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Jewish Theatres

Edited by Piero Capelli

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ZEHAVIT STERN*

The Archive, the Repertoire, and Jewish Theatre: Zygmunt Turkow Performs a National Dramatic Heritage

Abstract

How can one construct a dignified theatrical heritage in a culture with no dramatic canon, on-going theatrical institution or government support? Is it possible to create modernist theatre in a social environment eager for cheap entertainment? In this article I strive to address these questions through a close look at two multi-layered performances staged at the Warsaw *Tsentral Teater* (Central Theatre) in the 1923-1924 season: *Serkele* and *Der priziv* (*The Military Conscription*). Directed by Zygmunt Turkow and performed by a young ensemble that was about to evolve in the following year into the VYKT theatre (Warsaw Yiddish Art Theatre), these experimental shows re-claimed folk performance (and especially the *purim-shpil*) alongside nineteenth century Yiddish closet drama (written by Shloyme Ettinger and Sholem Yankev Abramovitch [Mendele Moykher-Sforim]). They thus drew on both the popular “repertoire” and the more prestigious “archive” of Yiddish theatre – to use Diana Taylor’s terms – enlisting the two opposite poles of her influential dichotomy for the sake of one common endeavour: to invigorate and elevate modern Jewish theatre. The theatrical events discussed in this paper, I argue, complicate and challenge Taylor’s theory and the common binaries on which she draws, such as “The West” vs. the “subaltern” or the colonizer vs. the colonized. Ultimately, Turkow’s efforts to enhance the viewers’ aesthetic sensibility and historical awareness shed light on the unique path of modern Yiddish culture and the stateless Jewish nationalism; its quest for a usable past and its heroic struggle to promote – or perhaps fabricate? – notions of cultural continuity.

KEYWORDS: Yiddish theatre, theatre, modernism, performance, Jewish nationalism, heritage, folklore, purim-shpil

Introduction: The Interwar Heritage Revolution

It was in 1896 that the fifteen-year-old Noyekh Pryłucki watched a *purim-shpil* (a skit traditionally performed on the holiday of Purim) for the very first time. He must have been truly impressed, for he immediately transcribed the sketch in his notebook (Weiser 2011, 37). Viewing, admiring and documenting are all fundamentals of ethnographic fieldwork, and Pryłucki, who started collecting and translating Yiddish proverbs at the age of seven,

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indeed became a folklorist, historian, journalist, and theatre critic, as well as a political leader and a Sejm member (Weiser 2011, 32-5). In 1899, three years after the aforementioned 'ethnographic' experience, the young Pryłucki produced a performance based on his transcription of that *purim-shpil*. Later on, upon publishing his first collection of Yiddish folklore (*Yidishe folkslider*), he encouraged his readers to collect and send him *purim-shpiln* (plural of *purim-shpil*) alongside songs, folktales, and proverbs (Pryłucki 1911), and in the following year published the first annotated collection of *purim-shpiln* ever printed in Yiddish (Pryłucki 1912). Pryłucki's youthful encounter with the traditional *purim-shpil* thus marks the onset of his on-going fascination with the crude performance. Many other Yiddish scholars, artists and cultural activists, followed in his footsteps, including Yitskhok (Ignacy) Schiper (1923), Yankev Shatzky (1935) and Itzik Manger (1936).¹

Pryłucki was by no means the first to document a *purim-shpil* performance. As early as 1716, Johann Schudt, a German scholar of Jewish folklore, collected, translated and published *purim-shpil* plays, that served to testify to an alleged Jewish inferiority (Schudt 1716, 4.309-10). In the realm of Jewish culture, Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (better known as Mendele Moykher Sforim) preceded Pryłucki's ethnographic endeavour in more than a decade by including a *purim-shpil* scene in his 1884 play *Der Priziv* (*The Military Conscription*) (Abramovitsh 1884). While sharing certain elements with Schudt's folkloristic perspective, the attitude of Abramovitsh and Pryłucki with regard to the *purim-shpil* tradition was essentially different. Born more than a half a century apart, these two prominent figures of Eastern European Jewish culture served as pioneers of a wave of fascination with the *purim-shpil*, a movement of re-discovery and re-imagination that began – like Jewish nationalism and in direct contact with it – in the 1880s, and culminated in the interwar era, when it ripened into a full-blown heritage revolution.

In Pryłucki's private collection, in a printed anthology of Jewish folklore or as a folkloristic vignette woven into a play – in all of these settings the *purim-shpil* had been documented, catalogued, 'preserved', imitated, and staged. The end of the nineteenth century thus signifies the beginning of the complex process, charged politically as well as aesthetically, by which the popular and ephemeral *purim-shpil* performance turned into a historical artefact and a source of national pride. In my forthcoming book, titled *The Birth of Theatre from the Spirit of Folk Performance: Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Invention of a National Dramatic Heritage* I examine this process and seek to understand when, how, and why artists and scholars began to document, re-imagine and re-enact the *purim-shpil*, formerly considered a low and even embarrassing form of entertainment. These various practices

¹ On the re-discovery of the *purim-shpil* in interwar Yiddish culture see Stern 2011.

of ‘reviving’ the folkish, humoristic, and often vulgar performance of the *purim-shpiler*, were all used, I argue, for the sake of the most solemn endeavour of constructing a national heritage. In the lack of a nation state, this enterprise was felt to be extremely urgent.

