

The Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto and its Contributions to Jewish Theatre Culture

By: Matthew Williams

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Though the Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto (JTC) made significant interventions into a realm of Jewish culture that had once been central to Jewish artistic life, it has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. The closest scholarly contributions to the subject were provided by historians Rebecca Margolis and Richard Bruce Kirkley. Margolis' work on Yiddish and the movement for Yiddish theatre in Montreal and Ottawa argues that is imperative to dissecting Canadian Jewry.¹ Concerning Toronto Jewry, Richard Bruce Kirkley's biographical article on John Hirsch and his efforts in bringing Jewish theatre to television in the 1970s offered a detail study of one theatre director.² Jewish theatre in the 1980s and 1990s Toronto is largely unexamined. The largest contributor to Jewish theatre in Toronto in this period is undoubtedly the JTC. This essay will attempt to remedy this issue by examining the Toronto Jewish theatre scene of the late 1980s and 1990s through the lens of its largest contributor: the JTC.

The Toronto Jewish Cultural Council (JCC) discovered a significant lack of Jewish representation and content in the Toronto theatre industry. The JCC held a meeting in 1984 to discuss the significance of the lacuna, and to brainstorm methods of tackling the issue in the most efficient way. Three important findings arose from the meeting: Yiddish theatre, once rich and widely enjoyed, had become non-existent in Toronto. There was but one theatre exploring Jewish themes and interests at the time, the Leah Theatre. Finally, there was an abundance of

¹ Rebecca Margolis, "Yiddish Theatre Beyond Montreal: Die Folkshpieler in Ottawa," *Canadian Theatre Review* 153 (2013): 34-38.

² Richard Bruce Kirkley, "John Hirsch and the Critical Mass: Alternative Theatre on CBC Television in the 1970s," *Theatre Research in Canada* 15 (1994): 75.

classic Jewish plays and content that, they felt, should reach a wider audience, but were not.³ The JCC proposed three primary objectives for what would become the Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto (JTC). Firstly, it would aim to “provide a forum of discussion” for present and future prospects of Jewish theatre. Secondly to “entertain new ideas” and projects in Jewish theatre. Lastly to promote Jewish issues and education through various programs and initiatives such as lectures in synagogues and Jewish drama festivals.⁴ It disbanded at the beginning of the new millennium; its efforts and failings defined the Toronto Jewish theatre experience for a decade or more.

The Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto formed as an extension of the JCC in 1984 with the intention of fulfilling the objectives set out by the JCC in its proposal. It aimed to institute a Jewish Drama Festival in Toronto, fund playwright competitions, stage readings of Jewish plays, and organize workshops in Jewish schools.⁵ The JTC would eventually fulfill many of the proposed objectives set prior to its inception by the JCC.⁶ However, many of its proposals and projects fell short of its goals. Complications regarding funding, a lack of interest amongst the general public, or a lack of talent and resources all mired the Committee’s efforts from their inception to their disbandment. But while many of the JTC’s proposed functions and initiatives failed to start or achieve distinct success in accordance with its own objectives, the JTC actively contributed to the Toronto Jewish community. The JTC did achieve some measure of success, according to its proposed goals, in using theatre as a vehicle for Jewish cultural education and representing Jewish issues through its annual playwright competition, its

³ The Jewish Cultural Council of Toronto, Meeting on Jewish Theatre, 7 February 1984, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

⁴ The Jewish Cultural Council of Toronto, Proposal for Sub-Committee on Jewish Theatre, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

⁵ Jewish Cultural Council of Toronto, Short Biography of The Jewish Theatre Committee, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

⁶ Ibid.

sponsored theatre workshops and stage readings, and external projects in the community. However, the unsteady and inconsistent nature of the theatre industry ultimately held back the potential of the committee's efforts for significant Jewish cultural contributions and philanthropy. Despite this, the JTC managed to achieve most of its proposed objectives.

The JTC developed Jewish theatre through its use of annual screenwriting competitions. Throughout JTC's lifespan, it put together and sponsored a Jewish playwriting contest annually, a program for which it would become most known. According to the chairman of the JTC, Ralph Wintrob, the JTC hoped that these competitions would be of "mutual benefit...that is, to develop a potential audience for Jewish theatre, and to aspiring playwrights who need to test a work in progress."⁷ The JTC's eligibility criteria allowed for plays written by Canadian Jewish or non-Jewish authors, so long as they contained "Jewish content." The winner of the annual playwright contest would have their play funded by the committee for viewership. Winners would also earn prize money. The JTC would then follow up with the author's original work by presenting it to Adult Education Chairpersons of various synagogues across the city where they hoped to develop educational programming around the play.⁸ These playwright competitions were publicized extensively through advertisements in Jewish media, particularly Jewish newspapers. Wintrob frequently wrote to the editor of the *Canadian Jewish News* to advertise the JTC's playwright competitions.

