

Yiddish Theater History, Its Composers and Operettas:

A Narrative without Music

N i n a W a r n k e

Modern Yiddish theater, as conceived by its founder, Abraham Goldfaden (1840-1908), was above all a musical theater. Ever since its early days in the 1870s, all theatrical productions, whether advertised as operas, operettas, melodramas, comedies, or dramas, offered music as an integral part of the performance. For most aspiring actors a powerful and beautiful singing voice was at least as important as acting talent if they wanted to embark on a successful career. Particularly in their first years in Eastern Europe and America, troupes drew heavily on the talents of former *meshoyrerim* (synagogue choir boys) whose musical training recommended them not only as performers but also as arrangers, composers, and/or conductors. One indication of the centrality of music in Yiddish theater is the fact that many of these songs quickly became popular with audiences and often continued to be sung long after the play was forgotten.

Musicologists, music collectors, and musicians, such as Irene Heskes, Chane Mlotek, and many others, have done invaluable work to preserve and disseminate this musical legacy.¹ Thanks to these efforts, Yiddish theater songs still live on as part of the Jewish popular music repertoire. Their original connection to the theater, and their place in and significance for specific productions, however, has been largely lost; for the most part, because historians and chroniclers of the American Yiddish theater have ignored its musical component. Their focus—my own included—has centered on its textual traditions.

Thus, despite the fact that operetta was the dominant genre, the common periodization of Yiddish theater does not trace its development. Instead, it reflects the influence of individual writers and the waxing and waning of literary influence on the stage: the 1870s and 1880s in Romania and Russia are associated with Goldfaden, the so-called father of Yiddish theater; they were followed by the Gordin era, named after playwright Jacob Gordin, whose efforts around the turn of the last century on behalf of theatrical and dramatic realism won him the epithet “reformer of the Yiddish theater.” In fact, the years when his influence was at its height are remembered as the “first golden era.” The “second golden era” followed well over a decade later (from the late 1910s through the 1920s), and coincided with the establishment and successes of the Yiddish Art Theater under Morris Schwartz. An early version of this periodization from primitive to sophisticated literary art was already formulated in 1909 by playwright David Pinski.² In 1918,

¹ See, for example, Eleanor G. Mlotek, et. al. *Pearls of Yiddish Song* (New York: Education Department of the Workmen’s Circle, 1988) and Irene Heskes, *Music as Social History: American Yiddish Theater Music, 1882-1920* (Champaign: Sonneck Society and the University of Illinois, 1984) and *The Music of Abraham Goldfaden: Father of the Yiddish Theater* (Cedarhurst, NY: Tara Publications, 1990). There are, of course, countless historical and contemporary recordings of Yiddish theater songs by Yiddish actors and singers.

² David Pinski, *Dos yidische drama: An iberblik iber ir antviklung* (New York: Drukerman, 1909).

we find this narrative trajectory, focused as it was on literary achievements, solidified in *Geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, written by theater critic and chronicler B. Gorin, whose work has served as the basis for most subsequent scholars.³

Although contemporary researchers of American Yiddish drama and theater have been revising some of the original paradigms, the centrality of music within the theater, its relationship to the text, its significance within the performance and for the audience, the status of the composer within the theater and the immigrant community at large are at best touched upon. Thus, references to “operetta,” “musical comedy,” or specific composers are hard to find in any history of American Yiddish theater.⁴ The only exception is the work of ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin who with his study on popular Jewish immigrant music, *Tenement Songs*, and the publication of the scores of two early operettas has begun to rectify this imbalanced picture.⁵ In his exemplary study the fields of musicology, popular culture, and theater history have come together for the first time.

The aim of this article is to analyze the changing status of the composer during the immigrant period and the development of the public discourse in the Yiddish press concerning Yiddish operettas since the attitudes inscribed in this discourse have directly or indirectly influenced subsequent scholarship on the history of American Yiddish theater. Thus despite the fact that by the 1920s composers became for the first time public figures to some degree, they have been largely written out of the historical record.

Historical Operettas and their Composers in the Early Period (1880s-1910)

Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, the historical operetta was a prominent genre on the New York Yiddish stage. Well into the first decade of the twentieth century, such operettas remained the obligatory fare for the holiday shows during Sukkoth and Passover when theaters expected the highest audience turnout. Although operettas by name, these productions were rarely identified with their “composers.” In fact, to this day, we associate most of these works of the early period with their writers and not with those who wrote or arranged the music.

