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Messiahs of 1933

*How Playwright Moishe Nadir and Artef Led
America Out of the Great Depression to a Future of
Full Employment, Justice, and Yiddish Satire for All*

One of the most radical cultural events in America could have taken place during the Great Depression, if everyone in the country spoke Yiddish: the public would have been able to welcome a Yiddish-speaking messiah who arrived in New York. With thirteen to fourteen million Americans unemployed, thousands of banks closed permanently, and breadlines everywhere, the nation needed a messiah. Not one, but two saviors arrived in New York and spoke the language of East European Jews in May of 1933. They could be seen in the company of actors at the Yiddish theatre collective Artef (Arbeter Teater Farband, or Worker's Theatrical Alliance), when it staged Moishe Nadir's play, *Messiah in America*.¹

Nadir's stage play begins with a comic portrait of theatre producers, and extends its satire to messianism. Broadway producer Menachem Yosef and his assistant Jack the Bluffer announce that a Yiddish-speaking messiah has arrived, and can be seen in their theatre for a price. Menachem knows his messiah is an impostor, but the public welcomes the savior, much to the producer's delight.

The 1933 producers of Nadir's play were messianic too. Artef's actors, their director, and Nadir took upon themselves the tasks of a messiah, inaugurating in artistic form their visions of social justice, peace, and redistributed wealth. Their Yiddish-language

responses to inequality and economic hardship in *Messiah in America* and other plays might now be regarded as scenes of a lost cause. The new, radical society their reveries anticipated never arrived. Their leftist political and artistic legacies remain outside mainstream American culture. Yet, this does not mean the work of these artists disappeared completely. The unions on strike, the anarchist peddler on Rivington Street, the tailor who won the lottery, and the false messiahs Artef presented on stage between 1928 and 1940 still can be found in play texts. Immodest proposals that Nadir and his theatre colleagues shaped into plays during that period survive with humor, daring, and imagination intact, as scenes of social change and satire born in a time of adversity.

The creations by Yiddish stage satirists like Nadir and his friend, puppeteer Yosl Cutler, differed from those of most other American artists who responded to the Great Depression. By the time the Hollywood cast of *Gold Diggers of 1933* sang “Brother Can You Spare a Dime?” in English, much of the United States was experiencing the economic insecurity and tests of will that Yiddish-speaking immigrants had known for decades, when they fled Eastern European pogroms and anti-Semitic governments. Artists like Nadir and Cutler, and their American Jewish artistic community, could bring their earlier education in poverty and survival, and their own forms of leftist politics and messianic tradition, into Yiddish theatre when responding to challenges of the period. In Yosl Cutler’s 1936 puppet show parodying Ansky’s classic play, *The Dybbuk*, a delirious Kabbalah student dreams of a “united front” formed by poor Jews within the “goyish” (or non-Jewish) crisis of the Depression.² But his vision of Yiddish activism and its culture uniting everyone for social change was only a dream.

The social consciousness and satire conveyed through theatre by Cutler, Nadir, and their associates did not find much of an audience in the English-speaking public, or “goyim” of America. Even Yiddish-speaking audiences generally preferred to see Second Avenue’s other theatres—where famous actors performed melodramas and musicals, and provided theatrical escapes from national crisis rather than confrontations with it. Sharing the 1933 Yiddish theatre season (but not the Artef stage) with Nadir’s play in New York were *Love for Sale*, featuring the popular actor and singer Aaron Lebedev; *A Mother’s Struggle*, starring tearful, melodramatic Jennie Goldstein; *Getzel Becomes a Bridegroom*, with comedian Menasha Skulnik in the title role; renowned actor Boris

Thomashefsky's production of *Polish Wedding*; Joseph Rumshinsky's musical, *The Girl From Warsaw*; and the Yiddish Art Theatre's acclaimed adaptation of I. J. Singer's novel, *Yoshe Kalb*. These plays about the Old World of Jews in transition and about New World Jews in love differed substantially in subject and style from the satiric, politically engaged theatre repertoire to which Nadir contributed. He and his colleagues in Artef, in the puppet theatre Modicut, and in the Yiddish Unit of the Federal Theatre Project created a special, alternate arena of response to the Great Depression and fascism in the thirties, as they staged ebullient scenes of resistance to oppression and struggles for survival by working-class Jews in the most difficult of times, although more difficult times were to follow in Europe in the 1940s.

Nadir's collaborations with Artef, with Yosel Cutler and Zuni Maud's puppet theatre, Modicut, and with the Federal Theatre Project's Yiddish Unit were not commercial ventures; his stage work, as well as plays by his colleagues, depended on support from workers' clubs, and on federal subsidy in the case of the Yiddish Unit. *Messiah in America* satirizes a world of money-making theatre production and cutthroat business competition that leftist Yiddish theatre workers like Nadir rejected. In the first scene of Nadir's play, a scheme to profit from messianic longings begins in the office of Broadway theatre producer Menachem Yosef. Desperately seeking new stage acts that will attract spectators, Menachem mentions in passing that he works to make a living, not merely to pursue his ideals; he is not so pure or self-sacrificing that he could "bring on the Messiah" by himself.³ Menachem's words inspire his assistant Jack the Bluffer.

JACK: What did you just say: Messiah? Messiah. Quiet. Why not bring on the Messiah? . . .

MENACHEM: Are you just talking, or do you mean business?

JACK: I mean business. You understand, it's like this. In America we have so many and so many Jews. We have plenty of Jews in New York alone. Am I right, or not?

MENACHEM: Right.

JACK: Nu, good, figure it this way. Every Jew is waiting for the messiah to come. And every Jew that's waiting for the messiah to come can afford a ticket for, let's say, a dollar seventy-five. Am I right, or not?

MENACHEM: Right.

JACK: So let's figure it this way. Two thousand people a night, at a dollar seventy-five each, makes 3,500 dollars a night. Am I right, or not?

MENACHEM: Right.

JACK: So figure it this way. (*Writing.*) Seven shows a week, plus two matinees, Saturday and Sunday, makes nine shows a week, at 3,500 a show, comes to . . .

MENACHEM: Wait a minute til I lock the door. (*Does so.*) All in all, I like it. It's a deal. But where do we get a messiah?

Not idealism, but profit motives speed the arrival of the first false messiah in Nadir's play. The "First Messiah Redemption Corporation" and other outrageously inventive plans for financial success take hold. Soon a battle for corporate control of the messiah market erupts. Through his stage satire, Nadir encourages the audience to laugh at the new messiahs of capitalism—men who promise to save everyone for a price, or let the market save them—in this case for the price of a theatre ticket. One measure of Artef's distance from capitalist art can be found in the thirty-five cent price of tickets it sold for Nadir's play in May 1933—far cheaper than Menachem Yosef's \$1.75 ticket to see the same savior.⁴

Artef also differed from commercial theatre, according to David Lifson, in these ways:

It had no capital, no investors, no rich patrons. The students in Artef gave most of their income to sustain the studio and its teachers. Substantiating Artef's dedication to art, Lifshitz (Artef's treasurer) submitted that *200,000* [a Sholem Aleichem text which became one of Artef's most popular productions] played to 60,000 people, but was withdrawn at the height of its run because Artef believed it should give more than one play a season to its subscribers.⁵

Far more eager than Artef to profit from long-running attractions, the first commercial producer featured in Nadir's satire not only charges high prices for tickets but he also keeps his messiah's wages low. The alleged messiah arrives after Menachem Yosef's assistant, Jack, calls in his Uncle Simkhe, a bearded immigrant from Eastern Europe who looks pious enough to be mistaken for a holy man, and who needs a job. Yosef persuades Simkhe to sign a contract guaranteeing him \$35 a week, a

respectable weekly salary in 1933, but a sum that turns out to be a very small percentage of the company's profits. It is not known what the standard pay for messiahs was that year, but Menachem Yosef ensures that the messiah will not be overpaid.

No satire of messianic capitalism would be complete without market competition, and after word spreads of the first messiah's arrival, a rival producer joins the fray by introducing a second messiah in America. Zipkin, who directs and performs in a Coney Island sideshow, has this conversation with the sideshow barker, Charlie:

ZIPKIN: Have you heard anything about what's doing with Menachem's messiah?

CHARLIE: Rakes in barrels of gold, they say.

ZIPKIN: Really? Gold? Barrels? He rakes it, hah? Quiet now, quiet, let me just think a minute. (*Hand to forehead*) You know what I'm going to tell you, Charlie . . . We'll come out with a messiah too—a better one than Menachem's.

Zipkin then introduces a new, younger, motorcycle-riding, English-speaking messiah to the world. The prospect of attracting an English-language audience means larger profits for the Yiddish-speaking Zipkin and his company. Looking back at the era in which Artef produced Nadir's play, it is tempting to ask whether the leftist collective should have followed Zipkin's example, and staged its satire about messiahs in English as well as Yiddish. That audience-expanding, profit-seeking idea was not part of Artef's 1933 repertoire, but in retrospect, Zipkin may have known more about economic and cultural survival in America than the artists satirizing his type. As seen in Chapter 4, a farsighted administrator in the Federal Theatre Project's Yiddish Unit initiated new translations of Yiddish plays into English in the thirties to reach a wider audience. Had the government-funded translations not stopped in 1939, innovative Yiddish plays might be more widely known to English-speaking Americans today. Unfortunately, Nadir's stage satire and others equally notable remain unpublished in English. Despite the 1933 hiring of a bilingual messiah who might have attracted *goyim* to his theatre, Zipkin and his comic life have been known primarily to those who can read Nadir's play in Yiddish.

