

JEWISH CONTRIBUTION TO THE BROADWAY MUSICAL STAGE

(A narration, with musical inserts by Rabbi Dr. H.M. Baumgard, Temple Beth Am, Miami, Florida, 1977. Peformed by the Beth Am Choir, directed by Selma Baumgard. James Bennett at the organ.)

The musical theater of America, as distinguished from opera, developed, and still draws its main energy from Broadway, the name given to the general area of New York City where most of the theaters are situated. As we see, this art form has been dominated by Jews. Why? How did the Jews get to New York and to Broadway? The answer is a familiar one. The Jews came to New York just one step in front of the oppressors. The great wave of Jewish immigration to this country came around the turn of the century 1880-1920. These people were fleeing the accusations that they killed non-Jewish children to use their blood to make Passover Matsas. They were fleeing the hunger forced upon them by restrictive laws restricting their occupations. They came by the millions at the turn of the century, terribly poor, uneducated in the ways of the world, but bringing with them a tradition of social cooperation, moral integrity, soberness, and a dedication to hard work and learning.

They settled primarily in the coastal city which was the port of entry into America, and much of the social and cultural character of New York was determined by its Jewish population. Out of the Jewish immigrant experience was born the words which adorn the statue of Liberty. These words written by a Jewess, Emma Lazarus. combine the best ideals of Judaism and of America. "Give me your tired and your poor", the statue proclaims to Europe, "The Wretched Refuse of Your Teeming Shore....Give These Your Homeless, Tempest Tossed to me, I lift My Lamp Beside The Golden Door". Selma Baumgard leads the Beth Am Choir in Irving Berlin's song from the Broadway show, "Miss Liberty". The song is called, "The Lady With A Lamp".

The Jews of Europe until the late 18th century were not permitted to own land, nor were they permitted to serve as farmers. Consequently, they turned to the selling of wares, to the peddling of shoes and shoe-strings, or kitchen tools or jewelry. The Jews were not permitted to become members of the labor guilds. They couldn't become carpenters or masons or craftsmen, so they turned to marginal jobs like serving as a handyman or fixer and like playing the violin at the local pub. The Jews of Europe never learned how to plant potatoes, but they learned how to bring joy through music!

In order to understand the place of music in the American Jewish Community, we have to understand that music has always been a

central part of the religious service in Judaism, even in Temple days. The psalms were originally created to be sung during the service, as their text clearly indicates. One psalm includes this lovely thought, "This is the day which the Lord hath made, let us be glad and rejoice in it". This day, any day, is the day which God has given us a precious gift. Something of this sense of joy in creation has marked the music of American Jewish composers like Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, for example, who wrote this song for the musical "The King and I". Merle Hamm now sings for us, "Whistle A Happy Tune".

For hundreds of years in Europe, the Jew was not permitted to appear in polite society. When the concert halls of Europe were finally open to Jews, a flood of artists stood ready in the wings, ready to present their developed art to the public. Artists like Artur Rubenstein and Horowitz, and Heifetz and Stern, and Menuhin. Kousevitsky, the great conductor of the Boston Symphony, belongs to the older generation of Jewish masters, but his disciple, Leonard Bernstein, bridges both classical and popular music. In Bernstein we have a wedding of Gustav Mahler and George Gershwin, of the European and the American Jewish musical talent. From Bernstein, then, we get the Jeremiah Symphony, named for the great Prophet, and also "West Side Story", written for the Broadway stage.

Steven Sondheim wrote the words for Bernstein's melodies in "West Side Story", but Sondheim did it all by himself for the musical, "A Little Night Music". From that show, Ann Aibel sings a song of love's disappointment, "Bring in The Clowns".

It is understandable that the Jews who suffered so intensely as a minority in Europe should be especially sensitive to the suffering of other minorities in America. In the musical, "Showboat", Jerome Kern painted a dramatic picture of the endless labor of the black man in his song "Ole Man River", sung now by Bernard Shaft.

Everyone knows the name of Robert Merrill, the great Metropolitan Opera baritone. Less popular is the name of Bob Merrill who wrote the words for the music to "Funny Girl", a play about a Jewish girl named Fanny Brice, played by Barbara Streisand, also a Jewess. "Funny Girl" is a relatively recent Broadway show about the true life experiences of a star of early Broadway. Bernice Anapol sings the song, "People", from that show. The music was written by Jules Styne.

One of the chief moral values of Judaism is hope and the refusal to despair. In spite of the difficulties that have come to our people, we have never, like the ancient Greeks, surrendered to despair. The Prophet Isaiah gave courage to his people when they were captured and taken into exile by the Babylonians. He said

⑥ in the name of God, "Though you walk through the fire, you will not be consumed; though the waters of the river overwhelm you, you will not drown". Something of this sense of hope permeates the song "Climb Every Mountain", written by Richard Rodgers, and sung now by Dr. Robert Brewster.

⑦ Rabbi Akiba said that the romantic book, "The Song of Songs" is the holiest book in the Bible. Love between a man and woman is, of course, a key theme in every Broadway musical. One of the most recent love songs from Broadway was composed by Marvin Hamlisch and Edward Kleben, for the show "A Chorus Line". Sylvia Weinberg sings for us, "What I Did For Love".

In Europe for a thousand years, the Jew was more a victim of than a patron of the theater. In the "Merchant of Venice", Shakespeare made the Jew seem to be a cruel miser. In the play, "The Jew of Malta", Marlowe made him seem to be the devil incarnate. Here in America, on Broadway, the Jew could be himself, something far different from that pictured on the European stage. In Europe, a Jewish composer had to convert if he wished his works to be heard. Such was the fate of Felix Mendelssohn, but by the time Maurice Ravel was born, things were somewhat better. George Gershwin, who learned much from Ravel, composed in the land of the free where he could write "Porgy and Bess" or "An American in Paris" with equal ease and hope to see his work published and presented.

