Ida Kaminska launched their "theater museum in the name of Esther Rokhl" on the thirty-day anniversary (*shloyshim*) of the great actress's death in 1926. The thirty-year-old Turkow, already a known active actor, director and producer, now took yet another role on himself – that of a historian and curator of the Yiddish stage. With the idea of a permanent exhibition still a faraway dream, the project took the form of a large collection of documents related to Yiddish theater, including plays and production programs, photographs and recordings.<sup>156</sup>

Inspired by Kaminska's stories and motivated by his new position as an archivist of the Yiddish stage, Turkow was eager to further explore the history of the *broder zinger*. In 1926, when the opportunity of performing in Brody came up, Turkow embarked on a quest for the remnants of the *broder zinger*. No one, however, in the town of Brody seemed even to have heard of the singers who had allegedly originated there, and the self-appointed historical expedition ended in failure. Twelve years later, a similar pursuit of the legendary performers, this time in the town of Lemberg (Lwów), was much more successful. In his *Conversations on Theater* Turkow recounts the story of this expedition:

מיר האָבן זיך געלאָזט איבער דער שטאָט זאַמלען מאַטעריאַלן, דאָקומענטן און פּאַקטן וועגן די "בראָדער" און טאַקע געפונען אַן אמתער אוצר פאַר אונדזער אַרבעט. מיר האָבן אפילו אָנגעטראָפּן אויף אַ זקן מיטן נאָמען ווייץ, אַ לעצטער מאָהיקאַנער פון די אַמאָליקע "בראָדערזינגער", וועלכער האָט נאָך געדענקט פאַרשידענע לידער פון זייער רעפערטואַר. דער עיקר אָבער האָט מיך דערפרייט אויסצוגעפינען אַ שענק, וווּ מען פלעגט נאָך פון צייט צו צייט זינגען און שפילן לויט דער טראַדיציע פון די אמתע "בראָדערזינגער".

We let loose on the city collecting materials, documents and facts about the "Broder" and indeed found a true trove for our project. We even met an old man named Vayts, the last Mohican of the *broder zinger* of long ago, who still remembered various songs from their repertoire. But the main thing that made me happy was to find an inn, where from time to time people still sang and played according to the tradition of the real "*broder zinger*."

Why was Turkow more successful in Lemberg in 1938 than in Brody in 1926? Was it indeed, as he humorously explained, because "A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country"

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid. 156.

<sup>156</sup> The collection, never systematically catalogued or set in its own building was deposited in YIVO, and in 1940 moved with YIVO to its permanent location in New York, where it is located till this very day. Indeed, the fate of Esther-Rokhl Theater Museum is similar to that of the writing on Yiddish theater in general, which typically involved dedication, deep love and fervent ideologies on the side of its creators, but, remaining associative and anecdotal, failed to create an objective body of knowledge. Turkow's *Shmuesn vegn teater*, mixing personal memories with amateur historiography, is no exception to the rule.

(*Nishto kayn Novi in eygenem land*)?<sup>157</sup> Or did the economic crisis, as Turkow argues, make people in Lemberg find new sources of living, including these “old” tavern performances? Above all, the favorable outcome probably had more to do with Turkow modifying his initial concept of the *broder zinger*. Whereas in 1926 Turkow insisted on finding traces of the original singers from the town of Brody who gave the style its name, by 1938 he broadened his definition to include any singers who performed in bars and inns in the “*broder zinger* style,” i.e. with lighthearted songs, often accompanied by illustrative gestures and costumes. Moreover, the Turkow of 1938 was better prepared for his research and more determined to find the *broder zinger*. He didn't just happen to be in town for another purpose, but was rather there with the express purpose of gathering materials for a theater production he was planning. The production, entitled *Di broder zinger*, marked Turkow's new direction in his revived VYKT theater (Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater—*Varshaver Yidisher kunst-teater*), which aimed to return to the early and allegedly uncorrupted Yiddish theater. No longer in Warsaw, where the theater was based in its early stages in the years 1924-1925 and 1926-1928, the revived VYKT opened in Lemberg in 1938, and performed successfully until the German attack on Warsaw in September, 1939. Whereas the earlier VYKT had been characterized by Turkow as “a European theater in the Yiddish language,” the later VYKT strove to “strengthen Jewish national consciousness.”<sup>158</sup> Dedicated to the idea of “*folkshtimlekh*” theater and striving to hit the balance between the cheerful and the accessible on the one hand to the innovative and artistic on the other, Turkow by 1938 envisioned a return to the ostensibly pure beginnings of the Yiddish stage.<sup>159</sup> From the vantage point of the highly popular and multifaceted interwar Yiddish theater, he imagined the early period of the Yiddish stage as its golden era, free from the corrupting influences of *shund* – characterized by wild plagiarism, the use of Germanized language (“*daytshmerizm*”), and banal melodramatic plots, which derived in part from the American Yiddish theater, with its commercial pressure and star system. Yitskhok Grudberg-Turkow, Zigmunt Turkow's brother and an actor, director and playwright in his own right, describes the atmosphere and ideology around the renewed VYKT in the following manner:

די שענסטע תקופה אין זיגמונטס לעבן. . . איז געווען דאָס באַנייען דעם "וויקט" ערב דער צווייטער וועלט-מלחמה. דאָס "וויקט" איז געווען זיגמונטס לעבנס-ווערק. . . אונטער דער השפעה פון די אַרומיקע פּאָליטישע וואַלקנס האָט זיך געשטאַרקט דער נאַציאָנאַלער-ייִדישער מאַמענט אין זיינע פּלענער און ארויס-זאָגן. "מיר מוזן טראָגן פּרייד, בטחון און גלויבן מיט אונדזער רעפּערטואַר. מיט אונדזער טעאַטער דאַרפן מיר גיַנסטיק שטאַרקן דעם ייִדישן מאַסן-מענטש"—האַט ער מיר געשריבן. ער האָט אויפּגעהערט צו זוכן פּיעסן אינעם וועלט-רעפּערטואַר—נישט-ייִדישע פּיעסן האָט ער אין לעצטן "וויקט" בלויז באַנייט פּונעם אַלטן רעפּערטואַר—און אַלץ געבויט אויף אַריגינעל-ייִדישן, פּאָלקסטימלעך-ייִדישן. ער האָט באַוווּסטיגט געבויט דעם רעפּערטואַר אויף געזאַנג און פּרייד—אַנטקעגנגעשטעלט עס די געשמאַקלאַזע "געזענגע און טענצע".

<sup>157</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 157-158.

<sup>158</sup> See Mordkhe Shner (Shinar), “Varshever yidisher kunst-teater (‘VYKT’),” in *Yidisher teater in Eyrope tsvishn beyde velt-milkhomes*, ed. Itsik Manger (New York, Altveltlekhen kultur kongres, 1968), 1:68-69, quoted in Mirosława M. Bulat, “Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*. [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Warsaw\\_Yiddish\\_Art\\_Theater](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Warsaw_Yiddish_Art_Theater). See also Sandrow, *Wagabond Stars*, 335-336.

<sup>159</sup> Turkow-Grudberg writes that in this period Zigmunt Turkow “stopped looking for plays in the world repertoire. . . and built everything on original Jewish, folkish-Yidish,” (*Er hot oyfgehert tsu zukhn pyesn inem velt-repertuar. . . un alts geboyt af originel-yidishn, folkstimlekh-yidishn*). See Yitskhok Turkow-Grudberg, *Zigmunt Turkow* (Tel-Aviv: Orly, 1970), 212-213.

און פון דער צווייטער זייט: נישט צו לאנגווייליגן דעם עולם, אַלע קרייזן פון עולם, מיט בלויז גערעדטן וואָרט. זײַן דעוויז איז געווען: אַ טעאַטער פאַר אַלע, אַ פּאַלקס-טעאַטער פון הויכער קינסטלערישער מדרגה.<sup>160</sup>

The best time in Zigmunt's life. . . was reviving the VYKT on the eve of the Second World War. The VYKT was Zigmunt's life's work. . . . Under the influence of the gathering political clouds, the national-Jewish element in his plans and sayings became stronger. "We must bring happiness, confidence and belief with our repertoire. With our theater we must spiritually strengthen the Yiddish person Of the masses [*masn-mentsh*]," he wrote to me. He no longer looked for plays from the world-repertoire—and built everything on original-Jewish, folkish-Yiddish.<sup>161</sup> He consciously built the repertoire on song and joy—positioning it against the tasteless "singing and dancing." And on the other hand: not to bore the public, all sectors of the public, with the speaking word alone. His formula was: a theater for all, a folk-theater of the highest artistic level.

As Turkow-Grudberg recounts, while the new VYKT revived a few earlier productions from the Yiddish and European theater, Turkow's heart was given over to his three new productions, all rooted in the beginnings of modern Yiddish theater.<sup>162</sup> These included two of Goldfadn's biblical operettas *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhba*, both with clear national tones, which by 1938 had become classics of Yiddish theater, and his own project, *Di broder zinger*, an operetta based on the story of the legendary tavern singers, written by the lyricist Shloyme Pryzament and composed by Yisroel Ashendorf. While *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhba* carried the prestigious stamp of "Goldfadn" on them and were presented in the years 1937-8 by the acclaimed *Goset* (Moscow State Yiddish Theater), Turkow's *Broder zinger* was a more risky production, and constituted an attempt to go further back in time, to the lesser-known pre-Goldfadn era. In all three productions Turkow sought to create a theatrical style rooted in Jewish tradition, "a kind of contemporary *folksshpil* (folk play)—a synthesis of drama, comedy, and operetta, interweaving serious and comic elements, music, song, and dance."<sup>163</sup>

Turkow was extremely enthusiastic about his new productions, and worked, as Turkow-Grudberg recounts, with "a stormy flow of energies," sweeping his team along with him. He spent nine months in preparation for *Shulamis*, which premiered on December 25, 1938. *Di Broder Zinger*, which followed shortly afterwards, was also based on a long development

<sup>160</sup> Yitskhok Turkow-Grudberg, *Zigmunt Turkow*, 212-213

<sup>161</sup> In the Yiddish original the same word appears here twice: "yidish," which can mean either Yiddish or Jewish, depending on the context. I chose to translate the first appearance here as Jewish, in accordance with Grudberg-Turkow's national direction, and the second as Yiddish, since it appears in conjunction with the word *folkstimlekh* (folkish), usually associated with Yiddish culture.

<sup>162</sup> Among the productions revived: Sholem Asch's *Onkl Mozes*, Sholem Aleychem's *Blondzhene Shtern* and Leonid Andre'ev's *Rasskaz o semi poveshennykh* (*The Seven Hanged*). See Grudberg-Turkow, *Zigmunt Turkow*, 214. Turkow's first productions at the *Tsentrāl Teater* in the early twenties were critically acclaimed productions of European works, such as Molière's *L'Avare* (*The Miser*; 1921), Gogol's *Revizor* (*The Inspector General*; 1922). Yiddish theater, Turkow insisted, must not confine itself to the "Jewish street" but should bring the entire world to its audiences. Alongside these classic work Turkow also directed Asch's *Motke ganev* (1923), Sh. An-ski's *Der dibek*; *Shloyme Ettinger's Serkele* (1923) and Mendele Moykher-Sforim's *Der priziv* (1923). See Miroslawa M. Bulat, "Turkow Family," YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Turkow\\_Family](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Turkow_Family).

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

process, and combined original lyrics and tunes with findings from his Lemberg field research. For Turkow, producing a musical show about the *broder zinger* which was based, at least partly, on their repertoire was the fulfillment of an old dream—to learn more about the roots of Yiddish theater and reconnect with them. The actor and producer was overjoyed when he found in Lemberg a few unemployed old actors who in their youth had sang with the “original” *broder zinger*, and who now, “in times of crisis and unemployment, remembered their old profession and went back to the wine cellars.” These shows, he felt, opened a window for him and his team into the performances of the *broder zinger*, who, according to Turkow's own historiography, had disappeared by the time of World War I.

Both Turkow's 1938 *broder zinger* production and his historical account in the 1950 *Conversations on Theater* are based on the assumed continuity between the “last *broder zinger*” he managed to find in an impoverished Lemberg in 1938 and the legendary singers of the nineteenth century. Turkow's personal impressions of the performances he attended constitute a key component in his historical narrative, and especially in his vivid image of the “folkish” environment in which the *broder zinger* performed: the cellar smelling of liquor and beer, full of the thick smoke of cigars and pipes, resonant with the sounds of conversation and drunken laughter. Above all, Turkow lingers on the simple audience, including bakers, water-carriers and cobblers, and their enthusiastic “thunder of shouts” when the bell rings and they “welcome their beloved [actors].”

While not a faithful image of the historical *broder zinger*, Turkow's account probably depicts accurately the Lemberg singers he encountered in 1938, and more importantly, sheds light on the way he perceived his production, as a response to the urgent needs of the simple people, offering the oppressed and poverty-stricken Polish Jews of 1939 “authentic Jewish entertainment” and national pride. Turkow regards the *broder zinger* as the quintessential folkish Jewish performers – more *folkstimlekh* even than the renowned *badkhn*, who originated much earlier in Jewish history. The *Broder Singer*, explains Turkow, was more available than the *Badkhn*, who performed only on special occasions. Moreover, audiences for the *Broder Singer* were more homogenous and their responses were therefore more authentic, less governed by limiting social conventions. In the case of the *badkhn*, writes Turkow, “the primitive listeners didn't always feel comfortable in a foreign neighborhood, often among the dressed up rich folk and the scholars (“*Oysgeputste gevirim un lamdonim*”), who felt obliged to keep up appearances (*haltn fason*).” The *Broder Singer*, on the other hand, “came down” to his audience, to the taverns and wine cellars in which they enjoyed themselves with a glass of liquor after a hard day's work. In those “*heykish*” (homey) venues, Turkow expounds:

מען האָט זיך געקאָנט דערלויבן אויף אַ צווישנרוף, אויף מיטזינגען, אויף אויסצוביטן זיך אַ באַליבט לידל, און דער זינגער האָט עס זיי טאַקע פאַרטיילט מיט דער ברייטער האַנט, אבי דער גריינצער איז געפאַלן אין טעלערל. דער עולם האָט תיכף דערפילט אין אים זייערס אַן אייגענעם עמך-מענטש, וועלכער זינגט אויסשליסלעך פאַר זיי און זיי, עמך טאַקע, קאָנען אים געבן חיונה אַן דער לאַסקע פון די מיוחסים און גבירים. דאָס האָט זיי אימפּאָנירט, צוגעגעבן תקיפות. . .

One could allow oneself to interject, to sing along, to ask for a favorite song, and the singer indeed handed them out generously, as long as the *graytser* (a coin) fell into the plate. The audience immediately felt the singer to be one of their own, a simple man, who sang just for them, and they, indeed simple people (*amkho*), gave him subsistence,

without the favors of the aristocrats and the rich. This made an impression on them, added strength. . . (160)

More mythological than historical, Turkow reconstructs here the audience of *Di Broder Zinger* as “*amkho*,” the simple people, the manual laborers, who for Turkow of the late thirties signified the folk. While this may have been the case in the wine-cellars of impoverished Jewish Lemberg of 1938, it was less so in nineteenth century Galicia, where this kind of entertainment was open mainly to the middle-class. This, in fact, is why Brody, a commercial center on the border of Russia and Austro-Hungary which attracted many middle-class merchants, was the hometown of the *broder zinger*. While Turkow is well aware of this history, which he recounts himself only a few paragraphs later, he nonetheless insists on characterizing the audience of the *broder zinger* as *amkho*. Moreover, in his urge to present the *broder zinger* as a folkish phenomenon, Turkow describes the performers as well in the same manner. Accurately recounting that the early songs sung by the Broder Singer were composed by Vevl Zbarzher, Elyokum Tsunzer, Yitskhok Yoyel Linetski and Avrom Goldfadn, Turkow nevertheless refers to these writers as “popular folk-lyricists” (*populere folksdikhter*), overlooking the fact that these were all highly educated people, motivated by a strong *maskilic* ideology.<sup>164</sup> Like Yiddish socialist critics of the thirties, Turkow regards even the *maskilic* songs of the *broder zinger* as expressing folkish resistance to the arrogance of the rich and the learned. In his production *The broder zinger*, as well as in his *Conversations on Theater* Turkow emphasized this so-called folkish stance of the *purim-shpil* by choosing to perform or quote songs from the repertoire of the *broder zinger* that mock the Hasidim and the upper-classes. Turkow thus combines in the same breath anti-Hasidic with anti-aristocratic, thus ignoring both the elitist nature of the *maskilic* movement, and the large support for the Hasidic movement in the nineteenth-century among “the folk” on whose behalf the *broder zinger* allegedly speak. He thus manipulates the historical facts in order to reconstruct the *broder zinger* as the ideal of a folkish theater, which speaks to the folk and on its behalf.

Reclaiming the *broder zinger* as a national icon, Turkow presents their art as folkish, authentic and accessible—an alternative to both bourgeois theater and commercial mass culture as represented in *Shund* theater. He, who in his early career strove to educate Yiddish theatergoers through world classics, now admires the idea of accommodating the spectators. In this sense, the *broder zinger* serve as his model, as their large popularity, explains Turkow, “came from their addressing the taste and mentality of the masses.”<sup>165</sup> The *broder zinger* thus come to signify immediate and personal contact with their audiences, the simple *folks-mentshn*, and a direct expression of their interests and concerns. This, for Turkow of the late thirties as well as of the fifties, constitutes a true ideal – on the theatrical level as well as on the social and national ones.

In addition to their *folkstimlekhkayt*, the *broder zinger's* appeal is also based on their pivotal role in the history of Jewish theater, which Turkow sums up as “creating an audience for the secular Yiddish theater and the first professional actor for it.”<sup>166</sup> This, indeed, is hardly Turkow's discovery, as the *broder zinger* are often regarded as Goldfadn's direct precursors. It is a well-known and often quoted “fact” that Goldfadn's first performance—an unsuccessful

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<sup>164</sup> Turkow, *Shmuesn*, 161.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

recitation of a poem he wrote—took place in a beer-garden in which *broder zinger* used to perform, and that he recruited his first actors from among them.<sup>167</sup> Turkow, however, enhances the significance of Goldfadn's alleged forerunners, and in *Conversations on Theater* recounts their story as a narrative of progress – indeed the complete history of Yiddish theater in its embryonic form. According to this narrative, the solo performances of “folk-songs” by Zbarzher, Linetski and others in the late eighteen eighties “quickly turned into duets, that enabled the broadening of the genre, giving it the character of a theater-performance,” in which the songs were usually framed within an introduction in prose and a little dance that served as the show's closure.<sup>168</sup> Gradually, according to Turkow, the ensembles grew in number, to trios and even larger groups, which eventually even included women— a significant sign of modern theater in Turkow's view – and thus the performance turned into “real” theater. The performers, who started out as singers, had to adjust themselves to the developing forms of the show, and with time learned how to tell a story in prose or dance, and improvise a verse or an entire scene.<sup>169</sup> Turkow adds, “with the success of the *broder zinger* their repertoire also grew. They would play sketches, farces, comedies, accompanied of course with suitable songs and ending with a happy little dance.”<sup>170</sup>

In his operetta the *Broder zinger*, in a homage to the tradition of the early *broder zinger* and the early Goldfadn theater, where male actors played the roles of old women and witches, Turkow played the role of a “*bobe*” (a grandma or an old lady). In fact, this was the only new production in the revived VYKT in which Turkow himself played a role. And yet, in spite of Turkow's popularity as an actor, “whose name used to entice the audience into the theater,” and regardless of his appealing cross-dressing, the show was a failure.<sup>171</sup> The audience who admired classics and adored melodramas, flowed in large numbers to see *Shulamis*, but was less impressed by the staged revival of the pioneers of Yiddish theater. This can probably be explained by the novelty of the production, a musical comedy where the plot served only as a loose framework for the songs and to the play's theme. Not too many among his potential audiences regarded the *broder zinger* as a cornerstone of Jewish theater. For most Yiddish theatergoers, the *broder zinger* signified neither the pure origins of the Yiddish stage nor an ideal of the folkishness, but rather old-fashioned popular entertainment – that is, if they had heard of them at all. As Turkow himself admits, the *broder zinger* came into the world just as unnoticed as they disappeared.<sup>172</sup> Turkow's attempt to rehabilitate the *broder zinger* and recreate them as cultural icons may have taken place at the wrong time. Enduring considerable economic and political pressures, Yiddish theatergoers on the eve of the Second World War enjoyed the escapist consolation of biblical or rabbinic tales of Jewish heroism, such as *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhba*, especially as staged by the renowned father of Yiddish theater. They appreciated less the effort to broaden the realm of Jewish cultural heritage, to reconstruct the story about the alleged origins of Yiddish theater, and to renew Yiddish theater itself.

The fourth performance of the renewed VYKT was planned to be a staging of the sacrifice of Isaac (*Akeydas Yitskhok*), one of the most common plays in the *purim-shpil* tradition. The planned production marked yet another attempt to return to the sources of Yiddish theater – more directly than in Turkow's 1926 staged *purim-shpil*, framed within Mendele's *Der priziv*. It is probably no coincidence that in this era in Polish Jewish life Turkow chose to produce a Purim play based on a mythological story of trial and near sacrifice, rather than on the carnivalesque story of the Scroll of Esther. Moreover,

<sup>167</sup> Oyslender and Finkin, *A. Goldfadn*, 36-32.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>171</sup> Yitskhok Turkow, *Zigmunt Turkow*, 218. Lyricist Shloyme Pryzament, on the other hand, claims that the show was a success, but one is more likely to believe Yitskhok Turkow. See Shlomo Pryzament, *Broder zinger* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1960), 35-39.

<sup>172</sup> Turkow, *Shumesn*, 159.

from the failure of *Di broder zinger* and the success of *Shulamis* and *Bar Kokhba* he may have also learned a lesson about the audience's preference for moralistic tales. Be the reason as it may, Turkow was never able to realize his plans, as the Nazi occupation of Poland brought an end to his VYKT theater. *Di broder zinger* thus marked the last stage in Turkow's ongoing struggle to reconnect with the pure roots of Yiddish culture and to appropriate them for the spiritual needs of contemporary Eastern European Jewish culture.

“The *broder zinger*,” Turkow summarizes his discussion in *Conversations on Theater*, “disappeared unnoticed from Jewish life, leaving a longing for the Yiddish word and the Yiddish song.”<sup>173</sup> He then concludes the chapter and the whole book with the finale of his *broder zinger* production—a song praising “the strength of Jewish song,” which surely does not belong to the repertoire of the legendary performers but was rather written for Turkow's nostalgic show. The longing for the Yiddish song can be attributed to Turkow's own quest to discover and reclaim an allegedly authentic Jewish culture. Turkow strove to educate the Eastern European Jewish “masses,” as he refers to them, in an accessible and unpatronizing way. Making these people reconnect with what he viewed as their rich cultural legacy became for him, as for historians and other cultural activists of the time, a national task. For Turkow, as for many of his fellow artists and historians in interwar Eastern Europe, true Jewish cultural heritage had to be re-imagined and constructed as secular, communicative and folkish. Jewish popular performance—from the *purim-shpil* to the *broder zinger*, came to signify all of these values.

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 176.

### Chapter Three: Appropriation in Times of Revolution Intercultural Dialogue in Moyshe Broderzon's Poetry and Drama

#### A. The Portrait of the Artist as a Folk Performer: "Ikh – a purim-shpiler..." as a Poetic Manifesto

איך – א פורים-שפילער...

איך בין א פורים-שפילער היינט  
און כ'שפאָס פון מיינע פֿריינד און פֿיינט!  
און פֿון די קיילעכדיקע מאַסקע-לעכער  
פֿליט איצט מיין לאַכעדיקער בליק אַרויס -  
אַריבער יעדן פּאַלאַץ, יעדן קליינעם הויז,  
און פֿלאַטערט-אויף, און פֿליגל העכער,  
אַריבער ימען, טייך און טעכער,  
און פֿליקט מיט דערנער יעדע רויז,  
און קיצלט ביי די זייטן יעדן טרוים-פֿאַרשוועכער,  
און גיט דעם שטן יין-נסך, בראַנד אַ פֿולן בעכער:  
- היי, אַלטער שוטה, מיט די אויגן רויטע,  
טרינק און זינג -  
"המן איז אין דר'ערד  
און מרדכי - אויפן פֿערד!"  
אין פֿרעמדע גלעקער קלינג,  
אַז אויפֿשטיין זאָלן אַלע טויטע!"

#### I – a purim-shpiler...

I am a *purim-shpiler* today  
And I make fun of friends and foes!  
And through the round mask holes  
My laughing glance flies off now –  
Over every palace, every little house,  
And flutters upwards, wings higher,  
Over seas and rivers,  
And plucks thorns of each and every rose,  
And tickles the sides of everyone who dishonors dreams,  
And gives Satan idol wine, a chalice full of fire:  
Hey, old fool with your red eyes,  
Drink and sing –  
"Haman is going to hell,  
And Mordechai on the horse!"  
Ring the foreign bells,  
So the dead shall rise again!<sup>174</sup>

<sup>174</sup> Moyshe Broderzon, "Ikh—a purim-shpiler..." *Yung Yidish*, 1 (March 1919 [Purim 5679]), 5-7. The English translation of

The declarative first-person voice of “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*,” together with its central place in the first issue of the avant-garde art journal *Yung yidish* (Young Yiddish), published in Łódź in 1919, in the aftermath of the First World War and the Bolshevik revolution, mark this poem as a manifesto, in the radical spirit of the time. In adherence to the period's modernist ethos, the speaker in this meta-poetic proclamation— of which the lines quoted above are only the opening – defines himself not as an introverted poet or a pensive intellectual; rather, he is marked as a rebel and an activist, challenging the imaginary world of devils and dead souls, and as the reader gradually realizes – contemporary reality. Less in accordance with the conventions of the time, however, is the poet's choice to assign the role of the revolutionary poet to the typically ignoble Jewish performer—the *purim-shpiler*.

Why does Moyshe Broderzon, the author of “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” and *Yung yidish*'s main founder, construct the *purim-shpiler* as the key figure for his pioneering poetic manifesto? What role does the folk performer play in the framework of the poem's meta-poetics and elsewhere in Broderzon's oeuvre? How does the function of the speaker here differ from or resonate with other imaginings and appropriations of the *purim-shpil* tradition, and of Jewish folk performance in general? And what is the relation between Broderzon's appropriation of the *purim-shpiler* and other modernist European reclamations of folk performance? Through a close reading of “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” and an analysis of *A khasenke* and *Lilisl*, two lyrical plays Broderzon published in the following years, I strive to address all these questions.<sup>175</sup> Reading these works in the context of author's artistic development, I explore the remarkable encounter between European modernism and the figure of the infamous Jewish folk performer.

The lines cited above constitute the opening of a rather long poem that occupies over a third of the newly founded publication – three of its eight pages.<sup>176</sup> The journal, entitled *Yung-yidish: lider in vort un tseykhenung* (Young Yiddish: Poems in Word and Drawing), redefines the word “poem” to include both textual and visual arts, proclaiming a field of common creativity, a collaboration between writers and painters/graphic designers. While other Yiddish modernist publications of the period combined literature with the visual arts as well, *Yung yidish* stood out in the extensive place it gave to the latter and the explicit meaning of visual images as poems.<sup>177</sup> The journal's first issue included seven

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the poem, (unless stated otherwise) is Kathryn Hellerstein's, with amendments made by me. Hellerstein's translation is taken from her article “Beyond the Purim-shpil: Reinventing the Scroll of Esther in Modern Yiddish Poems,” in *Culture Front: Representing in Eastern Europe*, ed. Gabriella Safran and Benjamin Nathans (Philadelphia, PA.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 241-266. Hellerstein discusses four Yiddish poems written in interwar Poland (by Broderzon, Miriam Ulinover, Roza Yakubovitch and Manger), and defines the rising interest in retelling the Biblical scroll of Esther as part of a “movement back to the sources,” which allowed poets to construct “a dramatic personae” through which they could “speak about difficult issues for Jews in politically complex time. “ and to “reconnect their work to the traditional texts of Eastern European Jews, from which modern Yiddish writing has torn itself, and thus reaffirm the Jewish nature of secular Yiddish culture.” (ibid. 241). My analysis differs from that of Hellerstein in that I emphasize the folkish and performative nature of the appropriated texts. In other words, I regard Broderzon and Manger poems as reclaiming the *purim-shpil* rather than the *Scroll of Esther*. Moreover, whereas Hellerstein argues that “these poets stepped outside the conventions of the poetry of their day” and that “this movement back to the sources seemed unfashionable,” I contend that from its very start, secular Yiddish culture appropriated a variety of traditional sources, and that there was never really a contradiction between contemporary secular Yiddish culture and reclaiming Jewish texts.

<sup>175</sup> See “Lilisl” in *Varshever Shriftn* (Warsaw: Literatn-klub, 1926-1927) 27<sup>th</sup> issue (each issue is this 958 page volume is numbered separately. *Lilisl* can be found on page 439 of the volume); *A khasneke* (Łódź: Yung yidish, 1920).

<sup>176</sup> The next and last two issues of *Yung yidish* (Łódź: Farlag yung yidish) were significantly longer [issue 2-3: 16 pages, issue 4-5-6: 28 pages]. The number of participants also rose – from 6 in the first issue to 11 in the second one and to 21 in the third and last one, which was also the first to include artists who weren't residents of Łódź, among them Uri Tsevi Grinberg, Melekh Ravitsh and Mark Chagall. The first issue carries the date Purim 5769 (Purim in the Jewish year 5769 [1918/1919] was celebrated on March 16-17), and was published in 400 copies. See *Yung Yidish* 1 (March 1919 [Purim 5769]); *Yung Yidish* 2-3 (April 1919 [Peysakh 5769]); *Yung Yidish* 4-5-6 (December 1919 [Kislev 5770]).

<sup>177</sup> A partial list of Yiddish publications of the period which combine literature and visual arts includes *Eygens* (One's own, Kiev: Kiever Farlag, 1918-1920, edited by Dovid Bergelson and Der Nister) and *Baginen* (Dawn, Kiev: Alukraynisher

graphic works (linocuts), created by four visual artists (Yankl Adler, Yitskhok Broynier, Marek Szwarc and Henekh Barczyński), and only three poems by two writers—Broderzon and Yitskhok Kacnelson (Katzenelson), who was the leading poet in Łódź at the time, the eldest and least revolutionary of the group. The slim volume, assembled in as little as one week, was published in March 1919, only three months after Broderzon's return to Łódź from Moscow.<sup>178</sup> Though humble in scope, the ambitious publication marked the simultaneous public debut of a periodical, an avant-garde art group and a publishing house.<sup>179</sup>

As was the custom in modernist publications of the time, the journal opened with a manifesto in prose. *Yung yidish* pronounced the current period chaotic (“*a shotrumisher toyu vavoyu*”) and painful, and declared itself as the God-blessed guardian of Truth, Art, Beauty, Yiddish, and the Biblical language of the prophets—all measures to ward off the devastating state of the world:

און מיר, מיר די בראשית'דיקע—מיר גייען אויף דער וואַך און פויקן אויס דעם שטורם פון הויה.  
מיט אונדז איז גאָט, דער גאָט פון אייביקייט, שיינקייט און גרויסן אמת! ער העלפֿט אונדז וועקן נשמות פון  
הינערפלעט—צו דעם ליכטיקן טאָג, צום טאָג פון תכלת און פורפור.  
פֿאַר דער קונסט!  
פֿאַר דעם יונגן שענעם יידיש!  
און פֿאַר דער אייביקער שפראַך פֿון נביאים!  
אַן שיינקייט קען די וועלט ניט געמאַלט זיין!

And we, we the primeval, we go on guard and drum out the storm of Existence. With us is God, the God of Eternity, Beauty and the great Truth! He helps us wake up souls from lethargy – to the light of day, to a day of blue and crimson.

For Art!

For the young beautiful Yiddish!

And for the eternal language of the prophets!

Without Beauty the world cannot be imagined [literally, painted]!<sup>180</sup>

Young and yet linked to mythological Creation, invoked through the adjective “*breyshesdik*” (primeval and also related to the book of Genesis, *breyshes* in Yiddish, and to original creativity), the group of artists who speak here collectively as “we” confronts the chaotic and muddled post world

literarisher komitet, yidishe sektsye, 1919, edited by A. Litvak), and later on *Khalyastre* (The Gang, Warsaw: Farlag Khalyaster, 1922, and Paris: Lachenal and Ritter, 1924, edited by Perets Markish) and *Albatros* (Warsaw and Berlin, [s.n.] 1923-4, edited by Uri Tsvi Grinberg).

<sup>178</sup> The first volume was prepared in one week according to Henekh Kohn's testimony. See Henekh Kohn, “Moyshe Broderzon,” *Morgn-zhurnal*, 3 Jan. 1957, quoted in Rozier, *Moyshe Broderzon*, 86.

<sup>179</sup> Besides the journal and the publishing house the group also planned a joint exhibition with the Polish avant-garde groups *Zdrój* and *Bunt* that never took place. See *Yung Yidish* 4-5-6 (December 1919 [Kislev 5770]), 2. See also Gilles Rosier, “Yung-yidish,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Yung-yidish>. Despite its fast growth, *Yung yidish*, like many other modernist journals of the time, turned out to be short-lived. Only three issues were published, in March, April and December 1919. A fourth issue, which was supposed to be dedicated to the Biblical figure of Ruth, was never printed. The publishing house *Yung yidish* remained active two years longer, and published mainly Broderzon's own poems and playlets. *Yung yidish's* list of publications includes five playlets by Broderzon: *A khasenke* (A Wedding, 1920), *Tkhiyes hameysim* (The Resurrection of the Dead; 1921), *Di malke Shvo* (The Queen of Sheba; 1921), *Shney-tants* (Snow Dance; 1921), *Tsunglungen* (Tongues-lungs; 1921), a volume of poems titled *Perl oxfn bruk* (Pearls on the Cobblestones; 1920), and a long poem, also by Broderzon, *Shvarts-shabes* (Black Sabbath; 1921). The publishing house also issued Kacnelson's poetic play *Fatima* (1920), and Chaim Król's volume of poems *Loybn* (Praise; 1920).

<sup>180</sup> *Yung Yidish* 1 (March 1919), 1. Translation is mine. Z.S.

war I world. While in the previous passage the writers complain that the “volcanic” events of history make it hard to hear the “new primeval quietness and eternity” (*naye breyshis shtilkayt un eybikayt*), here they respond to the harsh circumstances in the years following world war I and the October revolution by making even more noise, as they “drum out the storm of Existence” (*poykn oys dem shturm fun havaye*)—a loud, provocative intervention in the public sphere, a vivid metaphor for the group's art. As an instrument of rhythm rather than melody, the drum designates the very origin of music, the beat, associated with tribal, African rhythms, and is thus well suited, in the view of the period, for “we the primeval.”<sup>181</sup> Moreover, rather than the usual word for drumming, *poykn*, the poet uses here the verb *oyspoykn*: to “drum out,” namely to drum out the whole beat, which also means to disclose a secret. The double meaning of “*oyspoykn*,” alongside the lofty *loshn-koydesh* philosophized term “*havayae*” (Existence) intensifies the connection between drumming as a loud or even militant protest and the mystical essence of reality, between creation and creativity.<sup>182</sup>

The humorous, light-hearted and clearly modernist spirit of the speaker in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” may seem at first glance far from the high seriousness and romanticist terms used in the official manifesto of *Yung yidish* that was published alongside it. A closer look, however, reveals similarities between the position of the *purim-shpiler* in the poem and that of the collective “we” of the unsigned manifesto. Drumming, the expressive force of the manifesto's voice, is associated with the traditional performance of a *purim-shpiler*, who would typically be accompanied by a group of Klezmer that includes a fiddle, a double bass, and a drum. Moreover, although not mentioned directly in the poem, drums are alluded to by the onomatopoeic “*trakh-ta-ra-rakh*” (translated by Kathryn Hellerstein as “crash-kerr-ra-rash!”) which appears twice in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*,” serving in both cases as transition from the poem's depiction of the grim reality of need, hunger and pain into fantastic utopian images of a peaceful and happy world:<sup>183</sup>

און לאך! אַנציינערדיקער, טרוקנביינערדיקער, לאך:  
 די פרומע קדושים און די חושים-פרושים לאַז גמעאַך!  
 און מאַך די קרום-העוויהלעך, די הינטיש-חנדעלעך אַ סך,  
 און שרייַ נישט, אז די וועלט איז פלאַך!  
 און אויב דו זעסט נישט אַנדערש, נעם די אויגן און פאַרמאַך:  
 און – טראַך-טאַ-ראַ-ראַך! –  
 עס איז דאָך שלום ושלווה אויף דער וועלט!  
 עס העלט שוין אויף; אַ פּרילינג-זון אַ נייע קוועלט,  
 און מענטשן קושן זיך אין לאַנד אין פרייען,  
 און פעלקער זיינען אַנגעטאן אין גייסט אין נייעם,  
 און אויפגעבויט און אַפגעבויט איז אויך ירושלים!

And laugh! Teethless, dry-boned, laugh:  
 Ignore the pious martyrs and imbecile scholars,

<sup>181</sup> The role of drumming in Broderzon's poems and in the *Yung yidish* manifesto seems quite similar to the one it plays in Moyshe-Leyb Halpern's “Der gasn-poyker.” See Moyshe-leyb Harlpern, *In nyu-york* (New York: Vinkel, 1919), 36-37. Halpern's poem is also full of onomatopoeic sounds through which it provocatively declares its freedom and lawlessness.

<sup>182</sup> The word “*havaye*” belongs to a high, philosophical register of the Hebrew language. In Yiddish it is only minimally fused and very rare. It is therefore even loftier than the English “Existence” or its Yiddish fully fused Germanic equivalent “*zayn*.”

<sup>183</sup> Hellerstein's partial translation of the poem appears in her article. In using the “*tra-ta-ra-rakh*” as an interjection that marks the transition from one part of the poem to another, Broderzon was probably influenced by Aleksander Blok, who in his influential 1918 poem “The Twelve” employed the sounds “tra-ta-ta” in a this manner. More about Blok's influence on Broderzon see later on in this chapter.

And make the many crooked grimaces, the dog-like pleasing gestures  
 And don't cry, that the world is flat!...  
 And if you don't see differently, just close your eyes: And—crash-kerr-ra-rash!  
 Of course, there's peace and tranquility in the world!  
 It's already brightening up; a new spring-sun wells up,  
 And folks hug and kiss in the free country,  
 And peoples are clothed in new spirits,  
 And Jerusalem, too, has been built and rebuilt!<sup>184</sup>

Drumming functions here as an incantation through which the world can be turned upside down – in the spirit of the holiday of Purim and of the *purim-shpiler's* performance. Though the turnabout from horror to utopia takes place only in the speaker's imagination, this fantasy-making is still taken very seriously and described in the imperative: "And if you don't see differently, close your eyes: / And-crash-kerr-ra-rash!" The poem thus constructs an intricate web of relations between the *purim-shpil*, drumming (metaphorical or actual), creativity, and the possibility of envisioning a different reality, depicted as a mixture of actual sociopolitical change and messianic visions, of world harmony and a specifically Jewish redemption.<sup>185</sup>

Performance, as a metaphorical system, is common to "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" and to the manifesto, and figures also in Broderzon's "*Tkhiyes Hameysim*" (The Resurrection of the Dead). In this poem, also published in the first issue of *Yung yidish*, a group of clowns-fauns (*a kas leytsanim-faunen*) walk together in a snowy forest, sad as "a spring *klezmer*, only without a bow," or "a spring shepherd without a whistle." Less declarative than "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*," the poetic force of "*Tkhiyes Hameysim*" is in its narrative. It culminates in the surprising ending which envisions the arrival of spring and with it the Evil Inclination (*veytser-hore*), declared by the speaker and his friends the fauns as "Our Rebbe." A motif common to the manifesto, "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*," and "*Tkhiyes Hameysim*" is the resurrection of the dead, which endows these works with messianic import. Lowbrow performance is another shared feature of these three works, be it the *purim-shpil*, drumming or clowning, all signifying a cheerful, loud and provocative proclamation of opposition to a harsh reality.

