



New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway

Edna Nahshon, Museum of the City of New York

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In the early decades of the twentieth century, a vibrant theatrical culture took shape on New York City's Lower East Side. Original dramas, comedies, musicals, and vaudeville, along with sophisticated productions of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and Chekhov, were innovatively staged for crowds that rivaled the scene on Broadway. While these productions were in Yiddish and catered to Eastern European Jewish audiences (the largest immigrant group in the city at the time), their artistic and aesthetic creations and their play with politics and history came to influence all facets of the American stage. Vividly illustrated and with contributions from leading historians and critics, this history recounts in absorbing detail the heyday of "Yiddish Broadway" and its vital contribution to American Jewish life and its crossover to American culture. Performances grappled with Jewish nationalism, labor relations, women's rights, religious observance, acculturation, and assimilation. They reflected a range of genres, from tear-jerkers to experimental theater, and introduced American audiences to avant-garde dramatic technique. The artists who came of age in this environment include Stella Adler, Eddie Cantor, Jerry Lewis, Sophie Tucker, Mel Brooks, and Joan Rivers. The story of the Yiddish theater is therefore a tale of creativity and legacy, immigrants who in the process of becoming Americans had an enormous impact on the country's cultural and artistic landscape. From the Bowery to Broadway is a companion to an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York scheduled for February 2016.



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