

'Yiddish Theater' catches movement at a crossroads

The documentary chronicles a last-ditch attempt by a feisty actress and others to keep the tradition alive.

By KENNETH TURAN
Times Staff Writer

"Yiddish Theater: A Love Story" was not a film Israeli director Dan Katzir was planning to make. But when he met 85-year-old theatrical legend and all-around ball of fire Zypora Spaisman, he couldn't help himself. "I was captivated by her," he says, and this charming and disarming documentary makes it clear why.

A force of nature for whom the word "indomitable" is way too mild, Spaisman has the kind of fighting spirit they just don't make anymore. "Hitler couldn't

stop me, Stalin couldn't stop me," she says, making it clear that no one else had better try. "Retirement is a death sentence: People have to live."

For Spaisman, "living" meant acting in New York's dwindling Yiddish theater scene. For more than 40 years she was the driving force behind the Folksbiene, America's longest running Yiddish theater, and when she was forced out she promptly started another group, the Yiddish Public Theater, in 2000. Katzir, a former lieutenant in the Israeli paratroopers whose grandmother was an anti-Yiddish activist, met this irresistible force in December of that year at a particularly pivotal moment in time.

Spaisman's new venture had just eight days to raise enough money to keep the theater open, or it and her theatrical career would be over.

Sensing that he was witness-

ing the end of an era, Katzir recorded it all on a small video camera and ended up with an irreplaceable record of a life and a movement at a crossroads.

"Yiddish Theater" unfolds on different fronts. First is the story of the campaign, led by David Romeo, a producer-director and Spaisman's manager, to raise the necessary funds. Despite formidable publicity, including the New York Post's listing of the Public's production of "Green Fields" as one of the 10 best off-Broadway plays of the year, this proved slow going.

At the same time, Katzir uses his entrée to introduce us to some of the great survivors of the Yiddish stage. There is the still limber 80-something dancer Felix Fibich; actress Shifra Lehrer, a perfectionist who tweaks Spaisman for her ad-libs; and singer Seymour Rechezit, as irascible as they come, famous



VETERANS: Zypora Spaisman and Felix Fibich are among the great survivors of the Yiddish stage.

for his Yiddish version of "The Surrey With the Fringe on Top."

Given its origins, it's not surprising that "Yiddish Theater: A Love Story" has a catch-as-catch-can feeling to it. But nothing can take away from the flavor

of being caught up in the battles and dreams of a formidable group of people.

For a brief moment in time, we share their struggles, and that feels like a privilege, it really does.

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"Yiddish Theater: A Love Story."
MPAA rating: Unrated. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes. At Laemmle's Grande, 345 S. Figueroa St. (213) 617-0268