Nadir himself took an interest in widely accessible and popular entertainment forms, as demonstrated by the boxing match with which

he ends *Messiah in America*. After Zipkin and Menachem Yosef agree that they must either fiercely compete or merge their businesses, they come up with a perfect corporate solution. The rival businesses merge and promote a boxing match between their messiahs to determine which one is the true savior. The older, greenhorn messiah (Simkhe) wins the match, thanks to a horseshoe concealed in one of his boxing gloves. The innocent old man knocks out the younger messiah without knowing hidden weights are prohibited. He's simply told the horseshoe is a good-luck charm.

Both of the producers in Nadir's play herald the outcome of the boxing match as the start of a new age, a triumph for Jews of all nations, if not all of humanity. Holding the victor's hands up high, Jack the Bluffer announces that this "greatest fight of all time and all lands . . . [is] a credit to every American citizen in general and in particular to us, Israelites, whose history goes back to Jerusalem, to Zion, to the cedars of Lebanon, to the River Jordan, to the Wailing Wall." The new age's promise for the future is questionable, considering that it starts with the death of the younger messiah. The unfortunate man lies cold on the floor of the boxing ring as Jack delivers his laudatory speech. Everyone else on stage is oblivious to the death. Those in need of a messiah cheer their new world champion, and the producers secure their better world in the form of cash, jewelry, a new car, and a trip to Florida—profits from the public's offerings to their false messiahs.

The death in the ring that inaugurates the "new age" on stage had a grim counterpart in the militarism and fascism rising offstage, particularly in Europe during the thirties. Although Nadir could not have anticipated the rise of Hitler when he wrote his satire of messianism late in the twenties, the battle between the two theatrical producers to "corner the messiah market" speaks to a time when messiahs of one variety or another were wanted by nations, as well as individuals, and false messiahs might be accepted by desperate followers. On May 11, 1933, days before false messiahs walked across Artef's stage on the Lower East Side, the Yiddish newspaper *Morgn Frayhayt* reported that 100,000 people marched in New York City to protest against Hitler's fascism. Nadir's satire was not specifically directed at Hitler, but the political and economic conditions of the period rendered all the more timely his wariness of messiahs who would not save Jews, or anyone else. Jews had greeted false messiahs in earlier periods of history and literature, notably when Sabbati Zvi (1626–76) became "the Anointed One" and "King of

Nadir's MESSIAH IN AMERICA

STORY BY JOEL SCHECHTER

ART BY SPAIN



Figure 1.1

Nadir's *Messiah in America* comic strip illustrated by Spain Rodriguez. Courtesy of the artist and Jewish Currents.

the Jews.” Nadir was by no means the first Yiddish author to write a play about a false messiah. Yiddish theatre pioneer Avrom Goldfaden’s *Ben Ami*, a melodrama about a false messiah, opened in New York in December 1907. The famous actor Boris Thomashefsky produced the play, and Goldfaden in person watched its favorable reception. Nadir, aged 22 that year and already writing in New York, could have seen the play.⁶ Sholem Asch wrote a play about Sabbati Zvi in 1908. The messiah’s delayed arrival had been joked about by non-Yiddish authors too. Kafka once predicted, “The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary,” and his ironic prognostication has so far proven accurate.⁷

However, no other Yiddish play featured a comic, Coney Island messiah before Nadir set his second, younger false messiah’s arrival there. The new, English-speaking messiah joins the world of popular entertainment as a featured sideshow performer, and then as a boxing contestant. Although the stage directions don’t say so, it would be appropriate for the fat lady, the bearded lady, the sword swallower, and the petrified man to cheer for the new arrival’s victory in the ring. The impostor messiah’s employer (Zipkin) is theirs, and their sideshow needs new attractions as much as Menachem Yosef does on Broadway. In this play’s “new age,” prosperity is just around the corner—the corner of the boxing ring in which the winning messiah stands. Such triumphs sell more tickets, and confer on the producers their own salvation through capitalism.

A few speeches in *Messiah in America* might be read as a wry, subtle critique of rivalries between Yiddish theatre producers alive in Nadir’s time. Maurice Schwartz and Jacob Ben Ami initiated such a rivalry when their two companies competed around the same time (1918–19) Nadir wrote the story on which he later based his play. Ben Ami, who rehearsed his company in Coney Island at one point, could have inspired the play’s Coney Island sideshow scenes. There were other famous rivalries among the creators of Yiddish theatre in New York (notably those between Jacob Adler and Boris Thomashefsky), and other directors and actors might have seen themselves in Nadir’s characters when the play based on his story was performed first in 1929 and then in 1933.

Long before Zero Mostel portrayed a scheming theatrical producer in a film created by Mel Brooks, Nadir developed this earlier comic version of *The Producers*. Nadir’s confidence men sell tickets to the arrival of the messiah, instead of producing a musical that celebrates Hitler’s arrival as Fuhrer. While Mel Brooks did not derive his plot from Nadir, Brooks’s sense of humor, influenced by the Borscht Belt’s stand-up

comedians and *tummlers* (Yiddish for entertainer or social director), may have benefited from the same cultural circles known to Nadir. In Brooks's 2001 musical stage version of *The Producers*, based on his own film, the leading character boasts he was a protégé of actor Boris Thomashefsky. Nadir was not a protégé of Thomashefsky; but he knew most of the accomplished Yiddish actors in New York, and their plays, and also may have known Borscht Belt entertainers in the vicinity of his summer hotel in upstate New York.

For most of his professional life, Nadir was better known as an essayist and poet than as hotelier, playwright, or collaborative stage artist. Born Isaac Reiss in Narayov, Galicia, in 1885, he arrived in the United States at age 13, when his mother joined his father, who immigrated to New York earlier. By 1902 he was publishing articles for a Yiddish newspaper; he was editing the Yiddish humor journal, *Der Groyser Kundes* (*The Big Prankster*) by 1909 and then co-editing, with Jacob Adler, *Der Yidisher Gazlon* (*Jewish Bandit*), another Yiddish humor periodical, in 1910. Having found a place in the world of Yiddish satire, he also made his mark as a poet with *Vilde Rozyn* (*Wild Roses*), a volume of erotic verse in Yiddish that appeared in 1915. "Moishe Nadir" was one of several pseudonyms Reiss employed, as he followed the tradition of other Yiddish satirists—Sholem Aleichem and Mendele—who wrote under pseudonyms. "Nadir" translates as "here, take" or "take this," as in "Take this and choke on it." Perhaps the name was a warning to readers to brace themselves for his acid humor—or it simply invited readers to take and read his publications, which they did. In the twenties and thirties, tens of thousands of leftists read his poems and satiric columns in *Frayhayt* (*Freedom*), the Communist Party-funded Yiddish newspaper that in 1929 became the morning paper, *Morgn Frayhayt*, and in other journals. The fiery polemics, the erotic and epic poems, and the theatrical capes and coats he sported like a dandy brought Nadir considerable public attention.

Nadir's provocative and satiric newspaper columns were more widely noticed than his achievements in the theatre, but he left his imprint there too, as playwright and critic. In addition to adapting short stories for Artef, and seeing his own plays performed by the same company in the 1930s, Nadir collaborated with the distinguished Yiddish director, Maurice Schwartz, who staged several of his plays, including *The Last Jew* in 1921. His three-act musical, *The Tragedy of Nothing*, was produced at the Irving Place Theatre in 1927. A number of his one-acts and longer plays were performed by Modicut and Artef before Nadir published

them in a 1932 collection. Artef toured a play based on *Rivington Street*, a long poem published in 1932. He also contributed to the Federal Theatre Project's 1936–37 cabaret revue, *We Live and Laugh*, discussed later.

Few details about his productions can be found in histories of Yiddish theatre, although in her memoir actress Celia Adler briefly recalls some of the satiric sketches the “great humorist” Nadir wrote for Maurice Schwartz.⁸ Schwartz collaborated with Nadir again after his negative newspaper reviews of plays led some theatre producers to ban the critic from their houses. Schwartz, an actor and master of disguise himself, helped Nadir create a new identity—complete with false beard—so he could get past theatre guards on the lookout for the feared reviewer. “And so my enemies will increase their ‘guard.’ . . . The cashier has all his eyes out,” Nadir reported, “he is so flustered he gives back more change than he should. It’s a frenzy of activity! But it doesn’t help.”⁹ Like the first false messiah in his play, Nadir found his beard to be a distinct advantage in the Yiddish theatre world.

At the time that he wrote *Messiah in America*, Yiddish theatre was still quite alive and popular in New York, with over a half-million Yiddish-speaking Jews in the city supporting fourteen Yiddish theatres and ten Yiddish newspapers. Not all of these people attended Nadir’s plays or Artef, of course; that could explain why, when recounting his need to don a disguise as a critic, Nadir also recalls that the theatre he criticized was robbing the public of its “remaining bit of intelligence . . . turning [spectators] into fools.”¹⁰

Messiah in America displays no sympathy for fools. The misled public that worships false messiahs in the play exhibits a naive, all-accepting attitude toward impostor saviors. After the first messiah’s arrival is announced with a flurry of tabloid newspaper headlines, a gullible public eagerly greets the old man and, with prompting from Menachem Yosef, pays homage with expensive gifts.