Although these competitions attracted sizable entries, the committee ran into several issues throughout the decade, such as a lack of funding and low quality, ineligible entries. The first of these competitions began in the year 1990. The JTC reached out to *The Canadian Jewish*

⁷ The Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto, September 1994, "Annual Playwright Competition," *The Canadian Jewish News*, 11.

⁸ Methodology Behind Annual Playwright Contest, The Jewish Theatre Committee, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

News to advertise these contests.⁹ The first winner of this competition was a play called, *Hannah*, a biographical play about Hannah Szenes, the famed and beloved woman paratrooper for the British Army in the Second World War. However, upon reviewing the prospective play, the JTC wrote back to the author stating that instead of winning \$1000 as previously stated, the JTC would instead offer \$250 as winning prize money as none of the entries (including *Hannah*) demonstrated “exemplary Jewish work.”¹⁰ *Hannah* would not be produced as a stage play per contest rules until 1998, eight years later.¹¹ Disillusioned contest contributors wrote to Wintrob and the JTC complaining about being unfairly critiqued and overlooked as well as not having their manuscripts returned to them.¹² In 1991, a Holocaust drama called *The New Montana* by Lucille Hauser was chosen as the winner of the annual playwright competition. One of the judges, Jordan Merkur, described *The New Montana* as an “engaging, provocative piece that will move an audience.”¹³

These contests predictably suffered from a disproportionate amount of plays concerning the Second World War and Nazism, as Ralph Wintrob later explained.¹⁴ In fact, from 1994-2000, the remainder of the JTC’s lifespan, four of the annual playwright competition winners were either Holocaust dramas or plays situated in the Nazi-regime era (including a two-way tie between two such plays in 1994). The over-abundance of World War Two themed dramas was predictable, however, as the Holocaust is the most tragic part of Jewish history and an

⁹ The Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto, 12 July 1990, “Annual Playwright Competition,” *The Canadian Jewish News*, 37.

¹⁰ Letter from Ralph Wintrob, 1990, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

¹¹ The Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto, 18 June 1998, “Hannah,” *The Canadian Jewish News*, 37.

¹² Letters to Ralph Wintrob from disqualified contest participants, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

¹³ Letter from Jordan Merkur to the Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto, 15 July 1991, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

¹⁴ E-mail From Ralph Wintrob to the Jewish Theatre Committee, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

understandably large part of contemporary Jewish culture. The JTC judges justified their choices based on a play's ability to provide exemplary Jewish work in an entertaining format while forming a discussion of Jewish issues. For instance, a winning play *Sara's Cave* was described by the JTC panel as a "fine stage vehicle, but raises important moral issues for our time."¹⁵ Furthermore, this trend of contest winners writing about 1940s Europe would influence further participants to write similarly themed plays if they hoped to win, if they participated at all. Wintrob further explained the lack of participation in these contests as a consequence of insufficient advertising despite having numerous ads appearing in the *Canadian Jewish News* every year.

The JTC faced undeniable complications in completing its first objective: seeking talent and obtaining great Jewish work from talented writers. The JTC faced similar difficulties in completing its second objective, developing and publicizing Jewish theatre for Jewish and non-Jewish audiences. Although the JTC had produced a number of stellar, well-received Jewish plays, many of its productions suffered from small audience turnouts. For instance, when the JTC put together a public concert reading of *The New Medina* at the Lipa Green Building, the production was met with low audience participation despite a good review from a *Canadian Jewish News* reporter.¹⁶ The Committee came to the conclusion that the low turnout was caused by a small amount of time between announcing the project and the date of its premiere. The JTC also blamed the Medina Theatre group for not mailing flyers out to the public on time. The Committee lastly proposed that in order to attract as wide an audience as possible, the admission fee should be reduced to two dollars or reduced to a non-mandatory donation.¹⁷ One of the JTC's

¹⁵ E-mail to Ralph Wintrob, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

¹⁶ Minutes of the Meeting of The Jewish Theatre Committee, 25 November 1991, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

¹⁷ Ibid.

earliest productions (and one of the most advertised) was for the 1994 contest winner Robert Majzels and his play *This Night the Kapo*, a story of an elderly father's experience in a concentration camp.¹⁸ The play premiered on Sunday November 13th 1994 at 8pm at the Bloor Jewish Community Centre to a remarkably small audience of only sixty.¹⁹

