Caplan studies, teaches the richness of Yiddish theater.

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**College Talk**

“I grew up in a family where Yiddish was spoken around me quite a bit. I grew up surrounded by Yiddish and Jewish culture, but I didn’t grow up speaking Yiddish, so it was something that was sort of mysterious that I didn’t know very much about.” That is the way Dr. Debra Caplan explains how she became an expert in Yiddish theater.

A native of North Wales in Pennsylvania, she says she was always interested from a very young age in performing arts. “I studied theater in high school and I was very interested in theater history. I was very interested in the history of avant-garde theater and became a theater director,” she explains.

Caplan received her bachelor’s degree in Jewish studies and theater from Hampshire College in Amherst, MA, and her doctorate in Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations from Harvard University. Today she is an Assistant Professor of Theater at the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College, CUNY.

She explains how her interest in Yiddish theater evolved: “I started reading a lot in Yiddish, and when I discovered that Yiddish had this incredibly rich modernist theater tradition that had not been extensively written about, that was sort of it for me. It set me on a path.”

Despite the long history of Jewish culture, the history of Jewish theater is relatively recent. “There was no professional Jewish theater anywhere in the world until 1876, which—if you’re thinking about European theater traditions—is very late. Then, suddenly, these professional companies burst onto the scene,” explains Caplan. By the 1920s major critics were writing, “This is where avant-garde theater and became a theater director,” she explains.

Independent of its nature, Yiddish theater has many contexts. As Caplan explains, “the word ‘Yiddish’ in Yiddish means Jewish. If I showed you any book about ‘Yiddish theater,’ is it about Yiddish theater—that is, theater in the Yiddish language? Is it about all Jewish theater? Does it include theater in English, theater in Hebrew, Ladino or German made by Jews? It’s not clear.”

Things get more complicated not only because Yiddish theater developed in many countries with Jewish communities that were influenced by the culture and language of those countries, but also because there is no such thing as a stereotypical Yiddish theater. It has produced comedies, tragedies, musicals—you name it.

Caplan is now working on a book about Yiddish theater as a transgressive cultural phenomenon. “It was not really ever approved of by Jewish law, but it comes into being at this moment when these traditional Jewish communities are modernizing, and they’re modernizing very fast. There’s a generational divide; it’s the young people who are running away to join the Yiddish theater. They don’t care about these norms of who should perform and who should not perform and whether a woman’s voice should be heard singing or not. It’s irrelevant because they’re already sort of secularized and invested in modernity as sort of a project.

When asked whether her students—Jewish or not—show interest in Yiddish theater, her answer is very clear: “I’ve been surprised by how often students choose to work on Yiddish theater and why. For a lot of students, it’s a sense of how deeply integrated this tradition is into the city and a curiosity about its place in their neighborhoods and their communities.”

Caplan tells her students that theater is like a laboratory for empathy. “If you want to create more empathetic people, theater is the tool kit. There’s something really uniquely powerful about seeing something acted out in front of you live on a stage, and that’s something that I think applies to all theater, regardless of who is performing.”

“Yiddish theater is everywhere. Things get more complicated not only because there’s not an area of studies or designated research area to many countries with Jewish communities that are influenced by the culture and language of those countries, but also because there is no such thing as a stereotypical Yiddish theater. It has produced comedies, tragedies, musicals—yes, it exists.”

The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: [https://vimeo.com/220135862](https://vimeo.com/220135862)

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