

# Bridge of Light

YIDDISH FILM BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

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## Making It in America



AS IMMIGRATION halted and ties to the Old Country frayed, American-Yiddish culture came increasingly under the spell of American show business. Second Avenue impresario Max Gabel regularly adapted the most sensational Broadway hits and brought them to his Public Theater, where star Jennie Goldstein mixed English with Yiddish in her songs—"When I pretend I'm gay, *es iz mir okh un vey*" (it is, for me, "alas and alack").

Sprightly Molly Picon, herself influenced by the Jewish-American entertainer Fanny Brice, was featured in a series of tremendously popular "literary operettas" whose scores suggested those of the uptown musical theater. Nevertheless, Picon further en-

deared herself to Second Avenue by her stout refusal to abandon the Yiddish stage for Broadway. Not so Ludwig Satz, Picon's only rival as a comic star, who enjoyed an English-language success as Abe Potash in the 1926 Broadway production of *Potash and Perlmutter, Detectives*. The following year, Satz starred in *The Lunatic*, an independent production directed by Harry Garson. Although based on Harry Kalmanowitz's play *Der Meshugener* (The Madman), the movie had no Jewish content.<sup>1</sup>

The prewar lament "A Brivele der Mamen" was superseded by "My Yiddishe Mama," introduced by Sophie Tucker in 1925, the same year the play *The Jazz Singer* had its Broadway premiere. Where "A

Brivele der Mamen" was a tribute to the parent who waits in the Old Country, the forlorn subject of "My Yiddische Mama" has merely been left behind in the old neighborhood. The song's original 78 rpm recording featured both English and Yiddish renditions. The English words are self-consciously genteel; the less-restrained Yiddish version invokes food, tears, poverty, the Jewish heart, and God. In either language, the song was so totally an American-Jewish anthem that in the spring of 1926, Miss Ethel Walker's rendition preceded the first-run showings of *Broken Hearts*.

In 1924, *World's Work* magazine, which had run a series of articles luridly characterizing Jewish immigrants as the Typhoid Marys of political subversion, published *The Jews in America*, a book whose jacket wondered whether "with their un-American creed, [Jews] will ever be absorbed into the American commonwealth." Jews, of course, were absorbing madly. Far more than Poland and even the Soviet Union, America offered an unprecedented opportunity for assimilation—or mutation. The immigrant Jew had not only the option of exploring secular modes of Jewishness, but of submerging himself alongside other wildly disparate groups in the creation of a new national identity. In *The Jazz Singer's* extravagant paean to personal reinvention, a cantor's son from Orchard Street, played by cantor's son Al Jolson, becomes nothing less than "The World's Greatest Entertainer"—as Jolson himself was known—by applying burnt cork and singing about his "Mammy from Alabammy."

Mark Slobin, who has written several invaluable accounts of Jewish music in America, points out that, in addition to Jolson, virtually every major Jewish entertainer of the twenties—Sophie Tucker, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, even Molly Picon—made use

of blackface: "Some of them explicitly state, in memoirs, the comfort they derived from putting on that all-American mask of burnt cork. In blackface, they were no longer the immigrant—they were one with the soul of America as represented by the grotesque co-optation of the slave's persona." (The interest in African-American musical idioms shown by popular composers Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, and Harold Arlen is also suggestive.) Meanwhile, the *Dearborn Independent* assailed "Jewish jazz," a.k.a. "the moron music of the Yiddish Trust," comparing its "sly suggestion" and "abandoned sensuous notes" to the insidious corruption of those "Jewish" motion pictures—"reeking of filth" and "slimy with sex."

In fact, American show business was becoming more Yiddish, as well as vice versa. Jolson, Brice, Tucker, Cantor *et al.* represented America's first generation of openly Jewish popular entertainers. In movies and plays, East European Jews came to personify the drama of immigration—particularly after the United States effectively halted the inflow of foreigners in 1924. Following the Broadway success of *The Jazz Singer*, *We Americans* (a comedy about Jewish adjustment on the Lower East Side, with Yiddish actors Muni Weisenfreund and Morris Strassberg making their English-language debuts) was the surprise hit of the 1926–27 season.

