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Abstract: *From the 1920s until the 1950s, Yiddish Buenos Aires hosted a thriving theatrical landscape. Commercial ensembles, professional actors’ cooperatives, and professionally led amateur troupes vied for the allegiances of audiences. Impresarios benefited from the city’s geographical location in South America, which enabled actors from New York and Europe to travel and perform there during the Northern Hemisphere’s off-season. The much-criticized “star system” was transplanted from New York’s commercial Yiddish theater to the stages of Buenos Aires. Argentine Yiddish critics complained that the “imported” stars relied upon trite melodramas, light comedies, and vulgar musicals (shund), at the expense of “better” (literary) plays. Works by local authors were practically absent from the visitors’ repertory. The frequent turnover of guest stars entailed grueling rehearsal schedules, abrupt shifts in repertory, and minimal wages for professional actors in the locally based companies. In 1930, a pivotal season for the Yiddish theater in Argentina, two rival stars of the New York Yiddish stage visited Buenos Aires: Samuel Goldenberg, promoted as the finest Yiddish romantic actor of the day, performed at the Teatro Excelsior (joined there by Stella Adler); and Maurice Schwartz, founder of New York’s Yiddish Art Theatre, played at two other theaters. Critics treated Goldenberg and his melodrama-heavy repertory with a mixture of admiration and exasperation, while relentlessly hyping Schwartz and his “better” repertory. The 1930 theater season also coincided with the immigration of Jevl Katz, who would emerge as Yiddish-speaking Argentina’s most popular performing artist. The crackdown on sex traffickers associated with the Sociedad Zwi Migdal served as a backdrop for debates concerning the Yiddish theater’s repertory. Maurice Schwartz’s 1930 visit to Argentina helped to solidify the reputation of Buenos Aires as the last redoubt of the “better” Yiddish plays.*

Introduction: The International “Star System” and the Yiddish Theater

“Pseudo Stars”¹
Es forn starn,
Geyen starn
Kumen starn
Vi di harn,
Mit trumeytn un fanfarn
Oysgeputst vi huzarn
Dreyen zikh vi oyf bulvarn...

Stars are on their way,
Stars are going
And stars are coming
Like the lords,
With trumpets and fanfares,
Decked out like Hussars
They mill around the boulevards...

Samuel Iris, the author of these verses, was a comic actor who performed with various Yiddish theatrical enterprises in Buenos Aires. A veteran of the fabled Vilna Troupe, he settled in Argentina in the 1920s. Iris’s verses express the resentment that he and many of the other Yiddish actors of Buenos Aires harbored toward many of the international stars who traveled from far and wide to lead the local companies for varying lengths of time each season. His misgivings were echoed by Argentina’s leading Yiddish critics. One of them, Samuel Rollansky (Shmuel Rozhanski), acerbically commented that “the Yiddish theater in Argentina is a hotel with a large office [providing] transit visas” for the overseas stars, offering them ship passage and suitable accommodations, along with a percentage of the box-office take. The visitors’ incomes far exceeded what the domestic players might expect to receive.²

The star system was not new to the Yiddish theater; its origins lay in the heroic era of *blondzhende shtern*, as depicted by Sholem Aleichem in the novel that bears that name. David Mazower provides the following description:

With a few notable exceptions, it followed a similar pattern all over the world: a company of resident Yiddish actors would be joined by a star actor-manager, who would arrive with his own tried and tested repertoire, much of which would already be familiar to the resident actors. The star would also direct the company

¹ Samuel Iris, *Ot azoy hot men geshpilt teater – Así se hacía teatro* (Buenos Aires: 1956), 235.

² Samuel Rollansky [Shmuel Rozhanski], “Dos idishe gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” in *Yoyvl-bukh: sakh-haklen fun 50 yohr idish leben in Argentine; lekoved “Di Idishe tsaytung” tsu ihr 25-yohrigen yubileum (Cincuenta años de vida judía en la Argentina: homenaje a “El Diario Israelita” en su vigesimoquinto aniversario)* (Buenos Aires: 1940), 412, 415. Rollansky’s essay was subsequently published as a monograph, under the title *Dos yidishe gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine* (Buenos Aires: 1941).

and, depending on public demand, a new play might be performed each night of the week. With little time for extensive rehearsal, and few professional directors to interpret and stage the plays, the Yiddish theatre was very much an actor's theatre...³

The co-territorial Russian-language theater provided the template for the Yiddish theater in Eastern Europe and worldwide. As theater historian Nick Worrall writes:

Co-existing with the Imperial Theatres were the ordinary commercial theatres run by independent entrepreneurs, who performed the standard classics of the Russian and Western European repertoire, but who tended to rely for commercial success on stock melodramas and farces which were mainly imported from abroad, as well as the vaudeville... Rehearsals in these theatres were perfunctory affairs. The star reigned at the expense of the ensemble and, often, at the expense of the play. Dialogue would be improvised rather than learned. Sets would be taken from stock, rarely refurbished or renewed, and plays were frequently staged less for their intrinsic artistic merit than to provide profitable benefit nights for the leading actor or actress...⁴

Similarly, the movement for a "better" Yiddish theater, as articulated in the 1910s by the writers I. L. Peretz and Peretz Hirschbein, and by such actors as Maurice Schwartz and Jacob Ben-Ami, was prefigured in late Imperial Russia with the establishment of the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 and the elaboration there of Konstantin Stanislavsky's famous "system."

The Transnational Yiddish Theater in South America: Stars and Repertory

The anthropologists Leonor Slavsky and Susana Skura have outlined the historical development of the Yiddish theater in Argentina as falling into four distinct phases:

1901-1930 – From its beginnings until the clampdown (September 1930) on the Sociedad Zwi Migdal (the sex traffickers' mutual aid society).

1930-1948 – Star system vs. independent theater (e.g., the emergence of the *Idisher folks-teater* – IFT).

1948-1972 – From the postwar apogee of the Yiddish theater until the closure of the Teatro Mitre and other theaters.

1972-present – The inexorable abandonment of Yiddish in the theater?⁵

Theater criticism in the Argentine Jewish press (in Yiddish and Spanish) touched upon ways in which stars visiting from overseas did or did not adapt their repertoires to local conditions and provided striking evidence of the rivalries between the actors, their

³ David Mazower, *Yiddish Theatre in London* (London: Museum of the Jewish East End, The Sternberg Centre, 1987), 17. *Blondzhende shtern* (*Wandering Stars*) was first published in serialized installments in the Warsaw newspapers *Naye velt* and *Moment* from 1909 to 1911 and was subsequently included in the author's collected works; see: "Sholem Aleykhem," in Zalmen Reyzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese un filologye*, vol. 4 (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1929), col. 687; and the Wikipedia entry "Wandering Stars' (novel)": [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandering_Stars_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wandering_Stars_(novel)) (accessed May 30, 2019).

⁴ Nick Worrall, *Modernism to Realism on the Soviet Stage: Tairov, Vakhtangov, Okhlopkov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1.

⁵ Leonor Slavsky and Susana Skura, "Cien años de teatro en ídish en Buenos Aires," in *Encuentro: recreando la cultura judeoargentina*, Ricardo Feierstein and Stephen A. Sadow, comp. (Buenos Aires: Milá, 2002), 299-304.

impresarios, and the critics.⁶ Climactic events relating to the influence of the *tmeim* – sex traffickers and prostitutes – on the Yiddish theater provided the backdrop to the 1930 season in Buenos Aires, which is the main focus of this essay.