Despite the composer’s and/or conductor’s importance for a successful production, his role within the hierarchy of the company was subordinate. The theaters were usually in the hands of the star actors and authors. With the exception of star comedian and composer Sigmund Mogulesco, who briefly co-owned a theater in the late 1880s and early 1890s, no composer before Josef Rumshinsky in the 1920s shared directorship or ownership of a theater. Well into the 1910s, theater ads stressed the name of the author or star, adding that of the composer only in the by-line. Even the theaters’ press releases, written in the style of reviews, mentioned the music only in passing. Instead, these texts highlighted the exciting story and skillful acting. In the early decades, companies did not invest much in their “orchestras,” which consisted usually of four musicians. These quartets did not need a regular conductor; the first violin “conducted” with the bow. Even in the 1910s, when a conductor was firmly established, the orchestra consisted usually of only six to nine musicians. Nonetheless, theater directors were well aware of the importance of good music for a successful production. During the 1880s and 1890s when playwrights such as Josef Lateiner and Moyshe Hurwitz

³ B. Gorin [Yitskhak Goydo], *Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater*, 2 vols. (New York: Forverts, 1929).

⁴ Even Zalmen Zylbercweig’s six-volume *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (New York, Warsaw, Mexico City: Farlag Elisheva, 1931-1969) includes relatively little information on the first generation of composers, arrangers, or conductors who worked in the Yiddish theater.

⁵ Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982) and Slobin (ed.), *Yiddish Theater in America: David’s Violin (1897) and Shloyme Gorgl (189-)* (New York: Garland Pub., 1994).

were co-directors of theaters, they often demanded their own plays have more musical numbers than those by other writers so that they could keep a competitive edge.⁶

Until around 1910, most productions had relatively short runs, putting high demands on both playwrights and composers to produce new materials within a very short time. Sometimes a failed production would be taken down after one weekend to be replaced by a new show the following Friday. In his reminiscences, actor-composer Mogulesco described how he would write the music for the upcoming show each night after returning from the theater. This constant double demand often undermined his ability to learn his own roles properly and ultimately contributed to his drinking problem.⁷ Writers and composers tended to resort to adapting text and music from existing shows—neither the time nor, in many cases, their talent was sufficient to produce many original works. In fact, the so-called composers were more often arrangers than creators of original music. They worked with known melodies and arranged the music to accommodate the instrumentation and size of their specific orchestra. The majority of men who worked as composers and arrangers in the early decades of Yiddish theater, such as Louis Friedsell, Henry Russotto, Herman Wohl, Arnold Perlmutter, Mogulesco, and Sholem Secunda had received their musical training as *meshoyrerim* and several would later write music for both the theater and the synagogue. In fact, many of the early theater tunes, if not adapted from folksongs or European operettas, were influenced by cantorial music.⁸ For the immigrant intellectuals who wrote Yiddish theater reviews, operettas as a genre and the way they were created became a target of their critique.

Yiddish Theater Criticism and Theater Reform (1880s-1910)

Yiddish theater criticism had its beginnings in the late 1880s with the emergence of the radical press on the Lower East Side. During the following two decades, theater reviews became an integral part of the general program set by the intellectuals to educate and civilize the minimally educated immigrants and to make them citizens of the modern world. One important task within this program was to imbue them with “proper” artistic taste, which entailed teaching the function of art (be it in literature or in theater), as they understood it: realist in style and presentation, and socially engaged in content.⁹ Of course, in the minds of the intellectuals, Yiddish theater, with its predominance of operettas and melodramas, needed to be entirely reformed if it was to serve this function and if it was ever to become a player within modern world theater. For these critics, focused as they were on creating a literary, dramatic theatrical tradition, operetta and melodrama had neither a legitimate function nor a proper presentational mode, and they saw no artistic value either in the text, the music, or the performance. *Shund* (literally, trash) became the preferred term to denigrate them.¹⁰

⁶ Seiffert, “Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater,” *Di yidische bine*, vol. 1 (New York: Katzenelenbogen, 1897), no pagination.

⁷ “Mogulesko hot ongefungen tsu trinken far tsores,” *Forverts*, 24 February 1914, 6.

⁸ In his article, “Muzik in yidishn teater un in shul,” *Forverts*, 24 December 1913, for example, Rumshinsky comments extensively on the influence that synagogue music and theater music had on each other.

⁹ The centrality of realism in the thinking of the radical intellectuals is discussed by Steven Cassedy, *To the Other Shore: The Russian Jewish Intellectuals Who Came to America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹⁰ For an in-depth discussion of Yiddish theater criticism by immigrant intellectuals, see Bettina Warnke, “Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater: The Cultural Politics of Immigrant Intellectuals and the Yiddish Press, 1887-1910,” (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2001) or my article, “Theater as Educational Institution: Jewish Immigrant Intellectuals and Yiddish Theater Reform,” in *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times*, ed. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming, Spring 2006. Although both studies mention the critics’ stance toward operettas, neither one focuses on them.