In this article I will focus on one particular case, exemplifying the process by which the repertoire becomes the archive, and the ugly *purim-shpil* duckling becomes the beautiful heritage swan; this example being Zygmunt Turkow’s 1923 production of Abramovitsh’s *Der priziv*, produced in the Warsaw *Tsentrāl teater* (Central Theatre), a short-lived theatre company that he founded together with his wife Ida Kaminska, and that would soon transform into the VYKT (*Varshever Yidisher Kunst Teater*), the Jewish Art Theatre of Warsaw. The show of Turkow’s *Der Priziv* aspired to enliven modern Yiddish theatre with folkish repertoire, namely the *purim-shpil*, but, somewhat paradoxically, resorted for that purpose to the work of Jewish authors and historians who re-discovered and re-evaluated the *purim-shpil*. I will examine *Tsentrāl teater*’s *Der Priziv* in conjunction with another show Turkow directed only a few months earlier, a production of Shloyme Ettinger’s *maskilic* drama *Serkele* (written in the years 1825-1830, published in 1861), a theatrical event which took, at least seemingly, the opposite direction, and sought to bring a sense of grandness and historical legacy into the low, wild and carnivalesque popular Yiddish theatre.

To help locate these multi-layered performances within a larger conceptual framework, I will engage in a dialogue with Diana Taylor’s influential dichotomy of “the archive” and “the repertoire”. While Taylor’s binary serves as a useful point of entry for my investigation, Turkow’s endeavours, as I will try to show, challenge Taylor’s model, expose its limitations and the underlying assumptions on which it is based. Taylor’s influential study *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) explores a wide range of dramatic practices in the Americas, focusing on what she designates as encounters between the “repertoire” and the “archive”; the repertoire being a performance which serves as a socio-cultural ceremony – by nature dynamic, ephemeral, embodied, and time- and place-specific – and the archive would be the abode of supposedly objective and durable documents. Taylor lucidly presents a vast array of case studies and unveils the ambivalent and dynamic relation between the two poles of the archive and the repertoire. Two particularly telling examples are those of missionaries documenting a native culture while taking part in its destruction, and the 1992 “savage performance” (performed by Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco), in which two supposedly native Americans were displayed in a cage placed in the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History. Presented in a suggestive and nuanced manner, Taylor’s model is nonetheless based on the basic dichotomy of “us”, the documenting subjects, vs. “they”, the documented objects, a binary which adheres to the

more general opposition between the colonialist West and its Other. While “the archive” is identified with Western culture, supposedly speaking on behalf of the objective perspective of eternity, sanctifying documentation and often using it to control and exploit, “the repertoire” is considered to stand on the side of native consciousness, celebrating and even sanctifying temporal, local performance, considered a legitimate means for the formation of continuity and cultural memory. Like many historians, folklorists, and ethnographers, Taylor too is critical of what she considers to be the Western project of solidifying, documenting, archiving, and cataloguing live traditions, especially, of course, when it involves delegitimizing and even demolishing other ways of forming cultural memory.

The encounter between Jewish folk performance and the modern Yiddish artists who re-discovered, documented, and “revived” it suggests a transformation similar to the one described by Taylor, and criticized or parodied by some of the contemporary performance artists she examines: from the live, folkish, partly improvised performance to forms of conservation and exhibition. In this sense, the re-discovery of the traditional *Purim* performance (that is instances such as the *purim-shpil* embedded in Abramovitch’s *Der priziv*, or the ones transcribed in Prylucki’s folkloristic anthologies) may serve as yet another example of the dynamic relations between the repertoire and the archive, only in a different context: that of the Eastern European Jewish culture.

Notwithstanding the significant similarities between Taylor’s case studies and those analysed in this article, a closer look reveals noteworthy differences. The encounters between the repertoire and the archive in the realm of Eastern European Jewish culture is of a different sort than those described by Taylor or by Homi Bhaba, who famously coined the concepts of “mimicry” and “hybridity” to portray the complex relations between the colonizer and the colonized subject. In Eastern European Jewish culture, the distance between “we” who document and “they” who were being documented is significantly shorter than the one between the colonizer and the colonized, or between the Western and what is known in Postcolonial theory as “the subaltern”. First, in the Eastern European Jewish context “the folk” and the cultural activists who documented, archived, re-imagined, and reconstructed its “repertoire” (including the *purim-shpil*) belong to the very same ethnic group. In this sense, a closer parallel to the Eastern European Jewish case would be Russian culture, in which the “Other” from the perspective of the Russian “civilized” person (often referred to as “intelligent”) is not the colonized subject, but rather the Russian peasant, the *muzhik*. Yet even the Russian case differs considerably from the Jewish one. In Eastern European Jewish culture “the folk” and its leaders, writers, and archivists often belonged to the same socio-economic stratum, or at least originated in it. With