Debra Caplan's recent book *Yiddish Empire* provides a case study of the ways in which transnationalism was baked into the Yiddish theatrical endeavor.⁷ Like their Russian counterparts, Yiddish actors and troupes wandered from city to city and, indeed, across boundaries and oceans. The major stars brought along scripts of original and translated plays, stage instructions, costumes, sets, and sometimes even stage equipment.⁸ Argentina was a node in an international network comprising locally based theater owners, impresarios, actors, musicians, and crews, plus the guest stars and directors from abroad. At the same time, the Argentine Yiddish theater functioned within the diverse and multilingual theatrical ecosystem of Buenos Aires – a topic that merits a separate examination.⁹

Buenos Aires was the hub for Yiddish theater throughout the Southern Cone, with offshoots in Uruguay and Brazil, and (sporadically) in Chile as well. Yiddish troupes based in Buenos Aires made the rounds of cities and agricultural colonies elsewhere in Argentina, as well as nearby Montevideo. As for the guest stars, if Buenos Aires was their principal destination for the season, in the course of their tours they might also appear on the stages of the Argentine provinces, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo.

Over the decades, wrote Rollansky in 1940, “we have seen the greatest artists of the Yiddish stage, from all genres” in Buenos Aires; and “almost the entire Yiddish repertory – and much of the world repertory – was put on” there.¹⁰ Success at the box office was key to the survival of Yiddish theater as a commercial enterprise, and the guest stars were in constant demand each season. Theater impresarios in Buenos Aires depended upon the star system, because the tours by visiting actors were what sustained their businesses.

⁶ Both Rollansky and Zhitnitzky, in their historical surveys of the Yiddish theater in Argentina, decried its overwhelming dependency on the guest stars that visited from abroad (mainly New York City). See Rollansky, “Dos idishe gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine” (1940); and T. Beylin [L. Zhitnitzky], “Tsu der geshikhte funem idishn teater in Argentine,” in *Argentina: fuftsik yor idisher yishev, tsvantsik yor Di Prese* (*Argentina: 50 años de vida judía en el país, XX aniversario de Di Presse*) (Buenos Aires: *Di Prese*, 1938), 105.

⁷ Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

⁸ For example, in 1930 the Argentine Yiddish actor-impresario Leon Brest advised Maurice Schwartz to bring along his costumes and a few “spots” (spotlights). Brest to Schwartz, March 18, 1930, in YIVO Institute for Jewish Research Archives (New York), Maurice Schwartz Papers (RG 498), Box 6, Folder 55.

⁹ Isaac Nuguer's early career as impresario straddled both the Yiddish and Spanish-language Argentine stages. See: “Di homenakhe dem h' Yitskhok Nuger,” in *Penemer un penemlakhno*. 272 (December 6, 1929). For a general survey of the theater in Argentina from its beginnings to 1956, see: Beatriz Seibel, *Historia del teatro argentino* (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 2002-2010; 2 vols.). Its chronological, annotated documentation of the Argentine theater scene covers “national” (Argentine) companies, troupes specializing in peninsular Spanish repertory (e.g., zarzuela), French- and Italian-language companies, variety and cabaret troupes, and even circuses. The Yiddish theater and its connections to the “national” theater of Argentina are also mentioned. The glossy magazine *Lyra* published a book-length special issue (vol. 17, no. 174-176 [1959]) devoted to the broad range of associated topics with the Argentine theater, including a three-page article by Pablo Palant, “El teatro judío.” This issue also includes articles about the French, Italian, and English theaters of Buenos Aires.

¹⁰ Rollansky, “Dos idishe gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 412-413.

Argentine critics inveighed against the star system, even while selectively exempting some from their reproaches. One of their most frequent complaints was that the visitors fed their audiences an almost entirely imported repertory of operettas and melodramas. “Argentina is missing from the Argentine Yiddish theater” is how Rollansky put it.¹¹ He observed that while there was “Yiddish theater *in* Argentina,” one could not speak of “the *Argentine* Yiddish theater.” Rollansky contrasted the subordinate status of the Yiddish theater with Yiddish journalism and literature, where Argentina had emerged as a largely self-sustaining center of Yiddish cultural production.¹² The few Argentine Yiddish authors who occasionally wrote for the stage faced stiff competition. “There were Yiddish playwrights in Argentina,” Mollie Lewis Nouwen observes. “But they could not keep up with the demand for plays, so the majority of the seasons were filled with works from the United States and Europe.”¹³ In many cases, the visiting stars would also have supplied the musical scores for the operettas and melodramas that they put on in Argentina.

The North American guests tended to treat Buenos Aires as a distant and exotic stopover along a circuit that also took them to Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, Toronto, and Montreal. They made few if any adjustments to their made-in-New-York repertory. All too often, moreover, the plays that the stars produced in Argentina included words, phrases, and even dialogue in English, a language that was largely unintelligible to local audiences. According to Rollansky, eventually the visitors heeded the objections of the critics and audiences, by tweaking their scripts so as to eliminate English and make the plays more accessible to Argentine theatergoers.¹⁴

In 1932, the H. D. Nomberg Yiddish Writers’ Association went so far as to stage a mock trial of the star system, to the evident puzzlement of one actor visiting from North America, Joseph Buloff. In *Di Prese*, Jacobo (Yankev) Botoshansky (writing under the pseudonym Dr. Bramitsh) dismissed as “beyond absurd” the demands of some Yiddish writers that guest stars be banned from performing in Argentina. “That would effectively keep Argentine Jews from seeing the best Yiddish actors from all over, and it might even be a death sentence for the Argentine Yiddish theater,” he wrote, while contending that the *gastrol* system ought to be regulated (somehow!) by the Yiddish Actors’ Association.

¹⁵

Two Rival Stars Make Their Entrances in Buenos Aires

During 1930, about half a dozen Yiddish actors visited Buenos Aires to lead the two professional troupes that were active for the theater season. The guests included two of

¹¹ Rollansky, “Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 403.

¹² Rollansky, “Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 397.

¹³ Mollie Lewis Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires: Jewish Immigrants and the Creation of Argentine National Identity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013), 48.

¹⁴ See Rollansky, “Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 404. In August 2019, during a cursory examination of a box of play scripts in the Fundación IWO’s archives in Buenos Aires, I spotted English words and phrases (in Yiddish letters) in some scripts. Judging from ownership stamps, some of these were in plays that were performed by amateur troupes in agricultural colonies. These scripts may have been transcribed in the U.S. and sent from there to Argentina.

¹⁵ Adolf Mide, “A mishpet vegn starizm inem yidishn teater,” in his *Epizodn fun yidishn teater (Episodios del teatro judío)*, vol. 1, 4th edition (Buenos Aires: 1957), pp. [44]-47; Dr. Bramitsh [Jacobo Botoshansky], “Dos idische teater in yor 1932,” in *Di Prese*, January 1, 1933.

Second Avenue's leading dramatic actors, Samuel Goldenberg (1886-1945) and Maurice Schwartz (1889-1960). The impresario Isaac Nuguer invited Goldenberg to head the Teatro Excelsior company for four-and-a-half months in 1930. (It was the only Yiddish theater company in Buenos Aires that operated over the entire duration of an eight-month season in 1930.)¹⁶ He was joined there for two months by Stella Adler (1901-1992), from one of New York's preeminent Yiddish theatrical families. (She would later establish the Stella Adler Conservatory of Theatre, a famous training ground for actors.) Schwartz, founder and director of New York's Yiddish Art Theatre, performed for two-and-a-half months at two centrally located theaters, the Nuevo and the Argentino, at the invitation of Nuguer's rival, Adolf Mide.¹⁷ This was Schwartz's first South American tour, with many more to come.

The simultaneous presence in Buenos Aires of these fixtures of the New York Yiddish stage was a notable event for Yiddish theater in Argentina at a transitional moment in its evolution. The local theater critics assessed the two actors' contrasting repertoires within the context of the longstanding debate over literary and artistic values, with Schwartz specializing in plays by Yiddish literary authors and Goldenberg drawing heavily upon the *shund*, or popular repertory.¹⁸

Schwartz is remembered today for his films of Sholem Asch's Uncle Moses and Sholem Aleichem's Tevye. He also staged modern European plays and the occasional musical. His fame preceded him to Argentina via the press and through his recordings of humorous recitations. The largely forgotten Goldenberg ("the John Barrymore of the Yiddish theater"¹⁹) was that rarity among Yiddish stage artists: a tall, craggily handsome, and romantic *salon-shoyshpiler* who enjoyed playing the piano on stage.