Given the importance of song in a performance, it is not surprising that the use of music became a central issue during the rehearsals in 1891 of Gordin's programmatic first drama, *Sibirya* (Siberia), which the theater reformer wrote expressly to fight prevailing theatrical conventions. Mogulesco had inserted selections from Verdi's opera *Hernani* to be performed with a large chorus and was planning to add comic songs and couplets, which were standard for any comic role.¹¹ Gordin would only permit an appropriate Russian folksong that the prisoners sing on their way to Siberia and other content-driven musical interludes. After an altercation between Gordin and Mogulesco, the playwright stormed out of the rehearsal and returned only on opening night. The play was advertised as having music by Mogulesco but, apparently, it contained nothing that offended the sensibilities of the editor of the radical weekly *Arbayter tsaytung*, Abraham Cahan, who praised the truthfulness of its presentation and made no mention of the music.

A year later, however, Gordin was apparently less able to exert his influence. While the Orthodox *Yidishe gazetten* praised the music in *Der yidisher kenig lir* for its "Jewish motifs and cantorial melodies,"¹² Cahan was annoyed by "the stupid squealing singing that was generously interspersed throughout [the play]."¹³ When Gordin's *Mirele Efros* was performed in 1898, critics generally praised the performance and the realistic acting. The music, however, drew criticism precisely because it interfered with the perceived realism of the production: "It is a shame that the music accompanies [Mirele's] recitation of a verse of the Psalms with a melodramatic fiddling that does not make the moment more moving at all; quite the contrary: it reminds you that you are in a theatre."¹⁴

Yet, within the context of reviewing in general, critics had little concern for the musical aspect of a production. If they mentioned it at all, they usually limited it to a brief disparaging remark, such as the quotes above. When, for example, Gordin's *Got mentsh un tayvl* (*God, Man, and Devil*) opened in 1900, writers for the radical press debated the textual interpretations of the play at great length—that, after all, was their primary interest. They mentioned the acting only in passing and entirely ignored the moving rendition of *Mizmor l'Dovid*, based on Psalm 24, which serves a central motif of the play and helps characterize the protagonist who sings it in the first act and at the end, shortly before his suicide. Years later, Rumshinsky would declare this piece to be one of Josef Brody's crowning compositions.

Until around 1910, most of the theater reviews tended to focus on dramas written in the realist mode while operettas, which critics deemed "beneath criticism," were largely ignored. When they did write about operettas, their major criticism, repeated again and again, was that neither text nor music was original but borrowed from various sources and thrown together in a nonsensical way. Stories, they charged, lacked logical development and historical accuracy, and the music was often incongruous. Both text and music, they argued, were subservient to creating shows focused on spectacular and titillating effects to appeal to the audience's base tastes. With a hyperbole typical of the critics, Gordin lampooned the theater directors' prevalent attitude toward creating operettas. In the following quote from his one-act sketch, *Yokl der opern makher* (*Yokl the opera maker*), a theater director tries to convince the still idealistic greenhorn composer to write music to his new play: "Take a look, I've brought some scissors, and in one hour I'll paste together a brand-new opera, with ... a couple of acts stolen from an old operetta, an epilogue pilfered from a French melodrama, a prologue from Barnum and Bailey's circus ... and brother, there you have it: a new, stunningly successful

¹¹ Lulla Adler Rosenfeld, *The Yiddish Theatre and Jacob P. Adler* (New York: Shapolsky Publishers, 1988), 261.

¹² Kritikovski, "Klasishe trenn," *Yidishe gazetten*, 11 November 1892, 5.

¹³ Abraham Cahan, *Arbayter tsaytung*, 21 October 1892, 2.

¹⁴ Moyshe Katz, "'Di yidishe kenigin lir' oder 'mirele efros'," *Forverts*, 4 September 1898, as quoted in Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), 60.

opera! And the morons pay their money and cry, ‘Bravo!’ Yokl, don’t be a yokel; write operas—that is, steal music and shut up.”¹⁵ Gordin demonstrated considerable empathy for the originally high-minded composer who desperately needs to make a living but whose working conditions do not allow him to create anything artistic. He is pressured to compose music for an operetta whose text has not even been written or assembled from other works and has to work with a wannabe performer who can neither read music nor sing. Only a glass of beer brought by the director helps to break his inhibitions to sell out.

