

“Theatrical Liberalism: Jews, Theatricality and Modernity”

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I am delighted to be here in Venice discussing my current and future project on Jews and the theater because Venice is one of the most important originating sites for the very phenomenon I aim to explore. Prompted by my dear friend and colleague Shaul Bassi, I have begun to think beyond my own research on Jewish American Culture towards a collaborative project on Jews, theatricality and modernity in Europe and North America. Venice is a key site for this research -- both because of its particular Jewish cultural history and because of its history as a crossroads of European cultures. I would like to share with you today some early thoughts on this project.

In *The Gay Science*, in a section on the “problem of the actor,” Nietzsche argues that the Jews are “a people possessing the art of adaptability par excellence.” He equates acting in general with the condition of being a Jew: “what good actor today is *not* – a Jew?” (GS, sect. 361). My project, provisionally entitled *Theatrical Liberalism*, begins with the peculiar and insistent relationship between Jews and performance in modernizing Europe and North America asserted not only by Nietzsche but also by numerous historians, sociologists, dramatists. Many of these assertions are anti-theatrical – the Jews’ involvement with the theatre offers these critics a kind of “proof” of Jewish immorality. Others are triumphalist or apologetic, hoping to show the importance of Jewish contributions to modern culture by celebrating this apparently “Jewish” talent for the stage. *Theatrical Liberalism* aims to move beyond this moral binary, arguing that theater – in a wide variety of forms -- is central to understanding the complexity of Jewish

emergence into modern, cosmopolitan, non-Jewish societies. For European and North American Jews, theatricality has served, and continues to serve as a vital metaphor for the presentation of self in everyday life, and theater itself was and is a venue of major importance for Jews in terms of both consumption and production. Over the course of four centuries, in Europe and North America, theatricality came to represent, in the work of Jewish writers and artists, the liberating potential to *make a self*, a promise often set in opposition to the implicitly anti-theatrical (and essentialist) constrictions of *being a self*. As Jewish involvement in theater became increasingly visible in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish writers and artists not only continued to use the theater to express their own identities but, as we saw in the passage by Nietzsche, also became identified with it, and the shifting status of theatricality in modern culture is therefore also closely related to the rise and fall of antisemitism.

This story about Jews and the theater begins around the time of the Spanish expulsion, in 1492, and takes root in the highly theatrical experiences of those Jews who lived as Marranos — Christians in public, Jews in private. Gershom Scholem argues that we can locate the beginning of modern Jewish self-consciousness in sixteenth-century Marrano culture, particularly in the Sabbatian movement that sacralized the marranic split between inner belief and outer identity. Arguing in “Redemption Through Sin” that Jewish modernity begins with Sabbatianism, Scholem writes: “within the spiritual world of the Sabbatian sects . . . the crisis of faith which overtook the Jewish people as a whole upon its emergence from its medieval isolation was first anticipated.” Sabbatianism sacralized "necessary apostasy" -- essentially formalizing in religious terms the paradoxical Marranic condition of believing one thing while practicing another. Scholem sees both historic and metaphorical parallels between Sabbatian split consciousness and the modern sense of self developed by the eighteenth-century *maskilim* in Germany

("enlightened Jews").¹ This tension between "inner" and "outer" selves, later eloquently formulated in the *maskil* Judah Leib Gordon's exhortation to Russian Jews to be a "man abroad and a Jew in your tent," increasingly pervaded the modernizing Jewish world and indeed became its defining feature. And this modern tension between competing ideas of the self laid the groundwork for a mode of self-presentation that can best be understood as theatrical.

