STAGING SYNCHRONIZATION: YIDDISH THEATRE IN THE INTERWAR PARIS AND THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURAL NEGOTIATION

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Abstract: This article explores Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris (1919–1939) as a case study of cultural synchronization and resistance within a semi-peripheral theatrical system. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of E. Lovinescu, Pascale Casanova, and Itamar Even-Zohar, it analyzes how Yiddish theatre negotiated its position between center and periphery by adapting, reinterpreting, or resisting dominant French theatrical conventions. Through a close reading of repertoire, performance practices, and linguistic registers, the study shows how diasporic Jewish culture mobilized strategies of cultural transfer to assert its distinctiveness while engaging with the aesthetics of the Parisian stage. Rather than simply mirroring a hegemonic model, Yiddish theatre in Paris emerges as a dynamic cultural form responsive to and defiant of its environment. This approach situates the analysis within broader questions of intercultural exchange and minoritarian aesthetics, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how theatrical systems operate under transnational and intercultural influence, and offering insight into the cultural mobility of Jewish performance traditions.
Keywords: Yiddish theatre, synchronization, center-periphery, cultural transfer, diasporic culture.

Introduction

How does a marginal stage claim cultural space? This paper explores Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris (1919–1939) as a cultural synchronization and negotiation case study within a "peripheral"[1] theatrical system. Situated in Paris,

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[1] The *center-periphery* framework—a widely adopted conceptual tool in socio-cultural discourse, used to designate structural asymmetries between dominant and marginal cultural positions—serves here as a broad analytical lens, without implying a fixed or unchanging hierarchy, and will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections.

then widely regarded as the cultural and artistic capital of the West, Yiddish theatre served as a performative expression of *Yidishkeyt*— the Jewishness of Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews—within a predominantly French theatrical space and a buoyant cosmopolitan environment.

Drawing on Lovinescu's synchronization theory and Pascale Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*, this study investigates how Yiddish theatre maintained an autonomous cultural identity while engaging dialogically with French theatrical traditions. To further enrich the discussion and address the limitations of these models, the article incorporates Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory. His framework explores the internal dynamics of cultural systems and bridges Lovinescu's national focus with Casanova's global perspective, tracing how theatrical forms, performance styles, and dramaturgical conventions circulate and interact within complex networks. Together, these three frameworks reveal how stage polysystems deal with global pressures and local artistic practices, negotiating their position in a constantly evolving theatrical landscape.

By analyzing the strategic mediation inherent in Yiddish theatre's culture, this essay proposes a relational model of intercultural positioning, interrogating broader questions of synchronization, cultural hierarchy, and intercultural exchange: *How does a minor or diasporic theatre culture articulate its relationship to a hegemonic center, yet preserve its identity, and what does this negotiation reveal about the dynamics of center-periphery exchange?*

This prism offers a new perspective on Yiddish theatre as both diasporic and transnational,[2] emphasizing its role as a mobile, networked cultural system that mediated cultural transfers between Eastern European Jewish traditions and the Parisian cultural milieu. It reveals theatrical Yidishkeyt's idiosyncratic and versatile dimensions, particularly its relation to collective Jewish memory and its affinity with broader socio-political and artistic movements of the interwar period.

Situated within the broader framework of synchronization and cultural exchange, the paper engages directly with three thematic axes: the mechanisms

[2] While often used interchangeably, the terms *diasporic* and *transnational* convey distinct dimensions of cultural identity and circulation. "Diasporic" refers to communities shaped by displacement, collective memory, and a sustained sense of origin— often with a strong affective and linguistic bond, as seen in Yiddish theatre's engagement with *Yidishkeyt*. "Transnational," by contrast, emphasizes the fluidity of cultural exchange and artistic forms across national borders, highlighting the structural and performative mobility of theatre traditions like Yiddish art troupes touring from Moscow to New York *via* Paris.

of synchronization (how Yiddish theatre adopted, adapted, or resisted French cultural forms), institutional and cultural transfers (transnational migration and cultural transfers that shaped the Yiddish theatre in Paris), and theatrical representations (themes, symbols, and narratives that express evolving Jewish identity in a new cultural context).

The first section sets the stage with a brief historical and cultural overview of Yiddish theatre in the "City of Light". The second unit explores how synchronization operates within minor theatrical systems through the theories of Lovinescu, Casanova, and Even-Zohar, structuring the discussion into three subsections—each centered on one theorist and supported by case studies that highlight how repertoire choices, institutional networks, and cross-cultural interactions shaped Yiddish theatre's Parisian presence. By tracing these dynamics, the study ultimately sheds light on how minor and diasporic cultures assert agency within hegemonic frameworks, offering a more nuanced understanding of synchronization as a process that encompasses tension, adaptation, and innovation.

Staging Diaspora—The Parisian Setting

Between 1881 and 1939, four successive waves of immigration driven by pogroms, economic hardship, or political upheaval pushed nearly 3.5 million Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews from Central and Eastern Europe westward in search of safer, more prosperous living conditions. Before 1920, this migration was mainly transatlantic, with France serving primarily as a transit point to the United States or Argentina. However, the closure of U.S. borders in 1924, along with other factors, shifted migration toward Western Europe.

France soon became a preferred destination, seen by many as a promised land where one could *lebn vi Got in Frankraykh* ("live like God in France"). Impoverished by World War I and eager to rebuild its economy, the French Republic reopened its doors to foreign workers, reviving its tradition of hospitality. Around 100.000 Jewish immigrants—mainly Poles, Soviet Russians, and Romanians—fascinated by France, the first European country to emancipate Jews in 1791, arrived from the former Pale of Settlement and flocked to Paris, where they encountered a largely assimilated local Jewish community of around 40.000. For many of these newcomers—artists, intellectuals, and workers—Paris' magnetic energy and euphoric chaos represented a newfound sense of freedom, which reached its peak in the interwar period during the Roaring Twenties and the rise of jazz, radio, and

talking cinema—an era that inspired Hemingway's celebrated book, *Paris est une fête!*[3] *("Paris is a Feast!")*. The capital, already a sacred space for foreign painters and sculptors, home to the École de Paris, which brought together a generation of artists from all nationalities, also attracted writers, playwrights, and theatre practitioners of all kinds seeking modernity and artistic freedom.

Yet the euphoria was short-lived. The 1929 financial crash triggered economic and social decline, accompanied by rising political tensions and a national identity crisis that weakened republican ideals. Immigration policies grew more restrictive, while latent xenophobia and antisemitism became increasingly overt. The rise of Hitler in 1933 drove many German Jews to seek refuge in France[4]. By 1940, the freedoms of Jews in the country had progressively been revoked by the German occupiers and the Vichy regime, which made antisemitism one of the foundations of their policies. From May 29, 1942, all Jews over the age of six were required to wear the yellow star.

Upon arrival, these *goles yidn* ("diaspora Jews") *stood* apart from French Jews, who were deeply integrated and committed to republican values. Initially, there was misunderstanding—if not outright mistrust—between these assimilated *Westjuden* and the *Ostjuden*[5] from the East. The divide with their wealthier Parisian coreligionists, who were more discreet about their ethnic identity, was immediately visible, not only through language, with Yiddish as their primary tongue, but also through their often precarious socio-economic status, their religious spaces operating on the fringes of Consistory-controlled institutions, and their strong left-leaning political views. Although many gradually embraced integration, they brought with them a "national" conception of Jewishness rooted in tradition and language—*Yidishkeyt* or "Yiddishness".

In balancing these two value systems, theatre became a crucial support for Jewish immigrants, an opportunity to gather, like at a bathhouse or a synagogue. Amid the exhilarating yet turbulent decades of interwar Paris, a thriving Yiddish theatre scene emerged, allowing the Jewish immigrants a space for artistic expression and a key site for identity negotiation. It enabled them to rebuild

[3] Ernest Hemingway, *Paris est une fête!*, translated by Marc Saporta, Paris, Gallimard, [1964] 2011.

[4] David Weinberg, *Les Juifs à Paris de 1933 à 1939*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1974, p. 19.

[5] The terms *Ostjuden* ("Eastern Jews") and *Westjuden* ("Western Jews") were common categorizations in the 19th and early 20th centuries. *Ostjuden* referred primarily to Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe, often stereotyped as traditional or backward in contrast to the more acculturated *Westjuden* of Central and Western Europe. The binary was widely used in both antisemitic and intra-Jewish discourse, though it has since been problematized by historians.

their sense of self in an increasingly hostile environment while preserving their cultural roots in the face of a dominant and internationally recognized epicentre of modernity[6].

