

["Mogulesco" talk at Berkeley, Townsend Center for the Humanities, perhaps 2012]

You've been asked to take a look at a one-act musical I wrote, entitled "Mogulesco: A Tale of the Yiddish Theater." This project is an extension of a practice I've used since around 1975 to understand music in the culture of modernizing eastern European Jews around 100 years ago by going from research to performance.

I'll begin with the research side, which dates back to the mid-1970s when I was working at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in NY. The work began with the commercial, ethnic sheet-music industry that I talked about the other day, which took items from the Yiddish theater and other popular formats and put them into material form. But at the same time, Chana Mlotek, the doyenne of Yiddish music studies, pointed to a ring of over 100 archival boxes in the YIVO seminar room and asked me to tell them what they had acquired, since nobody had had time to look into them. This was the Perlmutter collection, with its geographically and temporally broad range of sources, paralleled by the Esther Rokhl Kaminska collection from the original Vilna YIVO. These fascinating treasure-troves mostly document the music of the Yiddish theater, still awaiting comprehensive study despite recent admirable volumes on the playwrights, scripts, and social history of this drama tradition.

The parts distributed to the orchestras that supported the melodramas and backed up the singers and comedians tell their own tales. Fortunately, troupes and musicians signed out these sets, which traveled far and wide in Yiddishland. Take, for example, one bundle of manuscript music for *Shulamis*, the warhorse of the Yiddish theater, copied out in 1903 in Odessa, it already arrived in Lodz the next year, was still in use in Kovno in 1939 and was signed out on August 12, 1940 in Vilna for what was probably the last pre-Holocaust staging of the show. And the parts are not actually in bad shape, considering that history. Another bundle, for a show called *Khanele*, is signed by Berenbaum in Leeds, England, Van Dyck, Antwerp, Herzfeld in Dresden, and Hoffman and Krakow, a cycle ending in 1903. Hoffman was the director of the Krakow Yiddish Theater and one of the prime sources for the scores in the Perlmutter collection, along with Gimpel in Lemberg.

In my short time here, I'll just focus on what these sets tell us about the actual performance practice. We find remarkably large scorings, with full complement of strings, winds, brass, and percussion. It's worth noting that clarinet predominates over oboe, not surprising given the instrument's prominence in the klezmer tradition. We learn that in eastern Europe, military musicians often signed, not always Jewish by name, for example Johann Kazcla" a private in the 56th foot regiment in Krakow. These types of names pop up more in Poland and Romania than elsewhere. Perhaps local military bands were hired for ethnic

entertainments, just as eastern European Jewish composers wrote material for city garrisons. In his 1944 autobiography, (another type of book about Jewish music), the prominent Yiddish popular song writer and theater director Joseph Rumshinsky mentions this type of early apprenticeship as important for his development. Perhaps the waltzes he wrote for czarist officers to twirl with their girlfriends and wives in a park near a bandshell in Dvinsk are lying in an archive deep in Russia. Yiddish performances were not always held in particularly Jewish venues, as indicated in a note saying "gespielt in Hotel Union." Marginalia also specifies that shows had well-delimited runs, as revealed in this annotation: "this opera was performed nine times, 14, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23 October and 9 11, 17 November, 1894. E Rivkin, Chicago Ill."

You might have noticed that I mention just sets of orchestral parts, not full conductors' scores. We learn from this either that music directors had their own scores for personal use or that they simply stitched together performances from, say, the violin part alone or perhaps a piano score also missing from the collections. We do know that music directors freely added interpolations, such as a notation to add "Janke Dudil in C Major" at a point in a play, or, elsewhere, "Ol' Man River." This sketches out a divide between the US and Europe, since those tunes would not have resonated in the Old World.

This performative flexibility exactly parallels the freedom found in the scripts for Yiddish plays, also in the Perlmutter and Kaminska archives, among others at YIVO. When I was working in the 1970s on staging a modern English performing version of an 1897 melodrama called "David's Violin," I found many variants in the collections, signed in to theaters ranging from Capetown to Cleveland. They disagreed about everything from the cast of characters to the musical numbers to the plotline. The scanty available music for that play, then, gives only a hint of what really went on at a performance. That these scattered and tempest-tossed sets of parts were not always in great shape to begin with emerges in Rumshinsky's autobiography. Speaking about the theater of Ester-Rokhl Kaminska, whose archive figures so prominently in YIVO's holdings. That these scattered and tempest-tossed sets of parts were not always in great shape to begin with emerges in Rumshinsky's autobiography. Speaking about the theater of Ester-Rokhl Kaminska, whose archive figures so prominently in YIVO's holdings, Rumshinsky says "Madame Kaminska...gave me some music from the opera *Shulamis*. It was on torn scraps of paper with stains and erasures. I found it very upsetting."

