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Encino Sun

## Yiddish Theater highlights struggle to preserve a dying art

BY S.A. DEDDO

The title of the 2006 documentary *Yiddish Theater: A Love Story* is, to a certain extent, misleading.

Yiddish theater, a movement of plays written for and by Jewish artists in the Yiddish language, is not the star of this story. The "Love Story" part is the main focus – a passionate affair between the Yiddish stage and a seemingly frail little woman from the old country. Her name is Zypora Spaisman, and though you may not have heard of her, many have been moved by her inspiring life.



*Yiddish Theater- A Love Story* producer Ravit Marcus and filmmaker Dan Katzir with director Arthur Hiller (center) at the documentary's Los Angeles premiere.

Dan Katzir, an Israeli documentary filmmaker, met Spaisman in December, 2000 while on holiday in New York City. He spent his weeklong vacation documenting Spaisman's struggle to keep her critically acclaimed but financially faltering Yiddish Public Theater alive.

Katzir appears in voice only in *Yiddish Theater: A Love Story*, serving as both narrator and interviewer. So when he arrived in person at a special question and answer session January 18 following a screening of the film at the Laemmle Encino Town Center 5, audience members found the acclaimed Jewish filmmaker a young, handsome man – who didn't even speak Yiddish himself.

"People have told me that I have an old soul," he told attendees. "And I tried to tell Zypora's story with a younger person's eyes."

*Yiddish Theater: A Love Story* documents the life of Spaisman, a feisty widow in her eighties and Holocaust survivor living alone in New York City. She's trying to raise enough money to guarantee the survival of the theater she founded – the Yiddish Public Theater, one of the last of its kind.

Katzir is as passionate about getting his documentary out to the masses as Spaisman was about getting audiences into her theater. They both struggled with the same problem – Yiddish is a dying language.

But Katzir's film has two advantages. First, it is told in English (with a few subtitles), and second, it is easily accessible to audiences across Los Angeles. Katzir's main battle has been getting the word out about his film, and the audience focused on that during the Q&A, one of many he and producer Ravit Markus have been holding across L.A.

"Why don't you get this film shown at Skirball [Cultural Center]?" asked one audience member.

"To them, I'm just another vendor trying to sell a product," Katzir replied. "But if you called them and asked to see this film shown there, they would be more likely to respond."

For a film that has gotten glowing reviews in newspapers across the U.S., including the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, *Yiddish Theater: A Love Story* seems destined for widespread recognition and "favorite" status among audiences Jewish and non-Jewish, young and old.

For more information on *Yiddish Theater: A Love Story*, visit the film's website at [www.yiddishtheater.net](http://www.yiddishtheater.net) or [www.myspace.com/yiddishtheateralovestory](http://www.myspace.com/yiddishtheateralovestory).

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