Newspaper advertisements, placed by the impresarios, played a key role in publicizing theatrical developments – and in providing the papers with a predictable source of income. A few days before his arrival in June 1930, Goldenberg's impresario, Isaac Nuguer, ran a display ad in *Di Idische tsaytung*, one of two Yiddish dailies in Buenos Aires, telegraphing the actor's greetings from Rio de Janeiro.²⁰ Goldenberg

¹⁶ Earlier that same season, the veteran actor, singer, and playwright Joseph Markovitch had been brought over from London to perform at the Excelsior. Markovitch was succeeded there by a young song-and-dance man, Jack Rechtzeit, from New York. Both of these visiting actors stayed on in Argentina after Goldenberg's tour began; Markovitch subsequently performed in some of the productions mounted by Goldenberg. Rechtzeit toured the Argentine provinces, though his performances there were not covered by the Buenos Aires Yiddish press. His departure from Argentina, later in 1930, was marked by *Di Prese* ("Haynt fort Yankev Rekhhtsayt op keyn Eyrope," October 28, 1930). Before World War I, Markovitch and Goldenberg had performed together in London.

¹⁷ Rollansky characterized Mide as "an impresario with adventuristic courage and scope" who arranged "brief seasons in fine theaters." See Rollansky, "Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine," 397.

¹⁸ The dictionary definition of *shund* is "literary trash." As applied to the theater, *shund* was commonly associated with melodramas and "vulgar" operettas; more about this, below.

¹⁹ The Barrymore tag was applied to Goldenberg in *Memories of the Yiddish Theater: Echoes of the Past*, an LP recording directed by Seymour Rexite, with narration by Miriam Kressyn (New York: Famous Records, [n.d.]; FAM-1008). The recording is accessible online (login required) at: <https://rsa.fau.edu/album/40701> (accessed November 25, 2019).

²⁰ Nuguer did *not* place a paid advertisement in the rival Yiddish daily *Di Prese*, announcing Goldenberg's impending arrival. Meanwhile, *Mundo Israelita* provided a fairly detailed profile of Goldenberg upon his arrival in Buenos Aires. See "Esperase con interés el debut de Goldenberg en el Teatro Excelsior," in *Mundo Israelita* June 14, 1930.

announced that he looked forward to staging “Jud Süß,” the dramatization of a novel by Lion Feuchtwanger, about the eighteenth-century German financier and Court Jew Joseph Süß Oppenheimer. The play had premiered at the Yiddish Art Theatre eight months earlier, under Maurice Schwartz’s direction, with Goldenberg and Schwartz alternating the two leading roles of “Jud Süß” and Duke Karl Alexander of Württemberg. The New York run of “Jud Süß” had witnessed its share of friction between the two co-stars: Goldenberg insisted on performing the title role until the play neared the end of its run – and only then did the two actors finally exchange their roles.

²¹

One day after Goldenberg’s “telegram” was published in *Di Idische tsaytung*, the same newspaper ran an interview with Maurice Schwartz’s close collaborator, the actor and stage manager Joseph Schwartzberg, who had just debarked in Buenos Aires. Schwartz arrived in Buenos Aires a week later and promptly mounted *his* production of “Jud Süß” before Goldenberg managed to do so. (Goldenberg had postponed his production due to rehearsal pressures.) Schwartz evidently intended to show up his former co-star for having monopolized the title role a few months earlier in New York.

Yiddish Theater Troupes in Buenos Aires

The majority of the professional actors in the Yiddish theater companies had settled more or less permanently in Argentina. Among them were some with extensive experience on the European Yiddish stage, such as Iris, Zina Rapel, and the Vienna-trained Leo Halpern. Others, like the young actress Miriam Lerer, came of age in Argentina.²² As was characteristic of the Yiddish theater elsewhere, the Argentine Yiddish theater included actor-couples and multi-generational acting families. The Argentine composer Jacobo Ficher cemented the Excelsior’s prestige as that company’s orchestral conductor.²³

As of 1930, the professional Yiddish actors of Argentina were wholly at the mercy of the impresarios for their employment. They were grossly underpaid – especially compared with the visiting stars – and there was no equivalent to New York’s powerful Yiddish theater unions, with their separate organizations for actors, musicians, choristers and dancers, dressers, ushers, and stagehands. The Yiddish Actors’ Association that was finally established in Argentina (1932) functioned more as a mutual-aid society than as a union that engaged in collective bargaining; it offered its members health, old-age, and burial benefits, as well as financial support for

²¹ For more on the New York production, see “Moris Shvarts un Semyuel Goldinburg kemfen iber eyn role,” in *Forverts (Forward)*, November 15, 1929; Joel (Yoel) Entin, “Fun der teater-velt: ‘Id Zis’,” in *Idishen kunst teater*,” in *Tsukunft (The Future)*, 35:3 (March 1930), 204-207.

²² “Notas teatrales: Con la incorporación de Leo Halpern la compañía del Excelsior ha hecho una buena adquisición,” in *Mundo Israelita*, February 1, 1930. Halpern was involved, on and off, in the Yung-Argentine theatrical movement (antecedent of the Teatro IFT). Miriam Lerer’s sister, Shifra Lerer (who was born in Argentina), became a prominent Yiddish actress in New York.

²³ Silvia Glocer, “Jacobo Ficher: fragmentos musicales olvidados,” in *Teatro ídish agentino (1930-1950) (Argentinier yidish-teater)* ([Buenos Aires]: Editorial de la Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, [2016]), 79-97. Accessible online at: http://publicaciones.filo.uba.ar/sites/publicaciones.filo.uba.ar/files/Teatro%20%C3%ADdish%20argentino%20%281930-1950%29_interactivo_o.pdf (accessed November 29, 2019).

impoverished retired actors. The Association also lobbied against the staging of “poor theater.”²⁴

Jewel Katz: The Exception That Proved the Rule

During the 1930s, the popularity of the Yiddish *kupletist*, parodist, and singer-songwriter Jevl (Khevl) Katz (1902-1940) was the rare exception to the overwhelming dominance of the guest artists from overseas. However, although Katz occasionally participated in theatrical ensembles, his appeal was overwhelmingly derived from his solo performances. Katz immigrated to Argentina from Vilna in May 1930 and promptly made the rounds of the Yiddish press. Their journalists pointedly contrasted the tasteful humor of his songs and couplets to the lewdness that they objected to on the theater stages.²⁵

Within weeks of his arrival, Katz publicly crossed paths with the North American stars: In June 1930, at a festive luncheon for Schwartz sponsored by the H. D. Nomberg Yiddish Writers’ Association, Katz performed his lampoon of the popular comic operetta, “The Romanian Wedding.”²⁶ And a month later, “the well-known artist Jevl Katz” (as he was already being billed²⁷) brought down the house at a benefit concert for Vilna’s YIVO Institute, whose headliners were Goldenberg and Adler.

The 1930 Season: The Guest Stars’ Contrasting Repertoires

In New York’s Yiddish theaters it was customary for successful dramas to have runs lasting for several weeks, while an operetta, if it was a box-office hit, might continue for an entire season. Things were different on the road, where audiences experienced a constant turnover of productions, with a punishing rehearsal process that actors called

²⁴ Rollansky, “Dos idishe gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 412. For details on earlier unionization efforts by Argentina’s Yiddish actors, see T. Beylin, [L. Zhitnitsky], “Tsu der geshikhte funem idishn teater in Argentine,” 100-101.