Sigmund Freud was perhaps the first to analyze self-consciously the wide acceptance by Jews of this double mode of behavior. In his study of jokes and the unconscious, he uses performance-oriented examples, Jewish jokes, to demonstrate how humor reveals the workings of the psyche. One joke he cites particularly reveals the way Jews developed two modes of behavior, one for the Jewish and one for the non-Jewish world:

A Galician Jew was travelling in a train. He had made himself really comfortable, had unbuttoned his coat and put his feet up on the seat. Just then a gentleman in modern dress entered the compartment. The Jew promptly pulled himself together and took up a proper pose. The stranger fingered through the pages of a notebook, made some calculations, reflected for a moment and then suddenly asked the Jew: "excuse me, when is Yom Kippur?" "Oho!" said the Jew, and put his feet up on the seat again before answering.²

The humor of the joke resides in the acknowledgement that one must "act" in the non-Jewish, modern world, but can simply relax and be oneself around other Jews. Underlying the light-hearted nature of the joke, of course, is the very real threat of persecution, which drove Jews to adopt this double standard of behavior. Mary Antin, in her 1912 autobiography *The Promised Land*, about immigration from Russia to America, indicates the dangers that informed this sense of split consciousness:

In your father's parlor hung a large colored portrait of Alexander III. The Czar was a cruel tyrant,--oh, it was whispered when doors were locked and shutters tightly barred, at night,-- he was a Titus, a Haman, a sworn foe of all Jews,--and yet his portrait was seen in a place of honor in your father's house. You knew why. It looked well when police or government officers came on business.³

Antin makes an effort to distinguish this sort of behavior from either lying or hypocrisy. This performance of patriotism was necessary for survival: “‘It is a false world,’ you heard, and you knew it was so, looking at the Czar's portrait . . . ‘Never tell a police officer the truth,’ was another saying, and you knew it was good advice.”⁴

Antin openly acknowledges the doubleness of the Jewish moral and behavioral code: “A Jew could hardly exist in business unless he developed a dual conscience, which allowed him to do to the Gentile what he would call a sin against a fellow Jew.”⁵ This sense of split consciousness is related to W.E.B. DuBois's notion of black “double-consciousness” in America: “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,-- an American, a Negro.”⁶ Whereas DuBois emphasizes the ways in which the internal development of the black American is crippled by this double consciousness, however, Jewish writers tend more often to indicate a sense of control over the different ways one behaves in the internal (Jewish) and external (non-Jewish, secular) world and to even draw strength from their ability to “outwit the Gentile.” This type of self-conscious role-playing, demanded by the modernizing societies in which Jews lived, led them to develop talents that were highly suitable for the theater. Offering a commercially viable place to employ role-playing skills, the theater was also an arena in which Jews and non-Jews alike could experiment with the shifting identity

boundaries so characteristic of the modern world. As the question of what it meant to be a Jew in a secular context became more pressing in the modern era, the theater provided a space for experimenting with (and often satirizing or critiquing) the multiple possibilities available to Jews no longer exclusively limited to traditional modes of self-representation.

In early modern Europe, the emergence of Jewish culture outside of a religious context was nearly always accompanied by significant Jewish production of theater, generally of a secular nature. This proliferation of Jewish-produced theater offers a rich archive of cultural information on the ways in which Jews negotiated the increasingly complicated divisions between self and other, home and street, religious and secular. As early as the sixteenth century, cosmopolitan Jews (mostly escaped Marranos) were beginning to write secular drama in Amsterdam and Italy, much of it in Spanish with occasional works in Hebrew as well. At least twenty plays have been attributed to Antonio Enriquez Gomez and a number of dramatic works in Hebrew to Joseph Penso, both descendants of Marranos living in early seventeenth-century Amsterdam.⁷ Penso's plays, written in Hebrew, often deal with secular themes and demonstrate a budding desire to use Hebrew for non-religious literary expression. In both Venice and Mantua, Jews participated in significant, and disproportionate, numbers in the local theater, writing plays in both Italian and Hebrew for the Italian stage. In a number of early modern Jewish communities, Purim observance was closely linked with theatrical activity and Purim plays are among the first existing examples of Italian Jewish theatre. In Venice, as Riccardo Calimani notes, Jews emulated the Venetian carnival, turning Purim into a festival of masks and disguises. A number of early Italian-Jewish plays were based on the Purim story itself, including a well-known play by Solomon Usque entitled *Ester*, which was performed in the New Ghetto in Venice in 1531. It seems no accident that these post-Marrano communities would turn to the

