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Jews on Broadway

From the Shtetl to the Bright Lights

The theater has had a special place in Jewish culture and Jews have had a special place in the theater since at least the 1880s. Just ask Henry Ford, whose anti-Semitic articles in the Dearborn Independent included an abridged version of the infamous *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* with the following in Chapter 10:

“The Theater has long been a part of the Jewish program for the guidance of public taste and the influencing of the public mind. Not only is the theater given a special place in the program of the Protocols, but it is the instant ally night by night and week by week of any idea which the "power behind the scenes" wishes to put forth. It is not by accident that in Russia, where they now have scarcely anything else, they still have the Theater, specially revived, stimulated and supported by Jewish-Bolshevists because they believe in the Theater just as they believe in the Press; it is one of the two great means of molding popular opinion.

Down to 1885 the American Theater was still in the hands of the Gentiles; from that year dates the first invasion of Jewish influence. This date almost coincides with the beginning of the organization and co-ordination of the Jewish world scheme for domination called Zionism, and this year marks not only the beginning of the Jewish wedge of control, but something far more important.”¹

Proving that even a broken clock will be right twice a day, there are two correct ideas contained in the article: first that theater was an important part of the American Jewish experience, providing paths for upward mobility and acceptance; and secondly that American theater would not have been the same without the influence of Jewish actors, musicians, producers and entrepreneurs.

The question arises then: how were Jews drawn to the theater? Why has it been so important to us? Perhaps the roots of Jewish theater lie in the Purim shpiel, the celebration of the events of the *Book of Esther*. We know that by the 15th century, Italian Jews were commemorating the holiday with elaborately costumed events.²

By the 19th century, the Purim shpiels had become more elaborate, and the amateur actors had evolved into professional “shpielers.”³ Despite usually beginning and ending with blessings for the audience, the shpiels often included humor that would be considered adult today. In 16th Century Frankfort, the script for a shpiel was



¹ http://www.biblebelievers.org/ij_ch10.htm

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purim>

³ http://judaism.about.com/od/purim/a/purim_play.htm

ordered burned because of its vulgarity; in 1728, the City of Hamburg banned the performance of all shpiels because of content.

Despite, or perhaps because of, these controversies, Purim shpiels continued to be an integral part of European Jewish life. They became increasingly elaborate productions, featuring musical numbers and large casts. Sometimes, cantors would use shpiels as venues for competitions. Moreover, the topics had expanded beyond the *Book of Esther* to include other Biblical stories, such as *The Selling of Joseph*, *David and Goliath*, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, and *The Wisdom of Solomon*. By the 19th century, there were traveling groups of Jewish performers in Russia and Eastern Europe. Performing in Yiddish outside of the context of the Purim shpiel, they would be known as Brody or Broder singers, the name deriving from the town of Brody in the Ukraine. Brody was a stopping point for performers on their way to the fair at Leipzig.⁴

Dawn of the Modern Era

Abraham (Avrum) Goldfaden, is generally recognized as the father of the modern Yiddish theater.⁵ Born in 1840, in Starokonstantinov, Russia, he was very much a child of the Haskalah, the Enlightenment. While Abraham would attend religious school, his father also insisted that he receive private lessons in Russian and German. In a similar manner, Abraham would be sent to and graduate from a rabbinical school, but he would never lead a congregation. Instead, he learned to become a poet.

As a poet, Goldfaden was serious. "Progress" was his first published poem and would be described by his New York Times obituary as "a plea for Zionism years before that movement developed". But Goldfaden had another side. As a young man he was said to have so loved and imitated the performances of the Brody singers that he was given the nickname *Avromele Badkhen* or "Abie the Jester". It was this contradictory nature, the mixture of comedy with drama, which would characterize the Yiddish theater.



The exact details leading up to the first performance are not known. Perhaps Goldfaden had seen a Brody singer named Israel Grodner or maybe just heard of him. At any rate, an inspiration came to Goldfaden. He would write a play, combining a storyline, Goldfaden's own poetry and the music of the Brody singer. It was a partial success. The audience hated the serious poetry, but loved the musical numbers and comedy. Goldfaden learned from his experience. From that point on, he would produce plays in Yiddish, with a story line and punctuated with songs and humor.

Goldfaden's first plays were simple affairs. He could often only afford to pay two actors. The story lines and characters were set, but the dialog was improvised. The plays lacked the precision of a modern production, but more importantly they contained elements of contemporary Yiddish culture. The songs and dialog were simple and humorous. His earliest comedies, like *Shmendrik* and the *Two Kumi-Lemls*, were based on premises that the audiences could relate to. The main character of *Two Kumi-Lemls* has

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Broder_singer

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham_Goldfaden

been described as the “ultimate simpleton, an unattractive pious Hasid with a squint, a stammer, a lump and a limp.”⁶ He is betrothed to the beautiful and romantic daughter of a wealthy, equally pious man. She loves her handsome young tutor. This is a pretty standard formula for a romantic comedy, but with a Yiddish element that appealed to the audience.



As he became more successful, Goldfaden’s more serious nature began to once again reassert itself. At the end of shows, Goldfaden would come out and lecture the audience. These so-called curtain speeches became a tradition in the Yiddish theater.

The Goldfaden plays continued to grow in both complexity and scope. In 1878, Goldfaden would produce *Di Kishefmakhern*, known in English as *The Witch*. It was a play about superstition; Goldfaden would say of it, “I wrote *Di Kishefmakhern* in Romania, where the populace – Jews as much as Romanians – believe strongly in witches.”⁷ The lead female role was written to be played by a man. The part was played by Israel Grodner. In this same production, Jacob Adler would make his stage debut in the role of Marcus, a young lover.

Yiddish theater might have remained confined to Eastern Europe, if not for the pogroms that followed the assassination Czar Alexander II. The Czar had been a social reformer, who allowed the Jewish people quite a bit of freedom. His successor, Czar Alexander III, organized religious persecutions. Jews were forbidden to own land or property, expelled from the major cities and theater was banned. Many of the actors fled to London, which would become the temporary home of Yiddish theater. Theaters sprang up throughout the Jewish section of London. Adler would say of this time “If Yiddish theater was destined to go through its infancy in Russia, and in America grew to manhood and success, then London was its school.”⁸

London might have made a permanent home for Yiddish theater, except for two factors: the Jewish community was small, and soon there were more actors than the limited number of shows could support; and London already had its own theaters, creating even more competition. Yiddish theater would continue on in London for years, but the best performers would seek their fortunes across the pond.

Beginning in 1881, 1.3 million Eastern European Jews would immigrate to America. In 1882, Leon and Miron Golubuk, accompanied by four members of their acting troupe, would journey from London to join their brother, Abe Golubuk, who was already in New York. Abe worked in a cigar factory, alongside a 12-year old boy, Boris Thomashefsky. Abe and Boris had persuaded a saloon owner to finance the production, as well as to pay for the troupe’s passage from London. Together they intended to form the first American Yiddish theater acting troupe, with a performance of *The Witch* as their inaugural work.