²⁵ Jevl Katz became hugely popular among Argentina’s Jews during the 1930s. For background, see: Zachary M. Baker, “Gvald Yidn, Buena Gente’: Jevl Katz, Yiddish Bard of the Río de la Plata,” in *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage: Essays in Drama, Performance, and Show Business*, edited by Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 202-222; Zachary M. Baker, “More Argentine than Martín Fierro’: Jevl Katz’s Debut in Buenos Aires, 1930,” in Digital Yiddish Theatre Project blog, accessible at https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/jewel_katz (accessed October 31, 2019); Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires*, 67-68, 72-73; Pablo Palomino, “The Musical Worlds of Jewish Buenos Aires, 1910-1940,” in *Mazal Tov, Amigos! Jews and Popular Music in the Americas*, editors: Amalia Ran and Moshe Morad (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 25-43; Ariel Svarch, “Der freylekhster yid in Argentine: The Life and Death of Jevl Katz, Popular Artist of the 1930s,” in *Splendor, Decline, and Rediscovery of Yiddish in Latin America*, edited by Malena Chinski and Alan Astro (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018), 225-250; Eliahu Toker, *iAndá a cantarle a Jevl Katz!* accessible via: http://eliahutoker.com.ar/escritos/gente_katz.htm (accessed: December 27, 2018); Zalmen Zylbercweig, “Katz, Khevel,” in *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, vol. 7 (unpublished), cols. 6163-6167. Accessible via: <https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/encyclopedia/khts-hvl> (accessed: October 30, 2019).

²⁶ “Der kaboles-ponem fun ‘Shrayber-fareyn H. D. Nomberg’ far Moris Shvarts,” in *Di Idishe tsaytung*, July 1, 1930. “Di rumenische khasene” (music by Peretz Sandler and libretto by Morris Schorr) had its New York premiere in September 1923, with Aaron Lebedeff and Bessie Weisman as leads.

²⁷ “An interesanter frimorgn farn Idish visn. institut,” in *Di Prese*, July 21, 1930. Katz’s popularity would grow throughout the decade.

“baking” the plays.²⁸ During his eighteen weeks in Buenos Aires, Goldenberg put on nineteen productions – about one play per week. For his part, Schwartz mounted thirteen productions during his ten-week tour. Considering that curtain time at evening performances was 10:00 p.m., with performances ending at around 1:00 a.m. – often followed by socializing and drinks into the wee hours – the daily ordeal for local actors and stars alike was quite grueling.

Literary dramas originally written in Yiddish were at the core of Schwartz’s repertory, while Goldenberg performed a mix of translated dramas and Yiddish melodramas. Some of the European plays in Yiddish translation – such as Feuchtwanger’s “Jud Süß” (staged separately by both Schwartz and Goldenberg) and Jerzy Żulawski’s “Shabse Tsvi” (produced by Schwartz) – drew upon Jewish source materials. Russian authors were well represented in each actor’s Buenos Aires repertory: Maxim Gorky’s “The Philistines” and Leonid Andreyev’s “Seven Who Were Hanged” (performed by Schwartz); and Leo Tolstoy’s “The Living Corpse” and Mikhail Artsybashev’s “Sanin” (performed by Goldenberg). Each actor also mounted one work by a modern Scandinavian playwright: August Strindberg’s “The Father” (Goldenberg) and Henrik Ibsen’s “Ghosts” (Schwartz). Goldenberg launched his season with a signature vehicle, Harry Kalmanowitz’s melodrama about a Jewish musician and composer, “In a Romanian Tavern.”²⁹

Stella Adler co-starred with Goldenberg at the Teatro Excelsior in several productions. Two of these were Yiddish translations (or adaptations) of European plays. The first of these was the adults-only, gender-bending “Yes a Man; Not a Man,” supposedly translated from French, with Goldenberg playing a character of ambiguous sexuality, a *tumtum* who is physically incapable of consummating his marriage to his former secretary (played by Adler).³⁰ The second translated play, “Trilby” (adapted by Mark Schweid from the novel by George du Maurier³¹), saw Goldenberg in the role of the hypnotic seducer Svengali, opposite Adler’s Trilby. Most of the other plays in which she co-starred with Goldenberg were *makheraykes*, hackneyed melodramas. Adler struck the critics as a new type of actress on the Buenos Aires Yiddish stage: young, tall, svelte,

²⁸ Nechemias Zucker [Nekhemye Tsuker], *Fir doyres idish teater: di lebns-geshikhte fun Zina Rapel* (Buenos Aires: Eygener farlag, 1944), 430.

²⁹ *Mundo Israelita*’s verdict on “In a Romanian Tavern” can be summarized by quoting the first sentence of its two-column review: “It is not always the case that a melodrama is a bad drama.” The newspaper considered Goldenberg’s debut to be a “great success,” not least because he had stimulated the Excelsior troupe’s “artistic ambition.” See “Teatros y conciertos: Fue aclamado Goldenberg en el Teatro Excelsior,” in *Mundo Israelita*, June 21, 1930.

³⁰ The play was attributed to a pseudonymous French (or possibly Belgian) author, one Dr. Charandai (as the name was spelled in Spanish-language advertisements in *Mundo Israelita*); “Yes a Man; Not a Man” was adapted by the actor and translator Rubin Fridman, then living in Antwerp, Belgium. Goldenberg first put on this play in New York in 1927 and it became one of the roles that he performed regularly. See Zachary Baker, “‘A Piquant Curiosity’: The Gender-Bending Drama *Yo a man, nit a man*,” Digital Yiddish Theatre Project, June 29, 2019 (<https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/a-piquant-curiosity-the-gender-bending-drama-yo-a-man-nit-a-man/>; accessed July 10, 2019).

³¹ Zachary M. Baker (with the assistance of Bonnie Sohn), *The Lawrence Marwick Collection of Copyrighted Yiddish Plays at the Library of Congress: An Annotated Bibliography* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 2004), entry no. 976. The bibliography is accessible online at: <https://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/marwick/marwickbibliography.pdf> (accessed August 1, 2019).

elegant, and “aristocratic” – more like a leading lady from Hollywood than a typically Yiddish “type.” *Mundo Israelita* praised her as “the feminine figure of greatest artistic significance” to visit Buenos Aires in recent years. She was sometimes criticized, however, for her delivery in English-inflected Yiddish.³²

Schwartz staged six plays adapted from works by four prominent Yiddish literary authors: Sholem Aleichem (“Tevye” and “Hard to Be a Jew”), Sholem Asch (“Kidush ha-shem” and “God of Vengeance”), Peretz Hirschbein (“The Smith’s Daughters”), and Yonah Rosenfeld (“Competitors”). Five of these were dramas and one was a comedy; all were staples of Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theatre. In addition, he mounted Abraham Goldfaden’s comic operetta, “The Two Kuni Lemls,” which had been memorably revived at the Yiddish Art Theatre. Most of these plays had been produced in Argentina previously, but Schwartz’s interpretations of the roles of Tevye, David Shapiro (in “Hard to be a Jew”), and Yankev Shapshovitsh (in “God of Vengeance”) elicited especially glowing praise from the critics.³³

As noted, Yiddish plays by Latin American authors were few enough to begin with; they were produced infrequently, usually as special performances – and they were almost never put on by star actors visiting from abroad. Toward the end of his run, however, Goldenberg premiered the play “Zisye Goy,” by the Argentine-born Yiddish author Samuel Glasserman (Shmuel Glazerman; 1898-1952). Its plot is prototypically melodramatic: Zisye is a thoroughly “creolized” (*akriozhirter*) “Jewish gaucho” in an agricultural colony on the Pampas. He marries off his daughter to a city slicker who promptly cheats on his bride and swindles his father-in-law out of his property. The familiar Argentine setting and the dialogue – sprinkled with Spanish and Spanish-inflected Yiddish – made this the hit play of Goldenberg’s tour.

Although “Zisye Goy” saw just four performances under Goldenberg’s direction, the Excelsior troupe (minus Goldenberg) took it on tour once the regular season ended, whereupon it joined the Argentine Yiddish repertory.³⁴ As Rollansky commented a decade later, the initial run of “Zisye Goy” was an extraordinary circumstance for the Yiddish theater in Argentina. By treating this play by an Argentine Yiddish author as

³² See “Nekhten iz ongekumen di shoyspilerin Stela Adler: a kurtser shmues mit der bakanter yunger artistin,” in *Di Idishe tsaytung*, July 9, 1930; “Teatro, música, espectáculos: El miércoles tendrá su función de honor la Sra. Stella Adler,” in *Mundo Israelita*, August 30, 1930.