There were other, less obvious ways in which Yiddish popular culture influenced its American counterpart. The movie reviewers of 1920 were impressed by *Humoresque's* unabashed appeal to raw sentiment and family values. That these, as well as the careful leavening of pathos with pratfalls, were staples of the Yiddish stage was acerbically pointed out by the young Marxist critic Harry Alan Potamkin a decade after the film's release: *Humoresque* was "an

impertinent fable written by a sentimental woman, Fannie Hurst, further sentimentalized by the director Frank Borzage, and almost obscenely sentimentalized in the performance of Vera Gordon, a product of the super-sentimental American Yiddish theater." (One wonders if Potamkin might have been any kinder to Gordon had he known that her husband's revolutionary activities required them both to flee Russia after 1905.)

The closing of America's golden door effectively split the Yiddish world into American, Soviet, and Polish centers, each subject to its own centripetal forces. Although the massive pre-World War immigration to America had stimulated the growth of Yiddish press, theater, and social institutions, their continued vitality was dependent upon a constant flow of new immigrants. As the flood became a trickle, spoken Yiddish went into decline and, by the end of the decade, the center of Yiddish culture shifted from New York back to Europe.

America blurred traditional distinctions between religion, worldly success, and popular culture. The late nineteenth-century crowding together of hundreds of *shtetlekh* on the Lower East Side, and the Darwinian struggle thus engendered among their transplanted *shuln*, stimulated liturgical music and promoted a star syndrome already nascent in Europe. In 1885, one American congregation hired a *khazn* for the unprecedented sum of \$1,000. This extravagance hardly went unnoticed. A procession of hopeful Russian and Polish cantors arrived in New York, where many learned the art of self-promotion and some turned toward music hall careers.

Forty years later, Jolson and Tucker were frequently referred to as secular cantors, while the



Yosele Rosenblatt, the most celebrated American cantor of the 1920s.

Harlem-based *khazn* Yosele Rosenblatt not only recorded liturgical music but performed it on the vaudeville stage, along with secular items like the ubiquitous "My Yiddishe Mama." The cantorate was a major site for the struggle between the sacred and the secular. Both *Broken Hearts* and the stage version of *The Jazz Singer* end with Yom Kippur reconciliations, having each presented a generational conflict in which an old-fashioned *khazn* disowns his disobedient child.

Although Jolson never appeared in the Yiddish theater, nor sang more than a few Yiddish songs, he



A figure of pathos rather than authority: Rudolf Schildkraut in Edward Sloman's *His People* (U.S.A., 1925).

had, as the foremost Jewish-American celebrity, a special significance for Jewish audiences and performers. In his streetwise apprehension of American popular culture, in his fantastic vitality and gangsterish monomania for success, he was cut from the same cloth as the so-called movie moguls. Brash and egocentric, a compulsive gambler and womanizer, yet insecure and apt to wrap himself in the American flag, Jolson was a flamboyant projection of the mogul persona.

In his preface to the filmed *The Jazz Singer's* souvenir program, playwright Samson Raphaelson recalled that when, as a college student, he first saw Jolson perform, he was overwhelmed and astonished by the religious fervor of Jolson's ragtime. This epiphany was the genesis of his play. "I hear Jazz," Raphaelson continued, "and I am given a vision of cathedrals and temples collapsing and silhouetted

against the setting sun, a solitary figure, a lost soul, dancing grotesquely on the ruins. . . . Thus do I see the jazz singer."

Jazz is prayer. It is too passionate to be anything else. It is prayer distorted, sick, unconscious of its destination. The singer of jazz is what Matthew Arnold wrote of the Jew, "lost between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born." In this my first play I have tried to crystallize the ironic truth that one of the Americas of 1927—that one which packs to overflowing our cabarets, musical revues and dance-halls—is praying with a fervor as intense as that of the church and synagogue. The Jazz American is different from the Negro evangelist, from the Zulu medicine-man, only in that he doesn't know he is praying.

Although the change in the immigration laws effectively halted the flow of East European Jews to America, immigrant Jews remained common figures in American movies through the coming of sound. Indeed, no longer a threatening horde, they were even a source of sentimental nostalgia.

Postwar ghetto films followed the lead of *Humoresque*, which sweetened the melting pot with the promise of upward mobility and the comfort of transcendent maternal love. With *Humoresque*, Patricia Erens notes, a new archetype joined the Stern Patriarch, Prodigal Son, and Rose of the Ghetto in the immigrant family constellation. This was the Long-Suffering Mother. And as the Mother gained in stature, so the Patriarch declined, becoming, in films like *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Edward Sloman's *His People* (Universal, 1925), and Frank Capra's *The Younger Generation* (Columbia, 1929), a figure of pathos rather than authority.

