

Theater

Tel Aviv Festival Explores Today's Jewish Theater

By MARGARET CROYDEN

There was a time when the meaning of the phrase "Jewish theater" was clear. It referred to the Yiddish theater, which started in the 1880's, and for several decades thrived in New York and in Eastern Europe, offering new plays in Yiddish, or translations (and sometimes transformations) of plays from other languages.

But today, just as Jewish identity itself has become more fragmented and uncertain, so "Jewish theater" is becoming more difficult to define. Is it the Yiddish theater which continues to function tenuously in New York? Does it refer to theater done by Jews — or to plays about the ethnic, minority experience of Jews in the United States and elsewhere and the long history of diaspora Jews? Or is it Israeli theater concerned with the history and contemporary experience of that young country?

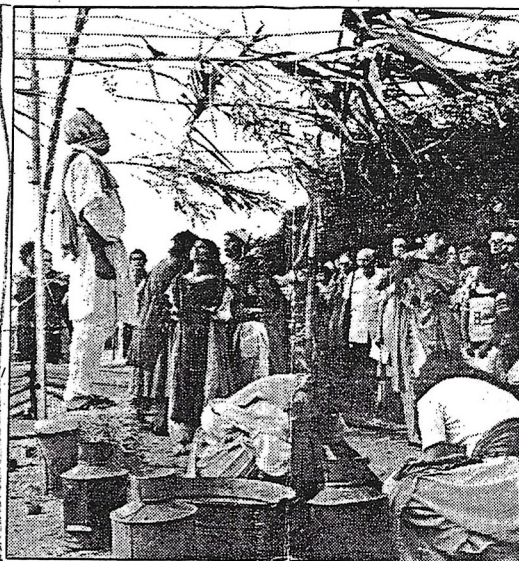
These were some of the questions posed and discussed at the first International Conference and Festival of Jewish Theater, held recently in Tel Aviv. The five day event, sponsored by Tel Aviv University's Department of Theater and two American-based foundations, the National Foundation for Jewish Culture and the Kinneret Foundation, consisted of 20 theatrical productions, four workshops and a series of films, seminars and lectures. It attracted actors, writers, directors and, in some cases, theater compa-

Margaret Croyden writes on the theater and is completing a new book "Remembering and Forgetting" based on the Jewish experience in America.

nies from the United States, Great Britain, India, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Venezuela and Argentina. Immediate history made its presence felt in the form of the Lebanese war; the Festival was nearly cancelled at the last moment owing to the number of Israeli actors called to the army and it was boycotted by German actors, whose companies were represented by their directors. In a different way, the current events were also felt in the anti-war poetry of Yehuda Amichai, a prize-winning Israeli poet, which he read accompanied by the music of the American composer Elizabeth Swados, and which expresses the mourning of Jews in the face of death and war.

But the impact of the political situation notwithstanding, perhaps the most revealing lesson of the Festival was the variety of themes, perceptions and theatrical techniques used by artists trying to define and come to terms with the meaning of the Jewish experience and consciousness in today's world.

For some young American artists of Jewish descent, as well as theater people from European countries, the theater is a means of renewing their cultural identity, or even discovering it for the first time. As Abraham Atik, the executive director of the National Foundation of Jewish Culture observed, "Many Jewish artists in the United States are trying to find a connection to the past and to the meaning of the Jewish experience, which, as they have become assimilated has been lost to them." One actor said that he was proud of his ethnicity and wanted to express it artistically, just as the Blacks and Puerto Ricans do: "Dealing with the Jewish experience through a Jewish theater company is a way of remembering what has hap-



Michal Govrin's "The Journey of the Year," above, is performed outdoors and "uses traditional sources in an unconventional way." "Imagining the Other (They)," below, commissioned by the Israeli group Neve Tzedek, is a dramatized confrontation between Israeli Arabs and Jews.



pened to the Jews and of being ever conscious of a possible repetition."