Whereas the more assimilated "*Israélites*"[7] preferred French productions or, at most, Jewish theatre—whether Hebrew or Yiddish—performed by prestigious touring ensembles such as the Vilner Trupe[8], Moscow's Goset[9] or Maurice Schwartz's[10] Yiddish Art Theatre from New York, dedicated to preserving the canonical status of their "high" art, immigrants favoured "light" Yiddish theatre developed locally within their communities. This theatre, often reflecting the remnants of a culture left behind or forcibly abandoned, offered a familiar and reassuring memory of origins, professions, values, and traditions.

Despite the sustained efforts of a handful of ambitious local directors and high-profile Jewish cultural organizations,[11] the Parisian Yiddish theatre repertoire remained largely commercial. Of the nearly one thousand different plays staged in 3.600 performances during the interwar years—a remarkable figure given the modest size of the immigrant community—only about 13% could be classified as "literary" or "art" theatre, either original works from Yiddish modernist playwrights or translations from the international artistic

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[6] For a comprehensive account of interwar Yiddish cultural life in Paris, see the recent scholarly work of Nick Underwood, *Yiddish Paris: Staging Nation and Community in Interwar France*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2022.

[7] A term used in the 19th and 20th centuries to refer to Jewish citizens in France (or in other European countries). While it appeared frequently during the interwar period, it has since fallen out of use. However, it remains in the names of certain institutions, such as the *Consistoire central israélite de France* or the *Alliance israélite universelle (AIU)*.

[8] The *Vilner Trupe*, founded in Vilna (Vilnius) in 1915 or 1916, was a pioneering Yiddish theatre company of primarily self-educated intellectuals of working-class origin, renowned for introducing its artistic innovation and for helping to establish modern Yiddish theatre on an international scale. In 1927, the company split, with a group of actors leaving for the United States and others going off on their own in Eastern Europe. It ceased performing in 1935 when it could no longer support itself financially.

[9] *GOSudarstvenny Evreyski Kamerny Teatr* (ГОСЕКТ)—un titre inspiré des *Kammerspiele* expérimentaux de Reinhardt—, puis sans l'épithète « Kamerny » (ГОСЕТ). The Moscow State Yiddish Theatre, founded in 1919 by Alexei Granovsky, was one of the most celebrated Yiddish theatre companies of the 20th century, known for its avant-garde productions.

[10] Maurice Schwartz (1889–1960) was the founder and director of the Yiddish Art Theatre in New York, dedicated to raising the artistic standards of Yiddish drama.

[11] In interwar Paris, organizations such as the Kultur-Lige Pariz, YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut/Jewish Scientific Institute), the Medem-Farband, the Kultur-Front, and YKUF (Yidisher Kultur Farband/Jewish Culture Association) promoted a "better" Yiddish theatre, advocating for higher artistic standards and cultural elevation. See also N. Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 57–91.

repertoire. The remainder belonged to light genres, with *shund*—mass-produced and anonymously authored plays—accounting for 61%, while more conventional profit-driven productions represented 26%[12].

Beyond the revered *klasiker* ("classics") of *Haskalah*[13] influence—Mendele Moykher-Sforim, Sholem Aleykhem, and Y.L. Peretz—who are regarded as the founders of Yiddish literary culture, a handful of authors like Sholem Anski, Sholem Asch, and Jacob Gordin also occupy the artistic sphere, leaving the "popular" domain to a group of commercial playwrights, most of whom emigrated to New York. Their names—William Siegel, Harry Kalmanowitz, and Louis Freiman, amongst others—are inextricably tied to the flood of operettas that inundated the Yiddish stage.

Regardless of artistic positioning, Yiddish theatre functioned as a *diasporic* system, built on an interconnected, transnational network of playwrights and artists, from individual guest stars to itinerant troupes. Its inherent mobility and reach, spanning Europe and the Americas, made the system global and networked rather than "national," granting it a uniquely idiosyncratic place in the international theatrical sphere. At the same time, its development, caught between artistic standing and mass appeal, reflected larger theatrical tensions in Paris, where movements like boulevard theatre, artistic popular theatre, and avant-garde experiments all vied for public attention.

This divide between "highbrow" and "lowbrow"—a schematic rather than a strict taxonomy—roughly recalled the broader landscape of French theatre, where the longstanding concept of *deux théâtres*—art versus commerce—divided theatregoers and critics[14]. The rise of cinema marked the end of France's "dramatocracy,"[15] drawing crowds toward film, jazz, and cabaret, and pushing

[12] All numerical data cited here are drawn from my own research, as summarized in my PhD dissertation (Michèle Fornhoff, *Le théâtre yiddish de l'entre-deux-guerres à Paris (1919–1939). La judéité mise en scène*, doctoral thesis, Sorbonne Université/Université libre de Bruxelles, 4 December 2023, https://theses.fr/2023SORUL113, p. 320).

[13] The *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, was an intellectual movement of the 18th–19th centuries that promoted secular education, integration, and modernization among Jews in Europe.

[14] Levine traces how cultural forms once widely shared came to be divided into "high" and "low" categories, shaping the cultural hierarchy of modern America, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988.

[15] Term coined by French theatre historian Jean-Claude Yon to describe the cultural and institutional dominance of spoken drama within French theatrical tradition. It captures the historical privileging of dramatic theatre over other popular forms such as vaudeville, operetta, or melodrama, particularly in how theatre has been theorized, archived, and canonized (« Théâtromanie,

traditional theatre to the margins of the *société de spectacle*[16]. The artistic and financial crisis that had begun in the *Belle Époque* deepened, driven not merely by temporary setbacks but by structural shifts toward commercialization, encouraging theatres to compete for fashionable stars and audiences, while other movements sought to redefine theatrical legitimacy[17].

In this landscape, a modernist theatrical current emerged, led by directors Louis Jouvet, Charles Dullin, Gaston Baty, and Georges Pitoëff—collectively known as the "*Cartel*"[18]. Opposing both commercial *théâtre de boulevard* and the elitism of state-supported institutions like the Comédie-Française, they championed a more visual, abstract aesthetic while revalorizing popular traditions and exploring Russian Constructivist staging. Their fiercely loyal audiences were largely elite, drawn from Paris's intellectual and artistic circles and culturally engaged segments of the public.

Meanwhile, artistic popular theatre found renewed momentum under actor, director, and theatre manager Firmin Gémier[19]—a disciple of André Antoine and a staunch Republican. Inspired by Romain Rolland and his *Théâtre du peuple*, which synthesized the ideals of an urban France politicized by the Dreyfus Affair, he founded the *Théâtre National Populaire* (TNP) in 1920, with state support. His dual mission was to make theatre both artistically meaningful and accessible to the working classes. Molière, Corneille, Beaumarchais, and above all, Shakespeare, whom he considered among the "evangelists of popular theatre," stood at the heart of his repertoire.

The historical and cultural context outlined above—necessarily presented in broad strokes—demonstrates that Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris was more than mere entertainment—it served as a negotiated space of adaptation, dialogue, and reinvention. But how did this theatrical system operate within a

société de spectacle. Une analyse alternative de l'histoire des spectacles, *Dix-huitième siècle* », N° 49, 2017, p. 351–363).

[16] Guy Debord, *La société de spectacle*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

[17] See also Pascale Goetschel, *Une autre histoire du théâtre. Discours de crise et critiques spectaculaires–France XVIII^e–XXI^e siècle*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2020.

[18] The "Cartel" was a collaboration of four prominent directors (Jouvet, Dullin, Baty, and Pitoëff) who were later joined by actor and stage director René Rocher reshaped modern French theatre in the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than an aesthetical movement, it operated as a moral and intellectual community, see Sarah Meneghello, « Paroles de privé, paroles de subventionné, concurrence entre directeurs ou destin partagé? », in Pascale Goetschel & Jean-Claude Yon, *Directeurs de théâtre XIX^e–XX^e siècles. Histoire d'une profession*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2008, p. 55.

[19] Actor, director, and French theatre manager, promoter of popular theatre and founder of the first Théâtre National Populaire (TNP) in Paris, in 1920.

dominant-French, more specifically Parisian, theatrical order? The next section examines how synchronization, cultural transfer, and theatrical representation shaped its position, drawing on the theories of Lovinescu, Casanova, and Even-Zohar—each offering a distinct perspective—to understand how Yiddish theatre negotiated artistic legitimacy vs. popular appeal, cultural autonomy vs. assimilation, global circulation vs. local belonging.

