

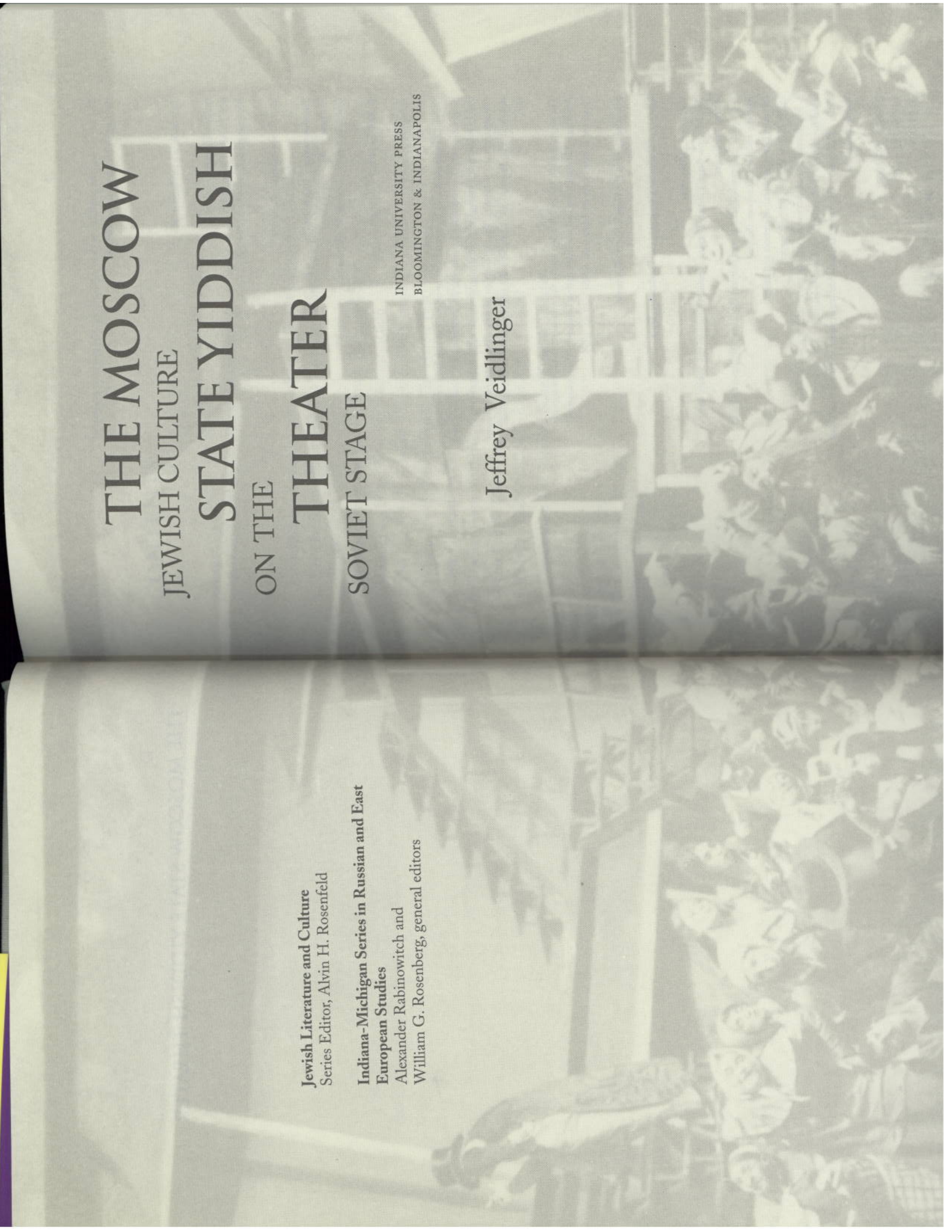
THE MOSCOW  
JEWISH CULTURE  
STATE YIDDISH  
ON THE  
THEATER  
SOVIET STAGE

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS  
BLOOMINGTON & INDIANAPOLIS