The Messiah of 1929

Audiences attending Nadir’s own play were less naïve, and far more amused by the first false messiah’s appearance, than the spectators portrayed within his play, if an account of its 1929 staging is any indication. Yiddish writer Lamed Shapiro saw Act One of *Messiah in America* performed in 1929, and recalled the audience around him laughing at the

white-bearded messiah, “a Galician Jew and a wimp, [who] couldn’t manage to stay on his feet and continually needed to be supported in someone’s arms to keep from collapsing on the ground. . . . People laughed not just at America but at the messiah as well.”¹¹ Shapiro watched a performance of Act One at the Civic Repertory Theatre on 14th Street in New York City; the excerpt from Nadir’s play was part of an evening celebrating the 1929 publication of his book, *A Lamp in My Window*.

“The grotesqueries of Jewish America held the hall in an unending convulsion of laughter,” Shapiro writes. Not entirely pleased by the event, he also confesses to feeling ashamed, “as though I were laughing at someone down and out,” and he wonders if Nadir has “forgotten what the messianic hope, the messianic vision meant to him over there in Narayev [Galicia] during the years of his youth.” In these last words Shapiro himself forgets that the character on stage is not a messiah, but an impostor, a greenhorn immigrant hired by a theatre producer to impersonate a savior. Nadir and his actor appropriately portray the false messiah as a man incapable of standing upright; Simkhe is not an upright man. The physical pratfalls, as well as the satiric dialogue, undermine the messiah’s position, and prompt the laughter at him. Nadir sets up this physical comedy early in the play, when Jack describes his uncle as a sick man who can’t perform heavy labor or stand on his feet for long. Stage directions in Act One call for the old man to faint. The crowd exclaims: “He fell, our messiah.” This messiah’s later boxing victory verges on the miraculous, even if he has a horseshoe hidden in his glove.

The first act’s scenes of a faltering savior enhance Nadir’s satire of the theatre world. Desperate to sell theatre tickets, Menachem Yosef hires the impostor for his beard—his messianic face—without auditioning him very carefully. That the old man can’t stand up for long attests to bad casting by the producer as much as anything else. A messiah who can stand on his feet might be better received, and Menachem’s rival, Zipkin, understands this; his younger, stronger false messiah can walk unsupported, ride a motorcycle, and dance. Zipkin knows better than Menachem how to cast the role of false messiah, which makes sense given his background. Most of the freaks—the abnormal characters—featured in his Coney Island show are frauds, like the young messiah. A Jewish actor portrays the sideshow Indian (the man who sold Manhattan). A man also portrays the bearded lady: the gender-bending He/She

is not actually half man and half woman. Having hired other frauds, Zipkin has no trouble finding a sensational false messiah. “The grotesqueries of Jewish America” to which Lamed Shapiro referred find new company in the sideshow world of Coney Island.

The Messiah of Coney Island

While not exactly a “freak” like the figures in his play’s Coney Island sideshow, Moishe Nadir also stood apart from the crowd. As a fervent supporter of Communist programs from 1922 to 1939, he separated himself from many Yiddish poets and artists through his politics, particularly after 1929, when other Yiddish writers left the Communist newspaper *Frayhayt* to protest its defense of Arabs after a pogrom in Palestine. Paul Buhle suggests that Nadir has been ignored “because, ‘Great Cynic’ and nihilist turned Communist (until his break with the Party in 1939), he remains *treyf* [not kosher] to the Jewish establishment. Only recently has he been partially rehabilitated to one of those oddities worth a passing mention.”¹² His Communist tendencies contributed to the posthumous neglect of Nadir’s plays—to his position as an outcast if not a sideshow freak—even after he broke with the Party.

In a Coney Island sideshow, outcasts and freaks are applauded, or at least regarded with fear and awe, for their abnormality. The critic Leslie Fiedler once argued in his book *Freaks* that dwarves are the Jews of the sideshow world¹³; Nadir’s vision of Coney Island unites Jews (the producers) and sideshow artists (curiously, no dwarves) in a world where they are popular. Their business is to be and sell “attractions.”

Throughout *Messiah in America*, although business acquires grotesque, fraudulent, and comic shadings, the producers who deal in sideshow attractions and false messiahs succeed. They know what their public wants: Nadir’s own voice might be heard through Zipkin, when the producer advises Jim, the Bearded Lady:

All America is Coney Island, little fool. Fake, swindle, bluff—that’s what America stands on. From ancient days people have wanted bread and circuses. Today they still want the same. . . . The god of bluff is the greatest god in the world, Jim. Greater than Jesus of Nazareth, greater than Edison or Ford . . . he must be worshipped with all your heart. If not, nothing happens, no chance of success.

Nadir hardly endorses such worship; the god of bluff becomes another target of his satire. P. T. Barnum's belief that suckers are born every minute becomes a major tenet of the faith, and one religious ritual takes the form of a boxing match between the two false messiahs. Those seeking the true messiah need tickets, not prayer or piety, to bear witness to the savior's arrival, secured through showmanship and successful competition. The outcasts of the world (the sideshow employees) join the paying spectators around the boxing ring, waiting for one of their own to be acclaimed.

Messiah in America incorporates several popular American entertainment forms that cast the audience as participants. When the play was staged in San Francisco in 2001, spectators began to cheer for their favorites in the boxing ring scene, as if they were sitting in a sports arena rather than a theatre.¹⁴ Chants of "Zip, Zip, Zip" broke out after the sideshow manager was introduced in the ring. Nadir wrote both the boxing scene and sideshow dialogue in a manner that allows actors to prompt audience cheers and comments, as sideshow barkers and boxing arena announcers often have. Given the right delivery by an actor portraying Jack the Bluffer, an audience may well cheer and laugh when he escorts a producer to the center of the ring and declares: "On this side, weighing in with close to one million dollars in previous earnings, Mr. Menachem Yosef." Cheers could similarly follow Jack's introduction of "the equally rich and glorious Mr. Zipkin." The audience is cast as a character—the crowd—through these speeches. Similar casting occurs in the sideshow, when Charlie the Barker tells the audience they are "now standing before one of the great wonders of the century." If the audience accepts its role in these scenes, the theatre itself becomes a melting pot, where diverse identities merge into that of the carnivalesque and sporting crowd. In Nadir's carnivalesque world, we see components described by Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin; in the sporting crowd, we see hints of Bertolt Brecht's favorite audience. Nadir's play resonates with the theories of Bakhtin and Brecht.¹⁵ Perhaps it is not bluff, fakery, or swindle, but the inclusiveness of these scenes, the rousing popular theatre that turns spectators and outcasts onstage into equals—all witnesses to a world where anyone, even an old man who can barely walk around the ring, can become an American champion.

The process of assimilation through boxing is also a process of deracination. Yiddish and messianic identities yield to something more universal: an exchange of punches and the title of world champion. Even

if the Old Messiah wins the fight while wearing Hasidic garb (long black coat, black hat, earlocks, long beard), the traditional image of a pious man gives way to that of another immigrant winning acceptance and acclaim as he takes a place in the line of fighting Irish, Jews, and African Americans who preceded him in the ring.

The grotesque scene of a white-bearded elderly messiah fighting a Coney Island sideshow's messiah in the ring also gives vivid physical form to Nadir's satire of what has been called the "the debased and mystified relations between men in capitalist society." Walter Benjamin observed that Marx "was the first to illuminate with criticism the debased and mystified relations between men in capitalist society, [and he] thereby became a teacher of satire; and he was not far from becoming a master of it."¹⁶ Extending Marx's satiric attitude toward capitalism, Nadir humorously writes a description of the "firm economic base" that Zipkin and Menachem secure through their joint investment in fighting messiahs. Zipkin tells this his partner:

You're a producer for theatre, I for circuses—fine. . . . You know what comes to mind? It comes to mind that we can arrange a prizefight, a boxing match between both messiahs, right at my circus. First of all for the publicity. Second we can make a dollar that way, because what sport won't pay fifteen dollars a ticket to see two messiahs fighting? Besides, right after the fight we get rid of the false messiah, the defeated one, and we keep the true messiah, the one that won. So we win two ways: first, we put our messiah monopoly on a firm economic base: one man instead of two. Second, we save half the money which the other messiah would have taken. Third, we cut out other competitors because they'll be afraid to take a beating.

As companies laid off their labor forces, and breadlines lengthened in the thirties, even messiahs were being thrown (or beaten) out of work at Artef. Still, one messiah needs to be kept alive, if the firm is to have any economic base at all.

The longing for a single, world champion messiah, which Menachem and Zipkin exploit, was acknowledged by Nadir and his associates too. If not the Messiah in person, at least social justice and human dignity associated with a messianic era were wanted by skeptics, including Moishe Nadir. Nadir's play is hardly an endorsement of messianic move-

ments. Its scenes ridicule the fervor with which followers embrace false messiahs. Nadir and Artef were far from devout in their regard for some Jewish traditions; and the depiction of messiahs in the play focuses on the deceptions, misled hopes, and profiteering such legendary arrivals engender, not on the joy and faith with which the Jewish and Christian religion traditionally welcome saviors.