Synchronizing Difference— The Negotiation of Cultural Identity

Synchronizing with the center? Lovinescu and the challenge of theatrical modernization

The synchronization theory, developed by Romanian literary critic and historian E. Lovinescu (1881–1943), remains key to discussions on the dynamics of cultural modernization in minor or semi-peripheral literatures. In *Istoria civilizației române moderne* [*The History of Modern Romanian Civilization*] (1924–1925), he defined "synchronism" (Romanian: *sincronism*) as the process by which Romania accelerated its integration into modernity by aligning itself with the cultural forms of Western European nations, rather than evolving in isolation or following a belated national trajectory. This, he argued, was not the outcome of organic development of local traditions, but a conscious and necessary process of cultural modernization through the selective adoption of dominant Western models—often French in Romania's case—across literature, politics, and institutions. A staunch Europeanist—famously invoking the Latin maxim *ex Occidente lux*[20] ("light comes from the West")—Lovinescu had lived and studied in Paris, where he absorbed French intellectual culture and embraced values of liberal Europeanism. Contemporary French sociology, particularly Gabriel Tarde's[21] theory of imitation, offered conceptual grounding for his cultural program, designed to achieve a "synchronic" equilibrium between

[20] All quotations from Lovinescu are taken from Mária Kovács's English summary of "The History of Modern Romanian Civilization", Transl. Mária Kovács. In *Modernism: Representations of National Culture*, edited by Ahmet Ersoy, Maciej Górny, and Vangelis Kechriotis, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2010, p. 40–47.

[21] French sociologist Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904) argued in *Les lois de l'imitation* (1895) that cultural and social change occurs primarily through imitation—a concept influential in early modernization theory, see Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation*, étude sociologique, Paris, Alcan, 1895.

Western frameworks and Romanian cultural tradition, where the Romanian substance borrowed the forms from the West. For Lovinescu, synchronization was "not evolutionary, but *r*evolutionary": a conscious, proactive, yet critical and phased strategy of overcoming stagnation and cultural provincialism. Far from seeing imitation as a sign of weakness, he affirmed that "imitation is the first form of originality" and that "any imitation, in time, gains a specific character". In this framework, Western influence was a catalyst for cultural development, rather than a threat to national identity—a "sociological necessity" for cultures situated between East and West.

Lovinescu's defense of cultural borrowing must also be understood in light of Romanian intellectual history. He lamented that Romanian culture, ethnically and geographically positioned at the boundary of the East (Byzantine culture) and the West (Latinity), had been "orientalized" through tragic historical circumstances, and that Orthodoxy had been imposing "a foreign liturgical language and alphabet, failing to help us create a national culture and art". In contrast, Moldavia's cultural contact with Poland, he argued, was "the real starting point not only of a superior culture, but also of the dissemination of the Romanian language in the darkness of Slavic and Greek Orthodoxy". During the 18th century, the influence of the Latinist current through Transylvanian Romanian intellectuals fecundated science and further strengthened the Romanian national conscience. Synchronization, then, was a revolutionary process of "adaptation and processing" acting from the outside and aimed at generating internal cultural renewal "in the form of a state of western civilization"—a "unification through leveling" symbolically achieved with the revolution of 1848. Although Lovinescu faced strong opposition during his lifetime from nationalist and traditionalist circles, he was integrated into the national canon after 1945 and became a key reference in the aesthetic debates of the 1960s and early 1970s. His ideas were once again contested in the 1980s by autochthonist authors who accused him of undermining Romanian originality and asserting Western cultural superiority. It was only in the 1990s that his program was reintegrated within a broader framework of discussion on European modernity in Romania.

Yiddish Theatre and French Popular Traditions: Synchronization or Reinvention?

At first glance, Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris appears to fit Lovinescu's model: a "minor" or "peripheral" culture engaging with a "dominant Western

center" imposing its forms as a pathway to cultural modernization. Yiddish theatre did indeed "synchronize" with dominant French theatrical traditions, notably by consciously borrowing "popular" dramaturgical structures that shaped the Parisian stage—above all melodrama. As the prevailing genre of "light" Yiddish theatre, it infused a wide range of performances—its influence detectable even in comic or musical forms. Marked by heightened emotional expression and stark moral polarization, this melodramatic mode most clearly reflects the cultural and emotional dynamics at play within immigrant communities.

In its strictest sense, the word *melodrama*—not to be confused with the Italian *melodramma*, which in the seventeenth century referred to opera librettos or opera itself—means "musical drama" or "drama accompanied by music". French melodrama, in particular, had a powerful influence. Coined in the 18th century and developed by the prolific playwright René Charles Guilbert de Pixerécourt (1773–1844), nicknamed *le Corneille des boulevards* ("the Corneille of the boulevards"), the genre emphasized music, heightened emotion, and moral resolution. Though it later gained a pejorative reputation, melodrama flourished in France, resurfacing again in silent cinema.

Drawing on Peter Brooks's seminal analysis, melodrama is not simply a theatrical genre but a "coherent aesthetic system, with a repertory of expressive features and devices" that arises in moments of cultural or moral disruption. It seeks to dramatize ethical struggle through polarization, emotional excess, and expressive gesture to make visible what is socially repressed[22]. As Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams argue, melodrama is not merely a "low" genre, but a pervasive narrative and representational mode that operates across media and history as a flexible form through which marginalized communities have articulated trauma, identity, and political longing[23]. These frameworks are particularly apt for understanding how Yiddish theatre reappropriated melodramatic tropes—not merely to entertain, but to articulate diasporic tensions, reaffirm communal values, and negotiate cultural belonging in interwar Paris.

In Yiddish performance, melodramatic frameworks thus played a particularly prominent role—not as mere imitation, but as forms reconfigured to mirror the sensibilities and experiences of Eastern European Jews, serving as potent vehicles

[22] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, p. VIII-IX.

[23] Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds.), *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2018.

for narratives of struggle, displacement, and redemption. Always infused with song and dance, Yiddish melodrama created a theatrical landscape that balanced sentimentality with spectacle, moral instruction with entertainment. For immigrant audiences, it provided not only a welcome escape from daily hardship in an often unwelcoming or even hostile environment, but also a vital means to reconnect with the *Alte heym*—the Old Home. After a week of exhausting labor, the theatre became a surrogate *bimah* ("pulpit"), a communal space for gathering, reflection, and shared cultural memory steeped in *Yidishkeyt*—its language, *vitsn* ("jokes"), old songs, and folk traditions.

This is precisely where Yiddish melodrama defies straightforward synchronization: rather than simply replicating dominant theatrical models or importing "forms without content," a "hollow" imitation devoid of authenticity, a critique famously articulated by Titu Maiorescu[24] and later explicitly challenged by Lovinescu's synchronization theory, it reshaped them by infusing Jewish themes, references and characters, transforming a widely popular genre into a vehicle for cultural continuity and identity affirmation. What emerged was an authentic "national" voice, not least through the Yiddish language itself, which resulted in a "yiddishized" reinterpretation of dramatic conventions. Consequently, melodramatic aesthetics —emotional extremes, implausible plots, and a moralizing bent—served as a backdrop for articulating tensions, reflecting both a social and psychological engagement with what was then regarded as "modernity".

While narrative structures or plot devices were often borrowed from French models—with interwar Paris being a hub for "literary spies" from abroad who would quickly translate or adapt the latest hits—these scripts were reworked: names and locations changed, familiar Jewish songs and dances inserted, and the tone adjusted for a Yiddish-speaking audience. Stock or slapstick characters like the *shlemiel* ("bungler"), the overbearing mother, the religious scholar, or the matchmaker were drawn from Eastern Jewish archetypes, rooted in *shtetl*[25] life or the urban Pale of Settlement.

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[24] Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917) was a Romanian critic and philosopher best known for his concept of "forms without substance," criticizing superficial cultural imitation in Romanian culture as early as 1868. Lovinescu's synchronization theory, developed in the early 1920s, was partly formulated in response to this position.

[25] *A shtetl* (Yiddish for "small town", pl. *shtetlekh*) is a predominantly Jewish settlement of Eastern Europe, typically characterized by close-knit communal life, religious institutions, and Yiddish-speaking culture.