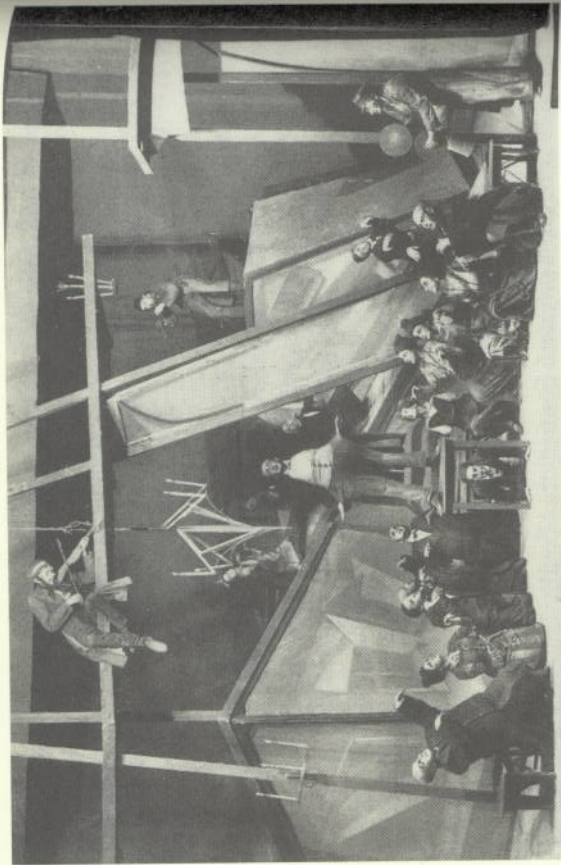
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**Jewish Literature and Culture**  
Series Editor, Alvin H. Rosenfeld

**Indiana-Michigan Series in Russian and East  
European Studies**  
Alexander Rabinowitch and  
William G. Rosenberg, general editors







200,000, 1923. Sets by Isaac Rabichev. Photo from *Das Moskauer Jüdische Akademische Theater* (Berlin, 1928).



200,000, 1923. Front, from left to right: Eva Iskhoki, Evgeniia Epstein, Rakhl Imenitova, Esther Karchmer. Back: Benjamin Zuskin. Photo courtesy of Ala Perelman-Zuskin.

round out the list of top salaried members.<sup>128</sup> Wages for the rest of the staff were scaled in thirteen divisions. This situation did little to placate the grumbling bit actors, who were already complaining that they were experiencing worse hunger than they had during the Civil War.<sup>129</sup>

These financial and administrative difficulties impeded the theater's artistic work. Unable to put together a full-length play, the troupe resorted to performing a series of sketches: *Three Jewish Raisins*, written by Dobrushin and Nakhum Oyslender (1893–1962), premiered in March 1924. Oyslender was born in 1893 in Kiev and, like Dobrushin, was the son of a lumber merchant. After studying medicine in Berlin, he was mobilized into the Red Army as a military doctor. After the Civil War, Oyslender started writing symbolic Yiddish poetry. However, he would find his niche not as a creative writer, but as a literary critic and translator; *Three Jewish Raisins* was his first venture into dramaturgy. The reference to raisins was both a tribute to Goldfajn's famous song "Raisins and Almonds" and a synecdoche of wine—a symbol of merriment and life.

Each sketch mocked one of the major genres of Jewish theaters: *Prince von Flisko Drigo*, about a love affair between a Chinese emperor and a poor Jewish woman from Odessa, poked fun at the melodramas popular among wandering Jewish troupes. In the spirit of Goldfajn, the play is an adventure-packed fantasy in which the two lovers narrowly escape certain death through a series of mishaps and encounters with bandits and pirates, only to be reunited in the finale. The second sketch, *Sarra Wants a Negro*, satirizing the American motto that "everything is possible in America," mocked the New York Yiddish theaters; and *A Night at a Hasidic Rebbe's*, the most successful of the three, parodied the mystical piety of Moscow's own Habima. This last sketch concludes after a wealthy rebbe explains to his eager neophytes how he has accumulated his wealth, and one student exclaims, "My God, how many poor people are needed so that one rich man can live the good life in this world!"<sup>130</sup> Once again Granovsky's staging emphasized the carnivalesque, mixing the sacred with the profane. By turning the ecstatic dance and singing of the Hasidim into theatrical gestures devoid of ulterior meaning, the movements were deprived of their spiritual significance. Such spiritual dance was also a large part of Habima's choreography, epitomized by plays such as *The Eternal Jew*. The popularity of the play was enhanced by Pulver's parody of Hasidic songs, using authentic melodies such as "When the Rebbe drinks, his students follow" which mocked the conformity of the sect. The first two sketches were later dropped from the repertoire, and the title *Three Jewish Raisins* was used to refer to a program consisting of Sholem Aleichem's *The Divorce Paper* (written in 1887), *Mazel Tov*, and *A Night at a Hasidic Rebbe's*. *The Divorce Paper*, Sholem Aleichem's "Life goes nowhere—feh!"