Another critic lamented what he considered the grotesque and morally offensive anachronistic use of music, alluding to the borrowings from European opera or operetta: “Just imagine how it looks when, for example, a High Priest sings an aria of a Spanish gypsy or when a Jewish princess declares her love for a Jewish shepherd with a solo of a French prostitute [or when]... a Jewish servant dances a Spanish pirouette or a French Cancan, and that in the middle of the Temple in Jerusalem.”¹⁶ While critics at the time lambasted all theater practitioners for pilfering and thus for producing “inauthentic” texts and music, the majority of the audience was probably untroubled by it because they did not know its origins. Of course, much of popular theater in Europe and America was built on creative adaptations of foreign plays and of integrating popular melodies into the performance. And incongruities or anachronisms in stagings were an accepted element of operettas: one may only recall Jacques Offenbach’s famous cancan in his *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

However, music was not merely a thoughtless hodge-podge addition to a play as these critics implied. It was as eclectic as the immigrants’ musical tastes, drawing from folk, cantorial, operatic, and the popular music of the day. In his analysis of Lateiner’s *Dovids fidele*, Slobin, in fact, demonstrates that “music does indeed contribute heavily to the coherence and cultural import” of the play. Lateiner, he states, “*did* know where to place his music, and Mogulesco knew exactly how to write it to both entertain and, at times, edify the audience.”¹⁷ It may not have been high art but it was effective and affective popular culture. Although Mogulesco’s songs were widely popular with his audiences, the critics rarely gave him any recognition for his compositions during his lifetime. When he died in 1914, actors, writers, and journalists clamored to publish their reminiscences about him but they all focused on his ingenuity as a comedian. Only the writer Leon Kobrin considered his music an integral part of his performance: he saw Mogulesco as a “national Jewish comedian” who “always [sang] the melody that he [carried] in his soul, his own songs, his own motifs, and how familiar [did] Mogulesco’s singing [sound] to the Jewish audience!” Many plays, he asserted, “owed their great success to Mogulesco’s song, to his truly Jewish music.”¹⁸

But besides the question over its artistic quality, it was the function of music within a typical performance that offended the critics’ sensibilities. Whether or not the songs were only loosely connected to or an integral part of the story line, they were there to showcase the actors’ abilities to sing and dance and to foment a close relationship between performer and audience. Upon hearing a song, the audience, especially on the gallery, would join in and if they liked it, demand a repeat. In an 1897 article, which criticized audience behavior during a benefit performance, for example, the author described the audience’s utter lack of attention to the action onstage until the music set in and two actors began to dance a waltz.

¹⁵ Jacob Gordin, *Yokl der opern-makher*, in *Yankey gordins eyn-akters* (New York: Tog, 1917), 185, as quoted in Berkowitz, 35.

¹⁶ Moyshe Seiffert, “Di geshikhte fun yidishn teater,” *Di yidische bine*, vol. 1 (New York: Katzenelenbogen, 1897), no pagination.

¹⁷ Slobin, *Tenement Songs*, 96. For a similar argument about Lateiner’s *Shloyme Gorgl*, see Slobin, “Some Intersections of Jews, Music, and Theater,” in Sarah Blacher Cohen (ed.), *From Hester Street to Hollywood* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

¹⁸ Leon Kobrin, “Zigmund Mogulesko,” *Tsukunft* (April 1914): 386; see also Kobrin, *Erinerungen fun a yidishen dramaturg*, Vol. 2 (New York: Komitet far Kobrin’s shriften, 1925), 23.

The music was wonderful, the dance even better, cheerful, merry, lively, ... it became so cheerful in the theater that audience members stopped fighting with each other and started to sing and whistle along. The mothers happily bounced their babies to the rhythm of the music, the older children stomped their little feet, many of those who knew this play already hummed the song that was to follow while the dance was still going on.¹⁹

Although meant as a critique of audience behavior, the text tells us much about the importance of music as a conduit to create a sense of community. The music had the power to stop the squabbles over seats, over hats that blocked one's view, or over other distractions and to erase, at least temporarily, the social, age, and gender divisions among audience members. Even more so than listening, it was the freedom to sing along that was a crucial element in building the communal feeling within the theaters. It also helped to popularize the songs, particularly in the early decades before sheet music and recordings: a theater company could thus transmit a new tune to up to three thousand audience members per night. Presupposing a familiarity with the tunes, collections of song lyrics were published regularly starting in the 1890s; by 1900, the sheet music industry made these songs easily available to immigrants who wanted to learn to play them on the piano or the violin.²⁰

While radical critics, belonging to the camp of the leftist intelligentsia such as Cahan and Gordin, tried to break this participatory element of the performances in the name of art and realism with its demand for a "fourth wall," more conservative critics did so, as the following quote from 1897 suggests, in the name of civility: "In no other theater in the world (with the possible exception of the Hottentots and Eskimos) would a theatergoer dare to sing along with the actor. I am ashamed to admit that on our Yiddish stage we hear this very often. When an actor sings the chorus of an aria or a couplet the entire gallery sings along."²¹ Despite the inroads of realist stage conventions after 1900, in 1907 Gorin still complained that comedians and soubrettes actively encouraged the audience to sing along.²² Of course, the audience's active involvement with the performance on stage had a long tradition in all lower-class theaters, Jewish and non-Jewish alike—a tradition that was still alive in the English-language Bowery theaters but had been banned from theaters serving a middle- and upper class clientele. The attempt to suppress the unruly participatory aspect of the theatergoing experience and demand restrained middle-class comportment paralleled the struggle to create an "orderly" service in the synagogue. Indeed, Tashrak made this parallel explicit in his 1912 book on etiquette. While most of the text is a direct translation of a standard etiquette book in English, he prefaced both the chapter on theater and on the synagogue with a personal reprimand of his readers who do not adhere to the standards of comportment expected in American theaters and houses of worship.²³