⑧ In "Porgy and Bess" Gershwin captured some of the pathos and beauty of the black people in America, something other composers seemed to overlook. He wrote for that show a song called "Summertime", which Marvis Martin now sings.

Some of you here tonight are too young to remember Irving Berlin who wrote so many popular songs that it is impossible to list them. Mr. Berlin, like so many immigrant Jews, was in love with America, so he wrote songs like "God Bless America", "The Easter Parade", and "White Christmas". Those too young to remember Mr. Berlin may recognize the name of Burt Bachrach. Bachrach is typical of many new young Jewish writers. Bachrach captured the mood of young America when he wrote, "What The World Needs Now, Is Love Sweet Love". The teenagers may have thought this was their personal discovery, but in Mr Bachrach's synagogue there is a prayer read at every service which has this theme; that prayer is in the Mezuzah on the door to his house; and that theme is found in our Bible repeatedly. Burt Bachrach is just one of many younger Jewish song-writers at work on Broadway today.

Simon and Garfunkle wrote not so much for Broadway as for the concert hall and for recordings. They might be called the

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 intelligentsia amongst those who composed for the modern record audience. Their songs like, "The Sounds of Silence" echoed the teaching of the Hassidic Rabbi who taught that to be a good Jew, one must be capable of three things, "upright kneeling, motionless dance, and silent screaming". Simon and Garfunkle captured the primitive longings of the heart of the younger generation when they wrote songs like "El Condor Pasa". Harriet Potluck sings one of their numbers, "Bridge Over Troubled Waters".

10
 Many a wonderful Broadway musical has found its way to Hollywood and to motion picture theaters. In movie production, too, Jews played a dominant part, in the early days especially, as the names Warner Brothers and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer testify. The "Sound of Music" is but one of many Richard Rodgers Broadway plays which found its way to movie audiences. The play contains, amongst other things, a reflection of the psalmists love of nature. "I lift up mine eyes unto the mountain", wrote the Psalmist, "From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from him who made Heaven and Earth". The Prophet wrote, "The very hills clap their hands and sing", and Richard Rodgers wrote, "The Hills Are Alive with "The Sound Of Music"". Dr. Gerson Sachs sings this for us now.

11
 Of all the musical plays which have appeared on Broadway, the longest playing show was "Fiddler on The Roof". Jews had written the music for most of Broadway's successful plays, but "Fiddler" was more than a musical play written by Jews. It was a story taken from Jewish history. So emotional was the audience response to "Fiddler" that Brooks Atkinson, a non-Jewish critic wrote, "To see "Fiddler" is not to witness a performance at all. It is a celebration. The audience cannot be separated from the performers". Especially rooted in the Jewish experience were the words from, "A Sabbath Prayer", one of the many touching songs from "Fiddler" by composers Jerry Boch and Sheldon Harnick. Pauli Levine sings this for us.

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 When the Jews in the tiny villages of Eastern Europe dreamed of some day returning to Israel, some scoffed and said it was an impossible dream. When those persecuted by the Czar thought of going to America, some said it was an impossibel dream. When the teachers in the synagogue spoke of the Messiah's coming, ushering in a time of peace and justice, when the last would be first, when those who suffered now would be the most rewarded, some said it was an impossible dream. Don Quixote was a dreamer of such dreams, of an evil world made whole. Joe Rubin, our Cantorial Soloist, sings now the great song from "man Of La Mancha" by Mitch Leigh, "The Impossible Dream".

Much of musical comedy is presented in the form of a fairy tale, because a fairy tale is frequently a way to talk about what the world might be like. The story of Don Quixote is a fairy tale

13 and so is the story of "The Wizard of Oz". Jews are attracted to these stories because they are messianic in outreach. Who has ever heard Dorothy sing, "Somewhere Over The Rainbow", and not wished that the song would come true. Harold Arlen, the composer of dozens of beautiful show tunes, wrote all the music for the perennial favorite, "The Wizard Of Oz". Iris Rosen sings now the big hit from that show.

14 The psalmist wrote, "The Lord is my Shepard, I shall not want....." Again he said, "Though I walk through the valley of death, I shall fear no evil for thou art with me.....". Something of this faith is in the song, "You'll Never Walk Alone", from the musical "Carousel". The authors, again, are Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein and our singer is Marvis Martin.

Living as the poorest of the poor in eastern Europe and longing for an escape from persecution, the Jews for centuries dreamed of returning to Zion, the Land of Israel. They imagined Israel to be a land flowing with milk and honey when in fact it was a land of sand and stones. The tendency to idealize a distant goal is a human quality but never more strongly illustrated than amongst the Jews.

15 The national anthem of the modern State of Israel is the song "Ha-tikveh". Ha-tikveh means "the hope". It was sung by Jews long before the State of Israel was even a remote possibility. Out of the movie "Exodus" came a new song with dramatic significance for all Jews. Dr. Brewster sings now, "This Land Is Mine".

16 Jews have written idealistic songs ever since the times of the Prophets. Isaiah prophesied the time when men would "Beat their swords into plows and learn war no more". Sy Miller was written a song for Americans called, "Let There Be Peace On Earth!". Our united choir under the direction fo Selma Baumgard will sing a verse of the song and then you are asked to turn to your special song sheet and join in the second verse. This will conclude the program.