When I was researching the music for the book "Tenement Songs," I realized that I could only understand how popular theater worked if I recreated it. So in 1976 I put on a 4-act Yiddish melodrama, "David's Violin," discussed in the book, in a new English translation by my friend, the English poet Tony Connor who concocted a kind of wacky vernacular that is some ways mirrors the *daytshmerish* of stage Yiddish at the time. I looked into the available versions of the play at YIVO. I found many variants in the collections, signed in to theaters

ranging from Capetown to Cleveland. They disagreed about everything from the cast of characters to the musical numbers to the plotline. The scanty available music for that play, then, gives only a hint of what really went on at a performance.

It was not obvious that one would put on “David’s Violin” at Wesleyan University, a New England college that had just shifted into multiculturalism and multigender access, and where I was viewed as a specialist in the folk music of Afghanistan, my dissertation topic. The point was to deepen my research by modestly reproducing the experience the public spaces of the early Yiddish theater. Just as people on campus recognized the students and faculty that sang, sometimes amateurishly, acted and sometimes over-acted, and cracked jokes, they were to some extent replicating the original shows. The actors who mesmerized the Lower East Side audiences and sang the songs I was studying lived among their audience, were on view in the community on a daily basis, and were the subject of gossip and very lively fan behavior, totally unlike today’s distanced celebrity culture. In this sense, Yiddish theater is just another manifestation of a worldwide entertainment form we call “popular theater.” It combines music, comedy, and melodrama in a time-tested system of known in India, Indonesia, Sicily, and many other world genres, and is in Shakespeare’s play.

But for the industrial immigrant society of New York 100 years ago, there was more. A significant percentage of the audience were working girls, who carried over their enthusiasm for this entertainment to the domestic sphere. They would play the songs they had heard, and then bought, in sheet music form, on pianos paid for on the installment plan. Their audience was the family and probably a boyfriend. This was a kind of upward mobility move that typified the experience of all immigrants and rural populations who became urbanized in America in the late 19th century.

Back at Wesleyan, I followed up “David’s Violin” with two more small-scale productions, one of them including the amazing 1895 vaudeville playlet “Among the Indians” about two Jewish peddlers in the territories. [describe] Then I paused for quite a while until I dusted off “Mogulesco” in 2011. It was written in the mid-1980s, with the help of my old friend the composer Louis Weingarden, and I finally produced it as a class project for a new course called “Yiddish Cultural Expression,” which I’m doing again this semester. It covers folksong, klezmer, holocaust song, literature, and theater, and engages the students in performance as well as reading and responding. At our show, people from the campus and community told me they were both entertained and educated. My friend and student, Hankus Netsky, who has seen “Mogulesco” and has written several of his own more commercial Yiddish material-based shows, remarked that “Mogulesco” is a bit didactic in so blatantly setting up the argument between Goldfadn and Mogulesco. I guess I agree, since the point of the show

is to present people today with historical issues. It's my way of bridging the gap between research and performance in the campus setting.

I'll just mention a couple of points about the class experience, since I observed the results both in the Wesleyan production of 2011 and one at Tufts just last December. I tried to build in prominent features of popular theater features – informality, a combination of humor, music and a bit of plot thru dynamic character roles. Still, the genre is subject to local variation. As it happens, in both campus productions, a woman student was cast as the redoubtable, macho editor Abe Cahan. At Wesleyan, we disguised her as a man, but at Tufts, they kept her gender and changed the character's name from Abe to Abbie, a flagrant anachronism for 1914, but acceptable to the audience. The African-American and Asian-American singers at Tufts also seemed another version of localization. At Wesleyan, although we had minimal costumes that vaguely suggested a rehearsal in Romania in 1880, one student insisted on wearing a party dress of today, and it really stands out in the clips as another type of anachronism. Still, it might be one that suits the old Yiddish theater's relaxed approach to historical setting, dating back to the purimshpil tradition of substituting czarist officials for pharaoh's henchmen, for example.

Let me play you the music clips, since you haven't heard the sound of the piece, and then we can talk over the show and anything else you'd like to bring up

- Clip 1: Shmendrik dance and solo song
- Clip 2: Shmendrik ending
- Clip 3: Pilgrims' chorus
- Clip 4: Shulamis lost
- Clip 5: Rozhinkes
- Clip 6: Duet/waltz
- Clip 7: Dance
- Clip 8: Czar/Chaplin

By way of conclusion, let me say that there is an impressive new critical edition of Goldfaden's canonical *Shulamis* in the works.... etc.