It is, however, in *Ikh – a purim-shpiler* that the complex role of performance is most clearly expressed. The poem's first line, declaring "I'm a *purim-shpiler* today!" (*Ikh bin a purim-shpiler haynt!*) introduces a significant attribute of the speaker—his being rooted in the present time. "Today" (*haynt*) is also the last word in the poem ending, as it starts, with a proud first person proclamation: "Because... I'm no more than / just a tear in vain / A good boy, a *purim-shpiler* today!" (*Vayl... kh'bin nisht mer - / a stam bekhinemdike trer, / a voyler yung, a purim-shpiler haynt!*). This emphasis on the current moment and the sense of urgency are central features of many modernist manifestos. These features also evoke the very essence of performance, always temporary and topical in nature. The *purim-shpiler* is even more strongly linked with time than other performance artists, since his art is restricted mostly to one specific day of the year—the holiday of Purim.<sup>186</sup> On another level, the foregrounding of "today" in the opening line marks a time of dramatic reversal (And tra-ta-ra-rakh! /

<sup>184</sup> Translation of the first four lines is mine (Z.S.), and only partly based on Hellerstein's translation of specific words. The rest is Hellerstein's. See Hellerstein, "Beyond the *Purim-shpil*," 248.

<sup>185</sup> Interestingly, while the poem only hints at the "Jewish" drums, another source of sound, the church bells, is explicitly mentioned: "*In fremde gleker kling / az oyfshteyn zoln ale toyte*" (Ring the foreign bells / So the dead shall rise again!). As we shall see, the mixture of Jewish and European connotations and allusions is typical of Broderzon's work.

<sup>186</sup> Though the traditional occasions for performing a *purim-shpil* were the eve and the day of Purim (often during the Purim meal), we know of certain times and places where a *purim-shpil* would be performed also in the days preceding or following the *purim-shpil*, and up to two weeks before or after the holiday.

There's peace and quiet in the world" (*Un trakh-ta-ra-rakh! / Es iz dokh sholem veshalve af der velt*). It can thus also be associated with the day of radical shift portrayed in the *Yung yidish* manifesto: "The day of light, of blue and crimson" (*dos likhtikn tog, der tog fun tkheyles un purpur*).

An acute sense of time is felt throughout the poem, in utterances that emphasize the present, such as "and who says that there's a war in the world right now? (*un ver zagt, as es iz atsinder af der velt milkhome?*), "and today I'm a young Jew" (*un haynt bin ikh a yid a yunger*), and "breathing with the contingent life of the moment" (*otmet mit der tsufeliker khayey-sho*). The prominence of "nowness", together with the speaker's declarative tone, construct the *purim-shpiler* as a temporary position rather than a stable identity—similar to that drumbeat, that marks a single, abrupt moment, with no beginning or end, with no melody or lyrics. From behind his mask, accompanied by bells and drums, the performer calls others to drink and rejoice: "And if you can't see otherwise, take your eyes and close them! / and trakh-ta-ra-rakh!" (*Un oyb du zest nisht andersh, nem di oygn un farmakh! / un – trakh-ta-ra-rakh!*), inviting the listener or reader to envision a utopian world by closing his eyes to the present reality), a world launched in the imagination by the drum beat. This breakthrough to a radically different reality marks a complex self-conscious choice, rather than naïve or cowardly escapism. The *purim-shpiler's* carnivalesque approach to devastating historical reality entails an awareness of the short life-span of his "solution." The speaker openly acknowledges the gap between his celebratory declarations and imaginings on the one hand, and the actual circumstances including his own melancholic disposition on the other; yet he opts for the carnivalesque position and chooses to be a *purim-shpiler* – at least for this one day. While wearing a mask and constantly performing may be interpreted as inauthentic or cynical, "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" presents it as an empowering experience and a meaningful existential stance. The *purim-shpiler's* mask allows for a certain critical distance and even for indifference: "I make fun of my friends and enemies!" —a gesture we later find out to be only feigned. Paradoxically, however, it also enables the performer to be involved in the world. Free from physical and social obligations, the speaker's young, laughing gaze – a metonymy or synecdoche for the performer himself – becomes both an acute observer of the real world and an active participant in and inventor of the imaginary one. He can thus fly around the world playing various pranks, and command even the devil himself to drink unkosher wine and sing: "Haman is going to hell (literally, in the ground)!/ and Mordechai is on the horse (idiomatically, has the upper hand)!" (*Haman iz in dr'erd / un Mordkhe – afn ferd!*).

In Broderzon's poetic manifesto, as I suggest in my reading of "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*," the performing artist occupies an inventive and authoritative position. Rather than testifying to foolishness or naiveté, the *purim-shpiler's* insistence on envisioning a different reality constitutes a source of strength. His ability to imagine an alternative world signifies the creative power of art and, furthermore, art's potential to generate social resistance.

Throughout the poem the *purim-shpiler* addresses various people in the second person, including a mythological figures such as Satan and the Biblical Esther, and a vaguely defined audience of listeners – implicitly also the poem's readers – whom he encourages to drink, sing, ring the bells, laugh, make grimaces and dog-like gestures to please the others (*hintish kheyndalakh*), and imagine a world of happiness and universal brotherhood where Jewish-messianic hopes have been fulfilled: "And Jerusalem too has been rebuilt and reconstructed" (*un oyfgeboyt un opgeboyt iz oykh Yerusholayim*). The performer's continuous dialogue with the audience is in line with the *purim-shpil* tradition, where the narration of the Biblical story (often that of the Scroll of Esther) is typically intertwined with direct references to the audience, such as the common ending "Today is Purim, tomorrow it won't stay / give me a penny and cast me away." (*Haynt is Purim, Morgn is oys/ gib mir a groshn un varft mikh aroys*).

The *purim-shpil* tradition is reclaimed most directly in the poem's 4 and 5 stanzas, which can be

read as a miniature modern *purim-shpil*. Whereas stanzas 1-2 and 5-6 broadly define the *purim-shpiler's* carnivalesque position towards reality, combining references to the horrific state of the world with ecstatic declarations such as “It is such liveliness! Such rejoicing!” (*S'iz khay gelebt! S'iz simkhe vesason!*), the poem's two middle stanzas engage with the story of the *megile* (The Scroll of Esther). Along the lines of the traditional Purim play, this part of the poem retells the Biblical story while relying on the listeners' assumed familiarity with it. Moreover, by addressing Queen Esther in the second person the speaker creates a sense of a live dialogue, as in the *purim-shpil* performance:

העי אסתרל, מיין שוועסטערל, דיר קומט אַ מלך קוש:  
א קלייניקייט – פון הודו און ביז כוש  
דערגרייכט דיין צויבערפולע הערשנדע מדינה!  
און דו אליין ביסט מלכות'דיק און שיין!  
נאָר אויסגעטאַרכט האָט ושתי עס, אַז דו – דו ביסט אַ גרינע,  
ס'האַט ושתי אויסגעטאַרכט אין קנאה-צאָרן,  
די ושתי אויפ'ן שטערן מיט'ן האָרן....  
נישט וואָר! עס האָט מיין אסתר'ל אַ פנימ'ל אַ קלאָרן!  
אַ סימן, זעט, דער קלוגער מלך טיפש האָט זי האַלט,  
און שפילט זיך מיט דעם רוט פון גאַלד...  
און גיט איר אַפּ אין האַנט  
אַ האַלבע לאַנד!

Hey Estherl, my little sisterl, you deserve a kingly kiss:  
It's no small thing – from India to Kush  
Extends your magical, rulling country!  
And you yourself are regal and beautiful!  
Vashti only dreamed it up, that you – you are green,  
Vashti dreamed it up it in her jealous-rage,  
That Vashti with the horn on her forehead...  
Untrue! My Esther has a clear face!  
Proof, you see, is that the smart idiot-king loves her,  
And amuses himself with the fame of gold...  
And bestows on her, right in her hand,  
Half the land!

Here, as in both rabbinical exegesis and the *purim-shpil* tradition, colorful side plots are added to the *Megile's* story, closing gaps in the often terse Biblical text, supplying missing motivations or emotional reactions, and adding (often lewd) humor. In this stanza the speaker incorporates into the original story the rivalry between Vashti and Esther, who as far as the Biblical story is concerned never met, but were rather replaced one by the other. As is the custom in the traditional Purim play, the speaker in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” engages with both the Biblical text and its traditional Jewish exegesis, often in a subversive manner. Thus, for example, whereas the Rabbis described Esther as “green,” in reference to her name “Hadassa” (from *Hadass*, myrtle) and as an expression of her beauty and youth, in many *purim-shpils* the green Esther, read as signs of pallor or simply ugliness, becomes the object of mockery. By referring to Esther's notorious greenness and yet defending her against the evil rumors of her ugliness, the speaker manages to oscillate between the two views of Esther – the laudatory *midrashic* one and the typically parodic position of the *purim-shpil*. At the same time, however, the

speaker also provides a creative solution to a hermeneutical riddle: how did the beautiful and heroic Esther become the *purim-shpil*'s object of scorn? Vashti's jealousy and desire for revenge, explains Broderzon's modern *purim-shpiller*, is responsible for the rumors that led to this shift. The horns on Vashti's forehead probably allude to another *midrashic* story: when Vashti was summoned to display her beauty to the King and his guests, the angel Gabriel intervened and made a tail grow on her. According to this tradition, the tail was the true reason for Vashti's refusal to obey the King.<sup>187</sup> Replacing one phallic and demonic object (the tail) with another (the horn), the speaker concurs with the *Midrash* in making Vashti into a wicked woman, punished by a sudden bizarre appendage to her body. And yet, unlike the *Midrash*, Broderzon's speaker also portrays Vashti's bitter feelings, thus providing this female character with agency.<sup>188</sup>

The second part of Broderzon's modernist *purim-shpil* is more radical in nature. Subverting Biblical, *Midrashic* and traditional *purim-shpil* narratives alike, in all of which Haman always figures as the prototype of evil and anti-Semitism, this poem goes as far as imagining a born-again Jewish Haman. The question whether the new Haman signifies a true transformation or only a superficial and misleading name change – from Homen (Yiddish of Haman) to HOMO – remains open.<sup>189</sup>

און המן! המן אויך, דער דורכגעטריבענער, דער אַלטער המן  
האַט אומגעביטן איצט זײַן קלינגענדיקע נאַמען  
פאַרקירצט, פאַרצויגן אים אויף "HOMO"  
און איינגעקנייטשט פאַראַידלט די נשמה –  
ער איז דער איינציקער, דער טרייער אויף דער וואַך,  
וואָס קעכלט זײַן מיזינקל ויזתא'ן.

And Haman? Haman too, the banished one, the old Haman,  
Has now changed his resonant name,  
Shortened it endearingly to "HOMO,"  
And wrinked, ennobled his soul –  
He is the only one, the loyal one on guard,  
Who pampers his youngest son Vaizata...  
And-crash-kerr-ra-rash!

<sup>187</sup> See *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Megila, 12b.

<sup>188</sup> The focus on the female characters of the *megile* is typical of Broderzon, who is fascinated with female Biblical figures throughout his work. A salient example are the three "moon shadows" Miriam, Ruth and Shulamite in *A khasenke*, discussed later in this chapter. Moreover, as declared in *Yung yidish*'s third issue (volumes 4-5-6), the fourth issue of *Yung yidish* was to be dedicated to Ruth (a fourth issue, however, was never published). See *Yung Yiddish*, 4-5-6 (April 1919), 2. In his 1922 volume of poetry *Begaysterung* Broderzon did however publish three Ruth-related poems ("*Rus-shtimungen*" "*di keniglikhe Rus*," and "*Boaz*," (*Begaysterung*, 147-149) alongside two poems on the female heroines of the scroll of Esther, Vashti and Esther ("*Hadassa-Esther*" [ibid. 118-119] and "*Purim-shikhres*" [ibid.120-121]).

<sup>189</sup> The traditional *purim-shpil* did contain one scene that had the potential to offer a certain insight into Haman's inner world – that in which Haman stands before the gallows. Although Haman expresses no remorse, and the scene is meant to rejoice in his downfall rather than evoke pity for him, it nevertheless opens a window to his feelings and thoughts. In his *Megile-lider* Manger reconstructs this scene in a poem titled "*Men firt Hamanen tsu der tliye*" (Haman is led to the gallows). The poem takes a step towards empathy for Haman, who expresses his last wishes – bidding his sons farewell and not hearing the "*grager*" (noise-maker). As a whole, the poem remains within the traditional framework of Schadenfreude, and ends appropriately with the words: "*Un s'lakhn un shpetn / Kind un keyt*" (and kith and kin/ laugh and scoff). See Manger, *Megile Lider*, 63-64. Broderzon goes further than Manger, in that he constructs a remorseful Haman and confronts the typical rejoicing in his downfall with humanist values. The traditional *purim-shpil* included also a scene of Vashty bewailing her death, in which the audiences used to cry. See Belkin, *ha-Purim-shpil*, 104-105.

Adding fuel to the fire of the carnivalesque celebration, the stanza turns from the embittered Vashti, beautiful Esther and stupid Akhashveryesh to the two great losers of the story: evil Haman and his youngest son Vayzata (Vayzose in Yiddish), doomed to be hanged for his father's sins. The portrayal of the Biblical characters in this verse is fused with contemporary overtones and a potentially subversive message, culminating in Haman's surprising new name – “Homo.” Whether this name change and the spiritual transformation that accompanies it is presented as reliable narratologically or not, the very term “Homo” introduces a humanist sensibility into the story. The Latin alphabet in which the word “Homo” is printed further emphasizes the cosmopolitan and modern quality of the term. The Western humanist perspective challenges the Biblical narrative, marked by unapologetic cultural chauvinism – a fantasy of Jewish revenge through the killing of non-Jews in the thousands. As typical of his writing in general Broderzon rhymes here a foreign term, “Homo,” with a traditional Jewish one, “*neshomo*” (or *neshome*) that belongs to the *Loshn koydesh* (Hebrew and Aramaic) component of Yiddish language.<sup>190</sup> In this case the two parts of the rhyme correspond not only in sound but also in meaning, as “*neshome*” (soul) may be regarded as the Jewish parallel to “Homo,” human being. Both terms designate a certain human essence, and are therefore quite confounding when they refer to Haman, known in Jewish tradition as “Haman the Wicked” (Haman *ha-roshe*). This emblem of evil served throughout Jewish history as the object of symbolic hanging, burning in effigy and public booing (typically, with the noisemaker or *grager*). The similarity in sound between “Haman,” “Homo” and “Neshomo” further strengthens the unsettling quality of linking together this icon of evil and western notions of humanism. The poem, however, leaves the question of the rehabilitation of Haman open. Should we indeed reconsider Haman and regard him according to scientific humanist standards? Should we trust his proclaimed transformation? Or should we perhaps be suspicious of his new persona and of his aspiration to belong to and benefit both from Western values and from the Jewish ideal of an “*eydele neshome*” (a noble/ civil/ delicate soul), implied in the words “*fareydlt zayn neshome*” (ennobled his soul)? Haman's pampering of Vayzata, his *mizinikl* (the endearing diminutive for *mizinik* – youngest son), is likewise open to contradictory interpretations. Their bonding may indeed evoke sympathy towards these two figures– reminding us that even poor Vayzata, sentenced to death together with his brothers, has a loving father, and that even evil Haman has warm, paternal feelings. Yet the allusion to Vayzata should probably be taken with a grain of salt, as the name “Vayzose” has become idiomatic in Yiddish for both a fool and also a penis (the latter meaning, however, is significantly less common). The close relations between Haman and his poor son Vayzata may therefore be understood as yet another joke at the expense of Haman and his descendants, and may thus be in accordance with the cheerful and victorious exclamation in the first stanza: “Haman goes to hell / And Mordechai – on the horse!” (Haman *iz in dr'erd!* / *Un Mordkhe – oyfn ferd!*)

The miniature *purim-shpil* in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” employs several of the traditional strategies of the Purim play. It retells the traditional Esther story in a simple rhyme scheme scattered with humorous puns, while playing freely with both Biblical and post-Biblical sources. The interventions in the original story, including a re-interpretation of central figures and anachronistic references to contemporary issues, are also in line with the genre.<sup>191</sup> Yet by introducing a rehabilitated

<sup>190</sup> The Hebrew word pronounced as “*neshama*” in Sephardic Hebrew pronunciation, meaning “soul,” is a completely fused Yiddish word pronounced “*neshome*.” However, in the Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew, usually used when liturgical or other sacred texts are read, it is pronounced “*neshomo*.” It seems that for the sake of the rhyme, Broderzon allowed himself the poetic liberty of using the more rare Hebrew Ashkenazi pronunciation, rather than the common Yiddish one, so that “*neshomo*” would rhyme with “homo.” Apart from saving the rhyme, the choice of the Hebrew pronunciation “*neshomo*” also elevates the linguistic register, possibly adding irony to Haman's metamorphosis.

<sup>191</sup> Thus for example, in a *purim-shpil* from Lemberg (1873) Haman informs on the Jewish artisans: “*Si yidishe hant-verker zaynen shreklekh betriger*” (The Jewish artisans are horrible liars), and in Eyn shen *purim-shpil* (1697) Haman describes the Jewish women who run to the market to buy the best fish and chicken, the Jews who refuse to touch a wine touched by a

Haman who has ennobled his soul, the poet exceeds the limits of the conventional *purim-shpil*. Even if the “converted” Haman should be regarded as no more than a hoax, the alternative interpretation, namely the possibility of a real transformation, is still there, challenging readers to humanize this symbol of Evil and anti-Semitism through ideals such as humanism, parental bonding or the noble Jewish soul. Hence, Broderzon's modernist appropriation of the *purim-shpil* relies on the genre while extending its limits – and beyond; this appropriation takes pleasure in Jewish tradition and its many layers, from the most weighty to the parodic, while challenging the traditional values of this culture and juxtaposing them with modern humanist concepts and ideals. Framed within an opening and an ending that reclaim the *purim-shpiler* as representing an existential and meta-poetic position, the mini *purim-shpil* at the heart of the poem demonstrates the performer's abilities, and testifies to his creativity, audacity and knowledge of the Jewish sources. Furthermore, it marks the *purim-shpiler* as an authoritative figure, who holds the key to this central Jewish narrative of persecution, salvation and revenge.

Following the miniature *purim-shpil*, the poem turns from the reclaimed Biblical story back to contemporary reality, portrayed as idyllic in the spirit of the topsy-turvy logic associated with Purim: “*Ve-nahafokh hu.*” Whereas in the first stanza an introductory “close your eye” precedes the “*trakh-ta-ra-rakh*” (*crash-kerr-ra-rash!*), the sound that marks the transition into utopia, in the third stanza the recurring “*trakh-ta-ra-rakh*” suffices to mark the transition. Moreover, in the third stanza the shift is followed not by a utopian image but rather by its sarcastic equivalent, i.e. a grotesque interpretation of the dreadful reality as a cheerful fantasy:

— — טראַך-טאַ-ראַ-ראַך — —

ווער זאָגט, עס איז אַצינדער אויף דער וועלט מלחמה?  
 אַ ליגן! קיינער ט'ניט גענאָסן!  
 אומזיסט, אומנישט נאָר בלוט פאַרגאָסן!  
 און ס'פליסן טרערן איבער אַלע מאָסן!  
 ס'איז חי געלעבט! ס'איז שמחה וששון!  
 און ערגעץ הערשט די נויט און הונגער?!  
 און ערגעץ ווילדעוועט אַ שטורעם פון יסורים?!  
 אוי, היינט איז פורים!  
 און היינט בין איך אַ ייד אַ יונגער  
 און ס'שמייכלען טרערן אויף די אומעטיקע אויגן!  
 און כ'רעד אַזוי מאַדערן און פאַרצויגן,  
 און איידלאַרטיק צו דעם ערב רב געבויגן...  
 ס'באַהאַלט די מאַסקע פונ'ם ליכט,  
 מיין בלאָס און אויסגעפייניקט יונג געזיכט,  
 פון בליקן לעסטערדיקע אומגעריכט.

And – crash-kerr-ra-rash –

Who says there is now a war in the world?  
 A lie! No one has profited!  
 Pointlessly, for nothing – only blood has spilled!  
 And tears flow beyond all measure!

Catholic, etc. See Belkin, *ha-Purim shpil*, 115-126.

It's a great life! It's joy and jubilation!  
 And somewhere need and hunger rule?  
 And somewhere there rampage a storm of agony?!  
 Oy, today is Purim,  
 And today I am a Jew, a young man –  
 And tears smile in my cheerless eyes!  
 And I speak so modernly and endearingly,  
 And bow so nobly to the riffraff...  
 The mask hides my pale and anguished young face  
 From the light,  
 From gazes blasphemously unaware...

It is only in this stanza that we learn— albeit through the by way of the cheerful litotes – about the actual state of the world— war, bloodshed, hunger and pain. Only here does the *purim-shpiler* reveal what is hidden behind his mask: a pale young Jew with sad eyes and “smiling tears,” using the mask as a refuge from the looks of others. Behind the indifferent, exuberant and authoritative image of the *purim-shpiler* one discovers in the last part of the poem a gloomy and sensitive young man. The speaker's western manner and verbal expression turn out to be no more than a façade. Self-conscious, he describes his speech as “modern and strange,” and himself as bowing to the riffraff (*erev-rav*), who seem to adore his civilized manners. By declaring his discourse as yet another part of his performance, the speaker destabilizes our understanding of the poem. If the *purim-shpiler's* rhetoric is no more authentic than his mask, how can we get to know him? Does the performer have a stable identity that exists separately from his mask and his performance? The proclamation “Today I'm a Jew, a young man” (*Un haynt bin ikh a yid, a yunger*) echoes the poem's opening and ending: “I'm a *purim-shpiler* today!” It therefore suggests that being a young Jewish man too is only a contingent state, not an essence, and that it is no more real or stable than the Purim performance. These destabilizing gestures mark the entire poem as a playful display of personas and perspectives. The *purim-shpil* lends its carnivalesque spirit to this meta-poetic poem, resignifying it within an unsettling modernist ethos.

The poem's last stanza brings yet another figure into the picture, as the *purim-shpiler* presents himself as Pierrot, the stock character of the commedia dell'arte:

און ווער עס זעט, דערקענט אין מיר – פיעררא,  
 וואס אטעמט מיט דער צופעליקער היי שעה!  
 און כ'גיי ארום, כ'שפאציר ארום אין וויסן, ברייטן קיטל;  
 און כ'זוך א לוסטיקן בשמחה'דיקן מיטל –  
 צו אויסשפאטן פון פיינט און פריינט,  
 ווייל... כ'בין נישט מער –  
 א סתם בחנם-דיגע טרער,  
 א ווילער יונג, א פורים-שפילער היינט!

And whoever see it, recognizes in me Pierrot,  
 Who breathes with the chance pleasure of the moment;  
 And I walk around; I stroll around in a wide, white *kitl*,  
 And I seek a happy, pleasurable means  
 To mock foe and friend,  
 Because... I'm nothing more –

Only a pointless tear,  
A nice young man, a Purim player today!<sup>192</sup>

Pierrot and the *purim-shpiler*, both representing centuries-long traditions of popular performance, share in this poem the standard dual quality of the sad clown. The poem relies on the common image of the tear behind the mask, yet changes the emphasis of this cliché – from the underlying sadness to the purposeful choice to wear a mask and the empowerment this option provides. Rather than hiding passively behind their disguise, Pierrot and the *purim-shpiler* actively “seek a happy, pleasurable means / to mock foe and friend.” The proclamation that opens and ends the poem: “I’m a *purim-shpiler* today!” marks the position of the apparently cheerful performer as the outcome of a determined decision. Moreover, whereas in the common romantic image the lonely performer is engulfed in narcissistic feelings which he wishes to hide from the maddening crowd, in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” the “tear behind the mask” is not merely a private matter but rather a sound reaction to the terrible state of the world. Under the catastrophic circumstances, it is the mask rather than the tear that requires explanation. It provides a temporary getaway – but also a radical alternative. The sad clown – Pierrot or the *purim-shpiler* – partakes in a modernist tragicomic ethos, aware of harsh reality and yet imbued with an optimistic revolutionary spirit.

Pierrot's loose white blouse, one of his most famous characteristics, serves here to link the European clown to the young Jewish speaker who likewise wears this garment. The connection is strengthened by Broderzon's word choice, as he describes the pierrotic blouse as a *kitl*, usually a reference to the white robe traditionally worn by Ashkenazic Jews on the High Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.<sup>193</sup> Jewish and non-Jewish European traditions converge here also by way of rhyme, as the French “Pierrot” is paired here with the culturally loaded Hebraic philosophical term “*khayesho*.” Literally meaning “life of the hour,” *khayesho* refers in Jewish thought to momentary pleasure and to earthly matters in general, which stand in opposition to the heavenly afterworld and to spiritual values. Here, as in other places in this poem and throughout his work, Broderzon juxtaposes not only different components of the Yiddish lexicon, but also Jewish and other European languages and value systems, constructing cultural encounters and clashes through his masterful rhyming.

In this stanza, as in the second one, the speaker challenges the audience's ability to see, in the sense of recognizing the underlying spiritual truth. In the second stanza the *purim-shpiler* calls into question the viewer's or listener's ability to see the declared utopia, proclaiming “if you can't see differently, just close your eyes.” (*Un oyb du sest nisht andersh, nem di oygn un farmakh*) Similarly, here the speaker states that only those who can see would recognize the Pierrot in him. Pierrot thus serves as the true yet difficult-to-discern alter ego of the *purim-shpiler*. Broderzon constructs the lowly and typically amateur *purim-shpiler* along the lines of the famed European icon of Pierrot – which originated indeed in a popular (though professional) tradition, yet by the early twentieth century, was associated to a significant degree with European high culture. Paradoxically, the speaker points to this fictional figure as his essence or authentic self – again, in a modernist destabilizing gesture. By

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<sup>192</sup> Translation is Hellerstein's. An alternative translation of the last three lines would be “I'm no longer / A pointless tear / [but rather] a nice young man, a *purim-shpiler* today!” This reading inverts the meaning and the value attributed to the carnivalesque poet.

<sup>193</sup> The Yiddish word “*kitl*” originates in the German “*Kittel*,” meaning “gown,” “overalls” or “smock,” and can simply denote a robe. However, since the “*kitl*,” and especially a white one, is so often related to the festive outfit of Ashkenazi men, and since a wide blouse describes Pierrot's costume better than a robe, I argue that in this poem the word “*kitl*” is meant to map the carnivalesque loose shirt on the religious Jewish girl. This is also in line with Broderzon's fascination with the innovative use of traditional Jewish terms and images, such as [der] “*Sinay fun sheynkayt*” (The Mount Sinai of Beauty) (see *Yung yidish* 2-3, 1) or, in a booklet dedicated to his Ararat cabaret “*Tsu der doziker, primitiv geredt, komedyantisher kavone un shlikhes viln mir zokhe zayn*” See *Ararat* (Łódź: Reznik and Sygal, 1931), 3.

equating the *purim-shpiler* with Pierrot Broderzon completes the transformation of the Jewish performer: from a member of ignoble profession, often associated with vagrants or Jacks of all trades, to a poetic figure and a cultural icon, which can become a model for the revolutionary modernist poet.

Given the humble reputation of the *purim-shpil* performance as low-brow and often vulgar popular entertainment, Broderzon's choice to present the performer as the speaker in the poem, and implicitly as his artistic persona, may seem rather surprising. One should also keep in mind that this poetic manifesto was written prior to the publication of Schipper's influential *History of Jewish Theater*, the first scholarly reconstruction of the *purim-shpil* as the premodern origin of Jewish theater and as the main – and almost only – site of dramatic creativity in traditional Jewish life. Broderzon was indeed a true pioneer of a phenomenon that was to become salient in Yiddish culture over the next few decades: the appropriation of the *purim-shpil(er)* and the transformation of this rather marginal tradition into a meaningful symbol of modern Jewish art.<sup>194</sup>

How then did Broderzon come to view the *purim-shpiler* as a possible poetic alter ego? What motivated him to reclaim the traditional Jewish folk performer? Are his main sources of inspiration to be found within Jewish culture – from the *Haskala* period to the *Klasiker* – or among other European cultures? In answering these questions various elements in Broderzon's biography and artistic development should be taken into account. One possible factor explaining Broderzon's sympathy for with the *purim-shpiler* is his bent for rhyming, which won him acclaim as master of prosody. Interestingly, Broderzon's proclivity for rhyming was in tension with his involvement in the modernist movements of his time, most notably expressionism and futurism as interpreted in Yiddish circles, where rhyming was typically rejected as obsolete.<sup>195</sup> Rather than expressing poetic conservatism or cultural nostalgia, Broderzon's insistence on rhyme was a conscious reaction against a certain contemporary dictatorship that considered free verse as the only correct choice for a modernist poet.<sup>196</sup> This presiding attitude affected Broderzon's career directly, for example when Peretz Markish refused to publish his poetry in the expressionist periodical *Khalyastre* (The Gang; 1922-1924).<sup>197</sup> Markish clearly appreciated Broderzon's poetry, and even chose the first few lines of Broderzon's poem “*Tsu di shtern*” (To the Stars) as the motto of the *Khalyastre* journal, as the direct source of the publication's name:

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<sup>194</sup> Broderzon published his poem after the publication of Gorin's first edition of his *History*, but it is hard to know if Broderzon read this American-centered history of Yiddish theater, published in New York. Another possible source of influence on him could have been the works of the Yiddish “*klasiker*,” such as the *purim-shpil* in Abramovitch's *Der priziv* and Sholem-Aleykhem's “*Baym kenig Akhashveyresh*,” but even if Broderzon was familiar with these works (and as far as we know, he was better versed in Russian literature than in Yiddish literature), it is unlikely that they had a significant effect on him. Moreover, though both works engage with the *purim-shpiler*, they hardly mythologize the Jewish performer or make him into a cultural icon. Broderzon, on the other hand, positions the *purim-shpiler* at the heart of the first issue of his modernist journal, and makes him the protagonist of his first play. Broderzon's turn to the *purim-shpil* owes, in my view, not in any Jewish source but rather in Russian culture of the time. I enlarge upon this later on in this chapter.

<sup>195</sup> On the other hand, many Russian modernist poets, such as Boris Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova and Alexander Blok (on whom Broderzon modeled himself, as I show later on in this chapter) wrote in rhyme. I thank Chana Kronfeld for this comment.

<sup>196</sup> The New York Yiddish modernist movement *Inzikh*, for example, fervently advocated free verse (probably under the influence of anglo-American modernism). See the *Inzikh* manifesto “Introspectivism,” *In Zikh* 1 (1920). For the English see “Introspectivism” in *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology*, Barbara and Benjamin Harshav, eds. and trans. (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), 774-784.

<sup>197</sup> See Gilles Rozier, “Broderzon, Moyshe” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. (2010) [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Broderzon\\_Moyshe](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Broderzon_Moyshe). Melekh Ravitsh, a close friend of Markish and of Uri Zvi Greenberg, and part of their art group *Khalyastre* criticizes Broderzon in 1945 in his *Lexicon of Yiddish writers* in a similar tone: “*Bay broderzonen iz faran tsu fil forem. Shvimt-arum der inhalt oft vi a kind in tatens kleyder*.” (Broderzon has too much form. The content hangs loose like a child in his/her father's clothes.) See Melekh Ravitsh, “Moyshe Broderzon,” *Mayn Leksikon* (Montreal: Komitet, 1945) 1:49-50.

מיר, יונגען, מיר, א פריילעכע, צעזונגענע כאליאסטרע,  
 מיר גייען אין אן אומבאווסטן וועג,  
 אין טיפע, מרה-שחורהדיקע טעג,  
 אין נעכט פון שרעק –  
 !Per aspera ad astra

We, the young, a happy, boisterous gang  
 We're treading on an unknown path  
 through deeply melancholic days  
 through nights of fright –  
*Per aspera ad astra!*<sup>198</sup>

Broderzon's or his speaker's identification with the *purim-shpiler* should thus be regarded as part of his struggle against the norm of free verse so dominant in the modernist Yiddish circles with which he was associated. By reclaiming the traditional Jewish rhymester as the quintessential artist figure and presenting a miniature *purim-shpil* at the heart of the poem, Broderzon declared his loyalty to traditional – and popular – forms of song or poetry, and made a claim about the origins of his own rhymed verse. In this sense Broderzon's position is opposite to that of the early *Maskilim*, discussed in the first chapter. Whereas the implied similarity between their own poetry and the rhymed verse of the Jewish folk performer – be it the *badkhn* or the *purim-shpiler* – constituted a source of anxiety for the *Maskilim*, Broderzon embraced the affinity and integrated it into his artistic credo.

Another significant link between Broderzon and the *purim-shpiler* is the poet's intense interest and involvement in the performing arts. Indeed, from the year 1922 onwards, theater became Broderzon's main field of creativity and public activity. It was in this realm that he most clearly demonstrated the innovation and experimentation for which he is best known today. Throughout the twenties and thirties Broderzon constantly experimented with various forms of performance, including the opera (*Bat-Sheva*, 1926), the puppet show (*Khad Gadye*, 1924), variety theater (*Shor Habor*, 1924) and the cabaret/Kleinkunst theater (*Ararat*, 1927-1939), which proved to be his most successful and lasting venture.<sup>199</sup> In these various initiatives Broderzon aimed at creating a modern theater relevant to contemporary Jewish life. While stubbornly resisting the melodramatic *shund* that dominated Yiddish theater of the time, Broderzon strove to remain communicative and accessible to broader Jewish audiences. Expounding an avant-garde credo, he nevertheless wished to maintain a continuous dialogue with the average Jewish theatergoer, who had little or no familiarity with sophisticated European

<sup>198</sup> Hellerstein skillfully translates the motto “*A freylekhe, tsezungene khalyastre*” as “a happy, boisterous gang.” In the context of this particular project focusing on performance it is, however, worth noting that more literally the word “*tsezungene*” means “sung spiritedly.” The poem was originally published in the second volume of *Yung yidish* (April 1919). English translation by Seth L. Wolitz, “Khalyastre,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Khalyastre>. Wolitz refers to all modernist/avant-garde movements of the time in Poland as “*Khalyastre*,” including Broderzon's *Yung yidish*, Uri Tsvi Greenberg's *Albatros* and others, although only the troika Markish-Greenberg-Ravitsh was known under this name. While Markish no doubt identified with and appreciated the opening of Broderzon's “*Tsu di shtern*,” he was most likely less enthusiastic about the poem's second and third stanzas, which playfully juggle with rhymes: all twelve lines in these stanzas end with “*ern*,” and thus rhyme with each other, while also creating many inner rhymes. Moreover, Markish was likely to disapprove of the romantic style in the *Yung yidish* manifesto.

<sup>199</sup> *Ararat*'s success should be attributed to Broderzon's talent for little comic episodes, as well as to the two performance talents he discovered, Shimen Dzigan and Yisroel Szumacher, who continued working as a comedy duo also after the war, in Poland and later on in Israel. See Shimen Dzigan, *Der koyekh fun yidishn humor* (Tel Aviv: Gezelshaftlikhn komitet, 1974). On the satires of Dzigan and Szumacher in Israel see Diego Rotman, “*Ha-dibuk eyno Moyshe Sne: al ha-parodye ha-satirit ha-dibuk ha-chadash shel Dzhigan ve-Shumacher (1957)*,” *Al na tegarshuni: 'Iyunim chadashim be-ha-dibuk*, eds. Dorit Yerushalmi and Shimon Levy (Tel Aviv: Assaph and Safra, 2009), 179-197.

theatrical norms, and was usually attracted to vaudeville and other forms of popular entertainment.<sup>200</sup>

Broderzon's activity in the realm of performance is strongly connected to his poetry. As Gilles Rozier puts it: "Broderzon's theatrical language is the same as that of his poetry, and the strong themes of his poetry can be found in his dramatic work. Connected by a network of similarities, these two facets of his work mirror each other."<sup>201</sup> The theater, Rozier explains, was a way for Broderzon to envision direct collaboration with other artistic disciplines, such as the the visual arts (theater sets, costumes, props), music and of course acting and performing.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, the multidisciplinary nature of the dramatic field no doubt appealed to Broderzon, who from early on in his career frequently co-operated with graphic artists. For example *Sikhes Khulin* (Idle Chatter) (1917), Broderzon's first major work, was published in the form of a traditional Jewish scroll and was designed and illustrated by El Lissitzky in Art Nouveau style. Another modernist visual artist, Yosef Tshaykov, illustrated *Temerl*, a children's story Broderzon published in the same year.<sup>203</sup> As early as his Moscow years, Broderzon initiated circles that involved artists of various fields, such as the 1917 *Circle for Jewish National Aesthetic* (*krayzl fun yidish-natsyonaler estetik*) with Lissitzky and Yitskhok Ribak, who founded the publishing house *Shamir* and planned a small studio of dramatic art, and the 1918 *Moscow Circle of Yiddish Writers and Artists*.<sup>204</sup> In the immediate post-war years (1919-1921) Broderzon dedicated his artistic energies to poetry and to the *Yung yidish* movement, with its proclaimed emphasis on "poetry in words and in drawings."<sup>205</sup> While he had not yet initiated dramatic productions, Broderzon, who was taking his first steps as a playwright, was already engaged in performance arts. In fact, the newly-founded *Yung yidish* publishing house published more plays than volumes of poetry, including five "dramoletn" – Broderzon's own coinage to designate his humorous or grotesque playlets, as well as a play by Kacnelson.<sup>206</sup> Broderzon's growing interest in the field of drama in his *Yung yidish* era, may explain in part his choice of a performer artist for his artistic persona in "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*," and the performative intervention in the midst of the poem in the form of a miniature *purim-shpil*. Moreover, in a sense the poem foretells Broderzon's future, as theater was soon to become his main realm of creativity.

A master of recitation and a regular winner of public rhyming competitions, Broderzon was in fact a performer even in his *Yung yidish* period, before embarking on his theater career. Indeed, the young poet's very appearance was rather theatrical in nature. His return to Łódź after the war, which marked his rebirth as a radical modernist artist, resembled the grand entrance of an actor, with Łódź's literary scene and the city's public sphere in general as his stage. This is how Y.Y. Trunk describes this

<sup>200</sup> Striking a balance between the experimental and the accessible was no an easy task to complete. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Broderzon was among those modernist artists who embraced popular culture rather than rejected it. On the relation between modernism and popular culture, see

<sup>201</sup> Rozier, *Moyshe Broderzon*, 121. Translation from the French is mine. Rozier translates the group's name as: "Moscow Circle of Jewish Writers and Artists," but I believe "Yiddish" is more appropriate here.

<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*, 48. Seth Wolitz describes *Sikhes Khulin* as "a slightly erotic and irreverent Ovidian verse tale set in old Prague, 'judaized' by making the dandy protagonist a rabbi." See Wolitz, "The Jewish National Art Renaissance," 29. Tshaykov also created illustrations for nine of Broderzon's "*Tankas*" published in 1917 in *Kunstring: literarish-kinstlerisher almanakh* (Kharkov: farlag Yidish, 1917). See Rozier, *Moyshe Broderzon*, 53, 59.

<sup>204</sup> Rozier, *Moyshe Broderzon* 41, 49. Broderzon also chose to dedicate "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" to El (or Eliezer, as Broderzon would have it) Lissitzki.

<sup>205</sup> Occasionally, Broderzon contributed his own drawings to *Yung yidish* publications. An illustration by him can be found, for example, on the cover of his *dramolet* "*Shney-Tants*" (Snow dance, 1921). The illustration is available online. See Gilles Rozier, "Broderzon, Moyshe," YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe.

[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Broderzon\\_Moyshe](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Broderzon_Moyshe).

<sup>206</sup> None of Broderzon's "*dramoletn*" was ever performed. However, theater critic Mikhael Vaykhert published an intriguing review of an imaginary production of "*A khasenke*," performed as a marionette theater. See Mikhael Vaykhert, "*dramoletn*," *Teater un Drame* (Warsaw: Farlag Yidish, 1922), I:171-177.

grand entrance in his famous memoir, “Poland”:

משה בראָדערזאָן איז באַלד נאָך דער מלחמה צוריקגעקומען פון מאַסקווע קיין לאַדזש מיט אַלע אויסערלעכע און אינערלעכע רעקוויזיטן פון אַ גרויסן, אפשר דעם גרעסטן ייִדישן פּאָעט. . . שוין אין זײַן פיזיאָנאָמיע האָט זיך משה בראָדערזאָן אָנגעהויבן צו באַווייזן אין לאַדזש ווי דער ליבלינג פון די מוזעס. ער האָט ווי אַ דיכטערישער לייב געטראָגן אַ קאָפּ פול מיט שוואַרצע האָר, ווי אויך שוואַרצע באַקנבערד אַ לאַ פּושקין. פון דער רוסישער רעוואָלוציע האָט ער מיטגעברענגט דאָס שוואַרצע רוסישע אַרבעטער-העמד, וואָס האָט פון משה בראָדערזאָנען אַראָפּגעשריגן אויף די לאַדזשער גאַסן ווי אַ פּאַרניכטנדיקע דראָנג. אויף דעם דאָזיקן שוואַרצן פּראָלעטאַרישן העמד האָט ער געטראָגן אַלערליי קייטלעך פון בורשטיין און קאַראַלן. . . אויף זײַנע לאַנגע אויסגעצויגענע פינגער. . . האָט ער געטראָגן אַלערליי איינגערעמטע געשניטענע שטיינער און קמיעות. מען האָט געזען באַשיינפערלעך, אז ווען די דאָזיקע פינגער נעמען גאָר די פען אין דער האַנט, קען זיי באַמת באַווייזן כּישוף. לאַדזש האָט באַלד אַראָפּגעלאָזט דעם קאָפּ.

