

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Taiwan-Yiddish Theatre Connection

Corey Fischer · Thursday, August 30th, 2012

I confess I was a little nervous as I waited in a bayside café to meet Stan Lai, whom both the BBC and the [New York Times](#) have tagged as the most important and innovative playwright and director in the modern Chinese Theatre. But the moment he appeared and I took in his shoulder length hair, goatee and smiling, open face, I felt like I'd always known him.

Actually, it was odd that we *hadn't* met before Stan's visit from Taiwan. In 1982, he had seen me on stage in one of the first productions by Traveling Jewish Theatre, the company I'd founded with two others in 1979.

After a few unsatisfying years playing minor character parts in some movies and TV shows, I ran away – not with a circus, exactly – but with an experimental, socially engaged theatre. My new career may not have paid as well as “the industry” but it provided the soul food I craved. Soon I was in New York, getting a crash course in collaborative, ensemble theatre-making from some giants of the American alternative theatre movement.

Working in that area, you can't avoid the big questions. Like: why are you doing this? What does it *mean*? What are you serving? I began to feel that, for me, a big piece of the answer would come from my own tangled Jewish identity. I'd not had any religious training as a child, but Jewish culture includes more than religious observance. I was drawn to learning about the history, literature, music and imagination of my ancestors. I had a hunch it could generate a new kind of theatre. After all, in those years, new forms of theatre were emerging from different ethnicities and identities – black theatre, Latino theatre, Asian and feminist theatre. But where, I asked myself, was a new *Jewish* Theatre? So I returned to Los Angeles in 1978 and invited two close friends to join me in finding out.

That question birthed a theatre that created and performed new works for thirty-four years. But theatre is nothing if not impermanent and despite its unusual longevity, [TJT finally came to an end](#) last spring.

Though I knew from our brief email correspondence that Stan had seen TJT, I was unprepared for the story he told which he generously told a second time so I could get it on video. (The video's below.)

The TJT play Stan saw in '82 that's central to his story was *The Last Yiddish Poet*, a play that my colleagues Albert Greenberg and Naomi Newman and I took a year to create collaboratively. It was our second project and grew out of our fascination with the story of the Yiddish language, which is often misidentified as a “dialect,” usually of German. It's not. But it's complicated. Yiddish was the spoken language of Eastern European Jews from around 900 to the early twentieth century. It began before they got to Eastern Europe though, in the area that's known today as the Alsace-

Lorraine, spanning the French-German border.



By the end of the fifteenth century, most Jews in Western Europe had either been formally expelled, killed or persecuted so relentlessly that they chose to resettle in Poland, Lithuania, the Ukraine and Russia. Several rulers – the best known was Catherine the Great – invited Jews to specific regions to serve the nobility as managers, merchants and tax-collectors. They brought their young language – Yiddish – with them and it began to graft Slavic words onto its Germanic and Hebrew roots. To add to the confusion, Yiddish is written with the Hebrew alphabet. So, unless you speak one of the languages, you’ll be forgiven for assuming that written Yiddish *is* Hebrew.

But until the late nineteenth century – about 150 years ago – there was almost no written Yiddish. It was strictly a spoken language of the common people. Rabbinical scholars showed off with flowery Hebrew and well-off merchants might use Russian, but the “proste yidn,” the “little people” stuck with Yiddish. A few prayer books, translations of the Hebrew Bible (the “Old Testament”) and a volume or two of pseudo chivalric sagas were published in Yiddish for the female demographic, who, being mostly excluded from the religious training (the *only* training available to Jews) spoke no Hebrew, in which almost all Jewish books were written.

But in the aftermath of a few revolutions and the Napoleonic wars, as the walls of the shtetl were breeched, a migration from Jewish villages (*shtetls*) and outlying towns to Cities like Warsaw, Moscow, Vilna and Cracow surged. Jews could, finally, acquire a secular education. For the first time in history young Jews began to write poems, stories, plays, essays and even novels and histories in Yiddish! By 1880, recitations and sketches were being performed in Yiddish, and soon full length plays. Within 50 years, Yiddish culture had recapitulated the evolution that most other cultures took centuries to accomplish. And in another 20, after millions of speakers of Yiddish had been murdered, Yiddish was left for dead.

Our play grew from our need to grasp this history in all its contradictions and plain *strangeness*. We, like most assimilated American Jews, had grown up with no idea that there even was such a thing as modern Yiddish poetry. The conventional wisdom said that Yiddish was marginal, good for jokes, a sentimental song like *My Yiddishe Momma*, and utterly trivial. But in researching our first play we had begun to discover the truth. So we made a play that began with two broken down Jewish comedians with false noses and exaggerated Yiddish *eggzents* who, in fact, pitch stealth zingers aimed at exploding the same cultural stereotypes they’re embodying. After some kibitzing and schmoozing, they announce a special guest: the last (der usta be a lotta dem...) Yiddish poet. But the poet isn’t there. Since the show must go on, one of the comedians is strong-armed by the other into impersonating him.

I’ll stop there. But hold that image of a couple of derelicts having to fake their way into a lost, dead or dying art form, as Stan Lai tells the rest.

[How Traveling Jewish Theatre Influenced the Birth of Modern Chinese Theatre in Taiwan from Corey Fischer on Vimeo.](#)

Images: Top, Traveling Jewish Theatre’s production of The Last Yiddish Poet; Stan Lai’s Secret Love in Peach Blossom Land.

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