no aristocracy, Eastern European Jewish communities were generally less stratified than other European societies, and more open to social mobility – through learning or through financial gain (or loss). Thus, the gulf between Tolstoy and Gogol on the one hand and the *muzhik* on the other is far greater than whatever separates S. An-sky, Hayim Nahman Bialik, Sholem Aleichem, Mark Chagall, Al Lissitzky, and other high-brow Eastern European Jewish artists from the common people of the *shtetl*. Like their fellow “Jews of the whole year” (*yidn fun a gants yor*), as they are called in Yiddish, the modern and modernist artists and cultural activists of Eastern European Jewish culture were typically born and raised in Yiddish, in small towns of the Jewish Pale of Settlement, quite often also in poor families, with little or no education beyond traditional Jewish learning. The culture of the *shtetl*, including its most folkish and crude expressions, was theirs just as much as it belonged to ‘the masses’. Those who created the modern Jewish “archive”, to use Taylor’s terms, were therefore much closer to the “repertoire” they documented, re-imagined, and appropriated than the “archivists” Taylor discusses, or those who took part in the Russian nineteenth century wave of fascination with Slavic or Russian folklore (Figs 2002, 41-42, 111-114, 173-176, 199-203). The unique case of Eastern European Jewish culture thus calls for further consideration. What happens when the documented “Others” are to a large extent also the documenting “We”? How does this proximity between the repertoire and the archive manifests itself in the realm of Jewish theatre? What should we make of a ‘primitive’ performance, such as the *purim-shpil*, that is not quite ‘exotic’ but is rather, for better or worse, associated with “us”, the historians, cultural activists, theatre critics, directors, actors and audience? And finally, what are the ramifications of an encounter between the repertoire and the archive that is intimate, multi-directional, ambivalent, and even conflicted? In what follows I will seek to address these questions by exploring the rich and suggestive examples of the two aforementioned productions: *Serkele* and *Der priziv*. Ultimately, I argue, Turkow’s attempts at bringing together “the archive” and “the repertoire” – be it by means of the nineteenth century closet drama or the folksy *purim-shpil* – shed light on the unique nature of modern Jewish nationalism, and the special path taken by Yiddish culture in what regards the weighty tasks of nation building and cultural rejuvenation.

The Theatrical Event as A Historic Site: Serkele on Stage

On Monday, 24 September 1923, the eve of *Succos* (the Jewish holiday of Tabernacles), a small ad was published in the Polish Yiddish language daily newspaper *Der moment*, calling on audiences to attend a performance of the

play *Serkele* with the renowned actress Ester-Rokhl Kaminska. In hope of filling up the modestly sized hall during the premiere and throughout the holidays of *Succos*, the ad called audiences to experience: “A festive production celebrating Yiddish Theatre’s Jubilee”. Anniversary celebrations were much loved within the Yiddish-speaking world, and especially in the realm of theatre, and an actress’ or a playwright’s birthday or *yortsayt* (anniversary of one’s death) were often commemorated. However, Yiddish theatre was, and still is, widely considered to have begun in 1876, the year Goldfajn first appeared on Shimen Mark’s *Green Tree* in Iași, Romania, and the year in which he started organizing his professional theatre. Yiddish theatre’s jubilee was thus to be celebrated only in 1926. Why, then, did *Tsentral Teater’s* advertisement cut out three whole years from Yiddish theatre’s chronology? The answer has probably to do with a certain historical urge, or a “will to heritage”, accompanied by a sense of urgency, that, as we shall see, was not only noticed in the ad’s subtitle but was also a salient element of the production as a whole.

The desire to crown the production of *Serkele* a historical event is notable also in preview articles published in both *Der moment* (*The Moment*) and in *Haynt* (*Today*), the two popular Yiddish daily newspapers, which pronounced enthusiastically the premiere to be held the next day. Under the title *A Holiday* (*a yontev*) Aren Aynhorn writes in *Haynt*: “Tomorrow is a holiday for Jewish theatre, and not only for the theatre, but for our young culture at large. The best way to tell that a national culture has some standing, that it blooms and grows, is when it stops living by the day and starts considering itself from a historical perspective” (Aynhorn 1923, 5). In *Der moment* Yoysef Khayim Heftman describes the production as “festive” and praises the theatre for putting on a play written a century ago, rather than behaving “like others in our ultra-modern times”, who strive to adopt the latest trends (Heftman 1923, 2). Heftman attaches another symbolic number to the play, declared a century old, and once again the anniversary is somewhat rushed, as the play was probably written between 1825-1830, and published only in 1861. Considering Heftman’s declaration we must keep in mind that the very idea of a hundred-year-old Yiddish play was regarded surprising, even bizarre. In the realm of Yiddish culture, a century-old play would be a true ‘pre-historic’ dinosaur, preceding not only the birth of Yiddish theatre, largely accepted to be 1876, but also the rise of modern Yiddish literature in the 1860s with the works of Abramovitsh, Yoyel Yitskhok Linetsky and Ayzek-Meyer Dik. The ads and previews take it for granted that only a few people were aware of the play so far, yet believe that this gap could soon be closed, and the play would become acclaimed – through educated newspapers articles and, of course, through the performance itself. By getting to know *Serkele* audiences, they predict, will gain “a historical perspective”, learn about the Jewish theatrical

tradition and strengthen their national awareness. This wishful attitude was expressed by journalists as well as by Turkow himself, who viewed the establishment of a historical awareness in the realm of theatre as “a question of national prestige and artistic necessity”, as he writes years later in his memoir (Turkow 1950, 137). Moreover, judging from the ads and the previews, the play was regarded a historic documentation of Jewish life of the preceding century, “the life of our grandmothers and grandfathers”, as Heftman writes, their cloths, customs and language. Little did it matter to him that *Serkele* was a didactic comedy, bordering on caricature, a combination of Moliere’s *Tartuffe* and Lessing’s bourgeois dramas, a satire portraying religious people as debased hypocrites and the *maskilim* as pure and holy. Heftman also mentions a previous production by the students of the Rabbinical Academy in Zhitomir in 1862, a pioneering adaptation embedded in cultural memory thanks to the fact that the leading role of *Serkele* was played by no other than Goldfadn, “the father of Yiddish theatre”, who, according to those who watched the show, performed exceedingly well (Berkowitz and Dauber 2006, 37). As part of the mythologization of Goldfadn’s life, some claimed that the aforementioned modest production had greatly affected Goldfadn’s decision to devote his life to the theatre, although it took him no less than a decade and a half thereafter to truly make up his mind. Whatever the case, it is clear that the previous amateur production of *Serkele* did not detract from *Tsentrāl teater*’s claim for originality. On the contrary, it even bestowed the play’s first professional production with further historical meaning.