Moyshe Broderzon returned to Łódź from Moscow with all the prerequisites from a great, maybe the greatest Yiddish poet. . . Moyshe Broderzon's physiognomy itself was enough to make him appear in Łódź like the darling of the Muses. Like a poetic lion he displayed a head full of black hair as well as black sideburns à la Pushkin. From the Russian Revolution he brought with him a black Russian worker's shirt, which garishly cried forth from Broderzon in the streets of Łódź like a destructive threat. On this black proletarian shirt he wore all kinds of necklaces made of amber and coral. . . On his long out-stretched finger. . . he wore framed and faceted gemstones and amulets. One could clearly see that as soon as these fingers held a pen in their hands [sic.], they could really perform magic. Łódź immediately bowed its head.

Broderzon's growing passion for performance had no doubt a lot to do with the four years he spent in Russia (1914-1918), where theater held a prestigious position in cultural life, and constituted – especially in the first two decades of the twentieth century—an arena of cutting-edge experimentation for artists of various media, with significant social and political implications.<sup>207</sup> In his Moscow period Broderzon absorbed the revolutionary spirits of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, and became involved in the radical cultural transformation that was taking place in Russia at the time, which led to the rise of modernist art movements such as Acmeism and Futurism.<sup>208</sup>

It is above all in the context of modernist and revolutionary Russian culture that one should understand “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*,” published only three months after Broderzon's return to Łódź. Broderzon's reclaiming of Jewish folk performance in this poetic manifesto was a direct outcome of his contact with avant-garde circles in Russian culture—and more specifically, with their appropriation of folk culture and popular performance. The last stanza of the poem, where the radical *purim-shpiler* declares Pierrot as his alternative persona, points to a significant link between Broderzon's poetry and Russian avant-garde art of the time: their shared fascination with *commedia dell'arte*.

<sup>207</sup> The high status and great artistic achievements of theater in Russian culture were in great contrast to the Yiddish theater of the time, which was typically regarded by critics as low-brow, or *shund*, as it was called in Yiddish, a term designating a product aimed at the lowest common denominator and lacking in artistic standards. See Nina Warnke, “The Child who Didn't Want to Grow Up,” in *Yiddish Theater New Approaches* (201-216).

<sup>208</sup> Although Broderzon resided in Polish Łódź from the age of ten and most of his adult life, it was Russian rather than Polish culture that was his main modernist affiliation and source of intertextual dialogue. Russian culture was easily accessible to Broderzon, who was born in Moscow and spent his childhood in Belarus, and for whom Russian, alongside Yiddish, was a mother tongue. No less significant were the four years Broderzon resided in Moscow between 1914 and 1918, a time in which the young poet was personally involved in the cultural and political activities at the very heart of revolutionary Russia.

## B. From Pierrot to the *purim-shpiler*: Challenging Commedia dell'arte in *A khasenke*

Originating in sixteenth century Italy and characterized by stock characters and improvised performances based on core scenarios, the commedia dell'arte was a theatrical form venerated in twentieth-century modernist Russian culture. According to Douglas Clayton it is “in the period between the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 that one finds a veritable craze for commedia dell'arte [...] in a number of forms that varied from attempts to recreate the Italian street theater in as pure a form as possible through productions of classical plays more or less associated with commedia dell'arte [...] to productions of contemporary plays [...] that borrowed and incorporated elements of commedia dell'arte.”<sup>209</sup> The commedia dell'arte, Clayton argues, “was for the modernists what the folk tale and the ballad were for the romantics.”<sup>210</sup> It marked “the author's or director's allegiance to the revolution in theatrical art.”<sup>211</sup> In Russia, as in other European countries at the turn of the century, the use of commedia dell'arte went beyond the dramatic field, and “became a sign of adherence to modernism, whether it be in the visual arts (Beardsley, Picasso, Braque, Rouault), in opera (Leoncavallo, Richard Strauss), in ballet (Diaghilev, Mikhail Fokin), in music (Schoenberg, Stravinskii, Prokofyev), or in poetry (Rilke).”<sup>212</sup>

While Clayton regards the revived interest in commedia dell'arte in twentieth-century Russia as a highbrow phenomenon based on Western models (most notably French romanticism), Olga Partan disputes this contention and argues for a “continuation of the tradition of Harlequinized art in Russia.”<sup>213</sup> She substantiates her claim by exploring a variety of turn-of-the-century Russian scholarly works that provided the intellectual background for the infatuation with commedia dell'arte in modernist Russian art.<sup>214</sup> Partan's research extends beyond modernism and the realm of theater, where the influence of commedia dell'arte was most strongly felt, to explore a variety of media including literature, drama, visual arts and ballet in over three hundred years of Russian culture, and trace a complex route in which “the Harlequinades migrated from high to low culture and vice versa.”<sup>215</sup> “The Italian commedia dell'arte,” argues Partan, “was an inexhaustible source of inspiration, providing a powerful impetus for the development of the Russian Arts and liberating the Russian artistic imagination.”<sup>216</sup> Like Clayton and other scholars, Partan too points at the first decades of the twentieth-century as a high-point in the interest in commedia dell'arte in Russian culture, in fact as a second wave – the first being in the eighteenth-century, at the time when Russian audiences had an actual encounter with Italian actors. Whereas the early wave was “a transmitter of the European baroque onto Russian soil,” the second wave, during the modernist era, “was a rather 'museological' experience since the

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<sup>209</sup> Douglas Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd: The Commedia dell'Arte / Balagan in Twentieth-Century Russian Theater and Drama* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 4.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>213</sup> Olga Partan, *Recurring Masks: The impact of the Italian commedia dell'arte on the Russian Artistic Imagination*, (PhD. diss., Brown University, 2004).

<sup>214</sup> Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, 4, 8. Olga Partan, *Recurring Masks*, 3. Clayton and Partan disagree about the scale and significance of Russian academic publications on commedia dell'arte, and about the possible influence of popular puppetry on Russian avant-garde artists (and especially that of Petrushka, a stock character of Russian folk puppetry close to Pulcinella in the commedia dell'arte). Analogously, the dispute between Clayton and Partan may help us understand the appropriation of Jewish folk performance in interwar Yiddish culture, since the crucial questions in both cases are similar. In regard to Yiddish culture we ask: to what degree was the appropriation of folk performance a direct outcome of similar Russian, Polish or other European “rediscoveries” or alternatively, the product of a Jewish search for folkish roots (influenced in itself by general European folkish trends)? What influence did scholarly writings such as Schiper's *History* have on literary and dramatic appropriations of the *purim-shpil*? What was the role that actual exposure to the *purim-shpil* tradition played in the re-imaginings of this folk performance?

<sup>215</sup> Partan, 258.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 2.

Russians were reviving and reinventing the *commedia* based largely on secondary sources. This second wave was associated with the rebellion against nineteenth-century realism that dominated Russian literature and other arts.<sup>217</sup>

It is in the field of theater that the anti-realist rebellion was most notable, and where *commedia dell'arte* was most dominant as a source of inspiration and an object of appropriation. “The injection of *commedia dell'arte* into the theater,” explains Clayton, “was in line with the developments that were sweeping all the other branches of art, for it permitted the slipping out of roles, the mocking of conventions, and the creation of an inexpensive, improvised, popular theater.”<sup>218</sup> *Commedia dell'arte* came to signify “the assertion of ‘theatricality,’ by which was meant a theater no longer dominated by notions of photographic realism or (literary) psychological verisimilitude.”<sup>219</sup> Among the salient theatrical works expressing this revolutionary spirit is Alexander's Blok lyrical drama *Balaganchik* (*The Fairground Booth*), which in Vsevolod Meyerhold's 1906 production came to be “perhaps the most crucial production in twentieth-century Russian theater.”<sup>220</sup> Another notable case of experimental appropriation of *commedia dell'arte* is Evreinov's *Vesolaya Smert* (*The Merry Death*), a work so close to *Balaganchik* that Blok regarded it as plagiarism.

For Broderzon, as for other European artists of various media, reclaiming the *commedia dell'arte* was a mark of adherence to modernism which in his case, also signified the very participation of Yiddish culture in contemporary European culture. Following models set by Russian modernists in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Broderzon incorporated *commedia dell'arte* characters into various poems he wrote in the years 1919-1922. In addition to Pierrot in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” one finds Pierrot alongside Columbine in another poem by Broderzon – “*Shneyshtilkayt*” (Snow-silence), and Columbine and Harlequin in “*Levone-shmeykhlen*,” (Moon-smiles) – both published in *Perl afn bruk* (*Pearls on the Cobblestones*, 1920). In Broderzon's next volume of poetry, *Bagaysterung* (*Excitement*, 1922) one comes across Pantalone, “the old teaser” (*der alter khoyzek-makher Pantalone*) in *Der karnaval funem sotn* (Satan's Carnival).<sup>221</sup> Most notably, Columbine and Harlequin feature in Broderzon's 1920 playlet *A khasenke* (*A Wedding*), the first *dramolet* printed in *Yung yidish* publishing house.

In *A khasenke* and elsewhere in his dramatic work Broderzon partook in the Russian veneration of *commedia dell'arte* as an alternative form of theater – beyond realism or symbolism. In the case of Yiddish culture, the realism against which a modernist like Broderzon strove to fight was not the refined *fin-de-siecle* naturalism of Stanislavski (which in fact, as Clayton argues, was progressive in its own way), but rather the banal narratives of the dominating *shund* theater, which typically combined realism with melodrama and were intolerant towards the intellectual and the experimental.<sup>222</sup>

In a leaflet celebrating four years of activity of his *Ararat* theater (established in 1927), Broderzon presents his dramatic credo, in which he proclaims his admiration for Goldfadn's folkish theater and his opposition to *shund*: “We are on our way to binding ourselves with the golden thread of

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<sup>217</sup> *ibid.*, 258.

<sup>218</sup> Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, 7.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>220</sup> *ibid.*, 76. An alternative common English translation to *Balaganchik* is *The Puppet Show*. For the original play see Aleksandr Blok, “Balaganchik,” in *Liricheskaia Drama* (Petersburg: shipovnik, 1908). For an English translation of *Blaganchik* and an introduction to his lyrical plays see Aleksandr Blok, and Timothy Westphalen, *Aleksandr Blok's Trilogy of Lyric Dramas* (London: Routledge, 2003). For the relation between *commedia dell'arte* or “Harlequinade” and Blok's poetry see Olga Yu Soboleva, *The Silver Mask: Harlequinade in the Symbolist Poetry of Blok and Belyi* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

<sup>221</sup> Rozier, *Moyshe Broderzon*, 120-121.

<sup>222</sup> For a discussion of the affinities between naturalism, symbolism, and the experimental appropriations of *commedia dell'arte* see Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, 12.

Goldfadn's brilliant folkish theater, which has become unraveled and entangled in the skein of *shund horrors*" (*Mir zenen afn veg tsu onknipn zikh in dem goldenem fodem fun Goldfadns brilyanter folkstimlekher teatralishkayt, vos iz fardribelt un farplontert gevorn in a knoyl fun shund-groyln*).<sup>223</sup> While declaring his "striving for Jewish-theatrical truth and seriousness" (*sthrebn tsum yidish-teatralishn emes un ernst*), Broderzon praises also his non-Jewish source: the commedia dell'arte. "Why is there so often improvisation in *Ararat*?" He asks, and answers immediately: "This is something that was inherited from and sanctioned by the commedia dell'arte." (*Farvos vert in "Ararat" oft improvizirt? – Dos iz an inyen, vos iz bekabole sanktsyonirt fun der komedya del arte*).<sup>224</sup> Interestingly, the inheritance of wisdom from the commedia dell'arte is described by Broderzon by the *loshn-koydesh* word "bekabole," which designates oral transmission of – typically religious – knowledge. In using this heavily loaded term Broderzon endows the *commedia* with the high status and sense of devotion usually ascribed to sacred Jewish texts. At the same time, however, Broderzon also pronounces improvisation as a mark of contemporary theater, a dramatic device that signifies and enables creativity, surprise and discovery, thus associating commedia with modernity. Broderzon no doubt takes pleasure in his self-conscious appropriation of the commedia dell'arte – marking it an icon of modern theater while also hinting at its ancientness. He is celebrating the universality of this theatrical form while Judaizing it through the allusion to traditional Jewish sources.

Broderzon's 1920 playlet *A khasenke* may be understood as a reenactment of his complex cultural dialogue with the commedia dell'arte. The play's extraordinary love triangle between of the *purim-shpiller*, Harlequin and Columbine thematizes the love-hate relationship of the Jewish artist with the Italian theatrical form, and more broadly, with European art. For Broderzon, as for Russian theater artists of his time, commedia dell'arte signifies contemporary modern ideals such as improvisation or anti-realism. At the same time, however, it also marks a specifically Western dramatic heritage, which does not always welcome its Jewish "others," nor is it easily embraced by them.

*A khasenke*, published in the prime of the *commedia* craze, belongs in terms of its form to a rather early phase in the development of the Russian preoccupation with the form. According to Clayton, the appropriation of commedia dell'arte in Russian culture went through a process in which the concepts and motifs of the *commedia* became more and more abstract, less marked as a historical genre and more fused into a contemporary dramatic vernacular. "In early examples of *commedia* revival plays," he contends, "the playwright integrated the commedia characters 'realistically' by showing them as itinerant actors. . . . Commedia elements were integrated with realistic ones as a play-within-the play."<sup>225</sup> In the second stage, *commedia* became a symbolist fantasy, stripped of any realistic frame—the solution of Blok's *Balaganchik* or Evreinov's *A Merry Death*. "Finally, in post-revolutionary Russian theater "the *balagan* genre" crystallized, a form defined by Clayton as "theater that self-consciously or parodistically draws attentions to its conventions and plays with them. . . . A play does not necessarily need to contain traditional commedia dell'Arte, with its masks, its costumes, its stylized plots," but rather employs the commedia dell'arte as "a substratum, a readily recognizable idiom or model to be quoted here and there."<sup>226</sup> If we are to locate *A khasenke* on this path of progression we should probably situate it somewhere between the first and second stage. Thematically,

<sup>223</sup> The metaphor of the golden thread is also a pun on Goldfadn's name, made up from the words "gold" and "Faden" ('thread' in German. In Yiddish: 'fodem'). At the same time, it also evokes the topos of "*di goldene keyt*" (The Golden Chain) of Jewish cultural continuity and transmission. See *Ararat* (Łódź: Reznik and Sygal, 1931), 11.

<sup>224</sup> *Ararat*, 10. Note the use of religious terminology "bekabole" (literary "through oral transmission"), a term that usually serves to describe the transmission of religious knowledge. This dramatic manifesto combines Jewish terminology with a completely secular position, much like Broderzon's free use of Biblical and other Jewish allusions in his playlets.

<sup>225</sup> Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, 159-160.

<sup>226</sup> Clayton, *Pierrot in Petrograd*, 160. For a critique of Clayton's definition of the *balagan* genre see: Marjorie Hoover, review of *Pierrot in Petrograd*, by Douglas Clayton, *Slavic Review* 54, no. 2 (Summer, 1995): 437-438.

as in realistic plays of the first stage, Columbine and Harlequin appear in Broderzon's play as actors. On the other hand, as a symbolist fantasy with a grotesque atmosphere and otherworldly creatures, such as moon shadows and musical instruments, this *dramolet* fits stylistically into the second phase. Moreover, like early Russian *commedia* plays, *A khasenke* includes a scene of performance. Yet rather than a *commedia* performance, *A khasenke* features a strange little Jewish folk-tale that serves as wedding *badkhones*.<sup>227</sup> This show within a show draws attention to theatrical conventions, and thus brings the *dramolet* closer to the high-modernism of the second phase and of the late *balagan* genre.

A lyrical and static drama written almost entirely in rhyming couplets, *A khasenke* features an atmosphere of gloom and suspicion, scattered with brief humorous interludes. The few turning points in its rickety plot are sudden and almost arbitrary. The play opens with an exposition, presenting the love triangle: the young *inammorati* Harlequin and Columbine, preoccupied with their courting game, and the melancholic *purim-shpiler* who tries to resist his sexual attraction to Columbine. When the lovers notice the *purim-shpiler* standing alone in his corner, Columbine is immediately drawn to the mysterious stranger, while Harlequin warns her against the all-too-strong mystic powers of the old hunchback. Columbine nevertheless admires what she senses as the *purim-shpiler's* spiritual qualities, such as his special connection to God and the inner fire in him. She even starts to regard the virile Harlequin as unsophisticated and foolish. Striving to win her over, Harlequin portrays the Jewish performer in demonic terms, associating him with evil spirits and with the apocalyptic end of the world. Gradually, he manages to arouse Columbine's suspicion. In the meanwhile the *purim-shpiler's* inner struggle against Columbine's sexual appeal intensifies, and he summons the three “moon shadows” – the Biblical heroine Miriam, Ruth and Shulamite – to help him resist temptation. In an effort to make his beloved Columbine acknowledge his rival's dark nature, Harlequin commands the *purim-shpiler* to perform for him and Columbine – much like a *badkhn* at a wedding: “Say a good word for our celebration / adorn our love with your word.” (*Zog tsu undzer simkhe a gut vort / Mit dayn vort – di libe undz batsir*). The *purim-shpiler* obeys and recounts a strange little tale, with no obvious point or structure, which baffles his two listeners and comes as a final proof of his otherness. Finally, following the *purim-shpiler's* premonition of an imminent disaster, Harlequin dies in Columbine's arms while preparing himself for their wedding ceremony. His death marks an abrupt *deus-ex-machina* plot resolution and leads directly to the play's final image: the *purim-shpiler* standing next to the dead Harlequin with his head bent down while Columbine walks away. The final word is then given to the prophet Isaiah, whose voice is heard, condemning “the prostitute” (understood in this context to be Columbine) and ordering her to wander around the world, playing her violin and singing her song.

Far from any aspiration for psychological realism, the play features flat and stereotypical characters. Columbine is attractive, naïve, emotional, and characterized by Biblically resonant feminine-decadent and urban-noble perfumes (“*bsomim un reykhes fun der shtetisher fareydlkayt un krenklikher tsart*”).<sup>228</sup> Handsome and agile Harlequin is the caricature of the romantic lover, eager to seduce the fair lady. He is a trickster (at a certain point he's called “*a feltsl tsadik*,” literally “a righteous person in fur,” which idiomatically designates a pious fraud) who would make any false promise and use any ploy in order to win over his beloved. Moreover, behind the sweetness of his courting love one senses a strong will to power, present in his relation to both Columbine and the *purim-shpiler*. Thus for example Harlequin complains that the *purim-shpiler* does not want to be his slave (“*Er vil nit zayn fun mir kayn knekht*”), and addresses Columbine in the imperative: “Quiet, my mistress! / I'm your master now! / He is a slave now” (*Shvayg, mayn harin! Kh'bin atsind dayn har! / Er iz knekht itsf*).<sup>229</sup> The

<sup>227</sup> Interestingly, in Broderzon's play it is a Jewish folk performer rather than the actor of the *commedia dell'arte* that challenges dramatic norms.

<sup>228</sup> Broderzon, *A khasenke*, 4.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, 14, 19.

*purim-shpiler*, the third side of the play's triangle, is more complex than the two lovers, and is marked by an oscillation between depression and messianic expectations, and between his passions and his moral standards. He too, however, is far from being psychologically credible and seems to embody abstract concepts of innate contradictions rather than emotional qualities. Moreover, his appearance is clearly stereotypical, and belies western models of "love interest," as he looks like a traditional old Jew with a grey beard, sidelocks (*peyes*) and a hunchback. Interestingly, none of these characteristics is mentioned in the play's initial description on the list of dramatic personae. Rather, it is Harlequin who mentions them as part of the anti-Semitic image he constructs. In addition to these three figures and the three "moon-shadows" who make a fleeting appearance, the play features a band of speaking musical instruments – including a clarinet, a fiddle, a trumpet, a double-bass, cymbals and a drum – who function as a subversive Greek chorus, offering encouragement and advice to the characters and interpretations to the play's audience. Throughout the play the instruments make short interventions that range from serious to humorous, and from nonsensical or cryptic to crystal clear. As appropriate for a musical ensemble, the language of these cheerful fellows is an ongoing play of sound and rhyme.

While Broderzon clearly follows earlier Russian models, and most notably Blok's influential *Balaganchik*, his appropriation of commedia dell'arte in *A khasenke* is unique in many ways.<sup>230</sup> First and foremost, this *dramolet* juxtaposes the sixteenth century Italian professional commedia dell'arte with the far less acclaimed *purim-shpil*, the typically amateur Jewish folk performance, originating in the Middle Ages and still in existence in Broderzon's times – though declining in his urban circles. The meaning of the commedia dell'arte in the framework of this cultural encounter differs from its significance in modernist Russian appropriations. Rather than standing for improvisation, spontaneity and the breaking of realistic norms, the commedia dell'arte signifies in *A khasenke* European conventions, theatrical and other, such as Harlequin's aggressive male-chauvinist courting style or his hostility towards the Jew and towards Jewish artistic traditions. Furthermore, while the commedia dell'arte figures stand here for European conservatism and xenophobia, the melancholic *purim-shpiler* embodies the promise of theatrical innovation, most notably in his bizarre folk-tale performance. The klezmer instruments, his musical accompaniment, also manifest the modernist ethos. As a parodical Greek choir, they offer witty and suggestive interventions in the play, thus drawing attention to the construction of the play and challenging theatrical conventions.

Of all the characters of the commedia dell'arte, Pierrot seems to be the one Broderzon identifies with the most, since in both in "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" and *A khasenke* the author constructs an analogy between Pierrot and the *purim-shpiler*. Whereas in the poem Pierrot functions as the *purim-shpiler*'s alter-ego, in *A khasenke* the Jewish performer simply replaces Pierrot, as the play features the peculiar love triangle of a *purim-shpiler*, Harlequin and Columbine—rather than the common one of Pierrot, Harlequin and Columbine. In sympathizing with the pierrotic figure and constructing him as the model for the radical poet, Broderzon partakes in a European and Russian tradition in which Pierrot stands for the writer as bourgeois society's outsider. This, for example, is the case with Blok's *Balaganchik*, especially in Meyerhold's production of this poetic drama, where the famous director

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<sup>230</sup> Blok's renowned lyrical drama *Balagnachik* (The Fairground Booth) no doubt influenced Broderzon in the creation of *A khasenke*, similar in its form (a short and poetic heplaylet), mystic atmosphere, meta-poetic implications, and appropriation of the commedia dell'arte. In Moscow of the 1910s, where Broderzon spent 4 years, Blok was almost universally admired and was the major influence on young poets. Broderzon was no exception to this rule, and admired Blok's opaque and uncanny style. In his book of poetry *Bagaysterung* (Warsaw: Yidish, 1922) Broderzon published a translation of Blok's polyphonic verse epic "The Twelve," in which the twelve Red Army soldiers are a revolutionary reacting of the twelve apostles. The poem, characterized by "mood-creating sounds, polyphonic rhythms, and harsh, slangy language" (Encyclopedia Britannica) clearly inspired Broderzon's own writing, as evident, for example, in his use of the "tra-ta-rakh" interjection, and possibly also in his use of the mood-creating sounds of the musical instruments in *A khasenke*.

himself played the role of Pierrot. In substituting Pierrot with the *purim-shpiler* Broderzon also endows the pierrotic figure with new meaning. The *purim-shpiler*/Pierrot's melancholia signifies indeed, as in the Russian model, the existential loneliness and abjection of the modernist artist; It also indicates, however, the trope of the eternal sorrow of the exilic Jew. Moreover, in Russian modernist drama Pierrot stands in opposition to the agile and active Harlequin and is typically marked as effeminate, homosexual or degenerate, and thus as a subversive diversion from the bourgeois or fascist norms of "healthy masculinity." In *A khasenke* Pierrot's alterity is transformed into the otherness of the *purim-shpiler*, who signifies the intellectual artist as well as the Jew—homeless, dressed in rags, well-learned and spiritual. It is easy to see why in a culture where notions of the degenerate Jews and the effeminate Jewish men circulated, Pierrot may have been regarded as Jewish, and the Jew—as pierrotic.

The connection between the *purim-shpil* and the commedia dell'arte, indeed an important a property of *A khasenke* and of "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*," is also a necessary condition of the creation of these two works. Broderzon constructed the Jewish folk performer along the lines of the fictitious characters of the commedia dell'arte in their Russian modernist interpretation, thus striving to create Yiddish modernist poetry and drama that participates in contemporary Russian and European trends, and is yet endowed with specific Jewish contents. Broderzon's *purim-shpiler* as depicted in "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" and in *A khasenke* is rooted in Jewish tradition and is simultaneously in conversation with European reality and culture. The love/hate triangle in *A khasenke* that links the *purim-shpiler*, Harlequin and Columbine reenacts the inter-cultural conversation between the two theatrical traditions and reconstructs the *purim-shpil* as a modernist Jewish icon. The cultural encounter depicted in the play is rather grim, often a clash of stereotypes rather than a dialogue that enhances mutual understanding. This troubling encounter is realized nevertheless in the framework of a modernist Yiddish play, which owes as much to its author's deep familiarity with and involvement in Russian culture of his time.

Like many modernist plays using commedia dell'arte 's characters and motifs, *A khasenke* does not follow the structure and other theatrical conventions of the Italian folk play, but rather appropriates it freely to suit its needs. Whereas the Italian model is plot-oriented, *A khasenke* reads as a long meditation on the *purim-shpiler*, exploring his character, his worldview and his image as perceived by Columbine and Harlequin. Following the *purim-shpiler*'s self-portrayal in the exposition comes a long conversation between Columbine and Harlequin that takes up the lion's share of the playlet. The thematic focus of this dialogue is the *purim-shpiler*. While Columbine senses the performer's virtues, Harlequin strives to make her see the *purim-shpiler*'s sinister nature, stressing his unappealing appearance, cunningness, and contact with dark forces.

The "*shtiler purim-shpiler*" (quiet *purim-shpiler*), the leading role in *A khasenke*, shares many of the attributes and motifs of the speaker in "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*," such as the simultaneous existence of sorrow alongside joy ("the tear hidden behind the mask"), a sober-pessimistic view of life alongside sanguine youthful spirits, and an all-pervading gaze that breaks away from the mask and freely explores the world. However, whereas in "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" the speaker overtly expresses his merriment and indifference to world misery, in *A khasenke* the *der shtiler purim-shpiler* is a melancholy and tragic figure, whose positive powers exist only as a potential, awaiting the right moment to burst forth:

שענקט אַ מאָל דער פּרילינג מיר אַ פּונק,  
 גיט אַ מאַל די זון צו מיר אַ ווּנק  
 . . .  
 און איך לויף פאַרויס אין פּריידן-בלענד  
 אָדער פּליגלען ווערן מיינע הענט

פליגלען פון התלהבות אינעם שווינג  
און איך ווער אַלץ יִנגער, יִנגער יונג,  
יעדער אָטעם – ווערט אַ פּאָן צעברענט  
יעדער פּאָן – אַן עמוד אש... אַ זיגל –  
יעדער בליץ – פּאַרברודערט מיטן וואָרט.

At times the spring grants me a spark,  
At times the sun gives me a wink  
...  
And I run forwards in a dazzle of happiness  
Or my hands become wings  
Wings of excitement in the impetus  
And I become ever younger and young,  
Every breath – a flag burned  
Every flag – a pillar of fire... a column –  
Every thunder – brother to the word.<sup>231</sup>

While the “today” in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” is portrayed as a momentary joyful eruption, presumably Purim—a day known for the commandment of celebration and reversal (“*ve-nahafokh hu*”), the awaited “spring” in *A khasenke* seems anarchist messianic, as it is associated with fire, blood and revolution. And whereas the poem's sad *purim-shpiler* opts for a momentary carnivalesque celebration, the gloomy “*shtiler purim-shpiler*” in *A khasenke* is characterized by an ongoing search for happiness. In both cases, however, the *purim-shpiler* oscillates between deep pessimism and revolutionary optimism. As a sad clown or a manic-depressive revolutionary, the *purim-shpiler* becomes emblematic of an existential position, rather than an occupation or a dramatic role. Broderzon reinvents the folk performer as the embodiment of a social, political and artistic worldview, and thus transforms him into a cultural icon. In “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” the performer marks the paradoxical nature of revolutionary spirits in a disillusioned post-war era. In *A khasenke* he signifies the peculiar state of the Jewish artist, who searches for his way among various sources of inspiration, and who, facing European xenophobia and miserable living conditions, is still strongly connected to his noble origins and to the potential for creative talent, energy and joy.

One way to interpret *A khasenke* is as a play dealing with the Jew's place in Europe. The portrayal of the *purim-shpiler* is clearly in line with common European and even anti-Semitic images. The *dramolet* foregrounds the Jew's miserable existence in Exile, and engages with stereotypes such as Ahasver, the wandering Jew, or the Jew as involved in commerce: “He holds in hand commercial scales” (*er halt in hant a miskher-vog*).<sup>232</sup> In this reading the play depicts the ambivalent relations between the Jew and his others, a relationship that entails mutual attraction and repulsion, trust and suspicion, and often complex combinations of these contradictory feelings. *A khasenke* also plays on well-known themes such as the Jew's inner struggle between the seductive foreign lover and loyalty to Jewish tradition, or the Jew's eternal yearning for redemption: “When will the sun's crown be lit? / When will the dark smoke disappear? . . . When will the crying stop in me?” (*ven vet oyflaykhtn di*

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>232</sup> Ahasver appears also in Broderzon's poem “*Menakhem ov*.” See Moyshe published in *Ibergang* (Łódź: L. Kahan, 1921), 25. In this poem the wandering Jew is a prophet: “*fun eybik vandldikn yid / dem midn ahasfer, dem novi mit di veyen shtume / vos klogt af shtum-loshn zayn biter golesdike lid. // A shtumer novi geyt! Vi shreklekh iz zayn vilder emes.*” (From an eternal wandering Jew / the tired Ahasver, the prophet with the blowing voice / who laments in sign language [literally: the language of the mute] / his bitter diasporic song. // A mute prophet goes. / How terrible is his wild truth.)

*kroyn fon zun?/ Ven farshvindn vet der shvartser roykh/ . . . Ven vet oyfhern in mir s'geveyn?)*

The *purim-shpiler*, however, stands in this play for more than “the Jew” and *A khasenke* is not only a play about Jews and their mostly hostile environment. It is also a meta-poetic play in which the *purim-shpiler* signifies the artist figure—marking a poetic position of loneliness and alienation from the world. Hence, a more nuanced reading would suggest that the play addresses the stance of the Jewish artist in contemporary European reality and the various alternatives available to him. On this interpretation the inner struggle of the play's protagonist and his complex relation with his European peers can be understood as the Jewish artist's oscillation between foreign and Jewish art.

Yet *A khasenke* is not a simple didactic Jewish parable, featuring the good Jewish art versus the evil or inferior non-Jewish option. The meaning of Jewish art in the play is not predetermined. The *purim-shpiler* seeks his way among various Jewish sources of inspiration, from the folk tale, Klezmer music, and the rhymed verse of the folk-song to lofty Biblical tradition of prophetic poetry, values and King David's harp. Harlequin and Columbine offer alternative models—not only the commedia dell'arte with its popular connotations, but also other European traditions, such as courtly love poetry, with its concepts of wooing and winning the fair lady. The encounter between the cultural worlds has no simple solution, and Jewish art is not necessarily portrayed as superior to the European one. Moreover, until the very end of the play, no clear answer is provided to the question of what is Jewish art. *A khasenke* cannot be summed up in the voice of the prophet Isaiah, condemning foreign art as a prostitute. Rather, the play, indeed a meditation on Jewish art, presents a polyphony of artistic alternatives, new and ancient, radical and conservative, foreign and Jewish, offering more doubts and questions than answers. A modernist play in dialogue with its Russian equivalents, *A khasenke* introduces unresolvable paradoxes, experimenting with parody and the grotesque and, with artistic conventions and their limits.

Despite significant differences in their worldview, behavior, and the artistic choices they represent, the three main characters in *A khasenke* share one important attribute: they are all performers. Upon noticing the *purim-shpiler* for the first time, Harlequin immediately reassures Columbine: “Don't be afraid. He is also an actor” (*shrek zikh nit, es iz a shpiler oykh*). Harlequin's long discussion of the *purim-shpiler*, which gradually becomes more and more venomous, starts paradoxically with a proclamation of assurance and affinity, which is also a self-conscious reference to the “brotherhood” of actors. In “*Ikh, a purim-shpiler..*” the Jewish performer becomes both a fictional figure and a cultural figure – much like Harlequin and Columbine. In *A khasenke*, on the other hand, it is Harlequin and Columbine who become actors, and are thus closer to the *purim-shpiler*. This re-interpretation of the commedia dell'arte characters as actors is much in line with modernist Russian appropriations of this performance genre, and most notably with meta-poetic plays such as Blok's *Balaganchik*.

Not merely a common denominator, performance, and especially the art of story-telling, become an arena of competition between the *purim-shpiler* and Harlequin. Early on in the play and as part of his courting efforts, Harlequin offers to tell Columbine a story. Interestingly, as soon as the European figure/actor mentions story-telling, terms directly associated with Jewish folk performance come up, such as a *maysale* (folk tale), klezmer, and *droshe-geshank* (literally, “sermon-gift/s” – wedding presents)—rather than more general terms available in Yiddish such as a *dertseylung* (story), *muzik* and *matones* (gifts): “*Un far dir a maysale ikh veys. . . /mikh baglyytn vet a libe-flayt, / klezmerlekh, kh'bashtel a lid bay aykh*” (And for you I know a folk tale. . . / a love-flute will accompany me / *Klezmer*, I order a song from you, 8), and: “*Ikh breng dir droshe-geshank atsind*” (I bring you a wedding-sermon gift now, 10). These declarations link Harlequin to the *badkhn*, who is typically accompanied by the klezmer, and who, as part of his role as Master of Ceremonies, announces the gifts

brought by the guests. Harlequin, however, never keeps his promise to tell Columbine a story or conduct their matrimonial ceremony. Instead, at the end of the play, he orders the *purim-shpiler* to perform at his wedding, namely to deliver a sermon or sing a praise-song in honor of Columbine and Harlequin, the bride and the groom. The *purim-shpiler* agrees to perform for the young couple, but chooses to tell a strange Jewish tale, which has nothing to do with Harlequin and Columbine nor with romantic love in general, and is apparently not what Harlequin has envisioned. The story told by the *purim-shpiler* serves as direct evidence for the deep gap between him and Harlequin in terms of style and manners. However, it also links the two performers, since it becomes clear that both the *purim-shpiler* and Harlequin take professional pride in performing and specifically in the art of story-telling.

While Harlequin resembles the *purim-shpiler* and even competes with him as a story-teller, he also claims to be a European poet, in the tradition of old-time fashioned, romantic verse. “I’m your knight, your galant poet” (*Kh'bin dayn riter, dayn poet-galant*), he brags to Columbine.<sup>233</sup> Moreover, Harlequin attacks the *purim-shpiler* for his inability to create a heroic song, and for producing instead typical Jewish songs – either lamentations or songs of flattery to the non-Jewish authorities (*ma yofes lid*): “And I only know that he's a Jew, / and *Ma-yofes* is his Heroic song/ that is, a song of complaint” (*Un ikh veys nor, az er iz a yid, / un ma-yofes iz zayn heldn-lid. / shteynsgezogt, a lid fun loyter klog*).<sup>234</sup> Harlequin also exclaims that “He is a *purim-shpiler* in the world!” [ *R'iz a purim-shpiler in der velt!* [emphasis in the original]], which in this context functions as a self-explanatory derogatory term. This professional rivalry between the *purim-shpiler* and Harlequin reaches its climax in a direct clash between the two:

#### ארלעקיין

ווי דו זעסט אים, אָט דער וואַנדער-גר!  
 טראָגט ער אום די בשורה פון דעם קץ –  
 יאָמערט ער אין נעכט – ווי ווילדע קעץ,  
 אָט דער לץ מיט נעגל-ציינער שאַרף...

#### דער שטילער פורים-שפילער

ס'איז פאַרלוירן ערגעץ-ווי מײן האַרף.  
 זוך איך זי אין אַלע עקן וועלט –

#### Harlequin

As you see him, the wandering alien!  
 He carries the message of the end –  
 He wails at night – like wild cats,  
 this clown with nails-teeth sharp...<sup>235</sup>

#### The Silent *purim-shpiler*

I lost my harp somewhere  
 I've been looking for it (her) all over the world.<sup>236</sup>

<sup>233</sup> Broderzon, *A khasenke*, 19.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>235</sup> The neologism “vander-ger” combines the words “vanderer” (wonderer) and “ger” (a stranger, and also a convert to Judaism).

<sup>236</sup> Broderzon, *A khasenke*, 20.

Following a long dialogue with Columbine, in which he describes the *purim-shpiler* in terms that are increasingly fiendish, Harlequin addresses his nemesis' qualities as a performer. Only then does the *purim-shpiler* respond to the the attack on him and on his artistic standing. Of all the unfavorable things said about him, it is the portrayal of his nature and professional skills that finally makes the *purim-shpiler* interfere in the dialogue between Harlequin and Columbine. Interestingly, the *purim-shpiler* expresses partial agreement with Harlequin, admitting his eternal wandering and artistic lack. Yet by mentioning his missing harp the *purim-shpiler* also links himself to ancient Biblical artistic traditions – from King David's mythological harp to the playing of the Levites in the Temple.

Further allusions to ancient Jewish traditions are found throughout the play, serving as potential models for the modern artist. Thus, for example, the *purim-shpiler* summons three “moon-shadows” – female Biblical figures related to music, dance and song, to help him resist Columbine's dangerous temptation. The *purim-shpiler* refers to these mythological creatures as part of his inner world, exclaiming: “Oh, my memories from long ago!” (*O, zikhroynes mayne fun amol!*, 23). It is clearly the realm of art that connects the performance artist and his three muses. Miriam, the first, responds to the *purim-shpiler*'s “shining voice” (*shtralendike shtim*) and dances “in light before him” (*Un ikh tants in likht antkegn im*, 23). These words fit well this “moon shadow” character, since they allude to the traditional text of *Kidesh Levone*, the Jewish ritual in which one recites a prayer for the new moon, that includes the following words: “Just as I dance toward you [the moon], and I cannot reach you, so will my enemies be unable to reach me.” The religious ritual, often rejected or overlooked in modern narratives of Jewish artistic heritage, is thus presented here as another source of Jewish creativity. When the *purim-shpiler* invites the second moon shadow he once again associates an ancient symbol with art. “*Kum tsu mir mit tents/ mit dayn gezang*” (come to me with dance, with your song), he addresses the Shulamite, the female lover of the *Song of Songs*, to whom he refers as “sister,” much like the male figure in the *Song of Songs*. The Shulamite answers him: “My groom awaits long in his misery. The groom looks for my song at night” (*S'vart mayn khosn in zayn elent lang. / s'zukunft der khosn in der nakht mayn lid*), echoing the voice of the Shulamite depicting her lover and his longing for her, and reversing the image of the Shulamite looking for her beloved.<sup>237</sup> This amorous dialogue ends with another allusion to the *Song of Songs*'s dark-skinned Shulamite, as the *purim-shpiler* exclaims: “You're black, my bride, but so beautiful” (*shvarts bistu, mayn kale, nor vi sheyn*),<sup>238</sup> followed by a series of metaphors, in which he compares the beloved's breasts to pigeons, or her thighs– to a colorful rainbow, echoing the famous Biblical love poem, where both male and female lovers compare each other's body parts to animals, plants, etc.<sup>239</sup> Finally, the third moon-shadow, Ruth, responds to the lover's song: “I hear your song of sorrow and longing/ I hear your voice looking for expression.” (*kh'her zayn oysgeveynt farbenkt gezang. / Kh'her dayn oysgang-zukhndike shtim*). In these words Ruth too alludes to the *Song of Songs*, through the motif of the male lover's voice (“*Kol dodi*”). The ongoing intertextual relations with the Bible and most prominently with the *Song of Songs* constitute a search for a poetic language suitable for expressing love and sexual attraction. The *Song of Songs*, once stripped from its allegorized sacred reading, provides a romantic vocabulary from a prestigious source that can be claimed as specifically Jewish.