³³ Still, in Rollansky’s estimation it was Rudolf Zaslavsky’s 1925 performance as Tevye that stood out as the “greatest artistic triumph” for that role (not Schwartz’s 1930 performance) – and indeed for the Yiddish theater of Buenos Aires. See Rollansky, “Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 400.

³⁴ See: “‘Zisye Goy’, Shmuel Glazerman’s kreftige drame fun idishen leben in Argentine, oyfgeföhrt durkh Samuel Goldenburg, in Teater ‘Ekselsyor’: a mitraysende forshtelung, vos der oylem hot oyfgenumen oysergevehnlakh varim,” in *Di Idishe tsaytung*, October 19, 1930; “Teatros y conciertos: Diose a conocer en el Excelsior una pieza de un autor judío argentino: el drama ‘Sisie goy’, de Samuel Glaserman, obtuvo un señalado éxito,” in *Mundo Israelita*, October 25, 1930. “Zisye Goy” is included in a volume of Samuel Glasserman’s plays (most of them single-act dramas), *Teater: dramatishe shriftn funm idishn lebn in Argentine* (Buenos Aires: Cultura, 1932). A list of cast members who performed at the October 1930 premiere (including Goldenberg) is included in that publication. Regarding the play’s tour following its premiere, see “Mit Glazerman’s ‘Zisye Goy’ fohrt aroys onhoyb detsember di gantse trupe fun Teater Ekselsyor,” in *Di Idishe tsaytung*, November 4, 1930. The troupe’s post-season tour was headed by its leading actress, Sarah Sylvia, and took in Montevideo, Uruguay, along with the Argentine provinces; see “Di gantse trupe fun ‘Ekselsyor’ vet shpilen in Montevideo: dem 22-ten un 23-ten in ‘Viktoria Hol,’ oyffhrendig ‘Zisye Goy,’” in *Di Idishe tsaytung*, November 13, 1930. On Glasserman and his plays, see Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires*, 9, 48.

part of his regular repertory (and not as a one-off), Goldenberg had earned “a great deal of merit [*skhus-oves*].” This compensated to some degree for the succession of standard-fare melodramas that he had put on during the rest of the season.³⁵

Debates and Polemics: The Yiddish Critics of Buenos Aires

The Buenos Aires of 1930 hosted a thriving Jewish press, which catered to a variety of personal tastes and ideological viewpoints. During that theater season the Yiddish newspapers produced a constant flow of reviews of Yiddish plays, background articles about the guest stars, articles about matinée benefits for charitable causes, banquets honoring the guests, and performances and concerts that took place elsewhere in Buenos Aires. “It turned into heaven and earth and theater in Buenos Aires,” Botoshansky wrote. “Cafés, coffee bars, workers’ clubs, cooperatives, banks – everywhere, the conversation was about theater. There was a kind of theater psychosis...”³⁶

The main critics were figures who made major contributions to Argentine, Latin American, and even global Yiddish (and Jewish) culture. The Polish-born Rollansky (1902-1995), who wrote for *Di Idishe tsaytung*, was a cultural critic, editor, and educator who later directed the Argentine branch of the YIVO Institute (known there as IWO), where he published the 100-volume book series *Musterverk fun der yidisher literatur* (*Masterworks of Yiddish Literature*). Rollansky tended to take a pragmatic view of the box-office imperatives that guided the impresarios and the stars in their artistic choices.³⁷

Di Prese had two journalists who regularly wrote about the theater: Botoshansky (1895-1964), who reviewed the plays’ performances, and Dr. L. (Pinkhos-Elazar) Zhitnitsky (1894-1967), who contributed think pieces and background articles on the theater.³⁸ Originally from Bessarabia, Botoshansky was a Yiddish actor, director, and playwright who during the course of his long career unleashed a veritable Niagara of prose.³⁹ He possessed a phenomenal memory and was quick to engage in polemics, even

³⁵ Rollansky, “Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 404. Though it was reviewed in other publications, the production of “Zisye Goy” passed unmentioned in *Di Prese* until the Excelsior troupe ran the ad for their tour following the end of the 1930 theater season – by which time Goldenberg had departed. In October 1931, Hymie Jacobson and Miriam Kressyn, visiting from New York, put on another play by Glasserman, the musical revue “S’feln khasonim in Buenos Ayres?” (“¿Faltan novios en Buenos Aires?”). However, unlike “Zisye Goy,” “S’feln khasonim” did not meet with enduring success on the Argentine Yiddish stage.

³⁶ Tsingetang [Jacobso Botoshansky], “Dos idische teater in 1930: iberzikht,” in *Di Prese*, January 1, 1931

³⁷ The writers A. L. [Arye-Leyb] Schussheim and José [Yosef] Mendelson also occasionally contributed theater-related articles to *Di Idishe tsaytung*. See: A. L. Schussheim, “Di mitshpiler,” in *Di Idishe tsaytung*, June 2, 1930; and Samuel Rollansky, “Star, shoyshpiler un retsenzent: un vu iz publikum? An entfer oyf A. L. Shusheym’s guzmes un nisht-rikhtige meynungen vegen ‘Di mitshpiler,’” in *Di Idishe tsaytung*, June 4, 1930.

³⁸ In addition, shortly after Goldenberg’s arrival in Argentina, *Di Prese* ran an in-depth profile of that actor, which Leib Malach sent from overseas. See: Leib Malach (L. Malekh), “Semuel Goldinburg,” in *Di Prese*, June 13, 1930. Malach’s appraisal of the actor, which was generally favorable, focused on his roles in European dramas, including “Jud Süß” and “Yo a man; nit a man.”

³⁹ Melech Ravitch, “Yankev Botoshanski,” in his *Mayn leksikon* (*My Lexicon*), vol. 4, book 1 (Tel-Aviv: I. L. Peretz Publishing House, 1980), 49-53.

invective, against his rivals. The less mercurial Zhitnitsky was born in a small town near Kiev and received a law degree in 1916 at Kiev University; after the Great War, he studied at the universities of Königsberg and Bonn, in Germany.

Salomón Resnick (1895-1946), who probably wrote the unsigned theater reviews in the weekly, Spanish-language *Mundo Israelita*, came to Argentina from Ukraine at the age of seven and wrote mostly in Spanish, though occasionally also in Yiddish (he was an early editor of *Di Prese*). Resnick was one of the first popularizers of Yiddish literature in Spanish translation, editing and publishing a number of important anthologies and works by individual Yiddish authors, including Peretz and Asch. His theater reviews were dismissive of the entire repertory, treating it purely as escapist entertainment. “The Yiddish theater can never descend beneath a level lower than that of the present,” he asserted.

As such, it is condemned to a prolonged and exhausting stagnation. The aforementioned considerations are those that have determined us not to dwell upon the repertory, with some exceptions, because in our judgment it is beneath any criticism. Rather, we are devoting our attentions to the productions and the players. That is the only thing that deserves to be taken into account, and the public does not go to the theater looking for anything else.

Accordingly, Resnick was gracious toward the Teatro Excelsior’s actors, guest stars, and (especially) its music director, Jacobo Ficher.⁴⁰

Bans and Boycotts: The Power of Advertising

Rollansky, in *Di Idische tsaytung*, saluted Schwartz’s arrival and reviewed his plays favorably, although occasionally critiquing the supporting casts for their lack of polish. By contrast, the editors of *Di Prese* and its critics blanketed the newspaper’s pages with panegyrics to Schwartz, lengthy reviews of his performances, reports on his comings-and-goings, and articles written by Schwartz himself. The paper’s favoritism precipitated a rupture between *Di Prese* and Nuguer’s Excelsior enterprise. The breach would have been obvious to *Di Prese*’s readers, because from mid-July 1930 until the end of Goldenberg’s run in late October the newspaper did not run a single review of his productions and the Teatro Excelsior pulled all of its ads from the paper. The actor’s name virtually disappeared from its pages.⁴¹ The attendant lack of publicity cast something of a cloud over the remainder of Goldenberg’s run; it also deprived *Di Prese* of a dependable revenue stream.