It was with great enthusiasm that Turkow took upon himself history’s heavy burden. Turkow welcomed the possible inherent traits of the play and the challenges it raised for him as an actor and director. He was even more excited about *Serkele*’s historic allure and hoped it would attract audiences. While aspiring for artistic standing, the ensemble he and Ida Kaminska assembled over the previous years depended solely on ticket revenue.² Like the *VYKT* that followed it, the company that performed at the well located venue of *Tsentrāl teater* in the years 1921-1924, existed from hand to mouth, often collapsing and coming to life again. Every economic failure threatened to devastate the theatre; every schlager was performed until it completely exhausted its financial potential. Each failure forced the troupe to leave Warsaw and wander around ‘the province,’ as it was called, namely Jewish towns from Vilnius to Drohobitz. in search of livelihood (Turkow-Grudberg 1951, 59, 67). Turkow had thus also good practical reasons to turn the ‘historic value’ of the play into an asset and a prominent part of his dramaturgy.

² On history of the building known as “*Tsentrāl teater*”, located on Leshno Street, at the very heart of the more affluent part of the ‘Jewish’ area of Warsaw see Turkow-Grudberg 1968-1971, 82-102.

“True, the play’s theme (*sujet*) is not original”, he writes in his memoir, acknowledging the influence of Moliere’s *Tartuffe* and German bourgeois theatre, but Ettinger “managed to create from a foreign theme an original work, which can rightly represent our national classical comedy.” (Turkow 1950, 136; translation mine). The melodramatic plot, the *maskilic* didactic content, and even the unforgettable main character, one of the most colourful and evil women in Jewish drama, a villain who tries to deprive her niece of her inheritance, are all shadowed by the play’s historic weight. Turkow was less interested in *Serkele* herself – the character or the play – and more in *Serkele* the archival finding, that he considered a historical and national treasure and presented as such. The “repertoire” of modern Yiddish theatre, written originally as a closet drama, becomes in this case a site of memory, an archaeological or museological gesture. Turkow’s *Serkele* flaunts its archival origin while striving to become a milestone in the history of Yiddish theatre, a cornerstone of its dramatic canon or its canon to become.

Turkow’s archival approach to *Serkele* corresponds to the way he discovered the play. As he himself recalls, one day his friend Yankev Zusman, a Yiddish prose writer and a poet, reproached him by saying “what’s all this about Moliere, Gogol, Andreyev, for heaven’s sake, don’t we have Jewish writers?”. Following this remonstration Turkow started looking for old Yiddish plays. A friend suggested *Serkele* and got him a copy from Prylucki’s private collection, in Shloyme Ettinger’s own handwriting stamped by the Polish censor (Interestingly, Prylucki had obtained this manuscript from Abram Erenberg, the Warsaw Jewish censor in his time, who was married to Ettinger’s granddaughter, Turkow 1950, 138). The play thus made its way to Turkow’s hands as a precious archival object, an authentic item to be discovered, demonstrating direct and unmediated relation to its writer and bearing a clear historical footprint in the form of the censor’s stamp. This stamp tells of the relations between Jews and the Polish authorities as well as of the specific history of this play. Ettinger wished to print out the play, yet when he handed it to the Polish censor, as demanded, he received it with so many changes that he decided to give up on printing it. He hand-wrote dozens of copies, distributed them among his friends and acquaintances, and even organized reading events. The hand-written play is therefore an ‘ossified’ historic exhibit yet also evidence of a performative and subversive praxis.

This heavy historical burden shaped the production of *Serkele* in many ways. First, like theatre critics of his time, and despite the satirical and pedagogical nature of the play which he did acknowledge, Turkow considered *Serkele* an unmediated testimony of past life, describing it as a treasure containing Jewish existence, thoughts, ways of life, which could serve as a monument to their folklore and lifestyle. And indeed, Turkow made great efforts to turn the production into a ‘period piece’, a re-enactment of a specific Jew-

ish history. Yitskhok Shlosberg (1877-1930), a composer and conductor, had written the musical score, based on “old motifs from Galicia”; and a local *badkhn* researched historic materials of Galician *badkhonim* to form the humorous scene in which the *badkhn* sings to the bride (according to Aynhorn, this was one of the best scenes in the show; Aynhorn 1923, 5). The painter, graphic artist and set designer Moyshe (or Maurycy) Apelboym (1887-1931), who was greatly invested in Jewish folklore – he used motifs of traditional Jewish art in his work, alongside modernist elements such as cubism and expressionism, and occasionally painted synagogue murals – designed the set and costumes according to the fashion of the nineteenth century.³ Apelboym was helped by the renown Polish-Jewish historian, Meir Balaban and by the Museum of the Jewish community in Warsaw, who provided him with sketches that assisted him in designing the set and costumes. A major challenge was posed by the language of the play, that was not only archaic and local (i.e. the Galician dialect) but also polyphonic: traditional Jews, *maskilim*, less educated *maskilim* or assimilated Jews all speak their own parlance in *Serkele*. Some spoke a higher register of Yiddish while others used a very plain one, some spoke Germanized Yiddish, while others spoke a Yiddish packed with Hebrew and Aramaic vocabularies. On this matter Turkow advised with the historian Yitzkhok Schiper, an expert of Jewish-Polish history, and a key figure in the ambitious common project of writing the history of Yiddish theatre and researching (or inventing) its origins in the faraway past. Schiper worked with the actors on language and elocution, turning the stage into a scientific laboratory in dialogue studies (Turkow 1950, 139) to accurately present the various characters in the play. Turkow realized that the play would be too “literary” for the Jewish public. *Serkele* is a family comic melodrama closer to Lessing’s bourgeois dramas than to Moliere’s stinging satires, and Turkow considered it too benign for an audience expecting, in his words, “schmaltz, singing, dance, fire and sulphur, strife and dispute” (1950). This was, he assumed, the reason theatres avoided it all those years. However, while economic pressures impelled Turkow and other Yiddish theatre directors to appeal to the audience’s taste, Turkow also took part in the endless campaign against commercial theatre’s *shund* (pulp) culture, led by theatre critics and certain directors and actors. He therefore hoped *Serkele* would be a fitting solution, “accessible, amusing, and at the same time educational”, as he writes in his memoir (Turkow 1961, 79).

