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"Amerike - The Golden Land"

[Glenda Frank](#)

LAND OF EXILES

"Amerike - The Golden Land"

Written by Moïshe Rosenfeld and Zalmen Mlotek.

Directed by Bryne Wasserman

July 4 – August 20, 2017

National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene
at the Museum of Jewish Heritage

Admission: \$35 to \$60,

For information about performance dates and times and tickets,
go to www.nytf.org or call 212-213-2120, ext. 206

Reviewed by Beate Hein Bennett July 10, 2017

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Directed by Bryna Wasserman.

National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene (NYTF) at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, 36
Battery Place, NYC.

July 4 – Aug. 20, 2017.

Sun., Wed. Thurs., 2 PM; Mon., Thurs., 7:30 PM; Fri., 12 PM; Sun., 6. \$35-60.

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Photo by: VICTOR NECHAY/Properpix.com

From 1880 until 1924 almost two million Jewish emigrants fled the poverty and pogroms of Eastern Europe to travel, mostly in steerage like my great-grandmother and her four year old daughter, to the Golden Land. "Amerike" (which includes the 1940s) is their musical, a gorgeous tribute to their joys, fears and struggles in a strange land. Don't miss it.

The narrative, with its personal voices rising out of the shared experience, begins with fear and hope in half a dozen cities in Europe. The snow falls (set and projections by Jason Lee Courson) and the cast sings "Mir Furn" (We're Going to America) and "Vi Shver S'iz Tsu Sheydn" (How Hard It Is to Leave the Old Home). As the company sings in Yiddish and dances, English and Russian translations are projected overhead.

The Ellis Island segment is fraught with the anxiety of anyone who must pass a test over which they have little control. One man, convinced he will impress the immigration official with a new name, practices has a melt down when questioned. He explains that he forgot his name. The official nods and writes down "Ferguson," Yiddish for "forget" ("fargesn") but to the rest of the world an Irish name. The story of a single father separated from his children, who are earmarked for return, is gut-wrenching ("Lozt Arayn," Let Them in). How do you explain when no one speaks your language? The songs, mostly popular numbers by period lyricists and composers, have been orchestrated by Pete Sokolow and Zalmen Mlotek to delight the contemporary ear.

The new world is dangerous, with thieves, challenges to the immigrants' core beliefs and family ties, and little opportunity to find the promised gold in the streets ("Dem Pedlers Brivele," A Peddler's Letter). The company warns "Vatch Your Step" with words by the legendary Yiddish heart-throb Boris Thomashefsky (1868-1939) of the People's Theatre. Working conditions are brutal ("Shnel Loyfn Di Reder," The Wheels Turn Quickly) and sometimes fatal: "Ballad of the Triangle [Factory] Fire," where 146 girls burned to death because the owners had locked the doors and the elevator was too small. The subsequent protests – choral lament "Bread and Roses" and "Oy Vey Kindenyu," in which a mother (Stephanie Lynne Mason) mourns her 16 year old daughter – fired the nascent union movement in New York.

Consolation comes from welcoming the Sabbath with candle lighting and family – "Lekho Dodi," a traditional song, and "Fraytyk Oyf Der Nakht" (Friday Night). From celebrating a peaceful world: "Zumer Bay Nakht Oyd Di Dekher" (Summer Nights on the Roof) and "Amerike Hurrah For Onkl Sem." And entertainment -- the Yiddish Theatre ("Roumania, Roumania" and "In a Kleyn Shtibele"), radio and film, media the immigrants embraced and molded.

The arc and songs are familiar. What makes this review stand out is the brevity in identifying later obstacles, the very compression speaking volumes. The explorations of the Depression (“Vi Nemt Men Pamuse,” How Do I Make a Living), the blatant discrimination in colleges and upscale hotels, and rumors of the Holocaust. The community has become a person, its experience in America a lifetime, and so the poignancy is not just historical but personal. “Amerike” is the story of every character on stage, who talks to us singly, in duets, in counterpoint or chorus. It is very moving when Sadie (Alexandra Frohlinger) sings “Am Yisrael Khay” (The Jewish People Live) because we feel it: the community has presented the fullness of life by embracing the joys of life, food, wine, relatives, laughter, song, disappointment, sorrow and a deep contentment and pride. It would not be a Yiddish revue without the laughter. The radio meteorologist tells us the weather is neither here nor there. So take a sweater just in case.



From video

In 1984 when the musical premiered, the language was English, not the Mameh Loschen. Yiddish is the language that unified the millions of immigrants from hundreds of towns and village, some of whom had never traveled anywhere before. Yiddish theatre and newspapers, like Abraham Cahan’s “The Daily Forward,” formed them into a community and taught them how to thrive. The theatre brought them Shakespeare and entertainment. Uptown critics with no Yiddish were enthralled and the talent (like the Adlers) made its way to Broadway and Hollywood, reshaping as it went.

Thanks to technology and a healthy budget for the NYTF in its 103 consecutive season, “Amerike” can come to us in Yiddish with supertitles. The performers are among the best young talent: Glenn Seven Allen (“The Light in the Piazza” at Lincoln Center), Alexandra Frohlinger (“Soul Doctor”), Stephanie Lynne Mason (“Fiddler on the Roof”) and David Perlman (“Baby It’s You!) have played Broadway. Daniel Kahn, who fronts the band The Painted Bird, is a leader in the current Yiddish cultural revival. Director Bryna Wasserman has won Drama Desk nominations for her staging of NYTF’s “The Golden Bride” in 2016, “The Golden Land” in 2013, and “On Second Avenue” in 2005. The high-energy seven-piece klezmer band, not having to share the stage with the actors, closes the show with panache. NYTF co-produced “Indecent,” inspired by “God of Vengeance” by Sholem Asch, at the Cort Theatre, which won two Tony awards.

As Zalmen Mlotek, Artistic Director of NYTF, observed, “The show is more than just a metaphor for the Jewish migratory experience; it is a metaphor for America as the land of opportunity and freedom.”

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