The critics' general disregard of music in the Yiddish theater at least until the 1910s needs to be seen within the context of writings on music in general. Overall, music was a rarely discussed topic on the pages of the Yiddish

¹⁹ Dr. T. Sigel, "Mir zaynen in teater," *Di yidishe bine*. Reprinted from an earlier article published in the *Tageblatt* (date unknown).

²⁰ Examples of publications with theater song lyrics include *Di yidishe bühne* (New York: Y. Katzenelenbogen, 1897), *Lider un kupleten fun nayste theater shtike. Fon berihmte ferfasser un dikhter* (Brooklyn: Hebrew Publishing Co., n.d.), *Yudishe theater un folks lieder: oysgevehlte lieder fun di beste yudishe dikhter* (New York: Y. Katzenelenbogen, n. d.), and *Yudishe theater lider: 100 zayten in 4 theylen* (Brooklyn: The Hebrew Publishing Co, 1901). For an in-depth analysis of the sheet music, see Slobin, *Tenement Songs*, particularly 119-197. The popularity of the piano in immigrant homes is discussed by Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 133-144.

²¹ Seiffert, "Di yidishe bine un ir tsukunft," *Di yidishe bühne*, as quoted in "Reforming the New York Yiddish Theater," 134.

²² See, for example, B. Gorin, "Der iker un der tofl in yidishn teater," *Amerikaner*, 14 June 1907, 5.

²³ See Tashrak (Yoysef Zevin), *Etikete* (New York: Hebrew Publishing Co., 1912), 87 and 114.

press. Although an occasional article about a famous European composer or about ancient Jewish musical traditions can be found, there was no concerted effort to educate the readers about musical traditions or genres. This is in stark contrast to the papers' dedication to familiarize their readers with literature—Yiddish as well as non-Jewish. The musical education, it seems, was largely left to the piano teachers. This lack of concern with music education can probably be attributed to the dearth of contributors knowledgeable about music. Although the Yiddish press wrote little to educate its readers about music, it actively promoted the attendance of “highbrow” musical events accessible to the majority of immigrants. Thus, articles appeared regularly that helped to promote the concerts of the many violin-playing Jewish *wunderkinder* which probably appealed to the audience not only because of their music but because of ethnic pride and solidarity. The press did the same for opera: in 1907, when Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House and the Metropolitan Opera House competed by offering tickets at so-called “popular” prices, the *Forverts* published synopses of all operas during that season on the day of opening night. It is very likely that many immigrants attended their first opera performance then and even those who stayed home had at least a chance to become culturally literate. However, the press offered little information about the composers or the music of the opera.

Although the early generation of composers received little credit for their work, even posthumously, the critics' attitude toward operetta, musical comedies, and melodrama was beginning to soften somewhat by 1910. With the waning of Gordin's influence, the newspaper battles over this controversial writer ceased and much of the fervor to fight for literary theater died down as well. Indicative of this changing attitude is the first lengthy and serious review of a so-called *shund*-play, Lateiner's *Dos yidishe harts* (*The Jewish Heart*), by Cahan, the staunch defender of art and realism. The review even included a positive mention of the music and the actors' singing, albeit without mentioning Mogulesco and Brody as composers.²⁴

Rumshinsky and The Advent of the Grand Operetta (1910-1930)

By the 1910s, the New York Jewish community underwent significant changes. The generation of immigrants that had arrived in the 1880s and 1890s and had dominated the political, social, and cultural scene were increasingly being replaced by their American-born successors or a younger generation of immigrants. This included the theater as well as the press. Although in 1911 and 1912, David Kessler and Boris Thomashefsky built themselves new playhouses on Second Avenue, away from their immigrant roots on the Bowery, the heyday of most of the great stars associated with launching the Yiddish stage in Romania and America was coming to an end as one by one retired or passed away. On the other hand, new troupes formed and new stars emerged, and the Yiddish press began to extend its theater coverage by launching special theater pages. In 1916, for example, the *Forverts* started to call this page “In the World of Theater and Music,” finally acknowledging the importance of music within the community.