M. N. Shpringberg, the editor of the weekly magazine *Penemer un penemlakh*, contended that paid advertising was at the root of the dispute between *Di Prese* and the Teatro Excelsior. “Our newspapers work hand in hand with the theatrical enterprises, not distinguishing one from the other... The key motive is the price of the advertisement [*avise* in Argentine Yiddish, from Spanish *aviso*],” he wrote. Shpringberg claimed, moreover, that advertising revenue from the theatrical enterprises exerted undue sway over the newspapers’ reviews of visiting actors and their productions. Through its partiality, *Di Prese* had “taken sides in the family [quarrel] and, having severed relations with the second theater [the Excelsior], where Goldenberg was performing – also over

⁴⁰ “Teatros y conciertos: Con éxito inició su actuación la compañía del Excelsior,” in *Mundo Israelita*, March 29, 1930.

⁴¹ A small number of charitable organizations that sponsored theater benefits ran ads in *Di Prese* for plays that Goldenberg produced during this period, but the Teatro Excelsior did not.

the price of advertisements – the newspaper did its utmost to ensure Schwartz’s success.”⁴² That Schwartz was aware of the sweetheart arrangements that the theater enterprises enjoyed with the local Jewish newspapers is evident from his acceptance of Y. L. Gruzman’s invitation to write for the weekly Yiddish magazine *Der shpigl*: “You take a humane attitude; you won’t destroy any worlds on account of an *avise*. I will remember the word *avise* from [my stay in] Buenos Aires – a short word, but one that means a lot.”⁴³

So, instead of reviewing Goldenberg and Adler’s productions at the Excelsior, *Di Prese*’s critics published dense analyses of Aleksandr Tairov’s theories of the modern theater and they covered the productions that Tairov’s Moscow Chamber Theater was putting on – *in Russian* – at the Teatro Odeón.⁴⁴ It is perhaps understandable that this leftist newspaper devoted its attentions to a visiting troupe from the U.S.S.R. and its celebrated director. Yet, one questions just how many of *Di Prese*’s readers were thereby motivated to attend the Moscow Chamber Theater’s performances.

Maurice Schwartz in Argentina: A Dissenting View

Early in Goldenberg’s tour, *Mundo Israelita* had introduced Goldenberg to its readers as follows:

Although Goldenberg’s preference is to devote himself to melodrama, thereby adapting himself to the exigencies of the repertory and the Jewish public, he also performs a variety of dramas of recognized artistic merit and universal fame. In the artistic terrain, Mr. Goldenberg’s extensive involvement with the theater of M[aurice] Schwartz – in which he performed roles of the utmost responsibility – also stands to his credit.⁴⁵

This may be the only favorable reference to Maurice Schwartz and the Yiddish Art Theatre to appear in the pages of *Mundo Israelita* throughout the 1930 season. For, in mirror-image contrast to *Di Prese*’s treatment of the two actors, the Spanish-language weekly boycotted Schwartz; it published precisely zero reviews of – or advertisements for – his productions. As with *Di Prese*, *avisos* evidently played a significant role in determining the Spanish-language newspaper’s coverage of the Yiddish theater.⁴⁶

⁴² M. N. Shpringberg, “Moris Shvarts’s durkhfal in B. Ayres,” in *Penemer un penemlakh*, no. 306 (September 1930).

⁴³ Maurice Schwartz, “Moris Shvarts vegn ‘Shpigl,’” in *Der Shpigl*, October 6, 1930.

⁴⁴ See, for example: “Forshteyer fun ‘Di Prese’ in a shmues mit Aleksander Tairov,” in *Di Prese*, July 20, 1930; L. Zhitnitsky, “Aleksandr Tairov un di filozofye fun teater: sakh-haklen un a pruv fun a klasifikatsye,” in *Di Prese*, September 5, 1930. Apart from articles about Schwartz and Tairov, *Di Prese*’s theater and cinema pages devoted considerable space to Hollywood’s stars and their (arguably) *shund*-laden movies. *Di Idische tsaytung* reported on only a few of Tairov’s productions, e.g.: “Tairov’s trupe kumt in di nohentste teg key Buenos Ayres,” in *Di Idische tsaytung*, July 8, 1930; Samuel Rollansky, “Aleksander Tairov, der gevagter teater boyer: tsum onkumen fun Tairov’s ‘Moskver kamer-teater’ keyn Buenos Ayres,” in *Di Idische tsaytung*, July 20, 1930. *Mundo Israelita* devoted a brief article to the Moscow Chamber Theater’s opening production of “The Storm,” by Aleksandr Ostrovsky, at the Teatro Odeón: “Teatros y conciertos: El Teatro Kamerny de Moscú fue acogido con calurosas ovaciones,” in *Mundo Israelita*, July 26, 1930.

⁴⁵ “Teatros y conciertos: Anunciase la próxima llegada de actor dramático S. Goldenberg,” in *Mundo Israelita*, May 31, 1930.

⁴⁶ The engineering firm Nuguer Hermanos – one conjectures that the impresario Isaac Nuguer was related to the firm’s partners – regularly advertised in *Mundo Israelita*; some of its ads appeared in the

Mundo Israelita commented on Schwartz's tour in only two articles published during and shortly after his 1930 stay in Argentina. The first of these accused him of being a hypocrite and a *poseur* because, having placed so much weight on the importance of ensemble performance, he had abandoned the Yiddish Art Theatre and was visiting on his own as a star. (Before the season began, rumors swirled that Schwartz would bring along his entire New York company to Argentina.) Schwartz was saddled with a "mediocre troupe" in his Buenos Aires production of "Jud Süß" and even "an excellent actor like him [was] unable to rescue a production of irremediable inferiority to which it was condemned by the lack of rehearsals, the mediocrity of the other performers, and for everything else that [was] delivered through improvisation."⁴⁷

Mundo Israelita reprised the theme about six weeks after the end of Schwartz's tour, in a feature commentary titled "Wanderings of an Actor." The article characterized "art theater" as a marketing gimmick employed by the incompetent "businessman" Schwartz. "Each new season [in New York] was a new financial disaster, even though its artistic prestige remained unharmed." The commentary scorned Schwartz's recently concluded South American tour as an attempt to recoup "the money that he did not succeed in earning in the United States." (This was a not-unfair assessment of the chronic financial difficulties facing Schwartz and the Yiddish Art Theatre.⁴⁸) As for the Yiddish critics of Buenos Aires, "They sang hosannas to him and were inclined to die and kill for the religion of the Art Theater, which in Buenos Aires gleamed by its palpable absence." Ultimately, in *Mundo Israelita*'s judgment, Schwartz's first visit to Argentina amounted to little more than that of an "adventurer."⁴⁹

"The Goldenberg Phenomenon Must Be Combated"

At the end of October 1930, five days after Goldenberg's farewell performances, *Di Prese* finally ended its months-long silence regarding his season at the Excelsior. Zhitnitsky, writing under the pseudonym T. Beylin, reacted to a reader's question: "Should we combat the *shund* theater in general, or the persons in it?" He responded categorically: "The *shund* theater must be combated *per se*, along with the persons who are its advocates and instigators." When critics single out individuals who promote this kind of

newspaper's "Theater and Concerts" pages. *Mundo Israelita*'s coverage of Yiddish theater is discussed in Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires*, 49.

⁴⁷ "Teatros y conciertos: La actuación de Maurice Schwartz," in *Mundo Israelita*, June 28, 1930. By contrast, wrote *Mundo Israelita*, "Goldenberg, who is a complete actor, put all of his qualities and all of his enthusiasm at his disposal in his interpretation of 'Jud Süß,' producing an unforgettable artistic spectacle." See: "Teatros y conciertos: Constituyó un gran éxito la representación de 'El judío Süß' en el teatro Excelsior," in *Mundo Israelita*, July 5, 1930.