Not all shared Turkow’s optimism and enthusiasm. What he considered a challenging play in terms of stylization and direction, yet offering undeniable historical allure, others saw as archaic, dull, and stale. It was not only the ‘common people’ and *shund* lovers who disliked the play, but also more

³ For further reading on Apelboym see Malinowski 2017.

sophisticated theatre lovers, and even Turkow's actors themselves. When Turkow introduced his 'discovery' to the *Tsentrāl teater's* troupe and the venue's owners, he recounts, they compared *Serkele* to *mayse bikhalakh*, story books written for old Jews, or to foolish *Bobe mayses*, old wives' tales. Only during rehearsals did they change their mind.

The stage text itself presented the performance as an act of discovering a hidden treasure, or even a "resurrection" (Yiddish: *Tkhies hameysim*), in Turkow's terms (Turkow 1950, 141). A series of introductions framed the event as theatre within theatre. First came on stage – that is on the apron stage, in front of the still closed curtain – a comic actor playing Ettinger the playwright. Although Ettinger was a highly educated man, fluent in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and Polish, a physician who studied at the university of Lemberg, he was portrayed lightly and humorously. This comic figure actually corresponded to the persona which the playwright used in the play, in the rhymed prologue that followed the style and convention of old Yiddish books. Another way of framing the show revealed itself when the curtain opened to show the actors blowing the dust off a huge book as if they were uncovering a treasure. When the book was opened the viewers saw an enlarged reproduction of the play's front page in Ettinger's handwriting.⁴ This meta-theatrical act introduced the play's literary source (printed closet drama) into the show, and also shed light on the 'backstage' – the work of the historian, the archiver, and the director himself, who probe through the cultural assets of the past.

These two historiographical gestures were preceded by another, even more didactic, one. The evening opened with a short introduction by Schiper, who presented the playwright and the play as well as addressed Ettinger's eighty-year-old daughter invited to the premiere in the following grandiloquent words: "we bless the blood of the classic writer" (Zeitlin 1923, 6). Such passionate statements reveal the urgency and the challenge in creating a notion of cultural and national continuity, a sense of a live theatrical tradition which is actually based on 'dead' historic documents. The actual presence of Ettinger's daughter and the blood metaphor that serves to crown her strive to undermine the ossified nature of the historical finding and fabricate a living, organic connection between the archive and the repertoire.

Turkow tried to create such an organic affinity, historic but also bodily embedded, between his production and the history of Yiddish theatre also through Ester-Rokhl Kaminska, "The Mother of Yiddish theatre", who played the leading role. This symbolic gesture, however, came with a price, since Kaminska refused, or simply could not, dispense with her usual role as

⁴ A photograph of *Serkele's* prologue, including the huge 'book' can be seen in Turkow 1950, 140.

a compassionated “mother” and play the shrew. Her stage persona was burdened by her “ghosting” (to use Marvin Carlson’s term, Carlson 2003, 1-15), and especially the role of *Mirele Efros*, the title character in Jacob Gordin’s renown play, sometimes referred to as “The Jewish Queen Lear”, which was the “most significant role in the mature phase of her career.” (Zer-Zion 2017, 473). Kaminska, so it seemed, was unable – or unwilling – to forsake the role of the victim for that of a witch. Was this one of the reasons for *Serkele*’s mere moderate success? *Serkele* was performed for a couple of months, about fifty shows, not quite a box-office disaster, but far removed from schlagers such as *The Miser* (an adaptation of Moliere’s famous play) or *Motke Ganev* (*Motke the Thief*, by Sholem Asch), which played for a whole year (starting in the 1921-1922 season). And, as the next tour of ‘the province’ revealed, *Serkele* was far less popular among audiences outside Warsaw, and the show was quickly banned from the travelling ensemble’s vast and varied repertoire (Shinar 1968-1971, 56).

Critics had varying opinions about the show. Aren Aynhorn of the *Haynt* claimed that *Serkele* had been “an artistic event, a historical cure for what was long neglected” (Aynhorn 1923, 5). He was also very impressed by the director’s skill in “transforming the past, that seems to us from afar grey and ossified . . . It is clear that the artist felt he was performing a holy task” (Aynhorn 1923, 5). Aren Zeitlin of the *Moment* was more reserved. Excited as he may have been by the historical significance of performing a hundred-year-old play, he could not avoid aesthetic judgment of the play itself that seemed to him “from an artistic perspective – weak. From a national perspective – strong” (Zeitlin 1923, 6). Zeitlin contended that the play presents a true image of past Jewish life, yet from a critical and one-sided point of view. He also criticized the dramaturgy and judged as unsuccessful Turkow’s effort to adapt the old play to the contemporary audience of Warsaw. If the masses found *Serkele* removed from the popular comic convention, to the educated Zeitlin it seemed “a light popular comedy. A burlesque of mishmash, laughter, naïve effects, and finally a naïve moral replete with a dance” (Zeitlin 1923, 6).