One of the new stars was a composer: Josef Rumshinsky.²⁵ His first real success came in 1910 with his music to Zalmen Libin's drama *Gots shtrof* (*God's Punishment*), starring Jacob P. Adler and his wife Sarah. Two of the play's songs became instant hits and were immediately published. The following season, he and Anshl Shor collaborated

²⁴ Cahan, “Yidishe shund pyesen,” *Forverts*, 24 October 1908.

²⁵ In fact, Rumshinsky is the only Yiddish theater composer whose works have been studied in some detail. See Bret Charles Werb, “Rumshinsky's Greatest Hits: A Chronological Survey of Yiddish-American Songs, 1910-1931” (M.A. thesis, University of California, Los Angeles, 1987).

in creating what Rumshinsky claims to be the first modern musical comedies on the Yiddish stage: *Dos meyd fun der vest* (*The Girl from the West*) and *Shir hashirim* (*Song of Songs*). Apparently, *Meydl* set a trend with the first Yiddish mother song (“Oy vey, mamenyu”) and *Shir hashirim* was the first Yiddish operetta built around a leitmotif. The success of *Meydl* established Rumshinsky’s place as the pre-eminent Yiddish theater composer—at least, if we believe the evolving visual representation of the composer on the sheet music. The 1910 cover of the sheet music to *Gots shtrof* is dominated by the portraits of the “eminent” Adler and his wife with a smaller portrait of the upstart Rumshinsky visible at the bottom.²⁶ Although still of minor importance, by sharing the cover with two of the most prominent stars, Rumshinsky nonetheless developed a recognizable persona and started to become a household name. When in the following year, the sheet music to the song “Kheyshek” from *Meydl* was published, the cover already featured a large line drawing of Rumshinsky presenting a book with his music, thus according him visually a status usually reserved for star actors.²⁷ In 1912, he wrote the music to *Khantshe in amerike* (*Chantshe in America*), the first operetta that contained Yiddish music with an American rhythm, which played to great success in America as well as in Europe. With these compositions, Rumshinsky firmly established the modern operetta in Yiddish theater, thus replacing the historical operettas of the previous generation.

Rumshinsky not only changed the musical style of operetta, he also revolutionized its performance conditions—a fact that goes unacknowledged in the standard histories. Fellow composer Sholem Secunda, who in the early years of his career had difficulties competing with his elder colleague, credits him nonetheless with ushering in a new era in Yiddish theater. In 1916, Boris Thomashefsky hired Rumshinsky to compose the music for his *Dos tsebrokhene fidele* (*The Broken Violin*). “In his very first attempt,” Secunda declares in his memoirs, “Rumshinsky raised the prestige of the operetta and with it the prestige of the composer himself. Until 1916 the composer’s name had been rather inconspicuous in theatrical publicity. Rumshinsky demanded and Thomashefsky agreed that the name of the composer must appear in letters as large as those of the star and above the name of the play.”²⁸ Moreover, he demanded that he not only get the usual six or eight musicians but twenty-four, including cello, harp, oboes, and instruments that had not been heard in the Yiddish theater before. In other words, he attempted to create conditions for the music that were similar to Broadway, thus launching the era of the “grand Yiddish operetta.”²⁹ Cahan reviewed the play and, probably for the first time in his twenty-five-year career as a theater critic, devoted almost half of his article to the music. His overall impression was positive but the inveterate watchdog of artistic plagiarism accused Rumshinsky of having adapted some pieces from other sources, which the composer, in a lengthy letter to the editor, vehemently denied.³⁰

But Rumshinsky not only composed new works and raised the status of the modern operetta, he also helped to bring about a reevaluation of Goldfaden’s works in the early 1920s. He was the first to produce a new staging of *Shulamis* for which he created an elaborate orchestration. As Zalmen Zylbercweig asserted, “this production

²⁶ See Figure 18 in *Tenement Songs*.

²⁷ See Figure 16 in *Tenement Songs*.

²⁸ Sholem Secunda, “From *The Melody Remains: The Memoirs of Sholem Secunda*,” in Joseph C. Landis (ed.), *Memoirs of the Yiddish Stage* (Flushing, N.Y.: Queens College Press, 1984), 119-120. The composer’s name continued to be prominently displayed in future theater ads as well. See, for example, ad for *Di lustige yidelakh, Forverts*, 27 August 1918. This “revolution” is not only mentioned by Secunda but generally acknowledged by the contributors to *Dos Rumshinski bukh: aroysgegebn lekoved zayn 50ten geburtstog* (New York, no publisher, 1931).

²⁹ Zalmen Zylbercweig, “Der yubilar,” *Rumshinski bukh*, 9.

