

Remembering a Yiddish theater diva

Dan Katzir's film highlights the life and death of Zypora Spaisman, a woman dedicated to keeping Yiddish theater alive

• By LEAH B. STERN

Israeli filmmaker Dan Katzir is in love again. This time, however, it is not with the young army officer who was his romantic interest in his previous award winning film, *Out for Love, Be Back Shortly*. Katzir's new obsession is the 86-year-old diva of Yiddish theater, Zypora Spaisman, who passed away in 2001.

Spaisman, best known for her 40-year run at the Folksbeine Theater in New York – the longest-lived, continuously performing Yiddish theatrical institution in the world – is the subject of Katzir's *The Yiddish Theater in New York*. The film will premiere in Israel on July 13, as part of the Jerusalem Film Festival.

"I usually like to do movies about young people and young problems," says the 36-year-old Israeli-born, US-based director, "but suddenly, I fell in love with an old woman. This woman was in her late 80s and she had much more to live for than most people my age."

Spaisman's passion was the Yiddish Theater. During her time at the Folksbeine, as well as her acting career, Spaisman sold tickets, raised money, worked on sets and even washed the floors at the theater. However, early in the 1997-98 season, with the theater's box office revenues dangerously low, the aging diva was dismissed. But the actress refused to give up and decided to open her own theater – the Yiddish Public Theater.

Katzir first crossed paths with Spaisman five years ago. He bumped into an old lady in a fur coat and a fur hat, on the bustling streets of Chinatown. Katzir had no idea who Spaisman was at that point but they started talking and she persuaded him to come and see her show. After his initial introduction to Yiddish culture, the diva pleaded with him to help save her theater, which would be forced to close in eight days time. The glint in her eye and her magical enthusiasm sparked his interest, says Katzir.

He agreed to do his part and decided to make Spaisman's eight day struggle to keep



ZYPORA SPAISMAN fought for Yiddish theater until the very end.

her theater alive the focus of the film. Set against the backdrop of the eight days of Chanukah, and the coldest Christmas season the Big Apple city has ever seen, Katzir documents Spaisman and her cast and crew as they refuse to let the curtain fall on their last production, the classic Yiddish play, *GrineFelder* (GreenFields).

"I will not retire. To retire is a death sentence. I want to have a life. I will not separate myself from the world," Spaisman tells the camera as she cuts up boiled chicken in her Manhattan apartment.

Most importantly, however, Katzir questions why Spaisman struggled to find other Jews to help save their collective heritage.

"Hitler tried to kill a people and a culture," says Katzir. "Yiddish existed for 1,100 years and after the Holocaust Jews associated it with something shameful."

American Jewry also moved away from the Yiddish world following World War II.

"Before the war New York City had 12 theaters playing Yiddish plays and after the war there was only one," points out Katzir.

In the film, Katzir highlights Spaisman's determination and dedication to save her theater. She is shown approaching six of the wealthiest Jews in Manhattan and manages to collect \$250, even though most of them say they do not believe a Yiddish theater can survive.

The donations are just not enough however and Spaisman's theater must close. At the film's end, we see Spaisman in her final performance, days later she slips into a coma. As she lies in her hospital bed, the City of New York honors her with a lifetime achievement award.

In the film, following her death, Governor George Pataki is seen writing a check for \$200,000 to insure that a national Yiddish theater is created, so that Yiddish theater always has a permanent home.