Esther story as a means of theatrical self-representation, since the Purim story itself is so closely focused on the complications of dual identity – the central character Esther is of course a consummate performer who effectively negotiates the boundaries between Jewish and non-Jewish society through a variety of theatrical devices. Mantua was also a theatrical center for the Italian Jewish community in the late 16th and early 17th centuries and Mantuan Jews were noted performers and playwrights not only for other Jews, but for Italian audiences as well. As early as 1525, Jews in Mantua were required to pay a sort of tax to support Jewish actors at the ducal court. One of the most important theatrical figures at the Mantuan court was a Jew, Leone de Sommi, who not only led and directed the company at the ducal court, but also wrote plays in both Italian and Hebrew and is credited with writing the first comedy in Hebrew, entitled “A Comedy of Betrothal”. The play, obviously meant for Jewish audiences (most likely also for Purim), models the dualism of Jewish encounters with modernity. It borrows its plot from a midrashic tale, and interweaves Talmudic and biblical references throughout, but in structure it closely follows the conventions of Renaissance Italian comedy and commedia dell’arte. Leone de Sommi also is known for one of the earliest and most important theoretical statements on theatrical methods in Italian theater history. In his *Dialoghi in material di rappresentazione scenica*, he argues, among other things, that Jews invented the theater (with the book of Job in dramatic verse form) and that the first playwright was therefore none other than Moses. Leone de Sommi is a fascinating and important character for any study of theatricality and Jewish modernity. His position as a skilled dramatist afforded him the luxury of being exempt from wearing the yellow patch that would identify him as a Jew, a privilege given to few at the time (one other who was exempt was his co-religionist and sometime collaborator at the Mantuan court, the musician Salamone Rossi). His ability to move easily between the Italian and Jewish

communities, to retain and nurture both identities in his professional and creative life, and to use the theater to negotiate and explore the possibilities of that mobility marks him as a prototypical modernizing Jewish character.

By the eighteenth century, members of Moses Mendelssohn's circle of *maskilim* in Berlin also found the theater to be a particularly effective medium for conveying their ideas about enlightenment, romanticism and assimilation. Writers such as Isaac Euchel and Aaron Wolfsohn used a clash of languages onstage, including Yiddish, French, German and Hebrew, to dramatize social and class differences among the various sectors of eighteenth-century German-Jewish society.⁸ In America, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Jewish playwrights and producers, notably Mordecai Manuel Noah, Isaac Harby and Jonas B. Phillips, were engaged in the struggle to define a new American theater.⁹ American Jewish playwright David Belasco, writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, was instrumental in popularizing a number of American stories about the theatricality of identity, many set to music by Puccini, such as *The Girl of Golden West* (1905) and *Madama Butterfly* (1900). Jews also began to be associated with the theater more directly in the public mind in the 19th century – for better and worse. The most famous of mid-nineteenth century actresses, such as Rachel (in France, born Elisa Felix, 1820-58), Adah Isaacs Menken and Sarah Bernhardt (French not American, 1844-1923), were Jewish women, for example, and the figure of the Jewish actress became a prominent, if complicated, trope in British and American nineteenth-century novels such as George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* and Henry James's *The Tragic Muse*.

By the late nineteenth century, as Jews throughout Europe entered the modern world, entertainment created by Jews flourished across Europe and America in the cabarets, music halls and operettas of England, France, Germany, Russia and Poland, and the circuses, vaudeville

shows, melodramas and operas of America. Parisian theater was deeply influenced in the mid-nineteenth-century by the work of composer and playwright Jacques Offenbach, born a German Jew (and son of a cantor), who is credited with having invented the operetta form, the precursor to the modern musical comedy. Jewish impresarios and critics such as Otto Brahm, who brought the naturalism of Ibsen and Hauptmann to the German stage, Georg Brandes, a great Danish critic who championed Ibsen and Strindberg in their early work, Max Reinhardt, who co-founded the Salzburg Festival in Austria, and Oscar Hammerstein I, who founded the Manhattan Opera and other theaters in America, fundamentally shaped both the art and business of the theater in those countries.¹⁰ The music publishers Witmark & Sons, run by three German-Jewish brothers, dominated the American music publishing business, popularizing the songs of late nineteenth-century American vaudeville and operetta stages. Theaters in America were also largely built and owned by Jews—the “Syndicate,” a group of seven Jewish theatrical promoters, determined most of the shows that were presented around the country until their power was broken by another Jewish producing team--the Shubert Brothers.¹¹