Whereas the *purim-shpiler* reconnects with his culture and textual memories, Harlequin refuses

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 23. See *Song of Songs* 3:5.

<sup>238</sup> The words “You're black, my bride, but so beautiful” allude to “*al tir'uni she'ani shecharchoret*” (Look not upon me, because I'm black), in *Song of Songs* 1:6, as well as to the Yiddish folk-song tradition, where one finds songs such as “*shvarts bistu shvarts / ober mit kheyne / far vemen du bist mies / far mir bistu sheyn*” (Black you are, black / but with grace / for some you're ugly / for me you're beautiful). See Y.L. Cahan, *Yidishe folkslider* (New York: Internatsyonale biblyotek farlag, 1912), 68.

<sup>239</sup> See *Song of Songs* 4:1-5, 5: 11-15, 7, 2-10.

to disclose his origins or even his true name to Columbine, despite her repeated requests. This secrecy casts suspicion on Harlequin, as the musical instruments clarify in their interludes, in which they refer to him as “*a feltsl tsadik*” (a hypocrite) or, ironically, as a “*tam*” (naïve, simple-minded). One wonders if Harlequin's self descriptions, his declarations of love for Columbine and promises of a glorious future can be trusted. These doubts reflect not only upon Harlequin's nature or his intentions as a suitor, but also on his art and on the artistic rivalry between him and the *purim-shpiler*, presenting his art as insincere. Responding to Columbine's question regarding his origins Harlequin addresses also his art:

כ'בין דיין ליב-באשערטער – כ'בין דיין טאָג!  
 כ'בין דער טאָג דער לעצטער – איך פאַרמאָג  
 גרויסן וויסן, שלאַנקייט, עלעגאַנץ:  
 ס'איז מיין לידעלע אַ ניין-באַקאַנטס...  
 כ'טראָג מיט זיך פון רום אַ לאַרבער-קראַנץ.

I'm your chosen beloved – I'm your day!  
 I'm the last day – I possess  
 Great knowledge, liveness, elegance  
 My song is a new acquaintance...  
 I carry around with me a laurel wreath of fame.

Harlequin answers Columbine with a pompous hyperbole (“I'm your day!”). As he boasts about his qualities and central role in Columbine's life, decorating himself with a laurel wreath, he also admits that his song is “a new acquaintance” (a *nay-bakants*). Harlequin clearly uses the neologism “newly-known” positively, the way one would use the common term it is based on, “well-known” (*gut bakant*). “Newly-known,” however, sounds like the opposite of famous, and Harlequin's coinage can thus be understood as a slip of the tongue, a rare moment of honesty in the trickster's speech, in which he discloses the fact that his “song” – his art, perhaps also he himself are in fact little known, or in other words, rootless or even fake. Harlequin's art is revealed as the antithesis of the *purim-shpiler's* creativity. Whereas the *purim-shpiler* is characterized by inner fire and linked to authentic Jewish sources from the Biblical “muses” to the folk tale, Harlequin's performance is pompous, insincere and lacks substantial foundations. This criticism of the Harlequin is aimed no doubt at Western art. More specifically, it may point at modern European art, as the term “newly-known” associates Harlequin with modern European art, with its obsession with innovation.

The enigmatic ending of the play, the words of the prophet Isaiah, concludes the meta-poetic discourse with an address to yet another type of performer – this time the iconic figure of the prostitute:

זונה גרויסע, וואָס דו אייביק ביסט,  
 וואָס דו האָסט די אַלטוועלטן פאַרמיאוס'ט,  
 וואָס דו האָסט באַשפּאַטן מענטש און גאָט,  
 וואָס דו האַנדלסט מיט דיין קראַנקער שאַנד!  
 זונה, נעם דיין פידעלע אין האַנט,  
 רינגל אום-אַרום די חרפה-שטאָט!  
 נעם דיין פידעלע, און זינג דיין ליד.  
 דו, פאַרגעסענע, זאָלסט זיין אין מיט  
 אין דערמיט פון אַלץ, פון נאַכט פאַרבלאַסט,  
 זונה גרויסע, און פון טאָג פאַרהאַסט!

Big Whore, as you eternally are,  
 Who made the old worlds loathsome  
 Who mocked people and God,  
 Who traffics in your diseased genitals!  
 Whore, take your fiddle in you hand,  
 Walk around the city of disgrace!  
 Take your fiddle and sing your song.  
 You, forgotten, should be in the middle  
 In midst of it all, pale at night,  
 Big whore, hated by day!

Isaiah's prophesy is preceded by the following stage directions: "Columbine goes away. And the voice of the prophet Isaiah follows her in thunder-chase (*dunern-geyeg*)." While these directions point at Columbine as the whore, the reader nevertheless remains baffled – If Columbine is indeed the harlot why isn't she called by her name? And if Columbine is a promiscuous woman, why doesn't she act as one in the course of the play? The *purim-shpiler* indeed regards Columbine as an evil temptress, but there are no direct attempts on her part to seduce him, and no mention of her selling her body to him or to others. Rather, she seems like a naïve and delicate figure. Why then this sudden severe attack on her? One can also wonder about the meaning of Columbine's odd punishment to walk around "the city of shame," singing her song and playing the fiddle. Finally, perhaps the most unsettling question: whose perspective does the prophet express? Is this the *purim-shpiler*'s position? Are these concluding words also the moral of the play?

While many of these questions remain open, the book of Isaiah provides partial explanation for the harlot's strange punishment. In the prophesy about the kingdom of Tyre (*Tsor*), known for her vibrant commerce, one finds the following verse:

קחי כנור סבי עיר, זונה נשכחה; היטיבי נגן הרבי-שיר, למען תזכרי.

Take a harp, go about the city, thou harlot that hast been forgotten; make sweet melody, sing many songs, that thou mayest be remembered. (KJV)

Broderzon was probably fascinated by the grotesque image of the harlot doomed to wander and perform—indeed a vividly mysterious ending to the play. The Biblical commandment to sing much and play well—albeit as punishment and a sign of doom – may have had appealed to the young poet and playwright in quest for the origins of Jewish art.<sup>240</sup> Moreover, in a typical modernist gesture, Broderzon appropriates here the Biblical punishment and the city mentioned in it for a portrayal of the poetry/performance of the modern city. To what extent, however, did Broderzon also sympathize with the moral message of the of Biblical wrath?

Whereas in the book of Isaiah the harlot symbolizes a foreign kingdom, in the ending of *A khasenke* she's defined more vaguely as the "other"—most likely Columbine, as the non-Jewish lover, or perhaps as the European artist. Interestingly, however, this "other" also resembles the Jewish performer in various ways. The harlot's destiny echos the fate of Ahasver, the wandering Jew, also one

<sup>240</sup> In *Isaiah* the harlot's performance, meant to remind God of her existence, indeed succeeds, as seventy years later God remembers Tyre. The cursed kingdom then returns to her fornication and commerce – only this time dedicating her hire to God.

of the derogatory names by which Harlequin refers to the *purim-shpiler*. The fiddle, a major symbol of Eastern European Jewish music, also links the whore in *A khasenke* to the Jewish performer. Indeed, the reference to the fiddle is by way of an anachronistic interpretation of the word “*kinor*” in Isaiah’s prophecy. Unlike the modern Hebrew “*kinor*,” which designates the fiddle or the violin, the Biblical “*kinor*” designated a lyre or a small harp, and King James and other translations are therefore correct to translate it as “harp.” Nevertheless, in Broderzon’s allusion to Isaiah’s prophecy, the harlot is destined to play the fiddle, and more precisely the “*fidele*,” in the diminutive form so common in Yiddish. Whether or not Broderzon was aware of the gap between the Biblical and modern meanings of the Hebrew “*kinor*” is difficult to determine. In any case, he no doubt took great pleasure in juxtaposing the three worlds so distant from each other—the Bible, commedia dell’arte, and Eastern European Jewish culture, via the common tropes of the fiddle and the wandering performer or Jew.

The use of Biblical language, and most notably the love idiom of the *Song of Songs* by the commedia artists is another way in which Broderzon brings together divergent cultural worlds. The Romantic dialogue between Harlequin and Columbine, similar to that of the *purim-shpiler* and the three moon shadows, is fused with allusions to the famous Biblical love poem. Thus, for example, Harlequin addresses Columbine in the words: “Come, happiness is already on the threshold / Come, happiness knocks already on the door” (*Kum, es iz dos glik shoyfn oyfn shvel! / Kum, es klapt dos glik shoyfn in der tir...*). The metaphor of the lover knocking on the door echoes the renowned image in *Song of Songs*, in which the male figure knocks on his beloved’s door, asking her to open it for him, and she is playfully dallying. Another example is found in the speech of Columbine, who in her enthusiasm about the *purim-shpiler* exclaims three times: “Oh, how wonderful is his figure!” (*O, vi vunderbar iz zayn geshtalt!*).<sup>241</sup> While not a direct allusion to any specific verse, these words seem nevertheless to be inspired by the language of the *Song of Songs*, in verses such as: “How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights! This thy stature is like to a palm tree.” (*Ma Yafit u-ma na’amt, ahava ba’ta’anugim. Zot komatekh damta le-tamar*).<sup>242</sup> The use of Biblical romantic imagery by the actors of commedia dell’arte; their employment of specifically Jewish Yiddish terms, such as “*droshe-geshank*” (wedding-sermon gifts); Columbine’s playing of the fiddle and Harlequin competing with the *purim-shpiler* in story-telling—all these “Judaizing” gestures bring the characters of the *commedia* closer to the *purim-shpiler*.

Throughout the play and in a variety of ways *A khasenke* juxtaposes the Jew and the non-Jew, European popular theater and Jewish traditional performance. The ultimate meaning of these cultural confrontations is, however, hard to nail down. On the one hand the play constructs dichotomies such as the authentic *purim-shpiler* versus the insincere Harlequin, or the pious Jew versus the foreign temptress. On the other hand, the Jewish performer and his European colleagues share many attributes. Whereas the play dramatizes the conflict between the *purim-shpiler* and the *commedia* actors, it also features a common universe of poet-singers and itinerant performers in which figures from the Bible, the commedia dell’arte and Eastern European Jewish culture all take part, oftentimes speaking the same language. Broderzon thus constructs the *commedia* artists as the “other,” while simultaneously deconstructing their alterity.

While appropriating a variety of sources, from the Biblical poetry of *Isaiah* and the *Song of Songs* and the Jewish folk-tale to gallant courtly love poetry and European drama, Broderzon refrains from limiting his characters to the sources suitable for their cultural background. The author clearly appreciates all these various materials and yet he keeps an ironic distance from them, mocking their pathos or folkishness, and taking pleasure in the cultural clashes that occur when these divergent

<sup>241</sup> Broderzon, *A khasenke*, 16-17.

<sup>242</sup> *Song of Songs* 7:7-8. The triple repetition brings this declaration of love even closer to parallelistic Biblical style, and particularly to *Song of Songs*, with its famous three oaths (“*Shalosh ha-shevuot*”) “not to stir up love until it please.”

cultural traditions are placed side by side.

How, in light of this celebration of uneasy cultural encounters, should one understand the figure of the promiscuous foreign woman? This riddle, one among many that the play presents, evokes a whole array of questions. Why does Columbine, who throughout the play seems rather idealistic and naïve, come to be regarded by the *purim-shpiler* as a Lilith-like figure, seductive and dangerous, and why the play's final word – the prophecy of Isaiah – denounce and punish her severely? Why, while constructing Columbine as such a demonic other, does the play also connect her to the Jewish performer and his destiny? And if indeed “*A khasenke*” deals with Jewish and non-Jewish art and culture, can the play's moral lesson be summed up by the conclusion that foreign culture is evil and doomed?<sup>243</sup> While I cannot offer sufficient answers to all these questions I would like to warn against a simplistic interpretation of a play which features a vivid dialogue with non-Jewish traditions, and which in itself was created under the influence of Russian Avant-Grade circles. I would like to suggest that the play ironizes both the European norms of courtship and romantic love, as well as the Jewish trope of the foreign woman attracted to the Jew and trying to seduce him, as in the Biblical story of Potiphar's wife or the medieval legend about the daughter of the King of France who fell in love with Rabeynu-tam.<sup>244</sup> Indeed, this trope lies at the heart of Broderzon's first major work, *Sikhes Khulin*, a pseudo-medieval tale, allegedly based on the chronicles of the community of Prague, about a Jew fancied by the daughter of the demonic Asmodeus and kidnapped by her. The apparent irony *Sikhes Khulin* arouses the suspicion that in *A khasenke* too, the trope of the evil foreign woman should be understood as tongue-in-cheek. Thus, the male Jewish anxiety regarding the non-Jewish woman should not be interpreted as the author's stance. Rather, it probably helps characterize the *purim-shpiler* as the prototypical traditional exilic Jew—alongside his other attributes (at times verging on anti-Semitism), such as his gray beard and sidelocks, his hunched back and burden of misery, or the more positive but equally stereotypical traits such as his special connection to ancient Jewish sources.

I find it hard to accept that “the words of the prophet Isaiah” that end the play present the play's moral message. Broderzon was no doubt fascinated with the trenchant style and sexual imagery of Biblical prophecy, and appropriated the Biblical tone and metaphor to provide the play with a surprise ending that is Jewish and yet universal, classical and yet provocative. Unlike the Biblical prophet for whom the harlot is a metaphor serving the moral message, Broderzon addresses the image of the cursed prostitute more playfully. While the framework remains that of a prophecy of doom, the vivid image of the whore as a performer sent into the world to sing and play takes on here a life of its own. The moralistic implications, on the other hand, become more vague. The free appropriation of Isaiah serves as the open-ended closure of the meta-poetic play, in which one's “song” or art is one's destiny.

A meta-poetic play like its Russian equivalents of the “*balagan*” genre, *A khasenke* engages with the nature of art and theater. Yet unlike the common universalizing tendency in Russian modernism, which blurs the differences between Russian and Western European art, and between high and low culture, Broderzon's poetics relates to the specific cultures—Jewish or Western European – that create the works of art. Rather than thinking in purely abstract terms of “theatricality” or “L'art pour l'art,” Broderzon's modernism is closely connected to notions of cultural diversity and social and aesthetic clashes. As evident in his manifestos, for Broderzon the question “What is art?” is inseparable

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<sup>243</sup> Rozier points to another strange fact related to these questions: How is it that a work that makes fun of romantic love and whose female protagonist is so evil is dedicated to Broderzon's young wife, with whom he lived so happily? See Rozier, *Moyshes Broderzon*, 130-136.

<sup>244</sup> Rabeynu Tam is Rabi Ya'akov ben Meir, Rashi's grandson. In Manger's version of the story the French king's daughter becomes the Queen of Turkey. See Ben-Zion Fishler, “Ma'ase be-rabenu tam, bat-melekh Turkia u-vat-melekh Tsarfat,” *Ha'aretz*, 13 March 2009. <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=1070609&contrassID=1&subContrassID=18&sbSubContrassID=0>

from the problem “What is Jewish art?” and likewise, as we see in *A khasenke*, from the question “What is European art?”<sup>245</sup> Constructing and deconstructing these common categories, *A khasenke* offers no simple solution to the dilemma of the Jewish artist. The play’s persistent emphasis on cultural particularity and its emphasis on the complex nature of inter-cultural encounters, including mutual notions of rivalry, jealousy, attraction, fear and distrust, may indeed be Broderzon’s unique contribution to the dialogue with Russian and European modernism.

### C. The *broder zinger* at the Junction of Cultures: The Rebellious Jewish Performer in *Lilisl*

“*Broder zinger*” (The Singer of Brody) was Broderzon’s first pseudonym, which he started using as early as 1908, when writing for the *Lodzher Togblat* (Łódź Daily) and later for “*Dos nayer lodzher folks-blatt* (The New Łódź Folk Newspaper). As a master of rhyme and punning, the young poet probably enjoyed the similarity in sound between BRODERZON and BRODER ZINGER. This remained Broderzon’s pen name throughout the years, alongside other folkish names, such as “*Der rebbe Elimelekh*,” “*Reb Zanvele*,” and “*Shmil-Shmelke*.”<sup>246</sup> It seems that from early on in his career Broderzon identified with folkish figures, and specifically with the *broder zinger*, who travelled around Galicia from the 1840 onwards, performing in beer gardens and wine cellars with songs and at times also related little sketches, and who, by the time Broderzon started writing, had disappeared from the taverns, and to a large extent also from collective memory.

In his *Yung yidish* period (1919-1921), after dedicating two works to the *purim-shpiler*, the poem “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler*” and the “*dramolet*” *A khasenke* discussed above, Broderzon embraced the figure of the bohemian *broder zinger* in yet another “*dramolet*,” *Lilisl*. Named after the play’s main female role, Lilith of Jewish legend, Broderzon’s *dramolet Lilisl* (written 1921 and published in the Almanac of the Warsaw Union of Authors and Journalists *Varshever Shriftn* 1926-7) nevertheless features the Jewish male performer as the leading character, a bohemian and drunkard – as befitting his profession. The play presents the story of Asmodai’s wife Lilisl, who wishes to divorce her old “*oyver botl*,” (over the hill) husband in order to marry the Jewish-Chinese poet Pis-khn-pe (literally the Hebrew is “the right to open one’s mouth chopped up into mono-syllables to mimic Chinese”).<sup>247</sup> As in *A khasenke*, here too a wedding performance provides the high point of the play – and the final twist in the plot. In *Lilisl*’s happy ending the *broder zinger*, invited to entertain the guests, ends up running away with the bride – to the great dismay of the groom. Subtitled “a grotesque,” *Lilisl* features expressionist atmosphere with apocalyptic overtones, and a mixture of human characters and various mythical and spiritual entities. It is, however, also fused with abundant humor and cheerfulness, which provides a compelling display of the author’s comic talent.

<sup>245</sup> Thus, for example, in the first issue of *Yung yidish*, the manifesto claims: “*Far der kunst! Far dem yungn sheynem Yidish*” (*Yung yidish* 1 (March 1919, 1). The manifesto published in the second issue provides a list of sources of inspiration, starting with: “*di shuln fun tanakh, fun grikhisher mitologye, fun shir-hashirim, fun lord-bayrn, sheli. . .*” (the academies of the Bible, of the Greek mythology, of the Song of Songs, of Lord Byron, Shelly. . .). This manifesto ends with a citation from the Song of Songs (translated into Yiddish): “*di berg hobn geshprungen, vi di inden, un di berglakh – kivne tson*” (“The mountains skipped like rams, and the little hills like lambs.” Psalms, 114:4), followed by the words: “*Oykh futurizm – tsu aldi eybike gute yor!*” (Also Futurism, to happy eternal years!) See *Yung yidish* 1 (April 1919, 1).

<sup>246</sup> See “Broderzon, Moyshe” *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, ed. Zalmen Zylbercweig, (New York: Elisheva, 1931-1969) I: 215. “Der Rebbe Elimelekh” alludes to a famous Yiddish song. Rebbe Elimelekh from Lizhensk (Leżajsk), born in 1717, was one of the founding Rabbis of the Hasidic movement. The popular Yiddish song about him, however, was written by the radical satirist Moyshe Nadir (1885-1943), who wrote for many years for the communist *Frayhayt*. Nadir’s intention was to mock the Hasidic tendency to imitate the Rabbi and the asceticism of rabbi Elimelekh’s, whom he reconstructs as a merry drunk. In a sense, Rabbi Elimelekh is yet another folk performer, as the poem depicts him singing and directing a whole celebration around him.

<sup>247</sup> Interestingly, Lilis is also one of Columbine’s names in *A khasenke*. See Broderzon, *A khasenke*, 16.

I suggest that *Lilisl* may be read as *A khasenke* as a meta-poetic play, which displays cultural alternatives and constructs a vivid dialogue between them. Whereas the *purim-shpiler* is juxtaposed with the *commedia* actors, *Lilisl* sets an opposition between the *broder zinger* and a bourgeois culture marked by hollow fashions and affected poetic standards. If in *A khasenke* Harlequin, the *purim-shpiler*'s rival, competes with the Jewish performer both in the realm of story-telling and for the heart of Columbine, in *Lilisl* the *broder zinger* contends—artistically and romantically—with the Jewish-Chinese poet Pis-khn-pe, an illegitimate descendent of the famous Chinese poet Li-Tai-Pe.<sup>248</sup> Armed with humorous rhymed songs and a group of klezmer musicians, the popular *broder zinger* challenges the highly acclaimed lyrical-romantic poet who represents one of the world's most ancient cultures, and eventually prevails over him—winning the heart of powerful *Lilisl*.

In addition to the *broder zinger* and Pis-khn-pe, *Lilisl* presents a wide array of characters, almost all of whom are involved with poetry, music or with both. One can roughly divide them into two camps: those who support the Jewish performance artist and those who follow the Chinese poet. On the one hand, pretentious European artists and art critics, who create an aura of admiration around the alleged Chinese poet, and on the other—wild and anarchic supporters of the *broder zinger*. To the first camp clearly belongs Pis-khn-pe's avid admirer and follower Iks-Igrek (the French pronunciation of the letters X and Y), a European intellectual who considers himself a poetry *maven*, and occasionally co-writes poems with Pis-khn-pe.<sup>249</sup> To these European bourgeois circles belongs also *Lilisl*'s servant Mr. Tsignbok (literally: billy goat), the “singer of her praises and companion” (*ir bazinger un baglayter*, 5) who composes “lyrical Lilith-dithyrambs and romantic nonsense” (*lirishe lilis-ditirambn un stam romantische narishkaytn*, 5) and “saccharine sweet-talk” (*lakrits-zise reyd*, 6), scattered with higher Germanized words.<sup>250</sup> The opposing party features Yidl-fidl, Berl-bas and Fishl-fleyt—three itinerant *klezmer* playing the fiddle, the double bass and the flute respectively—who stumble upon the *broder zinger* in an inn, and are invited by him for a drink, and then to perform together.<sup>251</sup> Four *lapitulekh*, or

<sup>248</sup> “Li Tai Pe,” also known as the drunkard poet, was a prominent Chinese poet (701-762) who won acclaim in Europe in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He is known today in the West as Li Po/Bo/Pai/Bai (His courtesy name Tai Po/Bo is where the “Tai” in his name originated). A 1862 pioneering French translation by the French Sinologist Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denys introduced Li [Tai] Po to European culture, and Ezra Pound’s 1915 English adaptation made him instantly famous in the West and a model for western modernism. The wave of interest sparked by Pound’s translation was probably the direct source of influence on Broderzon’s appropriation of this ancient Chinese poet. Interestingly, “Li Tay Pe” is also the first writer that Manger mentions in his short article “Favorite writers,” published in 1930 in *Literarische bleter* (republished in Itsik Manger, *Shriftn in Proze* (Tel Aviv: Y.L. Peretz, 1980), 326. One should note, however, that Broderzon chooses to describe “Li Tai Pe’s descendant” Pis-khn-pe as a Yiddish-Chinese poet rather than simply a Chinese one. Broderzon may have wished to hint ironically at Yiddish poets influenced by Chinese or Japanese poetry, and perhaps even to himself. In 1919 Broderzon published in Moscow the long poem “Toy,” made up of one hundred poems based on the form of the Japanese *Tanka*. (The *Tanka*, like the more famous *Haiku*, is a traditional form of short poetry. It consists of five units in a certain phonetic pattern). As a conscious modernist, Broderzon no doubt enjoyed this self-reference, which pointed to the author’s own limitation and ridiculed his multi-cultural aspirations. Moreover, in designating himself as a Yiddish-Chinese poet Broderzon may have implied that his work was incomprehensible to the larger European modernist community.

<sup>249</sup> In the Yiddish, Iks Igrek is described as Pis-khn-pe’s “*nokhshlepenish*.” The term, Broderzon’s own coinage, is based on the derogatory “*nokhshleper*,” literally “one who tags along,” formed in a structure which is common in names of diseases and other misfortunes.

<sup>250</sup> Examples of Tsignbok’s Germanized vocabulary, i.e. German words not fused in normative Yiddish are “*verend*” (*während* – while), or “*Herrin*” (*mistress*). See *Lilisl*, 17.

<sup>251</sup> The names Yidl-fidl Berl-bas allude to the well-known Yiddish folksong “*Tsen Brides*,” (*Ten Brothers*) with the refrain: “*Yidl mitn fidl / Berl mitn bas / shpilt mir oyf a lidl / afn mitn gas*.” The poem has many versions, and appears in Ginzburg’s and Marek’s anthology of folksongs as: “*Shmerl mit der fidl / Yekl mit dem bas*.” See Shoyl Ginzburg and Peysekh Marek, *Yidishe folkslider in Rusland*, ed. Dov Noy (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1991), 142. The poem was also reclaimed (and changed to “*Yidl mitn fidl / Arye mitn bas*”) in the film *Yidl mitn fidl* discussed in the next chapter of this dissertation. See also Joshua S. Walden, “Leaving Kazimierz: Comedy and realism in the Yiddish film musical *Yidl mitn fidl*,” *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image* 3, Issue 2 (Autumn 2009), 168-169; and see also Joshua Jacobson, “‘Tsen Brides’: A Jewish Requiem,” *Musical Quarterly* 84 (2000), 452–74 (quoted in Walden).

little demons, who act in the play as a chorus, also belong to the more anarchic and folkish camp. Their very names construct together an odd poetic phrase: “*Ikh Bin Gots Dales*” (I Am God's Poverty), which puts them on the side of the anarchic and folkish art of the *broder zinger*.

Who, then, are the champions of the two opposing camps? What kind of an artist is the Broder Singer and what is the significance of his being a performer, rather than a poet? Who is his opponent, Pis-khn-pe? What is the nature of the cultural encounters between these two and their followers, such as the *klezmer* or Iks-Igrek, the spokesperson for European artistic standards? What light does the rivalry between the *broder zinger* and Pis-khn-Pe shed on the Jewish popular performer? And finally, what aspects of the folk- or popular performance does Broderzon reclaim in *Lilisl*, and what do they signify in their new context?

In many ways the antipode of the tormented *purim-shpiler*, for whom the sky is always gray, the *broder zinger* is a colorful artist figure, successful, self-assured and marked with a disregard for cultural norms – be they Jewish religious law or European artistic standards. Presenting himself as a bohemian and a maverick, he flaunts his “sins,” such as the scandalous devouring of mice intestines in a dairy inn (*a milkhiker akhsanye*) – which further emphasizes his breaking the laws of *kashres* (such as separating dairy from meat and eating only ritually slaughtered kosher meat). Throughout the play the *broder zinger* encounters protest from other characters. Thus, for example, upon pronouncing that he has eaten mice with a Polish lady, the demons exclaim “Dear God! Dear God!” (*Liber got, liber got!*) and “this is a secret to keep from the whole city of Brod,” (*s'iz a sod far gants Brod*); and when the *broder zinger* composes nonsensical verse, Shlimazl (bad-luck) objects to his “futuristic language” (*tsukunft loshn*). The *broder zinger* is also free of anti-demonic superstitions. While other characters in the play, and even the little demons, are paralyzed with terror upon *Lilisl*'s arrival, the *broder zinger* remains fearless and self-assured, and accepts the assertive female devil with open arms. In contrast to the disastrous relationship of other male Jews with a demonic foreign woman in *Sikhes Khulin* and in *A khasenke*, the union between the *broder zinger* and *Lilisl* is a rather lucky one. It signifies the victory of the Jewish performer over the Yiddish-Chinese poet, and marks the happy ending of the play.

Like the Chinese poet, the *broder zinger* is a verbal artist; indeed he is described as “a word-drunkard” (“*verter-shiker*”). Far from the romantic pathos of Pis-khn-pe, however, the Broder Zinger is no lyric poet but rather a champion of puns, such as “*Brukhim Ha-gaboim*” (blessed are the collectors), instead of “*Brukhim Ha-boim*” (literally, “blessed are those who come,” the customary Yiddish or Hebrew “Welcome.”) Another central literary talent of the *broder zinger* is his skillful rhyming. While all the characters in the play speak in rhyme and meter (sometime creating rhymes jointly with others), the rhymes of the Jewish performer tend to be much wittier. This virtuoso often rhymes a *loshn-koydesh* term with a word of German origin, creating surprising pairs such as *getrofn* (met) and *bore pri hagofen* (blessed is the creator of the grapevine [the Jewish blessing recited over wine]); *begilufn* (Aramaic: inebriated) and *ahergerufn* (Germanic: summoned), *gaboim* (collectors) and *bloyim* (blue), *kidushin* (Aramaic: engagement) and *kushn* (kisses); or *grus* (greeting) and *shtus* (Hebrew: nonsense).

The *broder zinger*'s bent for puns and rhyme, alongside his folkish and conversational style, mark him in opposition to his rivals both on the romantic and on the poetic level: the pseudo-Chinese poet Pis-khn-pe and his European follower Iks Igrek. Pis-khn-pe's style is pompous and lacks humor or self-irony. Like the *broder zinger*, the Chinese poet too is a performance artist, as he gives recitations of his poetry. Upon appearing on stage Pis-khn-pe patronizingly compliments Tsignbok on his excellent poetry, and then moves on to his own performance – a recitation of a love poem that he has just composed for *Lilisl*. Full of pathos and vacuous metaphors comparing the lover to snow, honey and doves, Pis-khn-pe's poetry is admired by its listeners, who clap their hands enthusiastically. A few of them praise the poem, and Iks-igrek congratulates it on fitting Western artistic standards:

“Temperament / And yet restrained – in the European style” (*Temperament / Un eyropeishe oysgehaltn*).<sup>252</sup> Pis-khn-pe seems to greatly enjoy this European approval, and though he presents himself as a descendant of a respectable Chinese heritage, he proudly aligns himself with contemporary European style, proclaiming: “Lately I've come to prefer / Vers libre [free verse – the French term]” (*s'iz letstens mir gevorn liber / vers libre*). The tension between rhyme and the new mode of free verse, as we'll see later on, preoccupies the *broder zinger* as well.<sup>253</sup>

Ostensibly joining the general admiration for Pis-khn-pe's poem, the *broder zinger* remarks sarcastically: “O, so much fire! So much flame! / You probably have more of that [poetry]!” (*Oy vifl fayer! Vifl Flam! / Ir hot dokh nokh mistam!*).<sup>254</sup> The apparent irony in this compliment, which actually points up the wordiness and the exaggerated pathos of the Chinese poet's rhetoric is totally missed by Pis-khn-pe, who answers excitedly “A sea! / Just now I was seized by a new deluge / of feelings” (*A yam! / nokh itster bin ikh mit a nayem mabul ongenumen / fun gefiln*), admitting unwittingly the verbose nature of his poetry and articulating his romantic ideal of art or the “spontaneous powerful feelings.” (Wordsworth).<sup>255</sup> Shortly afterward the *broder zinger* moves from criticism masked as false-flattery to a direct attack on the Chinese poet and his European follower: “Here for instance, you have a greeting / from the primeval source of nonsense / Iks-Igrek [...] Pis-khn-pe.” (*Ot a shteyger, hot ir do a grus / fun urshprung funem shtus / Iks Igrek... Pis-khn-pe*).<sup>256</sup> Rather than signifying anything specifically Chinese, Pis-khn-pe represents an inflated style of poetry which carries no real ethnic or other unique and authentic marks. In fact, a stand-in for the heritage of European romanticism distorted and perverted into hyperbolic cliché. The enthusiastic responses to his banal poem mark the European orientaling nostalgia for exotic high cultures. Pis-khn-pe's insincere romanticism and the bourgeois and conservative admiration that surrounds him stand in opposition to the folkish and humorous style of the *broder zinger*, a counter-model for the European avant-garde.

Though regarded as a representative of Chinese culture, Pis-khn-pe's speech and poetry include Jewish terminology and allusions. The poet's mixed language derives from Pis-khn-pe's dual ethnic or religious identity as a “Jewish-Chinese poet.” The Chinese poet's Jewish discourse may also testify to Broderzon's choice to make the Jewish world of associations available to Jewish and non-Jewish characters alike – in *Lilisl* as in *A khasenke*. But whereas in *A khasenke* the *purim-shpiller* and the *commedia* artists seem to share a common cultural world, in which a variety of artistic sources – from European courtly love to the *Song of Songs* – are available to all, in *Lilisl* the Jewish sources prove themselves less accessible. In Pis-khn-pe's case, the allusions to Jewish sources are always out of place. Thus, for example, Pis-khn-pe declares that the “*Shkhine*” (the feminine aspect of divine presence) dwells in Tsignbok's praise of *Lilisl*, missing the apparent irony in juxtaposing the demonic female character with the divine one.<sup>257</sup> Other examples are found in Pis-khn-pe's recitation of a long love poem dedicated to *Lilisl*, which alludes to the *Song of Songs*, comparing his beloved's eyes to doves or

<sup>252</sup> Later on in the play Iks Igrek once again acts as the representative of European culture, as he calls the players to play: “*Mit an inhalt! / Mit badayt! / vi di eyropeyer kenen, epes dosiks / fun shopenen:* (With content! / With meaning! / As the Europeans know, something / by Chopin.” See Broderzon, *Lilisl*, 26.

<sup>253</sup> The published play has it as “Vers liba” (written in Latin alphabet) but should probably be “vers libre,” as in French, *ibid.*, 20.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. *Lilis* is a notorious figure in Jewish mythology. She appears as a demon in the Babylonian Talmud, in the Midrashic tradition and in Kabbalistic literature. *Lilis* is famous as evil, rebellious and promiscuous, and is considered dangerous to newborns and women in labor. She is known the also as Asmodai's wife. See for example *Babylonian Talmud*, tractate Eruvin, 100b, Tractate Nida, 24b. See also the esoteric *Alphabet of Ben-Sira*, available from <http://www.hebrewbooks.org/26862>.

calling her “my sister.” Unlike the *purim-shpiler*, however, who seems to be deeply connected with his Biblical allusions and with his three Biblical muses, the Chinese poet’s use of the references to *Song of Songs* is often grotesque, exposing the absurdity of his inflated style. Thus, when comparing Lilisl’s eyes to doves, the poet asks where did they fly off to (*vu zenen zey farfloygn*), which suggests that she is cross-eyed, and when he refers to her as “my sister and my bride” (*achoti Kala, Song of songs*, 4:12) he adds the less appropriate “my mother” to the list.<sup>258</sup> Finally, towards the end of the poem he refers to the mountain of Fuji-yama – a Japanese symbol rather than a Chinese one, which casts doubt on the poet’s claim to an authentic Chinese pedigree.

Notwithstanding Pis-khn-pe’s dubious Chineseness and his unclear Jewish/Yiddish background, the orientaling poet opposes the *broder zinger* and the popular Jewish tradition he represents. This antagonism is most notable in Pis-khn-pe’s reaction to the *klezmer* musicians. Pis-khn-pe finds the cry of the fiddle at the wedding objectionable, and demands: “Perhaps you would stop complaining? One needs to say something happy.” (*Efsher hert ir oyf tsu klogn? Epes freylekh darf men zogn*) Taking on the stance of spokesperson for Jewish culture, the *broder zinger* explains: “In order to adorn the bride / One has to make her cry. (*Kdey di kale tsu bakheyne / Darf men makhn zi tsu veyne*, 26). This response only makes Pis-khn-pe more eager to show the *broder zinger*—and implicitly the Jews in general – “the right way” of romantic love: “I want them to play about love / about divine feelings / like a dream... from afar.” (*Kh’vil men zol fun libe shpiln: / fun di getlekhe gefiln – / vi a kholem... fun der vayt*, 26). Pis-khn-pe also complains that the *klezmer* are too drunk and wild and offers to send them away. The wildness of the Jewish musicians stands in opposition to Iks Igrek’s praise of his poetry as “Mild – in the European way.” To the defense of the musicians come the *broder zinger*, arguing that one plays better when drunk, as does Lilisl who claims that their art is beautiful. The female demon thus aligns herself with the *broder zinger* and against her Chinese groom – a foreshadowing of her running away with the *broder zinger*, leaving the dismayed Pis-khn-pe behind.

The controversy over the *klezmer* musicians enacts the clash between divergent artistic norms, Jewish and European, folkish and the high-brow which lies at the center of *Lilisl*. It also echoes the high-culture critique within Jewish circles. This vivid confrontation is reminiscent of the *maskilic* criticism of Jewish folk performance discussed in chapter one, which viewed the traditional Jewish wedding from a bourgeois European perspective and found it wanting. Like Pis-khn-pe, the *maskilim* complained of the sad tunes and crying that characterize the Jewish wedding, which they found inappropriate for the celebration. They too did not appreciate what they perceived as the wild and often vulgar nature of Jewish entertainment. Paradoxically, however, as I argue in my analysis of the *maskilic* discourse above, the *maskilim*’s attack on folk performance was also the first step towards its rehabilitation as an art form in the following generations. Pis-khn-pe’s criticism works in a similar way. In judging the musicians according to European artistic standards, expecting them to express deep feelings (as in the romantic tradition) or alternatively to restrain their wildness, the Chinese poet also established the *klezmer* as his fellow artists. The *klezmer* debate thus serves as a watershed, presenting two artistic alternatives. On the one hand the European and pseudo-Chinese high culture, and on the other – the Jewish-folkish option, including the *broder zinger*, the *klezmer* musicians, and implicitly also the *badkhn* and other Jewish wedding traditions.<sup>259</sup>

The last six pages of the play depict the performance by the *broder zinger*, accompanied by the *klezmer*, at Lilisl’s wedding. In this performance-within-performance scene, which is indeed the high

<sup>258</sup> Broderzon, *Lilisl*, 19. The conflation of maternal and romantic love could also be a parodic allusion to Chayim Nachman Bialik’s famous poem: “*Hakhnisini takhat knafekh / Ve-hayi li em ve-akhot.*” (shelter me beneath your wing / and be a mother and a sister to me). The song was originally published in the Hebrew journal *Ha-shiloach* 15, issues 4-6 (October 1905), and written in February 1905.

<sup>259</sup> See the discussion of the implied *badkhn* later on in this chapter.

point of the play, the *broder zinger* sings rather than talks. Moreover, the scene sheds light on the complex figure of the *broder zinger*, and it is here that he is revealed as a sad clown – much like the pierrotic *purim-shpiler* in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” and *A khasenke*. The performance starts with a song in praise of drinking: “Topsy is better / the fiddle becomes sharp – a knife / [...] it doesn't hurt; It doesn't hurt! It is good as it is! / Without spirits life is straw.” (*Az baglezelt – iz dokh beser: / Vert di fidl sharf – a meser/ [...] S'shadt nisht; s'shadt nisht! gut azoy; / on a shnaps iz s'lebn – shtroy.*)<sup>260</sup> A common theme in many folk-songs, Jewish and other, drinking played an important role in the repertoire of the historical *broder zinger*, who typically performed in wine cellars and beer gardens. The song in praise of drinking therefore fulfills the reader's expectations of a *broder zinger*. The next part of the performance is, however, less predictable, and displays a different side of his art. Singing alongside the *klezmer*, the *broder zinger* dedicates a rhymed song to each of them, with a suitable refrain such as “Thus sings in the middle of the street / Berl Bas” (*Zingt azoy in mitn gas / Berl Bas*, 24) or “No! No! No! / Cry, fiddle, Cry!” (*Neyn! Neyn! Neyn! / Veyn, fidele, veyn!*, 25). While folkish in their overall appearance, a closer look reveals these songs as rather radical. Lines such as: “All the skies are clear / But our generation isn't!” (*Ale himlen zenen klor, / nor nisht klor iz undzer dor!*, 24), “All is totally sad, / Only the lie is the truth” (*Alts iz troyerik biz gor, / nor der sheker iz di vor*, 24), or “There's no peace anywhere” (*Ergets iz nishto kayn ru,* ?), disclose contemporary defiant overtones. Although sadness and crying are regarded as an integral part of the Eastern European Jewish wedding, they are traditionally related to the bride's anxieties upon leaving her parents, to the notion of the wedding day as a day of judgement, or to a dead parent who didn't live to see his or her child getting married. In *Lilisl*, however, the sorrow is endowed with a distinct modern flare, referring to the dreadful state of the world and to the emotional stance of the speaker rather than to the marriage ceremony.

