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Milken Archive of Jewish Music

Introduction to Volume 13 Great Songs of the American Yiddish Stage: Yiddish Theater, Vaudeville, Radio, and Film

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In the nearly four-thousand-year-old vineyard of Jewish history, the Yiddish theatrical stage is of relatively recent vintage. Apart from the purimspiel tradition, which probably dates to the medieval period in Europe and embraces other languages as well as precursors to modern Yiddish, and apart from the skits of badkhnim, formal, institutionalized Yiddish theater is a creature of the modern era. Its various genres and guises have ranged from low to middle to highbrow, and from transparently unpretending diversion to serious dramatic art. And aside from any forays into Yiddish drama in the early part of the Haskala (Jewish Enlightenment) in eastern Europe, whose plays have not endured as part of any theatrical continuum and for which no musical repertoire survives intact, Yiddish theater and related, publically presented Yiddish theatrical entertainment are largely phenomena of the period framed by the last three decades of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th.

This volume addresses specifically the American phases of the Yiddish musical-theatrical stage, beginning in the 1880s, and the American-based songwriters, lyricists, composers, and singers who fueled it. The songs here derive from the mass-oriented, often coarse, theatrically crude, and entirely commercially driven but nonetheless engaging Yiddish stage entertainment vehicles that flourished for more than six decades among large segments of eastern European immigrant populations and their first-generation American-born offspring. The aggregate repertoire presented here include: The American Yiddish Musical Theater, Yiddish Vaudeville, Yiddish Film, and Yiddish Radio.

The American Yiddish Musical Theater, commonly known as “Second Avenue,” was named—as was the Broadway musical for its eponymous street—after the lower Manhattan district (today identifiable as the East Village) where it made its debut and gained its first audiences. In that neighborhood, its most important and prestigious theaters once stood at the zenith of that long-running popular cultural episode, along with the cafés and other watering holes patronized by the actors, actresses, singers, and composers, as well as the headquarters of their own union. Satellite theaters and companies—eventually no less important—radiated during that era in other boroughs of New York City and across North America in cities with sizable Yiddish-speaking populations: Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Montreal, Cleveland, and Los Angeles. New York–based troupes also toured,

bringing Second Avenue productions to many other communities in America and abroad.

Songs in the Second Avenue musical-theater category were written expressly for or included in full-length staged productions based on plays and stage books or dramatic scenarios. These were billed variously—and sometimes pretentiously—as operettas (though few could qualify for that appellation), musical melodramas, musical comedies, romantic musicals, musical shows, and, eventually, following the lead of the Broadway reference, simply as “musicals.”

Second Avenue, as a generic designation and as an ethnic branch of American musical theater, may be distinguished from popular plays without music, as well as from more sophisticated literary Yiddish theatrical productions that enjoyed American staging with or without music. Among the latter was a more elevated type of drama intended to promote a level of realism in content and acting, transcending sheer entertainment or amusement while still aiming at wide audience appeal as an uplifting middlebrow path. That aspect of Yiddish theater in America (which could also have incidental music) included original plays and translated adaptations of classic works from Russian, German, English, and other serious theater traditions (*Der yidisher Kenig Lir* [King Lear], for example). But the minimally educated audiences of the day were also by and large the same ones who could, as at least one reportedly did, innocently and obliviously cry “Author, author!” at the conclusion of a Shakespeare play in Yiddish. Serious Yiddish drama nonetheless contended optimistically for a popular audience in the early decades of Second Avenue (that label came later to signify specifically musical productions), prior to the ultimate victory of musical comedy. It was most conspicuously advocated by the legendary playwright and impresario Jacob Gordin (1853–1909) as a type of “kunst for the people,” and was pursued onstage by serious actors such as Jacob P. Adler (1855–1926) and David Kessler (1860–1920).

Also outside the Second Avenue generic realm were the Yiddish Art Theatre, introduced in 1918 by the famous actor Maurice Schwartz (1888/1890?–1960), and its even more highbrow offshoot, Jacob Ben-Ami’s short-lived Jewish Art Theatre—for both of which incidental music was written by composers otherwise associated with serious classical work—and the *Arbeter Teater Farband*, better known as ARTEF, a Yiddish workers art theater that operated during the Depression years and for a while afterward.

