

Mirele Efros; or, The Jewish Queen Lear

JACOB GORDIN

Introduction

Mirele Efros, “the Jewish Queen Lear,” was one of the major roles in serious Yiddish theater. Jacob Gordin wrote the play in 1898 for Lower East Side star Keni Liptzin, who, though tiny and partial to sparkly jewelry, was known for her intelligence, intensity, and commanding presence. Having married a rich publisher, she was also one of the few performers who could afford to produce the vehicles she wanted: literary rather than low brow, primarily spoken rather than sung. A few years later, Ester Rokhl Kaminska, whom people called the Yiddish Duse, took on the role in her family’s theater in Warsaw. Their interpretations differed because their personas differed. The most often reproduced photo of Liptzin in the role shows a handsome woman standing proudly erect despite the walking stick in her hand; the most popular photo of Kaminska shows her white-haired and gentle, leaning on her stick and her little grandson. In the rivalry between the divas, fans took sides passionately.

Soon Mirele became the role by which serious actresses were measured. I myself have seen three Mireles: Leonie Waldman Eliad with the Romanian State Jewish Theater, Zypora Spaisman with New York’s Folksbiene, and Edit Kuper with Montreal’s Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre. In every case, Mirele’s chair, footstool, and stick are emblems of the woman and the play; the Montreal Yiddish theater actually sold T-shirts with a picture of an elaborate armchair. Opera star Rosalind Elias starred in a musical adaptation at New York’s Jewish Repertory

Theatre in 1985. The first to play Gordin's Mirele in English was Valerie Leonard, who starred in this translation at Theater J in Washington, DC, in 2019, at which time Nelson Pressley, critic for the *Washington Post*, described the "thump of her scepter-like cane" and called her "imperious and elegant." Mireles have performed in Spanish, Ukrainian, and a number of other languages, including a Russian-language film in 1912, and Berta Gersten played Mirele in the 1939 American Yiddish film, which has English subtitles.

Though Mirele's grandson appears only in the last act, a number of Yiddish actors got their start in the little role. Celia Adler played Shloymele in her father, Jacob's, production. Ida Kaminska played him in her mother's production.

Mothers often figured in Yiddish plays, though not so much as in Yiddish popular songs. Especially in America, where people had in fact left their mothers behind, far away, and might never see them again, mothers were the focus for guilt and longing; they also embodied guilt and longing for the entire traditional life immigrants may have left behind. Popular plays and songs about mothers tended to sentimental tear-jerking. More literary theater, however, offered a range of interesting mother characters, dramatic or comic, including steely heroines, shrews, criminals, and fools.

I disagree with Allen Rickman's analysis following the play of long-suffering Mirele. Overweening pride—hubris, as in Greek tragedy, and not merely maternal sacrifice and a scheming daughter-in-law—is what brings her low. In the Aristotelian formulation of the nature of tragedy, pride is her fatal flaw. Battling for control of the world (both household and business) that she built and intends to keep, she is a woman who struggles, falls, and rises wiser than before.

In *World of Our Fathers*, Irving Howe suggested that the power of the plot goes beyond the protagonist herself:

Mirele Efron spoke to the common Jewish perception, grounded in a sufficiency of historical experience, that the survival of a persecuted minority required an iron adherence to traditional patterns of family life. [The character] Mirele represents the conserving strength of the past, which alone has enabled the Jews to hold together in time.*

*Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 495.

And yet Gordin began his career as an enemy of all traditions, especially the Jewish: as a revolutionary in Russia, he worked the land alongside the peasants and wrote in Russian under the pen name Ivan. He left for America in 1891, just in time to escape arrest by the czarist police. Throughout his career, he remained true to the ideological missions of his youth, above all socialism and women's rights. He wrote plays to support his large family—nobody knows how many plays he turned out, including many potboilers under pseudonyms—but he also wrote and lectured on the political and literary subjects closer to his heart. And he was influential not only through his words but also because he was a very handsome man, tall and straight “as a palm branch [*lulav*],” as another playwright recalled, with dark intense eyes and great personal charisma.

Gordin was a revolutionary in theater as well. Like the other Russian Jewish intellectuals who arrived in America in the late 1800s, he knew fine Russian theater and at first scorned Yiddish theater, which had only appeared in 1876 and in 1891 was still primarily popular fare for uneducated audiences. But when a committee of Yiddish stars approached him in the hopes of a finer repertory, he sat down, “as a scribe sits to copy a Torah scroll,” to elevate Yiddish theater and thereby the young modern Yiddish literature.