The *broder zinger's* neo-folkish style functions similarly to the mask hiding the *purim-shpiler's* sadness and his acute political awareness in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” Much like the mask, the simple form of the *broder zinger's* wedding songs, their uncomplicated refrains and their traditional endings, disguise a gloomy modernist position. This goes hand in hand with Broderzon's view of the double goal of the performing arts, as a form of accessible entertainment which nevertheless aspires to reveal something real about the world, and functions as a model for the avant-gard. Whereas in *A khasenke* the melancholic look controls the *dramolet* and especially its ending, featuring death and prophecy of doom, in *Lilisl* the joyous spirit and happy ending only hint to the underlying misery. The final word of the play belongs to the little demons, who sing a song about the two lovers, *broder zinger* and *Lilisl*, who, “Protected from sorrow and pain / Drink, drink old wine / Till it becomes light again” (*oysgehilt fun leyd un payn / zingt met, trinkt men altn vayn / biz es vet shoyrn likhtik zayn*).<sup>261</sup> The performer's bohemian lifestyle, which involves singing, drinking, and enjoying the company of his lover(s), seems to protect him – temporarily at least – from the troubles of the modern world. In this sense, it resembles the carnivalesque position of the *purim-shpiler* – a conscious choice to resist bitter reality through merriment and performance.

The complexity behind the *broder zinger's* folkish “mask” is revealed also in a little sermon he gives, which begins with clear and conversational language, and gradually turns into a web of cryptic, associative metaphors, as the many alliterations take control over the meaning. The first few lines respond directly to Shlimazl, who reacts against *Lilisl's* control over her husband *Asmedai*. “Where is the 'And he shall rule over thee'?” protests Shlimazl, and the *broder zinger* answers:

<sup>260</sup> Broderzon, *Lilisl*, 23.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

זייער ווייט שוין! זייער ווייט!  
 ס'איז דער מין בכלל נישטאָ  
 דער והוא ימשול – דער והוא ימשול –  
 איז אַ משל אָן אַ נמשל  
 ס'איז אַ ווייניגשל נאָר אָן זאָפט,  
 ס'איז אַ שנאָבלדיקער בושל  
 מיט אַ כוח, מיט קראָפט,  
 מיט אַ חושל נאָר צו פראַשן,  
 נאָר די מושליע-פרעש צו פרעסן  
 גאַנצע בלאַטיקע מעת-לעתן  
 און דאָס פלאַשן-פלייש פון פיש...

Very far already! Very far!  
 There's no such thing,<sup>262</sup>  
 The “and he shall rule [over thee]” – the “and he shall rule” [Genesis 3:16]  
 Is an allegory with no moral,  
 Is a sour cherry with no juice,  
 Is a stork with a beak  
 With power, with vigor,  
 With an eye for frogs  
 Only the shell-frogs to eat  
 Whole muddy 24 hours  
 And the bottle-meat of fish...<sup>263</sup>

This bizarre kind of poetry arouses various responses among listeners. While Sheker (Lie) chimes in with a “*pish pish pish*,” echoing the dominant “f” and “sh” sounds in the *broder zinger's* poetic speech, his friend Shlimazl (Loser) objects:

אומפאַרשטענדלעך ... צוקונפט-לשון...  
 איי, ווו נעמט מען אַלטע צייטן,  
 ווען געהאַט האָט מאָס און וואָג  
 און דער גראַם צו פיש-קול – משקול?

Incomprehensible... future-language...  
 Oh, where can one find the old times,  
 When there were measure and weight –  
 And the rhyme for fish-voice [*fish-kol*]– meter [*mishkol*]?

The *broder zinger's* experimenting with sound, language and imagery clearly goes against the conservative expectations of Shlimazl, who opposes this innovative poetry. This opaque style also deviates from the norm of the play, where characters speak almost solely in rhyme, often jointly, as one figure completes the other's rhyme. Elsewhere in the play the *broder zinger* follows the convention of rhyming, but in this episode he speaks in free verse and plays with wild imagery and sound, following

<sup>262</sup> An alternative translation: “This sex does not exits at all.”

<sup>263</sup> Unfortunately, my literal translation can not provide a good sense of the many alliterations, indeed the true meaning of the poem. And of course, lacking the play of sound, the poem seems even more arbitrary than it is.

the ideals of certain modernist poetry. However, the *broder zinger*, I argue, parodies here the modernist poet rather than identifies with him. First, the *broder zinger's* speech degenerates in to absurd nonsense, which makes it hard to appreciate it as good poetry – radical or other; rather, it seems like light amusement or sheer sarcasm. Second, to judge from the rest of the play, the *broder zinger's* true style seems to be the rhymed song in meter, rather than the idiosyncratic free verse. Throughout the play the *broder zinger* creates skillful rhymes; moreover, in his final wedding performance, the fullest display of his abilities, he adheres to the norms of Jewish folk entertainment: reciting poetry in the form of AABB rhymes and a simple, communicable refrain, accompanied by *klezmer*. Finally, on the biographical level, Broderzon is known as a master of rhyme, who insisted on rhymed verse even though he was rejected for his allegedly old-fashioned style.<sup>264</sup> In light of all of the above, it is likely to assume that the author's position is close to Shlimazl's conservative stance deploring the proclaimed death of rhyme and meter– only without the nostalgic tone, clearly ironized here. In parodying idiosyncratic free verse Broderzon probably responded to what he viewed as all too radical contemporary poetics, that completely lost touch with form, sense and meaning, and to what he experienced as a stifling modernist dictatorship in his poetic environment.

Just as the undertone of sadness in the pseudo-folkish songs of the *broder zinger* discloses his social concerns, the performer's flirtation with modernist poetry reveals his awareness of contemporary artistic trends. Both mark the folkish position as a conscious choice – for the fictional *broder zinger* as well as for Broderzon. A seemingly carefree bohemian, the *broder zinger* is in fact a rebel involved in the world surrounding him. He is well aware of social reality and of artistic norms and fashions, including the European admiration for the exotic high culture of the Chinese, which serves as a model for Anglo-American elitist imagination, the romantic fascination with flowery lyric poetry; the bourgeois snobbish rejection of the crude, the wild and the folkish; and the modernist ideal of opaque poetry and the hegemony of free verse. Mindful of all these trends, the folk performer nevertheless opts for the folkish and the conversational. This choice marks him as a free spirit and an outsider. It enables the *broder zinger* to hide his radical or alternative messages in an outwardly folkish poetry, and serves as a disguise for his defiant act of running away with the bride under the guests' and the groom's eyes. Jewish folk performance is presented in *Lilisl* as a radical and refreshing alternative to European culture, with its pretense and blind fascination with the ancient oriental or the contemporary idiosyncratic.

#### **D. Purim-shpiler and broder zinger: The Artist as Performer in Broderzon's Oeuvre**

Examined together, *A khasenke*, “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*,” and *Lilisl* display common features of the Jewish folk performer, though by no means creating a homogenous image. In all three works the performer is characterized by a combination of merriment related to his profession, and melancholia related to the sorrowful condition of the empirical world. The balance between happiness and sorrow, and the way in which the two opposites co-habit is, however, different in each of the works. In “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” the carnivalesque performance offers temporary refuge from cultural conflict and from a reality of bloodshed and suffering. The only hope of the silent *purim-shpiler* in *A khasenke*, a tragic figure combining Pierrotic alienation with the suffering of the exilic Jew, lies in some vague messianic future. Only in this faraway time to come would he be able to realize his potential of optimism and energy. Finally, the lighthearted *broder zinger* in *Lilisl* evinces barely a strain of underlying melancholy, and expresses his social concerns only rarely, disguised in seemingly naïve and joyous folk-songs. In a sense, all three figures are variations on the theme of the sad clown. Thus, they

<sup>264</sup> See the aforementioned discussion Markish's objection to Broderzon's rhymed poetry.

express Broderzon's complex view of performance as a form of entertainment that is nevertheless politically engaged. Moreover, on the meta-poetic level performance becomes a model to poetic modernism which is accessible, playful and prosodically rich and yet radical.

In a world of conflicting ideologies, cultural clashes and bloody wars, associated with the hardships of twentieth century, Jewish folk performance comes to signify a rebellious stance. In "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" the speaker protests against "the rule of Haman" over the world, which seems to relate specifically to the horrors of WWI. In *A khasenke* the silent *purim-shpiler* copes with the anti-Jewish stereotypes of his rivals Harlequin and Columbine, who are ultimately punished by divine intervention—in what could be interpreted as response to the growing anti-Semitism in interwar Eastern Europe. Finally, the more humorous *Lilisl* addresses artistic rather than political concerns, as the *broder zinger* protests against the hegemony of European bourgeois culture, with its clichéd version of romanticism and hollow admiration of Oriental cultures.

In Broderzon's interpretation, all the various aspects of Jewish folk performance come to signify resistance to the existing social order. The Jewish marks an alternative to dominant European standards and its anti-Semitic or xenophobic prejudice; the folkish—a challenge to bourgeois and high-brow modernist conventions. Last but not least, performance signifies a live intercultural dialogue, a direct yet staged interaction with other perspectives and other artistic traditions, embodied by a broad range of fictional characters, Jewish and non-Jewish, ancient and modern. From the European theater icons Columbine and Harlequine to the Shulamite of the *Song of Songs*; from Satan to Haman, converted into a liberal HOMO; and from the folkish klezmer Yidl with the Fiddle to the french intellectual Iks Igrek. Together, these figures create a polyphony of cultural voices, with which the performance artist interacts, searching for and expressing his own unique voice. While all three works have a meta-poetic dimension, displaying a variety of aesthetic alternatives, none belongs to a pure space of art. Rather, the performer creates and expresses himself in a complex context, where sociopolitical conflicts, cultural heritage and religious or ethnic prejudice shape his art.

Though in all three works Jewishness is part of the performer's cultural heritage, these works vary greatly in their relation to it, and especially in their attitude towards Jewish religion – from the sacrilegious *broder zinger* to the pious "silent *purim-shpiler*." Whereas the performer in *A khasenke* looks and behaves in accordance with common Jewish stereotypes, the *broder zinger* and the performer in "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" are more universal figures. While the lonely and righteous protagonist of *A khasenke* struggles against his attraction to Columbine, the maverick *broder zinger* devours mice intestines in a dairy inn and engages in amorous relations with a beautiful Polish lady and with the demonic *Lilisl*. In Broderzon's oeuvre, where Jewish and non-Jewish characters share cultural associations, the performer's Jewish vocabulary, imagery and allusions to Jewish sources (mostly the Bible, and especially the *Song of Songs*) do not necessarily attest to his being Jewish. Thus, the performer's Jewishness is expressed first and foremost in the form of his performance – the *purim-shpil* or the humorous wedding sermon. While not linked to a glorious distant past, these genres of performance nevertheless signify in Broderzon's oeuvre the true heritage of the modern Jewish artist, the basis that enables him to engage in a vivid intercultural dialogue.

### **E. The Missing *Badkhn***

One Jewish folk performer stands out in his absence in Broderzon's oeuvre – the *badkhn*, who would have been well suited to the plot of *A khasenke* and *Lilisl*, which both feature a wedding performance. Broderzon's enthusiasm for the popular show and his admiration of Jewish heritage notwithstanding, the author eschews designating his hero as a *badkhn*, the lowest figure on the newly-

founded modern hierarchy of traditional Jewish folk performance.

Despite its title, no wedding takes place in *A khasenke*. Yet the *purim-shpiler's* performance for Columbine and Harlequin, who, at least as far as Harlequin knows, are about to be married, constitutes a high point of the play – and the probable source of its title. Instead of singing a song to honor husband and wife, as he is asked to do, the *purim-shpiler* ends up telling a story that has nothing to do with the couple or with the matrimonial ceremony, but rather portrays the tragi-comic concerns of everyday Jewish life. This strange little story, the power of which lies in its absurdity and its incongruity with the “wedding” ceremony, is in fact the *purim-shpiler's* only performance in the play. Given the context of this performance, it would have made better sense to portray the protagonist of the play as a *badkhn* rather than a *purim-shpiler*. Not only the setting of his performing – a wedding – but also its form, the narration of a bizarre and humorous folk-story, is better suited to a *badkhn* than to a *purim-shpiler*, who typically stages a Biblical story. Moreover, the play lacks any references to the holiday of Purim, except for one allusion to the book of Esther: “Haman is riding now on the royal-horse / and the sky is heavy with clouds” (*Haman rayt itst af der malkhes-ferd/ un der himl iz farvolkent shver;*”) which is metaphoric in nature and actually goes against the cheerful spirit of the holiday and the Biblical text in which Mordechai rather than Haman rides the King's horse.<sup>265</sup> One wonders, therefore, why a *purim-shpiler* rather than a *badkhn* was chosen for the protagonist of the play.

*Lilisl* features an even longer wedding scene, with a performance that resembles even more closely a traditional wedding performance, endowed with klezmer musicians and rhymed songs. Here, as in *A khasenke*, the wedding scene serves as a direct display of the performer's abilities and a high point of the *dramolet*. The term “*badkhn*” does come up in *Lilisl*, as the performer boasts: “The performer of the wedding ceremony / of the kisses / the matchmaker(*shadkhn*) / and the jester (*badkhn*) / am I!” (*Der mesader kidushin / fun di kushn / der shadkhn / un der badkhn / bin ikh!*), but the conceited performer who is the play's main character is known not as a *badkhn* but rather as a *broder zinger*, this is a strange choice, given the fact that this relatively modern folk performer, associated with the tavern, had typically little to do with the wedding ceremony.

The two *dramoletn* demonstrate the selective nature of Broderzon's appropriation of Jewish folk performance. The author's preference is clearly for the *purim-shpiler* and the *broder zinger*. Although he does express a certain interest in the *badkhones* tradition, by no means does he reclaim it in the same way – nor does he make it serve the performer's artistic identity. Broderzon's anti-*badkhn* bias is typical of interwar Yiddish culture. The *purim-shpiler*, whose social status was low throughout many generations, was reclaimed in twentieth century Yiddish culture in both historical and fictional writing. To a lesser extent, the nineteenth century *broder zinger*, associated with the dubious venues in which he performed, was also rehabilitated under the designation of a folk poet. The *badkhn*, on the other hand, was left behind. Broderzon's poetic and dramatic writing thus exemplify the strong preference for the carnivalesque *purim-shpil* in the modern appropriation of folk performance in Eastern European Jewish culture.

The *badkhn*, as we have seen in the previous chapter, holds a central position in Haskala literature, where he stands for inferior and tasteless rhymes and embodies degraded Jewish culture and art. In the following generations, however, as Eastern European Jewish artists start turning to folk performance in their search for the origins of their modern Jewish art, they typically show interest in the *purim-shpiler* rather than the *badkhn*. Notable examples are the *purim-shpil* scene in Mendele's play *Der priziv* and Sholem-Aleykhem's short story *Baym kenig Akhashveyresh* about a child's fascination

<sup>265</sup> Broderzon, *Lilisl*, 13. The play also features an allusion to Ahasver the wandering Jew, but although the name originates in King Ahasuerus, it has little to do with the *Book of Esther*, and is relate the the anti-Semitic myth about the Jew who stood by as Jesus was dying on the cross and is punished with eternal wandering.

with the *purim-shpiler*. Finally, in the interwar era, the heyday of the interest in folk performance and its appropriation, the *purim-shpiler*, the most theatrical among Jewish folk performers becomes even more salient. The *badkhn*, on the other hand, is more rarely “saved” from his notoriety in *masklic* discourse.<sup>266</sup>

The preference for the *purim-shpiler* had probably less to do with his professionalism or artistic qualities; in fact, *badkhnim* were less likely to be amateurs than *purim-shpiler*, who typically performed only on the day of Purim and who were often recruited among *yeshive* students and alternatively the low-status artisan clan. Nor does the preference have to do with the nature of the *badkhn*'s text.. On the contrary, the carnivalesque *purim-shpil* was more likely to include crude and even vulgar humor than the *badkhn*, who performed in the more respectful setting of the wedding.

Most likely the *purim-shpil*'s relative proximity to Western theater was what made this folk performance favored among modern Jewish artists, as it involved a story, well defined fictional characters, and usually also costumes and props – albeit rudimentary. The *badkhn*'s performance in comparison is more heterogenous in nature, closer to the vaudeville show than to the conventional drama, and with a clear practical side, as the *badkhn* serves also as Master of Ceremonies, pronouncing the presents brought by the guests (*droshe-geshank*), urging the couple to repent, leading his audience to the *khupe* to view the ceremony, and so on. Moreover, following Gorin's and Schiper's historiographies of Jewish theater *purim-shpil* was regarded as close to the commedia dell'arte – the popular European theater which became prestigious in nineteenth and twentieth century, when modernist European artists turned to it in their search for new artistic sources of inspiration.<sup>267</sup> Notwithstanding significant differences between the *purim-shpiler* and the commedia dell'arte's professional actors, who performed throughout the year, the two forms of traditional performance did share the principle of improvising on the basis of a well-known story, using a limited set of stock characters and basic props, which often includes masks.<sup>268</sup> Furthermore, the *purim-shpil* was also often compared to the European carnival tradition. Although not as respectable as the commedia dell'arte (perhaps until the publication of Bakhtin's influential work), this carnival nevertheless endowed this Jewish performance with a European equivalent.<sup>269</sup> No such counterpart was found for the *badkhn*.

Broderzon thus had good reasons to choose the *purim-shpil* as the Jewish counterpart of the commedia dell'arte in *A khasenke* and in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” In choosing the *purim-shpiler* rather

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<sup>266</sup> A rare exception to this rule is the interest of the Minsk circle in the *badkhn*, as expressed in the journal *Tsaytshrift*. However, the research on *badkhnim* was part of the section on folklore, rather than art. See note 3 in this dissertation.

<sup>267</sup> See chapter two of this dissertation.

<sup>268</sup> Based on a Biblical narrative, the *purim-shpil* could also be related to other forms of traditional European theater, such as the medieval mystery play, also adored by modernist Russian dramaturges, such as Evreinov. As I've shown in the second chapter of this dissertation, scholars of the *purim-shpiler* such as Schiper argued for affinity between the *purim-shpil* and the mystery play and even for influence of the Christian morality play on the Jewish comic *purim-shpil*.

<sup>269</sup> Bakhtin's renowned study on the carnival, *Rabelais and His World*, written during WWII, was published on 1965. See M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1968). Although Broderzon's rediscovery of the *purim-shpil* precedes Bakhtin's work in about two decades, the two belong to the same generation (Broderzon was born in 1890 and Bakhtin in 1895), and their common interest in folkish phenomena expresses the *Zeitgeist* in Russia of their time. And while Broderzon spent the years of WWI in Moscow, Bakhtin spent them in the Russian centers of Odessa and Petersburg. More broadly, the appropriation of folk performance and folk culture in interwar Yiddish culture no doubt owes to the Russian (and Polish) rising interest in folklore. Robert Adler-Peckerar also points at the resemblance between Bakhtin's work and the work of the Minsk group, arguing that “Reading Erik's discussion of the Yiddish popular entertainment that once thrived in the marketplaces of Eastern Europe, it is difficult to avoid the resemblance to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and his famous studies on the carnival.” See Robert Adler Peckerar, “The allure of Germanness in modern Ashkenazi literature: 1833—1933,” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2009) ProQuest (AAT 3411185), 87-88. For the relation between the emergence of Yiddish folklore and Polish ethnography see Itzik N. Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003).

than the *badkhn* to serve as the protagonist of *A khasenke* Broderzon set a limit on the otherness of the Jewish performer. Similarly, the more modern *broder zinger*, comparable to the bard or the cabaret singer, also located the Jewish singer in a more “universal” setting.

Yet *A khasenke* also celebrates the otherness of the Jewish performer, particularly in the “theater within theater” scene, where instead of a conventional wedding song, the *purim-shpiler* performs with a pointless little story that shocks his European audience. Similarly, *Lilisl* flaunts the alterity of Jewish wedding customs, including the crying audience and the whining fiddle, and celebrates the wildness of the klezmer – so shocking to the European bourgeois Iks-Igrek. This paradox is central to Broderzon's complex representation of cultural encounters. Aiming to construct an aesthetic clash, Broderzon inserts a *badkhones* scene in two of his *dramoletn*. Yet, striving to create a cultural icon, an artist figure that he and his modern readers can sympathize with, he opts for the figures who have more in common with European dramatic traditions: the *purim-shpiler* and the *broder zinger*. Long before the “invention” of multi-culturalism and the reclaiming of the marginal, Broderzon flaunts the special vantage point of the Jewish artist, and celebrates in his work the complex interaction between Jewish and Western cultural legacies. (Interestingly, Russian culture, the most direct influence on Broderzon, remains behind the scenes).

Furthermore, Broderzon's appropriation of the Jewish folk performer should be understood in the framework of the artist's grappling with troubling questions of the nature of Jewish art, and the existence of a specifically Jewish cultural heritage, which preoccupied many Jewish artists of his generation. Broderzon's solution, however, differed from interwar Yiddishist historiographies and Turkow's theater productions (both discussed in the next chapter), which were characterized by a quest for the authentic and pure origins of Jewish theater. Broderzon's appropriation of folk performance is more playful and self-conscious than these serious identity projects. As fitting for a poet who identifies with the *purim-shpiler*, it can best be described as carnivalesque, celebrating the mask, the polyphony of voices, and the reversal of roles. For Broderzon, performance signifies the opposite of authenticity. It is associated instead with the freedom of wearing of the mask, with the conscious and temporary choice of a certain role, or with the public declaration of an aesthetic or political stance. Performance, as the opening lines of “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” quoted above remind us, is first and foremost a form of communication. In Broderzon's oeuvre the Jewish performer interacts with his audience, his European colleagues, and the Jewish tradition that informs his show.

## **F. Drumming, not Nign: The Route from Romantic Poetry to Modernist Performance**

To conclude the discussion of the appropriation of Jewish folk performance in Broderzon's work, I would like to go back in time from 1919-1922, the era of *Yung Yiddish* and the *dramoletn* to 1913, the year in which Broderzon published his first book of poetry, *Shvartse Fliterlekh* (Black Spangles). Romantic and mostly somewhat clichéd, these early poems carry banal names such as “*Troyim*” (Dream), “*Dayn Treer*” (Your Tear), or “*Laydnshaft*” (Suffering), and bear no mark of Broderzon's imaginative modernism of the years to come. Their significance lies mostly in enhancing our understanding of the poet's development from these unripe attempts to his mature writings. The comparison between “*Yung bin ikh!*” (Young am I!), the most declarative poem in *Shvartse Fliterlekh*, and the poetic manifesto “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” can help us comprehend Broderzon's poetic transformation, and the change in his attitude towards the question of cultural heritage. Inspired by the four turbulent years he spent in Moscow, in the midst of a political and cultural revolution, Broderzon, I argue, made a leap from his early romantic *folkism*, motivated by Peretz, to a Russian-influenced fascination with ethnography and folk performance, suffused with modernist spirit.

יונג בין איך, ווי יונג – דער פּרילינג!  
(פרילינג איז דאָך אייביק יונג).  
הייס דאָס בלוט, און קלאַך די אויגן, -  
ווי אַ האַרפע'ס ציטער קלונג...

יונג בין איך, און דאָך – פאַרטרויערט:  
בענקשאַפט זינגט פון יעדער ליד!  
ווייטע, ווייטע אַלטקייט שימערט –  
מיין אַלטן ניגון: “ייד”.

### Young am I!

To Y.L. Peretz

Young am I, as the spring is young!  
(Spring indeed is eternally young).  
Hot the blood, and clear – the eyes,  
like a harps' trembling chime...

Young am I, and yet – in gloom:  
Longing sings from every poem!  
Distant, distant old-times shimmer –  
My old melody: “Jew.”

A meta-poetic poem, “*Yung bin ikh!*,” like the later “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*,” is based on the tension between the speaker's spring spirits and youthful energies on the one hand, and his deep sadness on the other. The melancholia in each of the poems is, however, different in nature. Whereas the speaker in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” is preoccupied with the devastating state of the world (albeit by way of ironic denial), the speaker's sorrow in “*Yung bin ikh!*” is more intimate, and relates to romantic notions of longing, and, in the surprising ending of the poem, to some ancient Jewish “essence.”

While the speakers in both poems are artists, the one in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” is a performer, whereas the one in “*Yung bin ikh!*” is a poet. Musical performance is present in “*Yung bin ikh!*” only via metaphors used by the protagonist, such as the trembling harp (“*a harpes tsiter klung*”) and the old (Jewish) melody (“*der alter nign*”). Moreover, the Yiddish word “*lid*,” in the line “*benkshaft zingt fun yeder lid*” (longing sings from every poem) designates both a song and a poem. Although the protagonist refers here to his poems, he plays on the other meaning as well, which he evokes with the word “singing.” Indeed, music – mostly classical Western – constitutes a central metaphor throughout *Shvartse Fliterlekh*, where one can find poems such as “*A strune zifts*,” (A string moans), “*Nisht in takt*” (out of rhythm), “*Vayse klavishn*” (White piano keys), “*A fuge*” (A fugue), “*Skertso*” (Scherzo), “*Akompanyament*” (accompaniment) and “*Preludium*” (Prelude).

At a time when Broderzon himself turned from a lyrical poet to a manifold modernist artist who wrote, directed and produced, his declared artistic persona changed accordingly – from a melancholy poet aiming at deep and genuine expression in “*Yung bin ikh!*” to a neo-folkist modernist

performer imbued with carnivalesque spirits in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” The four Moscow years converted Broderzon from a lyrical poet immersed in yearning, nostalgia and a vague nationalist ethos, to an irreverent artist, radical and yet communicative, involved in politics, and eager to appropriate Jewish heritage to fit his contemporary preoccupations. Whether the carnivalesque *purim-shpiler* or the bohemian *broder zinger*, the performance artist signified a new stage in Broderzon's writing, a stage marked by optimism rather than nostalgic sorrow, communication rather than introversion, and masquerade rather than a claim to authenticity.

Whereas the young Broderzon, like the speaker in “*Yung bin ikh!*,” is characterized by the gentle quivering sound of the harp, Broderzon of the interwar era, similar to his *purim-shpiler* persona, is an artist of many talents, who wishes to shake his audience by “drumming” – which could be interpreted as a metaphor for drastic poetic devices, including irony, humor, odd imagery and surprising allusions. The harp, the main simile in “*Yung bin ikh!*,” expresses the poet's delicate soul and also resonates with Jewish tradition, suggesting the Bible and especially the Book of Psalms. This ancient instrument, missing from the musical landscape of Eastern European Jewish culture, goes well with the notions of “distant oldness” and “longing” dominant in the poem. “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*!” on the other hand, evokes a completely different musicality, that of the drums (implied by the “Tra-ta-rakh!”) and the church bells, both part of the immediate, concrete environment. Far from any romantic or Biblical appeal, these musical instruments suit the neo-folkish and carnivalesque adoption of the *purim-shpiler*, and the loud and declarative nature of their sound goes well with the provocative stance of the performance artist, of merriment in the face of a reality of suffering and bloodshed. His art consists of creating alternative visions of the world (“And tra-ta-rakh! / There's peace and quiet in the world”), opening up the possibility of social and political change.

Broderzon's two artistic personas – the melancholy-nostalgic poet and the radical performer – also mark different attitudes towards reclaiming the Jewish heritage. “*Yung bin Ikh!*,” written in Y.L. Peretz's heyday and dedicated to him, reveals the influence of the great Yiddish author.<sup>270</sup> Peretz, the leading figure in the Yiddish literary scene in Poland during the first two decades of the twentieth century, was a master of neo-Hasidic tales and folkish stories (*folkstimlekhe geshikhtn*) and an ardent speaker for Jewish revival through reclaiming Jewish cultural treasures. The old melody (*der alter nign*), the main metonymy for Jewish (folk) treasures in “*Yung bin Ikh!*,” is central to Peretz's reclaiming of Jewish folk culture, and appears, among others, in his stories “*Gilgulo Shel Nigun*,” / “*A gilgl fun a nign*,” “*Nigun chadash*,” / “*A nayer nign*,” and “*Petirat ha-menagen*.”<sup>271</sup> In the spirit of the romantic tradition, in Peretz's work the melody serves as direct expression of the individual's soul and of the *Volksggeist*. Another layer of meaning relates to Peretz's neo-Hasidism, as the *nign* (Yiddish)/ *nigun* (Hebrew) is also associated with the Hasidic songs typically sung by the Hasidim on the Sabbath and on holidays, and especially at the “*tish*” (literally “table”)—the festive gathering around the Rebbe's table. The Hasidim freely borrow melodies from various sources, high and low, sacred and indecent, Jewish and non-Jewish, and the *nign* thus denotes in the Hasidic tradition also the essence of spirituality or holiness which can be found everywhere, and can potentially be “redeemed” and

<sup>270</sup> In his early years Broderzon preoccupation with Jewish tradition is indeed influenced by Peretz and fits the framework set by the great Polish Yiddish author. Rozier, for example, claims that Peretz's modernist drama “*Bay nakht afn altn mark*” (*At Night at the Old Marketplace*; 1907) influenced Broderzon's play “*Der Royter Rayter*” (*The Red Rider*; 1921). Moreover, he argues: “The title ‘Yung-yidish seems to answer the question posed in 1910 by Y.L. Peretz: ‘*Vu bistu, yung-yidisher dikhter?*,’ which can be interpreted as ‘Where are you, young Jewish poet?’ or ‘Where are you? Young Yiddish poet?’ See Rozier, *Moyshe Broderzon*, 67. Peretz no doubt continued to be a source of influence on Broderzon throughout his creative career. Broderzon published a poem named “*Tsu Peretzn*” (*For Peretz*) (see Moyshe Broderzon, *Bagaysterung*, 46-67) and wrote a libretto based on Peretz's 1888 long poem “*Monish*.”

<sup>271</sup> See Y.L. Peretz, *Ale Verk* (New York: *Morgn-frayhat*, 1920) V: 23-24, 116-135. The *nign* also plays an important role in Yankev Glatshiteyn's roman *Ven yash iz gekumen* (New York: Moyshe Shmuel Sklarski, 1940), 7-10, 293-304.

transformed.<sup>272</sup> The old melody in Broderzon's "*Yung bin Ikh!*" ringing "distant oldness" no doubt relates to these romantic and neo-Hasidic notions. It denotes a certain spiritual essence, which is both personal: "my old melody," and national, as evident from the song's content and the poem's finale word: "Jewish." Like other poems in "*Shvartse Fliterlekh*," such as "*Mayrev-klangen*" (Sounds of the Evening Prayer), the poem that concludes the collection, "*Yung bin Ikh!*" follows the famous Polish Yiddish writer's call for a Jewish culture that draws on traditional sources and is yet expressed in Yiddish – the language of the masses.<sup>273</sup>

Peretz's folkism, part of his vision of a Jewish cultural renaissance, is characterized by the search for an authentic expression of the national soul. In a sense, this quest is a secular metamorphosis of the Kabbalistic "raising of the sparks," striving to attain the spiritual essence hidden in the midst of the most profane and low. Rather than the residue of divine presence, the light concealed in the shattered vessels in the terms of Lurianic Kabbalah, Peretz's folkism aims at the national Volksgeist. Broderzon's romantic fascination with music as a universal expression of emotion, as expressed in "*Yung bin Ikh!*" merges with a Peretzian reclaiming of the Jewish *nign* as conveying the national soul or Jewish longing and suffering.

In reclaiming the *purim-shpiler* Broderzon forsakes this romantic model and embarks on his own modernist search for an artistic Jewish heritage, a project that incorporates influences of Russian modernism into Peretz's vision of a national Jewish renaissance. Whereas the figure of the melancholy-stricken lyrical poet stands for a romantic search for depth and essence, the image of the *purim-shpiler* is more playful and heterogenous, and marks the self-conscious reclaiming of tradition from a variety of elements. The reconstruction of heritage is constantly in dialogue with non-Jewish cultures – as in the juxtaposition of the *purim-shpiler* and Pierrot – and with contemporary politics and social reality – as in Haman shortening his name to "Homo."

Broderzon of the post-WWI era turns from the organic Peretzian ideal, in which Jewish folk culture serves the genuine roots of modern Jewish culture, to a modernist inorganic model that doesn't lay claim to a real continuity with the Jewish sources, but rather deliberately reveals its constructed nature. Aware of its constructed nature, Broderzon's modernist appropriation of tradition wittingly employs anachronisms and sacrilegious gestures. Little wonder, then, that he identifies with the carnivalesque *purim-shpil*, in itself an ironic comment on the Biblical text. In the Peretzian model Jewish folk culture – such as the *nign* – is transformed into a spiritual and national symbol, and serves as a sign of antiquity and authenticity.

It is appropriate that Broderzon, who was deeply involved in performance in a variety of forms, became a pioneer in the discovery of the *purim-shpil*. Following him came literary historians such as Schiper, poets such as Manger, the actor and theater director Turkow and film director and producer Green. Broderzon's 1919 "*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*" can thus serve as the manifesto of a whole movement in Yiddish culture of the interwar era that reclaimed Jewish folk performance to construct modern Jewish art and reconstruct its history. However, unlike the search for the authentic and pure origins of Jewish theater, which characterizes interwar Yiddishist historiographies and Turkow's theater productions (both discussed in the next chapter), Broderzon's appropriation of folk performance is both

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<sup>272</sup> Peretz's interest in the folk *nign* and other folk phenomena was also related to his socialist affiliation. See Ken Frieden, *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 231-310. For a discussion of Peretz's "pseudo-neo-chasidic" style see also Jordan Finkin, *A Rhetorical Conversation: Jewish Discourse in Modern Yiddish Literature* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 109-146.

<sup>273</sup> This call was mostly clearly expressed in Peretz's famous Czernowitz Conference speech. See *Di Ershte Yidishe shprakh-konferents*, 1908 (Vilnius: YIVO, 1931), 133-134; See also Kalman Weiser and Joshua A. Fogel, eds. *Czernowitz at 100: the first Yiddish language conference in historical perspective* (Lanham, Md. : Lexington Books, 2010).

playful and self-conscious. As befits a poet who identifies with the *purim-shpiler*, it can best be described as carnivalesque, celebrating the mask, the polyphony of voices, and the reversal of roles.

Performance, I argue, comes to signify in Broderzon's work a public position, a creative activity and an existential stance. The Jewish folk performer – whether the traditional *purim-shpiler* (as in “*Ikh – a purim-shpiler...*” or in *A khasneke*), or the more modern *broder zinger* (in *Lilisl*), signifies all these qualities in the unique cultural setting of twentieth century Eastern European Jewry.<sup>274</sup> In Broderzon's case as in other instances, the appropriation project was informed by his affiliation with or affinity for European trends, such as the Russian fascination with the commedia dell'arte or more generally with popular performance and ethnography, or the modernist constant quest for new sources of inspiration, including the low and the abject, against the stifling fixed hierarchies of classicism and bourgeois culture.<sup>275</sup> Reclaiming folk performance was also elicited by Jewish national aspirations, themselves part of the rise of European ideologies of the nation state. Peretz, for example, as Ruth Wisse writes, “modeled his idea of Jewish cultural renaissance on Poland's struggle for independence, which compensated for the Poles’ political dependency by promoting national language and culture.”<sup>276</sup> In Broderzon's modernist oeuvre these divergent shaping forces and tendencies are juxtaposed rather than harmonized, as various sources such as the Bible, the Jewish folk story and the commedia dell'arte engage in dialogue, compete and clash. The national and the cosmopolitan, Jewish particularism and European pride and prejudice create together a polyphony of voices, in which the modern Jewish strives to find his own particular voice. In this heterogenous universe Jewish folk performance signifies a cultural junction, where high and low, traditional and contemporary, European and particularly Jewish clash in a carnivalesque celebration—“*a freylekhe, tsezungene khalyastre*” (a happy, boisterous gang).

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<sup>274</sup> Moreover, Broderzon, like other modernists (including non-Jews such as James Joyce in *Ulysses*), positions the Jew as a metonym for the modern person, and thus for the modernist poet.

<sup>275</sup> The Russian appropriation of commedia dell'arte was in itself, like the Yiddish project, a case of a relatively marginal culture reclaiming an icon of the dominant and prestigious Western culture.

<sup>276</sup> Ruth R. Wisse, “Peretz, Yitskhok Leybush,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, 2010. [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Peretz\\_Yitskhok\\_Leybush](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Peretz_Yitskhok_Leybush). See also Ruth Wisse, “Introduction,” in *The I.L. Peretz Reader*; Isaac Leib Peretz and Ruth R. Wisse (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), xiii-xviii; See also Ruth Wisse, *I.L. Peretz Peretz and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991). Although Wisse emphasizes Peretz's nationalism while repressing his Socialist affiliations, her analysis of Peretz nevertheless offers many insights into his work.

## Chapter Four: The Popular Imagination The Commodification of Folk Performance in Yiddish Cinema

This chapter examines the appropriation of folk performance in Yiddish cinema through a close study of three films from 1936-8, the brief “Golden Age” of Yiddish cinema. Focusing on the tensions inherent in these films, I strive to shed light on the complex role of traditional Jewish performance in the popular cinematic imagination. The first part of the chapter, titled “From Fiddle to Vaudeville: Authenticity and the Fantasy of Social Mobility in *Yidl mitn fidl*,” explores the dual role of *klezmer* performance in the successful film *Yidl mitn Fidl* (*Yiddle with the Fiddle*, Poland, 1936, dir. Joseph Green) as an icon of traditional authenticity on the one hand and a vehicle of social mobility on the other. The itinerant musicians in the film, I argue, function as mediating agents between the *shtetl* and the modern urban environment. Moreover, it is precisely their independence from the norms of the *shtetl* that allows the *klezmer* to serve as a utopian image of traditional Eastern European Jewish life, and thus evoke nostalgia among the film's urban viewers. And, to a certain extent, the ideal of the *klezmer's* free-spirited life on the road paradoxically destabilizes the fantasy of social mobility. In the second part of the chapter, “The Radical Traditional versus the Commodified Modern: The *purim-shpil* as a Cultural Alternative in *Der purim-shpiler*,” I analyze Green's next film, *Der purim-shpiler* (*The Jester*, USA, 1937) in comparison to *Yidl mitn Fidl*, and contend that *Der purim-shpiler* subverts—probably against the director's own intentions—its Hollywood-like “rags to riches” narrative. In contrasting the charm and honesty of the *purim-shpiler* with the cynicism of the professional actor, and juxtaposing the socially engaged *purim-shpil* performance with the lightweight commodified cabaret, the film establishes the folk performer as an object of emotional identification, and presents his performance as morally and aesthetically superior to modern show business. Thus, alongside the plot line of progress, the film allows for a subversive reading, which criticizes the commodified production of nostalgia and pseudo-authenticity.

Finally, in part III of the chapter, “Ethnographic Display and Stylized Aestheticization in *Der dibuk*,” I examine the transformation of Sh. An-sky's famous play, written in the years 1912-1914, to the popular 1937 film, and show how the ethnographic display in the play, which strives to establish folklore as a basis for secular Jewish identity, is transformed in the film into a spectacle of *yidishkayt* and exoticism, oscillating between blunt commodification and modern aestheticization. A century after Ginzburg's and Gottlober's harsh attacks on Jewish folk performance, popular Yiddish film, inspired by the modern appropriation of folk performance in literary circles, embraces the *klezmer*, the *purim-shpil* and the *badkhn*, using them to market picturesque images of Eastern European Jewish life alongside fantasies of social mobility.

### A. From Fiddle to Vaudeville: Authenticity and Social Mobility in *Yidl mitn fidl*

As we filmed, they ate, and for the successive shots of the table, the food had to be replenished, over and over again. Our poverty-stricken guests couldn't figure out what was happening. They thought they have been invited to a real wedding, and when one

woman asked why so much food, we explained to her it wasn't a real wedding, we were just making a film. I don't think she had ever seen a film, but she said "Why didn't you tell me before? With so much food, I could have brought my daughter to get married for real. She has a *khosn* (bridegroom), but we have no money. . . to make a proper wedding."<sup>277</sup>

This anecdote about the making of the 1936 *Yidl mitn fidl* in the largely Jewish small town of Kazimierz touches upon some of the most basic concerns of Yiddish film, such as the rendition of folklore, the place of art in the realm of the *shtetl*, and the gap between inhabitants of the *shtetl* and the modern world.<sup>278</sup> Like cinema's myth of origins, this tale too engages the border between cinematic representation and the "real world." In the famous myth of origin it is the Parisian audience of the Lumière Brothers' *Arrival of a Train at the Station* (1895) that takes the cinematic image to be reality, and is absolutely terrified by the approaching train represented on the screen. In the above-quoted story, narrated by Molly Picon, the American star of the Polish-American film crew, the *shtetl* extras cannot tell a production set from real life milieu. In both cases, the virgin audience is presented as naïve, and the pleasure we take in the story depends on the difference between "us," modern film mavens, and "them," who lack acquaintance with the medium.<sup>279</sup> The train story, usually read as no more than proof of the cinematic "reality effect," has a clear socio-historical dimension, as Tom Gunning has argued.<sup>280</sup> It sets apart two periods, two kinds of audiences with different experiences. Picon's story operates in a similar way. While pointing at the blurry boundary between film and life, it also emphasizes a social border; in this case, the one between the experienced Polish-American film crew and the residents of the Jewish *shtetl*, who, more than forty years after the first cinema screening, remain unfamiliar with the medium (at least according to Picon), and can serve as film extras without even realizing they are not participating in a real wedding. The social and educational gap between the inhabitants of the *shtetl* and the American star has an obvious economic dimension. While ostensibly a story about the similarity between the film set and life, this anecdote actually reveals the gap between them, as the excess of food is what makes the woman realize that there is something strange about this wedding. In order to achieve lifelike realism, the cinematic wedding and its set need to be larger than life.