Yiddish Vaudeville was the other live format, which played in music halls, variety houses, and roof gardens. Its introduction in general preceded indigenous full-scale Yiddish theater in America. Vaudeville ranged from individual songs, song-and-dance routines, and comic monologues to skits, revues, and even one-act sketches and playlets.

Yiddish Film consists of popular musical theater projected and played out on the wide screen, sometimes preceding live productions of the same shows.

Yiddish Radio was broadcast from a soundstage that generated its own large repertoire of popular theatrical-type songs, independent of any larger surrounding production but stylistically similar to songs written for full-length shows. Many of these pieces were subsequently included in live revues, vaudeville routines, and the like. Some are included in this volume; many more will be found in Volume 12: Legend of Toil.

The American Yiddish musical theater was a powerful product of the immigrant experience, and it became a highly successful export to Europe, South Africa, and South America. During its peak years, its leading stage personalities—many of whom attracted fiercely loyal partisan fans known as patriots—could be virtual folk heroes among certain elements of Jewish society.

Origins and Early Years of Second Avenue

By all extant accounts (upon which, in the absence of concrete evidence to the contrary, we must rely), the first known formally staged, full-length Yiddish musical-theatrical production in America dates to 1882. The foundations had been laid only six years earlier in Europe, when Abraham Goldfaden (1840–1908), a multitalented, learned Haskala beneficiary and adherent, founded his Yiddish theater in Romania. Goldfaden came to be accepted universally and affectionately, even if a bit simplistically, as “the father of modern Yiddish theater”—always a problematic parental tag. His plays and operettas, which drew on a variety of biblical, historical, secular folk, operatic, and Jewish liturgical sources as well as on his imagination, were performed by his own troupes and others (including rivals and imitators who were not always above “borrowing” from Goldfaden or plagiarizing in Yiddish translation from other obscure and unrecognizable sources)—not only in Romania, but in cities throughout the Czarist and Hapsburg empires. Often they were staged in cleverly camouflaged defiance of the 1883 ban on Yiddish theater in the Russian Empire, which continued sporadically, with authorities in certain regions—especially Russian Poland—sometimes willing (or open to inducement) to look the other way; in other cases, authorities might have assumed—or been led to assume—that a production was actually in German.

The 1882 American debut of Yiddish theater was in fact also a Goldfaden work—assumed to have been his operetta *Di kishefmakhern, oder di tsoybern* (The Sorceress, or the Witch), presented by an imported troupe that comprised a motley crew. And, if we can accept the accounts in his memoirs (dictated to playwright Joseph Lateiner, who wrote them in Thomashefsky’s name as recollected stories) as well as the oral recollections he later offered to friends, family, and admirers, the young, soon-to-become illustrious and legendary actor-singer-songwriter-producer-impresario Boris Thomashefsky (1868–1939)—who claimed to have persuaded a benefactor to bring the troupe to New York—stepped in at the last minute to act and sing a female role! There is still some lingering question among historians about whether *Di kishefmakhern* was indeed the show

presented on that occasion at Turn Verein Hall, as advertised in the press, or whether another production (probably still Goldfaden) might have been substituted—or whether the plans actually materialized. But in view of the limited information provided by currently available documentation, along with reminiscences shared many years later, the occurrence has come to be generally accepted. Until hard evidence to the contrary emerges, *Di kishefmakhern* must be considered the first Yiddish theatrical production in the United States. Moreover, whatever its identity or precise date, it did give birth to popular Yiddish theater in America.

Permanently intoxicated by the fumes of the greasepaint, and possessed of remarkable market instincts about the type of entertainment the growing Yiddish-speaking immigrant community would demand, Thomashefsky went on to found Second Avenue as a patently American Jewish stage genre, an emotional outlet, a creative vehicle, and a virtual way of life for its insider professional contributors as well as its devoted followers. Almost immediately he began to organize and appear in other musical-theatrical entertainments and revues, which led to further full productions. For those, he began importing singers, actors, and actresses from Europe. He made various and shifting alliances with composers, conductors, lyricists, and librettists, and he carved out stage roles for himself—and for his wife, actress and singer Bessie Thomashefsky, his sister Annie, and other associates. By 1912 he had his own venue, the Downtown National Theatre. Other companies and partnerships had emerged by then, along similar as well as divergent lines. But much earlier, Thomashefsky had become a force that could not be ignored.

