



Der Payatz: Around the World with Yiddish Theater

Herman Yablakoff

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Herman Yablokoff was a master of his craft. He was an actor, singer, songwriter, playwright, director and producer in a world that has virtually disappeared. In *Der Payatz*, his autobiography, Yablokoff the showman stages a vivid recreation of his times. The result is breathtaking and captivating as Yablokoff, with genuine theatrical style offers the story of his life. He introduces himself in 1960. In Warsaw, Poland for a concert tour, Yablokoff attempts to enter the Soviet Union to visit his father's grave. He then relates the story of growing up in Grondo early in this century. With fascinating detail he reconstructs the vibrant Jewish life of the city. The synagogues, schools, people and his family's struggle for existence all come to life again. Yablokoff's love for the theater began at an early age as he became acquainted with the visiting Yiddish troupes that came to town. He soon began to perform in children's roles. Restricted from performing in Yiddish, these groups would deliver their lines in that language until warned by a lookout to revert to Russian. After a stint in the Polish Army, as a musician, Yablokoff, still a teenager, joined a group of Yiddish performers traveling in Lithuania. In 1924, he arrived in America. Immigration had recently been restricted. On Ellis Island, officials, amazed at his youth, greeted with skepticism his claim that he was an accomplished actor. Remarkably, a board of inquiry invited him to audition and his performance was awarded with entrance to the United States. He toured with stock companies in the U.S. and Canda and struggled to gain entrance to the tightly controlled Hebrew Actors Union. Herman Yablokoff was not an instant success, but he eventually began his climb to the top of his profession. Songs like "Papirossen" became international standards. Another of his well-known Yiddish melodies, "Shveig Mein Hartz" was plagiarized into the popular hit "Nature Boy." And Yablokoff went on the radio, known only as the mysterious "Der Payatz" -- the Clown. His original compositions and unique story telling in song became widely popular and proved to be the turning point in his career. Soon he was not only starring, but producing, directing and writing his own shows, showcasing Yiddish performers such as Aaron Lebedeff, Maurice Schwartz and Menasha Skulnik. In 1947, in the midst of a hectic schedule, he sought and obtained permission to entertain the remnants of European Jewry, still in the "Displaced Persons" camps. For months he traveled from camp to camp offering a song, some laughter and tears, to lighten the hearts of those who had suffered so much. He considered it the most gratifying experience of his life. It was in one of the camps that he discovered his niece, Dora, the only survivor of his family in Grodno. Yablokoff's travels continued to take him around the world, wherever Jews were found. He entertained in South America, Israel, Scandinavia, even in Cuba. All the lush details of these places, the sights, sounds and people are here to savor. Originally published in Yiddish, *Der Payatz* was translated by Bella Mysell, Yablokoff's wife and herself a star of the Yiddish stage. They were a popular team for many years. Herman Yablokoff died in 1981, and the Yiddish culture in which he thrived had already largely vanished. But he leaves an enduring look at that culture. The master showman captures all the drama and excitement of the world in which he lived, giving us a riveting picture of a time that no longer exists. So have a seat, turn the page, the curtain is going up on another Yablokoff production.

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