Israeli artists face different problems and question. For one thing, they do not have to affirm their Jewishness in distinction to the rest of their society — although Israeli playwright Dan

Horowitz, for example, felt that the population of Israel had become so large and so ethnically varied that many artists have to rethink their relationship to their individual heritage. But the main artistic challenge, as he saw it, is in Israel's search for a

national culture — and that includes Israeli theater — typical of Israeli society and the Israelis' kind of Jewishness. Many of the Israelis attending the Festival also felt that although religious tradition provides a rich source of material for artists in dealing with contemporary problems, Zionist history and Zionist ideals can also be drawn upon.

Other playwrights and performers at the Festival said they were looking for spiritual reawakening through discovering their own roots and religion, and what better way was there to make such a search than through one's work in the theater?

For many of the groups, the search for their own definition of a "Jewish experience" involves a search for appropriate theatrical forms as well — forms that, in many cases, attempted to mesh traditional themes and a sense of history with unconventional and avant-garde theatrical techniques. The degree of success varied from group to group, but the significance of the Jewish Theater Festival, Mr. Atik said, was to begin making such a search — to help artists find a "form for the expression of their Jewishness — their particular distinctiveness within the concepts of universalism."

One company representative of the effort to combine new forms with the traditional and mystical aspects of Judaism is "A Traveling Jewish Theater," an experimental group from the United States. Composed of only two actors and a director, the California-based troupe, says in its brochure that its purpose is to "give theatrical form to various streams of visionary experience which run, sometimes underground, through Jewish history and imagination." In Tel Aviv, three of their pieces were shown: "Coming From a Great Distance," a dramatized collage of ancient tales of Baal Shem Tov, a spiritual master of the 17th century who "carried the spirit of renewal into the lives of Eastern European Jews"; "Dance of Exile," which explores themes of Jewish exile and Jewish alienation through use of elements of the Spanish Cabbalist tradition; and "The Last Yiddish Poet," an explora-

tion of the significance of the Yiddish language, and the humor and the tragedy of Eastern European Jews. Directed by Naomi Pollack and performed by Albert Greenberg and Corey Fisher, the productions were alive with contemporary devices such

'For some, Jewish theater is a means of renewing their cultural identity.'

as puppetry, masks, spontaneous movements, and filmic collages. But these modernist techniques notwithstanding, the overriding visual images were distinctly connected with the sensibility and ambience of the East European *shtetl*, sometimes in a nostalgic and sentimental way. Though this may be a way for the actors of making connections with their heritage, it made for a somewhat limited frame of reference. But "A Traveling Jewish Theater" is only two years old, and may be working toward a larger perspective.

"The Journey of the Year," written and directed by a Hebrew University theater professor, Michal Govrin, also used traditional sources and ritual theater in an unconventional and highly effective way. "Unlike other ritual traditions," Miss Govrin said, "Jewish worship never underwent the process of theatricalization . . . owing to its prohibition in the ten commandments. . . . A type of sacred theater did, however, manifest itself in Jewish worship: The use of rhythmic words, and rhythmic movement, special speech, story telling, costuming, accessories and ritual objects (all within a fixed time and space) and a participating audience." This tradition, she feels, presents a "possibility to examine the theatrical aspects of Jewish ritual with a view to a new perspective for understanding ritual-

Continued on Page 9

Exploring Jewish Theater

Continued from Page 6

theatrical expression within the Jewish ceremony."

"The Journey of the Year" expresses not only Jewish ritual, but the experience among Jews of the cycle of the Jewish year, commencing with *Rosh Hashana* (the New Year) until its end at *Tish B'Av* (the mourning of the destruction of the temple) and the coming of the New Year once again. The piece is performed outdoors, with the audience actually following the actors through "the stations of the holidays and festivals," each of which is depicted through traditional Jewish customs. Some holidays like *Purim* evoke a carnival scene, with food offered to the spectators. Passover is dramatized by family preparations for the great feast the Seder, and by enacting the story of Moses on Mount Sinai on a high hilltop surrounded by small burning fires.

In using traditional sources, Miss Govrin involved the audience directly. Children were especially responsive. Recognizing the holidays as part of their life experience, some even joined the cast to read from the Holy Scriptures. As in family celebrations during the holidays, one could feel the strong bond resulting from a common religious ethos and historical past.