Other Goldfaden productions followed in New York after the initial one in 1882, sometimes in Americanized versions as the appetite for unadulterated Goldfaden faded, and at first without his knowledge. But as the immigrant population swelled, it became obvious that it was less interested in the biblical, historical, literary, or morally and ethically didactic and even homiletical subject matter of much of Goldfaden's work. This audience was hungry for homegrown plots and story lines, topical themes, artificial nostalgia, romanticized Old World folk motifs refracted through the prism of the American immigrant experience, sheer diversion, and, especially, New World immigrant situations and characterizations with which they could identify directly—through tears as well as laughter, including laughter at themselves. Whereas Goldfaden's operettas and smaller works had, despite his imitators, constituted the principal repertory of Yiddish musical-theatrical troupes in Europe, his productions could not sustain that central role in the culturally divergent American environment. For one thing, his audiences in cosmopolitan European cities such as Łódź, Odessa, or Warsaw were more mixed than those early American ones; they included middle, upper-middle, and professional-class elements that in general were not part of the pre-1930s Jewish immigration waves. In New York, by contrast, few university- or gymnasium-educated Jews were apt to be found in the loges alongside the seamstresses and cloak makers or their bosses, or the merchants and shopkeepers—all of whom represented the vast majority of the crowds that were

attracted to Second Avenue in its pre-1920s phase and well beyond. Thomashefsky accurately intuited their preferences and proceeded to provide for them with his own productions.

In the period bounded by the 1890s and the First World War, a number of playwrights, composers, songwriters, and lyricists emerged on the scene, eager to follow Thomashefsky's proven recipe for popularity. They provided—in some cases for many years—alternatives to Goldfaden in the form of the more resonant and more immediate theatrical productions the audiences craved—shows permeated and punctuated by saltier song-and-dance routines, manufactured nostalgia for Europe and European ways, superficial melodramatic displays, superimposed contemporaneous American popular dance-band and song styles, and echoes of other ethnic and racial groups in the New World. The books and scenarios for many of those productions could be characterized within the extended context of what came to be known, not always with opprobrium, as *shund*—an almost institutionalized industry of “literary trash” that encompassed a world of vulgar, unrefined plays, cheap pulp fiction, common periodicals, and other coarse diversions.

Included in the bevy of early contributors to the rise of Second Avenue were the aforementioned Joseph Lateiner (1853–1935); Sigmund Mogulesco (1858–1914); Jacob Koppel Sandler (1853/60–1931); Louis Friedsell (1863–1923); Reuben Doctor (ca. 1880/1882–1940); Louis Gilrod (1879–1930); Herman Wohl (1877–1936); Isidore Lillian (1882–1960); and, perhaps the most curious of all, one “Professor-Dr.” Moshe Hurwitz (ca. 1844/1850–1910), who was neither. He is said to have converted to Christianity in Romania (and then staged a flamboyant “reconversion” to Judaism in a Romanian wine garden), despite his continuing Yiddish theatrical activity as a playwright (or adaptor) both there and in America.

The primitive level of locally conceived Yiddish musical theater in its early decades, with its pandering, can be gleaned partly from a glance at the titles of some of the productions. These included such Americana-infused curiosities as *Der yidishe Yankee Doodle* (1905) and a Yiddish version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (even more melodramatic than the original); a reimagined “Jewish Hamlet” as *Der yeshiva bokher* (The Talmud Student), replete with cantorial renditions and a cemetery service for the “Jewish Ophelia”; and the 1907–08 supposedly *farbeserd* (“improved” or “updated”) offering of Goldfaden's last work, *Ben Ami*—a serious drama, with music, that seems to have drawn loosely on George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda*, cheapened (to Goldfaden's dismay, according to some reports) to appeal to astutely predicted popular tastes by the insertion of comic songs and couplets on the order of typical “oompah” song-and-dance numbers heard in pubs and vaudeville houses. There was also ample pretended exotica with unfounded, fantasized historical contexts and bungled history such as Hurwitz's 1896 production, *Di b'ney moyshe, oder di yidn in khine* [tshine] (The Sons of Moses, or the Jews in China)—or his *Brokhe, oder der yidisher kenig fun poyln oyf eyn nakht* (B'rokhe, or the Jewish King of Poland for One Night) of the same season, with a historically incongruous crucifixion scene in which the loyal,

tenacious Jewish heroine's dying song on the cross refers to Christ's "Seven Last Words," quoted from Psalm 22.