This mode of crossbreeding was particularly common with *shund*[26] melodrama, the theatrical counterpart to pulp fiction, where anonymous Jewish playwrights would churn out serialized playlets by the dozens as some contemporaries put it, "like potatoes," replicating familiar effects, punchlines, or crowd-pleasing formulas. They transposed the action from Paris to Odessa, Marseille to Berditshev, or Bordeaux to Bialystok. While many scripts were simple fabrications, others borrowed from *Haskalah* comedies, French operas, or Shakespearean drama. In *Der yeshive bokher* (*The Yeshiva Student*), also dubbed *Der yidisher Hamlet* (*The Jewish Hamlet*), references to the Danish prince surface in the simulated madness of the hero and the troubled, fraught relationship with his mother. In *Berele Bosyak*, a farcical play whose title character's name loosely suggests a "bumpkin" or "simpleton," the protagonist resorts to a "mousetrap" play featuring his own wretched life to unmask his father's cruelty. And Halévy's *La Juive* (*The Jewess*) may have influenced Lateiner's *Hinke un Pinke* (*Hinke and Pinke*), where a Jewish heroine, loyal to her husband, is sentenced to the pyre by a Christian duke she rejected.

From Adaptation to Resistance: The Limits of Synchronization

As a way of emotional engagement with life's crises and vicissitudes, the French melodramatic mode appeared, in its conception and representation, as a new *genre sérieux* ("serious genre") between tragedy and comedy—what Diderot called a "drama of the ordinary" —through its struggle against evil and quest to purge social disorder. This framework did not remain confined to the French stage, it found powerful new expression in the diasporic context. With its contributions, the imaginative dramatization of life, the transgression of generic constraints, Yiddish melodrama became an engaging arena for the self-fashioning of Jewish immigrants eager to distance themselves from the Old Home while resisting acculturation or outright assimilation. Beyond the structural adaptations previously mentioned, "yiddishizing" consisted of securing *Yidishkeyt* through the twin pillars of theatrical Jewish identity: embodied Jewishness and the *mameloshn*, mother tongue, echoed through traditional song and dance.

A minority language in interwar Paris, Yiddish primarily addressed the Jewish immigrant community, as the large majority of long-established, assimilated Jews

[26] *Shund* refers to lowbrow, mass-produced and mostly anonymous Yiddish theatre, popular among immigrant audiences but often criticized for lacking artistic value.

spoke French. Popular Yiddish plays embraced an often caricatural "Jewspeak"[27] filled with folklore catchphrases repeated regardless of context but eagerly sought by a wistful audience. Proverbs (*Di hin kenen lernen fun zayere eyer*, "The hens can learn from their eggs"), insults (*Gey, un brekh dikh a beyn!*, "Go break your leg!"), diminutives (*mameniu*, "little mama"), and interjections (*Oy, vey!*, "Oh no!") punctuated the dialogue, privileging the effectiveness of the idiom over literary sophistication. Language also underscored generational shifts: younger "greenhorns" often picked up vernacular dialect or "Daytshmerish"[28] Germanisms (e.g., *Großvater* instead of *zeyde*, "grandfather") to distinguish themselves from the old ways.

Onstage, Jewishness foremost translated into a worldview rooted in shared ancestry, memory, and cultural heritage—above all, language. Its outspoken communal character drew on familiar *topoi* like family, tradition, and core rites of passage. Marriage, in particular, dominated Yiddish operetta. An unusually high number of *shund* plays followed the paradigmatic *Rumenishe khasene* ("The Romanian Wedding")—the most popular Yiddish play in interwar Paris—with titles including the word *khasene* ("wedding"), *khosn* ("groom"), *kale* ("bride") or *khupe* ("canopy") in a wide spread of geographical or local variations, such as *Di galitsyaner khasene* ("The Galician Wedding"). These works encouraged spectators to relive personal memories, and, by extension, express collective identity, all while showcasing traditional songs and dances.

This "ethnic pop" functioned as both expressive framework and major commercial strategy, structuring narrative material in recognizably Jewish terms and luring theatregoers with the quantity of musical or dance "numbers" advertised. Songs filled emotional gaps, marked entrances and exits, or amplified dramatic effects. Some, such as the lullaby *Shlof, mayn kind* ("Sleep, my Child"), triggered poignant recognition scenes; others, like *Had gadya* ("One Little Goat") or liturgical melodies galvanized communal worship and bonding. Choruses often celebrated Jewishness outright—*Freylekh veln mir zayn, kinder fun Yisroel* ("Merry We Will Be, Children of Israel," *Ben Hador*)—while dances

[27] The term "Jewspeak" was coined by David G. Roskies to describe the hybrid, expressive vernacular emerging from Yiddish-inflected Jewish culture, see David G. Roskies, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999, p. 117.

[28] *Daytshmerish*, from the Yiddish *daytsh* ("German"), was a pejorative 19th-century term for overly Germanized Yiddish. Often used in early Yiddish theatre, it marked characters of noble or pretentious bearing.

ranged from Hasidic *horas*[29] to Yemenite stejps, adding a sense of cultural authenticity.

More than entertainment, melodrama reinforced *Yidishkeyt* as an organic bearer of tradition in an unfamiliar world. For recent immigrants, it nurtured a nostalgic image of the *Ostjude* and deepened the divide with assimilated *Westjuden*. Yet it was the Eastern Jews who, by sheer numbers and socio-cultural energy, fueled the growth of a thriving Yiddish "popular" theater in Paris, staging narratives that reimagined their shared experience night after night.

As demonstrated, Yiddish theatre and Lovinescu's Romanian model share important historical and conceptual ground. While separated in time—the former emerged in the mid-19th century, the latter in early 20th—both arose as responses to modernization from semi-peripheral cultural positions, engaging with dominant Western forms to negotiate their place within modernity. Lovinescu theorized this process as "synchronization": a conscious and strategic alignment with Western (especially French) models, which he viewed not as cultural surrender, but as a path to revitalization.

Yet the resemblance ends there. While Lovinescu advocates synchronization as a deliberate and teleological strategy—one in which peripheral cultures consciously adopt dominant forms in order to align with Western modernity—Yiddish theatre complicates this framework. Its use of borrowed melodramatic conventions was not a gesture of cultural subordination or of aspiring to "catch up," but a means of reworking dominant forms to articulate diasporic experience. The appropriation of French melodrama, in this case, was not about convergence with a central norm, but about adaptation to distinct communal sensibilities.

In this sense, both frameworks share a belief in the transformative power of external forms, but fundamentally differ in orientation: Lovinescu's is integrative and future-oriented, aiming at civilizational alignment; Yiddish theatre is responsive and situated, using adapted forms to preserve cultural specificity and reframe diasporic tradition within the shifting and fragmented landscape of interwar Paris.

[29] A traditional circle dance popular in Hasidic and broader Jewish communities, often performed at weddings and celebrations. Characterized by rhythmic stomping and collective movement, it symbolizes joy and spiritual unity.

Transnational Circulation: Casanova's World Republic of Letters *and Yiddish Theatre*

In *La république mondiale des lettres*[30] (1999), French literary scholar Pascale Casanova (1959–2018) explores how literary capital is unequally distributed across the globe, reinforcing hierarchies in which some literatures are dominant while others—the *petites littératures*—remain "small," that is, "literarily deprived"[31]. Echoing Henry James's metaphor of *The Figure in the Carpet*[32], where a motif can only be understood within the full design, and invoking Valéry Larbaud's call for an "internationale intellectuelle"[33], Casanova contends that literary meaning emerges only when the literary field is understood on a global scale, as an interconnected whole. The geography of this world republic of letters, she posits, "is based on the opposition between a capital, on the one hand, and peripheral dependencies whose relationship to the center is defined by their aesthetic distance from it."[34] Literary space is thus structured not by national borders but by oppositions between the different degrees of literary capital possessed by different national spaces—a model often compared to the political and economic world-system described by sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein[35].

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[30] Pascale Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres*, Paris, Seuil, 1999.

[31] *Idem*, *The World Republic of Letters*, M.B. DeBevoise (trans.), Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 181.

[32] *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896) from Henry James is a novella in which a literary critic searches obsessively for a hidden pattern or "design" that unifies an author's entire body of work—a metaphor later adopted in literary theory to suggest the need for holistic interpretation.