Yet, there is one major difference between the two stories. Whereas in the train story an

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<sup>277</sup> Molly Picon and Jean Bergantini Grillo, *Molly! An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), 67-68.

<sup>278</sup> I refer to the film as *Yidl with the fiddle*, rather than *Yidl with his Fiddle*, as in the common English translation of the title (also the one used by the National Center for Jewish Film that markets the film), because it leaves more place for gender indecisiveness, as befitting its cross-dressed protagonist. The name "Yidl" (a nick-name for Yehuda or Yuda in Yiddish as well as "little Jew," a diminutive of "yid"), is grammatically neuter (as are all Yiddish words in the diminutive). Interestingly, when screened in the United States in 1937 the film was marketed under the title: *Castle in the Sky*, which erased any ethnic marks and emphasized the fantasy element in the plot.

<sup>279</sup> For a further analysis of the myth of Lumière's *Arrival of a Train at the Station* see Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Art & Text* (Spring 1989): 31-45. According to Gunning, there is no actual evidence for this myth. The persistence and prevalence of the anecdote should be understood in light of common beliefs and anxieties regarding early cinema and cinema in general like, for example, the power of the cinematic image, the mythical childhood of the medium, early cinema as a cinema of attractions, etc.

<sup>280</sup> Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment," 31-33.

icon of modern times serves to praise the new film technology and its ability to create a reality illusion, in *Yidl mitn fidl* a cultural mark, i.e. the Eastern European Jewish wedding, complete with its *klezmer*, dances, *badkhn* and, of course, the festive meal, attest to the director's skillfulness in creating a lifelike scene. Indeed, the endeavor to render Jewish customs on the screen is apparent not only in this scene but also in *Yidl mitn fidl* as a whole, and, more broadly, is characteristic of Yiddish cinema at large. One common feature of Yiddish film is the use of the modern medium to produce vivid—if exaggerated—images of Jewish holidays, celebrations, and prayers, or to reconstruct the picturesque Jewish *shtetl* for urban moviegoers from Warsaw to New York. While the images and stories in the films depict tradition, the desire to reenact and consume these customs is essentially modern, and draws on the view that the old Jewish way of life has been declining, and many of its customs are about to disappear from the world. Thus, the hyperbolic rendering of rituals and customs is motivated by a modern version of “salvage folklore.” The notions of crisis and imminent demise, which were felt in Jewish Eastern Europe as early as the late nineteenth century, and the dramatic processes of urbanization, secularization and mass immigration, gained further impetus after the first World War. As in other cultures, the need to preserve or represent tradition arose in Ashkenazi culture together with modernity. In fact, as Eric Hobsbawm has famously shown, the very notion of tradition is essentially modern.<sup>281</sup> While constructed as modernity's “other,” tradition is nevertheless accompanied in modern discourse, more often than not, by feelings of loss and nostalgia. In this sense, the cinematic representation of Eastern European Jewish folklore in 1936 is no less modern than the depiction of a steam engine in 1895. Picon's story is not only a joke about the ignorance of Kazimierz Jews. Rather, it might evoke a sense of nostalgic admiration for these “authentic” Jews of the “old country,” their joyful traditional weddings, and their perpetual alertness to new ways to finesse an economically inequitable system. Whereas the Lumière myth is told about people of the past, Picon narrates the encounter with her contemporaries, whom she compares in her memoirs to exotic natives, and whose poverty shocks her.<sup>282</sup> As a child of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, she views the *shtetl* dwellers as embodying her own “past,” her cultural and socioeconomic origins. Yet Picon's account of filming *Yidl mitn fidl* in Kazimierz involves no veneration of a glorious Old Times or grief over cultural loss. Rather, the great star of American Yiddish theater is relieved at having escaped this world, leaving no doubt as to the superiority of the American way of life.

The complex relations between modernity and tradition manifested in the behind-the-scenes wedding anecdote operate also in the film itself. The construction of authenticity, the oscillation between a patronizing look at the past and nostalgic reverence for it on the one hand, and the power structures produced by the socioeconomic gaps between the *shtetl* and the United States on the other. These and other matters are engaged in *Yidl mitn fidl* on the level of plot, acting, photography, set design and music. As befits a popular comedy, the film's story remains rather simple: kicked out of their home for falling behind on their rent, the cross-dressed Yidl and her elderly father embark on a journey, making their living as *klezmer*. On the road they are joined by two other musicians, and Yidl helplessly falls in love with one of them, a virile

<sup>281</sup> See footnote no. 8 in this dissertation.

<sup>282</sup> Picon and Grillo, 25-6. See also Joshua S. Walden, “Leaving Kazimierz: Comedy and Realism in the Yiddish Film Musical *Yidl mitn Fidl*,” *Music, Sound and the Moving Image*, volume 3, issue 2, Autumn 2009, 186. Picon's shocked reaction to the poverty of Kazimierz is discussed also in J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds* (New York, Temple University Press and Schocken Books, 1995), 239.

violinist named Froyim. The four continue traveling together through many *shtetlakh*, rescue on the way an escaping bride who joins them as a singer, and finally reach Warsaw, where two theater producers discover musical talents among the group. Initially left behind, Yidl ultimately turns out to be the producers' real find. In the film's dramatic climax, Yidl sings and narrates the story of her journey, revealing her true gender to her beloved and showcasing her talents in front of an admiring audience. Yidl's success in Warsaw launches her glorious stage career, and the film's final scene shows her on board a ship, where she unites with her lover while sailing towards the land of endless possibilities, America.<sup>283</sup>

*Yidl mitn fidl* is thus a musical comedy, constructed around a “rags to riches” and “a star is born” narrative, leading towards commercial success in the big city and ultimately towards America. It is also a road movie, for which the landscape of Jewish Eastern Europe provides a picturesque and folkloric setting. Together, these popular Hollywood genres help shape a drama of tradition and modernity, much like Picon's first Yiddish film, aptly titled *Ost und West* (*East and West*, Austria, 1923, dir. Sidney Goldin), which revolves around a tri-polar tension among modern American norms, an acculturated Jewish-Austrian environment, and *shtetl* life. *Yidl mitn fidl* also follows the conventions of what Chris Straayer has called “the temporary transvestite film,” including the common “stations” typical of the genre such as falling in love with a person of the other gender; risky events such as sharing a bed, bathing together, and a near kiss/hug scene; the appearance of a rival who has the advantage of openly belonging to the “right” sex; a scene of revelation, in which the beloved finds out the “true” gender of the protagonist; and the ultimate victory of the heteronormative order, as the figure of the cross-dresser is “reformed” in the manner of a heterosexual coupling.<sup>284</sup> The more unique element in Yidl's story is that the revelation scene takes place on a stage. Yidl's masquerade and its undoing, together with the whole journey story, become part of a show, a play within the cinematic frame, as Yidl tells her story to the diegetic audience, who finds it entertaining. Thus, the moment of return to the true gender is also the glorious birth of a star.

Such an effective combination of several Hollywood formulas made the 1936 musical comedy *Yidl mitn fidl* one of the most successful products of the short-lived Yiddish cinema, both in terms of box-office and Yiddish press reviews. The film was screened not only in the Jewish movie houses of the Lower East Side or Warsaw—the regular venues for Yiddish cinema—but also in non-Jewish theaters. It even received some favorable reviews from the non-Yiddish press, though hardly as enthusiastic as the Yiddish ones, who were proud of this professional product of the young and small-scale Yiddish film industry. The musical score of *Yidl mitn fidl* produced many hits for the Jewish stage that were to be sung for years to come, including *Oy, Mama, I'm in love* (*Oy, mame, bin ikh farlibt*) and the title song *Yidl mitn fidl*, which according to Hoberman was even sung (in a revised form) by German Jewish prisoners in the concentration camps.<sup>285</sup> Scenes from the film regularly appear in various documentaries, from the Nazi

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<sup>283</sup> The final scene of *Yidl mitn fidl*, just like the ending of Barbra Streisand's 1983 *Yentl*, a Hollywood box-office hit which also narrates female to male cross-dressing in a traditional Eastern European Jewish environment, takes place on the boat taking the heroine to the United States. In both cases the happy ending on board the ship to America enables the United States to remain in the realm of fantasy, without having to deal with the challenges of immigration.

<sup>284</sup> Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies: Sexual Re-Orientations in Film and Video* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 44-78.

<sup>285</sup> The song is indeed based on an earlier one, but it is undoubtedly the film that made it a big hit. The

propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* (*Der Ewige Jude*, Germany, 1940, dir. Fritz Hippler) to the vastly different *Almonds and Raisins* (USA, 1985, dir. David Elstein and Russ Karel) and *The Golden Age of Second Avenue* (USA, 1987, dir. Morton Silverstein). The film's impressive success on both sides of the Atlantic (including Nazi Germany, where the censor authorized the film for Jewish audiences) served as inspiration for other Yiddish films. Producer and director Joseph Green, motivated by the favorable outcome of his recently founded "Green Films," made three more Yiddish films over the next three years, before the war broke out (*Der purim-shpiler*, *Mamele* and *A brivele der mamen* [*A Letter to the Mother*]). In all of these he relied on his tried and true recipe of humor, musical numbers and "yiddishkayt" (traditional Jewishness).<sup>286</sup> None of the post-1936 films that Green created, however, repeated the success of *Yidl mitn fidl*.<sup>287</sup> It is therefore worth asking: How should we account for the film's favorable reception, both in Europe and in the United States? Partly, the answer lies in the combination of Polish and American talents that the "green" Joseph Green (formerly Yosef Greenberg) managed to bring to the film. A native of Lodz who had returned from the United States to his home country to found his own production company, Green made good use of experienced and cheap local cinema people, such as his co-director Jan Nowina Przybylski, camera-persons Seweryn Steinwurz and Jakub Jonilowicz, as well as the Yiddish poet Itsik Manger who wrote the lyrics for this musical comedy. Poland enabled Green to make films on a low budget at the same time it provided the "authenticity" of the old country. From the other side of the Atlantic Green brought over the big star of the production, Molly Picon, whose salary took roughly twenty percent of the budget. Picon came with her two regular companions: the composer Abe Ellstein and her husband and agent Jacob Kalish, who also served as the film's co-producer.

Picon was clearly Greens' main bet. Not only did he pay her the fortune of \$10,000, he also tailored the film to her tiny proportions, providing the beloved comedian of New York's Second Avenue, also known as "the Yiddish Broadway," with numerous opportunities for physical gags and musical numbers. To better suit Picon's comical talents, Green changed the original screenplay of the film, which narrated the story of a bride who in the midst of her wedding runs away with a group of *klezmer* to avoid her forced marriage to a rich old man.<sup>288</sup> Green expanded the story of the musicians and assigned Picon the role of a girl masquerading as a *klezmer* boy, thus enabling the comedian to employ her best-known trademark: cross-dressing. To the dramatic conflict between forced arranged marriage versus romantic love, a staple of modern Yiddish cultural discourses, which developed as a critique of a traditional Eastern European society, were now added a variety of motifs from various film genres and topoi, including musical comedy, a road movie, cross-dressing, and the plot formulas of "rags to riches" and "a star is born." The end product was a light comedy, in which the drama of arranged marriage is overshadowed by the norms of Hollywood cinema, and where the modern reproduction of "authentic" *shtetl* life provides an entertaining American gloss to Eastern European hardships and dilemmas.

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concentration camp version was clearly based on the film's version.

<sup>286</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Green's formula, see the interview with him in the weekly *Literarische bleter* (Literary Pages) quoted later on in this chapter.

<sup>287</sup> In the next part of this chapter, I analyze the film *Der purim-shpiler*, and try to explain its relative box office failure by comparing it to *Yidl mitn Fidl*.

<sup>288</sup> "Picon was not particularly suited to play the bride," explains film historian J. Hoberman (238), thus aligning Picon with her screen character.

Beyond the many effective formulas and the abundance of talent from both sides of the Atlantic, the success of *Yidl mitn fidl* is rooted in its ability to provide a response to the social concerns of the time. Through humor, picturesque images, and pleasurable melodies, the film harmonizes tensions between past and present, the *shtetl* and modern urban life. While in her memoirs Picon pities the poor inhabitants of Kazimierz, the film in which she stars depicts traditional Eastern European Jewish life as a bittersweet fantasy, where hardships transform into adventurous challenges. The narrative of progress covers the social anxieties lying at the film's core with a gloss of success. *Yidl mitn fidl* thus offers a romantic image of the old world accompanied by a triumphant fulfillment of the American dream. While unequivocally promoting progress towards modernity and economic prosperity, and ultimately immigration to America, *Yidl mitn fidl* still allows for limited nostalgia for “*di alte heym*” (The Old Country).

Jewish folk performance, represented in *Yidl mitn fidl* first and foremost through the wandering *klezmer*, signifies both the traditional way of life and a means of social mobility. It thus plays a key role in negotiating the cultural tensions produced by the troubling encounter between tradition and modernity.<sup>289</sup> Molly Picon, who plays the leading role in *Yidl mitn fidl*, is another key element in the construction of a harmony between tradition and modernity in the film. Picon impersonates Itke, a *shtetl* girl traveling with the *klezmer* cross-dressed as a boy named Yidl who ultimately becomes a successful comedian—much in the style of Picon herself.<sup>290</sup> Characterized by endless optimism and an exceptional capacity for transformation, the figure of Yidl offers a light-hearted negotiation between the social tensions rooted in the processes of modernization, urbanization and migration. Picon's public persona as a Yiddish-American star and the daughter of immigrant garment-workers helped shape *Yidl* as an icon of prosperity and a successful merging of East and West, and added a realistic dimension to the sweet fantasy of the film.

My analysis of *Yidl mitn fidl* below focuses on two powerful cultural symbols operating in it—folk performance on the one hand, and popular entertainment on the other. I ask: How is folk performance imagined in the film? What role does it play in the drama of East and West, created for mass consumption on both sides of the Atlantic? What are the relations between folk performance and its sought-after transfiguration—the American vaudeville stage? How does gender, embodied most prominently in the troubled image of the cross-dresser, relate to folk performance and to questions of cultural heritage, acculturation and assimilation? In what follows I demonstrate how *Yidl mitn fidl* offers insights into the appropriation of folk performance in popular Yiddish culture of the interwar era. I argue, in particular, that the collective figure of the *klezmer*, an icon of tradition, helps address the modern challenges of

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<sup>289</sup> I follow here the example of Gaylyn Studlar in her studies of American film stardom in around the 1920s. See Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). See also her more recent “Oh, 'Doll Divine': Mary Pickford, Masquerade and the Pedophilic Gaze,” *Camera Obscura* 16, Issue 3 (2001): 196-227. Studlar views the masculine stars of the Jazz age as evidence of “how American masculinity negotiated various social and sexual dilemmas of the time. These included the perceived rebellion of women against sexual and domestic norms, the ethnic threat of new immigrants, and the alteration of middle class lifestyles by modern industrial economics.” (*This Mad Masquerade*, 5). Similarly, I view Picon, a contemporary of Pickford, Rudolf Valentino and Douglas Fairbanks, as negotiating cultural tensions around immigration and gender in the Yiddish-American realm, in both her roles and her public persona.

<sup>290</sup> Although the name Yidl is similar in sound to the Yiddish word “Yid” (Jew), it does not stand here for “the diminutive form of the word 'Jew,’” as Walden and probably others believe (Walden, 161), but is rather the common Yiddish nickname for Yuda (the Yiddish version of the Hebrew name Yehuda).

reclaiming cultural heritage and maintaining an ethnic identity while promoting an ethos of social mobility.

The life and music of the *klezmer* play a key role in *Yidl mitn fidl*, which follows their journey from its very beginnings in the departure from the *shtetl*, to the big city of Warsaw, signifying success but also the disassembly of the band. In accordance with the road movie genre, the *klezmer's* journey brings together divergent characters, including stereotypical *shtetl* types (rendered from a modern and critical point of view) such as the compulsive liar Kalamutker, Arye, Yidl's elderly and hesitant father, alongside members of the younger generation, including the virile Froyim, Taybele the escaping bride, and of course the energetic Yidl. For Yidl the challenges related to wandering are augmented by those resulting from her cross-dressing, such as her flawed masculinity and her “impossible” attraction to Froyim. Yet despite these social, economic and gender troubles the lives of Yidl and the other itinerant musicians are depicted as free, happy, and optimistic. The *klezmer*, as depicted in *Yidl mitn fidl*, form their own little universe within traditional Jewish society, complete with a leader, rules regarding the distribution of wealth, common celebrations and a strong sense of solidarity. When, towards the end of the film, the band starts to disintegrate, the viewers are likely to feel a sense of loss. The modern circumstances in Warsaw, with its greedy producers and mass audiences looking for the next star, and the hospitable widow, who offers Kalamutker, the band's leader, the comforts of bourgeois domesticity, put an end to the footloose and fancy-free lifestyle of the musicians. We sympathize with Kalamutker who has a hard time leaving his freedom and male camaraderie, despite the promise of a loving wife, a comfortable bed and regular hearty meals. Constructed as a utopia, the life of the itinerant musicians evokes nostalgic feelings already within the narrative of the film. The *klezmer* thus serve as object of nostalgia for the traditional way of life, enabling the film's original spectators to project their own longing for the world they left behind.

The final part of the film, including the last romantic complication in Warsaw and its resolution on board the ship to America leads in a somewhat rushed manner towards the happy ending. It recounts the emergence of Yidl as a vaudeville talent and her fast track to international stardom, and marks a departure from the language of the road movie. Although sailing to the United States constitutes the last stage of the journey, and three of the original band members are present on board, the atmosphere in this scene is bourgeois and formal. Yidl returns to her female persona, Froyim conducts a small orchestra while wearing a tuxedo, and the music played is no longer *klezmer* music but rather American Jazz peppered with elements from traditional Jewish folk music, aimed at pleasing the wealthy passengers. While providing the ultimate happy ending, including a romantic reunion and the promise of opportunities for successful acculturation, the film's closure is still likely to engender in the spectator a certain nostalgia for the open road. The American dream for which the ship serves as a metonymy signifies not only the triumphant conclusion of the trip but also the end of the musicians' way of life, complete with their merry performances, joyous drinking parties, romantic episodes and community spirit.

As is often the case in the commodified portrayals of modernization in Yiddish culture (and beyond), the utopian image of the past and its accompanying nostalgia operate alongside a trajectory of progress. Music, the key element in the life of the *klezmer*, represents both nostalgia and progress. Throughout the first part of the film, music contributes to the joyous atmosphere.

Many songs are spontaneous bursts of joyfulness and strong emotions, as common in the tradition of the musical, like the song which marks the beginning of the trip, sung by Yidl and her father on the wagon taking them away from their hometown, or the song expressing Yidl's love towards Froyim.<sup>291</sup> Yidl's revelation scene, in which she comically performs the songs of journey, marks the point of change from the impromptu unmediated performances to the urban professional stage. Before the viewers' very eyes (both the diegetic audience in the Warsaw theater and the film's audience), Yidl's private reminiscences are transformed into a mass commodity, and the *klezmer's* tunes, equipped with the dramatic staging and grand orchestration typical of vaudeville performance, become box office hits.

The free and adventurous lives of the itinerant musicians are thus contrasted in multiple ways with the modern urban environment of Warsaw or the United States (symbolized by the ship sailing towards it). Yet in the common dichotomy of traditional *shtetl* life versus modern life, the *klezmer* cannot be simply reduced to the traditional mode. Rather, they mark an alternative sphere, free of the social constraints typical of both traditional Eastern European Jewish life and modern urban life. The liminal position of the *klezmer*, as a mediating agent between tradition and modernity, between ethnic heritage and assimilation, enables them, I argue, to negotiate social tensions and anxieties. The appropriation of folk performance in *Yidl mitn fidl* allows for an idealized image of a certain realm in traditional Eastern European Jewish life. This sphere is perceived as "authentic," rooted in traditional melodies and customs, and yet free-spirited and open to change; and as specifically Jewish while diverging from the social and religious confinements of *shtetl* life and offering a way into the big world. This in-between stance of the *klezmer* no doubt played a key role in the film's appeal and helped market *Yidl mitn fidl* to urban viewers on both side of the *Atlantic*.

In order to further examine the liminal position of the folk performance in *Yidl mitn Fidl*, let me turn now to Joshua Walden's article "Leaving Kazimierz: Comedy and Realism in the Yiddish Film Musical *Yidl mitn Fidl*." This article, the most comprehensive ever written on this film, exemplifies, I believe, a common view of the film. Activated by the common dichotomies of East and West, past and present, tradition and modernity, the article follows the film's harmonizing tendencies while adding to it the post-WWII perspective and the aura of the culture's tragic death. Walden is no doubt right in presenting the encounter between tradition and modernity, "The Old Country" (Yiddish: *di alte heym*, the old home) and "The Golden Land" (*di goldene medine*) of America as the film's essence, and his article indeed provides a rich cultural context for *Yidl mitn fidl*, from contemporary Hollywood and Polish cinema to Jewish folk music and American jazz. Yet Walden overlooks the unique liminal position of the *klezmer* between *shtetl* life and modernity. His article also lacks a more critical examination of processes such the construction of nostalgia or the commodification of folk performance.

Walden reads the film as a combination of two worlds. On the one hand the *shtetl*, imagined through folk music and the picturesque images of Kazimierz (where large parts of the film were shot), and on the other hand, modern American entertainment culture.<sup>292</sup> *Yidl mitn fidl*, Walden contends, creates a "persuasive impression of quasi-ethnographic documentation, while celebrating the possibilities offered to Diaspora Jews by modernity and emigration." The film's

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<sup>291</sup> See Walden, "Leaving Kazimierz: Comedy and Realism in the Yiddish Film Musical *Yidl mitn Fidl*," *Music, Sound and the Moving Image* 3, issue 2 (Autumn 2009):167.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

music, composed by the American composer Abraham Ellstein and “combining the influence of Eastern European Jewish folk music and modern American entertainment” seems to serve in Walden's analysis as a model for the relations between tradition and modernity in the film, which he defines in terms such as “combination,” “merging,” and “synthesis.”<sup>293</sup> All three elements of Walden's basic formula, I argue, are over-simplified and need to be refined; the *shtetl*, modern American (or Americanized) culture, to which Walden refers also as “cosmopolitan life,” and what he terms the “combination” between them. The dichotomy *shtetl* vs. Modernity cannot exhaust *Yidl mitn fidl*, which offers a range of cultural-geographic loci: the *shtetl*, the in-between space of the road and the life of the *klezmer*; the big city of Warsaw and the ship sailing towards America. Each of these sites is rich in connotations that mark a different cultural realm. Furthermore, behind the cheerful harmony between the oppositional worlds of tradition and modernity that the film constructs, these tensions, anxieties and power structures into which Walden does not delve deeply enough.<sup>294</sup>

Let us start with the second element in Walden's analysis, what he terms “the cosmopolitan world,” whether in Warsaw or in the United States. Rather than a Western vision of faceless universalism, I argue, *Yidl mitn fidl* presents a Judaized version of the Western world, a certain modern Jewish Utopia. Warsaw, replete with its greedy producers and vivid theater audiences, signifies an entirely Jewish urban space, with no mention of non-Jews, and in this sense it is comparable to the common image of the *shtetl*. Similarly, the ship marks a specifically Jewish version of the American dream, where the Jew becomes the leader of a Jazz band and continues to play his Jewish tunes—in the requisite jazzy arrangement. Moreover, this cultural hybridity carries special benefits for the minority, as it enables one “*landsman*” (in this case Yidl) to recognize another (Froyim) by virtue of the “Old Country” tune. Jewish identity is transformed in this vision into a secret heritage, just as the jazzy tune is decipherably Jewish to those who possess the relevant inside knowledge. Significantly, this particular fantasy of a Jewish-American co-existence, somewhere between multicultural ideals and the melting pot ideology dominant at the time, takes place on the way to America rather than on the new continent, thus allowing the Golden Land to remain a pure fantasy. The ship, Warsaw, and the broader urban Jewish realm in which Yidl rises to stardom stand indeed in opposition to traditional *shtetl* life. Yet these sites signify not “the cosmopolitan world,” as Walden claims, but rather a specifically Jewish vision of modern life. True, this slightly acculturated Jewish sphere exceeds political borders, and in this sense is indeed cosmopolitan; yet its profound Jewishness separates it from general European or American culture and marks it as a modernized *Yiddishland*, an idealized vision of social integration which nevertheless allows the characters their own identity.

The other pole in Walden's dichotomous analysis, namely the Old World also, requires further consideration. Walden describes the Old World through the ubiquitous categories of “*the shtetl*” and *Yiddishland*, two terms which he uses interchangeably. Yet even though these two terms are often associated with the traditional world of Jewish Eastern Europe, their meanings and connotations differ significantly. Whereas “*Yiddishland*” usually refers to Yiddish culture, separate from any geographic framework, the *shtetl* is a physical—and special—entity.<sup>295</sup>

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 170, 171, 175.

<sup>294</sup> Although he occasionally refers to the relations between the Old World and the modern one as “ambivalent” or “complex,” Walden fails to elucidate the nature of this ambivalence or the reasons for it.

<sup>295</sup> Unlike “*the shtetl*,” which refers specifically to a pre-Holocaust reality, the term “*Yiddishland*” sometimes refers

Although “*the shtetl*” had become a spiritual and even mythological entity, as Walden, following David Assaf and David Roskies, argues, the concept still draws its strength from its concrete geographic quality. Moreover, while “the *shtetl*” is indeed a powerful cultural construct, its various significations, formed in different times and places, should not be merged into a single signified—even if some of its features as a mythological entity, such as the alleged absence of non-Jews—may be common to many of its variants. The negative valence of the *shtetl* in *Haskala* literature, with its emphasis on ignorance, religious prejudice and corruption at the Hasidic court, is quite different from the one created by Sholem Aleykhem, still critical but more emphatic, or from the patronizing and slightly nostalgic representation of the *shtetl* in Yiddish films such as Green's American-Polish production *A brivele der mamen*, and—more to the point of our discussion—in his *Yidl mitn fidl*.<sup>296</sup> Rather than a vaguely defined stereotype, the notion of the *shtetl* should provide a comparative framework that could help analyze the specific image constructed in each and every case.

While Walden argues (without much specification) that the image of the *shtetl* in *Yidl mitn fidl* is more idealized than in other Yiddish films, a closer look at the film reveals that Yidl's home *shtetl*, the starting point of her journey, is far from ideal. On the contrary, the film's first two scenes depict it as a place of hardship and misery. In one of these scenes the young Itke, playing the violin on the marketplace for a living, is sexually harassed by a bully, and in the other she and her elderly father are thrown out of their house for falling behind on their rent. The town's stereotypical gossips, all female of course, pity the poor orphan but do little to help her. Taybele's wedding in another *shtetl* also presented by a largely negative image, as the vividness and joyful spirit of the traditional celebration can hardly balance out the tragedy of the young woman forced to marry a rich old man. The only ray of light in these somber scenes are the *klezmer* themselves and above all Itke/Yidl, who bravely faces the oppressor in the first scene, and helps Taybele escape the wedding in the other. In sum, the *shtetl* is depicted in *Yidl mitn fidl* as a site of poverty, heartless matchmaking and gossiping women, where economic pressures and traditional mores lead to dreadful conditions such as homelessness or forced marriage.

Why then would one regard the *shtetl* in *Yidl mitn fidl* as idealized? The answer lies probably in the joyous lifestyle of the *klezmer*, which occupies a large part of the film. Yet rather

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specifically to post-holocaust Yiddish culture, a world which is also described by Jeffrey Shandler as that of “post vernacular Yiddish.” See Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language & Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>296</sup> See Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000). Walden writes “As represented in art, the Yiddishland *shtetl* was generally inhabited by stock folkloric characters, including the rabbi, the bride, the dairyman, and the fiddler.” (174-175). Walden's mention of “art” is too general and in need of further specification. Thus, for example, in the literature of the *Haskala*, from Walden's list only the bride and the *rabbi* would be included (and one should probably add other figures such as the *melamed*, the *shadkhn*, and, to a lesser degree, the *badkhn*, discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. Furthermore, both the dairyman and the fiddler, protagonists of two of Sholem Aleykhem's renowned works, *Tevye der milkhiker* (*Tevye the Dairyman*, and *Stempenyu* (1888), were not part of the stereotypical *shtetl* figures prior to WWI, and were conceived by Sholem Aleykhem in his attempt to go beyond the limits of the traditional *shtetl*. In *Stempenyu*, for example, the *klezmer* is clearly the outsider, a marginal and dubious character, and serves Sholem Aleykhem as a Jewish equivalent to the artist figure common in European culture. See Sholem Aleykhem, *Ale Verk* (New York, Forverts, 1942), 2 [alef]: 123-254. The *klezmer*, and especially the fiddler, become a symbol of the *shtetl* only in modern times, when they come to signify the starting point for the way out of the *shtetl*. Lastly, the fiddler owes his fame also to the immense success of Marc Chagall and of the Broadway musical/Hollywood film *Fiddler on the Roof*.

than epitomizing the world of the *shtetl*, the *klezmer*; I have argued, establish a separate social sphere. What Walden designates as “*the shtetl*” in fact marks two separate spaces: the traditional *shtetl*, with its confining social and religious norms and economic hardships, and the utopian life of the *Klezmer*; imagined as a space of freedom where even the hardships become favorable opportunities. Whereas Jewish folk music constitutes a sign of tradition in the film, the *klezmer* who play it constitute an ambivalent icon, linked on the one hand to tradition, and on the other to the modern world through the universal appeal of music and performance, and through a teleological narrative of progress. True, by virtue of their profession the *klezmer* are closely associated with Jewish tradition, most notably in their key role in the traditional Jewish wedding. *Yidl mitn fidl* indeed makes use of this connection, above all in the wedding scene, where they serve as part of a folkloric display which is one of the film's highlights. Paradoxically, however, Yidl and her colleagues use this traditional celebration to rebel against social norms by running away with the bride in the midst of the festivities. Moreover, while partaking in the traditional way of life the free-spirited *klezmer* also diverge from it in many respects, and enjoy relative liberty from social norms, such as the need for economic stability, the hierarchies of young and old, or the confining structure of the nuclear family.<sup>297</sup> It is hence no coincidence that the *klezmer's* journey starts with the departure from the *shtetl*. In the cinematic appropriation of musical folk performance, unlike in historical Eastern European Jewish society, one needs to leave the *shtetl* and its normative sphere in order to become a *klezmer*. The film shapes the itinerant *klezmer* as providing in their spatially dynamic existence an alternative sphere within Eastern European Jewish life, which calls for veneration and nostalgia, and yet points forwards, to the big metropolis and ultimately towards America.

The road, the *klezmer's* habitus, in Bourdieu's term, constitutes an intermediate sphere between the *shtetl* and Jewish urban life. Unlike the *shtetl*, marked by poverty and decline, the road signifies progress, and is constructed as a land of freedom and adventure. Already the first day of Yidl and Arye's travels is marked by prosperity, as their more experienced rivals turn into partners, and as the coins showered over them are celebrated merrily in a drinking party. Yidl's naïve view of the road as providing endless adventures governs the film as a whole. Thus, for example, traveling requires Yidl to dress-up as a boy, a status which indeed entails certain romantic complications, but also gives her great pleasure. In opposition to the harsh image of Yidl's “home” in the *shtetl*, e.g., Yidl's elderly father sitting on a pile of his personal belongings in the middle of the street in his *shtetl*, the road offers “luxury accommodation” in a barn transformed into a lodge. This improvised shelter is depicted as a rural fantasy, complete with a well (an opportunity for Froyim to display his muscles), a nearby pond for bathing and washing, and a soft bed of hay. Kalamutker, the lodge's “owner,” presents the place as his “palace” (“here's the bedroom, here's the bathroom”) and takes pride in the facilities, such as a blanket which serves as pajama or a hanged bucket that serves for washing (“technology!”). Furthermore, the barn is eroticized through the tensions between Yidl and Froyim, who sleep

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<sup>297</sup> The image of the free-spirited *klezmer* is in line with their cultural image in Jewish culture, as expressed for example in Sholem Alyekhem's novel *Stempenyu*. There are some parallels between the liminal position of the *klezmer* in Eastern European Jewish imagination and that of the cantors, especially in the modern era, when cantors became known for “engaging the aesthetics and mores of the non-Jewish world” and associated with social mobility. See Jeffery Shandler, *Jews, God and Videotape: Religion and Media in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 14. Shandler's discussion in his first chapter (“Cantors on Trial”) focuses on the public image of cantors in the United States among Eastern European Jewish immigrants.

next to each other and bathe in the pond, where Froyim gallantly saves Yidl from drowning. The world of the *klezmer*, characterized by temporariness and insecurity, is portrayed in *Yidl mitn fidl* as a utopian space, beyond the rules of normal society, and seemingly existing outside time and place.

As in other films of this genre, in *Yidl mitn fidl* too the road trip narrative “promotes a male escapist fantasy. . . defining the road as a space that is at once resistant to while ultimately contained by the responsibilities of domesticity: home life, marriage, employment.”<sup>298</sup> The resistance to domestic life is also in dialogue with a plot structure common in Yiddish culture (as well as in Eastern European Jewish life): running away from the *shtetl*, leaving the family behind. The plot structure is famously employed in Abramovitsh's *Maso'es Binyomin Ha-shlishi (Travels of Benjamin the Third)*.<sup>299</sup> The road movie also typically sets “the liberation of the road against the oppression of hegemonic norms,” and in the case of *Yidl mitn fidl*, it works first and foremost against the constraints of traditional Eastern European Jewish life.<sup>300</sup>

The third element in Walden's formula, i.e. the relation between tradition and modernity, also requires further nuancing. To describe the relation between the *shtetl* and urban modern life in *Yidl mitn fidl* in terms such as “combination” or “merging” entails suppressing the power relations acting in this Polish-American mass product. Walden lays out a wide array of sources that influenced the film, including the American Hollywood musical, contemporary Polish cinema, Yiddish literature and more, but fails to analyze their political significance or the hierarchy and struggles among them. Even when it comes to the music, the paragon of Walden's merging paradigm, his analysis focuses on separating the traditional elements in the film's soundtrack from the modern ones, while concealing the element of power typical of all tradition/modernity relations. Whereas Walden's analysis suggests that the film's composer Abraham Ellstein added modern elements or orchestration to Eastern European Jewish music, I would describe his work in terms of appropriation, as serving the film's acculturationist vision, which is an ideological and a commercial interest of the filmmakers. Like other modern works, *Yidl mitn fidl* constructs the very notions of tradition and authenticity through the modern point of view, defining “tradition” as the exotic other, and sorting out which customs are in need of “salvation.”

Finally, Walden views the film as motivated by two different goals, a preservationist drive on the one hand, and a modernizing one on the other. As he formulates it: “the creators of *Yidl mitn fidl* sought to produce a typical musical comedy film, and at the same time to document

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<sup>298</sup> Thus, for example, in the drinking scene the klezmer burst spontaneously in a merry song glorifying alcohol and male bonding, including lines such as “Girl Shmirl [*meydl shmeydl*] / With a clarinet in hand, what else does one need?” *Yidl mitn fidl* is not unlike the Hollywood road movie, a genre “traditionally focused on men” which responds to “the breakdown of the family unit,” and to “the destabilization of male subjectivity and masculine empowerment.” The road movie positions in uncomfortable dialectics “conservative values and rebellious desires.” and offers “an alternative space where isolation from the mainstreams allows transformative experiences.” See Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, “Introduction,” in *The Road Movie Book*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1997), 2-4.

<sup>299</sup> For a discussion of the fantasy of leaving wife and home behind and the price paid by its victims see Bluma Goldstein, *Enforced Marginality: Jewish Narratives on Abandoned Wives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), and especially chapter three “The Victims of Adventure: Abandoned wives in Abramovitsh's *Benjamin the Third* and Sholem Aleykhem's *Menakhen-Mendl*.” (ibid., 49-91)

<sup>300</sup> Cohan and Hark, *The Road Movie Book*, 1.

the culture of the Eastern European *shtetl*.<sup>301</sup> For Walden, the movie's central ambivalence is

[t]he desire of Diaspora Jews to preserve the traditional life of the Jews of Eastern Europe while also embracing the advantages of modernism. The makers of *Yidl mitn Fidl* thus employed some realist elements of film-making to record and salvage Jewish culture in Poland, but at the same time reduced their documentary images to a backdrop for a comic romantic fantasy of escape from the Old World to the new. Music plays a crucial role throughout the movie, as both a primary tool in the attempt to create a persuasive impression of quasi-ethnographic documentation, and a vehicle that celebrates the possibilities offered to Diaspora Jews by modernity and emigration.<sup>302</sup>

Walden vacillates here between viewing *Yidl mitn fidl* as a semi-ethnographic film made with a genuine intent to preserve, record or salvage Jewish Polish culture, and a more critical view of the movie as a mere “attempt to create a persuasive impression of quasi-ethnographic documentation.” Walden's fluctuation between seriously considering the folkloristic display in the film and uncovering the cinematic manipulations involved is apparent not only in this paragraph but throughout his article, and may indeed relate to the writer's inner struggle between the film critic in him exposing the filmmakers' purposeful manipulations and the ethnomusicologist in him who revels in the ethnographic treasures the movie offers the post-WWII viewer.<sup>303</sup> My understanding of the film departs from that of Walden in that I view the film as a careful construction of “authenticity,” which no doubt contributed greatly to the commercial success of the film. First, I argue, the various terms Walden uses, such as “realistic depiction,” “accuracy,” “preserve,” “document,” “record,” “salvage ethnography,” or “quasi-ethnography,” are not interchangeable, but rather occupy different positions on the range from preservation (an active interference in processes of cultural decline) at one extreme, through documenting or recording (actions endowed with the pretense of objectivism), to realism (a term which assumes a certain artistic creativity), at the other extreme.

Moreover, what Walden describes as two opposing directions in the film are in my view two sides of the same coin. The desire to document *shtetl* culture (or, as I would put it, to produce and sell its “authentic” images) is by no means opposed to embracing modernity and emigration. Rather, the construction of “tradition” and the nostalgic aura that often accompanies it are part and parcel of the essentially modern look at traditional ways of life. Ultimately, Walden's view of Yidl seems to be influenced by the retrospective doom which often dominates the contemporary gaze at pre-Holocaust Yiddish culture to which Michael Andre Bernstein refers as “backshadowing.”<sup>304</sup> While Walden is conscious of this bias, he is nevertheless

<sup>301</sup> Walden, “Leaving Kazimierz,” 160.

<sup>302</sup> Walden, “Leaving Kazimierz,” 183. “Green combines elements of ethnography and popular entertainments, by pairing quasi-ethnographic footage of the residents of the Polish countryside with shots of the actors singing their song.” Ibid., 170, or “Kalich and Green decided to film the first half of *Yidl mitn fidl* in and around Kazimierz in order to document the setting and culture of the traditional stratum of Jewish life in Poland with persuasive realism.” Ibid., 171 or, while talking about Picon: “Her alarm at the state of the culture she had travelled to Poland to document and preserve only increased with time.” Ibid., 186.

<sup>303</sup> Thus, for example, Walden refers to the “intention to present the film as a realistic depiction of the life in a quintessential Eastern Europe Jewish town.” Ibid., 185.