Wintrob would attempt to rectify these low participation numbers by inviting reviewers out to see these plays. Furthermore, Wintrob proposed sponsored regular play reading, more effective advertisement, and keeping a consistent, central location for plays in response to the low audience participations rates.²⁰ The JTC and the chairman would reach out to other Jewish cultural organizations for help on publicizing as well as advice on how to proceed through these issues. Wintrob, convinced that there was a significant lack of media attention to the efforts of the committee, wrote to Adam Fuerstenberg, the chairman of the Jewish Book Awards for assistance.²¹ In order to further publicize the JTC's plays and expose them to wider audiences, Wintrob sent several scripts to other theatres for consideration – Wintrob sent the screenplay for *This Night the Kapo* Tarragon theatre in Toronto, but was eventually rejected for failing to meet their standards.²²

Several initiatives were proposed to encourage audience participation. The JTC started a new program to generate interest in theatre called “First Words” in 1994. The program would involve staged script readings and discussions from aspiring writers, which did not need to necessarily be completely Jewish in nature, but should be “of interest to the Jewish

¹⁸ The Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto, 8 December 1994, “This Night the Kapo,” *The Jewish Tribune*, 18.

¹⁹ The Jewish Theatre Committee of Toronto, 3 November 1994, “This Night the Kapo,” *Canadian Jewish News*, 18., *Jewish Life*, “This Night the Kapo,” 2 December 1994, 2-3.

²⁰ Minutes of the Meeting of the Jewish Theatre Committee, 1 June 1994, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

²¹ Letter to Adam Fuerstenberg, 29 May 1998, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

²² Letter to Ralph Wintrob from Tarragon Theatre Representative, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

community.”²³ These complications with the JTC’s productions was covered by Jewish newspapers, with commentary by Wintrob hoping that this exposure would serve as a remedy to low audience participation.²⁴ The successes of the JTC’s further productions were as turbulent as the Toronto theatre industry itself – some of its plays would have sizable turnouts while others would suffer the same fate as *The New Medina* and *Night of the Kapo*.

The JTC would continue to advertise its prize-winning plays extensively in *Canadian Jewish News* and other Jewish media. Many of the JTC’s productions would receive glowing reviews from the media despite low audience participation. The CBC Radio Show described *The Always Prayer Shawl* by Janet Dirks as entertaining, “highly recommend it. [You] do not have to be Jewish to enjoy this play.”²⁵ *The Jewish Tribune* published an article on the original and re-release of the JTC’s play *Yaacov Gordin*, a story about the famed Jewish playwright. The article examined Gordin’s contributions to theatre and the importance of a play in his honour.²⁶ An article in *The Globe and Mail* from 1997 reported on the decline of the theatre industry caused by a lack of funding and resources as a consequence of a lack of interest in local theatre production.²⁷ Stagehands, actors, directors, and more employed in the theatre industry are asked to work for free – some producers subsidize their own homes to pay for plays.²⁸

The Toronto theatre scene was largely unprofitable, making it difficult for theatre groups to find success, particularly theatre groups focused on Jewish issues. Producer Janese Kane commented on the rocky theatre industry in *Canadian Jewish News*, claiming that although she

²³ Minutes of the Meeting of the Jewish Theatre Committee, 27 June 1994, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

²⁴ E-mail from Ralph Wintrob to the Jewish Theatre Committee, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

²⁵ Excerpt from the Transcript of CBC Radio Show Review, 9 March 1995, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

²⁶ *The Jewish Tribune*, “Yaacov Gordin,” 27 January 2000, 17.

²⁷ *The Globe and Mail*, “Decline of Toronto Theatre,” 5 April 1997, C12.

²⁸ Ibid.

lost money on two performances she produced (*A Shayna Maidel* and *Sight Unseen*), she does not regret her decision to produce them as there is a sincere need for more Jewish plays and content.²⁹ The *Canadian Jewish News* estimated that a full production of a stage play would cost roughly a minimum \$15,000 – a barrier to entry that many theatre groups cannot surmount, especially in a period where interest in local theatre has significantly waned.³⁰ However, despite the troubling circumstances which plagued the theatre industry in Toronto and abroad, the JTC's play *Hannah* managed to attract an audience of four hundred people despite its insufficient advertising.³¹

In the same article, optimistic news of a new theatre being built at the Bloor JCC signaled a good omen for Jewish theatre in Toronto.³² Following the success of *Hannah*, talented stagehands begun volunteering their time and skill in order to aid the JTC put on productions and promote Jewish issues.³³ The JTC managed to persevere through the nineties despite the pressures of a seemingly non-profitable entertainment industry by staging full productions nearly every year placing Jewish concerns and issues on the forefront of theatre. In addition to the numerous plays concerning the holocaust and the Nazi-era, the JTC funded plays on important Jewish figures (*Yaacov Gordin*) feminist-centric issues in Jewish households (*Bitter Apples*), and a creative response play to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* which hoped to shine a different light on its famous Jewish protagonist, Shylock.³⁴ The JTC's commitment to Jewish theatre in Toronto is culturally significant because the committee managed to stage educational plays entirely focused on Jewish issues despite an inopportune climate for the theatre industry.