Modernizing Jews created theater not only in non-Jewish venues, but also for specifically Jewish audiences, in Jewish languages and with Jewish themes. Many important Zionist activists, like Theodor Herzl and Israel Zangwill, wrote plays, Zangwill’s best known being *The Melting Pot*, a melodrama about assimilation in America.¹² Another Zionist, Martin Buber, not only tried his hand at playwriting but also developed an entire theory of ethics based on his experience with drama.¹³ The theater was of course central to the early Zionist movement. Habimah a sophisticated Hebrew-language Jewish theater founded in Moscow in 1918, moved to Tel Aviv in 1931 and became the national theater of Israel in the 1950s.¹⁴ The Yiddish theater, begun in Romania in the 1860s, quickly gained in popularity and spread throughout the Yiddish-

speaking world. By the turn of the century, active Yiddish theaters flourished in Poland, Russia, Germany, England, the United States, Canada and South America.¹⁵

First and second generation immigrant Jews in America are largely responsible for inventing the Broadway musical comedy. In my recent book, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, I argue that in the early to mid-twentieth century, American Jewish writers brought to the musical stage a powerfully appealing vision of America fashioned through song and dance. It was an optimistic, meritocratic, selectively inclusive America in which Jews could at once lose and find themselves. The story of Jewish acculturation is closely interwoven with the development of the American musical; theater history and Jewish history cannot be separated. In plays such as *The Jazz Singer*, *Girl Crazy*, *Babes in Arms*, *Oklahoma!*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*, Jewish composers, librettists, and performers transformed the experience of New York Jews into the grand, even sacred acts of being American. The Broadway musical therefore emerges as yet another theatrical form by which Jewish artists negotiated their encounter with secular non-Jewish society.

I present you with this brief overview of Jewish involvement in the theaters of Europe and North America not to celebrate Jewish accomplishment – although the importance of Jews in so many different national theaters does demand further exploration – but rather to ask why and how the theater has been so central to the process of Jewish modernization and why this relatively small and politically marginal ethnic and religious group has had such a significant impact on the cultural life of so many different countries. Certainly much valuable scholarship has been produced in recent years on the history of various Jewish theaters. Work on the Yiddish and Israeli theaters has been particularly strong and significant attention has also been paid to the involvement of Jews in the theaters of Germany, Russia, and the United States. This scholarship

has laid crucial groundwork for any discussion about Jews and theatricality – identifying and making available the key personalities, texts, and histories of Jewish involvement in the theater itself. The larger questions, however, about the importance of the theater and theatricality for understanding Jewish modernity -- and the liberalism that allowed that modernization to occur -- across national borders and chronological divides have only begun to be asked. Because of the complexities of Jewish history, the constraints of the academy, and the limitations of any individual scholar, there has been little opportunity to bring individual cultural histories into dialogue with one another in order to discern larger cultural patterns. I myself have felt frustrated by the nation-oriented framework of my own research, and the limitations that framework imposes. At the same time, it will take years simply to do justice to the richness of the American source material on which I work. It is not possible to do a more comprehensive or comparative study in isolation. It requires a community of scholars, all pursuing similar questions but with varying expertise in particular languages and historical periods. Hence the birth of the idea for *Theatrical Liberalism*. Cross-national and diasporic in its approach and scope, *Theatrical Liberalism* will bring together scholars of Jewish studies, theater history, and cultural studies to address the importance of theater and theatricality in European and North American Jewish modernity from the 16th to the 20th centuries. *Theatrical Liberalism* will examine the ways in which Jewish theater and theatricality fundamentally reshaped the liberal contexts in which it developed, and the ways in which theatricality served as a crucial mode for re-inventing Jewish identity in modern terms. This project will ask if there is a relationship, across nations, between the status of theatricality and the status of the Jews and will look at . theatrical genres, formal conventions, and kinds of theatricality, as they develop in individual national situations in order to determine if there are patterns common to modernizing Jewish

writers across national borders. In short, the project aims to discover – through the medium of theatre history – what it means to discuss a Jewish culture and history that is truly diasporic.

