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Caplan studies, teaches the richness of Yiddish theater

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *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 in college and became 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 from *The New York Times* went to the Lower East Side and wrote, “This is where innovation is, this is where the avant-garde is going. We all need to learn from these performers.”

Because theater is a communal experience, Caplan thinks that Yiddish theater became the proxy for the nation that Jews didn’t have at that time. “Theater requires the creation of a temporary community where



Dr. Caplan with students.

Photo by Yulia Rock

everybody speaks your language and everybody has the same points of cultural reference.”

New York became the epicenter of world theater, thanks to the many immigrant communities who created their own theatrical traditions, whether Jewish, Italian, Irish or German. “There were a lot of people moving between those spaces, especially in vaudeville,” she says.

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.”

“There is not as much Yiddish theater today by a long stretch as there was in the 1920s and 30s. New York used to have permanent Yiddish theaters that did Yiddish plays year-round; they’d have eleven or twelve of them at the same time, permanent standing Yiddish theaters. Today, there are two Yiddish theater companies in the city, but they don’t perform every single day, and they’re much smaller. I think that one of the interesting things is that Yiddish is still very much spoken in the city, but the ultra-Orthodox and the Hasidic communities are by and large not permissive of theater outside of the bounds of single-gender theater, maybe in a school, maybe as an education exercise. Professional theater of the sort that we’re accustomed to seeing on the stages of New York is not part of that culture. So that’s not the community that’s coming to see, by and large, the pieces that are being produced today. It’s the more secular community.”

Caplan thinks that Yiddish theater speaks to everybody because it poses universal questions for any community. “‘How do you retain communal integrity in a modern world where things are changing really fast?’ That’s still a really important question for people.”

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/220135862>

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