

Read by Tom Oppenheim on Sunday, February 22, 2009 at the *Jews/Theatre/Performance in an Intercultural World* conference at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Introduction

I am delighted to speak to you tonight and want to thank Edna Nahshon for inviting my mother and me to participate in this fascinating forum concerning Jews and Performance. As the Artistic Director of the Stella Adler Studio of Acting and a member of the Adler family I am deeply engaged with my heritage and with questions of how the Yiddish Theater/Group Theater tradition from which I come, relates to today's world. As Stella's grandson, I feel I have a unique perspective on the art of acting and of theater, a perspective that has led me to the conclusion that the Yiddish Theater has had a profound and ongoing impact on American theater and film acting, an impact that extends worldwide. I will go farther and say, when American acting is at its best, it unmistakably bears the stamp of the influence, energy and spirit of the Yiddish Stage and when it falters it does so by falling away from that influence. In my opinion American acting and theater would do well to reexamine its Yiddish Theater roots. Though I will limit my remarks to performance I'm quite sure they pertain to playwrights as well.

#1 - Duality

I had originally intended to produce a lecture with a video component that demonstrated this influence. It would have begun with a film clip of Maurice Schwartz in a Yiddish Cinema film version of *Tevye* and include a few other performances from Yiddish cinema. It would then move to a screen test of Luther Adler in *Awake and Sing!*, performances from some other members of the Group Theater like Lee J. Cobb and Julie Garfield. Some example of the work of Paul Muni would be included. It would then conclude with Marlon Brando and his offspring Al Pacino, Robert De Niro and Sean Penn and a lesser well known, but in my opinion, equally talented actor named Mark Rylance.

What this montage would reveal from the first to the last, from Schwartz to Brando, is a brand of performance characterized by profound depth of feeling, enormous intelligence and cerebral engagement towards the uncanny portrayal of vivid and unique individuals who at the same time bear the marks of the archetypal or mythological. Take Schwartz, for example, the scene from *Tevye* where he learns that his daughter has married a gentile. Schwartz enters his hovel, slowly and methodically does a prayer for the dead and then delivers a monologue in which he denounces and disowns his daughter with an inner heat that is frightening to behold. One simultaneously sees a mythological Jewish father, biblically charged with the task of keeping the Jewish People and culture together and a specific historical father suffering from familial betrayal, loss and grief.

The same might be said for Marlon Brando. One sees in Brando's work unique and highly imaginative portraits of specific human beings: a longshoreman, a mafia Don, an ex-patriot in Paris, for example. At the same time one sees larger than life figures which point beyond the historical to the archetypal. My mother used to say to me when I was a little boy "the reason why Marlon was so loved by so many is that he would play working class characters, in such a way that people recognized themselves, and then he would endow those characters with classical gestures, size and stature."

As I studied acting with my grandmother over the years I began to understand that this duality in certain performances that I had seen and intuited was there quite by design. Stella constructed her technique to include this demand on her students. Stella's definition of an actor was intrinsically connected to her elevated understanding of what it means to be alive, of what it means to be a human being. She saw humanity as organically endowed with mythological size and stature. We are defined not merely by our

historical socio-economic selves but by an infinite depth of inwardness and possibilities. For Stella an actor was an ever evolving, deeply engaged human being, “an aristocrat of the spirit”, as she called them. Therefore, actors must be not only be trained but also educated. The educational component of Stella’s work entailed an ongoing process of opening oneself up to life through a comprehensive study of nature including human nature, through “big ideas” accessed through reading great literature, listening to important music, trips to museums, acquaintance and engagement with social realities in the world, and through a passionate commitment to self-exploration and expansion.