⁶ <http://theater.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?res=9804EFD61639F935A25755C0A962948260>

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Witch_of_Boto%C5%9Fani

⁸ *Jews on Broadway*, Stewart F. Lane, McFarland and Co. Inc., 2011

Breaking with the earlier tradition, they had cast a woman to play the lead role. Opening night comes...and she never shows up. There are several explanations offered: either she developed a headache or perhaps a case of stage fright or maybe she was bribed by New York's German Jewish community, who feared embarrassment. Whatever the reason, the opening night performance never came off, but a huge crowd had turned out for the performance. A huge crowd that was ready to pay to see Yiddish theater. Soon Yiddish theater was an integral part of the New York Jewish culture. Sweatshop workers, peddlers, working men and women, would sit next to their wealthier uptown brethren to take in the shows. Even Orthodox Jews would attend shows on Friday afternoons and Saturdays. The tickets would be purchased in advance and the lights turned on the day before. Even non-Jews began to attend.



Boris Thomashefsky would become one of the early stars of the theater. As a teenager, he often played female roles. One story has the young Thomashefsky being responsible for the failure of the diva to appear in the first performance; he bribes her to feign illness so that he can play the role. It is Thomashefsky who first takes the shows on the road. In Baltimore in 1887, fourteen year old Bessie Baumfeld-Kaufman, goes backstage to meet the beautiful young "actress" she had seen on stage, only to discover that the "actress" was a boy. Bessie would become romantically involved with Boris and, as he moved on to play male roles, she would take over playing the role of ingénue.⁹

As the years pass, Thomashefsky would come to head one successful acting troupe; Jacob Adler another. Thomashefsky's group tended to perform lighter, more comedic works; Adler preferred the more serious dramatic works. But you might see Adler in a musical and Thomashefsky in a drama. As Yiddish theater spread out from the hub of New York, the plays began to take on American sensibilities. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, you might see Yiddish versions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Goethe's *Faust* and even, ironically enough, Wagner's *Parsifal*. Adler hired Jacob Gordin as a playwright, and soon Gordin wrote Yiddish adaptations of *King Lear* and *Othello*. This prompted Thomashefsky to have a Yiddish version of *Hamlet* written.

A new wave of Yiddish immigrants, coming to America between 1905 and 1908, prompted both theatrical entrepreneurs to return their lighter, comedic opera-style roots. I bring this up because, although Jews would contribute in many areas of American theater, arguably the greatest contributions are in musical comedy. Despite the success achieved by these plays, they were often dismissed as "shund" or trash, as opposed to serious drama.

We have now reached the end of the first period of our discussion. Let me offer a brief recap:

Yiddish theater had evolved out the Purim shpiels. Originally drawing from the story of the Book of Esther, the subjects portrayed by the Shpielers expanded to include other Biblical tales, and then more secular subjects. During the Enlightenment, the Haskalah period, the shpielers would evolve into the traveling musicians known as the Brody singers. Abraham Goldfaden, the man credited with inventing Yiddish theater, combined story lines with the singing of Brody singer Israel Grodner to create the first Yiddish musical plays. These plays were so successful that soon

⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boris_Thomashefsky

multiple performance groups were touring Eastern Europe. Jacob Adler was one of the many actors that learned their craft under Goldfaden. Because of the religious persecution beginning in the 1880s, Adler and other actors fled Eastern Europe for London and then on to New York. In New York, Yiddish theater was a huge success, adding new topics, new talents such as Boris Thomashefsky and spreading out through America. While dramas were often performed, the greatest successes came from musical comedies.

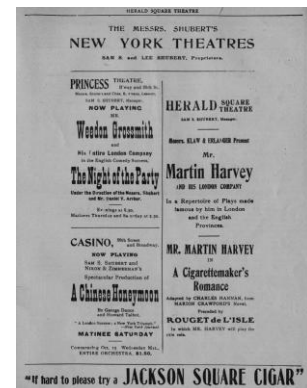
As a post-script to this part of the story, the later part of Abraham Goldfaden’s life is a sad story. He was a folk-hero, hailed as having established a new and successful art-form. But he didn’t achieve much success in either London or New York. He remained poor and he was unable to establish a successful theater group outside of Eastern Europe, a place he would return to until he came to America final time in 1902. Finally, in 1907, Goldfaden was able to talk Thomashefsky into producing his play *Ben-Ami*. The play was a huge success, but ironically Goldfaden would die not long after opening night.

“Remember Me To Herald Square”

In the early days of the Yiddish theater, performances were generally held in the area of New York below 14th Street Union Square. The Yiddish Art Theater, also known as the Entermedia Theater, is located at 12th Street and Second Avenue, for example. Even that theater, built by Louis Jaffe in 1926, was uptown for most Jews living in New York in the early days.

But Jewish entrepreneurs had been building theaters in the uptown areas of New York for years; they had been putting on mainstream American plays in these theaters. In 1893, Charles Frohman would open the Empire Theater at 41st Street and Broadway¹⁰. The first play produced there was *The Girl I Left Behind Me* by David Belasco, the son of Sephardic Jewish parents who had moved to San Francisco during the Gold Rush. Belasco is perhaps most famous for his adaptation of the story “*Madame Butterfly*”¹¹ into a play. Belasco would open his own theater at 42nd Street, between 7th and 8th Avenues, in 1902.

The three Shubert brothers, Sam, Jacob and Lee, had come over from Poland in 1882 and settled in Syracuse, New York. The family name was originally “Schubart” but was Americanized. Each of the brothers pulled themselves up from poverty to become theater managers. In 1900, they would obtain the lease for the Herald Square Theater, the first of many theaters that they would own. Tragically, Sam would die in a train wreck in 1905. The two remaining brothers would go on to build an empire that would span the globe. By 1924 they had 86 theatres in the United States alone. By the end of that decade they would own, operate, manage or be responsible for bookings in 1,000 theaters in the U.S. alone. The organization that they established had produced more than 600 shows. Today, in addition to owning 17



¹⁰ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire_Theatre_\(New_York_City\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empire_Theatre_(New_York_City))

¹¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Belasco

Broadway theaters, the Schubert organization manages the National Theater in Washington, D.C.¹²

Oscar Hammerstein was born in Prussia. His mother died when he was 15 and he fled from his brutal father, coming to America in 1864. He worked sweeping floors in a cigar factory. Within 10 years, he had learned enough about the cigar to found the U.S. Tobacco Journal. An inventor, Hammerstein would hold 52 patents, 44 of them related to the cigar business. But his real passion was for opera.¹³



He would build his first theater, the Harlem Opera House, on 125th Street in 1889. His second theater, the Columbus Theatre, was built in 1890 on the same street. He would then move his operations downtown, build the first Manhattan Opera House in 1893 on 34th Street. This failed as an opera house and would be reopened, in partnership with fellow entrepreneurs John Koster and Albert Bial, as “Koster and Bial’s Music Hall.” Despite being very successful monetarily, Hammerstein was dissatisfied with the artistic direction the management took. Not only did the new owners present vaudeville in the theater, in 1896 they would allow the venue to be used for the first public exhibition of a Vitascope movie.

