

REVIEW: YIDDISH THEATRE: A LOVE STORY



by michael fox

WHAT'S MOST STRIKING ABOUT "YIDDISH THEATRE: A Love Story," Dan Katzir's valuable documentary about a crucial week in the life of the last Yiddish stage company in New York, is its refusal to wallow in bathos.

Although Katzir is potentially recording the end of an era, one that some viewers will be amazed to learn was still extant when the film was shot in December 2000, he eschews a funereal tone in favor of a briskness that frequently tilts toward irreverence, but not disrespect. In a sense, Katzir's spirited approach is the perfect match for octogenarian actress Zypora Spaisman and her cohorts, for it aptly mirrors their unwavering drive to live, to create and to share with an audience.

"Yiddish Theater: A Love Story" screens Sunday, Feb. 11 at the AMC La Jolla in the San Diego Jewish Film Festival. Katzir, a garrulous young Israeli who lives in Los Angeles, is slated to be on hand for the screening.

As the film opens, the Folksbiene Yiddish Theatre, the last survivor of the dozen such enterprises that prospered in New York City before World War II, is performing Peretz Hirshbein's 1916 shtetl romance "Green Fields" to sparse audiences. Spaisman and producer David Romeo are determined to boost the house and keep the play running, but the odds are mighty long. For one thing, the troupe is performing at a venue on the Lower East Side. Once upon a time this was the hub of immigrant Jewish life, of course, but it's a major shlep from the Upper West Side and the other neighborhoods where Manhattan's Jews now reside.

From a broader cultural perspective, it's the frenetic holiday season, and "Green Fields" is fighting for a sliver of attention

amid the crunch. The film shows the ubiquitous Christmas trees and lights, hinting at the David-and-Goliath battle that Folksbiene is fighting against the dominant culture. This isn't Katzir's most convincing ploy, however, for Manhattan is the last place where you can depict a Jewish Entity – albeit a Yiddish troupe – as a minority venture. Katzir uses the Hanukkah menorah, and the metaphor of the dwindling oil that miraculously lasted eight days, to count down the days and gently build the tension as the endearing Romeo pursues last-minute investors in order to extend the "Green Fields" run.

Meanwhile, the filmmaker takes us into Spaisman's daily life, and shows us what the theater means to her. It represents the overriding majority of her professional career, for one thing. Equally important, it's a concrete bridge to her roots in the Old Country, and a defiant homage to her 150 family members who perished in the Holocaust.

But even more than that, the Folksbiene is what gives shape to the widowed Spaisman's hours and meaning to her days. So the documentary, by staying focused on the personalities in the present, is a vital portrait of Jewish lives rather than an elegy for an abstract concept like the demise of Yiddish Theater.

To be sure, the Yiddish songs that Katzir sprinkles on the soundtrack are the essence of melancholia. But if the indefatigable Spaisman and her fellow actors express a little frustration and a lot of disappointment, they give no voice to self-pity.

One suspects that that was part of the attraction for Katzir, who narrates the film and can be heard asking questions off-camera. He's a typically brusque and unsentimental Israeli, which doesn't mean that he is without empathy but simply that he's more attuned to the future than the past. He might not be the obvious candidate to make a documentary called "Yiddish Theater: A Love Story," but he proves to be the right one. ☆