[33] Valéry Larbaud, « Paris de France », *Jaune, bleu, blanc*, Paris, Gallimard, 1927, p. 15, quoted by Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des Lettres*, *op. cit*., p. 16. Valéry Larbaud (1881–1957) was a French writer, translator, and cosmopolitan intellectual who promoted international literary exchange.

[34] Pascale Casanova, *WRL* (EN), *op. cit*., p. 12. For Casanova, aesthetic distance is also measured in temporal terms: a work's position within the literary world is assessed according to how "contemporary" or "belated" it appears in relation to the dominant norms set by the center—what she calls the "Greenwich Meridian of Literature". This temporal standard reinforces global hierarchies, with peripheral literatures often deemed out of sync or behind.

[35] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York, Academic Press, 1974. Wallerstein's world-systems theory conceptualizes the modern world as a hierarchical system divided into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones, shaped by unequal economic and political relations. Although Casanova does not cite Immanuel Wallerstein directly, her conception of a global literary space has been widely compared to his world-systems theory, particularly in its attention to uneven development and peripheral agency.

Within Casanova's literary world, Paris—and, to a lesser extent, other leading centers—functions as an undisputed cultural capital that determines literary legitimacy, while minor literatures must compete for recognition: "Paris became the capital of the literary world, the city endowed with the greatest literary prestige on earth"[36]. This denationalized "new 'Babel', a 'Cosmopolis' [at the] crossroads of the artistic world", she notes, "has often entailed a peculiar blindness, particularly with regard to writings from those countries that are most distant from it"[37]. Hence, the global literary system is far from democratic but rather structured around entrenched hierarchies of prestige, where certain languages, genres, and literary traditions carry more symbolic capital than others. Writers from less institutionally dominant cultures are compelled to seek recognition by conforming to dominant norms set by major centers, forcing them to continually battle for legitimacy, either by assimilation or resistance.

Translation and the Politics of Recognition

One of the key mechanisms in this fight for recognition is translation, which Casanova views as the primary gateway for "small literatures" to access the global stage: "Translation is the foremost example of a particular type of consecration in the literary world [...], the major prize and weapon in international literary competition"[38]—a means by which a national literature accedes to world literary spaces and enters into competition for literary legitimacy. Although Casanova's model focuses on literature, its rationale is extendable to theatre (insofar as it functions as a literary text), where Paris as *le nombril du monde* ("the world's belly-button") was not only a literary capital but also a hub of theatrical consecration and a key node in the circulation of modernity. Much like the acquisition of literary legitimacy—what she terms *littérarisation*[39]—theatrical recognition often hinged on how well a "minor" tradition could engage with—or be absorbed into—the dominant aesthetic and institutional frameworks, thereby breaking from "exile" and catching up with its perceived *retard* or temporal lag. "Accordingly", she specifies, "I define *littérarisation* as any operation—translation, self-translation, transcription, direct composition in the dominant language—by means of which a text from

[36] Pascale Casanova, *World Republic...* (EN), *ed. cit*., p. 24.
[37] *Idem*, p. 30, p. 34.
[38] *Idem* (EN), p. 133.
[39] *Idem* (F), p. 188.

a literary deprived country comes to be regarded as literary by the legitimate authorities"[40].

Through the prism of Casanova's theory, interwar Yiddish theatre in Paris, despite its immense success within internal circuits, appears as a "marginal" or "eccentric" system—a *petite nation*[41] ("small nation")—constrained by language barriers, cultural distinctiveness, and exclusion from institutional structures. Its audience was primarily Yiddish-speaking, its presence largely ignored by the Parisian press, and its funding stemmed from internal networks. However, this relative isolation did not prevent it from breaking these barriers and seeking visibility beyond its immediate audience while maintaining systematic autonomy.

To understand this paradox, it is essential to revisit the distinction between Yiddish art and commercial theatre, as well as the networks sustaining each. As discussed earlier, commercial Yiddish theatre was driven by local troupes composed of Paris-based Yiddish-speaking actors, occasionally joined by visiting stars from abroad. Art theatre, by contrast, was the realm of renowned touring ensembles from Moscow, Vilnius, or New York, often supported by highly cultured Yiddishist circles, and operating within broader *transnational* circuits extending across Europe and the Americas[42]. This dual structure persisted in Paris: while art theatre gained access to prestigious venues such as the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, the Théâtre de la Renaissance, or the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin—thus attracting a French and international audience and receiving considerable press coverage—commercial theatre was confined to Jewish neighborhood venues, catering primarily to an immigrant, Yiddish-speaking audience, and remained mostly invisible in French media.

Thus, when viewed through Casanova's model, commercial Yiddish theatre functioned as a closed system, thriving on internal popularity rather than seeking external validation, and most efforts to enhance its quality came from *within*, with little explicit interest in broader recognition or assimilation into the dominant theatrical sphere. Only Yiddish art theatre, with its aspirations for artistic validation, somehow aligns with Casanova's theory—though even here, an important tweak is needed: aside from the Paris-based PYAT[43] leftist

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[40] *Idem* (EN), p. 136.

[41] *Idem* (F), p. 148 sq.

[42] For background on the transnational networks of the Vilna Troupe and the institutionalization of Yiddish art theatre, see Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2021).

[43] *The Parizer Yidisher Arbeter Teater* (PYAT), or Parisian Yiddish Workers' Theatre, was founded

workers' theatre, which pursued artistic ambitions, Yiddish art theatre from abroad operated through a transnational network rather than a local hierarchy. This challenges the author's assumption that artistic legitimacy flows from the center (French theatre) to the periphery (Yiddish theatre): while French theatre retained its global prominence, Yiddish theatre circulated within its alternative network between Europe and the Americas. Far from being an isolated cultural phenomenon, it was deeply embedded in migratory artistic exchanges, cross-cultural dialogues, and competing ideological currents. Although touring troupes like the Vilner Trupe or Goset exemplify this diasporic art theatre, their aesthetic influences stemmed primarily from Russian and German theatrical traditions rather than French models.

In contrast, translation offers the most direct point of interaction between Yiddish and French theatre, as it represents an explicit negotiation for visibility within the dominant cultural space. As the following case study demonstrates, the *intraduction* (in-translation), both textual and performative, of Yiddish plays into French, served as a critical mechanism for gaining visibility and testing the boundaries of artistic legitimacy on the Parisian stage.

From Yiddish to French: the Contested Reception of "God of Vengeance"

Got fun nekome ("God of Vengeance") by the Yiddish playwright Sholem Asch premiered in 1925 at Théâtre de l'Atelier, a modest Montmartre venue from the early 19th century previously known for operettas, vaudevilles, and light comedies. Three years earlier, it had been acquired by French actor Charles Dullin (1885–1949) to transform it into a hub of theatrical excellence and research, prioritizing literary quality over commercial appeal. A student of André Antoine, Jacques Copeau, and Firmin Gémier, Dullin envisioned an "experimental drama laboratory" devoted to actor training, directing, staging, and design. He favoured "literary" theatre and "open characters," as Jean Vilar called them—poetic, multi-dimensional figures that transcended interpretation

in 1928 as a drama circle within the Kultur-Lige Paris, a leftist Yiddish cultural association that promoted Jewish arts, literature, and workers' education in interwar France. Initially known as the *Parizer Yidisher Arbeter Teater*, it later rebranded as the *Parizer Yidisher Avantgard Teater* to reflect its increasingly experimental and avant-garde orientation. PYAT played a fundamental role in the development of political culture within leftist circles in interwar France. See also N. Underwood, *op. cit.*, p. 92–133.

and elicit universal identification. His predilection for character roles led him to specialize in a repertoire depicting financial corruption and greed, drawing inspiration—like Gémier's notably prejudiced Shylock—from longstanding Jewish stereotypes. Whether playing Harpagon, Mercadet, or Volpone, none of them Jewish, he favoured exaggerating mannerisms and speech patterns in ways that evoked familiar antisemitic tropes.

Asch's *Got fun nekome*, translated by Lupus Blumenfeld, provided Dullin with yet another opportunity to indulge his penchant for controversial roles. Fascinated by the play's dramatic potential, he had met the Polish-Jewish playwright, then living in Paris since 1915, and took a strong interest in staging the work. Originally written in 1905, the play had already stirred controversy: after its 1907 New York debut, Yiddish papers led by the Orthodox *Tageblat* condemned it as "filthy," "immoral," and "indecent"[44]. Its 1923 Broadway revival with a cast that included the acclaimed German Jewish actor Rudolf Schildkraut ended abruptly when the entire cast was accused of violating the state's Penal Code, jailed for one night, and later charged with obscenity, notably for including the first onstage lesbian kiss in New York theatre history.