Hammerstein would exchange law suits with his former partners.

Disenchanted with the partnership, he opened a fourth venue, the Olympia Theatre, on Longacre Square, where, in 1896, he presented a comic opera that he wrote himself, *Santa Maria*. Nine years later, Longacre Square was renamed Times Square, and the area would become, through his efforts, the heart of the New York theater district.¹⁴

David Nederlander would purchase the lease for the Detroit Opera House in 1912. Not long after that, he would move to New York, where he would come to own 9 Broadway theaters, making his organization second in size to only the Shuberts. Today the Nederlander Organization continues to own Broadway properties, in addition to owning the Fisher Building in Detroit and three West End theaters in London.¹⁵

Because of the vision of these entrepreneurs, New York had a thriving theater district.

“How do you get to Broadway? Practice.”

One might think that with a thriving and popular Yiddish theater and many successful Jewish theater owners, the stars of Yiddish theater would have an easy time moving uptown. Some, really a few, were able to make a successful transition. Jacob Adler had already famously played Shylock from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* on the Yiddish stage at the People’s Theater,

¹² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shubert_family

¹³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Hammerstein_I

¹⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koster_and_Bial's_Music_Hall

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nederlander_Organization

performing the role in Yiddish. He would reprise his performance in a 1903 Broadway production.

Alla Nazimova was another famous star of the era. She had appeared in Yiddish theater interpretations of Chekov and Ibsen plays. In 1906, she would appear in *Hedda Gabler* on Broadway and in *A Doll's House* the following year. She would go on to be a star in silent movies, before returning to Broadway to appear in the *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Good Earth*.

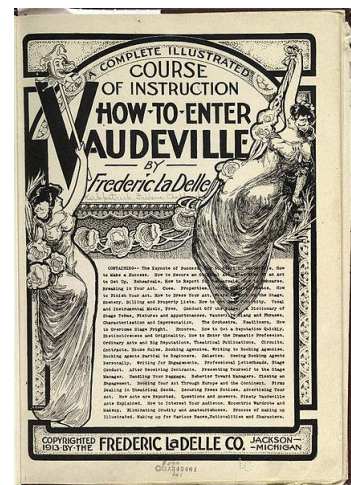
But most Jewish performers of that time did not immediately find the bright lights on Broadway; for them, the path to success would come through vaudeville.

There are two theories about the etymology of the word “vaudeville.” Both agree that the word comes to us from French. The first theory is that it is a corruption of “Un chanson du Vau de Vire” meaning “A Song of the Valley of Vire.” Apparently the drinking songs sung in this valley were particularly humorous and satirical. The phrase was shortened to “vaudevire” and then to vaudeville. The second explanation is that it came from “voix de ville” or voice of the city. Regardless of the origins, vaudeville was a popular form of entertainment in the United States from the 1880s until it was displaced by movies in the early 1930s. (The closing of New York’s Palace Theater in 1932 is generally regarded as marking the end of vaudeville.)

Vaudeville played in neighborhood theaters, affordable and accessible to most people. As the Yiddish theater was, vaudeville was the theater of the proletariat. Unlike the variety and burlesque shows that preceded vaudeville, it was family entertainment. On October 24, 1881, impresario Tony Pastor ushered in the vaudeville era with the first self-proclaimed “clean” vaudeville show. Pastor banned the sale of liquor on premises and eliminated much of the bawdy material. The experiment proved a success.¹⁶

Martin Beck was the most successful vaudeville promoter. Born in Slovakia in 1868, he came to the United States in 1884, along with a troupe of actors. Not Jewish himself, he is an important figure in the lives of many Jewish stars, including Ed Wynn, Sophie Tucker, Fannie Brice and an aspiring stage magician who changed his name from Erik Weisz to Harry Houdini. Beck met Houdini in a beer hall in St. Paul, Minnesota, where Houdini was performing. Beck sent Houdini a telegram that said “You can open Omaha March twenty sixth sixty dollars, will see act probably make you proposition for all next season.” Houdini kept the telegram and wrote at the bottom “This wire changed my whole Life's journey.”

By 1905, Beck had formed the Orpheum Circuit, a chain of theaters that stretched from Chicago to San Francisco. In 1913, he built the Palace Theater on Broadway. The opening act was the French actress Sarah Bernhardt, who was of Jewish ancestry. The Palace Theater soon was considered “the Mecca of audiences and the paradise of actors.”¹⁷



¹⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaudeville>

¹⁷ <http://www.nycago.org/Organs/NYC/html/ResBeckM.html>

Given the social climate of the times, it should not be surprising that there was a decided ethnic tilt to the performances. There were circuits for African-American audiences, for Italian audiences, for Yiddish speaking audiences. Much of the humor revolved around stereotypes. The Jewish characters were portrayed with exaggerated Yiddish accents, shown as being dishonest and overly concerned with money. At the same time, many Jewish performers donned blackface, the most notable being Al Jolson. Viewed through our contemporary sensibilities, we decry the racism. However many Jewish performers would embrace and extol African American culture.

Fanny Brice, born Fania Borach, began her career in burlesque, in the chorus. She would change her name to seem less ethnic, which is ironic in light of her later career. She achieved success at the age of 17, thanks to a song by a relatively unknown writer named Irving Berlin. She would sing the song, “*Sadie Salome, Go Home*” with an exaggerated Yiddish accent, despite the fact that she didn’t actually speak Yiddish. After the success of her rendition of the song, she was able to break the barrier and become the first Jewish comedienne. Her routines epitomized the strength of the women she had grown up with. She would go on to have a Broadway career and to be portrayed by Barbara Streisand in the show *Funny Girl* and the *Funny Girl* and *Funny Lady* movies.¹⁸



A contemporary of Fanny Brice, diminutive Molly Picon, born Małka Opiekun, would also find success on the vaudeville stage. Only 4’10” tall, Molly began by playing boy’s roles. She would soon go on to playing the “All-American girl” an ironic role for the daughter of Russian Jewish parents.¹⁹

Comedienne Sophie Tucker also broke stereotypes with her portrayal of the “Red Hot Momma” character. Born Sonya Kalish in Tulchyn in the Ukraine in 1886, she came to America as an infant. She started singing for tips in parent’s restaurant, but soon moved into burlesque. She was known for her risqué songs, including “Nobody Loves a Fat Girl, But Oh How a Fat Girl Can Love.” As with many other performers of the day, Sophie Tucker would don black face. But unlike most other performers, she became so enamored with African American music that she hired some of the best African American musicians of her day to give her lessons and hired African American composers to write songs for her.