But the most interesting review that accurately and sensitively grasped the nature of the archival performance in *Serkele* was published in *Moment*, in the humoristic column “The Twisted Mirror”, by *Der tunkeler* (the pen name of Yoysef Tunkel, a Yiddish prose writer, poet and caricaturist):

Many of the audience don’t know what kind of a play it is and what you’d eat with it. Therefore, *Tsentral teater*’s management decided to place at the entrance the business manager and director that while asking for the tickets explains the essence of the play to each and every guest . . . The show you are about to watch ladies and gentlemen is not a usual one. It was written by Etinger, a dear man, a great writer, an “*intiligent*” (educated person) who lived five hundred years ago. His sister is sitting right here! The tickets! Tickets

please! *Panie* (Polish for sir), Sir, you are trying to sneak in without a ticket! Get out of here! Yes, my colleague Dr. Schiper discussed the play already, it is an historicistic [sic] play. With characteristic display of the psychology . . . Don't push! Tickets! You don't have tickets? Go to hell!
(Tunkeler 1990)

Der Tunkeler's poignant satire mocks the desire to turn a plain comedy into a national-educational-historical performance, this on top of controlling the unruly masses who try to sneak into the theatre. The passion for a cultural past, the older the better, the academic emphasis, the desire to educate the audience, and the somewhat awkward execution of all this – these elements, which parodied so competently by *Der tunkeler*, catch the enormous gap between those high expectations and the rude, undisciplined public and the discourteous theatre manager and usher, who lectures and curses alternately.

Serkele was thus more than a production of a hundred-year-old play – whether marvellous or stale. It was first and foremost a performance of cultural continuity. It was a show of excavation, a project of resurrection, presenting itself as such and therefore expressing an extremely complex relation between the archive and the repertoire, here in the sense of the unruly and popular Yiddish stage. *Serkele* was a theatre production based on archival documentation that was transformed into a stage act, a representation of imagined historical continuity, a staging of national heritage.

The Repertoire, the Archive and Experimental Theatre: The Case of *Der priziv*

By the end of November 1923 *Serkele* went down.⁵ The theatre's next production was *Mr. Tshu the Sinner*, a play by Julius Brestel that Ida Kaminska imported from Berlin, impressed by the *Volksbühne* production, starred by the German-Jewish renown actor Alexander Granach (Turkow 1961, 88-89). The success of this love melodrama relied on its exotic, supposedly Chinese, nature. Consulting no other than the Chinese consul in Warsaw, Turkow constructed a set abound with colourful lanterns and painted screens made of bamboo, and during performances chanted with Kaminska Chinese songs of longing, for which she had learned to play the Banjo.

Despite, and possibly because of all this, *Mr. Tshu* had been a box office failure, and already in December the desire to renew the Jewish repertoire

⁵ Turkow initially introduced *Serkele* to the repertoire of the VYKT (Warsaw Yiddish Art Theatre), and the troupe performed it in 1924 in Łódź. However, while Łódź critics appreciated the historical play, it failed completely in terms of box-office, and was therefore quickly taken out of the VYKT repertoire (Shinar 1968-1971, 56).

and build a national theatrical heritage struck Turkow again. This time, as we shall soon see, he also felt the need to experiment with modernist theatrical means in the manner of the Russian theatre that he admired. Turkow turned once more to the archive, where he then found an old forgotten Jewish drama, this time Abramovitsh's play *Der priziv*. Differently from *Serkele*, a realistic production burdened with the task of a historical re-enactment, *Der priziv* was an experimental show, drawing inspiration from the archive as well as from the repertoire of traditional folk performance, while also adhering to contemporary modernist trends.

Like *Serkele*, *Der priziv* too was presented as "a historical document" by virtue of its age and the high standing of its author, known as the "grandfather" (*zeyde*) of modern Yiddish and Hebrew literature. Once again, the show was considered historical, first, because *Der priziv* had never before been performed on stage, and second, because of its content. Indeed, no century had passed since the publication of *Der priziv*, but mere four decades, yet it was long enough to be felt as an unmediated representation of Jewish life already gone by. An anonymous ad in *Ilustrirte vokh* (Illustrated Week) magazine, published a day before the premiere, proclaimed: "It is for the first time that the grandfather of Yiddish theatre will be presented on stage, and Jewish audience will see again folkish characters that have all but disappeared". Here too, *Tsentrāl teater* was hoping to earn cultural capital, and by that financial capital, through the standing of its author. Here too the ad commemorated a *yortsayt*: six years since the author's death (this time an accurate anniversary, rather than a more ambitious and symbolic one, as in the case of *Serkele*).

Even though the *zeyde* (grandfather) was enlisted for the sake of the play's prestige, and obviously to draw an audience, Turkow was attracted to the play for reasons other than its literary and historic pedigree. Unlike *Serkele*, that Turkow found exciting, he considered *Der priziv* too literary and dramatically weak. As far as he was concerned, the cultural treasure at stake was not the play as a whole but rather a *purim-shpil* scene embedded in it. This minor scene, one out of forty-five (!), is what drove Turkow, according to his memoir, to stage the play, or rather, use it as an inspiration for his very free adaptation. Turkow did not only shorten the play substantially, cutting out two whole acts and introducing many changes in the remaining two, he also turned the text into raw material for theatrical experimentation. Humour, buffoonery, meta-theatrical elements were used to challenge theatrical conventions and 'break the fourth wall', namely to eliminate the distance between the stage and the audience and thus undermine realistic-melodramatic model on which the play is based. Turkow drew his inspiration first and foremost from Vsevolod Meyerhold, who rebelled against the realistic tradition of his teachers in Moscow's art theatre, Constantin Stanislavsky