Even though Nadir ridiculed corporate greed and exploitation of traditional Jewish yearnings for a messiah, the theatre ensemble that staged the play in 1933 can be seen as part of a secular messianic movement. Artef's political philosophy favoring anti-capitalist, worker-centered Yiddish culture contained a modicum of messianism within it. The theatre collective's audiences, and some of its artists, participated in Communist Party and union activities, rallies, and marches that united those on stage and off. If the satiric play Nadir wrote, and others in the same tradition, did not bring on the Messiah or full employment during the Great Depression, at least this Yiddish theatre and the activists who bought tickets to it promised everyone a role in their movement for social change. That is, everyone who spoke Yiddish.

Nadir's Messiah and Benjamin's: A Speculative History

Imagine that everyone in the United States spoke Yiddish in 1933. With widespread understanding of the language, Nadir's satire of salvation through capitalism could have toured the country, spreading laughter and political awareness everywhere. *Messiah in America* and Artef's theatrical art would have become widely known as part of a larger messianic cultural and political project that sought to make social justice, equality, redistribution of wealth, and internationalism the America way. The play introduced a few impostors, false messiahs; but as deliverers of radical culture, the author and the Artef actors who performed the satire in 1933 were themselves "endowed with a *weak* Messianic power"—their coming had been expected by earlier advocates of change, as Walter Benjamin suggested during the same decade in another context.¹⁷

Throughout the Great Depression, these messianic Yiddish artists would continue to address the concerns of labor, the unemployed, exiles, and revolutionaries in America. All that was necessary for Artef to move the nation forward with its radical culture was for Americans to speak Yiddish and attend the theatre.

From the transformation of America into a Yiddish-speaking nation, with Artef as the country's most prominent theatre company, momentous changes might follow. Here is a scenario for cultural and political change in 1933. Bertolt Brecht visits the United States and sees several studio collaborations between Artef artistic director Benno Schneider and Moishe Nadir; immensely impressed, Brecht asks Schneider to stage the world premiere of his play, *Mother Courage*, in a Yiddish adaptation by Nadir. National acclaim for Brecht and Artef builds, as critics applaud Schneider's wildly inventive staging of Brecht's epic theatre, which has much in common with Nadir's satire in its mordant depiction of events. The chorus of praise ensures that by 1940 Artef's *Mother Courage* tours the United States and every unoccupied country in Europe. Brecht's friend, Walter Benjamin, intent on learning Hebrew and moving to Jerusalem, hears so much about Artef from Brecht that he learns Yiddish and moves to New York instead, where he lives until 2010 as a Professor of Marxist Midrash (Hebrew for "commentary") at Columbia University.

In his theses about the philosophy of history, Walter Benjamin observes that "the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however." The theatre collective of Artef, already engaged in radical remembrance of traditions and history through such plays as its 1932 staging of Kushnirov's *Hirsch Leckert*, about Jewish workers in Russia resisting the Tsar, finds in Benjamin an aesthete eminently suited to comment on its experiments. His book on Yiddish theatre inspires worldwide production of plays by Nadir in repertoire with classics by Sholem Aleichem, Mendele, and Artef's *Mother Courage* (known as *The Jewish Mother*). In the 1940s, the young Mel Brooks, Danny Kaye, and Judy Holliday meet Nadir and Schneider in a Borscht Belt resort, hear about their exciting satires, and discover within Artef's leftist Yiddish sense of humor the inspiration for new political comedy and songs. Along with Brooks's *The Producers*, *Messiah in America* opens for a long run on Broadway as an antic anti-capitalist musical.

The world also becomes a stage. Late in the forties, when Israel still is debating whether Yiddish or Hebrew should be its national language, the achievements of Nadir and Artef—heralded by Benjamin, his friend (and professor of Jewish mysticism) Gershom Scholem, and thirty-six anonymous holy men and women wandering the world—lead to a decision that the former center of Yiddish culture, Poland, not Israel, should be the Jewish homeland, resulting in preservation of Palestinian rights

in the Mideast and rights of return to Eastern Europe for all Yiddish exiles. With Palestine autonomous, peace in the Mideast, and no need for American troops in the region, the \$700 billion saved in Pentagon expenses (known as the “Iraq peace dividend”) funds universal health care and full employment in a new, twenty-first-century American Works Progress Administration (WPA). Artef, now part of the WPA’s New Federal Theatre Project, enjoys a summer home in Warsaw, with a regular season in New York, Paris, and Moscow each year. And Moishe Nadir posthumously is declared Poet Laureate of the United States in honor of his contributions to American theatre.

Yiddish theatre in America was not as influential or far reaching as my imaginary history would have it. The messiahs portrayed in Moishe Nadir’s play were only actors. And yet the author and artists with whom he collaborated were messianic, if only for an hour or two at a time, as some of their plays showed audiences the promised land (America, not Jerusalem), a territory where Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history and Bertolt Brecht’s political satire lived on the stage of their Yiddish American counterparts. It was a world where, as Benjamin wrote, “every second of time was the strait gate through which the messiah might enter.”¹⁸ Although no one knew what the messiah would look like, he or she could have been an artist at Artef. By now many of that era’s messianic idylls about peace, justice, and internationalism have subsided, or been destroyed by Hitler, Stalin, and American anti-Communism; but some of the humor, the optimism, the social activism, and the daring survive, like ruins, in the texts of plays and in theatre history.

The remains of thirties Yiddish theatre in America might also be regarded as a dybbuk, a resistant spirit still at large. In Ansky’s classic Yiddish play, *The Dybbuk*, we are told, “If someone dies before his time, his soul returns to the world to live out the span of his years, to finish the undone deeds, to feel the unfelt joys and sorrows.”¹⁹ In 1926 when Yosel Cutler collaborated with Zuni Maud on the first of several puppet plays parodying *The Dybbuk*, their work suggested that the theatre troupes staging Ansky’s play in New York at that time kept the dybbuk at large in our consciousness. Yiddish theatre itself was a source of dybbuks, at least in Maud and Cutler’s comic vision.²⁰ Will its undone deeds ever be finished?

A few of the events in this cultural history represent missed opportunities, points of near intersection where radical Yiddish theatre might have moved more fully into the mainstream of popular and international political theatre, and influenced writers, stage directors, actors,

and ordinary citizens alike, with significant successes outside Yiddish theatre's usual locations on Second Avenue in New York City. When Brecht's play, *The Mother*, opened in New York in 1935, the playwright actually visited Artef, and he wrote briefly about one scene in a Yiddish play at Artef (*Haunch, Paunch, and Jowl*) that displeased him.²¹ He knew Artef's artists, and they knew him to some extent, although they never collaborated. (Earlier, when Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* first opened in New York in April 1933, its producers advertised in the Yiddish newspaper, *Morgn Frayhayt*, and must have expected some Yiddish-speaking theatregoers to attend the English-language production.)

Interest in Yiddish theatre was also shown by Clifford Odets, whose *Waiting for Lefty* attracted considerable attention to the concerns of the labor movement in 1935 when the author and Sanford Meisner staged the play in New York. (Instead of waiting for the messiah to arrive, Odets' cab drivers wait for a labor organizer named Lefty, who does not arrive.) Odets chose to have his play *Awake and Sing* translated into Yiddish and staged by the Yiddish Unit of the Federal Theatre Project in 1937–38.

Yiddish theatre's reach extended to the Catskills resorts in New York where Danny Kaye (born David Daniel Kaminsky), Mel Brooks (born Melvin Kaminsky), and Judy Holliday (born Judy Tuvin) performed for Yiddish-speaking audiences—although they performed mostly in English in the 1930s and '40s—before they went to Hollywood. Not far from their resort locations, Moishe Nadir once ran a summer hotel in Lake Sheldrake, where puppeteer Yosel Cutler first met Nadir and his radical politics. The prospects that Brecht, Odets, Kaye, Brooks, and Holliday could have met Nadir, or joined Benno Schneider in collaborative creation, are not entirely imaginary; they knew a number of the same Yiddish artists by reputation if not personally. And they responded to some of the same economic and social crises, although hardly in a uniform manner.

In addition to *Messiah in America*, other innovative Yiddish satires staged in the 1930s have not yet been translated or published in English. Their resourceful responses to American crises remain unheard by many Americans, including theatre scholars and historians, which means the events described here are rarely mentioned in the annals of theatre history. In archives and rare book collections, Yiddish plays of the period survive as neglected documents of resistance to poverty, injustice, unemployment, and displacement and as fragments of a lost world where

messiahs arrived on stage. (Years later, when an angel flew onto the stage in 1992, and a man named Prior Walter passed on to the other world in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, Yiddish briefly could be heard on stage again in a radical American play. But that is another story.²²)

Without question, the audience for messianic and satiric Yiddish theatre in the thirties was small, compared to the audience attending Second Avenue musicals, melodramas, and the Yiddish Art Theatre. Certainly the audience watching Artef's studio perform plays like *Messiah in America* was smaller than the one attending its main stage productions on Broadway, as will be seen. But those participating in the smaller stage events could be compared favorably to the watchman about whom Isaac Bashevis Singer spoke when asked if he ever expected to see the Messiah. "I have the same hopes as the people of Chelm [legendary city of fools]," Singer answered. "There, a man is employed to welcome the Messiah. It's not well paid, but it's a steady job."²³ Perhaps anyone writing about this theatre today also takes up the profession of the man from Chelm, as did some of the writers and actors associated with Artef.