Eddie Cantor, born Israel Iskowitz, was orphaned at an early age. He began his career on the Lower East Side, winning a talent contest when he was only five. He worked odd jobs to break into show business, including working as a singing waiter in a restaurant in Coney Island, where he was accompanied by a young pianist named Jimmy Durante. As a teenager, he performed other comics’ material and performed in blackface. His real talent, however, lay in his expressive eyes and his ability to imbue his portrayals of the “nebbish” character with a depth and sensitivity.²⁰



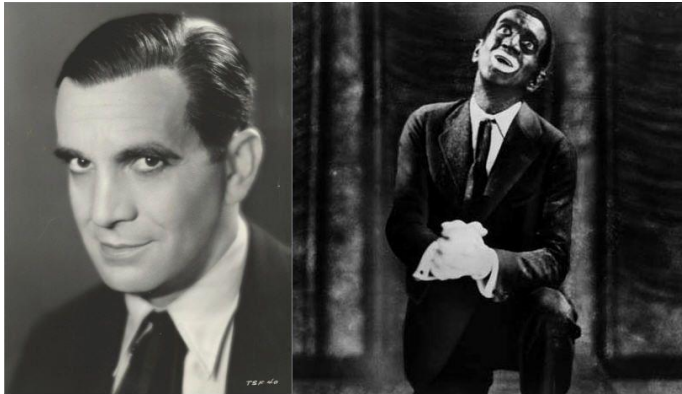
¹⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fannie_Brice

¹⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Molly_Picon

²⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eddie_Cantor

Al Jolson was a contemporary of Eddie Cantor. (Roughly speaking, that is. Jolson did not know his actual date of birth and approximated 1886, Cantor was born in 1892.) He was born Asa Yoelson in Srednik, Russia. Jolson's father, a Rabbi, came to America in 1891. By 1894, the rabbi had saved enough money to send for his family and they were reunited.

Jolson's first job in entertainment came in 1902, when he was hired as an usher for the Walter L. Main Circus. Because of his wonderful singing voice, he was soon promoted. In 1903, he joined a burlesque show. In 1904, he appeared for the first time wearing blackface. This gave his career a huge boost. By 1908, he was regularly appearing as part of a minstrel show.



In 1911, Jolson starred in his first musical revue. J.J. Shubert was so impressed by Jolson's energy that he booked him in *La Belle Paree*, a musical comedy which opened at the Winter Garden Theater in 1911. Jolson would go to be regarded as the greatest entertainer of his time. When we look at Jolson wearing blackface through our today's perspective, there is some repellent about it. But Jolson is also credited with helping introduce African

American music to white audiences, helping to pave the way for artists including Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Fats Waller, and Ethel Waters.²¹ Jolson's singing style is credited as influencing musicians as diverse as Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, Jerry Lee Lewis and even Bob Dylan.

These were the major Jewish figures in theater before World War I. Each is unique and worthy of study on their own; but they all have certain elements in common. They either came from Eastern Europe or were born soon after their parents arrived. They all followed the same path to success: burlesque to vaudeville to Broadway, and in some cases to the movies.



Soon another generation followed. Originally known as a singing group *The Nightingales*, the four sons of Minnie Marx soon added comedy to their routines. Their uncle, Al Sheen, was a ventriloquist who helped them break into vaudeville. Each of the four developed his own unique on-stage personae. Chico, for example, disguised his Yiddish accent with a faux Italian accent. Before achieving immortality in film, the quartet was highly successful Broadway actors. *I'll Say She Is*, *The Cocoanuts* and *Animal Crackers* were each successful Broadway plays.

There were actually five Marx brothers, but Gummo dropped out early. There may have been a six brother, Manfred, who is rumored to have died only months after birth. Zeppo played the straight man on stage,

²¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al_Jolson

while he is supposed to have been the funniest brother in real life. Chico, Harpo and of course Groucho were the most famous. Their stage names were given to them by fellow vaudevillian Art Fisher during a poker game. Their real names are:

- Chico = Leonard
- Harpo = Adolph, later changed to Arthur
- Groucho = Julius Henry
- Gummo = Milton
- Zeppo = Herbert Manfred²²

As previously mentioned, the Marx Brothers began as musicians; their talent for comedy came to light when Groucho began exchanging insults with a heckler. In 1911 while still performing as *The Nightingales* singing group, they met a young violinist, Jack Kubelsky. Kubelsky, the son of Jewish immigrants from Lithuania, became close friends with Zeppo Marx. It was only natural that Zeppo would invite his friend to the house for Passover Seder. It was at this Seder that Jack met the Marx Brothers' cousin Sadie Marks²³, a romance followed and they would wed. Jack would adopt the less ethnic last name Benny, while Cousin Sadie would change her name to the even more American "Mary Livingstone" and the duo would share a long and illustrious comedic career.



The Marx Brothers were justifiably famous for their ability to improvise. Even after they started making movies, they would still go out on the road and test variations of comedic skits to see which combinations elicited the greatest responses from live audiences. But you can only do so much with improvisation. Successful Broadway plays and Hollywood movies require choreography and scripts, and for those, you need writers.

"The Plays the Thing..."

The Cocoanuts was the most successful of the Marx Brothers three Broadway plays. It would have a run of 276 performances at the Lyric Theater, from December 8, 1925 through to August 7, 1926. After the Broadway closing, the show would go on the road for what was called the "1926 Summer Edition" tour. In 1927, the show would return briefly to Broadway for a revival. In 1929, the film adaptation would be released.²⁴

What made the show so successful? In addition to the talents of the Marx Brothers, the script was written by George S. Kaufman and the music by Irving Berlin. Kaufman would also write the scripts for the Marx Brothers



²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marx_Brothers

²³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Livingstone

²⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cocoanuts_\(musical\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cocoanuts_(musical))

productions of *Animal Crackers* and *A Night at the Opera*. In fact, the Marx Brothers would beg MGM studio head Irving Thalberg to hire Kaufman to write their script as, without his talents, their careers had begun to flounder. Despite their partnership that spanned decades, Kaufman hated the way that they would improvise around his scripts. Once during an *Animal Crackers* rehearsal, he is said to have walked up onstage and quipped, "Excuse me for interrupting, but I thought for a minute I actually heard a line I wrote."²⁵