In a provincial Polish town, Yankl Tshaptshovitch (Charles Dullin) runs a brothel in his basement, while living upstairs with his wife, Sarah (played by Simone Jollivet, Mrs. Dullin), a former sex worker, and their daughter Rivkele. Obsessed with redemption, he commissions a Torah and arranges a pious marriage for the young woman. But she is seduced by a female prostitute, Manke, and manipulated into opening a rival brothel with her. When Yankl realizes her "fall," he violently drags her downstairs, shouting "To the basement!" and returns the Torah to the rabbi, denouncing it as powerless against divine cruelty.

From the outset, the production was steeped in controversy. Warnings at the première advised it was unsuitable for family audiences, but the scandal enjoyed robust box office success, even as it polarized reception in the French press: some hailed the dramatic intensity and the unsettling strangeness; others condemned its brutality and Grand-Guignolesque excess. Jollivet, known for her antisemitic views, set the tone by donning a fake "Semitic nose" made of pink putty. Accordingly, Dullin, in turn, stripped the play of its symbolic, cultural, and religious layers, tailoring it to flatter antisemitic stereotypes, to the delight

[44] Scholem Asch, *Leksikon fun der nayer yidisher literatur*, vol. 1, New York, Alveltlekhn Yidishn Kultur-Kongres, 1956, p. 183–192.

of one paper that exulted: "Prodigious depiction of the turmoil and frenzy that stir the soul of Israel!"[45]

His Yankl became a grotesque caricature (Fig. 1): a frenetic, ruthless figure oscillating between religious fervor and ruthless bargaining. The authoritative theatrical journal *Comœdia* observed: "Mr. Dullin portrays Yankl as a gaunt Jew with a hooked nose [...] shaken by brutal frenzies that at times feel more forced than natural"[46]. Another critic lamented the plays' poor quality, calling it "simplistic without being concise" and the staging "weak"[47].

La Rampe added, highlighting the crux of the matter: "[The play] is remarkably performed by Dullin, a picturesque and frenetic Yankl, but one *not Jewish enough*"[48]. Interestingly, the Jewish press echoed and amplified this final point with *Menorah's* columnist Henry-Marx, dismissing the play as vulgar, false, and "*foreign to Judaism*"[49].

A public spat between the play's two French *transporteurs*—translators—further clouded the reception. Raymond Geiger, the "original" adaptor, accused the other, Lupus Blumenfeld, the reviewer, endorsed by Asch—of not knowing French, whereas the Blumenfeld retorted that Geiger did not know Yiddish... Reviewers panned the translation as "incorrect," "too strictly litteral" or "rather mediocre"[50]—yet another reminder of the "untranslatability" of Yiddish, as Kafka[51] once noted.

Not Jewish Enough or Too Jewish?

To fully assess whether Casanova's theory explains the Parisian reception of *God of Vengeance*, we must revisit the role of translation in shaping the play's legitimacy. Casanova argues that "small literatures" gain recognition only when

[45] *Idem*, *L'Action française*, in C. Meyer-Plantureux, *Les enfants de Shylock*, *op. cit*., p. 59.
[46] *Idem*, « A l'Atelier—*Le Dieu de Vengeance*, traduction de L. Blumenfeld », in *Comœdia*, 23.4.1925, p. 1–2.
[47] Henry Bidou, *Journal des débats*, [s.d.].
[48] Philippe-Emmanuel Glaser, « La semaine dramatique —À l'Atelier », in *La Rampe*, 10.5.1925, p. 4. [Emphasis added].
[49] Henry-Marx, « Le Dieu de Vengeance », in *Menorah*, n°10, 15.5.1925, p. 164. [Emphasis added].
[50] « À l'Atelier—*Le Dieu de Vengeance*, pièce en 3 actes de Schalom Asch, traduction de L. Blumenfeld », in *Comœdia*, 23.4.1925, p. 2.
[51] Franz Kafka, "Introductory Talk on the Yiddish Language", delivered on February 18, 1912, at the Jewish Town Hall in Prague, in Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente I*, edited by Malcolm Pasley, Frankfurt am Main, S. Fischer Verlag, 1993, p. 188 sq.

translated and validated by dominant literary centers, which impose their own criteria of legitimacy. *This* case, once more, both supports and challenges this claim: translation into French did not automatically grant legitimacy within the French system, as Casanova suggests. Beyond being shaped by the aesthetic and ideological expectations of the French literary establishment, its legitimacy remained multi-layered and subject to internal debate, demonstrating that legitimacy is multi-layered and can be contested from *within*.

God of Vengeance's Parisian reception meets Casanova's theory on three fronts. First, rather than engaging with the play on its own terms, French critics assessed it according to dominant legitimacy standards, applying French dramatic conventions instead of engaging with its Yiddish roots. Dismissed as "inauthentic," the play's reception supports Casanova's claim that minor works are judged not on their intrinsic merits, but through the aesthetic and ideological values of more institutionally powerful traditions. Second, the play's struggle for recognition highlights the power imbalance between established and emerging literary spaces: rather than being acknowledged as a major Yiddish work, *God of Vengeance* was measured against prevailing French theatrical norms and found lacking. This demonstrates how the dominant space dictates the terms of artistic legitimacy, filtering what is deemed worthy of recognition. Third, the French translation—typically a gateway to legitimacy in Casanova's model—failed to secure cultural inclusion, suggesting that translation alone is insufficient when the content does not conform to prevailing value standards.

Yet, a key contradiction in Casanova's framework arises in the *internal* contestation of legitimacy. While one might expect Jewish critics to defend the play against the dismissive stance of the French press, they too rejected it because it was "not Jewish enough". This foregoes Casanova's assumption that "small" works enter the literary world as a unified, cohesive entity seeking validation from a dominant capital, revealing instead that marginal literary spaces are not monolithic, but marked by internal hierarchies and legitimacy debates. French-Jewish critics may have assessed Asch's work against a different standard of Jewish literature—one shaped by Franco-Jewish assimilationist ideals, French literary aesthetics, or a conception of Jewish identity incompatible with Asch's Eastern European, Yiddish-speaking perspective. Some even went as far as to deem *God of Vengeance* "foreign to Judaism," exposing deeper internal fractures within the field of minor literature itself and complicating any straightforward dynamics of recognition. An additional paradox of the play's reception came from antisemitic critics who praised it for the wrong reasons. They interpreted

it not as a piece of serious drama, but as "evidence" of Jewish moral corruption, confirming their own prejudices—a selective recognition based on ideological manipulation rather than dramatic merit, making the play look "too Jewish".

In the end, translation is a double-edged process, capable of granting legitimacy but at the same time introducing a new layer of complexity, inviting misreading, distortion, rejection, or ideological appropriation. Yiddish drama, even in translation, had to engage with multiple, divergent expectations—from the dominant French literary sphere and from within Jewish cultural debates. A French adaptation that failed to preserve Yiddish cultural nuance could explain why both Jewish and non-Jewish critics found it "inauthentic," while antisemitic critics misconstrued it as a confirmation of their biases.

To summarize, while Casanova's theory helps explain *God of Vengeance*'s struggle for legitimacy in Paris, the case also highlights three major complications: the internal fractures of the periphery (Jewish critics themselves disagreed on what constituted "authentic" Jewish drama), the gap between recognition and acceptance (antisemitic critics praised it for the wrong reasons), and the non-neutrality of translation (which became a source of distortion and exclusion and contributed to the play's contradictory reception). Ultimately, legitimacy, recognition, and translation prove to be far more complex and contested processes, both externally with the dominant cultural authorities and internally, within the internal dynamics and debates of the minor literary field itself.

Theatrical Representation: Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory

Given the respective limitations of both Lovinescu's and Casanova's theories in fully accounting for the dynamics of Yiddish theatre in Paris, the polysystem theory developed by Israeli culture researcher and scholar Itamar Even-Zohar (b. 1939) offers a more capacious framework for analysis. Although first published in 1979, before Casanova's *World Republic of Letters*, his work gained renewed traction in comparative literature and translation studies in the early 2000s—notably through Philippe Codde's 2003 article in *Poetics Today*, which coincided with Casanova's reception in literary studies[52].