Earlier messianic cultural activity can be found in the nineteenth-century satiric Yiddish novels of Mendele (Sholem Abramovitsch), whose writings are part of a modern tradition wherein, as critic Dan Miron observes, Jewish literature "assumed the prophetic role of a 'watchman of Israel.' It was meant to replace the Rabbis, the Talmudists, the Hasidic leaders, the mystics, and even the biblical prophet himself as a guide of the Jewish people in modern times."²⁴ Artef and Nadir's theatre drew more on the writings of Karl Marx and his followers, and on Mendele and Sholem Aleichem's comic Yiddish literature, and less on the Bible, for their messianic project, but they did not entirely neglect rabbis and Hasidic leaders, sometimes satirizing them in irreverent plays. Not simply waiting for a messiah to arrive, these artists imagined what his world would look like, and showed it on stage, an activity that did not necessarily require prophecy. The world of messiahs and wonder rabbis in Nadir's satire and the puppet plays of Maud and Cutler looks much like New York in the thirties, complete with Yiddish-speaking capitalists and Communists. In their own ways, these satirists followed the example of producer Menachem Yosef, who observes in *Messiah in America* that "since we all believe in the messiah, and since he is bound to come, why shouldn't he come a little sooner? And if he is going to come, why shouldn't he come direct to our firm?"

The Communist Messiah

When theatre collaborators at Artef responded to the economic and political crises of the 1930s, their new Messiah was Communism. The Messiah had to be created, not simply awaited—and created through a political and social movement, not simply through theatre. The radical politics explored by Yiddish theatres like Artef developed in concert with, and gave another voice to Yiddish political activism of the period. Historian Paul Buhle notes, “While the Communist trade unionists fought union leaders and management in the garment trade, a recreational and fraternal network blossomed. Yiddish enthusiasts threw their energy into the shules [schools], into new summer camps where children could have an intensive Yiddish Jewish education and enjoy a break from city life, into amateur and semi-professional theatrical activity.”²⁵ Artef’s theatre developed with the support of groups of workers whose members bought tickets to benefit performances. In fact, Artef staged the May 17, 1933, New York performance of Nadir’s play, *Messiah in America*, as a benefit for the propaganda work of the Yiddish Bureau in the Central Committee of the Communist Party.²⁶

It could be argued that the Messiah of Communism welcomed by Yiddish-speaking Americans was as false as the messiahs in Nadir’s play. Although traditional East European messianism is the main form of salvation parodied by *Messiah in America*, Zipkin at one point suggests that the new, would-be savior takes his orders from Moscow. “I’m not saying he is, God forbid,” admits the sideshow master, “but it could happen. Isn’t he an internationalist? He redeems all peoples and nations? . . . That means his ideology is thoroughly Bolshevik.” Nadir wrote Zipkin’s lines with tongue in cheek, to mock smear tactics used against American radicals. When the sideshow owner and his assistant Charlie discuss whether the Old Messiah might be a greenhorn red, secretly working for the Comintern, they practice a variation of red squad tactics used against other New York immigrants in the first decades of the century. Their short-lived plan to defame an old man supposed to be the Messiah, and too innocent to engage in any political scheme, renders the political persecution desperate, incompetent, and comic.

Nadir’s false messiahs are hardly spokespersons for Moscow or Bolshevism, as they work for American businessmen, whose capitalist speculation in messiahs he satirizes. In doing so, the playwright enlists theology in the service of historical materialism, a practice Walter Benjamin

advocated in his 1940 theses on history.²⁷ (The Yiddish American artist Nadir engaged in this practice without any prompting from the German critic; but Benjamin might have been the perfect critic for Nadir's plays, had he seen them.) As the false messiahs in the satire turn into commodities, Nadir's satire looks askance at commodity fetishism, which is also a kind of worship.

The play's comic dialogue about the Communist Messiah also could be read as a nonmusical variation on the Yiddish song, "What Will Happen When the Messiah Comes?" ("*Vos Vet Zayn Az Meshiakh Vet Kumen?*"), which according to Eleanor and Joseph Mlotek, was sung with Soviet references in the 1920s. The answer to the traditional song's question, "Who will teach the Torah?" was "*Lenin rabeynu*," or "Lenin our teacher"; the answer to "What will we eat?" was "*Broytkartlekh*," bread ration cards.²⁸ The song also echoes Jewish references to Moses, known as "*Moshe Rabeynu*." Nadir might have been familiar with another Yiddish Messiah song written by Jacob Jacobs: "The Messiah Comes, They Say the Messiah Is a Bolshevik" ("*Meshiakh Kimt, Men Zogt Meshiakh Iz a Bolshevik*") was recorded in 1922. Historian Henry Sapoznik notes that the song's "story of the Messiah's long-awaited arrival and his inability to get past Ellis Island" because of his Bolshevism was "the oddest song" among many responding to the Soviet revolution.²⁹ Perhaps Nadir heard Jacobs sing the comic number in a Yiddish vaudeville show, and its humor inspired his own scene about a Bolshevik Messiah. In any case, Nadir's false messiah is only briefly suspected of Communist tendencies; producers Zipkin and Menachem Yosef decide such attributions would not be profitable, and instead decide on a capitalistic merger of their holdings. (Today their outrageous bottom-line decision might be appreciated for its humor even in the former Soviet Union, where free market practices have replaced Communist ideology.)

As will be seen, Nadir himself was too immersed in American Yiddish culture to follow the Soviet line or a "Bolshevik" messiah without reservation. But he and other Yiddish theatre artists at Artef acknowledged the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre (Goset) as an exemplar of stage art in an age of revolution. The Soviet state-sponsored Yiddish theatre Goset proved that secular messianic theatre could thrive—at least for a few decades, before Stalinism ended it. Artef staged the plays of some of the same authors as did Goset, and in that sense made its New York theatre part of an internationalist movement. The Yiddish language, too, moved from Eastern Europe to many other locations where Jews

immigrated. While the audience for Yiddish theatre in the United States may have been limited, the prospective number of spectators around the world was larger. The puppeteers Zuni Maud and Yosl Cutler of Modicut performed for that larger Yiddish audience when they left New York to tour the Soviet Union, Poland, France, and England in the thirties. Nadir met some of his comrades abroad too. At home, in New York, he and others at Artef also moved into larger circles, collaborating with the Federal Theatre Project for a time, after the Communist Party's 1935 call for broader cultural and political alliances in a Popular Front against fascism. And though Sholem Aleichem did not live to see the Popular Front, new interpretations of his comic plays and stories by Goset and Artef won considerable praise for these Yiddish theatres, and made Aleichem, posthumously, a contemporary of Soviet and American radicals in the thirties.

Critic Naomi Seidman observed that from its inception Yiddish literature was not only "created for a collective . . . it also created, imagined, and sustained this collective as a feature of its textual world."³⁰ The collective of Yiddish literature included women and ordinary people—who spoke and read the language—at a time literatures in other languages were often inaccessible to them. The same inclusive vision can be found in radical Yiddish theatre. Artef's collective had a small physical presence within the theatre among those who created and witnessed the stage plays, but there was a much larger public present in the plays themselves. Oppressed, displaced people around the world were given a voice by actors who spoke for them. In this sense, many of the theatre's constituents lived on stage, as literary and theatrical inventions; but Nadir's satire in *Messiah in America* suggests, in a mocking paean to bluff, that public leaders on the other side—the side of self-serving power and greed—also depended on fictions to preserve their privilege, without acknowledging that their world, too, was a theatrical construction as false as the play's messiahs. The messianic impulses of Nadir and Artef led them to create in theatre a world that would accommodate their vision of history and their community, when the world outside would not. Working-class struggles for social change could be seen on stage when, in David Lifson's words, "Artef reproduced the strikes in the needle trades in *Roar of the Machines*, and the farmers' food riots in *Drought*, and the bonus march of the veterans in *The Third Parade*."³¹ Other Artef productions portrayed conflicts between employees and employers through adaptations of folklore and humorous fiction by writers like Sholem Aleichem.

Outside of Artef, in other Yiddish theatres of the thirties, one could find other depictions of union solidarity, strikes, and pleas for social justice and anti-militarism. Modicut's innovative political satire included a rent strike celebrated by Yiddish-speaking puppets and a Hitler puppet that bared its fangs. The popular Second Avenue comedian Menasha Skulnik led a union of kosher chicken cutters through a strike to victory, in the 1932–33 musical comedy, *Getzel Becomes a Bridegroom*. While hardly known for radical political action, Skulnik in the role of Getzel was part of the larger theatre movement through which Yiddish culture responded to crises of the period. The comic actor Leo Fuchs crooned in Yiddish about economic and marital catastrophe. He used only one English word, "trouble," in a popular song with that title performed during the Great Depression; his comic song, and the remarkable dance that accompanied it, wrested grotesque humor and jubilation from the struggle to survive. Yiddish culture's capacity to endure and cheer its audiences in dark times, and to ridicule wealth and abusive authority, also surfaced in the Federal Theatre Project Yiddish Unit's cabaret revue of 1936–37, *We Live and Laugh*, and its well-received productions of the Sinclair Lewis play, *It Can't Happen Here*, and David Pinski's *The Tailor Becomes a Storekeeper*. Artef was not alone in the development of satiric Yiddish theatre.