Despite winning a Pulitzer Prize for the 1932 musical *Of Thee I Sing*, which he wrote with Morrie Ryskind and Ira Gershwin, Kaufman may have been most proud of his other Pulitzer, which he won for the 1937 comedy *You Can't Take It With You*, co-authored with Moss Hart. Kaufman claimed to know nothing about music and to hate it in theater.²⁶



Whatever George Kaufman may have felt about music, music and song was the true love of Irving Berlin's life. Born Israel Isidore Baline on May 11, 1888, he was one of eight children of Moses and Lena Lipkin Baline. His father, a cantor in a Russian synagogue, moved the family from Russia to America when Irving was 5 to escape the pogroms. Berlin's only memory of his early years was of lying in a blanket by the side of the road, watching his house burn to the ground.²⁷

The family would make their way to America, settling in a "cold-water basement flat with no windows" on Cherry Street on the Lower East Side. His father, unable to find work as a cantor in New York, took a job at a kosher meat market and gave Hebrew lessons on the side, and struggled to support his family. He died when Irving was thirteen years old. With only a few years of schooling, Irving found it necessary to take to the streets to help support his family becoming a newspaper boy, hawking *The Evening Journal*. An oft repeated story, first told by Berlin's biographer and friend, Alexander Woollcott, is that on his first day of the job, Berlin "stopped to look at a ship about to put out for China. So entranced was he that he failed to notice a swinging crane, and he was knocked into the river. When he was fished out, after going down for the third time, he was still holding in his clenched fist the five pennies that constituted his first day's receipts, his contribution to the family budget." His mother worked as a midwife, and three of his sisters worked wrapping cigars, a common trade for immigrant girls. His older brother worked in a sweatshop assembling shirts.

For Berlin, music provided both a figurative and literal escape from the poverty of the Lower East Side. With a group of friends, Irving used to go to saloons in the Bowery section of Lower Manhattan, singing to customers in the hope that some would pitch a few pennies their way. Things were pretty rough in this area. He soon acquired musical street-smarts, learning the types of songs likely to appeal to the traffic and honing his singing skills. He would work at *Tony*

²⁵ <http://www.comedyontap.com/pantheon/kaufman/kaufman.html>

²⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_S._Kaufman

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irving_Berlin

Pastor's Music Hall in Union Square and then, in 1906 when he was 18, a job as a singing waiter at the *Pelham Cafe* in Chinatown followed.

Berlin would often sing songs written by his friend, George M. Cohan. But he wanted to write his own material. Berlin's specialty in these early days was making up off-color or "blue" versions of popular songs. He also taught himself piano. In 1909, he was able to get a job as a professional lyricist with the Ted Snyder Company. In 1911, Berlin would write the song *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. That song made Berlin an over-night sensation and he was booked as feature performer later that year at Oscar Hammerstein's vaudeville house, where he introduced dozens of his other songs to the audience.

"Timeless classic" is a cliché often used to describe songs. But it is truly an apt term for *Alexander's Ragtime Band* which has been at or near the top of the charts on multiple occasions: first release in 1911; again in 1927 (Bessie Smith version); 1937 as rerecorded by Louis Armstrong; Johnny Mercer's version in 1945; Bing Crosby and Al Jolson in 1947; Ray Charles recording of a big band version in 1959.

It is perhaps indicative of the American culture that our "second national anthem", *God Bless America*, was written by a Russian immigrant. Originally written by Berlin in 1918 while he was serving in the U.S. Army, Berlin would rewrite it in 1938. The first version contained the lyrics "Make her victorious on land and foam, God bless America..." That seemed too militant. A second version was written with the phrase "Stand beside her and guide her, to the **right** with the light from above." That seemed like an endorsement of the political Right. The version that we all know was released as a peace song in 1938, sung by Kate Smith on her radio show. During World War II, at the request of Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau in an effort to increase the sales of war bonds, Berlin would write a stage show called "*This is the Army*." In 1942, the movie *Holiday Inn* would introduce the song "*White Christmas*," which would become one of the most widely recorded songs of all time. In 1946, after the sudden death of Berlin's friend Jerome Kern, Berlin would take over the writing of "*Annie Get Your Gun*." But as important as any of Irving Berlin's other contributions was his opening the door for other Jewish songwriters. As George Gershwin would say "Berlin had shown us the way; it was now easier to attain our ideal."

Ira and George Gershwin were born on December 6, 1896 and September 26, 1898 respectively, in Brooklyn, New York. Ira was born Israel Gershowitz, while George's birth name was Jacob Gershowitz. Their parents, Morris (Moishe) and Rose Gershovitz, had come to the United States from Odessa, Russia, in the early 1890s. Working collaboratively the two brothers wrote more than a dozen Broadway shows, including classic songs such as "*I Got Rhythm*", "*Embraceable You*", "*The Man I Love*" and "*Someone to Watch Over Me*", and the opera *Porgy and Bess*.²⁸ In 1924, George Gershwin would write his most recognizable melody, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Tragically, in 1937, George died of a brain tumor. Although his work after George's death is often overshadowed by the works



²⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Gershwin

that the brothers created together, Ira would continue writing until the 1950s.²⁹

Jerome Kern, born in 1885, composed more than 700 songs that were used in over 100 plays.³⁰ Some of his classics include "*Ol' Man River*", "*A Fine Romance*", "*Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*", "*All the Things You Are*", "*The Way You Look Tonight*" and "*Long Ago (and Far Away)*". Kern was born in New York City, the child of German Jewish parents. Although his father, Henry Kern, ran a stable when Jerome was quite young, Henry soon prospered as a merchant. While Jerome always wanted to pursue a career in music, his father wanted him to join the business. That came to an end when Jerome inadvertently ordered 200 pianos, when the order was supposed to be for 2. Jerome was sent to study piano and composition at the New York College of Music and then to Heidelberg, Germany, for private tutoring. He came back to the United States by way of London. When he returned to New York, he was immediately able to find work writing scores for Broadway shows. In 1912, he wrote his first complete score for *The Red Petticoat*, a musical comedy Western. By 1914, Jerome had evolved a unique style, a mixture of ragtime and syncopation that, according to theater historian John Kenrick, would set the pattern for musical comedy love songs that would last until the 1960s.

Anecdotally, it was Jerome Kern's love of playing poker that would save his life. In 1915, he was supposed to sail with his friend and theatrical producer Charles Frohman to London. The night before, Kern stayed up late playing poker and missed the boat. Frohman would be killed when the boat, the *Lusitania*, was torpedoed by a German U-boat.