On the other end of the spectrum among the Festival's presentations was "Imagining the Other (They)," a play dealing with a specifically Israeli and very contemporary subject. Commissioned by the Israeli group, "Neve Tzedek," and mounted by the American director Joseph Chaikin, the piece is a dramatized confrontation between Israeli Arabs and Jews who discuss and act out their cultural, social and political conflicts and persecutions from ancient times until today, each side "keeping score," as it were. Performed in Hebrew and Arabic, the production was the result of a most unusual experiment: three Jewish actors, three Arab actors, a Jewish musician, an Arab musician, a Jewish writer-director, and an Arab writer-director worked collectively, each contributing his or her own story or stories from people they knew, with Mr. Chaikin and his associate, Mira Rafalowicz supervising the whole team. The Arab-Jewish problem within the play is presented in a satirical, non-political framework, and left deliberately unresolved. The play's Jewish writer, Miriam Kainy, said that she had not aimed "for balance or



Patrick Waldron in "James Joyce and the Israelites"

ever confrontation." Her object was to "put Arabs on stage — real Arab actors and let them speak for themselves, out of their own experience." Indeed, the play was apparently the first time that Israeli Arabs had appeared on stage with Jews and were able to tell their own stories — perhaps one reason for its intense impact on the Festival's audience.

One of the more conventional pieces shown at the festival, though symptomatic of interesting activity in the United States, was Arthur Miller's "The Price" mounted by the American Jewish Theater expressly as a vehicle for the fine Jewish-American actor Joseph Buloff, who was to be honored at a special "tribute to Yiddish theater." (As it turned out, Mr. Buloff fell ill and couldn't come. The drama, performed by the American Jewish Theater went on anyway, playing at the Habimah Theater to sell-out houses and standing ovations). Now in its fourth year as the resident professional theater company at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York City, the American Jewish Theater had as its original purpose the performance in English of previously untranslated Jewish classics. "These plays manifest Jewish customs, ethics and myths and should be uncovered," said its founder and director, Stanley Brechner. "Instead of doing Ibsen which I had studied in my drama course in college, why not uncover some of the great Jewish writers?" He also produces new work by Jewish playwrights on Jewish themes.

But "The Price" is not exactly a play dealing with Jewish themes. Why

bring it to the Festival? "I did it for Joseph Buloff, one of our great Jewish actors," Mr. Brechner said. "I wanted Buloff to bridge the gap between the generations — to have him play in the Habimah Theater, which represents the oldest Jewish theater in the world. Performing there physicalized the fact of sharing the tradition. We were the first American-Jewish company to play there."

Perhaps one of the surprising contributions to the festival was the British entry, (optioned for a New York production) "James Joyce and the Israelites," written by an Irishman, Seamus Finnegan, directed by a Jew, Julia Pascal, and played by a delightful cast of Jewish and non-Jewish British actors. Concerned with the universality of suffering, the play presents the saga of three generations of an Irish-Jewish family, interspersed with material from Joyce's real life and his writings, especially "Ulysses." The point of the piece is that the Jewish dilemma is similar to that of the Irish, both peoples having been persecuted, nearly wiped out, and forced to endure a world-wide diaspora. At the end, James Joyce, as the story teller, asks, "What is a Jew?" and answers: "I am a non-Jewish Jew. I am Jewish as an act of rebellion in a Christian world. . . . But real liberty is forgetting ethnicity. Real liberty is non-conformity. Liberty is choice, being free from being a patriot — this is the road to spiritual development."

"James Joyce and the Israelites" was a provocative contribution to the Festival's dialogue between cultural distinctiveness and universalism continues. But the dialogue has not been without practical results. The National Foundation for Jewish Culture is already planning the next Festival; plans are afoot for the founding of an International Center in Tel Aviv to act as a clearing house for Jewish theater activities; a Journal of Jewish Performance is envisioned as well as the possibility of establishing funds for Jewish playwrights, along the lines of the Eugene O'Neil Playwrights Conference, to attract talented professionals. But the main dividend of the Conference/Festival so far is the momentum it created and the support it offered to theater artists from many countries to aspiring to create a theater that is Jewish and contemporary at the same time.

THINK SUMMER
THINK FRESH AIR FUND