At the same time, in a continuation of the vaudeville stereotype, Jews continued to appear as comic figures. "Very short and very greasy." N. L. Rothman described the prevailing stereotype in a 1928 issue of *Jewish Forum*, "a big bulbous nose protruding from between tiny, mournful eyes. . . ."

He waves his hands ludicrously with every word—he commits the most excruciating faux pas at any social gathering—if there is anything he loves better than to cheat at business, with winks and grimaces, it is to shy bricks at the Grand Master of the Saint Patrick's Day Parade, with whom, later, he sheds scalding tears of friendship. This is he, waddling across the silver screen, to the obscene obligato of roars of laughter. And the loudest of laughs issues from our friend, the Jew.

Merging with the ghetto dramas during the mid-twenties, the vaudeville-derived comedies spawned a popular cycle of Jewish-Irish films. While some, like Universal's *The Cohens and the Kellys* (1926) concerned business partnerships, most Jewish-Irish films revolved around affairs of the heart. These were doubtless inspired by the enormous success of Anne Nichols's stage play, *Abie's Irish Rose* which, opening on Broadway in 1922, ran for much of the decade, demonstrating that true love transcended religious or ethnic difference. In these films, as in the tragic *Manasse*, assimilation became synonymous with intermarriage.

There were also a number of sentimental dramas that indirectly celebrated the warmth of the Jewish family by having a kindly version of the Stern Patriarch shelter a Christian waif. In *A Harp in Hock* (De Mille, 1927), no less an eminence than Rudolf Schildkraut plays an irascible old pawnbroker taught

love by an adorable Irish orphan boy. (The strength of the Jewish family shown in these films cuts two ways. As Erens points out, "the adoption of Jewish children by Irish families is never treated.") In 1928, at the tail end of the cycle, came Paramount's version of *Abie's Irish Rose*—for the rights to which Jesse Lasky paid an unprecedented half a million dollars—although the Cohens and the Kellys kept right on assimilating into the sound era.

In keeping with the ethos of the melting pot, only a few films showed Jews as they had lived in Europe. Sloman's *Surrender* (Universal, 1927), is one notable example. Based on the 1915 drama *Lea Lyon* by Alexander Brody, the film is set in a Galician village invaded by Cossacks and concerns a love affair between a rabbi's daughter and a Russian prince. Yet even here the generational dynamics are the same as those of the ghetto drama, where the central theme remained the breakdown of authority within the immigrant family. In the struggle between young assimilators and their tradition-bound elders, the battle was already over. With very few exceptions, most notably Capra's *The Younger Generation*, youth reigned supreme.

As the decade waned, the ghetto film waxed increasingly optimistic. Rather than the exotic Other of the German cinema, or the impoverished and persecuted *shtetl*-dweller of the Soviet film, the American movie Jew was a model of successful adaptation. Hollywood constructed "Americanism" as an unproblematic process of assimilation—an idealization of the road taken by the movie moguls themselves. The emphasis shifted from survival to success, from making it to America to making it in America.

This situation was anticipated in the most authen-

tic of German-Jewish films, E. A. Dupont's *The Ancient Law*, which, although set in nineteenth-century Austria, parallels *The Jazz Singer* (and even Mark Arnshteyn's *Der Vilner Balebesl*) as a story of generational conflict and show-biz assimilation. This point was made by Potamkin: Dupont's film shows "the metamorphosis of the young Talmudic Jew into a man-of-the-world. . . . It tells of the battle between two worlds: the testament and the drama." (Potamkin rated *The Ancient Law* "far above" *The Jazz Singer*: "There is more scrutiny of the data of folk, and the intensity of the village Jews, passionate of temperament, is rendered." He singled out Avrom Morevsky for particular praise: "This was not slobbering, though it conveyed the emotionalism in the rigid orthodoxy, the rigid impassioned orthodoxy, of the parent . . .").

To a certain degree, the persistence of the melting-pot films may reflect the interest of the moguls themselves. Sam Goldwyn is responsible for both the adaptation of Yeziarska's *Hungry Hearts* (1922)—the production of which, studio memos indicate, he followed quite closely—and its spiritual sequel, the 1924 comedy *In Hollywood with Potash and Perlmutter*. Edward Sloman, who made several Jewish-theme films for Sigmund Lubin in the teens, maintained that he directed *His People*, *Surrender*, and *We Americans* (1928) at the behest of Universal boss Carl Laemmle.