Oscar Hammerstein II was the grandson of theater owner and impresario, Oscar Hammerstein I. Born in 1895 in New York City, it would seem that theater would be his natural vocation. After all, not only was his grandfather instrumental in the development of Broadway as a venue, as a vaudeville promoter, but his father, William Hammerstein is often credited as being the inventor of the pie-in-the-face as a comic shtick.³¹ But William wanted his son to have a life outside of theater. Oscar Hammerstein II attended Columbia University and went on to Columbia Law School. When his father died in 1914, Oscar left Columbia for a career as a writer, producer and director.³²

He often worked in partnership with other composers. In 1927, Hammerstein partnered with Jerome Kern to create *Show Boat*. Mark Lubbock would write of that show "Here we come to a completely new genre – the musical play as distinguished from musical comedy. Now... the play was the thing, and everything else was subservient to that play. Now... came complete integration of song, humor and production numbers into a single and inextricable artistic entity."³³ He credits Hammerstein and Kern with completing the process that was begun so long ago by Goldfaden.

²⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ira_Gershwin

³⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerome_Kern

³¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oscar_Hammerstein_II

³² [Ibid](#)

³³ <http://www.theatrehistory.com/american/musical030.html>

Of course, Hammerstein's most successful and longest collaboration was with Richard Rodgers. It came about because Rodgers original partner, Lorenz Hart (the son of Jewish parents, born in Harlem) had a drinking problem. When his alcoholism became out of control, Hammerstein was brought in as a substitute. The result of the initial collaboration with Rodgers was *Oklahoma!* Rodgers and Hammerstein would go on to produce such Broadway musicals as *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *Flower Drum Song*, *The Sound of Music* and many more.



This is only a cursory examination of the contributions of Jewish composers to theater on Broadway. There are entire books devoted to the history of the American musical and justifiably so. Each of the composers above is deserving of their own biography. But let me summarize briefly. Jewish theater originates with the Purim shpiels; evolves into a more modern form in Russia in the 1870s when Goldfaden combines his poetry and story-telling with the music of Brody singer Israel Grodner; the plays, written and performed in Yiddish, resonate with the audiences in Eastern Europe and grow in scope and complexity; the plays also produced the first generations of Jewish actors and songwriters; Jewish theater, including the writers and performers, moved from Eastern Europe to London and then on to New York; in New York Yiddish theater combined with burlesque and vaudeville, with actors moving from one style to the other, often participating in all three; at the same time, Jewish theater owners began buying properties in the area around and north of Herald Square, creating the Broadway theater district; Irving Berlin breaks into song-writing, soon followed by the Gershwins, Kern, Hammerstein and many others. Influenced perhaps by the Yiddish theater of their youth, these composers helped continue the evolution of musical theater. The music was now an integral part of the story-telling.

But musical theater was only a part of the Jewish theatrical experience. From the very beginning, some Jewish actors preferred the serious side of theater.

“Let’s Get Serious”



Born in Odessa, Russia, in 1855, Jacob Adler had begun his acting career in Eastern Europe, performing first in classic theater, before participating in the early Grodner plays. He came to the United States by way of London. In New York, he established the first serious Yiddish theater company, hiring Jacob Gordin as his company's writer. Together they crafted the very successful *Der Yiddisher King Lear*, with Adler in the title role. That performance, along with his portrayal of Shakespeare's Shylock, are considered Adler's greatest works. Adler explained his decision to pursue serious theater instead of becoming a singer simply: "I had no voice." There is probably more to the story than that. Musical theater was not held in high esteem in many quarters, including the Jewish communities. Adler's own uncle said of the

Goldfaden productions "Is this theater? No my child, this is a circus."³⁴

Adler established a tradition of serious acting and Gordin a tradition of writing serious plays that would influence many generations. Leon Kobrin, considered a disciple of Gordin's, was the first to write plays about the American Jewish experience. Korbrin plays included *The Ruined Family from Downtown* (1899), *Ghetto Dramas* (1904), *The Immigrants* (1910) and *The Tenement House* (1917). He also translated the works of Guy de Maupassant, Emile Zola, Maxim Gorky, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov into Yiddish for the New York stage.³⁵

Sholem Asch is better known as a novelist, but he was also a playwright. When his 1907 play *Got fun Nekomeh (God of Vengeance)* was performed at the Apollo on Broadway in 1923, the entire cast was arrested and convicted on obscenity charges. The play is set in a brothel in Poland and involves a loving, lesbian relationship. The play also involves a Torah scroll. Other Sholem Asch plays include *Der Veg tsu Zikh (The Way to Oneself)*, 1917; *Motke Ganev (Motke the Thief)*, 1917; *Onkl Mozes*, 1918.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, you could also see the plays of Sholem Aleichem and I. L. Peretz being performed in New York. According to historian Moses Rischin, the four major Yiddish theaters—the Thalia, the Windsor, the People's, and the Grand—presented 1,100 performances annually during the turn of the century, before an estimated audience of 2 million patrons.³⁶



Two actors that came out of the Jewish theater of this time were Edward G. Robinson (born Emanuel Goldenberg) and Paul Muni (born Meshilem Meier Weisenfreund). Both actors got their starts in the Yiddish theater before moving on to Broadway and then film. Edward G. Robinson first appeared on Broadway in 1915, appearing in *Under Fire*. Roles in *Under Sentence* (1916), *The Deluge* (1917), *The Pawn* (1917) and many others followed. In 1923, Robinson appeared in *The Idle Inn*, based on a book by Peretz Hirschbein.

37

Paul Muni grew up in the Yiddish theater, both his parents were actors. Even as a child, Muni had amazing talent with makeup. His first professional role was playing an 82-year old man. Muni was 12-years old at the time of the performance. While still a teenager, he was signed by Maurice Schwartz for his Yiddish Art Theater. Muni's first role on Broadway was as an elderly Jewish man in the play *We Americans*, written by playwrights Max Siegel and Milton Herbert Gropper; it

³⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob_Pavlovich_Adler

³⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leon_Kobrin

³⁶ http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article_display.aspx?articleID=1411

³⁷ <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000064/otherworks>

was also the first time that he ever acted in English.³⁸ Three years later, he would be signed to make movies by Fox and would receive an Oscar nomination for his performance in his first film, *The Valiant*. Muni would return to Broadway to appear in *Counselor at Law*, a major hit. In 1932, Muni would return to Hollywood to star in *Scarface* and *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*.



Jacob Adler's daughter, Stella Adler, made her first appearance on stage when she was only 4-years old appearing in the play "*Broken Hearts*" at the Grand Street Theater on the Lower East Side, as a part of her parents Independent Yiddish Art Company. Her mother, Sara Adler, was an actress in the Yiddish theater, most recognized for her portrayal of the prostitute *Katusha Maslova* in Jacob Gordin's play adapted from Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. All five of Stella's siblings were also actors. In 1931 she joined the Group Theatre, founded by Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford. Stella Adler would later marry Clurman.

The Group Theater was founded in 1931 to develop an American acting style and to present plays of social significance. It was based around the Stanislavski system of acting, a system that offered a more realistic style of acting, but extending it. Both Adler and Lee Strasberg would establish acting schools, both private studios and through classes given at the NYU School of the Arts.