Melodrama was the form of the times, and it suited his goals. Melodrama may have taken its name from the invariable use of music in the action to heighten emotion. Music in *Mirele Efros* includes not only moments when characters are playing some kind of instrumental music, heightening the effect of the action, but also the sounds of specific prayers (traditional chants and even the Hebrew words themselves). It's true that nowadays producers may find it hard to pay musicians, but music deepens and darkens the action emotionally, enlarging the universe of the action from bourgeois parlor to eternity. It's also true that most actors will probably be unfamiliar with the way prayers should sound, but the prayers in this play can be heard on YouTube as well as at any traditional Ashkenazic synagogue. Naturally, the effect of the melodic chanting will be stronger and more specific on theatergoers familiar with the prayers' associations, but all hearers will respond consciously or unconsciously to performers who make it their business to find and listen to the real thing, however exotic, and imitate it musically.

Typically, melodrama includes certain other elements as well, such as suspense, splendid curtain speeches, and a mix of high intense moments with comic “low” characters. Above all, melodramatic plots depict the

battle of good and evil. Virtue always triumphs, reestablishing order in the universe. This pattern has led us moderns to dismiss melodrama as simple-minded, and many popular melodramas are just that. Besides, nowadays people so pride themselves on tough-minded irony and cynicism that the very term *melodrama* is an insult. But for intelligent playwrights like Gordin, the story and characters are too nuanced, too real, to be simple-minded, and the underlying implications give the story a deeper resonance. For all those reasons, melodrama has been getting more respect in the academy lately—while on the stage (and television, and movies), it never went away! Note also that for a long time Yiddish theater preserved the nineteenth-century European acceptance, and indeed approval, of tears as a profound response to truth in art.

Just as Shakespearean actors must not only enunciate the sixteenth-century words but also rise to the sixteenth-century sensibility, so too Yiddish actors—even actors playing a Yiddish drama in translation—must carry roles written a century ago or more. (When a Yiddish play seems old-fashioned, that is a factor of when it was written as well as its Yiddish-ness.) Stirring declamations, sudden shifts in tone, embodiment of characters who are real and yet larger and more meaningful than real—melodrama roles give marvelous scope to actors who can make the most of them. Performing melodrama is perhaps analogous to performing baroque music. Authentic period instruments make clear the composer’s intentions by making the composition beautiful in the original way. However, some modern ears find the sound alien, and for their sake a twenty-first-century musician may search for a more modern instrument and playing style in order to convey the beauty of the piece. Similarly, a director can choose to make the performance of a melodrama low-key, the words spoken as colloquially and informally as possible (and possibly the musical enhancement pruned away), and this does make the play more accessible to modern audiences. Still, when this diminishes the potential dramatic effect down to just another family story, what’s the point in doing the play at all? Responding to Theater J’s 2019 production of *Mirele Efros* in English, the *Washington Post* critic reflected that nowadays acting such “high relief drama” requires “a particular kind of tact,” which he associated with cast members’ “simplicity and power.” I think by “tact” he meant the ability to serve the original, though in a way accessible to modern sensibility. Not easy.

In stage practice, Gordin insisted on verisimilitude unbroken by adlibs or distracting musical numbers; on ensemble acting rather than,

to use the Yiddish term, *starizm*; and on a spoken Yiddish unpolluted by German (an affectation of the time), so that actors spoke only the Yiddish (or occasionally Hebrew or Russian) appropriate to their characters. He had a gift for creating vivid minor characters, sometimes for specific actors who remained identified with the role forever; actors feared him but adored him because his plays stretched them and let them shine. And in general, because his reforms drew audiences that were more refined and educated people, he transformed Yiddish serious theater. Naturally, popular theater continued to thrive, as it does in all cultures, but from then on, Yiddish intellectuals considered the state and level of Yiddish theater a touchstone of modern secular Yiddish culture as a whole. From 1890 to 1910 is remembered as the Gordin Era.

By the early twentieth century, the more intellectually ambitious Yiddish art theater projects shared the visions of the European and American avant-garde as a whole. It was Gordin who had drawn Yiddish theater into the larger sphere; yet, ironically, his own plays were becoming old-fashioned. Yiddish art theaters began to scorn such warhorse melodramas as *Mirele Efros* and *God, Man, and Devil*. All the same, popular audiences kept asking for them, laughing and crying till the final curtain, and actors continued to choose Gordin's plays as vehicles. Several of the best, including *Mirele Efros*, have remained repertory staples till this day.