Emma Goldman's Yiddish

The radical satire created by Nadir, Artef, and some Federal Theatre artists also resonated with the early Yiddish political activism of Emma Goldman, not only in its affinities with anarchist, Communist, and union support of working-class culture but also through the great benefits language conferred on it. New York City police once were unable to prosecute Emma Goldman for her speeches, because, as an officer reported, "she spoke to this group of Jewish women on the Lower East Side, and I'm sorry I couldn't take down what she said because she spoke in Yiddish."³² Yiddish speech conferred protection from police surveillance on Artef's radical theatre artists as it did on Goldman. Artef may not have needed the protection, as Yiddish theatre in general was less threatening to American officials, and less frequently obstructed by them, than fiery political speeches. (For example, police closed Sholem Asch's *God of Vengeance* in 1923 when the play, with its lesbian love scene, opened in English at the Apollo Theatre on West 42nd Street. A jury convicted the producer and lead actors of presenting an immoral drama,

which ran, incidentally, for 133 performances before it closed. No legal problems arose earlier when it was staged in Yiddish.³³)

Artef, by creating political and satiric theatre in Yiddish, was speaking mostly to the initiated—those who already knew what Goldman and others termed “the jargon.” The creators of theatre at Artef were committed to working-class history and culture by virtue of the fact that the actors themselves were workers, and rehearsed after a day’s labor in the garment industry or another profession outside the theatre. Initially they trained in classes at the *Frayhayt* Dramatic Studio directed by Jacob Mestel. The training program, started in 1924, was followed by formation of the Arbeter Teater Farband (Worker’s Theatrical Alliance), or Artef, which offered full-scale productions. Before studio graduates entered Artef they took classes in Yiddish, as well as lessons in diction, declamation, movement, history, and literature. They undoubtedly heard some political theory from teachers like critic and historian Nathaniel Buchwald, but Artef actors also learned the vocabulary of the labor movement and met activists within it on their day jobs.

Artef’s Yiddish-language performances were visited more frequently by English-speaking audiences after the ensemble’s Russian anti-conscription play, *Recruits*, and Sholem Aleichem’s comedy about a lottery-winning tailor, *200,000*, received favorable recognition in the English-language press. These successes attracted Broadway and Hollywood celebrities to Artef, and for a brief period, the theatre advertised names of well-known actors appearing in its audience, rather than those on stage. As for the less famous working-class spectators, in 1937 Emanuel Eisenberg wrote as follows:

Plain ordinary decent folk couldn’t even get a look-in [at Artef’s plays] for a time; they were trampled down by actors and directors and producers and even writers who were coming to find out how the miracle of an ensemble company had been worked. Actors had been practically ordered to attend by the producers whose works contained them. This is probably one of very few instances on record where sheer watching was supposed—or hoped—to impart the spectator with an equal gift.³⁴

“Sheer watching” was necessary because many visitors did not understand the Yiddish they heard. (And “sheer watching” did not provide sufficient education in ensemble work for the guest artists witnessing

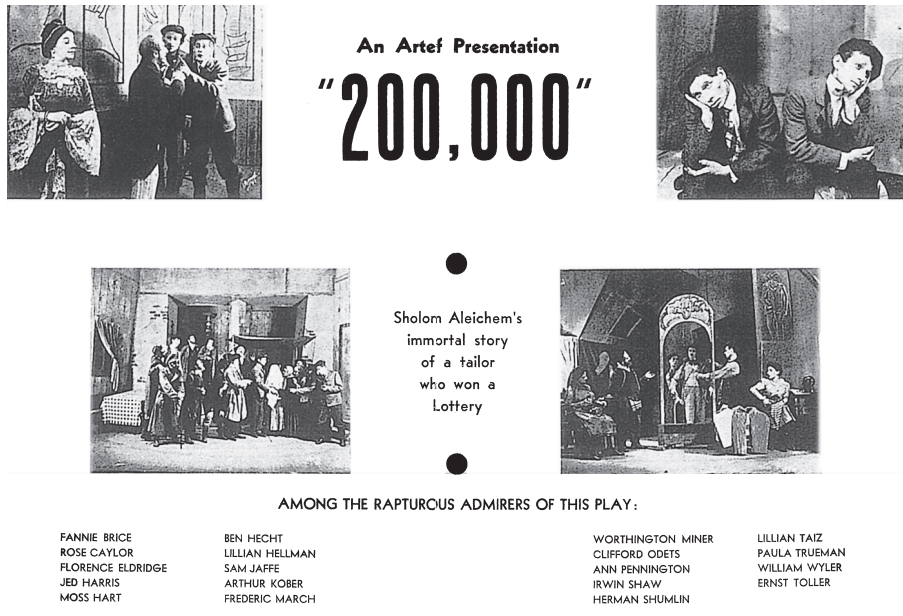


Figure 1.2

Artef's 1936 advertisement for Sholem Aleichem's *200,000*. Courtesy of the archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

Artef's creations; no English-language ensembles won renown as successors.³⁵) Artef's English-language audience members may have missed some of the textual humor and political nuances in their "sheer watching" of the Yiddish plays. It is questionable whether the ensemble would have been greeted with the same enthusiasm if its English-speaking visitors had fully understood the words in Artef's anti-capitalist and anti-militarist scripts.

On the other hand, the political speeches of Emma Goldman had considerable impact in public after she became proficient in English. She was arrested and deported for her speeches against war and American militarism, which government authorities understood. Perhaps as long as Goldman spoke Yiddish in the United States, she was safe from prosecution. Artef and Nadir, by choosing to continue their radical speeches in Yiddish long after Goldman was deported to Russia in 1919, encountered little persecution from American officials. (Goldman briefly figures in Nadir's *Rivington Street*, performed by Artef in 1932, and discussed in Chapter 2.)

Politically conscious artists who quarreled in Yiddish over the abuse of power and excesses of wealth benefited in another regard from the language that lends itself to quarrels. Here is how the humorous lexicographer, Michael Wex, describes Yiddish:

Disharmony lies at the heart of Yiddish. Or, to put it more simply, this is a language that likes to argue with everybody about everything. . . . Yiddish begins by putting itself into an adversarial relationship with the entire physical world. As long as the Messiah is still missing and the Temple remains unbuilt, the whole world is in a sort of metaphysical *goles* [exile] from which it, too, needs to be redeemed.³⁶

Disharmony within the language and an adversarial relationship with the world that lacks a Messiah, however, do not always lead to leftist views critical of wealth and power. American Yiddish plays often show less concern for political organizations and unions than for family, with personal crises requiring adjustments to assimilation, social mobility, and the abandonment of Old World practices such as arranged marriage and orthodox religion. Despite breaking with past cultural and religious practices, Jewish life goes on in these plays; the new, younger generation finds its own way, its own romance and new professions, without radical politics or satire of messianism. While conducive to quarrels, the Yiddish language was not necessarily the source of them. In the world of Yiddish theatre, notable differences arose between proponents of *kunst* or “art” theatre and the so-called *shund* (or literary trash) theatre creators. Some artists wanted their theatre to avoid the popular *shund*, which attracted and entertained working-class Yiddish families, and instead sought to raise their audience so it would appreciate a level of artistry comparable to Ibsen’s. Nadir humorously imagined the impact of the demand for “higher” art on ordinary theatregoers in his monologue for “The Average Theater Goer.” The title speaker complains that “when a play really does please me because there is dancing and singing in it and it’s lively, [the Yiddish critics] come along and say that it doesn’t even begin to please me, that it is trash and that it revolts me. In plain words, according to them, plays which please me do not please me because they really please me very much indeed.”³⁷ Nadir’s own plays employed popular forms of culture, from boxing to puppetry, for topical

satire. That *shund* could sympathetically portray radical activists and the Yiddish labor movement will be seen later.

The division between American advocates of *shund* and higher art can be traced back at least as far as the late nineteenth-century efforts of Boris Thomashefsky to create a Yiddish theatre company in New York. In 1893, Thomashefsky met resistance from German-American Jews who feared that his American premiere of Goldfaden's comedy, *The Witch*, would bring dishonor and degradation to the Jewish community.³⁸ Other debates between proponents of "art" and *shund* followed, and Nadir entered the dispute from time to time.

The appeal of *shund* through Yiddish musical comedy, which began with Goldfaden in Romania in 1876, has lasted as long as Yiddish theatre itself. (As late as 2005, a Yiddish musical revue titled *On Second Avenue* won praise from the press in New York.) But a curious reconciliation of differing sides in the *shund-kunst* debate was effected through radical theatre presentations of writing by the great Yiddish humorist Sholem Aleichem in the twenties and thirties. When Artef and Goset produced versions of his stories and plays about impoverished, oppressed Jews, the works were staged with innovative and sophisticated acting, which joined high levels of artistry and concerns with class and wealth in popular comedy. For this achievement, Sholem Aleichem deserves praise as a major contributor to radical Yiddish theatre—although his plays achieved less of this acclaim during his own lifetime than after it. Through Artef and Goset, his writing provided occasions for remarkable new, left-wing stage productions and popular Yiddish stage satire to which Nadir and his associates contributed. The productions also made radical Yiddish theatre part of an international movement; Aleichem's language and humor could be understood (despite variations in dialect) by friends, comrades, and relatives from New York to Moscow, Warsaw to Bucharest—cities that all had Yiddish theatres in the first half of the twentieth century. (Nadir, for example, wrote about Goset's Moscow staging of a Sholem Aleichem play.)