And, as the Warner brothers shot *The Jazz Singer*'s Lower East Side scenes on location, used the Winter Garden Theater (Jolson's "personal kingdom") for the final number, reconstructed the Orchard Street Synagogue on a Hollywood backlot and included a lengthy interlude of Yosele Rosenblatt in performance, one cannot but be struck by the surplus of authenticity with which they invested

the film they would advertise as their "Suprem Triumph."<sup>2</sup>

In April 1926, Warner Brothers—a scrappy studio whose major asset was the trained dog Rin-Tin-Tin—had formed a partnership with Western Electric thus creating the Vitaphone Corporation for which over the next few years, Sam Warner would produce scores of one- and two-reel "acts" (mainly solo vaudeville performers) with synchronous sound-on-disc accompaniment.

Two months later, on the advice of their then-top contract director Ernst Lubitsch, Warners paid \$50,000 for the rights to *The Jazz Singer*. In August, the first Vitaphone program—eight shorts (ranging from a speech by industry *mashgiekh* Will Hays to the overture to *Tannhäuser* to a song by virtuoso guitarist Roy Smeck), plus the feature-length *Don Juan*—had its premiere at the Warners' theater in New York. Sound was in the air, literally. (Newly established radio networks were competing to sign vaudeville stars. In 1926, the *Forverts* began the first Yiddish-language broadcasts on New York's WEVD.) Warners' Vitaphone experiment proved successful: a second program opened in October, a third in February 1927. Now, Warners was ready to produce a feature with music and incidental dialogue, protecting their investment with the presence of superstar Al Jolson.

Appropriately, the film that would sound the death knell for both silent film and vaudeville opens on a mournful note. To the accompaniment of a pseudo-Semitic melody, a series of titles identifies the Jews as "a race older than civilization" whose culture is threatened by a new urban music which is "perhaps, the misunderstood utterance of prayer." It



is erev Yom Kippur on the Lower East Side, and thirteen-year-old Jakie, son of Cantor and Sarah Rabinowitz, is to chant *Kol Nidre* in his father's synagogue. Cut to Jakie performing "My Gal Sal" in a local saloon. Jakie is betrayed by Yudelson (Otto Lederer), the film's comic stand-in for the Jewish community, who rushes to report the boy to his father. The cantor (Warner Oland) arrives, drags Jakie by his ear homeward past the pushcarts of Hester Street, and, despite Mama's tearful supplications, administers the strap. Tearful Jakie runs away from home even as his father's *Kol Nidre* wells up on the soundtrack.

Jolson sings *Kol Nidre* in *The Jazz Singer*.



A decade or more passes. In a studio reconstruction of Coffee Dan's, a San Francisco show-business hangout of the era, Jolson makes his first appearance as the mature Jakie, now known as Jack Robin. The entire scene is redolent of his liberation from tribal taboo. Jack wolfs down a breakfast of *treyf* with ragtime ebullience, eyes his Gentile patroness with awe-struck lust, and puts across "Toot, Toot, Tootsie" with a lascivious self-assurance. That Jack, when called upon to perform, sings "Dirty Hands, Dirty Face," is richly evocative of his conflicted patrimony. The song is a mawkish ballad of paternal love in which, alternately maudlin and mocking, the singer

revels in the role of father to an incorrigible street urchin who, beneath a grimy exterior, is "an angel of joy." But Jack's inability to sever all connection to his past is made overt in the film's next musical sequence: while on tour, he is drawn to a hall where Yosele Rosenblatt is giving a concert.<sup>3</sup>

This ambivalence is further developed when Jack is called to Broadway and triumphantly returns to New York, heading immediately for the Lower East Side where, as a title informs us, "For those whose faces are turned towards the past, the years roll by unheeded." When he discovers that his mother is indeed alone at home, he springs from her embrace to the parlor piano for strenuous rendition of "Blue Skies." In her only authentic moment in the film, Eugenie Besserer seems utterly flummoxed as Jolson interrupts the song midway to steal a kiss, promise her a new pink dress, offer her a new apartment in the Bronx, and tempt her with a trip to Coney Island, all the while suggestively vamping on the keyboard. (It was this short spoken interlude which effectively destroyed the silent cinema. The Warners had not intended to make "talking" pictures so much as automate the music that accompanied silent ones; only after noting the audience's response to Jolson's spontaneous improvisations did they realize what they had wrought.)