⁴⁸ Schwartz occasionally alluded to the financial challenges facing the Yiddish Art Theatre – and him personally, also – in a series of ten travelogues that he sent to the New York *Forverts* during his South American tour. These articles ran in that newspaper from June 28 to October 11, 1930. In a letter, the actor-impresario Leon Brest expressed the tour's central objective for Schwartz quite bluntly, "... I have a very good plan for you to make money. The chief purpose of your tour is to make money – and that will be an absolute, 100 percent certainty." Leon Brest to Maurice Schwartz, March 18, 1930.

⁴⁹ "Andanzas de un comediante," in *Mundo Israelita*, October 11, 1930. In 1933, Schwartz would indeed return to Buenos Aires, but this time he brought along several actors and supporting crew from the Yiddish Art Theatre. During that tour the company staged its greatest hit, "Yoshe Kalb," adapted from the novel by Israel Joshua Singer.

theater, they are “fighting against the *shund* theater system that is ravaging the accomplishments of our theater, which are meager enough.”

Zhitnitsky then named names: “And that is how our stance against the *shund* actor Goldenberg may also be understood – as a synonym for all that is bad in our theater.” Goldenberg, he conceded, was a “gifted and tremendously talented actor” who, however, “for many years went along the malign path of melodrama, operetta, and vulgarity.” Having momentarily redeemed himself by performing alongside Schwartz at the Yiddish Art Theatre in its New York production of “Jud Süß” in 1929, Goldenberg’s relapse into *shund* during his Buenos Aires tour amounted to an unpardonable artistic betrayal. Much more was expected from him:

Thus, it is clear that on the one hand we are dealing with a capable actor who could be a useful element for our pure theater. But instead, his inclinations have drawn him to the theatrically pathological, to the trashy, as expressed in the repertory that he exploits in the theater. And that requires every critic who values the theater as a basis of culture to combat the Goldenberg phenomenon [*dershaynung*] in the Yiddish theater.⁵⁰

Goldenberg’s traducing of artistic standards demanded the strongest possible condemnation: “The Goldenberg phenomenon in the Yiddish theater must be combated by the theater critic, by the mindful theater spectator, by every culturally aware person who grasps that the theater is the greatest basis of our culture... Our fight against the *shund* actor and the *shund* theater is forced upon us and is necessary.” Zhitnitsky insisted that there was nothing personal involved here, “for us, insofar as their personalities are concerned, the Goldenbergs are a trivial nothingness.”⁵¹

The *shund* label – so casually employed as an epithet – really needs to be interrogated. Everywhere, Yiddish authors, critics, and journalists objected to the formulaic nature of the prevalent repertory and deplored its evident appeal to plebeian tastes. Theater historian Nahma Sandrow has a different take, however. What others refer to as *shund*, she labels “Yiddish popular theater” – an entertainment medium *par excellence*. “*Shund* is the sort of art that most cultures and most people like best,” she argues. “It freely mixes everything: classical Yiddish songs, topical jokes, pilfered dialogue, irrelevant show tunes... *Shund* is so elastic a concept that people can disagree over whether a certain show is *shund* or not.”⁵² Indeed, [The Thomashefsky Project](#), to take one recent endeavor, placed Yiddish popular entertainment on a pedestal, showcasing its impact upon Broadway and situating the prolific Second Avenue

⁵⁰ T. Beylin [L. Zhitnitsky], “Teater un kino: notitsn un bamerkungen: nit keyn perzonen, nor sinonimen,” in *Di Prese*, October 31, 1930.

⁵¹ Zhitnitsky would offer a more positive appraisal of Goldenberg following the actor’s 1936 tour in Argentina. Goldenberg, “as always, devoted more attention to artistic performance than to the selection of repertory,” though on the latter front he merited praise for his productions of Dostoevsky’s “Crime and Punishment,” Andreyev’s “He Who Gets Slapped,” and especially Benjamin Resler’s “Shoes” – “which elicited lively discussions in all theatrical circles” and “was the Teatro Excelsior’s hit, both materially and morally.” Even in the plays from his “old” (i.e., melodramatic) repertory, “Samuel Goldenberg’s full artistic powers to form a theatrical personality are revealed.” See T. Beylin [L. Zhitnitsky], “Dos argentinish-idishe teater in 1936,” in *Di Prese*, January 1, 1937, 26.

⁵² Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 111-112.

tunesmith Joseph Rumshinsky alongside such famous composers as Gershwin, Copland, and Bernstein.⁵³

The Struggle against the *Tmeim* – and Prospects for a “Better” Yiddish Repertory

However, more was at stake in the Argentina of 1930 than mere questions of artistic taste. The public crusade against *shund* accompanied a feverish social and judicial campaign there and elsewhere in South America, to clamp down on the *tmeim* – the “impure” Jewish pimps and prostitutes. There was the perception that this element, through its loyal patronage of the Yiddish theater (and its visible presence there), exercised an outsized influence on the plays that got produced, especially operettas and melodramas from the *shund* repertory.

The controversy over the production of Leib Malach’s sensationalizing play “Ibergus” (“Overflow/Regeneration”), in 1926, had been a defining episode in the ongoing struggle against the *tmeim* in the Yiddish theaters of Argentina – and would still have been fresh in many theatergoers’ memories four years later. The plot of “Ibergus” (which is set in Brazil) revolves around the interactions between a prostitute, Reyzl, and a variety of character types in her underworld milieu (a madam, a former pimp, a wealthy john, etc.), and also outsiders seeking to extricate her from those surroundings.⁵⁴

Botoshansky’s “quasi-religious frenzy” over the play’s production, writes historian Victor A. Mirelman, led “*Di Presse* [to attack] the manager [Mide] and his theater for compromising with the dealers, while *Di Yiddishe Zeitung* defended the right of the manager to select the plays. The argument between both newspapers continued in a fiery manner for a few months and divided even the respectable community, which took sides on the issue.”⁵⁵ At the risk of oversimplifying matters, Botoshansky (in *Di Prese*) contended that sex trafficking was inextricably intertwined with the *shund* plays that were being produced; consequently, expulsion of the *tmeim* from the Yiddish theaters of Buenos Aires was a *precondition* for the elevation of the repertory. In turn, productions of “better” plays would reinforce community standards of decency among artists, producers, and audiences alike.

⁵³ The Thomashefsky Project (<http://www.thomashefsky.org>; accessed November 15, 2019) was spearheaded by Michael Tilson Thomas, the music director of the San Francisco Symphony and grandson of the Yiddish actors Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. The Project included performances at public concerts with several major symphony orchestras between 2005 and 2008.

⁵⁴ See: L. Malach [Malekh], *Ibergus: drame in fir aktn* (Buenos Aires, 1926). Background on the Buenos Aires production is included in the prologue by Botoshansky, its director. His prologue and excerpts from “Ibergus” are also included in the volume *Yiddish South of the Border: An Anthology of Latin American Writing*, edited by Alan Astro (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 89-98. (The play’s title is translated there as “Remolding.”) There is a complete translation of “Ibergus” into Spanish, by Nora Glickman and Rosalía Rosembuj, in *La trata de blancas* (Buenos Aires: Pardes, 1984). On its initial production, see C. Tova Markenson, “Jewish Immigrant Theatre and the Argentinean Avant Gardes: The Case of *Ibergus* in 1926 Buenos Aires,” *Modern Drama*, vol. 63, no. 4 (Winter 2020), 455-476. A comprehensive study of the *Ibergus* controversy remains a desideratum.

⁵⁵ Victor A. Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 216.