<sup>304</sup> Michael Andre Bernstein, *Forgone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

fascinated with the folkloristic abundance in the film.<sup>305</sup> “Although the filmmakers and actors could not have fully intended it at the time,” Walden writes, “the movie, rather in the manner of salvage ethnography, preserves images of the Eastern European *shtetl* shortly before its destruction in World War II.”<sup>306</sup>

Unlike Walden, I tend to doubt that a desire to document Eastern European Jewish culture motivated the filmmakers. Rather, I argue, the construction of authenticity in *Yidl mitn fidl*, as in other Yiddish films, is a cinematic manipulation meant to attract contemporary (primarily Jewish) audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. Furthermore, even if such a preservationist attitude did shape *Yidl mitn fidl*, one should examine it further, posing questions such as: Which aspects of traditional life did the filmmaker choose to present and which did he prefer to omit? What image of “The Old World” does the film offer its urban viewers on both sides of the Atlantic? What implicit and explicit tensions does this specific image address and how does it negotiate them?

Green's often quoted interview in the Yiddish weekly *Literarische bleter* (Literary Pages) offers a glimpse into the motivations behind the creation of *Yidl mitn fidl*:

דער סוזשעט פון פילם זאָל זײַן ייִדיש און דאָך אַלמענטשלעך-אײראָפּעיִש. ווי ווייט מעגלעך אויסמיידן דעם גלות-ײִד, קאַפּאַטעס, אײבערלאַזנדיק טראַדיציע אויף וויפל ס'גײט דעם פילם קאַלאָריט. אַ געוויסע מאָס ייִדישן פּאָלקלאָר און עטנאָגראַפיע. אײך האָב זיך באַמײט, אַז די אונטערגעשטראַכענע מאַמענטן פון סאַציאַלע אומרעכטקײטן זאָלן נישט אַרויסקומען צופיל שרײַאיקע פּראָפּאַגאַנדע, נאָר רײן קינסטלערישע מאַמענטן. די עמאַציאָנעלע מאַמענטן ווי פּריידן, לײדן און אײבערלעבנישן זענען רײן אַלמענטשלעכע.

The film's theme should be Jewish and yet universal-European. As far as possible avoid the diaspora Jew, *kapotes* (traditional Hasidic silk black coat, worn on the Sabbath—Z.S.), leaving in tradition to the extent it gives the film color. A certain amount of Jewish folklore and ethnography. I made an effort that the highlighted moments of social injustice should not come out too much like shrieking propaganda, but rather as pure artistic moments. Emotional moments such as joy, suffering and life-experiences are purely universal.<sup>307</sup>

Far from ethnographic ambitions, Green presents himself in mastery of his product, laying out clearly his ideological motivations. The producer and director portrays himself as striving for the golden mean, for a film that is both Jewish and “universal,” socially engaged but not overly didactic. Green uses here “universal” as “humanistic” but also as “non-Jewish” and “apolitical,” and aims at a film that is not too Jewish and not too socialist.<sup>308</sup> Similarly, when referring later in

<sup>305</sup> See Walden's discussion of the pre-holocaust view of the film: Walden, “Leaving Kazimierz,” 185-188.

<sup>306</sup> Walden, “Leaving Kazimierz,” 160.

<sup>307</sup> “Der nayer yidisher film 'yidl mitn find' –A geshprekh mitn redaktor un mitrezhiser Yoysef Grin,” *Literarische bleter* 13 no. 39 (Sep. 25, 1936): 625. The interview is quoted in translation by Goldman, Hoberman and Walden (the latter quotes from Hoberman and Goldman, and seems to have not noticed that the two draw on the same interview). See Eric Goldman, *A. Visions, Images, and Dreams: Yiddish Film Past and Present* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1983), 90; Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 239.

<sup>308</sup> Interestingly, Abraham Grafman, film critic for the Warsaw Yiddish Daily “*Moment*,” writes about Green's film *Der purim-shpiler* in terms very similar to those of Green: “The whole film is agreeable [...] without the old familiar *shtraymelakh*-Jews (a *shtrayml* [diminutive plural: *shtraymelakh*] is a traditional fur-trimmed hat worn by Hasidic Jews on the Sabbath and other festive occasions – Z.S.), even at the Purim table and even at the synagogue's

the interview to the role of music in his films, Green portrays his ideal as “many folk-motifs and simultaneously modern motifs.” Rather than aspiring to cinematic realism or cultural preservation, Green perceives the folklore in the film as ornamentation which adds traditional Jewish “color” to the film. Furthermore, confessing his interest in “colorful” Jewish customs rather than the more familiar or stereotypical ones, Green provides insights into what guides him in choosing specific ethnographic elements. The word “*kapotes*” which follows the term “*goles yid*” (diaspora Jew) makes it clear that by “*goles yid*” Green refers pejoratively here to the religious Jew. Green also seems to prefer the modern terms “folklore” and “ethnography” over “tradition,” which to him is more closely associated with the realm of religion.

Green's cinematic credo exemplifies how “tradition” is constructed through the modern perspective, in this case, a specifically secular one, which celebrates ethnic pride alongside universal ideals. The main icons of tradition in the film, the Eastern European Jewish wedding and folk performance, are consistent with Green's secular view, which constructs tradition as a series of colorful customs, rather than an enclosed religious world characterized by laws, rituals and beliefs. Indeed, each of the four films Green produced in the years 1936-1939 includes the mark of *Yiddishkayt*. While in *Yidl mitn fidl* he focused on folkloric elements such as the wedding and folk performance, each of his next three films presented a Jewish holiday—*Purim* in *Der purim-shpiler*, (1937) *Sukkes* (the Holiday of Tabernacles) in *Mamele* (1938), and *Peysakh* (Passover) in *A brivele der mamen* (1939). Yet in presenting these holidays Green emphasizes their social meaning over their religious import. All of them are celebrated in the realm of the family, around a festive meal, rather than in the more solemn environment of the synagogue. Moreover, the customs depicted avoid blessings or prayers directed at God, but rather focus on the holidays' social significance. The construction of the *suke* in *Mamele* conveys a sense of an all-male community, the chanting of Had-Gadia (a song typically sung at the Passover Seder by the youngest child, and one of the few texts traditionally recited in Yiddish) brings forth the memory of the family's missing father, and the *purim-shpil* helps break an enforced marriage. In this sense Green's films differ from many other Yiddish films, from the renowned *The Dybbuk* to American *shund* (pulp) melodramas such as *Libe un laydnshaft*, which exhibit not only *kapotes* but also *taleysim* (prayer shawls), reenacting major liturgical texts such as the mourning *Kaddish* or prayers from the High Holidays.<sup>309</sup> Such religious moments and struggles no doubt spoke to the heart of many viewers, yet Green avoided this direction and offered a more social and folkloric version of *Yiddishkayt*. This preference was shaped by Green's secular ideology, as well as by the desire to create Jewish films with a universal appeal. Given the intensified processes of secularization among Eastern European Jews and especially among those of them who immigrated to the United States, many viewers could appreciate Green's definition of *yiddishkayt* as folklore.

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doorway you meet only stylish and dignified Jews (“*sheyne yidn*,” literally “beautiful Jews,” i.e. the elite of Jewish society – Z.S.), whom you can show the whole world. Only the matchmaker [...] is a typical matchmaker. The film direction generally avoided successfully the caricature and dealt with the Jewish material in a pure humane way, with no specific characteristics.” See Avrom Yitskhok Grafman, “‘Der purim-shpiler’: ershter yidish-veltlekher film,” *Moment*, Sep. 24, 1937 (10 no. 22), 28.

<sup>309</sup> One Yiddish film was even titled *Kol Nidre*, after one of the most famous *Yom-kipur* prayers. Many films, such as the Yiddish *Der Vilner Balebesl* (English title: *Overture to Glory* [literally: *The Wealthy Man of Vilnius*, USA, 1940, dir. Max Nosseck), the American *The Jazz Singer* (USA, 1927, dir. Alan Crosland) or the German *Das Alte Gesetz* (The Old Law, Germany, 1923, dir. Ewald Andre Dupont) also dramatize the conflict between Jewish law and the norms and the appeal of the non-Jewish world.

*Yidl mitn fidl*, Green's first film, presents no Jewish holiday and avoids almost completely prayers and blessings. From the elaborate religious ritual at the heart of the wedding ceremony, the film leaves in only the three most famous words “*Harey As Mekudeshes*” (You are sanctified unto me) and even these are heard offscreen, while the viewers follow Yidl sneaking away. The two markers of tradition in the film, the Jewish wedding and the *klezmer* (who, as I argued above, are simultaneously also a symbol of social mobility), belong as much to the social and folkloric realm rather than the religious one.<sup>310</sup> While the opposition between forced arranged marriage and romantic love has been a cornerstone of the critique of traditional Eastern European Jewish life since the *maskilic* era, the figure of the *klezmer* and specifically the fiddler came to signify *shtetl* life only in the twentieth century. Unlike stereotypical figures such as the naïve *hasid/khosid*, the garrulous *shadkhn* (match maker) or the *kokhlef* (the town gossip), the fiddler was a marginal figure in early literary imagining of the *shtetl*. It is only through the success of certain Jewish musicians in the late nineteenth century that the fiddle became a mark of Eastern European Jewish culture. In fact, the fiddle became a mark of tradition only through its “alter-ego,” the westernized violin, and the promise of social mobility it offered.<sup>311</sup> Interestingly, Yidl's success story is not that of the common progress from the folkish fiddle to the classical violin. Rather than becoming a violin player, Yidl turns into a singer and a comedian, and her ultimate venue is not the concert hall but rather the vaudeville stage. This transformation has a clearly gendered dimension, since from the point of view of the 1930 thirties, becoming a singer and even a comedian is a more suitable profession for a woman than a violinist.<sup>312</sup> The end point of Yidl's journey allows Picon to showcase her talents, while also expressing the film's ideology which aims at economic success rather than at the broadening of artistic horizons. In other words, *Yidl mitn fidl* is an immigrant fantasy rather than a *maskilic* tale.<sup>313</sup> This dream, which no doubt spoke to the heart of many of its urban viewers, also reflects Green's personal vision, as an immigrant to the United States who went back to his Polish homeland to found his own production company and make a living out of the dreams of Eastern European Jews and their American diaspora.

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<sup>310</sup> Moreover, like other symbols of tradition, the arranged marriage and the figure of the *klezmer* came to signify traditional Eastern European Jewish society only in modern times. In this sense they exemplify my argument that the construction of tradition is a quintessentially modern act.

<sup>311</sup> “[m]usic had become a hallmark of the Jew as a figure in the European mind, while Jews themselves were ever more energetically involved in a variety of professional and expressive musical vocations.” See Mark Slobin, “Music: An Overview. YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe. [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Music/An\\_Overview](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Music/An_Overview). See also Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of The Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1982), 88-93 The following biographical anecdote by Marc Chagall can attest to the connection between the fiddle as a sign of tradition and the violin which marks progress: “I joined the cantor as a singer. On the High Holy Days, the whole synagogue crowd and myself clearly heard my hovering descant. I'll become a singer, a cantor. I'll go study in a conservatory. A *klezmer* taught me to play the violin. I whittled something. . . and thought: I'll become a violinist. I'll enter a conservatory.” See Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and his Times: A Documentary Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 112.

<sup>312</sup> Yidl's lover Froyim, on the other hand, transforms from a fiddler in a group of *klezmer* to a violinist and a conductor in the orchestra pit of the theater.

<sup>313</sup> The two producers, eager to succeed, and the image of money raining on the group further emphasize the dream of prosperity that lies at the heart of *Yidl mitn fidl*. By comparison, other Yiddish films focus more on aesthetic development or refinement, as for example *Der vilner balebesl* (*Overture to Glory*, 1940), where the *shtetl's* cantor is strongly moved by Chopin's music and is excited to learn to read music.

In sum, folk performance serves in *Yidl mitn fidl* as an icon of Jewishness and authenticity. Simultaneously, however, it is also viewed as a bridge to the modern world and a vehicle of social mobility, partaking in the universal language of music and performance. In times of rapid secularization, urbanization and immigration the cultural icon of folk performance helped negotiate social anxieties, while avoiding direct confrontation with charged matters such as religion, prejudice, and socioeconomic gaps. Folk performance's marginal position in Eastern European Jewish society becomes an advantage rather than a drawback, since it provides refuge from serious political concerns and refreshes the common Jewish stereotypes. Moreover, the figure of the traveling *klezmer* allows for re-imagining folk performance as a semi-independent sphere, free from the social limitations of the *shtetl*. The appropriation of folk performance provides a way out of the common binary of *shtetl* vs. Modernity, constructing a fantasy tale endowed with a traditional flair on the one hand, and with the glamour of fame and prosperity on the other. This in-between icon opens up the possibility of nostalgia for traditional Eastern European Jewish life, even for a generation of viewers who still remembered *shtetl* life too vividly to be wistful about them. Through the use of folklore Green is able to present—to Jews and non-Jews alike—a Jewishness that is defined not by religion but rather by its colorful and vivid customs, such as the joyful street music or wedding dances. In this sense, Green's interest in folklore is not unlike that of modern artists such as Broderzon, Turkow or Manger, and resembles also the endeavors of Yiddishist cultural historians such as Schiper or Erik, who strove to make folklore a basis of modern secular Jewish identity. Yet in Green's case the ideological motivation seems to be second to the commercial one. Eventually, Green is less interested in redefining Jewish identity, and more in producing an attractive commodity marketable for Jews and non-Jews alike. He is less engaged in questions of Jewish artistic heritage and more in constructing a safe and pleasant image of Jewishness. Whereas modernist Yiddish artists and Yiddishist scholars reclaimed folkish forms of performance as Jewish cultural heritage and strove to transform them into modern(ist) art, including poetry, prose and drama, *Yidl mitn fidl* drew a line of progress from folk performance to commodified art for the masses, not only by means of its story-line, but also by employing folk performance to provide ethnic color to this cinematic product. Furthermore, in the context of the late 1930s, a time of virulent anti-Semitism in Europe, and to a lesser extent also in the United States, folk performance provided a way out of negative Jewish stereotypes, based on religion and superstition. Instead, it offered a more “universal” (*almentshlekh*) Jewish image, as Green phrases it, which softens Jewish otherness and uses ethnic particularity as attractive “color” added to the cinematic product.<sup>314</sup> That such an image is created within a Yiddish film aimed mainly at Jewish audiences is intriguing, and points perhaps to an internalization of anti-Jewish sentiments by the Jewish viewers and to their desire to distance themselves from less modernized Jews and their imagination. Folklore, as presented in the sweet fantasy of *Yidl mitn fidl* signifies a golden mean and suits a vision of ethnic pride and limited acculturation to Western culture, while defying the option of complete assimilation. In this sense the folkish *klezmer*, the starting point of the “rags to riches” plot, is similar to the journey's happy ending with its resolution in Picon's Yiddish vaudeville. Both Eastern European Jewish folk performance and popular Yiddish American (or

<sup>314</sup> *Yidl mitn fidl* was less likely to provoke negative responses than, for example, *Der dibuk*, which was heavily laden with religious customs and with superstitions. See my discussion of *Der dibuk* later on in this chapter. For a more detailed discussion of *Der dibuk* and its reception see my article “Ruchot refa'im al masach ha-kolno'a: Li-she'elat ha-zikaron ba-seret ha-dibuk (1937)” in *Al Na Tegarshuni*, 198-219.

Americanized) show business present a light-hearted and easy-to-digest Jewish culture, and neither is too far from the taste of the Westernized spectator, whether Jewish or not.

### **B. The *Purim-shpil* as a Cultural Alternative in *Der purim-shpiler* 1937**

Introducing Green's 1937 film *Der purim-shpiler* (English title: *The Jester*), film critic and historian J. Hoberman writes:

The title is one of the most suggestive in all of Yiddish cinema, evoking both the carnival holiday of Purim and the origins of Yiddish theater, but the script, which Green cowrote with the leftwing New York journalist Chaver-Paver and which Manger then polished, is disappointingly timid. To a large degree, *Der Purimshpiler* rehashes *Yidl's* tale of itinerant performers, star-crossed lovers, and village Jews who become stars in the big city.<sup>315</sup>

While appreciating the homage to traditional folk performance, Hoberman deems *Der purim-shpiler* less accomplished than *Yidl mitn fidl*, Green's first film, produced the previous year. Indeed, the comparison between the two films is quite appropriate. Green was clearly motivated by *Yidl mitn fidl's* remarkable success, and attempted to reactivate his effective formulas, including a narrative of social mobility and scenes of folk performance. Moreover, in hopes of attracting potential audiences, both films allude to traditional Jewish performance in their title. Like its predecessor, *Der purim-shpiler* draws on Hollywood genres and conventions such as the musical, the romantic comedy and the “rags to riches” plot. It also makes use of two stars of the American-Yiddish stage, in the case of *Der purim-shpiler* Miriam Kressyn and Hymie Jacobson. Green also worked with the same Polish co-director (Jan Nowina-Przybylski) as he did in *Yidl mitn fidl*, and once again shot parts of the film in picturesque Kazimierz Dolny, well-suited for the role of the quintessential *shtetl*. Both films were created in accordance with Green's artistic and ideological credo discussed above, aiming to combine the Jewish with the universal and to avoid the “*kapote* Jews” and other stereotypes from the realm of religion, offering instead colorful secular-populist folkish traditions. *Der purim-shpiler*, like *Yidl mitn fidl*, criticizes the social norms of the *shtetl* through the dilemma of arranged marriage vs. romantic love, a staple of modern Yiddish culture since the days of the *Haskala*. In both films the way out of a marriage based on the economic interests of the parents is none other than folk performance, and traditional performance thus doubles as rebellion against deplorable Jewish norms.

Why then was *Der purim-shpiler* so much less successful than *Yidl mitn fidl*? Hoberman ascribes the film's limited popularity to its weak narrative, arguing that “the movie is certainly thematically underdeveloped.”<sup>316</sup> He also claims that “from the original audiences' point of view, it is unlikely that all the elephants in Poland could compensate for the absence of Molly Picon.”<sup>317</sup> While the plot of *Der purim-shpiler* is indeed less well-crafted than that of *Yidl mitn fidl*, and its fewer musical numbers lack Picon's endless energy, other reasons are to blame for the film's limited success. Green himself attributed the film's relative failure to the casting of Yiddish art-theater's Turkow in the leading role. According to Green, Turkow “was not right for

<sup>315</sup> Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 243.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.* The reference to the elephants relates to Green's expressing regret over his use of a non-Jewish circus in the film.

the part. He was too tall. . . and wasn't funny enough."<sup>318</sup> Green also thought that instead of a circus he should have included in the film a Jewish group of actors, and that the music should have been "more Jewish." In other words, Green believed that more *Yidishkayt* and less high-brow performance would have drawn greater audiences to the film, and he was probably right. At least from a commercial point of view it seems that Green failed to balance Jewishness and universalism as required by his own formula, and gravitated too much towards the latter. Yet the film suffers from a more significant imbalance, for which Turkow is indeed largely responsible, between the light-hearted comical spirit of the film and its tragic dimension. Whereas Kressyn and Jacobson, who play the film's amorous couple Esther and Dick, bring to the film the smoothness of American show business, the celebrated Polish actor and director who plays Getsl, the hapless side of the love triangle, endows the film with a poignant tone and a harshly realistic quality. Turkow's forceful presence and sensitive acting fractures the glossy cover that Green so wanted to bestow on the film. As embodied by Turkow, the figure of Getsl the sad dreamer hinders the effective use of commercial formulas. The film's plot supports the melancholic spirit introduced by Turkow's acting, especially through its ambiguous ending. Defying the norms of romantic comedy, the story ultimately breaks into two separate lines. While Esther and Dick have it all— love, prosperity, fame, and even the community's acceptance—Getsl, the film's protagonist, remains a sad and lonely *shlimazl*. This split enables Getsl to remain true to himself until the very end, thus resisting the narrative of progress from misery to prosperity and from folk-performance to the professional stage.

*Der purim-shpiler* begins with the arrival of Getsl, the dreamy vagabond, into the *shtetl*. The opening scene establishes the imbalance between two sides of the future romantic triangle: while Getsl immediately falls for the charming young Esther, she makes fun of the eccentric stranger. Thrown out of the town's workshops for his lack of experience, the desperate Getsl wanders the streets of the *shtetl*. His bad luck turns into good fortune when Esther's father, a master cobbler, accidentally pours a bucket-full of filthy water on him, and, as a gesture of compensation, admits him to his workshop. Getsl's life continues to be marked by a mixture of bad luck, slapstick humor, and miraculous coincidences. As a cobbler's apprentice he spends his time showing tricks to his fellow workers and reciting lines from the *purim-shpil*, for which his angry boss mockingly names him "*Purim-shpiler*." Meanwhile, his beloved Esther falls for a circus actor, a slick womanizer named Dick, who provokes her parents' resistance and leaves Esther heartbroken when the circus continues its tour. When Esther's family suddenly inherits a fortune, they hasten to match their disobedient daughter with the simpleton son of a rich family. Aiming to arrange the betrothal, Esther's parents invite their prospective in-laws to celebrate together the holiday of Purim. The pre-engagement party, which includes a festive Purim meal and a *purim-shpil*, turns into a fiasco when Getsl, who plays king Akhashveryresh, steps out of his role to insult the affluent groom, thus sabotaging the planned match. Following that incident, the disgraced Getsl is expelled from the house, and Esther secretly joins him. Upon reaching Warsaw the two, who are desperate for food and shelter, miraculously run into Dick, now a well-off cabaret singer. Dick is overjoyed to reunite with Esther and willing to take the loyal Getsl under his patronage. Soon enough Esther joins Dick as a cabaret singer, and Getsl, who refuses to be the fifth wheel, leaves the happy couple and returns to the *shtetl*. Just when the townspeople are about to lynch Getsl, whom they blame for Esther's disappearance, the missing

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<sup>318</sup> Quoted in Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 245.

girl and Dick reappear in town, legally wed and obviously well-off. While all rejoice in Esther's glamorous reappearance, Getsl wanders off lonely, penniless and heartbroken.

Despite Hoberman's judgement, and perhaps that of the film's original viewers, *Der purim-shpiler* is the only film in Green's short cinematic career to exceed the aesthetic limitations of a mass product, probably against the filmmaker's own intentions.<sup>319</sup> The friction produced by the figure of the loser Getsl, enhanced by Turkow's masterful acting, opens up the way for a double reading of the film, understanding it as enabling two opposing interpretations. Alongside the main line of the film which recounts a story of progress through modernization, urbanization and (limited) acculturation, *Der purim-shpiler* also points up the price exacted by these processes and the hardships endured and moral strength exhibited of those left behind. This subversive semantic layer is most notable in the *purim-shpil* performance, the one scene in the film where Getsl, the eternal loser, becomes a real hero. The traditional Jewish performance goes beyond the decorative value Green has assigned it, offering instead cultural criticism, and a challenge to the alleged superiority of the urban stage, promoted in the main narrative line. While the film's inherent ambivalence most likely harmed its effectivity as a mass commodity, it endowed the film with aesthetic and ethical values. The film's commercial failure may thus attest to its aesthetic achievement rather than to its thematic or structural weakness.

The scene of the Purim party is without a doubt the film's high point, as it effectively mocks the vulgarity of Esther's nouveau riche family and the hypocrisy of their wealthy prospective in-laws. And it does so by way of a traditional *purim-shpil*, thus introducing into the film "colorful Jewish folklore," in accordance with Green's formula. The humorous spirit of the Purim holiday and the *purim-shpil* transform the whole scene into a carnivalesque happening. The two families sitting around the festive table are grotesquely caricatured, including the snobbish father of the potential groom, his imbecile son, Esther's loud and corpulent mother and Esther's drunk grandfather, who giggles like a teenager with the elderly family's servant. In fact, the table manners of the rich, and especially the nouveau riche, are so vulgar, and the contrast between their behavior and the elegant dishes so grotesque, that their images wildly drinking and devouring food were used in the Nazi film *Der Ewige Jude* as anti-Semitic propaganda. Into this unruly celebration steps the traditional *loyfer* (messenger) announcing the performance, followed by the actors of the *purim-shpil*, first among whom is Getsl playing King Akhashveyresh. Their performance is a realistic reenactment of the traditional *Purim-shpil*, complete with amateur actors in rudimentary masks and costumes, and a rhymed text including common jokes, such as references to Esther's ugliness or to Akhashveyreh's drinking habits, recited in the typical *purim-shpil* melody. The merry drama comes to an end when Getsl exploits his "royal" position to declare the potential groom Vayzata the fool. This remark infuriates the groom's father, who explodes at the *purim-shpiler* and his hosts, exclaiming again and again: "a cobbler remains a cobbler" (*a shuster blaybt a shuster*). At this point Getsl pulls the King's mask off his face and yells back, symbolically tearing the mask of hypocrisy from the in-law's face: "He doesn't like the cobbler, but the cobbler's dowry does suit him!" (*es gefelt im nisht, der shuster, ober der nadn funem shuster shteyt im yo!*).

This intense scene goes beyond the display of vivid Jewish customs and becomes a true aesthetic transformation of the Purim play. It reclaims the traditional dramatic form as art rather

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<sup>319</sup> During the years 1936-1939 Green made four Yiddish films which no doubt rank among the great achievements of this small movie industry.

than folklore. In a sense, the scene's strength works against the film as a whole, as the last third of the film which follows the *purim-shpil* pales in comparison, providing an anti-climax to the tour de force of Turkow's/Getzl's performance. The passive vagabond, usually dependent on others, subverts the power of the two rich and authoritative families, and manages to save his beloved Esther from the terrible fate of marrying a simpleton. As befits a childlike figure, attracted to fantasy, romance and play, Getzl's grand moment occurs when he assumes a fictive role. Turning the character of King Akhashveyresh, known as a weak and foolish drunkard, on its head, Getzl reveals himself to be a real hero who dares stand up to the powerful magnate. The dramatic act of tearing the King's mask from his face signifies also the exposure of Getzl's true face, or at least a side of him that was unnoticeable so far, and very far from his public image—angry, involved, and active. Whereas the narrative of Esther and Dick follows the rags to riches formula, common in both Hollywood and Yiddish cinema, the story of Getzl, the wretch who once in his lifetime has a moment of glory, is endowed with a tragic quality. The charismatic and assertive side of Getzl revealed in the *purim-shpil* disappears, however, as soon as he sets foot again in the real world, and in the big city of Warsaw he becomes once more a useless dreamer. The *purim-shpil* has hence been a one-time rupture, a door that was briefly torn open, rather than a crisis that provokes a lasting psychological or physical change.

Impressed by the success of Manger's *Megile-lider* and hoping to benefit from the talent and prestige of the popular Yiddish poet, considered the quintessential neo-folkish poet, Green hired Manger to write the film's dialogue. Furthermore, it is very likely that the very idea of re-enacting a *purim-shpil* on the silver screen and titling the film *Der purim-shpiler* is owed to Manger's popular *Megile-lider* (later adapted for the stage).<sup>320</sup> Manger's masterful hand is apparent in the design of the rowdy celebration, above all in the skilled rhymes, which overflow from the *purim-shpil* into the whole scene. The humor, including self-referential anachronisms, is also typical of Manger.<sup>321</sup> Manger is probably responsible (together with Khaver-Paver), for the use of the Biblical satire to criticize contemporary society, and particularly the rich.<sup>322</sup> The poet's famous *Megile-lider* (Songs of the Book of Esther), a series of dramatic monologues in rhyme published in Warsaw (also the place *Der purim-shpiler* was produced) only a year earlier, is comparable in many ways to the film's *purim-shpil* scene. In the *Megile-lider*, as in his other Biblical poems, Manger transferred the plot to contemporary Poland, introducing socialist values into the story.<sup>323</sup> Presented by the author as a modern *purim-shpil*, the *Megile-lider* retells the biblical story while turning the tailors into heroes and criticizing those, like Esther, who rise to greatness and betray their humble origins. If elsewhere in the film *Der purim-shpiler* takes after *Yidl mitn fidl*, in the *purim-shpil* scene the influence of Manger's *Megile-lider* seems to have the upper hand, transforming the folk performance into an event with social and political significance. The uprising of the poor against the rich provides a new meaning to the

<sup>320</sup> This is also Hoberman's assumption, he writes: "indeed, one wonders if *Der Purimshpiler* wasn't originally inspired by Manger's 1936 *Megile-lider*." Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 244.

<sup>321</sup> Thus, for example, when the King asks Esther about her name, she answers: "Esther, as the *Megile* says" (*Ester, vi shteyt in der megile*).

<sup>322</sup> Khaver-Paver is the pseudonym of the writer Gershon Aynbinder (1900-1964). Born in Podolia, he came to the United States in 1923 and worked as a teacher while also publishing children's stories, parodies and satires.

<sup>323</sup> See Manger, *Megile-lider*. See also Itzik Manger, *Medresh Itsik* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1984). For a discussion of Manger's iconoclastic use of language see Chana Kronfeld and Robert Adler Peckerar, "Tongue-Twisted: Itzik Manger between *Mame-Loshn* and *Loshn-Koydesh*," *Poetics Today* (Forthcoming in a special issue "Yiddish: Between Languages and Theories," edited by Hana Wirth-Nesher).

socioeconomic gap inherent in the *purim-shpil*, typically performed by poor people in rich people's houses. It also activates the carnivalesque potential of the folk performance and more generally, of the holiday of Purim, in allowing for a reversal of roles: the passive Getsl becomes active, whereas the powerful rich families are humiliated and rendered helpless.

Manger's influence aside, other factors may have also supported Green's feeling that the *purim-shpil* had both an aesthetic and a commercial potential. The growing interest in this folk performance among literary circles and the rising theory viewing the *purim-shpil* as the origins of Yiddish or Jewish theater, described in the previous chapters of this dissertation, were part of the *Zeitgeist* that surround led to the creation of *Der purim-shpiler*. In a sense, the film marks the final stage in the appropriation of folk-performance in the interwar era. What started as an elite phenomenon in Yiddishist and modernist circles becomes common knowledge and is exploited to appeal to the masses. In all likelihood, this process owes much to the mediating figure of Manger, a self-consciously modernist poet who created a folkish persona which gained him remarkable popularity.

Through its unique aesthetic and social values, the *purim-shpil* performance sheds a new light on the commercial performances presented in the film: the circus and the cabaret/vaudeville. Whereas in *Yidl mitn fidl* the superiority of the modern urban vaudeville over the *klezmer* playing on the streets and in weddings goes without saying, in *Der purim-shpiler* the two more professional forms of performance seem deficient in comparison with the folk performance, from both a moral and an aesthetic point of view. In the circus performance the magician's trick is used to humiliate Getsl, thus revealing this popular form of entertainment as crude and based on the all-too easy exploitation of the weak, unlike the ethically justified and courageous attack on the rich in the *purim-shpil*. On the cabaret stage, Esther's sincere longing for her home town is transformed without any delay into a musical number marketing nostalgia. Dick and Esther's cabaret thus reveals itself to be based on an inherent dishonesty, and stands in opposition to Getsl's mask-less performance in the *purim-shpil*. Thus, whereas the comical figure of Yidl/Picon and the "rags to riches" plot revolving around her presented a clear narrative of progress, the tragicomic Getsl questions the very notion of development from the humble folkish performance into the glorious urban stage. The powerful *purim-shpil* performance, characterized by sincerity, social engagement, and even subversiveness, exposes the superficiality of commercial show business and its simplistically folkish exploitation of Jewish folk culture.

*Der purim-shpiler* presents a dichotomy between Getsl, the tragic loser who signifies the hardships of *shtetl* life, and Esther and Dick, the lightweight comic figures who stand for glamorous urban life. Accordingly, while the former is associated with folk performance, the latter are metonymies for modern show business. The film constructs a stark opposition between the two social spheres and the two kinds of performance, and presents it as too deep to be harmonized through a narrative of progress, as it was in *Yidl mitn fidl*. While on the level of plot the modern cabaret, promising prosperity and fame, triumphs over folk performance, in many other aspects of the play's meaning folk performance is the victor of the implicit competition between the two cultural formations. The film's spectator would be probably impressed with the traditional *purim-shpil*, which thanks to Manger's clever satirical lyrics and to Turkow's superb acting becomes the most powerful scene in the entire film. Indeed, one is more likely to identify with the amateur *purim-shpiler*, a true actor with rare tragicomic qualities, than with the smooth

pair of vaudeville performers, young and beautiful but completely two-dimensional. Moreover, whereas the commercial performance is presented as mere entertainment, a commodity which enables its consumers to delve into sweet nostalgia, the traditional Purim play is endowed with a clear ethical and social dimension, as it serves as a foil for an ill-matched engagement plan and exposes the hypocrisy of the rich. The path leading from the folkish *purim-shpil* through the popular circus all the way to the professional stage may thus designate degeneration rather than progress, probably against the explicit intentions of filmmaker Green. Folk performance, meant to add ethnic "color" to *Der purim-shpiler*, as it did to *Yidl mitn fidl*, exceeds its exotic and decorative value envisioned by Green and becomes the film's critical climax. The commercial quasi-ethnographic appropriation of folk performance yields to a reclaiming of the genre now endowed with a clear social and ethical dimension. Through the contributions of leading Eastern European Jewish artists such as Manger and Turkow, this product of mass consumption, cut according to the norms of Hollywood cinema and Yiddish-American vaudeville, is transformed into a modernist-socialist work of art.

### C. Ethnographic Display and Stylized Aestheticization in *Der dibuk*

It is noteworthy that such a play as *Der dibuk*, which was so far removed from life and the relation to things in the years after the World War, precisely such a play has captivated everyone. The drama has so much depth, so much beauty, and so much poetry, that it must captivate even people who haven't the slightest idea about the archaic and dark *shtetl* life of the Polish and Russian *Hasidic* Jews presented in the play.

These words, published in the New York *Forverts* (*Forward*) in January 1938, were written by Y. Kissin in his review of the film *Der dibuk* (*The Dybbuk*), screened at the time in New York movie theaters.<sup>324</sup> The War mentioned is World War I, and the success described is not that of the film, shot in Poland in 1937, but rather of the play in a range of productions from 1920 onward, in Eastern Europe and in New York. The gap between life among Jewish *Hasidim* in the nineteenth century, and Sh. An-ski, the ethnographer and revolutionary who had fashioned it into a play, is supplemented here by the distance between the writer and the "archaic and dark *shtetl* life" in the "Old Country" from which Kissin, like the majority of his readers, had emerged. Another review, that of Frank Nugent, the film critic for *The New York Times*, opens a window into the possible viewing experience of audiences who were more remote from the social environment depicted in *Der dibuk*, and even more strongly biased against it.<sup>325</sup> Nugent, whose criticism is marked by a clear anti-Semitic tone, argues that the film might have worked "as a fantasy minted from the religious-superstitious mind of the nineteenth-century Polish Jew," but fails to do even that, due to its naturalistic aspirations. Michał Waszyński's *Der dibuk*, Nugent argues, would have been better off offering An-ski's work a fantastic interpretation, as did the

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<sup>324</sup> Y. Kissin, "Sh. An-skis groysse folk-drame 'Der dibuk' in a talky." *Forverts*, 29 January, 1938. Y. Kissin wrote book- and theater- reviews in various New York Yiddish newspapers and periodicals, including *Di naye velt*, *Tsukunft* and *Forverts*.

<sup>325</sup> Frank S. Nugent, "The Dybbuk (1937) THE SCREEN; The Continental Brings In a Film of 'The Dybbuk,'" *New York Times*, January 28, 1938. <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E02EED91E3EE03ABC4051DFB7668383629EDE>

play's stage production (which Nugent, as he himself admits, knows only second hand). Instead, it is a basically realistic work, involving “childishly crude” attempts at fantasy through “obvious tricks” such as dissolves, smoke, and spirits whose presence makes a candle flame bend.

Obviously affected by the film, Nugent writes:

It has been presented as a reality; and it emerges as a curious ghost story. Indubitably it is impressive—in spots. Indubitably it becomes a strange revelation of stranger beliefs, of still stranger customs. . . . Told as bluntly as it has been, it strikes of stupidity, silly superstition, outmoded religion. And, aside from its thematic weaknesses, it is overlong, static in presentation, rather awkwardly contrived. Yet, for all that, it is an interesting record—else we should not have taken so long to dismiss it—as incredible in its way as a documentary film of life among the pygmies or a trip to the Middle Ages. It is that odd.”

How is it that both Kissin and Nugent, despite their vastly different points of view, regard this highly stylized film as aspiring to realism? How does the work's alleged naturalism relate to the “dark” or “medieval” qualities the two critics ascribe to *Der dibuk*? What, in the cinematic production of *Der dibuk*, directed by the assimilated Polish Jew Michał Waszyński and featuring gothic atmosphere and aestheticized Jewish rituals, promoted notions of lifelike realism, even detail-oriented social naturalism? And, on the other hand, in what ways did the film, depicting Eastern European Jewish life in a nineteenth-century Hasidic community, construct notions of complete “otherness” for viewers as diverse as the anti-Semitic New York Times critic and the Eastern European Jewish immigrant? In what follows I analyze the cinematic aspects of *Der dibuk* as shaped by the opposing yet complementary tendencies of pseudo-realism and gothic stylization. Focusing on the portrayal of folk performances, including *klezmer*, folk dances and the *badkhn*, I analyze the transition from the ethnographic display in the play to the commodified film. While aiming to produce notions of genuine presentation, the film, I claim, aestheticizes and exoticizes the world it portrays. Jewish folklore, from religious custom to popular prejudice, and from the Hasidic *tish* (ceremonial gathering of the Hasidim at the Rebbe's table) to the traditional wedding, plays a key role in the construction of both authenticity and alterity.

In order to better understand the viewing experience of the film's original audiences, I would like to examine more closely Nugent's and Kissin's arguments. The venomous overtones notwithstanding, one can easily understand what bothers the critic in what he calls the “groping after the mystic,” as indeed, the tricks used in the film to create a mysterious atmosphere were rather crude.<sup>326</sup> It is harder, however, to comprehend why, despite the film's obvious gothic atmosphere, Nugent perceives it as a lifelike presentation. One possible answer is provided by Nugent himself, who attributes the film's realistic quality to the very nature of the cinematic media: “The screen does not lend itself too readily to fancy. It has to be cajoled out of the reality that is one of the disadvantages of photography.” Yet the indexical nature of photography, its indication that “that-has-been,” in Roland Barthes' terms, can only partially explain the assertion of a realistic presentation in *Der dibuk*.<sup>327</sup> Although the film was partly shot “on location,”

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<sup>326</sup> A contemporary viewer may indeed attribute the crude effects to the time of the film's production. It is thus important to remember that these effects seemed crude also to its original audiences in the 1930s (or at least the more experienced among them).

<sup>327</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

namely in a traditional Eastern European Jewish *shtetl*, indeed in 1937 rather than in the nineteenth century, many of its scenes, in fact the most dramatic ones, were shot in a studio constructed as an expressionistic town square, featuring slanted walls, an ancient gravestone, dim lights and eerie shadows. The soundtrack and dances were clearly inspired by expressionistic German cinema, as well as by the play's stage productions, and most notably Evgenii Vakhtangov's expressionistic-symbolistic production for the Hebrew *Ha-bima* (The Stage) theater.<sup>328</sup> The notion of realism should be therefor ascribed not to the film itself but rather to its viewer: his preconceived belief in Jewish otherness alongside a certain curiosity and voyeuristic urge which may have led to a perhaps unconscious desire to watch “a documentary about life among the pygmies.”<sup>329</sup> Nugent's lack of acquaintance with the culture presented in the film, and more importantly, the antagonism he felt towards it, made him overlook the extensive stylization of traditional Jewish life in Waszyński's production. Thus, stylization pervades every aspect of the film, from the *Hasidic* songs and dances to the gothic funeral procession and the occult practices in the *mikve* (ritual bath house), and from the tragic figure of the skeptical *Hasidic Rebbe* to the stereotypical figure of *Nute*, the warmhearted servant, with his folk-songs and naïve humor.