[52] Codde reconsiders Even-Zohar's polysystem theory in light of more recent developments in translation studies and comparative literature, emphasizing its continued relevance for modelling intercultural dynamics, see Philippe Codde, "Polysystems theory revisited: A New Comparative Introduction", *Poetics Today*, vol. 24, n° 1, 2003, p. 91–126.

Whereas Lovinescu's model of synchronization presumes a linear path of cultural modernization, and Casanova emphasizes hierarchical structures of symbolic domination, Even-Zohar instead proposes a multi-layered, relational model defined by the *dynamic interaction* of multiple, competing literary and cultural *systems*. This approach enables us to consider Yiddish theatre not as a passive recipient of dominant influences, but as an active agent negotiating its place within *a network of competing, interdependent* cultural forms.

A polysystem, in Even-Zohar's terms, is a constellation of interrelated systems operating within a broader, evolving socio-cultural "ecosystem" of dynamic *networks* without linear causality. Rejecting rigid structuralist and nationalist paradigms, rejecting the idea of a fixed, hierarchical system centered around dominant canons, he proposes a multi-layered, dynamic, and interdependent model—an "open *system of systems*"[53] that captures variability and heterogeneity in time and place—where multiple literary and cultural subsystems coexist, shift, and influence one another. "Cultural life," he quotes, "is a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent"[54].

This conceptual shift was pivotal. Rather than privileging canonical *texts*, Even-Zohar instead foregrounds the role of literary *systems*, departing from the normative binaries of "highbrow" vs. "lowbrow," and allowing for the multi-layered interplay between "canonized" and "non-canonized" forms, as well as between center and margins. Crucially, these positions are not fixed but in constant flux: peripheral systems may shift to central positions, and so-called "minor" literatures may exert influence on major ones[55]. Translation becomes central to this dynamic, serving as a key mechanism for peripheral literatures to enter dominant systems. Far from being a mere philological specialty, it is an active force of innovation that not only brings minor works to mainstream readers but also shapes and influences national literary traditions: "I conceive of translated literature not only as an integral system within any literary polysystem but as a most active system within it"[56].

Importantly, the polysystem theory extends beyond literature to other semiotic fields such as language, performance, art, and broader socio-cultural

[53] *Idem*, p. 16.
[54] *Ibidem.*
[55] *Idem*, p. 18.
[56] *Idem*, p. 21.

production. It thus provides a powerful model for understanding how peripheral or minoritized systems are not merely passive recipients of influence from dominant ones but also contribute to the fluid and reciprocal nature of cultural dialogue—not only by absorbing dominant norms, but also by reshaping them from within.

To showcase these bidirectional transfers between cultural spaces, the evolving notion of Jewishness itself, embodied in the figure of the "stage Jew," performed by both Jewish and non-Jewish actors, offers a compelling case for understanding *performative* translation, highlighting that translation in not confined to texts alone but compasses staging (the director), performance (the actor), interpretation (the audience) and cultural framing (critics, press, theatre practitioners, scholars). It also demonstrates the active role the Yiddish language played within the Parisian theatrical polysystem, underscoring that the center-periphery relationship is flexible, negotiated, and context-dependent.

The following sections address these reciprocal dynamics through two perspectives—French portrayals of the "Stage Jew" and Jewish portrayals of French characters.

French portrayals of the "Stage Jew"

The concept of the "Stage Jew" refers to a theatrical stereotype that has appeared in European drama for centuries, with Shakespeare's Shylock (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1596) being among the most enduring examples. Ranging from grotesque and antisemitic to sympathetic or even heroic, this recurring stock character has embodied shifting representations of Jewishness, shaped by cultural, political, and social change. The trope was initially constructed by gentile theatre-makers and audiences, who often depicted Jews through external, stereotypical lenses rather than through authentic self-representation. Jewish playwrights and actors later engaged with this figure, sometimes subverting, reinterpreting it for their own purposes. In Yiddish theatre, portrayals of Jews vary widely by genre, from burlesque self-mockery to tragic, multidimensional characters that transcend caricature. In contrast, French interwar theatre often presented a narrower view, relying on outdated stereotypes rather than striving for authentic representation.

French actor Firmin Gémier (1869–1933) was the first in interwar Paris to set the standards for a controversial version of the "Stage Jew". His acclaimed portrayal of Shylock—performed successfully throughout a forty-year

career—inspired many imitators. The 1919 production at the Théâtre Antoine coincided with a period of relative calm in French antisemitism after the turbulent Dreyfus years. Yet some observers still accused Jewish banking and Jewish theatre of causing France's economic and intellectual decline[57]. *The Merchant of Venice*, a comedy centered on money, thus arrived at the opportune moment, inciting some actors to interpret Jewish characters, their specialty, if not their (inter)national calling card.

Though Gémier publicly claimed he was impartial in choosing his repertoire and asserted he was a convinced Dreyfusard, his Shylock heavily relied on the antisemitic stereotypes of the era—both physical and moral—including a crooked nose, frizzy red hair, protruding ears, shifty gaze, forked beard, gnarled fingers, and a limping gait (Fig. 2). His portrayal, deeply rooted in reverence for Shakespeare, focused on a highly physical—or plastic—representation of the character, with critics noting his furtive glances, eager lip movements, and careful handling of props like the contract, the knife, and the scales. To give his interpretation the necessary visual impact, Gémier incorporated stereotypes from the antisemitic fantasies prevalent in Western collective imagination, such as phrenological features, and deliberately avoided psychological depth to make the ethnic portrayal instantly recognizable.

Despite the roles' contentious nature, Gémier's Shylock was a triumph. While the mainstream French press largely avoided referencing its antisemitic dimension—praising instead the actor's "active and optimistic genius," his "incomparable colorfulness," or even his "almost sympathetic sincerity,"[58] the Jewish press found the performance "brutal, unsympathetic—at times bordering on farce"[59].

How, then, should we assess this portrayal? While scholars continue to debate whether *The Merchant of Venice* is inherently antisemitic or merely reflects its historical context—it was written two years after the torture, hanging, and dismemberment of Queen Elisabeth's Jewish physician, Rodrigo Lopez (1525–1595), unjustly accused of attempting to poison her, there is evidence Shakespeare borrowed the infamous "pound of flesh" episode from Italian author Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone* (1378). Perhaps, for an Elizabethan

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[57] Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, *Antisémitisme et homophobie*, *Clichés en scène et à l'écran*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2019, p. 135.

[58] Jean Manégat, « Dans les subventionnés », in *La Rampe*, 1.10.1928, p. 15.

[59] Raymond Pentzell, "Firmin Gémier and Shakespeare for everybody", in *The Tulane Drama Review*, vol. 11, N° 4, Summer 1967, p. 113–124.

audience, Shylock served as a scapegoat. Nonetheless, gentile interpreters later approached the role in ways ranging from caricature to villainy.

Jewish actors, by contrast, often acknowledged the character's complexity and emotional depth. In *Shylock and Shakespeare*, Abraham Morevski of the Vilner Trupe analyzes the part from a Jewish perspective, drawing on his experience as both actor and Yiddish translator of the play. Reviewing theatrical productions from Rudolf Schildkraut's[60] 1906 Berlin performance onward, he critiques those that fail to respect Shakespeare's philosophical depth, arguing instead that the playwright consistently lends his voice to tormented, isolated figures at odds with the world around them, such as Hamlet, Othello, Falstaff, and Coriolanus. For the comedian, Shylock's iconic monologue—"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes..."—carries Shakespeare's own voice: a plea for empathy with the oppressed[61].

This understanding informed most Jewish portrayals of Shylock, which refrained from reducing the figure of the "dog Jew" to a cutthroat villain, a sworn enemy of Christians, or a comic target. Ayzik Samberg, Jacob Adler, Joseph Kessler, Samuel Goldenberg, and Maurice Schwartz—all of whom played in Paris—sought to portray the characters' dignity and alienation. Rather than relying on religious or pejorative tropes, they adopted an authentically ethnic perspective—an embodiment of *otherness* stripped of degrading caricature. Transformed into a figure of ethnical intensity, the demonized usurer came to symbolize "the inarticulate cry born of a frustrated need to be understood"[62].