and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko. Meyerhold aspired to realize the theatre's theatricality, or what he termed "jeu de théâtre", and for this purpose relied on ideas and methods taken from vaudeville performances, the circus, puppet theatre, fair shows, the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, Japanese Kabuki theatre, Indian Kathakali dance, and so on and so forth (Houghton 1938, 117, 128. Roose-Evans 1984, 21-22). Turkow embraced Meyerhold's theatrical view and sought to fulfil it through the Jewish *purim-shpil*. His vision for *Der priziv* was, in his own words, "to turn the entire play into a theatrical *purim-shpil*" (Turkow 1950, 85). Indeed, the *purim-shpil* scene embedded in *Der priziv* became the centre of the play, not in terms of the plot but of the theatrical language.

The 'discovery' of the *purim-shpil* 'hidden' in *Der priziv* was actually part of a far greater recovery project in which Turkow became involved while probing the archive, and more specifically through the research of his friend Schiper, who during the very weeks *Der priziv* was playing on stage published the first volume of his monumental study *The History of the Jewish Art of Theatre and Drama: From Ancient Times Until 1750* (original title: *Geshichte fun yidisher teater-kunst un drame: fun di eltste tsaytn biz 1750*, 1923). Turkow did not have to wait for the publication of book, as he had already read some of Schiper's work, published in a 1921 special issue of the popular Warsaw Yiddish daily *Moment*. If we were to summarize the most basic claims of Schiper's tome, a work replete with sources, pictures and footnotes, it would be as follows: Jewish theatre did not begin, as is usually maintained, at the last quarter of the nineteenth century, namely with Goltfaden's theatre, but rather with popular theatres in the 'ghettos' of Europe that were active throughout the centuries. Relying on 'a comparative method', meaning the assumption that there were profound cultural connections between Jews and their Christian neighbours, and on the premise of cultural continuity, namely the assumption that later *purim-shpil* performances preserve ancient traditions, Schiper presented a bifurcated system of parallels and influences that run between Jewish jesters and performers (*lets, badkhn, nar, shpilman, purim-shpiler* and others), which he catalogued and dated, and their European counterparts, such as the German Narr, the European Carnival, or the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Among this wide array of Jewish and non-Jewish performers, one performance stands out as the book's salient protagonist: the *purim-shpil*. The primitive and popular performance, amateurishly played only once a year, the show so wild and vulgar that Rabbis often burned its texts, *Maskilim* and Jews of the post-*Haskala* generation held in contempt, and anti-Semites presented as proof of Jewish cultural inferiority – this lowly performance was transformed in Schiper's account into the cradle of Jewish theatre. Turkow's dramaturgy of *Der priziv* is therefore a complex stage event, seeking to fulfil Meyerhold's theatrical conception, as

well as to promote Schiper's archival discoveries and reinforce his historical assertions. The performance thus signified a bidirectional movement: from the popular repertoire to the archive and back to the stage of Yiddish theatre.

Drawing inspiration from Meyerhold's legendary production of Blok's *Balaganchik* (*The Fairground Booth*, 1906), and from his 1912 article "*Balagan*", Turkow turned to a 'primitive' form of performance in order to create modernist theatre. In his article "*Balagan*" Meyerhold writes about another popular show: the French *cabotine*. The wandering actor, who lacks any artistic vision, and whose name became a synonym for charlatan, was an inspiration for the Russian director. "The *cabotine*", writes Meyerhold, "is related to the Pantomimist, the historian and the actor . . . He created miracles by his technical command. The *cabotine* keeps the tradition of true acting alive" (cited in Roose-Evans 1984, 23). Through the *cabotine* and his accoutrements, the mask, the gesture, the movement, Meyerhold envisioned, the theatre would be able to break free of its literary constraints and experience an improvisational renaissance.⁶ Turkow asked, therefore, to execute Meyerhold's vision by creating a clownish, grotesque performance, undermining the audience's expectations, mixing old with new, reality and phantasy, the Western European *commedia dell'arte* and *cabotine* with the traditional Jewish *purim-shpil*.

How did it all appear on stage? Contemporary theatre critics allow us a glimpse into the show, and it seems that Meyerhold's vision was mostly carried out by one character: the *lets* (fool). The show opened with a clown coming from the audience with a hat of bells (partially Arlequin, possibly Pierro, or rather *Stańczyk*, the renown polish clown), albeit wearing a *Tsitsit* (a Jewish religious four-corner garment), the tufts of which showed from under his cloths. This *lets* (*payats*, or *lekerloyfer*, *atsrats*, as he is named in Abramovitch's *purim-shpil* scene) opened with a rhymed comic monolog, where he pointed at the different characters and explained the show, as was the role of the *payats* in the *purim-shpil*. In the traditional folk performance, the *lets'* comic monologue was also a way to address the poor dramatical means, i.e. the lack of a proper stage, set and program, and here too it was combined with a very low-key performance. The Jewish Arlequin included many jokes in his monolog, mentioning among others "Grandpa Mendele" (that is Abramovitch), "Dr. Schiper", Pryłucki, and other renowned theatre critics. He came on stage before each and every set, forming some sort of an intermission, and at times popped also during the scene, to explain what had happened, what happens right now and what is to be expected.

