

Alyssa Quint and Amanda Miryem-Khaye Seigel, eds., *Women on the Yiddish Stage* (Oxford: Legenda, 2023), pp. 331.

by *Ruthie Abeliovich*

Women on the Yiddish Stage, edited by Alyssa Quint and Amanda Miryem-Khaye Seigel, represents a significant scholarly contribution to Jewish studies and theater history. This groundbreaking anthology defines a new field of research, by assembling a diverse collection of essays that illuminate the pivotal yet often overlooked roles of women in Yiddish theater, from its origins to contemporary times. In addition to uncovering the previously unexplored histories of women artists in Yiddish theatre, the volume paves new research vistas and establishes a foundation for future research, encouraging scholars to explore the rich intersections of gender, Jewish culture, and performance.

From its inception, Yiddish theater was notable for its inclusion of women performers—a cultural shift that, as Quint discusses in her introduction, marked one of the most significant developments in this artistic domain. The book raises critical questions regarding the cultural contributions of women on the Yiddish stage. How did female actors shape and generate culture? While male performers had long dominated diverse public stages, women had rarely participated in public Jewish performances prior to the establishment of Yiddish theater. The pioneers of this theater enterprise recognized that women’s involvement was essential, and by the late 19th century, female performers had begun to achieve celebrity status comparable to their male counterparts. At the same time, the public visibility of women in performance also exposed them to societal stigmas, including associations with prostitution and moral impropriety. For many women working in the theater and traveling with Yiddish theatre troupes, marriage offered a measure of protection against the harassment and chauvinism prevalent in their profession. The study of women in Yiddish theater encompasses their leadership roles and participation in troupes often structured like familial units.

Women on the Yiddish Stage provides a compelling examination of the social challenges that women theatre creators encountered in their pursuit of recognition and success in the Yiddish theatrical world. The book delves into the social barriers and gender biases these women faced, while highlighting their multifaceted artistic

contributions to Yiddish theatre. The prominence of women in Yiddish theatre reflects their growing enfranchisement in public Jewish cultural life, as well as the integration of secular values into their artistic expressions.

Many of the women theatre makers discussed in this volume not only performed but also authored plays and penned memoirs that chronicled their careers and lives, often serialized in the Yiddish press. Nina Warnke's essay examines how performers like Bessie Thomashefsky, Bertha Kalich, and Sarah Adler navigated societal conventions, simultaneously challenging and conforming to gender norms. The impact of women's presence on stage extended beyond aspiring actresses; they became symbols of empowerment and financial independence for female audiences.

This volume features twelve chapters authored by scholars of Yiddish theater, each offering historical perspectives on the careers and representation of women in this vibrant cultural sphere. For instance, Sonia Gollance explores Judith Berg's choreographic practice, highlighting the significance of dance within Poland's Yiddish Art theater. Vivi Lachs provides an insightful analysis of early 20th-century Yiddish theater song sheets, revealing how composers and performers engaged with gender roles during a period of profound cultural transformation. Ronald Robboy's meticulous examination of Molly Picon's songwriting uncovers lesser-known aspects of her illustrious career, while Caraid O'Brien discusses Miriam Kressyn's navigation of American life for immigrant and Yiddish-speaking audiences. O'Brien sheds light on the transition of women actresses from the Yiddish theatre stage to the Yiddish speaking airwaves, and the fashioning of their personas as radio broadcasters. Ina Pukelyte sheds light on the interwar Yiddish theater scene in Kaunas, spotlighting the previously unknown influential roles of female impresarios Sofia Edri and Rachel Berger.

Debra Caplan's chapter on Sonia Alumis raises pivotal historiographical questions about our ability to study and understand an artist whose personal narrative remains largely undocumented. Utilizing the trope of the 'voice' to discuss the dearth of women narratives in Yiddish theatre, Caplan's chapter provides a model for theatre historians that seek to recover stories of female theatre makers whose archival presence is less robust than their male colleagues. Tova Markenson addresses the societal stigmas faced by female theatergoers in turn-of-the-century

Buenos Aires, while Veronica Belling chronicles Sarah Sylvia's trailblazing leadership in the Johannesburg's Yiddish theater scene.

Giulia Randone analyzes Ida Kaminska's innovative Yiddish adaptations of Bertolt Brecht's "Mother Courage," described by its critics as "anti-Brechtian." Anna Rozenfeld discusses Diana Blumenfeld's theatrical activities, in the Warsaw Ghetto and later, in postwar Poland, as she became a Yiddish radio broadcast. Similar to the example of Miriam Kressyn discussed in O'Brien's chapter, the voices of these motherly female performers guided their audiences through profound cultural and social transitions. Finally, Corina L. Petrescu explores the lives of Dina Koenig and her daughter Lya Koenig-Stolper, whose theatrical careers exemplify the resilience and agency of women within the shifting landscape of Yiddish art theater.

Despite the rich tapestry of women's contributions, theatre histories tend to minimize their agency, and their cultural networks are frequently depicted as subordinate to male-dominated systems. This trend was further compounded by the prevailing focus on national theater histories and elite institutions in theater historiography. *Women on the Yiddish Stage* offers to reconsider such prevailing cultural narratives by placing the limelight on the seminal activities of women in the Yiddish theatre. The contributions in this volume cover a wide temporal range, from late 19th-century Yiddish theater in Eastern Europe to postwar productions featuring Yiddish-speaking actresses. The geographical scope of the chapters provides insight into the theatrical activities of Yiddish-speaking theater makers, spanning from Romania to the United States and from Buenos Aires to Johannesburg. Collectively, these elements form a transnational network of women in Yiddish theater, which helped to propagate Jewish cultural identity across borders and connect diasporas within a social landscape marked by fragmentation.

Women on the Yiddish Stage effectively brings the work of women in the Yiddish theater work into visibility through a series of compelling case studies, laying the groundwork for future research that will illuminate transnational, female-centered networks of creative and intellectual exchange. This anthology is an essential resource for scholars and students alike, offering invaluable insights into the roles of women in Yiddish theater and their broader cultural implications. Through its meticulous scholarship and comprehensive analysis, it paves the way

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for a more nuanced understanding of the intersections between gender, culture, and performance in the Yiddish theatrical tradition.

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