No memorable songs came from that early phase of Second Avenue, with the striking paradoxical exception of one that came to reign for more than a half century as the world's most known Yiddish song: Jacob Koppel Sandler's *Eili, eili*—written at the zero hour for Hurwitz's *Brokhe*.

Eventually, more thought went into the books and story lines, even as they continued to describe the absurd situations and implausibly happy resolutions that the audiences wanted. By the 1920s, Second Avenue began to experience a measure of relative maturation as a fresh crop of playwrights, scriptwriters, and lyricists entered the arena. From then on, one can at least find in the best of the productions some sense of synergy between music and action, as songs began to grow out of the plots and flesh out characters or characterizations, advancing rather than stopping the action as unrelated musical numbers. Still, immigrant-era audience tastes and predilections remained paramount. Second Avenue did not exist to elevate or educate. It cannot be said that, even in its most ripened phase, it gave birth to a repertoire of musicals with redeeming dramatic—much less literary—value. Moreover, none of the plots, characters, or scripts would resonate with 21st-century audiences (even in translation)—appearing silly outside of their original social contexts. Fully staged revivals would thus probably be neither viable nor warranted—except for purely historical purposes, perhaps in a documentary format or within the framework of a narrated staged or semi-staged revue (along the lines of Michael Tilson Thomas's brilliant presentation about his grandparents, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky [*The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Jewish Theatre*] that would offer scenes from many shows.

With the arrival on the scene of more gifted composers, however, beginning with Joseph Rumshinsky and followed by Alexander Olshanetsky, Sholom Secunda, and Abraham Ellstein, among others, a repertoire of engaging—and in some cases musically timeless—songs emerged, providing Second Avenue with its most enduring legacy.

Dramatic Dimensions

One sails in uncharted seas in the effort to reconstruct the dramatic contexts of the songs of Second Avenue. Undated scripts—some of them obviously early drafts—have been located for only some of the shows. Like discovered ancient shipwrecks, they seem frozen in time, echoing an entirely lost world of nearly a century ago. Typed in Hebrew characters or even handwritten, they contain undecipherable margin notes and cryptic instructions that allude to unexplained changes along the rehearsal route; and some are missing whole sections. Rarely are specific locations within the action indicated for particular songs. And it is impossible to know how much was changed—songs, characters, and even plot elements—by the time the curtain rose on opening night or even thereafter. Songs

were frequently moved from one spot to another during the staging process, and others could be added after a show was composed. Fortunately, press reviews, advance notices, information contained on published song-sheet covers, and a few located souvenir programs are helpful in detangling some of the muddle. Further confusing things for the historian is the fact that the actors were permitted considerable freedom to improvise and ad lib from one performance to another in the same production.

Many of these dated ephemeral plays are crudely constructed, primitive in their predictability, and saturated with deliberately exaggerated but “required” stereotypical characters whose onstage development was generally absent. Yet, patterned on the “song-and-dance” mold, the action furnished the audiences with the simple, diversionary entertainment they demanded—especially as backdrops to the music, which seems to have salvaged the producers’ investment much of the time. The plays themselves overflow with warmed-over trite situations, stock plot twists, convoluted subplots, and shopworn coincidences. Looping throughout these plots are recycled clichéd recipes of family objections to marriages; schemes for alternative matches with ulterior motives; eleventh-hour revelations of concealed identities such as highborn birth or Jewish parentage; convenient discoveries of “long-lost” relatives in time to save the day; and orphaned or lost Jewish children who grow up to become Russian army officers, famous personalities, or even Christian aristocrats or clergymen. There is nearly always a luckless shlimazl, a comic victim of circumstances; and a villain—perhaps a stingy uncle, some meddler intent on thwarting a marriage, or an ill-intentioned rival—who always received resounding boos from the audience during his curtain calls. A favorite predigested routine formula concerns last-minute revelations at or just before a wedding, when a couple is unknowingly about to enter into a forbidden—sometimes even incestuous—union, unaware of some concealed adoption, improper conversion, divorce, or other previously hidden information that would nullify the marriage. That crisis is usually resolved by yet another revelation or some remaining piece of the puzzle, a dramatic device not confined to the Yiddish theatrical realm. One finds its non-Jewish counterparts recurrent in Western literature—from Shakespeare to Victorian novels and plays as well as Gilbert and Sullivan. But the Second Avenue repertoire, whose versions seem less plausible, can appear disproportionately riddled with this cliché.