Judging by the harsh criticism the show received, it seems that Turkow's

⁶ On Meyerhold's staging of Blok's *Balaganchik* and his seminal 1912 article see Clayton 1993 and Crone 1994.

intention of creating a radical and innovative theatrical event did not come through. Instead of bringing new life into closet drama, the multiple interventions of singing, dancing and comic rhyming only burdened the show. Instead of a playful, carnivalesque theatre, the audience witnessed long speeches that were not that funny. The verbosity of the interludes, or *intermedyes*, as they were called in Yiddish, added to the wordiness of Abramovitch's closet drama, and did away with the playfulness that Turkow had been aiming for. It is doubtful whether Meyerhold, who resented wordiness on stage and preferred pantomime, dance and movement, would have approved of Turkow's interpretation of his work. *Der priziv* had been one of the greatest failures of *Tsentrāl teater*. It failed critically as well as financially. It was performed less than twenty times and went down after less than three weeks. Even Turkow himself admitted that artistically *Der priziv* had been the least successful of *Tsentrāl Theatre's* productions. *Serkele*, on the other hand, he considered its greatest artistic success.

It is not hard to find reasons for *Der priziv's* failure: a play too literary and weak, the audience's difficulty at accepting such an iconoclastic approach towards the "Grandfather of Yiddish Literature" and general resentment of experimentation, an under-equipped stage ("*pust un vist*", empty and deserted, complains the theatre critic of the *Haynt*. Aynhorn 1923, 5), tedious interludes, and the unbreachable gap between the use of basic, 'primitive' elements on the great stage of a Moscow theatre, and on the stage of the already impoverished *Tsentrāl teater*. The most interesting reason for failure, however, had been raised by Yitskhok Turkow-Grudberg, Turkow's brother. According to him the audience did not like the show because they felt that they were its target of mockery. "It was impossible", he writes, "to accept the thought that the *purim-shpil* was the cradle of Jewish theatre" (Turkow-Grudberg 1970, 81). Whatever the reasons for its box-office fiasco, Turkow-Grudberg no doubt grasped the show's underlying ideology. Behind the buffoon's mask, the jokes, the ironic gestures, the stand-up comedy making fun of all greats of Warsaw's Jewish cultural life of the early 1920s, was an extremely serious motivation: rewriting the history of Jewish theatre.

If Turkow-Grudberg is right, then the failure of *Der priziv* was, in a sense, a misunderstanding. While Turkow, following Schiper and Pryłucki, aimed to elevate the *purim-shpil*, turning it into a respectable Jewish art heritage, his unsophisticated audience, still holding to traditional negative view of the *purim-shpil*, took the reference as an insult. While the audience accepted the genesis myth that Turkow performed in *Serkele*, tying it to the *maskilic* closet drama, they were far less willing to accept the theory that the *purim-shpil* was the source of Jewish theatre – perhaps not unlike Darwin's opponents, who refused to accept a theory claiming that human and apes share a common ancestor.

Turkow's determined effort to corroborate and implement Schiper's theses only brings into relief the artificial, non-organic nature of his embracing of the Purim-shpil, rejected so harshly by the audience. Turkow had not drawn his theatrical inspiration from *Purim* celebrations of his childhood in Warsaw, but rather from the archive, where he had also found *Serkele*. In this sense, Turkow's affinity with the *purim-shpil* was not much greater than Meyerhold's with the French *cabotine*. Both searched for a usable past in a cultural realm quite different than the one in which they lived. The production of *Der priziv* demonstrates clearly that modern Jewish theatre had not historically evolved out of the *purim-shpil*, albeit in convoluted ways, as Schiper claimed. Rather, the modern re-imagination of the *purim-shpil* was deeply related to archival research and nationalist ideology and was enabled by huge, daring leaps to the relatively near and yet already foreign Jewish past.

Conclusion

At this crucial moment of optimism and growth marking the early 1920s, the first years of the Polish Republic, what becomes evident are also the difficulties facing a minority group, living among an often suspicious and hostile environment, who strives to create in its own language, drawing on its own culture. Under such conditions the repertoire and the archive were burdened by desperately pressing questions of national prestige. Jewish artists felt inferior to their European colleagues. Not unlike many of them they strived for historically inspired art, but also, unavoidably, hoped for a modest financial success that would allow their survival. Turkow tried to produce a notion of cultural continuity through *Serkele*, and gained moderate success, despite his effort being possibly awkward and overbearing. However, when he went further, and dared turn to the *purim-shpil*, he failed. The financial and cultural deprivation of his work became evermore striking the more the means he used leaned towards the *avant-garde*. The *purim-shpil* revealed itself as a Freudian *unheimlich*, a collective uncanny, strangely familiar to the twentieth-century Jewish theatregoer, and yet unsettling, perhaps even a taboo, especially for those who wished to view Yiddish theatre as on a par with European theatre. Because it was so difficult to both perform the *purim-shpil* and put it at bay, Turkow tried donning the honourable gown of "Grandpa Mendele" and the more dignified *commedia dell'arte*, yet to no avail. Lacking a more substantial and less daunting theatrical tradition, the making of a *folksteater*, in the sense of a national theatre, was heavily charged and difficult. The intervention of "the archive" in "the repertoire" and "the repertoire" in "the archive" was partially rooted in inferiority feelings and an apologetic

stance, yet, paradoxically, often evoked cultural anxieties among its viewers, rather than calming them. At the same time, however, the bold mixture of past and present, high and low, closet drama and folk performance also demonstrated determination, a willingness to take financial and artistic risks, and most of all – a yearning for a national artform and aesthetic heritage. Turkow's efforts at creating a modernist experimental art theatre out of *maskilic* drama and *purim-shpil* may have not always been commercially or aesthetically successful, but without telling the story of his imaginative and constellative work it would not be possible to understand the historical and artistic origins of Yiddish theatre, and Jewish theatre as a whole..

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