²⁹ *Canadian Jewish News*, "Jewish Theatre in Toronto," 27 August 1998, B9.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Letter From Jack Messinger to Ralph Wintrob, 9 December 1998, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

³⁴ *Canadian Jewish News*, "Shylock," 10 July 1997, 31.

The JTC's commitment to the Jewish community extended beyond the stage to programs and events on Jewish education such as organized workshops, lectures, and festivals. The JTC held several successful educational events on the Jewish theatre. Before the JTC's reliance on its annual playwriting competitions, the JTC organized workshops on the importance of drama in Jewish schools as well as organizing developmental workshops which resulted in the formation of the Medina Theatre Ensemble in the mid-Eighties.³⁵ In collaboration with the Leah Theatre, the JTC organized a symposium called, "What's a Jewish Theatre?" which invited influential figures in the Jewish theatre industry to discuss and debate Jewish issues in theatre.³⁶ The JTC proposed educational courses based on submitted plays. Wintrob proposed courses for four of the JTC's plays to the Jewish Institute of Learning, a course which ran its first year in the fall of 1995.³⁷ Members of the JTC used many of its submitted scripts for simple readings and presentations for educational purposes. The initiative encouraged schools requesting the JTC's scripts for use in their curriculum.³⁸

The JTC would organize lectures and workshops based on their submitted plays and their authors. For Instance, Wintrob invited Alexander Hausvater, acclaimed playwright and theatre director, to lecture at his synagogue and to host workshops concerning his work and Jewish education.³⁹ However, many of these programs ended due to financial burdens. The expenses for the event was equivalent to the fee required for Hausvater to speak, leaving the JTC no room for

³⁵ Short Biography of The Jewish Theatre Committee, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Letter From Ralph Wintrob to the Jewish Institute of Learning, 27 June 1994, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

³⁸ Synopsis of Responsibilities by the Jewish Theatre Committee, 1993, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

³⁹ Minutes of the Meeting of the Jewish Theatre Committee, 3 June 1993, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

publicity.⁴⁰ A shallow turnout for this event would leave the JTC at a loss and thus unable to put together programs of this calibre as often as they would have liked.⁴¹ Wintrob would later write to Hausvater that he could not reimburse him for his work for some time due to funding cuts.⁴²

Furthermore, the JTC proposed further contributions to Jewish theatre culture through a drama festival and exhibit. The main objectives of this exhibit were to produce a souvenir catalogue that would be sold to visitors and to collect artifacts and recorded performances to show in this exhibit.⁴³ The total required budget for this festival outlined in the JTC's proposal was estimated at just below \$203,000.⁴⁴ In an effort to secure funding for this venture, Wintrob applied requests for funding from multiple sources including funds, bursaries, and the Canadian Government. Wintrob applied for funding from the Endowment Fund of the Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto but was ultimately rejected for showing no proof of profitability.⁴⁵ Funding from the government reached similar complications; in order for the committee to be granted any funding from Toronto, they would have to make Toronto strictly the focus of the exhibit, contrary to its proposal plans.⁴⁶ The Jewish Theatre Committee's plans for a festival and exhibit would ultimately go unfunded and unrealized. The JTC had far more projects and proposals that had seen relative success in the decade, however.

The Jewish Cultural Council of Toronto recognized the importance of theatre in the early Eighties and formed a proposal for a committee that would fulfill the need for Jewish theatre and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Letter From Ralph Wintrob to Alexander Hausvater, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Proposal to the Jewish Cultural Council by the Jewish Theatre Committee, Short Biography of The Jewish Theatre Committee, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

⁴⁵ Letter From the Jewish Foundation of Greater Toronto to Ralph Wintrob, Short Biography of The Jewish Theatre Committee, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

⁴⁶ Minutes of the Jewish Theatre Committee Meeting, 13 January 1992, Archival Accessions 2012-6/2, Shelf 87-1, Ontario Jewish Archives, Toronto, ON.

culture based on three primary objectives: receive new, exemplary Jewish work from talented authors, publicize plays and contribute to the Jewish cultural community. The JTC demonstrably completed these objectives to the best of its ability in a tumultuous and unsteady period for the theatre industry. The annual playwriting competition generated numerous scripts of exceptional quality for Jewish audiences. Furthermore, the theatre committee brought these Jewish plays to the stage where Jewish content was few and far between. The JTC would use these plays and their authors to form workshops and educational programs as a positive contribution to Jewish studies. The JTC's contributions would then inspire smaller committees and theatre groups to make similar contributions to the Jewish cultural community. Although the theatre committee experienced numerous problems in launching its initiatives, its contributions to the Jewish cultural community is immense and should not be ignored.