The Musical Dimensions

The musical forms, conventions, and styles of Second Avenue relied at first on a number of models, including those of Goldfaden, as well as elements of the Viennese and other European national operetta traditions. But the music of these American Yiddish musicals also came to be informed in short order by some of the extrinsic gloss of perceived Jewish, Ukrainian, Russian, Gypsy, and other folk motifs and tune styles that resonated in popular imagination—as well as by references to traditional cantorial influences and synagogue modes, where those elements related especially to specific characters or plot situations.

Among the many stock song patterns was the “couplet song,” to which newly invented or improvised couplets dealing with topical situations or personalities were appended to the original song at any particular performance—often on the spot, since the conductor had only to be signaled.

The commercially driven songwriters, however, rarely attempted to mine the bedrock of genuine or authentic European Jewish folksong (nor would they have known how), turning superficially at most to bits of its topsoil. Largely molded by Haskala or Haskala-oriented environments and influences—as well as Western musical experience—during their pre-immigration years, Second Avenue’s principal composers were for the most part émigrés from cosmopolitan centers in eastern Europe. They would thus have had little firsthand familiarity with the wealth of Yiddish folksong that flourished primarily in the small villages and outlying regions of the Czarist and Hapsburg empires. These composers were, on the other hand, quick to reflect and incorporate idioms, contemporaneously fashionable dance rhythms, and melodic styles of the day from uptown American popular and theatrical musical venues. Yet the modal adaptation of those in-vogue features, together with familiar residual strains of the imagined Old World, often combined to yield an emblematic fusion whose ultimate product was nothing less than a worthy legacy of wonderful songs.

Orchestrations

Few complete or authoritative orchestrations of these songs—or the shows from which they were extracted—have survived; and in many cases full orchestrations with actual partituras were never made in the first place. (Some recently discovered orchestrations have turned out to be either after-the-fact representations of composers’ desiderata, or ones made for later concert performances.) Many modest orchestrations were created following a show’s opening—for live radio broadcasts or makeshift 78-rpm recordings, both with limited orchestral forces and usually, if not always, for far smaller ensembles than the actual fullpit orchestras in the theaters. By about 1920, or shortly thereafter, a pit orchestra of at least twenty-four musicians became the accepted standard for properly financed productions. Even then, conductors often worked from sketches or charts—a not uncommon practice in the theater world—sometimes conducting from the piano in the pit; and those sketches also often relied on a significant measure of improvisation.

After meticulous research concerning orchestral forces and size, typical instrumentation, and orchestral styles and idioms consistent with the original productions, the Milken Archive turned to leading reconstruction orchestrators—commissioning new, historically considered orchestrations expressly for the songs it recorded. These polished professional renditions reflect the known collective desiderata of the best Second Avenue composers and producers, even if their intentions were not always fulfilled completely. It is a mistaken presumption to link the authenticity of orchestral quality or sound to the cruder

accompaniments on contemporaneous but technically inferior old recordings, which were made hastily, with minimal financial investment, and for a different purpose. Most of the major shows—especially by the late 1920s—were orchestrated not by unskilled scribblers, but either by the composers themselves—who often had solid classical training—or by accomplished professional orchestrators. Nor by that time were the orchestra pits populated by unschooled street or folk musicians, but often by some of the best players in the business—including conservatory-trained union musicians who played in uptown theaters and concert halls on other nights.

Voice Types

Vaudeville houses could feature not only popular voice types and crooning deliveries, but also salty and, where appropriate, even boisterous timbres. But apart from the specifically comic character roles that generated vocal personalities of their own, the Yiddish theater, with its pretensions to operetta, required—and presented—legitimate and even classically trained voices as singer-actors/actresses (much as did Broadway until at least the 1970s). There were no microphones, and the theaters were not tiny. Even as popular entertainment, the vocal models were not the club or pop singers of the day, but the voice types that would have been heard on either side of the Atlantic in operettas by Franz Lehár, Emmerich Kálmán, Victor Herbert, or Sigmund Romberg—or, for that matter, in good Gilbert and Sullivan productions.

The Echoes of an Era

Second Avenue reached its apogee between the late 1920s and the mid-1940s—oddly enough, enjoying prosperity during the severely strapped days of the Great Depression and the anxious years of the Second World War. By the dawn of the 1950s it was already on the wane, having become weakened by, among other things, increasing amounts of English interspersed with the sometimes simplified Yiddish—all in an effort to retain appeal for postwar generations who found less resonance (and less to understand) in a completely Yiddish medium. But there were still one or two generations old enough to be able to identify with its past and with the situations and characters recalled by its plots. The Yiddish musical theater thus limped on for a while, its stalwarts often in denial—refusing to admit the truth of its twilight.