Nevertheless, Nugent may not be entirely wrong in ascribing realistic aspirations to *Der dibuk*. The filming in the picturesque *shtetl* Kazimierz Dolny and the participation of the town's inhabitants as extras were aimed no doubt to produce a rhetorical impression of authenticity. The many folkloristic gestures in the film, such as the *Hasidic tish*, the Sabbath meal, and the performance of a wedding *badkhn* were also intended to enhance the lifelike quality of the film. The attempt to construct an ostensibly genuine image of Jewish life in a nineteenth century *Hasidic* community, complete with its customs, superstitions and rituals, may perhaps be what the critic meant by “realistic presentation,” and indeed, may have evoked—as it still may do—the feeling of watching a documentary, even among viewers more familiar with and less hostile towards the cultural environment depicted. In striving for folkloric accuracy *Der dibuk* operates similarly to other ethnographic displays, including the museum or the documentary, and like these forms of exhibition, the fictive *Der dibuk* also has a dual valance. While it aims to manufacture a sense of real life, documented and presented in naturalistic detail, it also points up

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<sup>328</sup> Waszyński used to tell that he worked with F. W. Murnau, the renown German expressionist film director, as well as with the celebrated Vakhtangov. While these connections are probably one of the many lies he used to tell about himself, as his biographer Samuel Blumenfeld contends, these lies nevertheless attest to Waszyński's sources of inspiration. See Samuel Blumenfeld, *L'homme qui voulait être prince. Les vies imaginaires de Michal Waszynski* (Paris: Grasset, 2006) 47-48. Indeed, under the influence of expressionist films such as Robert Wiene's *Das Kabinett des Doktor Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*) or Paul Wegener's *Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam* (*The Golem: How He Came Into the World*), both produced in 1920, and Vakhtangov's production of *Der dibuk* (premiered in January 1922), the choice between a realistic and an expressionistic production became a central dilemma of the following producers of the play, on stage and on the silver screen. See Edna Nahshon, “*Moris Schwartz matsig: Ha-dybbuk (1921)*,” in Shimon Levy and Dorit Yerushalmi, eds. *Al Na tegarshuni: I'yunim Hadashim Be-ha-dibuk* [“Do Not Chase Me Away”: New Studies on The Dybbuk] (Tel Aviv: Assaph/Theater Studies and Safra, Publishing House, 2009), 83.

<sup>329</sup> Stefania Zahorska, the film critic for the Polish weekly *Wiadomości Literackie* (Literary News), was no less hostile towards the life depicted in the film than Frank Nugent. However, whereas Nugent found in the film a realistic depiction of utter otherness, Zahorska, who according to her own testimony expected to find unique Jewish properties, was disappointed to find strong influences of Polish artistic traditions. See Stefania Zahorska, “Dybbuk,” *Wiadomości Literackie* 44 (1937), 6. See also Elżbieta Ostrowska's article, where she criticizes Zahorska for familiarizing the other: “Der Dibuk/ The Dybbuk,” in Peter Hymes (ed.) *The Cinema of Central Europe* (London; New York: Wallflower press, 2004), 25-33.

its constructed nature.<sup>330</sup>

*Der dibuk* was of course hardly the only Yiddish film shot in interwar Eastern Europe to construct alleged authenticity. As I've argued earlier in this chapter, *Yidl mitn fidl* and *Der purim-shpiler* also drew on a certain naïve image of life in an Eastern European Jewish town, and offered picturesque *shtetl* images and ostensibly vivid Jewish customs, including the charms of traditional Jewish performance. Indeed, one could argue that all Yiddish films produced in Eastern Europe had a similar ethnographic bent. As commodified culture products, targeted at urban Jewish and non-Jewish moviegoers on both sides of the Atlantic, they were meant to evoke a sense of a genuine representation of the traditional Jewish way of life, which was gradually becoming remote, obsolete and even exotic to larger parts of these potential audiences. Often they also strove to elicit nostalgic feelings—typically combined with a patronizing gaze.

Yet in all of Yiddish cinema, *Der dibuk* stands out in its abundance and variety of folklore. Based on a play by the writer and ethnographer Sh. An-ski, *Der dibuk* is marked by an exceptionally rich folkloristic display. The story of *Der Dibuk* takes place in the purely traditional setting of a *Hasidic* community, and in a vaguely defined past, sometime in the nineteenth century, and thus features a community completely untouched by modernity.<sup>331</sup> In this sense *Der dibuk* differs from the majority of Yiddish films, which address the modernization of Eastern European Jewish society in various ways. Among the many films dedicated to the processes of modernization, urbanization and secularization, one could mention the Soviet *Evreyskoe schaste* (*Jewish Luck*), based on Sholem Aleykhem's *Menakhem-Mendl* stories; the sentimental *A brivele der mamen*, which begins in Eastern Europe and ends happily in the United States; *Yidl mitn fidl* and *Der purim-shpiler* with their social mobility plots, the cantor-turned-opera-singer narratives such as *Der vilner balebesl* (*Overture to Glory*) or *Dem khazns zundl* (*The Cantor's Son*). Interestingly, it is precisely *Der dibuk*, the film that is most “medieval” in its atmosphere and least engaged with the contemporary reality at the time of its creation, that became the most renowned work of Yiddish cinema.

In what follows I explore the extensive ethnographic display in *Der dibuk*, its intertextual models and stylistic affiliations, and its ideological and commercial motivations. The cinematic *Der Dibuk*, I argue, owes much to various influences, including An-ski's ethnographic research and dramatic writing, the stage productions of the play, German expressionist cinema, and the norms of the emerging Yiddish cinema, especially as manifested in its successful precedent *Yidl mitn fidl*. The end product, I argue, is heterogenous, revealing allegiances to various models and motivations, and allowing for divergent interpretations. Focusing on the appropriation of folk performance, I analyze the processes of aestheticization, exoticization and commodification which take place in *Der dibuk*. Following the transition from the play to the film, I examine the ways in which customs and beliefs become folklore, a national drama, a product of mass consumption and ultimately, a site of memory.

*Der dibuk* narrates the story of two young lovers, the rich merchant's daughter Leye and the poor *yeshive* student Khonen, who can hardly be considered her suitable match. When Sender, Leye's rich father, decides to marry her off to a better qualified groom, the desperate

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<sup>330</sup> For a discussion of the nature of the ethnographic exhibition and its attempt to cover the lack of real life see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>331</sup> The only possible hint of change is that the pessimistic *Rebbe* is engulfed in self-doubt, a fact which may be ascribed to the challenges of modern times, including the *Haskala* movement.

Khonen turns to black Kabbalistic magic, which ultimately results in his death. Refusing to forget Khonen, Leye becomes possessed by him, in the very midst of her wedding ceremony. The exorcism ritual that follows reveals the backdrop love story of Sender and Khonen's father Nisn, who, as young *yeshive* students, have promised to marry their then unborn children to each other. Leye and Khonen's love is thus a fulfillment of an ancient oath between their fathers, whereas Sender's refusal to marry his daughter to Khonen constitutes a betrayal of his departed friend. Only after a trial against Sender, featuring the conjured up Nisn, does the Rebbe succeed in exorcising Khonen from Leye's body. This ostensible triumph over the persistent spirit, however, is followed by Leye's death, perceived as a reunion with her dead lover. The fathers' special relationship, revealed in the play only in the trial scene (Act IV), is re-enacted in the film's first twenty five minutes. From a hidden motivation and a backdrop story in the play, the bond between Sender and Nisn becomes an integral part of the cinematic plot, rendering the love between Leye and Khonen even more fateful.

In its cinematic and theatrical adaptations alike, *Der dibuk* is a story about the problematic relations between past and present. The narrative, as Naomi Seidman explains, is first and foremost that of the dead who return to the living: Khonen who takes over Leye's body (or soul), and Nisn, who returns to demand his debt from Sender. The sin which motivates this tragic melodrama is that of forgetting, or rather repressing, as "Sender's love to his friend," Seidman argues, "was actually never forgotten, neither by the children who fulfilled it nor by Sender himself."<sup>332</sup> Hence, on a deeper, more symbolic level, the community in *Der dibuk*, ostensibly unaffected by the crises of modern life, engages with the challenges of rupture, loss and remembrance. An-ski, the modern scholar, may have created traditional society in the image of his own fractured culture.

Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport, better known as Sh. An-Ski, was a pioneer ethnographer of Jewish life in Imperial Russia, who in the years 1912-1914 headed an expedition to Jewish towns in the Pale of Jewish Settlement.<sup>333</sup> Devoted to the field of Jewish ethnography since 1907, An-ski approached his project with a sense of a mission. A socialist and a secular Jew, An-ski perceived folklore as the only possible basis for contemporary Jewish culture, and saw himself as the redeemer of his findings. His main goal was not the preservation of the materials but rather their transformation into a work of art endowed with national meaning.<sup>334</sup> He did it most famously in *Der dibuk*, a work marked by an abundance of folkloristic materials. In

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<sup>332</sup> Even in the play, Seidman contends, Sender admits that he always felt a certain attraction to Khonen as a potential son in law: "The dybbuk is neither a product of the past nor of the present, but rather of the relation between them, abruptly disturbed." Naomi Seidman, "The Ghost of Queer Love Past: Ansky's Dybbuk and the Sexual Transformation of Ashkenaz," in *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, eds. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 239.

<sup>333</sup> For a careful analysis of An-ski's life see Gabriella Safran's recent biography, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-ski* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>334</sup> Sh. Sharia, who participated in An-ski's expedition, writes: "Often, he [An-ski – Z.S.] would say that these folk tales await their savior." In Shmuel Werses, "Ben shne olamot (Ha-dibuk) le-sh. An-ski be-gilgulav ha-tekstu'aliyim," *Ha-sifrut*, 3-4 (35-36) (Summer 1986): 160-161. Gabriella Safran suggests we should regard An-ski's anthropological project as "salvage ethnography." See Gabriella Safran, "Dancing with Death and Salvaging Jewish Culture," *Slavic Review* 59, No. 4 (Winter, 2000): 761-781. In a later article, however, she points at the greater complexity in An-ski's positions, and claims that he was well aware of the researcher's projections on the objects of his/her research. See Gabriella Safran, "Jews as Siberian Natives: Primitivism and Sh. An-ski's *Dybbuk*," *Modernism/Modernity* 13 no. 4 (2006): 635-655.

addition to possession and exorcism, the practices that lie at the heart of the play, *Der dibuk* features superstitions, idioms and curses, folk songs and folk tales, including stories in praise of *Tsadikim* (*Hasidic* holy men), a martyrological narrative about the Khmelnytsky pogroms (1648–1654), a story from Reb Nahman's *Mayse me-zibn betlers* (*The Story of the Seven Beggars*), and more.<sup>335</sup> The figure of a guest who appears in town, inquiring about the ancient synagogue and the local customs, may serve as a reminder of the anthropological inquiry on which the play is based. Many, including the Hebrew national poet H. N. Bialik and Yiddish-language critic Shmuel Niger, criticized *Der dibuk* for its eclectic museum-like quality and regarded it as a jumble of folk customs.<sup>336</sup> A closer look at the “ethnographic display” in the play shows that it was culled and shaped according to ideological and artistic considerations. *Der dibuk* not only presents folkloric discoveries but changes their meanings through stylization, waesthetic transformation and symbolism. Like Y. L. Peretz in his *Hasidic* stories or in dramas like *Bay nakht afn altn mark* (*At Night at the Old Marketplace*) and *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*), An-ski, who drew inspiration from Peretz, introduces socialist and aesthetic values into the traditional materials. Thus, for example, the *Hasidic nign* (melody) in the opening of the play turns from an expression of *dveykes* (cleaving to God) into a *nign* of mystery, and its words, which deal with the body-spirit relation, gain a new meaning related to the *dybbuk*. Owing to his socialist ethos and perhaps also to his “professional pride,” An-ski presents no familiar Jewish rituals such as the Sabbath or the Jewish Holiday. Instead, he prefers the exceptional, such as a ceremony of *dybbuk* exorcism, or the rabbinic trial where the plaintiff is a dead person. Moreover, in describing public religious rituals, such as the the *Hasidic tish* or the exorcism of the *dybbuk*, An-ski increases their social and institutional aspects at the expense of elements of worship and pious devotion. Preoccupied with the tension between the individual and the community, the play *Der dibuk* does not weigh in unequivocally on the side of the individual. Rather, the communal spirit is shaped within it as a core value, by rituals attesting not only to social cohesion but also to the challenges affecting the collective's survival.

While An-ski's writing was ideologically motivated, rooted in the attempt to establish a secular Jewish identity and to create a socially aware national drama, the cinematic *Der dibuk* was first and foremost envisioned as a product for mass consumption. Thirty three year old film director Waszyński, a “wunderkind” of Polish cinema, came to the film with vast experience in commercial cinema, but not much interest in Jewish issues.<sup>337</sup> Throughout the thirties Waszyński shot a couple of features a year, “devoid of artistic ambitions and formal innovations,” which “gained him popularity with the wide audiences, at the same time having numerous reviewers frown upon excessive exploiting of cliché and settling routine solutions.”<sup>338</sup> Although the skilled director co-operated with politically committed artists such as An-ski's close friend Alter Kacyzne, a Yiddish writer and photographer who held the rights to the play, and Yiddish and

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<sup>335</sup> The play paraphrases Reb Nahman's story known as “The Mountain and the Fountain,” which in the original is told by “the beggar of the third day.” See *Beggars and Prayers: Adin Steinsaltz Retells the Tales of Nachman of Bratslav*, trans. Yehuda Hanegbi et al., edited by Jonathan Omer Man (New York : Basic Books, 1979). For the Yiddish see *R. Nakhman Bratslever, Sipurey-mayses*, ed. Shmuel Rozhanski (Buenos Aires: Literatur gezelschaft baym YIVO, 1967).

<sup>336</sup> See Werses, “Ben shne olamot,” 154-165.

<sup>337</sup> Daria Mazur, *Waszyński's The Dybbuk*, trans. Maciej Smoczyński (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2009), 34-35. See also Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 282.

<sup>338</sup> Mazur, *Waszyński's The Dybbuk*, 34.

Polish playwright and theater director Andrzej Marek (Mark Arnshteyn), Waszyński's commercial bent is clearly felt in the film. A salient expression of the commodification of *Der dybuk* in its cinematic form is the extensive popularization of the play's ethnographic disposition. Whereas An-ski's play makes selective use of elements from the tradition and Jewish folklore, the film presents a wide range of cantorial passages, prayers and blessings, humor, songs, and superstitions. These folkloric additions serve the film's commercial goals in various ways. First, they contribute a fashionable folkish flavor to the profusion of music and dance in the film. Like most of Yiddish film, the cinematic production of *Der dibuk* may well be regarded as a musical, as it includes five songs, a similar number of dances, and a performance by a cantor. If the film isn't usually regarded as a musical, it is probably due to the longer than average pauses between the musical numbers, and to the somber spirit of the play still lurking over the film. The abundance of dance and music in the film was no doubt meant to attract Yiddish audiences, who were used to the norms of Yiddish *shund* (low brow) theater, infused with singing, dancing and other vaudeville-like numbers. Moreover, the strong presence of non-verbal arts helped attract audiences who couldn't understand the Yiddish spoken in it.<sup>339</sup> Many of the film's songs and dances are folkish and performed ostensibly *in situ*, such as the *nign* which the *Hasidim* sing at their gathering, the ballad sung by Leye and her female friends while embroidering, and the typical workmen song, sung by Nute the coachman while he's cleaning the reins.<sup>340</sup> Alongside these "ethnographic" songs, the film also features songs as a spontaneous expressions of feeling, as common in the Hollywood musical, for example, when Khonen bursts into singing the "Song of Songs" to convey his love towards Leye. Moreover, the recurring tune of "Song of Songs" comes to play an important role in the film, since it is through it that Sender comes to recognize Khonen as Nisn's son.<sup>341</sup>

Other folkish elements are even less in accordance with An-ski's play and its attempt to establish folklore as the basis of a secular Jewish identity. Above all, what stands out in the film's ethnographic display are the conventional religious elements, of the kind found in almost any Yiddish film, which are absent from the play, such as a cantorial singing in the synagogue (chanted by the famous cantor Gershon Sirota), Khonen's funeral procession and the *kaddish* recited for him, and the elaborate wedding ceremony, including the ceremonial circling of the *khupe* (wedding canopy) and betrothal blessings. Thus for instance, a Sabbath meal at Sender's house, completely absent from the play, becomes an opportunity for exhibiting common Jewish customs, as it includes a *kidesh* (ceremonial blessing on the wine); a lavish main course (a whole carp); Sabbath candles displayed by a prolonged close-up; and the massive tome of the *Tsenerene* (a paraphrase of biblical passages directed at women), from which Leye's aunt Frade recites. Another salient example is the *Hoshana Rabbah* scene, which features a visual display of men wrapped in prayer shawls and carrying the Four Species (plants endowed with symbolic significance during the holiday of *Sukes*) who encircle the synagogue's main space, accompanied (in voice only) by Gershon Sirota, one of the best-known cantors of the interwar period and

<sup>339</sup> *Der dibuk*, as Nugent's review reminds us, managed to draw non-Jewish audiences also due to the international stature of the play, which by 1937 had already established itself as a classic of Jewish theater in Hebrew, Yiddish and other languages.

<sup>340</sup> The low character of Nute (played by Maks Bożyk in his typical casting), who often protests against the wealthy, is another folkish addition to the play which accords with the stereotypes of Yiddish film and theater, which also contributes to the film's anti-rich spirit.

<sup>341</sup> Thus, for example, Nute refers to Sender sarcastically: "Haven't you counted enough money today?"

probably the first cantor to have had his songs recorded. Here, the film follows the standards of Yiddish cinema, which often offered its audiences cantorial singing. Many plots were created around the figure of a cantor, and others, like *Der dibuk*, featured a famous cantor or just his voice as a special bonus meant to attract audiences.<sup>342</sup> While the name of Sirota surely appealed to many spectators, there were apparently also spectators who objected to this use of prayer. So fretted, for example, the film critic of the Yiddish daily *Der Moment*, who considered the use of prayer in the film sacrilegious.<sup>343</sup>

An-ski would have most likely rejected this display of *yidishkayt*, for both aesthetic and ideological reasons. However, for the creators of Yiddish film and its spectators such displays were regular components of the cinematic commodity. It is precisely the estrangement many spectators in Poland and in the United States felt towards the religious way of life that turned Jewish tradition on-screen into a popular visual subject, and sometimes into an object of affectionate embrace. While An-ski stresses in his works the rupture in Jewish institutional life, presenting a *Tsaddik* engulfed in self-doubt, a wedding ceremony that is interrupted twice, and an exorcism ritual that leads to the death of the possessed, the film portrays Jewish tradition in a more harmonious and congenial way. Through prayer, blessing and ritual, the cinematic *Der dibuk* constructs *yidishkayt* as an attraction intended for mass consumption. Yet alongside the blunt commodification of Jewish tradition, *Der dibuk* also appropriates Jewish folklore and especially Jewish performance in more complex ways, through processes of aestheticization and exoticization. Whereas in displaying *yidishkayt* *Der Dibuk* accords with the norms of Yiddish popular film and theater, in aestheticizing tradition it follows the models set by the play's stage productions as well as those of German expressionist cinema. Moreover, Waszyński's theatrical reenactment of traditions such as the *Hasidic* dances at Leye's engagement party or the funeral procession aestheticize the religious ritual, endowing it with macabre qualities that augment the dark nature of the play. Indeed, these scenes may support the argument, presented by Mukdoni and others, that the origins of Jewish theater lie in Jewish religious practice.

The stylized wedding scene in *Der dibuk* attests to the film's various influences and exemplifies the film's commodification of *yidishkayt* alongside higher artistic inspirations and tendencies of exoticization. Whereas in An-ski's *Der dibuk* the wedding scene is immediately interrupted, the film offers its spectators a lavish ethnographic display which strives to construct authenticity on the one hand, and, on the other, to transform Jewish folklore into a modern work of art. On the immediate level, the scene adheres to the norms of the developing Yiddish cinema, where a wedding scene appeared in almost every film. More particularly, it is reasonable to assume that the makers of *Der dibuk* were directly influenced by the spectacular folkloristic display Green provided for the spectators of *Yidl mitn fidl*, the first internationally celebrated Yiddish film, screened in Poland in September 1936—nine months before the filming of *Der dibuk* started. Wedding dances, *klezmer*, sumptuous refreshments, a *badkhn*, and the matrimonial ceremony itself, including the encircling of the bridegroom by the bride—all were included in

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<sup>342</sup> Examples for the first kind: *Der vilner balebesl* (*Overture to Glory*, USA, 1940, dir. Max Nosseck), *Dem khazens zundel* (*The Cantor's son*, USA, 1937, dir. Ilya Motyleff), both starring Moyshe Oysher, and *Kol Nidre* (USA, 1939, dir. Joseph Seiden). For the second: *Yankl der shmied* (*The Singing Blacksmith*, USA, 1938, Dir. Edgar Ulmer) starring Moyshe Oysher, and *Ikh vil zayn a mame* (*I Want To Be a Mother*, USA, 1937, dir. George Roland) and *Libe un laydnshaft* (*Love and Sacrifice*, USA, 1936, dir. George Roland), featuring cantor Leybele Waldman.

<sup>343</sup> Avrom-Yitshok Grafman, "Der nayster gilgl funem altn 'dibek'," *Moment*, January 10, 1937 (28 no. 224), 7.

Taybele's wedding in *Yidl mitn fidl* as well as in the wedding forced upon Leye in *Der dibuk*.<sup>344</sup> In both films the gap between rejoicing and luxury on the one hand, and the spirit of gloom that comes to rest upon the bride on the other, creates dramatic tension, and the somber notes of the plot are interwoven with the customarily tearful element in the traditional Jewish wedding, expressing the sorrow of the young bride who is about to leave her parents' house. Thus, while providing a colorful display of Jewish folklore in the traditional *badkhn* call for the bride to weep, both films exploit the folkish customs, and especially the *badkhn*'s sad speech (“*Veyn, kalenyu, veyn...*” [Cry, bride, cry]) and the weeping of the women, to criticize Jewish tradition. In allowing the somber side of the *badkhn*'s performance to dominate the whole event, the tragic *Der dibuk* goes further than the lighthearted comedy *Yidl mitn fidl*. The woeful *klezmer* tunes characteristic of the traditional wedding, which were so sharply criticized by the *maskilim* and by writers of *Ha-tekhiya* generation, are transformed in the cinematic *Der dibuk* into a dramatic element which contributes to the macabre atmosphere of the film and helps condemn the forced marriage and the betrayal of Sender's dead friend, Nisn.

Alongside Yiddish film and particularly *Yidl mitn fidl*, *Der dibuk* owes its grotesque design of the wedding celebration and particularly the choreography of its dancers to Vakhtangov's legendary production. Whereas the play features two dances—Sender celebrating his daughter's engagement and Leye's dance with the blind beggar—the film offers its viewers six dance sequences: the betrothal dance—extended into a whole scene, and five dances at the wedding. This is in line with the general tendency in the film to transform the more scholarly ethnographic disposition of the play, which emphasizes verbal findings such as stories and idioms, into a folkloristic spectacle. The choreography of the dance at the signing of the *tnoim* (betrothal contract) is relatively realistic, “without the exaggerated hand movements that characterize the typical interpretations of *hasidic* dance after the War,” states Michael Alpert.<sup>345</sup> I tend to agree with Alpert, though my impression is that at least one of the dancers emphasizes and “decorates” the turning of his head and lingers upon it more than a *Hasid* would typically do. Yet, while the choreography itself is indeed relatively naturalistic, the scene as a whole is highly stylized. First, the crosscutting with Khonen, who, grieving the disastrous news of Leye's betrothal, strives to connect with the powers of darkness, and eventually dies, dramatizes the dance and charges it with suspense. Second, the cinematography disassembles the dancers into their hands and feet while emphasizing their shadows on the wall, thus intensifying the ecstasy, which grows all the stronger as Khonen enhances his supplications for Satan's help and is swallowed by a mysterious cloud of thickening smoke. The storm of dancing is interrupted when the Messenger mysteriously appears and announces that Khonen has been mortally harmed (*Khonen is genizekt gevorn*), thus bringing together the two parts of the parallel action, which are sealed with the cry of Leye, heard off-screen: “Khonen!” Unlike the betrothal dance which serves the story, and, by means of its design, intensifies the drama, the wedding dances are staged as a “separate vignette in the plot, in the manner of a theatrical musical play.”<sup>346</sup> In certain old prints of the film (though not in the latest and most accurate restoration of the National

<sup>344</sup> Taybele's wedding is the scene discussed in Picon's anecdote quoted in the previous part of this chapter. It was famously filmed for thirty hours using the town's inhabitants as extras.

<sup>345</sup> Michael Alpert, “*Freytlachs* on Film: the Portrayal of Jewish Traditional Dance in Yiddish Cinema,” in *When Joseph Met Molly: A Reader on Yiddish Film*, ed. Sylvia Paskin (Nottingham, UK: Five Leaves Publications, 1999), 132.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

Center for Jewish Film), every dance was accompanied by an explanatory title. Thus the following announcements would appear on the screen: “Dance of the Poor,” “Dance of Death,” “Dance of the Rich” (in particular, the rich women, who are notable for the opulent *shterntikhlakh* (headbands) that decorates their heads), “The Dance of the Beggars,” and one designated by the English title “The Tap Dance,” which, according to Alpert, is the *patshants*, a traditional dance of hand-clapping.<sup>347</sup> These dances serve, above all, as ethnographic display, presenting folk traditions of dance and attire—and above all the *shterntikhl*, considered archaic already in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>348</sup> There's also a social dimension to the dances, which, in the spirit of the play, underscore the gap between rich and poor, and especially between Sender the wealthy and the paupers who stream in to take part in his celebration. The sinister and ostensibly chaotic “Dance of the Poor” is designed, as Alpert writes, as a parody of the stately and orderly dance of the wealthy, and can hence be understood as a critique of the rich, added to the vagrants' complaints about the refreshments served to them and to the desire they express to participate more fully in the celebration. Yet the grotesque design of the beggars and the poor, including images such as a lame beggar hoping on one leg and waving one of his crutches in the air, also objectifies them, thus undermining the socialist messages of the play.<sup>349</sup>

It is in the dances of the beggars, the poor, and the dance of Death that one feels most strongly the influence of Vakhtangov, who in his production added to the play an expressionist and grotesque “dance of the beggars.” In Vakhtangov's interpretation, these dances functioned as an expansion of the dance which a blind beggar woman forces upon Leye in the play, symbolically demanding Leye's powers, her youth, and even her life. In order to measure up to the challenge presented by the legacy of Vakhtangov's famously artful “dance of the beggars,” which had earned great praise in the theatrical performance, the filmmakers engaged the choreography of Judith Berg. In Berg's and Waszyński's interpretation, the dance of the beggars, originally pervaded by “a shadow of death,” in the words of Devora Bartonov, was supplemented by an even more macabre one—the Dance of Death.<sup>350</sup> The dance of the dead was part of the wedding ceremony in Europe as early as the fifteenth century, among non-Jews and Jews alike. In the film, however, the Dance of Death doesn't serve the ethnographic display, but rather functions as a sort of poetic imagining, echoing the tradition of the plays, poems and pictures dedicated to the *danse macabre*.

Born in 1912, the young Berg had come to the film after having studied dance in Dresden with Mary Wigman, one of the originators of the Expressionist tradition of *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance), who combined in her dances non-Western traditions of dance, dramatic performance, and music. Upon returning to Poland, Berg set up her own school of dance in

<sup>347</sup> These titles are most likely a late addition and were not present in the film's original screenings in the United States (and certainly not in its screenings in Eastern Europe).

<sup>348</sup> See introduction to Yisroel Aksenfeld's *Dos Shterntikhl* in Yisroel Aksenfeld and Shmu'el Rozhanski (ed.), *Dos Shterntikhl; un Der ershter yidisher rekrut* (Buenos Aires: Literatur gezelschaft bay YIVO, 1971).

<sup>349</sup> This notion is strengthened in light of the fact that in this scene actual beggars, or, in the words of Henekh Kohn, the film's composer, “undisciplined human material” (*nisht ditsipliniert mentshn-materiel*), served as film extras. See Henekh Kohn, “In film atelye,” *Literarische Bleter* 30 (23.7.1937): 485.

<sup>350</sup> Devora Bartonov, “He'arot le-rikud ha-kabtsanim be-hatsagat 'ha-Dibuk' shel 'ha-Bima' be-Moskva,” *Tsafon* 2 (1993): 238-141. Evidence to the challenge that the legacy of the play presented for the film's makers and viewers, can be found, for example, in the film review written by Abraham Isaac Grafman, critic for the Warsaw daily *Der Moment*. Grafman claimed that the film “is saturated by the theatrical *Dybbuk* in all its conceptions.” “The dancing of Judith Berg,” he writes, “was a major attraction (albeit still far from *Ha-bimah*).” See Grafman, “Der nayster gilgl.”

Warsaw, and under the influence of Wigman developed a style of dance which combined *Hasidic* dance traditions and a modern Expressionist style.<sup>351</sup> In her choreography of the *Hasidic* dances and the dances of the wealthy women, Berg largely followed the norms of the traditional Jewish dance, in which the men move in simple but vigorous steps, while women are restricted to small steps and delicate movement of their palms. On the other hand, in the Beggars Dance and the Dance of Death, Berg created a modernist dance which had little to do with Jewish tradition but rather conformed to the new conventions of the *Ausdruck* dance. In both her folkish and expressionist dances Berg brought to the film a modernist quality and a Western perspective. Whereas the Russified An-ski viewed Jewish folklore as a national legacy, Berg contributed to the film a different modern outlook. She was interested in Jewish customs as a potential source of inspiration and a way to broaden the horizons of Western modern dance. This outlook went hand in hand with a certain exoticization of Jewish dance, apparent in the “authentic” *Hasidic* dances as well as in the modernist Beggars Dances and the Dance of Death.

Interestingly, it is the *badkhn* who presents the Dance of Death, concluding his speech with the words “The life of the human being is like a dance of death” (*Dos lebn fun a mentsh iz tsu a toytn- tants geglikhn*). This introduction combines two of the *badkhn's* conventional roles—a preacher and a master of ceremonies—oddly using them as the transition into the dance which is clearly a modern addition to the traditional wedding. Although these dances are part of the wedding scene, the music which accompanies them is no longer the diegetic playing of the *klezmer*, as in the dances of the rich. Instead, the soundtrack switches to an extra-diegetic dark tune, which serves as a recurring motif in the film, and is repeated in its dramatic ending, when Leye unites with Khonen in death. Upon the first notes of the extra-diegetic music, the beggars begin to dance, as if hearing it—an additional sign that the film is decisively departing from realistic representation. A close look at the dance, which at first glance may seem unified, reveals two distinct kinds of movement. While some beggars simply sway strangely from side to side with their hands spread outwards, others—indeed the younger and more attractive ones—move still in threatening gestures but with much greater elegance, in a style similar to that of the Dance of Death which follows. The two kinds of motion probably owe to the mixture of two types of dancers: the extras, who as we know were recruited among the local beggars, and professional dancers—a prime example of the aesthetic appropriation of the folkloristic materials in *Der dibuk*.

From amongst the beggars then arises the figure of Death, whose gender identity is mixed. Its head is covered with a kerchief and its face, made up as a white mask, appears like a skull, with large, dark circles around the eyes, a black nose, and a broad mouth that is all teeth. Death is clad in trousers, over which is a strangely cut gown, a translucent gauze that mimics the bridal veil, and a striped linen cape that is reminiscent of a *talis* (prayer shawl) cut by diagonal lines, according to the Expressionist aesthetic tradition of the set design. The beggars dance around Death with their eyes shut, as is in the grip of a trance, and Death moves its whole body, spreading its hands and reaching out to Leye in a stylized invitation to dance. Leye tries to back away, but Death approaches her, and finally grabs her at the waist and they dance together. Gradually, as the embrace grows stronger, Death envelops and caresses Leye, and she rests her

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<sup>351</sup> On Berg and her dance career after the Second World War, including, among others, the developing of Zionist “folk dances” see Judith Brin Ingber and Felix Fibich, “The Unwitting Gastrol: Excerpts from an Oral History Interview,” in [http://www.jbriningber.com/Fibich\\_Apr\\_18\\_07.pdf](http://www.jbriningber.com/Fibich_Apr_18_07.pdf). I thank Zachary Baker for the reference.

hands upon its shoulders: a bodily convergence laden with sexuality, impossible in the realia of the plot but here effected by dance. The scene culminates in the final part of the dance, photographed from Leye's point of view. As she experiences the vertigo of the dancing, Death's face is transformed for her into the face of Khonen by means of a cinematic superimposition. The legacy of Vakhtangov's stagecraft; the Expressionist dance of Berg, which exploits folkloric and exotic elements in modernist new style, and Henekh Kohn's modern music, containing vague echoes of traditional *klezmer* music—all are woven together to create the Dance of Death, one of the high points of the film.

Whereas the wedding dances in *Der dibuk* combine folklore and expressionist stylization, the *badkhn*, another significant performer in the traditional Jewish wedding, is presented more realistically. The *badkhn*'s role is divided into four separate sequences, which conform to his various roles as master of ceremonies and as moralist. He thus invites the poor to share the donations they are offered by Sender, orders the *klezmer* to play, and holds two longer speeches, both macabre in nature. The first, a moralistic sermon about death awaiting all people, serves as an introduction to the Dance of Death, and the second, which addresses Leye's dead mother, is followed by Leye being led to the *khupe*. Only the last of these speeches, also the only one shot in a close-up, appears also in the play. In An-ski's original, it is aunt Frade who chants this text, rather than a *badkhn*—a character absent from An-ski's drama. Also different is the context of the speech in the film in comparison to the play. Whereas in the film the speech forms part of Leye's aborted wedding to Menashe, the groom forced on her, in An-ski's version Frade chants the speech at the very end of the play, shortly before Leye joins Khonen through death. The sermon, addressing the dead mother watching the daughter led to the *khupe*, thus designates Leye's true wedding—to her beloved Khonen. By assigning the speech to a *badkhn* the film thus returns this monologue to its implied origins as a *badkhones* speech, since in a traditional Jewish wedding, when a parent of the bride or the groom is dead, the *badkhn* customarily addressing them as absent-present guests.

In the context of the present project, and my focus on the appropriation of folk-performance, the appearance of the *badkhn* in the film deserves some further consideration. Why did An-ski create a speech in *badkhones* style, which serves to wed Leye and Khonen, and yet assign it to a female character? Why wasn't he true to the original context of his folkloristic object? And why did the creators of the film choose to resurrect or rediscover the missing *badkhn*? These related questions can be answered on different levels. An-ski, as I argued, was interested in the aesthetic transformation of the ethnographic findings, rather than in their mere museological presentation, for the sake of creating a new secular culture. By having a female family member hold the *badkhn-esque* speech An-ski sets the sermon in a more personal, emotional and intimate context. He may also have aimed at resisting the limited role assigned to women in the public sphere in traditional Jewish society. That this relative is also the dead mother's sister, who has brought up Leye since birth as a mother would, emphasizes this aspect of meaning even more. Furthermore, it is possible that An-ski, like so many other Jewish artists of his time, disapproved of the traditional *badkhn*, and therefore left him out of the story. Apparently, however, An-ski was nevertheless fascinated by one of the *badkhn*'s traditional roles—inviting the dead parents to the wedding—and appreciated his possible contribution to the story of eros and tantalus which lies at the center of *Der dibuk*. He therefore recreates that role in a form more desirable to him, transforming it from a public ritual to a more private one, and

from formulaic discourse to an expressive personal speech.<sup>352</sup>

Twenty years after An-ski's play, the cinematic *Der dibuk* takes a different path, and presents an elaborate traditional wedding, including the *badekens* and *khupe* ceremonies, offering to the poor and *shertikhelakh* worn by the rich, and a handful of dances. Last but not least, the film also brings back the *badkhn* into the story. Visually, the film positions the *badkhn* on a balcony overlooking the town square, thus creating an imposing stage for his performance, and a hierarchy between him and his listeners. The shadows that the *badkhn* casts on the wall behind him contribute to the sinister atmosphere. On the verbal level, the macabre words of the *badkhn* serve the tragic quality of the scene, and of the film in general. His oration dwells on the death that awaits all people as well as on Leye's deceased mother. Between the two speeches comes the Dance of Death. Rather than a mere artifact of authenticity, the *badkhn* is therefore stylized to serve the modernist macabre character of the film in general, and of the wedding scene in particular. The *badkhn* thus exemplifies both tendencies operating in the appropriation of folklore in Waszyński's *Der dibuk*. While it is no doubt meant to attract audiences to a display of authentic Jewish tradition which had almost disappeared from the world of the urban moviegoer, it also aestheticizes this folk performance with a modernist frame, assigning it a crucial role in establishing the dramatic relationship of the living and the dead.

Contemporary spectators are even more susceptible to the appeal of the *badkhn* and the whole folkloric display in the film as an authentic documentation of Eastern European Jewish life, which was destroyed so shortly after the film's release. The ethnographic display of Hasidic culture, so central to the play on which the film is based, its cinematic stylization characterized by gothic-expressionist notes, alongside the blunt commodification of folklore made to attract mass audiences—these factors might be less significant or apparent for those who wish to watch the ostensibly authentic figures of Yiddish speaking *Hasidim* in Jewish Eastern Europe. Such viewers may overlook the various ideological, aesthetic, and commercial motivations behind the film, including those of Sh. An-Ski, the Russified Jewish ethnographer who created a mystical tale of social and national significance, or the aspirations of Michał Waszyński, an assimilated Jew and the “king” of Polish popular cinema of the thirties who adapted it for the screen. *Der dibuk's* many historical dimensions easily collapse into one flat image of a world on the brink of annihilation.<sup>353</sup>

In Pierre Nora's terms, the film functions in contemporary culture as a “site of memory” (*lieu de mémoire*), a realm of symbolic representation, a material or spiritual entity which replaces authentic collective memory. In modern times these sites are substitutes for the “real” memory of the archaic communities: embodied, unconscious and often sacred: “There are sites of memory because there are no longer environments of memory.” While Nora's idealized image of pre-modern memory is debatable, he accurately describes modern societies' need for sites of

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<sup>352</sup> Originally, the play included no wedding scene, only the disastrous possibility of an arranged marriage set in opposition to true love and union in death. Even when, following the advice of the Russian theater director Leopold Sulerzhitsky, An-ski added a second act, which included Leye's unfortunate wedding, he interrupted the ceremony even before it even started (See Safran, *Wandering Soul*, 93, 213-215, 249). An-ski's opposition to the marriage institution may have contributed yet another layer to his resistance to the *badkhn*.

<sup>353</sup> For a further discussion of the function of *Der dibuk* as a site of memory in contemporary culture see my article dedicated to the question of memory in *Der Dibuk* in *Al Na Tegarshuni*. See note 314 in this dissertation. See also my “Cinema as Site of Memory: *The Dybbuk* and the Burden of Holocaust Commemoration,” in *Modern Jewish Experience in World Cinema*, Lawrence Baron, ed. (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011) (Forthcoming).

memory and the mechanisms for their construction. The mass destruction of European Jewry presents a special challenge to modern memory, not only due to the immensity of the catastrophe, but also because the survivors and their offspring typically do not live in their pre-war communities, and since only little is left of the original locations of these cultures, even for the most motivated pilgrim. *Der dibuk* seems suitable for such a commemoration of the pre-war Jewish world in a post-war world: mobile (packaged as a DVD) and yet rooted in pre-war Poland where it was filmed (though mostly in a Warsaw studio); foreign due to its Yiddish language, now understood by very few of its current viewers, and yet international through its soundtrack, subtitles, and reputation. While these qualities characterize every Yiddish film shot in Poland, and thus predispose all of Yiddish-Polish cinema to pedagogical use, *Der dibuk* is especially susceptible to such appropriations as a substitute site of memory. The film's folkloristic nature, the fact that it takes place in a distant, vaguely defined Eastern European Jewish past, its tragic romanticism, and the eternal presence of death render *Der dibuk* an ideal commemorative symbol. Yet, the question needs to be asked: what happens if the film is watched primarily as an ethnographic document and a site of memory, or assigned the role of a *kaddish* mourning the decimation of European Jewry?<sup>354</sup> The Nazi Genocide may overshadow the culture it destroyed, and the rift it created may hide the traumatic crises of modernity, which lie at the heart of *Der dibuk*. As a *kaddish*, the film memorializes the Jewish dead rather than illuminating their lives, including their disappearing folklore and the modernist stage- and screen- re-imagining go of their traditions in interwar Eastern Europe.

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<sup>354</sup> Ira Konigsberg refers to *Der dibuk* as a *Kaddish*: "*The Dybbuk* is a Kaddish, a prayer for the dead, which asks us to remember the Dead." See Ira Konigsberg, "The only 'I' in the World: Religion, Psychoanalysis and 'The Dybbuk'," *Cinema Journal* 36 no. 4 (Summer 1997): 22-42. Two Polish film scholars who have recently written on *Der dibuk* quote Konigsberg, warmly supporting his designating *Der dibuk* as a *Kaddish*. See Elżbieta Ostrowska, "Der Dibuk/ The Dybbuk," in *The Cinema of Central Europe*, ed. Peter Hames (London; New York: Wallflower Press, 2004), 25-33; Mazur, *Waszyński's The Dybbuk*, 71, 80.

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