

# THE YIDDISHISTS



Poster for the Ten Commandments at the New Yiddish Theatre, London, 1943; Poster advertising several Hebrew Dramatic Club productions, including The Two Sergeants, Uriel Acosta, A Slap for a Slap, and The Kidnapped Child, London, 1889; Abish Meisels' keys to the New Yiddish Theatre, London, 1943

OUR NEW SERIES DELVES INTO THE TREASURES OF THE WORLD'S BIGGEST YIDDISH ARCHIVE AT YIVO

## LONDON'S YIDDISH THEATRE

The East End once boasted a dynamic and thriving Yiddish drama scene. **Stefanie Halpern** reports on the golden age of this unique theatrical experience

In 1945, playwright, producer and manager Abish Meisels staged an adaptation of Abraham Goldfaden's *The Ten Commandments* at the New Yiddish Theatre in the East End. An Austrian refugee, Meisels immigrated to London in 1938. Five years later he walked down Adler Street and entered Adler Hall. He turned a key, unlocking the doors to the New Yiddish Theatre. According to Meisels, his mission was "to present the best in Jewish drama; to keep alive the art of the Jewish theatre, and to inculcate into the minds of the younger generation a love and appreciation of their lives, customs, and language."

*The Ten Commandments* chronicles the struggle between the angel of good and the angel of evil as it impacts on the lives of two unsuspecting Jewish couples. The angel of evil attempts to make the two couples break the tenth commandment: "Thou shall not covet thy neighbour's wife." However, goodness prevails and neither couple breaks their marriage vows. The play is about faith in the inherent goodness of man, and continuity in the face of disaster through reuniting the family.

Meisels' production may have been salient for London's post-war Jewish community. Many of his 20-person company were refugees from Nazi-occupied Europe, as were others of London's Jewish population. They found in Meisels' theatre, as he put it, a "much needed cultural, educational and social centre," and a sense of belonging.

By the time Meisels opened his theatre in 1943, the Yiddish stage had been in existence for nearly 70 years. Its story began in 1876, when writer Abraham Goldfaden staged the first Yiddish theatrical productions in Romania and Russia.

Yiddish plays were first performed in the UK in the 1880s, concurrent with the mass migration of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews to Britain. Between 1881 and 1914, nearly 120,000 of these immigrants entered the country, most settling in the East End. These Yiddish-speaking Jews brought with them the desire for entertainment in

their native tongue.

Early productions by the Hebrew Dramatic Club, the first theatre in London built specifically for Yiddish plays, showcased the talents of actors such as Jacob P Adler, who would go on to become one of the greatest stars of the Yiddish stage.

A poster from 1889 advertises on the same bill both 'serious' Yiddish dramas as well as lighter fare: the Yiddish translation of the play *Uriel Acosta* by the German gentile writer Karl Gutzkow centres on the threat of Acosta's excommunication from the Jewish community; and *A Slap for a Slap*, is a comedy by Shomer-Shaikevitch. Many of the Yiddish companies changed their repertoire weekly, with new plays premiering on Saturday evenings and running to Thursday night. Several Jewish communities in cities such as Manchester were visited by Yiddish troupes from Europe and America.

Meisels' company was the last theatre in Britain devoted to Yiddish productions. It followed the Hebrew Dramatic Club on Princes Street (1886-1887); the Pavilion Theatre on Whitechapel Road (1906-1934); the Temple of Art, known as the Feinman Yiddish People's Theatre on Commercial Road; the Grand Palais on Commercial Road (1934-1970) and the Jewish National Theatre at Adler Hall (1936-1939). The use of Yiddish declined as the community became assimilated. In 1947, Meisels locked the doors to the New Yiddish Theatre for the last time.

The history of the UK's Yiddish theatre is preserved in the archive of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, where Meisel's collection as well as posters, scripts, and many other papers reside. The archive holds the keys to this history – it also holds the actual keys to Meisels' New Yiddish Theatre. ■

See: [yivo.org](http://yivo.org). To learn more about Yiddish theatre, take YIVO's Shine Online Educational Series course, *Oh Mama, I'm in Love: The Story of the Yiddish Stage*, curated by Stefanie Halpern: [yivo.org/ohmama](http://yivo.org/ohmama). **Stefanie Halpern** is Assistant Director of the YIVO Archives.