

Poster

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Gilgl fun a nign 1:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tIPvQWUBwPo>

Gilgl fun a nign 2:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZLXTsyJW76s>

Gilgl fun a nign 3:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAC19xehlwU>

Metamorphoses of a Melody

Rafaël Goldwasser giving guest performance

For a melody sprung from Chassidic spirit, one can hardly imagine a better example than that which was presented at the stage of the Societaetstheater, bearing the slightly circuitous title "Metamorphoses of a Melody." This title is certainly more comprehensible for outsiders than "A gilgl fun a nign," as the story is called in the Yiddish original by Itzhok Lejb Perez. Like many Yiddish songs the melody is a borderline experience: it can be cheerful or sad and suddenly change from one mood to the other, even embody both dispositions at the same time. In the present case, it is about a melody which is in fact intended for mourning the dead. It transforms itself several times, it is sung by different people in different ways, by a Klezmer group, at the theater stage, it is played on a barrel organ, and, finally, it

transforms itself to a jazz theme. And each time the melody reveals another facet of mood without forsaking its most inner nature.

The presentation by the LufTheater Strasbourg showed in an inconspicuous way modern theater forms which are primarily a combination of direct acting and film sequences. Several small projection screens allow a simultaneous presentation of different levels of character and time. What is outstanding here is the ease with which the elements merge. This seems to be an integral factor of the LufTheater which – existing since 1992 – demonstrates the viability of Yiddish-speaking culture with a new production every year. The ensemble focuses its productions on the Yiddish classics and the Yiddish share in the cultures of Eastern Europe.

The one-person-piece gains its power through the intensity of performance of Rafaël Goldwaser. This is a man who can play theater in French, English, Spanish, Hebrew and Yiddish, who has five degrees from the universities of Tel Aviv and Paris, and also is a dancer, choreographer, director, drama teacher and professor of theater studies. A critic once wrote about him that he could narrate with his feet. He manages to dominate the stage for fifty minutes without resorting to cheap tricks. The mix of studio theater play, great expression, and the many levels he conveys is striking.

Peter Zacher

(Translation: Johanna Wolter)

THE TRANSMIGRATION OF A MELODY

By Yitshok Niborski (France)

“The
Transmigration of a Melody,” by I.L. Peretz—DVD—film of a performance by Rafael
Goldwaser with the Lufttheatre,
2009-11-25

Rafael
Goldwaser is a Yiddish actor who has followed his own road, one that is unusual

for our times, indeed, one that is perhaps truly unique. Born in Argentina, he is the actor son of an actor. His father, Zishe Goldwaser, was well known in that country both for his stage performances and his recitals. Having studied with great masters in Paris, Rafael performed for a few years in Israel and has now been living in Strasbourg for about a quarter of a century. There, in an environment which at the beginning was completely unfavourable to Yiddish theatre—indeed, to Yiddish in general—Goldwaser stubbornly tilled the hard soil far and wide, until he had achieved tangible results, both in the domain of theatre and in support of Jewish culture in general.

Goldwaser's Lufttheatre ('Theatre of the Air') has gone through several stages, At times it is rich in human and material resources, and at times...poorer. But by hook or by crook, every few years something new emerges from Strasbourg. Goldwaser has both staged entire plays and performed recitals of prose works. He has acted in Yiddish and in French, and has sometimes mixed both. On one occasion he appears with a small troupe and on another in a one-man-show. But always he is creative.

Nowadays, when many take the easy way out, performing 'Yiddish theatre' in the form of entertainment reviews with as little Yiddish as possible, Goldwaser has chosen to tread a more rugged terrain. He brings to the stage the words of a Manger or a Bashevis Singer, a Peretz or a Sholem-Aleichem, resorting to every means at his disposal to make himself understood—every means except to cheapen.

As can be expected, this attitude did not instantly attract a wide audience. For a long time he was known mainly in Western Europe. But over the course of the years his patient artistic work began to be noticed. Today he is known the world over. This year he was invited to stage important performances in Poland and Canada. His accomplishments are also better known and understood thanks to the success of films that are now available.

The newest of these films is based on Y.L. Peretz's masterpiece, Transmigration of a Melody, the short story which is one of the most beautiful and most profound pieces in Peretz's Hasidish collection. The readers of the Forward are surely familiar with this monologue, in which the narrator, a Talner Hasid, discusses the spiritual nature of music: A melody is like a person: It can rise to the highest heights and sink to the deepest abyss. It can live and die and then come alive again. The tale Peretz wove around this notion represents one of the pinnacles of his art.

Adapting this wondrous monologue to film is no mean task. The text is difficult, a consequence of its dense Hasidic-rabbinical vocabulary and the subtlety of Peretz's style. Here and there Goldwaser edits marginally, but in general he remains faithful to the original. So how do those with a more rudimentary knowledge of Yiddish manage? English-language subtitles provide some assistance; more important, however, are the actor's own efforts to bring the viewer closer to Peretz's creation.

Within this framework Rafael Goldwaser has sown his own work of art. Should the sense of the words escape the average viewer, he endeavours to make up for it through strength of expression. He pronounces the sentences with a truly sharp enunciation, and at a hairsbreadth slower than he would with a totally fluent Yiddish-speaking audience. With the same aim—making the words comprehensible—he accentuates the words more strongly and more distinctly.

Goldwasser does not just harness his voice to the task of interpretation, but his entire body. The monologist does not stand in one spot: he moves constantly among the elements of a simple but clever set: taleisim (prayer shawls) hanging in the manner of curtains symbolically and aesthetically portioning the visual field. The actor glides over one area, pauses at another, and rocks at a third, ostensibly in a covered wagon on the way from Machnovke to Berditchev and back. He pulls out all the stops, using not just his face, but his body and soul—a well-thought out and exciting dynamic—anything to illuminate the word and make it more accessible.

Such a rendition has many advantages, but it diminishes somewhat from the narrative ease, and at certain climactic moments (for example, the description of a theatre performance in Kiev) Goldwasser's portrayal becomes too loud and lively. A moment such as this requires a bit of restraint. After all, Peretz's Hassidic narrator is of course the unassuming, polite (yet astute) Yoychenen the Teacher, who enjoys telling a story with "simple words, unsalted and ungreased." With him in mind, it is difficult to wholly justify the jester-like tenor here and there adopted by Goldwasser with a sing-song that is not always appropriate for the dialogue.

These miniscule flaws, however, in no way call into question the exceptional quality of Goldwasser's work—and, incidentally, not just his. The film was very judiciously and tastefully directed by Mariette Feltin. She successfully dodged the pitfall of monotony, often changing the camera angles, interrupting the main narrative with well-matched pictures which accompany or represent on the screen the actor's shape, leaving only his voice in the background. Music and sound (by Jean-Raymond Gélis) suitably accompany and emphasize the moods and hues of Peretz's story. Brilliant lighting and the above-mentioned minimalist taleisim stage scenery also have a strong effect. The whole package makes this newest transmigration of Peretz's *Transmigration of a Melody* a most successful creation. It is our good fortune that DVD technology has made it possible to bring such craftsmanship to libraries, institutions of learning and homes wherever Yiddish literature and Yiddish spoken word art are cherished.