#2 Humanity

This sense of humanity is another contribution to American acting that I believe can be attributed to the Yiddish Theater. It is reflected vividly in the memoirs of Jacob P. Adler as translated and edited by my cousin Lulla Rosenfeld. There and elsewhere Lulla describes Jacob Adler’s work in terms of the Haskala, which she describes as follows:

“Education was the battle cry of this Jewish revolution. If the world would not break the wall of the ghetto from the outside, the Jew must break it from the inside. Education - secular education - was the tool that would break the wall. Free, no longer isolated, the Jew would take his place in science, in art, in political action, in every great endeavor of the time”

Born in 1856, Jacob Adler discovered the theater as a young man and joined the then burgeoning Yiddish Theater. When Tsar Alexander III outlawed Jewish Theater in 1883 Jacob Adler fled Russia traveling first to London where he spent seven years, then to New York City where he set up his theater not far from where we gather tonight. Early in his life as an actor, Jacob sought to uplift the Yiddish Theater to the stature of other great theatrical epochs like the Greeks or the Elizabethans. He understood the function of theater to facilitate growth in both actor and audience. He writes:

“Except for 1887, when I spent several months in America, I lived in London... How in London I grew, how, with me, our theater grew - grew in its soul - and how, in the same moral sense, our audience grew.

How did we grow, you ask? Through plays. Workmen climb on ladders. Sailors climb on ropes. Actors climb on words. On plays.”

Jacob P. Adler was not only an actor and producer but also a teacher, a builder of theaters and Prometheus-like, a maker of culture. When he died in 1926, church bells rang and 150,000 people lined the streets of the Lower Eastside of Manhattan in his honor. Again it was my mother who explained to me that Jacob Adler was so loved because he brought the big world of ideas to Jewish immigrants and used the theater to educate and to uplift his audience.

Stella grew up in this environment. Her father put her on the stage at the age of four:

“Jacob Adler said that unless you give the audience something that makes them bigger – better - do not act. Do not go into theater. Unless you can create something bigger and better, there is no use climbing around chattering on a stage. I have a mission from my parents - right down from the old man, who said, make it better for them. Otherwise, why are they here?”

#3 Revolution/Social Obligations

Recognizing Jacob Adler's contribution leads me to the third ideal that Yiddish Theater contributed to American acting and culture. The sense of revolution, social obligation and idealism that informed the life and work of Jacob Adler was inherited by future generations of actors.

The enormous vitality of the theater of Yiddish Theater, and the many transmissions of it from the Jewish to the Gentile world, are less well known among students of American Theater, than, for example the Stanislavski System, Stella's encounter with Stanislavski in 1934, or the first visit of the Moscow Art Theater to these shores, but perhaps no less influential. In 1946 Marlon, Brando, deeply under the influence of the Stella Adler, Harold Clurman and the idealism of the Group Theater, turned down a commercial Broadway production of an Eugene O'Neil play to perform in Ben Hecht's *A Flag is Born*, a piece which raised money for the creation of the state of Israel. This production was directed by Luther Adler and starred, among others, Celia Adler and Paul Muni.

Paul Muni was born Muni Weisenfreund and began his career on the Yiddish Stage. My mother reported to me that Marlon told her he would get goose flesh every night as he watched Muni act. Something of Muni's thunder translated from the ghetto through Brando to Broadway, Hollywood and beyond. When Marlon Brando died some four years ago, his good friend Sean Penn went on the Charlie Rose Show. "Why" asked Charlie Rose, "is acting different after Marlon Brando than it was before him?" Without skipping a beat Penn responded "Marlon would have said 'Why is acting different after Paul Muni, then it was before him?'"

Muni was not Brando's only Yiddish source. He studied with my grandmother and said of her "If there wasn't the Yiddish theater, there wouldn't have been Stella. And if there hadn't been Stella, there wouldn't have been all these actors who studied with her and changed the face of theater —and not only acting, but directing and writing."

There is a moral imperative in the strain of Yiddish Theater, which began with Jacob Adler, and his writing partner Jacob Gordin, and extended to Stella and Luther Adler, Harold Clurman and the Group Theater. This spirit was passed onto Marlon Brando and his progeny. It commands us to "make it bigger and better for them. Otherwise, why are they here?"

Conclusion

While Stella's techniques are popularly thought of as one of a number American interpretations of the Stanislavski System what makes her utterly unique and, in my opinion, eternally relevant is this powerful presence of the Yiddish Theater and of the spirit of her father in her life and work.

Perhaps today, as the world is in the grips of pain and poised on the edge economic and spiritual dissolution, but also on hope and the palpable possibility of substantive change, it is a good time for us in the theater to look back at the great American tradition of Yiddish Theater, listen to our Yiddish ancestors, and remember the deeper purpose of our profession.