³⁰ See Cahan, “Di naye operete in tomashevskis teater,” *Forverts*, 20 October 1916, and “Yoysef rumshinski entfert ab. kahanen,” *Forverts*, 29 November 1916.

sanctified for the first time the name of the founder of Yiddish stage.”³¹ Goldfaden’s new status as a classic was now even being sanctioned by the intellectuals who had considered him passé thirty years earlier when they fought for socially critical plays in a realist vein. The aging Cahan was full of nostalgic longing for his youth and moved to sing along [!] during the performance. While he lauded Rumshinsky for bringing Shulamis back “from her grave,” he did find the music “too beautiful” for the simplicity and folksiness of the play.³² For Cahan, the modern demands of operetta clearly proved to be an aesthetic that had little in common with the beginnings of Yiddish theater. For years to come, Rumshinsky worked closely together with Molly Picon and her manager-husband, Jacob Kalich, creating many classic standards and contributing significantly to her career as one of most popular and highest paid Yiddish performers.

Composers between Oblivion and Public Figure

Because of his pre-eminence as composer and conductor and because of his own journalistic pieces, Rumshinsky seems also to have been largely responsible for fostering a public discourse in the press about operetta, the role of the composer and conductor, and music in general. By the time Rumshinsky responded to Cahan’s 1916 review of *Dos tsebrokhene fidele*, the articulate composer had already begun to publish occasional articles in the *Forverts*, many of which were geared to educate the public and to critique conditions in the theater. His educational pieces included one on the *leitmotif*, on how to recognize musical talent in children, and on the role of the conductor, which, he claimed, some audience members regarded as superfluous—after all, what could a man with a little stick in his hand possibly contribute to a performance? He often critiqued audience expectations, behavior, and taste, as well as what he considered the problematic musical influence that synagogue and theater had on each other.³³

By the 1920s, he also took on the role of eulogist both in the press and at the funerals of his colleagues Friedsell, Peretz Sandler, Yitskhok Shlosberg and others. At a time when the deaths of popular figures in the Jewish immigrant community regularly spurred mass attendance at their funerals, and the press was filled with the reminiscences of colleagues and friends, the passing of the composers received little public attention. Rumshinsky’s appraisals of their lives and works were often the only ones that reminded the readers of the composers’ contributions to the Yiddish theater and their own lives. When Friedsell passed away in 1923, Rumshinsky helped organize his funeral that about 1,000 people attended and reminded readers that he had written the music to some 150 operettas during his thirty years in New York.³⁴ But his death was overshadowed by the passing of the poet Morris Rosenfeld whose funeral brought well over 10,000 mourners to the streets and spurred a massive outpouring in the Yiddish press. Although as many immigrants could probably sing Friedsell’s songs as could recite Rosenfeld’s poetry he, like other composers, took up little space in the imagination of the public. When Henry Russotto passed away two years later, his death went virtually unnoticed; not even Rumshinsky honored him at the time.

³¹ Zylbercweig, “Der yubilar,” 9.

³² Cahan, “‘Shulamis’ shteyt uf fun keyver,” *Forverts*, 26 June 1923. But Cahan would be alone in rejecting this and subsequent attempts by theaters to present Goldfaden’s plays with a contemporary aesthetic, whether in regards to music or performance style. On the revival of Goldfaden as a classic and Cahan’s rejection of the modernist stagings of his plays, see Joel Berkowitz, “The Tallis or the Cross? Reviving Goldfaden at the Yiddish Art Theatre, 1924-26,” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 50 (Spring 1999): 120-138.

³³ These and Rumshinsky’s other articles are reprinted in *Rumshinski bukh*.

³⁴ Rumshinsky, “Lui fridzel hot geshribn muzik far 150 yidishe pyesen,” *Forverts*, 26 June 1923. See also *Rumshinski bukh*, 65-66.

Although immigrants may have learned to play the piano from their sheet music, the early generation of composers never became public figures—neither while they were alive nor posthumously. The press had ignored their work during their lifetime, and even in 1920s (and beyond) when intense nostalgia for the early days of the immigrant Yiddish theater produced article after article, and actors’ memoirs became a regular feature in the Yiddish press, the composers remained largely absent from the narratives. It seems that the collective theatrical memory shut out the work of the composers. Much of the actors’ writing or, in most cases, the writing of their journalist ghostwriters, seems bent on demonstrating the actors’ strength as performers and their participation in creating a “better” theater, one that—as the discourse during the previous decades had made clear—did not include music in any positive sense. This pattern of writing the composer out of the story continued well into recent years. Molly Picon’s 1980 autobiography, *Molly!*, barely mentions Rumshinsky despite their intense collaboration over many years.³⁵ Within the genre of memoir, it was left to the composers themselves to create a monument to their own and their colleagues’ lives and works.³⁶