The communion is broken when the cantor appears and, catching his wife and son together at the piano, cries "Stop!"—whereupon the film abruptly reverts to silence. In the ensuing title, the cantor denounces the jazz-singing prodigal for his misuse of divine energy. At first Jack attempts to pacify his father by suggesting that America transcends Jewishness: "If you were born here, you would feel as I do." When the cantor accuses him of apostasy, a startlingly blunt title appears in which Jack makes ex-

plicit Raphaelson's point: "My songs mean as much to my audience as yours do to your congregation!"

*The Jazz Singer* reaches critical mass on the afternoon of Jack's Broadway opening, which is, again with cosmic inevitability and comic improbability, *erev Yom Kippur*. In the midst of the final rehearsal, his mother comes backstage to inform Jack that on the night of his dying father (and, by extension, the Jewish community). Refusing his mother's request, Jack rushes madly onstage and hurtles through the chorus line to intone a fevered incantation of mother worship. He is now, for the first time in the film, the fully blown, iconic essence of "Jolson-ness." Finishing the song to tumultuous acclaim, the dazed and tormented jazz singer returns to his dressing room where, gazing into the mirror, he sees not a black faced minstrel but a synagogue filled with praying Jews. Jack realizes he must return to the Lower East Side "before the sun is out of the sky." His producer flatly warns him that if he walks out, he will never again play Broadway. Thus caught between conflicting commandments, Jack elects to chant.

It is this prayer which ends the play (as it ran on Broadway and toured the country, as it was performed in the Catskills, and as it was televised in 1959 with Jerry Lewis in the Jolson role). The repentant son replaces his dying father as cantor, who had in turn replaced *his* father (who had in turn . . . ), a ritual, sentimentalized affirmation of the eternal burden of Jewishness. For the film, however, the Warner brothers added a dreamlike reversal in which back in blackface and back on Broadway, Jack goes down on one knee to sing "Mammy" as Mama herself sits beaming in the audience, the fatuously proud Yudelson beside her, and the cantor gone forever from the picture.

If Jolson seemed to the pioneering pop-culture critic Gilbert Seldes to possess a "daemonic" vitality, to his disciple George Jessel he was, in fact, something else. "In 1910," eulogized Jessel at Jolson's West Coast funeral (there were East Coast rites as well),

the Jewish people who immigrated from Europe to come here were a sad lot. Their humor came out of their troubles. Men of thirty-five seemed to take on the attitudes of their fathers and grandfathers, they walked with stooped shoulders. When they sang, they sang with lament in their hearts. . . . And then there came on the scene a young man, vibrantly pulsating with life and courage, who marched on the stage, head held high like a Roman Emperor, with a gaiety that was militant, uninhibited and unafraid. . . . *Jolson is the happiest portrait that can ever be painted about an American of the Jewish faith.* (my emphasis)

Included in *The Jazz Singer's* souvenir program is the terse declaration that, "the faithful portrayal of Jewish homelife is largely due to the unobtrusive assistance of Mr. Benjamin Warner, father of the producers and ardent admirer of *The Jazz Singer*." This statement, which attempts through paternal approval to legitimize the overthrow of Jewish tradi-

tionalism depicted in their film, suggests that the Warners were uneasily aware that the story of *The Jazz Singer* was not only that of Jolson or many of their employees, but also their own.

Although the ads for *The Jazz Singer* that ran in the *Forverts* gave cantor Yosele Rosenblatt nearly the prominence of Jolson, the movie offered a myth and a self-portrait that would preoccupy American-Yiddish cinema for the next fifteen years. The story *The Jazz Singer* told, no less than the technology it employed, made Yiddish talkies inevitable.

NOTES

1. Ironically, it was given a Yiddish soundtrack and rereleased in 1934 as *Oy di Shviger! (What a Mother-in-Law!)*.
2. *The Jazz Singer* followed by three months another Jewish triumph: for seven years, Henry Ford's *Dearborn Independent* had been publishing its own version of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Finally, in 1927, Clarence Darrow filed a \$5 million libel suit against the newspaper and Ford, personally. The series ended, and on July 8, the industrialist apologized.
3. Rosenblatt had already made two secular Vitaphone shorts, *Omar Rabbi Elosar* and *Hallelujah*; the piece he sings here is the secular eulogy *Yortsayt*. Thus, it is Rosenblatt's off-screen rendition of *Kol Nidre* that secures *The Jazz Singer's* claim to be the world's first cantorial, a genre that would come into its own three years later.

*Overleaf: Yidishe tokhter, Russian revolutionary. Tamara Adelheim as the militant heroine of Grigori Roshal's His Excellency (U.S.S.R., 1928); frame enlargement.*