Ruinous Laughter, Anger, and Joy

During his association with Artef, Moishe Nadir created stage adaptations of classic Yiddish texts by Sholem Aleichem and Mendeleyev, as well as a few plays of his own that the company produced. Most of these

productions featured Artef's students, who comprised the company's studio, rather than the more accomplished Artef actors in the main ensemble; perhaps Artef was reluctant to give Nadir's tendentious satire full, main-stage productions. A Yiddish-language newspaper announcement for the May 27, 1933, performance of Nadir's *Messiah in America* at the East New York Worker's Club, 608 Cleveland Street, New York, promised that "the whole actor's collective of Artef will participate in the program."³⁹ But the limited-run presentation received less publicity and less press attention than Artef's main season of plays. Artistic director Benno Schneider staged many of the studio projects written by Nadir, including the 1933 presentation of *Messiah in America*; but he was praised for larger Artef productions such as *200,000* and *Recruits*, which reached Broadway stages, rather than anything he directed for the East New York Worker's Club, or other tour sites. That discrepancy may be one reason Nadir himself expressed reservations about some of Schneider's directing. After Schneider staged the play *Jim Kooperkop* (not written by Nadir) for the main company in the 1930–31 season of Artef, Nadir asked this question in print:

Should we present plays which the director likes because they enable him to demonstrate his skills; should we stage dazzling productions in order to outshine the bourgeois theatre; or should we stage militant, hostile, *revolutionary* [plays]—not in the sense of their art form, but rather in the sense that they portray the spirit of our struggles, of our ruinous laughter, of our anger and joy?⁴⁰

Nadir created the second kind of play—militant, hostile, revolutionary—and questioned whether Schneider cared for it. The "spirit" of his struggles, his laughter, anger, and joy still can be found in his neglected plays, and those of his colleagues.

In Schneider's defense, it should be said that while capable of staging "dazzling productions" on Broadway, and in large theatre houses, he also did direct smaller scale, more portable productions, which may have more fully served Artef's goal of reaching workers. *Messiah in America* and chamber pieces, like Chaver Paver's *Motl Peysi the Cantor's Son* (1934) and *Nit Gefidelt (Not Fiddled, 1935)* based on Sholem Aleichem stories, would not "outshine the bourgeois theatre," but their tours to workers' clubs and community centers initiated a decentralized, alternative theatre. Benno Schneider moved from his early work with Vachtangov

at the Habima in Russia, to New York collaborations with Artef, which sometimes opened in Broadway houses; but his stage work also traveled to the East New York Worker's Club and other forgotten locations, where Schneider, Nadir, and other Artef collaborators created new proletarian theatre, and enlarged the audience for it.

Perhaps this is one reason Nadir collaborated with Schneider and Artef on studio productions several times between 1929 and 1933. The satirist and poet became involved with Artef's studio early in its formation. As Edna Nahshon notes, in the late 1920s, Artef adapted a plan for "small-scale studio presentations for which no large budgets were needed, and which, in their modesty, would not attempt to represent the ultimate model for proletarian theatre art. . . . It was also agreed that poet Moishe Nadir would play a major role in carrying out these plans."⁴¹ By the end of the 1929–30 season, the studio ensemble had performed Nadir's adaptation, *Benjamin Quixote*, based on Mendelev's satiric novel, *The Travels of Benjamin III*, and directed by Schneider. Another studio evening in the same season was based on Nadir's own tendentious poetry, titled *Hand Over the World, Bourgeois*. Nadir continued to provide plays for Artef studio productions through the 1930s. He shared the studio space with Sholem Aleichem and Mendelev (through his own adaptations), which kept him in excellent company. His *Pain in the Neck* was on a double bill with Paver's *Not Fiddled*, presented at an Artef educational meeting as late as 1939.⁴²

Studio plays by Artef continued throughout the thirties, and Nathaniel Buchwald offered them special praise in 1935 when he noted that while Artef won attention on Broadway, the company had been

producing not only "regular shows" at regular playhouses, and at modest admissions, but has made good theatre available to workers in their own neighborhoods, performing sometimes upon bare platforms, sometimes upon improvised stages and always to admiring audiences. . . . It is not generally known that the Artef has to its credit a score of short plays and skits of the *mobile* type and that neighborhood bookings of Artef groups and individual concert performers have been more numerous than its performances of full-length plays.⁴³

Not only *Messiah in America* but also Nadir's epic poem, *Rivington Street*, discussed in the next chapter, entered this mobile repertoire. The playwright

may have shared Buchwald's enthusiasm for the traveling plays, since his best theatre texts were among them.

Buchwald also had some concerns about the mobile theatre's soundness as an artistic forum. He noted Artef's "deplorable tendency, of late, to neglect the work of the *mobile* type and the danger of its attaining a state of 'splendid isolation' and tearing itself loose organizationally from its mass basis." In retrospect, his anxiety about neglect and isolation of the work appears to have been warranted; aside from news releases printed to announce workers' club stops for the plays, and a list of the studio plays that Artef itself printed in its tenth-year anniversary book in 1937, few records of the mobile theatre's activities survive.

While not calling for Nadir's plays to be staged by the main company, Buchwald was critical of that company's failure to stage new American "proletarian" plays more often. David Lifson in his history of Yiddish American theatre writes that "Buchwald attested the fact, that there was a conflict between Artef and the proletarian writers who complained that Artef had abandoned the Jewish writers' work."⁴⁴ Nadir and other writers of new and experimental plays were not exactly abandoned by Artef, but their work with students in the studio was indeed neglected by critics and historians.

In addition to the opportunity to tour plays, there were other advantages to studio work, including removal from box office pressures and an openness to more experimental forms by the young actors and their audience. (Two of these Artef actors, Jules Dassin and David Opatoshu, later received considerable attention for their film work.) In a list of Yiddish theatre's accomplishments, Lifson notes that the "studio groups among the drama clubs and the *Freiheit* and Artef studios provided the inspiration for the New York Civic Repertory's 'First Studio' and the Theatre Guild's Studio which became the Group Theatre." Inspiring the Group Theatre, which began in the early 1930s, is no small achievement.⁴⁵

Even if largely unnoticed by press critics, the activities of Artef's studio and its mobile theatre gave Moishe Nadir incentive to write some of his plays. His adaptations of Sholem Aleichem and Mendeleyev were completed for studio production. Other plays, such as *Messiah in America*, if not specifically written for Artef, were eminently suited for it. Nadir first published *Messiah in America* in the *Frayhayt* in 1928, and said it was adapted from a story he wrote in 1919. The play appeared in print some years after Nadir helped create the Arbeter Teater Farband (Artef) in December 1925, at a meeting where he was one of the

featured speakers, along with Nathaniel Buchwald and Jacob Mestel, other Artef founders.⁴⁶

Artef's first play was produced in 1927. It is possible Nadir would have written and published *Messiah in America* if Artef did not exist; but the collective's creation could have prompted his play's creation, and Artef's internal debates on revolutionary theatre may even be reflected, indirectly, in some of the play's self-conscious dialogue about theatre and messianism.

In an essay on Yiddish poetry, Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg once noted that Yiddish culture was destroyed "through the brutalities of Nazism and Stalinism, and also the gentleness of American assimilation."⁴⁷ The assimilation portrayed by Nadir, with one messiah a world champion and one messiah dead at the end of the boxing match, is not so gentle. But the play also offers a comic portrait of survival. Messianism lives on, however fraudulent, how impious its promoters. The Old Messiah is a survivor, like Yiddish culture itself. At one point during the boxing match, Zipkin argues that anger, not culture, enabled the Jews to survive as a race, and has "given them so to speak a historical knock-out." But Nadir gives messianic Yiddish culture in America a new life through his humor and social criticism. His play portrays the assimilation and death of a few Yiddish-speaking Americans. Many more prospective Yiddish spectators have been lost since he wrote *Messiah in America*. But like the Old Messiah, the culture goes on, and theatrical satire like Nadir's remains one of its enduring treasures. If there has not yet been a revival of interest in Nadir in recent years, or a rush to translate his work, at least renewed American interest in other Yiddish theatre has begun with the staging of Tony Kushner's adaptation of Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, Robert Brustein's adaptation of I. B. Singer's *Shlemiel the First*, and new productions in English of Asch's *God of Vengeance*. Michael Chabon's 2007 noir detective novel, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, offers a new tale of Yiddish messianism gone awry. *Messiah in America*, and Nadir's other satires, also might interest a current-day audience, especially if the words are translated into English.

A Gallery of Rogues

Nadir's unflattering depiction of greed and deception was originally performed for Yiddish-speaking audiences; but its social criticism is no more directed at Jews alone than Ben Jonson's *Volpone* is a satire of

Italians simply because his characters live in Venice. In both cases (and that of Leopold Bloom and Max Bialystock in Mel Brooks's stage version of *The Producers*), the satire transcends its ethnic, geographic, and religious references, and its original language. Without question Nadir's satire depicts American Jews who speak Yiddish, but that is not their outstanding feature. Their otherness—their life among immigrants, sideshow freaks, rival messiahs, and exceptionally talented artists—might include Jewishness, but it is hardly limited to that identity. Earlier works like Melville's novel, *The Confidence Man*, and Twain's portrait of unscrupulous Shakespearean actors in *Huckleberry Finn* provide Nadir's confidence men with illustrious non-Jewish American predecessors. Jews should be honored to have their own representatives in the gallery of rogues sketched by Jonson, Melville, Twain, and, more recently, Nadir and Brooks.