As the plans develop, I will be looking for collaborators to participate in a series of seminars and to ultimately publish essays or possibly manuscript-length monographs on theatricality, Jews and modernity in 16th and 17th c. Amsterdam and Italian cities such as Venice and Mantua, 18th c. Berlin, and on later 19th and 20th century developments in London, Paris, Warsaw and other centres in Eastern Europe. And if all goes well, we will meet for a seminar in the not too distant future in Venice!

¹ Gershom Scholem, “Redemption Through Sin,” in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), p. 84.

² Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relations to the Unconscious* (New York: Norton, 1963), p. 80. It’s worth noting that the most influential theory of laughter and comedy is by the Jewish philosopher, Henri Bergson.

³ Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 18.

⁴ Antin, *Promised Land*, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 3.

⁷ The dramatic writings of Antonio Enriquez Gomez and Joseph Penso are particularly interesting for their secular themes. See Israel Zinberg, *History of Jewish Literature* (Cleveland: Case Western University Press, 1972-78), vol. 5:117-36 for details on these plays.

⁸ See Zinberg, *History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 8, chap. 5 on Isaac Euchel's "A Family Portrait" and Aaron Wolfsohn's "Frivolity and Bigotry."

⁹ In the forewords to Noah's *She Would Be A Soldier* (1819) and Phillips's *Camillus: or, The Self-Exiled Patriot* (1833), both writers discuss their nationalist project. Both works can be found in the Rosenbach Rare Book Collection of the American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, MA. Jonathan D. Sarna, in *Jacksonian Jew* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981) describes the extraordinary commitment of a number of prominent Jewish men to developing an American national drama and reveals Noah's passionate involvement with the early American stage.

¹⁰ Jacob R. Marcus in *The Rise and Destiny of the German Jew* (New York: Ktav, 1973) notes that Otto Brahm brought the naturalism of Ibsen and Hauptmann to the German stage at the turn of the century (149). Reinhardt, who succeeded Brahm as the dominant figure in German and Austrian theater (he co-founded the Salzburg Festival) was committed to Jewish causes as evidenced by his production of the pro-Zionist pageant *The Eternal Road* in New York in 1937. See Stephen Whitfield, “The Politics of Pageantry, 1936-1946” in *American Jewish History* 84 (1996): 221-251. For more information on the life of Oscar Hammerstein I, see Vincent Sheean, *The Amazing Oscar Hammerstein* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1956). George Morris Cohen Brandes, a Danish-Jewish theater critic was also significant in the late nineteenth century for his championing of Ibsen. See Georg Brandes, *Eminent Authors of the Nineteenth Century: Literary Portraits*. Trans. Rasmus B. Anderson. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1886).

¹¹ On the Theatrical Syndicate and the Shuberts, see Don B. Wilmet and Christopher Bigsby, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Theatre* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), vol. 2, pp. 212-218.

¹² Of Zangwill's nine plays, his best known work is *The Melting Pot* (1908). In the 1890s, Herzl was well known as the author of the Viennese plays *Tabarin* (1895) and *The New Ghetto* (1898), among others. See Jacques Kornberg, *Theodor Herzl* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹³ Buber wrote a number of important essays connecting his ideas about Judaism to the drama as well as a mystery play entitled "Elijah." Maurice Friedman, ed. *Martin Buber and the Theater* (New York: Funk & Wagnall's, 1969).

¹⁴ See Mendel Kohansky, *The Hebrew Theatre* (New York: Ktav, 1969).

¹⁵ Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996); J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light* (New York: Schocken, 1991).