Adler was the only American actor to have studied with Konstantin Stanislavski. Strasberg would branch off and create the Method approach to acting, combining elements of psychology with acting. Adler would leave the Group Theater over differences with Strasberg (she once referred to Strasberg's use of emotional memory as an acting tool as "sick and schizophrenic") but there were significant areas of commonality among the members that influenced generations of actors: belief that acting interpretation draws from an actor's memories and experiences and the belief that theater can and should have social significance. The Group Theater produced works by many important American playwrights, most notably Clifford Odets and Irwin Shaw. It's most successful production was the 1937-38 Broadway hit *Golden Boy*, which starred Luther Adler.

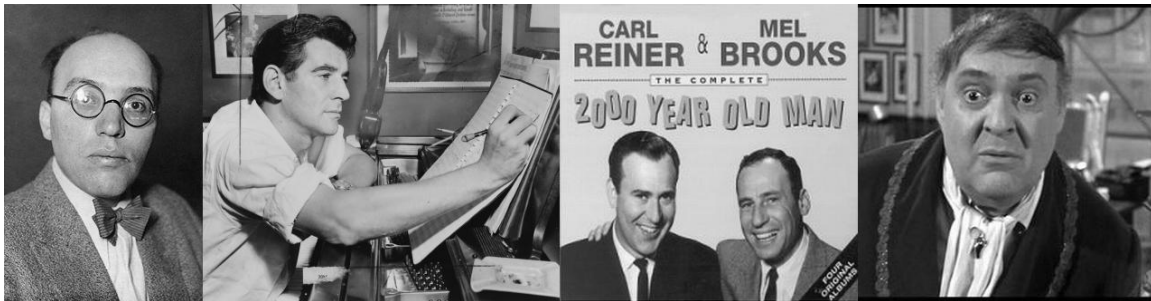
Clifford Odets was born in 1906 to a middle-class Jewish family. He would be widely considered the greatest dramatist of the 1930s. Irwin Shaw was born Irwin Gilbert Shamforoff in the South Bronx, New York City, to Russian-Jewish immigrants. A prolific writer best known for his novels, his first play *Bury the Dead* was performed in 1936.

The Group Theater, and the many other theater groups that would later spin off from it, marked and mirrored a change in American Jewish culture. The earlier generations of Jewish theater, if they dealt with contemporary issues at all, had been concerned with the problems of surviving in America and the conflicts between the new and the old cultures. Early plays dealt with issues like arranged marriages or whether a young man should be a cantor or a jazz singer. Or they were purely escapism. Now plays were dealing with more serious social issues, social injustice and, by the late 1930s, with the looming specter of Nazism.

³⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Muni

Stella Adler was an active participant in the Committee for Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews or, as it became known, the Bergson Group. The group was dedicated to spreading the word about the atrocities taking place in Europe and to call on President Roosevelt to take action. Other Jewish members of the group included her brother Luther, Eddie Cantor, Kurt Weill, Milton Berle, Carl Reiner and Groucho and Chico Marx. Non-Jewish members included Adler's student Marlon Brando, Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Vincent Price and Count Basie. Theater had become political.

In the years following World War II, many Jewish Broadway and Hollywood actors, writers and producers would have their careers ruined by Joe McCarthy and the House Un-American Affairs Committee. Composers Leonard Bernstein and Mark Blitzstein (the pro-union musical *The Cradle Will Rock*), John Garfield, Zero Mostel, Edward G. Robinson, Stella and Luther Adler, Clifford Odets, Elia Kazan, Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller are just some of the more than 300 show business figures who were blacklisted. An overwhelmingly high percentage "happened" to be Jewish.



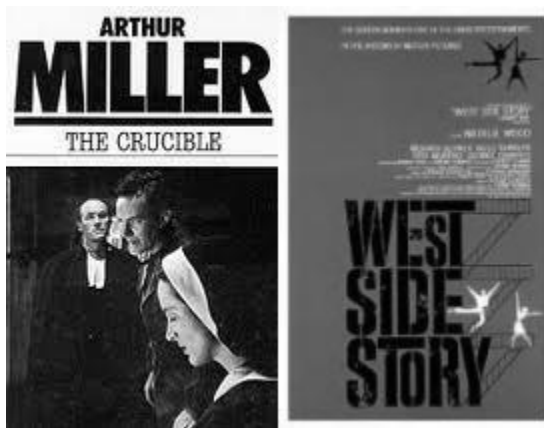
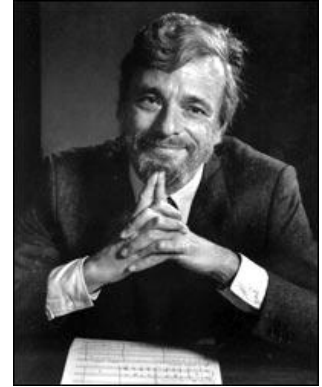
Arthur Miller, whose play *Death of a Salesman*, is widely regarded as one of if not the greatest American drama, was betrayed by his close friend, Elia Kazan, who testified that he believed Miller, Odets and Edward G. Robinson were all Communists.

Despite the hearings and the anti-Semitism of the times, Jews continued to have an influence on Broadway. In 1949, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, with music by Jule Styne, was a smash hit. Jule Styne would write music for *Peter Pan*, *My Sister Eileen* and *Bells Are Ringing*. He would compose over 1,500 songs during his career, including "Don't Rain on My Parade," "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," "Everything's Coming Up Roses," "Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow." In 1950, the George S. Kaufman directed *Guys and Dolls* would open and run for over 1,200 performances. In 1951, Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The King and I* would open. In 1955, Richard Adler and Jerry Moss would provide the music and lyrics for *Damn Yankees*. But 1956 would be an even bigger year.

A Jewish lawyer named Herman Levin was producing a new musical based on George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Unable to get Rodgers and Hammerstein to write the music, he turned to the team of Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick "Fritz" Loewe. *My Fair Lady* would have a Broadway run of almost nine years. The duo would follow with *Paint Your Wagon* and then *Camelot*.

1957 would see the launch of *West Side Story*, with a script by Arthur Laurents, music by Leonard Bernstein and lyrics by a young man named Stephen Sondheim.

Sondheim had grown up on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where he was childhood friends with Jamie Hammerstein, the son of Oscar Hammerstein II. Hammerstein would act as mentor to Sondheim. While in high school, Sondheim wrote a comic musical and brought it to Hammerstein for his opinion, asking him to evaluate it without prejudice. *"Hammerstein said it was the worst thing he had ever seen." But if you want to know why it's terrible," Hammerstein offered, "I'll tell you."* The rest of the day was spent going over the musical, and Sondheim would later say that *"in that afternoon I learned more about songwriting and the musical theater than most people learn in a lifetime."* At the opening of Hammerstein's musical *South Pacific*, Sondheim would meet Harold Prince, with whom he would work for many years.