The skepticism toward messianic leaders and their promoters that Nadir expresses in his satire represents one of his lasting contributions to leftist Yiddish culture. However enamored Nadir himself might have been with Soviet politics and Communism, his humorous rejection of misguided religious fervor, and of those who profit from such fervor, transcends the specific situation in his play, and evokes comic wariness of other messiahs, too, in an age of personality cults and ideological police states. In the title essay of his book *Confession*, Nadir describes how he became an associate of Communists when he was invited to write for their newspaper, *Frayhayt*, and how the cult of Lenin worship led to the cult of Stalin worship. He writes with humor and some self-deprecation about the party line he accepted for much of his career as a writer.⁴⁸ Nadir recants his worship of the "God" of Soviet Communism in this 1940 essay, which was published posthumously. His later disillusionment with a savior (and redemptive history) was anticipated by his 1919 short story, *Messiah in America*, and the play based on it. For years, Nadir "tried as best he could to accept and assimilate Communist ideology," notes Harvey Fink, "but he experienced many moments of open and hidden opposition to the inflexible laws governing 'proletarian art.' Neither did he have an easy time swallowing the general Communist line."⁴⁹ Nadir's collaborators in Artef did not always follow a Communist Party line either; as David Lifson observes, "It was no secret from the start that Artef was of the Communist movement. . . . But artistically it attempted independence of expression. . . .

The matter of productions deviating from ideological precepts was to lead to sharp conflicts.”⁵⁰ Nadir’s mockery of messiahs (and of those who red-bait a messiah) gives theatrical voice to his own heterodoxy and Artef’s.

Satire like Nadir’s clears the ground, as it questions orthodox behavior and seeks to end dependency on false hopes—to end the suffering and martyrdom that messianic followers endure, and sometimes perpetrate. He is not entirely negative. A call for freedom of conscience can be found within his satire too. In “The Chosen,” an ironic response to an *Evening Mail* newspaper editorial, he described the Jewish people as “the feverish conscience of the world, and the world hates its conscience—naturally. We have no crowns but our heads; no scepters but our arms; no fatherland but our souls. . . . An exotic, incomprehensible people, we Jews.”⁵¹

Whether or not this admission describes all Jews, it fits Nadir himself, with his “feverish conscience” and his internationalism bound to no particular country. His conclusion that “conscience” and lack of fealty make Jews an “exotic, incomprehensible people” suggests that the playwright is an equal-opportunity offender—he gently mocks himself, as well as others.

Nadir’s wariness of messiahs and their followers also surfaced in a 1915 Christmas satire he published in *Der Groyser Kundes* (*The Big Prankster*). As Aaron Rubenstein observes, Nadir purportedly conducted an interview with the famous Jew, Jesus Christ. Conversing with the savior in Yiddish, Nadir expressed concern that Jews still suffer, although he hardly expected Jesus to help them at Christmas, when the savior had to “hover around the gentile houses.”⁵² In *Messiah in America*, Jewish messiahs again deliver little relief to Jews. Not limiting his satire to one religious leader, Nadir can be regarded as an ecumenical iconoclast.

His anti-religious, anti-messianic satire also can be seen as part of a larger Yiddish theatre tradition that the writer Joseph Roth summed up after he watched the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre (Goset) perform in Berlin. Roth said, “The theatre remains Jewish even when it attacks Jewish traditions. Attacking tradition is an old Jewish tradition.”⁵³ It is unfortunate that in some circles, Nadir has been remembered (or despised) far more for his association with Communists than for the comic writing and ironic distance with which he departed from messianism in his iconoclastic theatre.

The Future of Yiddish Theatre: A Prophecy

If Nadir's Old Messiah wandered back onto the stage today, he might pass for one of the men whose absence humorist Harry Golden lamented a half-century ago, when he predicted the future of Jewish culture in America. By the year 2000, said prophet Golden, American Jews "will comb the highways and byways looking for some elderly gent with a beard—an immigrant from the old country—whom they can sit up on a platform and 'enjoy' as the representative of their past."⁵⁴ Golden said that a survivor from the old Yiddish ways, if he has a very heavy accent, will be so rare that as a public speaker he can command fees of five thousand dollars for a single lecture. The price would probably be much higher now, due to inflation in the value of cultural heritage. In the twenty-first century we have few survivors of Yiddish theatre who still talk about the old days. But today and tomorrow, I predict, some people will want to hear about the old culture, its actors, its satire, and melodramas, because they are nearly gone, or threatened with disappearance. Which is ironic, because Yiddish theatre was threatened with extinction, and had to fight for its survival, almost from its beginning in the United States. An 1899 history of Yiddish literature published in the United States expressed doubts that Yiddish theatre would last another ten years in America; it lasted much longer. In fact, you can still see Yiddish plays performed in New York, as well as in Montreal, Bucharest, and Israel.⁵⁵

Not only has the art survived, in a reduced form, but Yiddish theatre—like Yiddish culture itself—was aware of the need to survive, and shared that urgent sense with its audience, for more than a century. Many Yiddish plays, comedies and tragedies, can be seen in retrospect as expressions of a determination to go on, to continue one's family, one's religious beliefs, one's traditions, in a new world such as America where the old ways are questioned and need to change or face extinction. Jewish commitment to survival sometimes requires a fight for justice, or a strike for fair pay, particularly in the 1930s, but not only then. From its beginnings in the nineteenth century, when Yiddish theatre thrived in Eastern Europe among Ashkenazi Jews, and when they immigrated to the United States to escape persecution and seek better living conditions, the traveling players and writers carried with them not only their own language but also a shared determination to find a better life, greater economic opportunity, and justice—a determination inseparable

from the Yiddish culture that developed in New York and other urban centers of the United States.

Walter Benjamin never wrote about Yiddish theatre's past or its future, but his philosophy of history inadvertently provides an approach to the subject. As noted earlier, Benjamin observed that "the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however." We should be wary of investigating the future of Yiddish theatre too; if it has one, it is not terribly promising. On the other hand, it once was promising; remembrance of Yiddish theatre and its past is an activity in which scholars and historians have engaged for decades. Then too, as Benjamin noted in his theses on history, there can be no resistance or revolt without memory of the past. He saw the "struggling, oppressed class" "nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren."⁵⁶ (The freeing of Jews from slavery in Egypt still is invoked every year at Passover as an act of liberation to remember and renew.) Yiddish theatre itself might be regarded as an act of remembrance, as many play productions amount to remembrances and celebrations of past Jewish creativity and culture. Yiddish theatre's acts of remembrance might continue in new plays, as well as revivals and studies of older works that celebrate survival and the need for radical change in time of crisis.

American theatre of the thirties provides wonderful examples of this genre. But Yiddish theatre also responded to crises when it began as an ensemble form in 1876, the year Avrom Goldfaden started to stage Yiddish musical comedies in Romania. Before that time, Jews rarely acted in theatrical roles, except in Purim festivals, and at weddings, where the entertainers known as *badchanim* would tell stories, joke, sing, and dance. One of the first comedies Goldfaden wrote concerned the military draft, which he himself faced and evaded at the time he was writing *The Recruits*. Theatre at that moment was not only entertainment, but a humorous form of protest against militarism and conscription. When Yiddish theatre was banned in Russia, Goldfaden and other Yiddish theatre artists moved to America. Its American origins were born, in part, out of flight from persecution and anti-militarism; given that beginning, it is not surprising the theatre continued to raise its voice against injustice and violence, even in musical comedies.

Far from being nostalgic for the old country and not especially pleased by the prospects for profit, assimilation, and success in the new country either, Moishe Nadir was not the only Yiddish writer to see

America through wide-open and wary eyes. The cultural and political sensibility that took shape in his Yiddish satire, his enduring humor, and that of his associates deserves to be heard again. That *Messiah in America* has received few stagings and little critical attention does not mean it is a neglected masterpiece, or a promising commercial property. Its satire of business, theatre, and religion lacks the sentimentality and songs of some more popular Yiddish plays. Its criticism of American popular culture, including Broadway attractions and religious extravaganzas promising salvation, probably would not have attracted a Second Avenue audience in the thirties. Still, while the messiahs in the play may have been false prophets, Nadir himself offered a poetic vision of America that turned out to be farsighted. We still live in a time when promoters sell the public salvation, although today's messiahs may promise redemption through wars to end terror, or new tax cuts, or perfect automobiles. Forms of the false advertising, financial acquisition, ideological chicanery, and sideshow sensationalism that he mocked continue to thrive in the arts, politics, and religion; it is not too late for Nadir's Messiah to return to the stage.

His other satiric plays and poems deserve reconsideration as well. *Rivington Street*, also staged by Artef, responded to the Great Depression by recalling the promise America once held for Jewish immigrants on New York's Lower East Side. The epic poem, considered in Chapter 2, still holds within it some of the promise that Nadir and other Yiddish writers wanted to see fulfilled in the thirties.