Though the resident theaters in other cities quickly became memories (except for Montreal, the strength of whose Yiddishist base was able to support local Yiddish theater for some time), Yiddish musicals as well as Second Avenue–variety comedies without music continued to play in New York throughout the 1950s and 1960s and even into the 1970s—including in a few of the original downtown venues. Of course the number of simultaneous productions was greatly decreased by the mid-1950s. Sholom Secunda's *The Kosher Widow*, for example, was produced in 1959, and he wrote music for Yiddish shows in the 1960s. His final Yiddish musical, *Shver tsu zayn a yid* (*It's Hard to Be a Jew*)—a musical version

of a well-known Sholom Aleichem play that had been presented in New York in 1921—was produced as late as 1973. Some Second Avenue–type Yiddish productions toured as late as the 1960s to cities where they played to elderly and rapidly graying audiences. Whereas in Second Avenue’s heyday, invented, romanticized nostalgia for the Old World had been an important part of its attraction, the audience nostalgia now was for Second Avenue itself. And this last, post-1950 phase did not increase the repertoire of lasting songs.

Also beginning in the 1950s, the venue for some of the greats of Second Avenue shifted to uptown stages. Molly Picon, one of the Yiddish theater’s most adored personalities, delighted Broadway audiences of the 1960s in *Milk and Honey*—but in English. The 1956–57 season saw Menashe Skulnick, the most famous and most gifted Second Avenue comic character actor of them all, in *Uncle Willie*—a Broadway play entirely in English, without music, about tensions between a Jewish and an Irish family in the Bronx. And in 1966 Skulnick appeared on Broadway in a new, full-fledged but politically unwise musical, *The Zulu and the Zeyda*, in which one of the only Yiddish words he uttered was the admittedly unintended but now inescapably offensive reference to black people—and in a show that takes place in South Africa, no less. In that show, he sang a beautiful, now forgotten song—“Rivers of Tears”—with a thick immigrant Yiddish accent. But it failed to gain notice offstage.

The reborn interest in Yiddish language and culture toward the end of the 20th century, as well as a preoccupation with rediscovering and revisiting roots and heritage, provided enthusiastic audiences for several Yiddish-oriented musical revues in New York in the 1980s and 1990s. These were cleverly designed, through imaginative narration, dramatized English introductions to Yiddish songs against musical backdrops, and other cohesive techniques to relate even to audiences ignorant of the Yiddish language. The two best-received productions, which also toured, were *The Golden Land* and *Those Were the Days*. While not confined to theatrical songs per se, those productions revived several of them—along with related Second Avenue comedy routines, dance numbers, skits, and some typical shtik. That renewed awareness of things Yiddish has also given succor to the productions of the Folksbiene Yiddish Theatre, the oldest continuously running Yiddish theatrical company. Its productions, however, which have addressed some of Goldfaden’s classics, such as *Shulamis* in 1982, are now given with English as well as Russian supertitles, but they have not included full-scale revivals of Second Avenue musicals. To the contrary, one of its most successful 21st-century productions was a Yiddish version of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *The Pirates of Penzance*, or *The Slave of Duty*—under the Yiddish title of *Di yam gazlonim*.

When Nobel laureate Isaac Bashevis Singer was asked late in life about the death of Yiddish theater, he hedged. “In Jewish life,” he replied, “between sickness and death can be a long time. And the [Second Avenue variety of] Yiddish theater was sick from the beginning!” He was not referring, however, to the music or the songs. And he added, “So I wouldn’t say it’s dead.”

A NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION AND DICTION

Pronunciation in the songs recorded by the Milken Archive expressly avoids consistency with standard literary (YIVO) Yiddish, following instead the mixture of Volhynian, Galician, and southern Polish dialects prevalent on Second Avenue stages. The variety of those performers' backgrounds and geographical origins in the heyday of Second Avenue, however, also yielded occasional words sung in northern Polish and Ukrainian dialects—without consistency even in the same song. This, too, is deliberately reflected in the Milken Archive recordings. To attempt adaptations to literary Yiddish would not only be inauthentic, but would also destroy intended rhyme schemes in many cases.

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