Nonetheless, thanks to Rumshinsky’s stature, Yiddish theater composers as a group did slowly attain more public visibility. His music, writings, and initiative to change the status of the operetta and the composer had turned him into a public figure by the mid-1910s, and critics as well as the audience began to take notice. Cahan’s lengthy discussion in 1916 of the music in *Dos tsebrokhene fidele* was indicative of a general shift emerging in theater criticism. He as well as the younger theater critics began to focus much more on the musical and performance aspects of operettas than was typical in previous decades. In fact, reviewers often discussed these aspects at length precisely because they considered them the saving graces of productions whose texts they found formulaic and boring. By the second half of the 1920s, the visibility began to extend beyond the reviews. Veteran prompter and playwright Sholem Perlmutter began publishing biographical articles on Yiddish theater composers as well as actors and playwrights in various Yiddish newspapers.³⁷ And in 1927 and 1928, theater critic Avrom Frumkin of the *Morgen zhurnal* gave composers (besides Rumshinsky) for the first time a public voice by running a series of interviews with them that featured their careers, their latest work, as well as their opinions about the state of the Yiddish operetta.³⁸ He thus offered them the type of public exposure that previously had been reserved to writers and actors.

By the late 1920s, Rumshinsky had enjoyed two decades of continuous success working with Adler, Thomashefsky, Clara Young and, most consistently, with Molly Picon and her husband. He was the undisputed star composer and conductor and a public figure unlike any other Yiddish composer before him. In 1931, on occasion of his fiftieth birthday, he was honored with a publication in his name that included tributes from a wide range of composer colleagues, writers, and critics as well as a selection of his own writings. Rumshinsky was the only Yiddish theater composer thus honored. The contributors agreed that Rumshinsky had saved the Yiddish operetta, which they felt, had been the “neglected” “stepchild” of Yiddish theater during the Gordin years, and they celebrated him as a consummate

³⁵ See Molly Picon, *Molly! An Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980).

³⁶ Rumshinsky published his *Klangen fun mayn leben* (New York: Biderman) in 1944 and Sholem Secunda’s memoirs were serialized in the *Forverts* from May 1969 to December 1970. A short excerpt of Secunda’s work can be found in Landis, *Memoirs of the Yiddish Stage*.

³⁷ They probably provided the basis for this book, *Yidishe dramaturgn un teater-kompozitors* (New York: IKUF, 1952).

³⁸ See, for example, the following articles by Frumkin in *Morgen zhurnal*: “Vegen muzik un suzheten far operetes amol un haynt,” 9 March 1928 (about Herman Wohl); “Nit in dzhhez ligt di tsore, nor in di suzheten,” 16 March 1928 (about Sholem Secunda); “Kempft mitn ‘vilen fun der tsayt’,” 23 March 1928 (about Arnold Perlmutter).

professional and “reformer” of the Yiddish stage by introducing the modern operetta.³⁹ Sholem Perlmutter, with effusive jubilee rhetoric predicted that “figures like Rumshinsky remain forever in the memory not only within the narrow circles of our profession but also in the life of our people because an entire historical era which they created is connected with their names.”⁴⁰

Rumshinsky himself, however, saw the situation of the Yiddish theater composer more realistically and more bleakly. Toward the end of his memoir, he pointed to the ephemeral nature of music and to the specific conditions of the Yiddish theater composer, which deny him the credit he deserves. “The situation of the composer for the Yiddish theater is generally very sad because the world can never acquaint itself with his better musical creations because the entire score ... is rarely, almost never printed. ... And the saddest aspect is that as soon as the operetta is taken off the bill, the entire music dies away.” But in closing he tried to reassert the value of his own work and that of his colleagues: “Music is an important factor in theater in general and in Yiddish theater especially.”⁴¹ When Sholem Perlmutter’s *Yidishe dramaturgn un teater kompozitors* (Yiddish Dramatists and Theater Composers) was published a few years later, Jacob Shatzky stressed the importance of these biographical articles on the composers even though, as Jacob Mestel noted, the list was far from complete.⁴² Shatzky believed that the articles dedicated to the composers were helping to rescue them from oblivion, and he stressed the need to evaluate their contributions to the theater. Sadly, the history of the Yiddish operetta still beckons to be written.

³⁹ See, for example, A. Mukdoyni, “A vort tsu yosef rumshinski’s yubiley”, 11, and M. Osherovitch, “Yoysef rumshinski der shtendiger ‘onfanger’,” 16, both in *Rumshinski bukh*.

⁴⁰ Sholem Perlmutter, “Der diktator fun der yidisher operete,” *Rumshinski bukh*, 24.

⁴¹ Rumshinsky, *Klangen fun mayn lebn*, 823.

⁴² Among the names he mentions that are neither included in Perlmutter’s book nor in *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* are A. Kreyn, Yoyel Engel, Henekh Kon, Lazar Vayner, Moyshe Rauch, Vladimir Heifetz and others.