Whereas, Rollansky (in *Di Idische tsaytung*) argued that the campaign for the “better” repertory operated on a *parallel* track with the community’s fight against the traffickers. It reflected a generational conflict between “the very first Jews” of Buenos Aires – the *tmeim* – and the newer immigrants, with social and political ramifications that were *also* being played out at the theater. “In no Yiddish center in the world,” Rollansky later observed,

did such a societal struggle take place as in the Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires... In such an atmosphere of fear and upset it was also possible to put forth the theory, which was commonly accepted for two decades in Argentina, that with the expulsion of the traffickers and their “women” the theater will be placed on a higher cultural level and will become a literary and artistic theater.⁵⁶

To counter that argument, Rollansky adduced examples of highly artistic performances that took place during the heyday of the *tmeim*, such as Maurice Moscovich’s extended sojourn before World War I and Rudolf Zaslavsky’s “Tevye” in 1925. Whereas, he continued, one of the greatest box-office successes of the more recent period came after the sustained campaign against the *tmeim* was well underway, “with Nellie Casman’s ‘Little Cantor’ [‘Khazndl’], which was filled with vulgarity and where one of the most typical numbers was the couplet containing the requisite mimicry and gesticulations of ‘It’s Shaking’.”⁵⁷ Notwithstanding their vitriolic polemics over cause and effect, both Botoshansky and Rollansky clearly preferred a “better,” more literary repertory over the *shund* plays.

The definitive suppression of the Sociedad Zwi Migdal occurred in late September 1930, in the thick of the Teatro Excelsior’s season and three weeks after a right-wing military coup. This followed months of well-publicized raids on houses of ill repute, including the Migdal’s headquarters, during which 108 members of the organization were arrested. (Many others fled to neighboring countries.) The arrests marked the end of the Jewish procurers’ organized presence in Argentina.⁵⁸ This was a critical blow against their visibility on the “Jewish street” – and their influence on the city’s Yiddish theaters. Even so, by actor Pesach Burstein’s account, as of 1934 there was still some *sub rosa* activity going on in Buenos Aires between purveyors of the sex trade

⁵⁶ See Rollansky, “Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 397, 399.

⁵⁷ Rollansky, “Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 400-401. “Dos khazndl” enjoyed a run of 50 successive performances in 1929, which (as of 1931) “constitute[d] a record for the Jewish theater in Argentina.” See: “Teatros y conciertos: Nelly Casman hará una temporada en el Teatro Nuevo,” in *Mundo Israelita*, August 22, 1931. Indeed, Casman was still at it more than four decades later, when Nahma Sandrow caught one of her performances: “She vibrates all over, till even the absurd red flower sticking up on top of her head jiggles, too, and she looks down at her own chest with such childlike surprise and satisfaction that the audience roars with delight.” See Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 391-392, 403.

⁵⁸ Regarding the Jewish role in the prostitution traffic in Argentina, see: Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930*, 197-220; Robert Weisbrot, *The Jews of Argentina: From the Inquisition to Perón* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 59-66; Nora Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman* (New York, Garland, 2000); Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires*, 36-39; Mir Yarfitz, *Polacos, White Slaves, and Stille Chuppahs: Organized Prostitution and the Jews of Buenos Aires, 1890-1939* (Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 2012; accessible at: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bx304mn> [accessed March 29, 2019]); Mir Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

and some of the local Yiddish actors.⁵⁹ (Prostitution remained legal in Argentina until 1936.)

Thus, as Slavsky's and Skura's chronology of the Argentine Yiddish theater suggests, Goldenberg and Schwartz arrived in Buenos Aires at a flash point in the development of the Yiddish theater in Argentina. Their visits precisely coincided with the juridical dénouement of the intensive social conflict over the influence of the *tmeim* – the sex traffickers and prostitutes – within the Jewish community. The flurry of judicial activity directed against the Sociedad Zwi Migdal was accompanied by a constant drumbeat of press coverage which would have been impossible for the visiting actors to ignore. Not surprisingly, then, both chose to address the controversy by putting on plays that treated prostitution and the sex trade.

Schwartz staged Sholem Asch's notorious drama "God of Vengeance" in late June 1930 (three months before the suppression of the Migdal), again at the end of July, and once more in late August. "God of Vengeance," a literary play, portrays the ultimately unsuccessful attempts by a Warsaw brothel owner to protect his daughter from the family's enterprise and its underworld milieu. The play, which was part of the Yiddish Art Theatre's regular repertory, was also familiar to Argentine audiences.

Goldenberg, for his part, put on lurid melodramas involving prostitutes, including "In a Web of Sin," by William Siegel, and "The White Slave," by Isidor Zolotarefsky. Siegel's potboiler was a contemporary play; Zolotarefsky's shopworn play had its premiere fully two decades earlier. Both productions starred Stella Adler in the role of the victimized prostitute; moreover, "The White Slave" was the vehicle that was selected for her benefit performance shortly before her return to New York – where Adler then joined Schwartz [!] at the Yiddish Art Theatre for the Fall 1930 season.⁶⁰

The crackdown on the procurers' organized presence in Argentina helped to lay the groundwork for the subsequent, repeated tours by Schwartz, Jacob Ben-Ami, Joseph Buloff, and Luba Kadison, all of whom visited Argentina during the succeeding years. These apostles of the literary repertory encountered devoted audiences during their many visits to Argentina; their success also reflected the growing sophistication of Argentine Yiddish audiences. "The theatergoing public had expanded from the early viewers with their supposed ties to the Jewish underworld to encompass a much wider cross-section of Jewish immigrants in Buenos Aires, from the middle class to the recently arrived," Nouwen notes.⁶¹ The maturation of the Yiddish audiences of Buenos

⁵⁹ According to Burstein, prostitutes attended his performances on Friday evenings, when their businesses did not operate. "They would send baskets filled with flowers to me on stage, with invitations to meet at the Café Internacional or the Café Popular. Certain Yiddish actresses were even friendly with them.... I was shocked to learn how many people around me were 'silently' involved in that profession. An actor in my own troupe, brazenly, even wanted to broker an opportunity for me to earn some income on the side." This was in 1934, during his first tour in Argentina, when prostitution was still legal. See Pesach Burstein, "Patriotkes fun yidishn teatern" in his *Geshpilt a lebn (Life upon the Yiddish Stage)* (Tel-Aviv, 1980), 199, 201.

⁶⁰ Benefit performances took place toward the end of a guest star's run and guaranteed a certain percentage of the box-office income to that actor. At the Yiddish Art Theatre, Schwartz and Adler co-starred in a production of "The Witch of Castile," based on the novel by Sholem Asch. See: Ab[raham] Cahan, "Sholem-Ash's 'Di kishef makherin fun Kastilyen' in Shvarts's kunst teater," in *Forverts*, October 31, 1930.

⁶¹ Nouwen, *Oy, My Buenos Aires*, 49.

Aires thus proceeded in the immediate aftermath of the struggle over the *tmeim*, which had so gripped the Argentine Jewish community.

That said, operetta stars – including the young prima donna Miriam Kressyn, the charismatic Molly Picon, and the risqué Nelly Casman – and stars of melodrama *also* continued to pack the houses in Buenos Aires. For, as much as critics might inveigh against “guests, guests, guests,” without the stars the Yiddish theater was unable to flourish there.⁶² Nevertheless, both by positive and negative example, the stars helped to inspire local activists to pursue their own, non-commercial theatrical experiments, culminating in the enduring success of the independent, leftist *Idisher folks-teater* – Teatro IFT later in the decade.⁶³

The 1930 Yiddish theater season in Buenos Aires offered operettas, comedies, original Yiddish dramas, dramas from world literature, curiosities of dramatic literature, and melodramas – lots of melodramas, including one by an Argentine Yiddish author. If Maurice Schwartz stood for the best of the classic Yiddish literary repertory, then Samuel Goldenberg represented the most versatile and capable exemplar of the melodramatic repertory. The two actors personified the split personality of the Yiddish theater; in that single season, Buenos Aires provided an ideal laboratory for them to display their talents and their plays.

⁶² Rollansky, “Dos idische gedrukte vort un teater in Argentine,” 415.

⁶³ For background on the *Idisher folks-teater* – Teatro IFT, see: Karina Wainschenker, *Antecedentes, surgimiento y desarrollo del teatro IFT* (Buenos Aires: VII jornadas de Jóvenes Investigadores, Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Universidad de Buenos Aires, 2013; accessible online at: <https://www.aacademica.org/000-076/338> [accessed January 11, 2019]); Paula Ansaldo, “El teatro como escuela para adultos: un recorrido por la historia del IFT en su tránsito del ídish al español,” in Skura and Glocer, *Teatro ídish argentino*, 143-160.