West Side Story would be the start of a prestigious career. Sondheim would follow that success with *Gypsy* and then *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. The lead role in that production would be offered first to Phil Silvers, then to Milton Berle, before finally being offered to Zero Mostel.

The decade of the 1950s was not only a wonderful time for Broadway musicals, but also for dramas. January 22nd, 1953, saw the opening of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* which would win the "Best Play" Tony Award that year. The play is a dramatization of the Salem witch trials and is often taken as an allegory for McCarthyism. Miller himself would be called before the HUAC and convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions.³⁹

Arthur Asher Miller was born in Harlem, New York, the child of Polish-Jewish immigrants. His father was, at one time, a moderately wealthy businessman who owned a clothing store that employed 400 people. But the family would lose everything in the stock market crash of 1929. Arthur would work menial jobs during his high school years, saving enough money to go to college. He would attend the University of Michigan, graduating in 1938 with a degree in English. He would return to New York and begin writing plays. In 1940, Miler wrote *The Man Who Had All the Luck* which closed after only four performances and disastrous reviews. But by 1946, he had written *All My Sons* which was a Broadway hit. In 1948, in a span of six weeks, Miller wrote *Death of a Salesman* which opened on Broadway in 1949. That play would win a Tony Award for Best Author, the New York Drama Circle Critics' Award, and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It was the first play to win all three of these major awards. The show would run 742 performances.⁴⁰

³⁹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Crucible

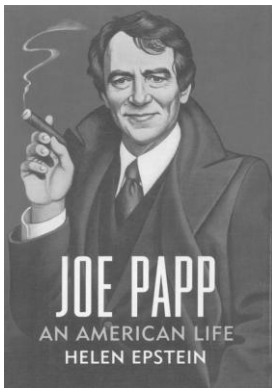
⁴⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Miller

Perhaps the most significant dramatic work of the 1950s, from a Jewish perspective certainly, was the *Diary of Anne Frank*, a dramatization by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett. It opened at the Cort Theatre, Broadway, on October 5, 1955. The role of Anne Frank was played by then seventeen year old Susan Strasberg, the daughter of Group Theater founder and teacher, Lee Strasberg. The play would win the Tony Award for Best Play, the New York Drama Critics Circle award for Best Play and the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Susan Strasberg was nominated for the Tony Award for Best Actress.⁴¹

In 1955, Paul Muni would return to Broadway, starring in the Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee play, *Inherit the Wind*. The play is a fictionalized account of the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” Trial, in which a high school teacher would be found guilty for teaching Darwinism. The notes in the play’s program made it clear that it was not supposed to be a historical account; instead the play is intended a criticism of the political climate of the 1950s.⁴²

As the 1960s began, a hot new playwright emerged. In 1961, Neil Simon’s first Broadway play, *Come Blow Your Horn*, would open at the Brooks Atkinson Theater. It would run for 678 performances. By 1966, Neil would have four plays running concurrently on Broadway: *Sweet Charity*, *The Star-Spangled Girl*, *The Odd Couple*, and *Barefoot in the Park*. Born in the Bronx in 1927, over the years Neil Simon would win almost 30 major awards, including Emmys, Tony awards, Golden Globes, Writers Guild and New York Drama Critics Circle awards.⁴³

In 1966, Woody Allen’s *Don’t Drink the Water* would open on Broadway. It would run for 598 performances. He was born Allen Stewart Konigsberg, December 1, 1935, in Brooklyn, New York. Although he is much better known for films and television writing, Allen also achieved success on Broadway. He wrote and starred in *Play It Again, Sam* which ran for 453 performances and also featured Diane Keaton and Tony Roberts.⁴⁴



Joseph Papp is almost the anti-Broadway star. Born Joseph Papirofsky in 1921 in Brooklyn, New York, Papp discovered he had a talent for staging plays with little or no resources while serving in the Navy during World War II. After the war, he would return to New York and get a job as a stage manager at CBS. He would lose that job in the 1950s as the result of America’s anti-Communist hysteria. Papp, it seemed, had belonged to a “radical” actors group. Being unemployed left him free to pursue a dream that he had of bringing free Shakespearean theater to the masses. Despite opposition from the City of New York, including and especially Robert Moses, Papp was able to garner enough support to launch the Shakespeare in the Park Festival, beginning with the 1956 production of *Taming of the Shrew* starring Colleen Dewhurst. By 1962, the Summer Shakespeare program had been given a permanent home in the Delacorte Theater in Central Park and Joseph Papp could move on to his next project, the establishment of a year-round Public Theater. It would find a home in the East Village, at the old Astor Library. Here, Papp would present new, original and sometimes controversial works. *Hair*, the play made

⁴¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Diary_of_Anne_Frank_\(play\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Diary_of_Anne_Frank_(play))

⁴² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inherit_the_Wind_\(play\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inherit_the_Wind_(play))

⁴³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil_Simon

⁴⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woody_Allen

famous by its nude scene, its use of profanity and depiction of drug use, premiered at the Public Theater. In later years, Joseph Papp brought us Larry Kramer's play about AIDS called *A Normal Heart*. We saw plays about Vietnam (*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*) and shows that featured nontraditional "rainbow" casts. Joseph not only brought theater to the public, he made it relevant.⁴⁵

And Joseph Papp is often credited with saving Broadway as a venue and the Shubert Theater as a venue with the 1975 production of *A Chorus Line* which would run for 6,137 performances. Ironic for a man who loathed the commercialism of Broadway and felt validated each time he was passed over for a Tony Award.

I have mentioned Larry Kramer, whose work *A Normal Heart* has been named one of the 100 most important works of the 20th century; other modern Jewish contributors include Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*); the late Jonathan Larson, who wrote *Rent*; Wendy Wasserstein, author of *The Heidi Chronicles*. This is not intended as a comprehensive list.

Since the Tony Awards were first given out in 1947, Jewish artists have been recognized far beyond their numbers in the general population:

69% of composers receiving awards have been Jewish.

70% of lyricists receiving awards have been Jewish.

56% of librettists have been Jewish.

That doesn't take into account the playwrights, actors, producers, directors and choreographers, or the theater owners for that matter. Jews helped define both the modern musical comedy and the socially relevant drama. And Jews helped make theater into a voice for the people.

This presentation aligns with my earlier paper on the History of Jews In American Cinema (<http://www.larrykuperman.com/history-of-jews-in-american-cinema/>). One thing that occurs to me; for much of our history we were forced to keep a low profile. With the liberation which began in the late 19th century, Jews were able to enter areas previously forbidden. When the restrictions were removed, we burst upon the scene.

⁴⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Papp

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