One critic praised *A Night at a Hasidic Rebbe's* for its intricate artistic content as well as its propagandist anti-religious message but was less impressed with the other "raisins": "Here they only dance and sing."<sup>131</sup> *Izvestiia*, in contrast, was full of praise: "One can say that it is the most joyous production of the season."<sup>132</sup> *Pravda*



the Bund hall where they played in Vitebsk for the summer; the Moscow State Yiddish Theater was placed in the heart of the downtown theater district—less than a kilometer from the famous Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, and Tairov theaters. In short, the theater was clearly addressing itself to a non-Yiddish-speaking audience. For central state organizations such as the Commissariats of Enlightenment and Nationalities, both of whom sought to use the theater as a showpiece to demonstrate for foreigners the thriving culture of Soviet national minorities, the ethnic composition of the in-house audience made little difference. However, for the Jewish Section, which hoped the theater would inspire traditional Jews to revolutionize their values and adopt new behavioral patterns, the lack of interest among the targeted audience was a significant problem to be rectified in the future.

### Revolutionary Theater

Bolshevik thinkers of the 1920s believed that with appropriate content the theater could become an ideal medium for a revolutionary culture. It alone could present utopian visions in concrete forms: revolutionary heroes, right-wing foes, popular festivals, religious rituals, modern industry, and capitalist speculation could all be appropriately exalted or denigrated in a setting comprehensible to even illiterate masses. This sentiment was shared by the community of artists involved in the Soviet Jewish theaters of the 1920s. They were united by a common belief that the theater was the medium most suited to freeing Jewish society of what they saw as its insipid, rabbinical scholasticism and bourgeois philistinism.

The initial successes of the Bolsheviks in establishing control over the turbulent, war-torn country caught many of the self-appointed guardians of proletarian cultural purity off guard. Lacking the resources to create a network of Soviet, state-controlled cultural institutions, the Bolsheviks were willing, for the time being, to welcome those that emerged independently. Unsure how best to create and enforce a purely working-class culture, these enthusiasts were willing to tolerate a motley mix of interpretations. Typical of this ambiguity was the state's simultaneous funding of both the Hebrew-language theater, Habima, and the Moscow State Yiddish Theater. In such an open environment, the Yiddish Theater's symbolist staging, constructivist sets, folkish melodies, and popular texts were permitted to prosper relatively free of state interference.

The Moscow State Yiddish Theater's support for Communist ideals and compliance with Bolshevik nationality policies of the era, as well as its use of the language championed as the vernacular of working-class Jews, helped gain it an unprecedented degree of state patronage. However, while the theater was formed with the support of the state, the initiative came from Jewish artists whose own ideals corresponded roughly to those of the Soviet government.

As a result of its official sanction, the theater became a haven for artists working in all media. Those unsure of how to express their revolutionary ardor appropriately could be comforted that the theater provided a suitable forum. Those fearful of arousing suspicion of their apprehensions toward the new order could camouflage themselves among the theater's zealots. And those simply unable to

echoed this sentiment: "One can confidently say that of all the parody spectacles of the ongoing season this is the most successful, most joyous and wittyest."<sup>133</sup> While the Soviet press praised the productions of these years for their strong social messages, some critics were dubious about the theater's potential to persuade Jews of the merits of communism. One reviewer wrote: "I suppose that to the Jewish theater all this is new and unusual and would be irreplaceable for the broad Jewish working masses in the provinces, but here in Moscow, alas, it is idle beauty."<sup>134</sup> Indeed, evidence suggests that the theater was not reaching its intended audience—the Yiddish-speaking religious Jews. In the words of Nahma Sandrow, "Laughter came in two waves: first from those who understood the jokes, and then from those to whom they had to be explained."<sup>135</sup> Russian-language synopses were sold to 60 to 80 percent of the audience each night,<sup>136</sup> brief summaries of all productions appeared in the major theatrical journals along with the cast lists, and the performances were so dominated by song, dance and decorations that they could be appreciated even without any understanding of the dialogue.<sup>137</sup> Furthermore, while the Jewish population of Moscow was rapidly increasing, it still only constituted 5.8 percent of the total Jewish population of the Soviet Union, and it was one of the most assimilated segments of that population.<sup>138</sup> The frequency of articles on the theater in the Russian press confirms that it was not exclusively of interest to Jews. The new theater building on Malaia Bronnaia was a stark contrast from



*A Night at a Hasidic Rebbé's*, from *Three Jewish Raisins*, 1924.  
Photo courtesy of Ala Perelman-Zuskin.