Still, Jewish characters on the interwar Parisian stage were not always figures of blame. Some non-Jewish directors sought to depict them authentically, most notably Gaston Baty[63] (1885–1952), who staged Sholem Anski's *Dibbuk*—a three-act play that would later attain a mythical status in Yiddish theatre—to capture Jewish mysticism. First made famous by the Vilner Trupe (Warsaw, 1920)—one month after the death of its author—and later by Evgeny Vakhtangov's Hebrew-language version for Habimah[64] (Moscow, 1922), *The*

[60] Rudolf Schildkraut (1862–1930) was a celebrated Austrian-Jewish stage actor known for his powerful performances in both German-language and Yiddish theatre, particularly in roles that combined classical gravitas with emotional intensity.

[61] Abraham Morevski, *Shylock and Shakepeare*, St. Louis, Fireside Books, 1967, p. 91.

[62] Z. Ackerman et S. Schülting, *Precarious Figurations: Shylock on the German Stage, 1920–2010*, Berlin-Boston, De Gruyter, 2019.

[63] Gaston Baty (1885–1952) was a leading figure in the French avant-garde theatre movement and a member of the "*Cartel des Quatre*".

[64] Habimah repertory theatre, founded in 1918 in Moscow by Nahum Lazarevich Tsemakh and permanently reestablished in Tel Aviv in the 1930s, was the first professional Hebrew-language

Dibbuk had already impressed Parisian theatrical and artistic circles with their performances, respectively in 1922 and 1926. Perhaps inspired by the latter, Baty introduced the work to French-speaking audiences in 1928 at the Studio, a small attic theatre beneath the roof of the prestigious Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, designing the sets himself and casting French actors Hubert Prélier and Marguerite Jamois in the lead roles.

At the heart of this mystical tale between Leah and Khonen—a young, emaciated Talmud student—is a dybbuk: the spirit of the dead that comes to inhabit the body of the living. Their Hasidic fathers, Sender and Nissan, once pledged to marry their children, but Sender, now wealthy, breaks the vow, favoring a more profitable match. Desperate, Khonen turns to Kabbalistic numerology to conjure gold, but dies upon uncovering the sacred formula. When Leah visits his grave before her wedding, his spirit possesses her. Refusing her arranged marriage, she is exorcised by the miracle-rabbi of Miropol. The ritual kills her—reuniting her with Khonen in the afterlife—"between two worlds"[65].

Rather than merely replicating the original, Baty approached the Hasidic world as a dramatic entity with its own inner logic. His ambition, as he explained, was to "restore to the poet's work what had been lost in the passage from dream to manuscript"[66]. Fascinated by this spellbinding world and convinced of his ability to communicate his sense of awe to the audience, Baty seized the opportunity to conceive of theatre as a form of civic religion—a popular gathering that transcended social classes—an ambition inherited from his mentor, Firmin Gémier, founder of the renowned Théâtre National Populaire (TNP).

Armed with his mastery of lighting, which added an unprecedented intensity to this drama of possession, Baty nonetheless drew visibly from the iconic scenographies of the Vilner Trupe and Habimah. He championed a theatre liberated from the tyranny of the text and advocated for the director's creative rights, treating his *cahier de régie* ("prompt book") not just as a technical tool but as a means of preserving his theatrical vision. While his costume design closely followed Habimah's models, showcasing traditional gear and symbolic color schemes—Leah's white wedding dress; Khonen's velvet-trimmed caftan,

theatre and a major influence on Jewish and Israeli performing arts.

[65] The subtitle of the play.

[66] Gaston Baty, « Le metteur en scène », in Gaston Baty, *Rideau baissé,* Paris, Bordas, 1949, p. 37 sq.

white stockings, and a *tallis-katan* ("small prayer shawl"); the wonder-rabbi's full white satin ensemble including a fur-trimmed hat, the printed original script on the left-hand pages of the director's book is crossed out and corrected by hand in places, with corresponding handwritten stage directions noted opposite.

These corrections deserve scrutiny. While some aimed to clarify or refine the phrasing, others erased key references to Jewish tradition. Spitting to ward off the evil eye—cut. *Tikkun hatsot* ("midnight service"), a Jewish lamentation ritual recited each night at midnight in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, becomes "at such an hour". Elsewhere, mentions of embroidered ark curtains are replaced with "ancient *parochets*," removing the evocation of the richly decorated veils often donated by synagogue patrons. Similarly, *Sholem aleykhem*, which precedes the greeting "Peace be upon you," is dropped. Ancestral superstitions, such as evil spirits "hiding in every corner, in every crack," messianic longing, and praise of Israel, lines central to Hasidic identity—are all removed. While these deletions are sporadic and do not alter the dramatic structure itself, they do neutralize the text's cultural references to Jewish culture, reducing its expressive power and authenticity.

Other choices speak through a series of staging "errors"—intentional or not?—involving Jewish ritual and tradition. Like the Vilner Trupe, Baty uses a stage curtain that resembles a gigantic *tallit gadol* ("large prayer shawl")—spread out above the platform, with its sides hanging down on either side. Like Habimah, he places the ark center stage in the synagogue set, but whereas they place a small *bimah* ("pulpit") with railing on the right and include only a single lectern, the French director removes the platform altogether and places two lecterns on either side of the ark for Khonen and his fellow student Henekh—a significant departure from ritual accuracy.

Some rare photographic documents preserved in the Gaston Baty collection at the Performing Arts Division of the Bibliothèque nationale de France capture key moments, allowing comparison between the Studio cast's performance style and that of their Jewish counterparts.

A first striking example (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4) concerns the scene of Khonen's death after learning from Sender that Leah is engaged to another man (Act I). In Habimah, horrified Hasidim freeze in dynamic poses; at the Studio, actors appear stunned and restrained. Khonen lies front and center, his gaze skyward; his fellow students stand stiffly, hands by their sides. Other examples include the contrast in physicality and costuming between Habimah and the Studio in the meeting scene with the frightened fiancé, Menakhem, and his tutor, Mendl,

who reminds him of the speech he is to deliver during the wedding ceremony (Act II); different stagings of Leah's wedding and her rejection of Menahem (Act II); and the portrayal of the rabbi of Miropol, particularly the loss of spiritual authority in Baty's version (Act III).

While limited by available sources, these frozen moments provide valuable clues to embodiment, gesture, and interactions, but—more interestingly—to the cultural coding and the interpretive intent. In this regard, Baty's omissions of *Yidishkeyt* stand in sharp contrast to Habimah's immersive, internally driven energy. His static, introverted, and austere *tableaux vivants* are visually striking, especially the exorcism scene, where the Hasidic prayer shawls form geometric rhythms with the stripes of the curtain behind them, set in stark contrast with the dark kneeling silhouette of Leah.

The French press largely praised the production. While Artaud was reportedly captivated by Marguerite Jamois's "terrifying" performance, Paul Achard described it as "hallucinatory"[67]. Pierre Brisson (*Le Temps*) echoed his colleagues' admiration for the director's "meticulous artistry and his usual mastery of chiaroscuro," but noted that the first two acts dragged, calling the staging "picturesque" yet slow and tonally monotonous[68]. He did, however, laud the exorcism scene for its poetic power and tragic grandeur. Others, like Lucien Descaves or Robert Kemp, dismissed the play as superstitious or alien: "These ceremonies are odious to our Western souls"[69].

Jewish critics, once again, responded differently. Maurice Brilliant lamented betrayed ritual inaccuracies: *batlonim* swaying like sailors, their psalm-chanting reduced to "soothing murmurs"; Khonen's death portrayed more as heartbreak than divine punishment, uncovering "the other name of God". He also noted a softened ending where Sender's remorse resembled Christian redemption[70]. More nuanced than Benjamin Fondane of *Cahiers juifs*, who bluntly declared the play "very poorly"[71] staged, *Menorah*'s theatre critic René Wisner called the performance "respectful but not fervent," contrasting it with Habimah's

[67] Paul Achard, *La Presse*, 2.2.1928, in Gaston Baty, *op. cit*., p. 49.

[68] Pierre Brisson, « Chronique théâtrale. Studio des Champs-Élysées—*Le dibbouk* », in *Le Temps*, 6.2.1928, p. 2.

[69] Odette Aslan, « Le dibbouk d'An-ski et la réalisation de Vakhtangov », in *Les voies de la création théâtrale*, N° 7, Paris, Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1979, p. 237.

[70] O. Aslan, *op. cit*., p. 237.

[71] Benjamin Fondane, *Cahiers juifs*, 2nd year, vol. II, 1934. Born Fundoianu, Fondane was a Jewish journalist of Romanian origin.

sacred intensity. Still, he recognized Baty's sincerity—a Christian mystic seeking Jewish mysticism—as a symbolic gesture of intercultural empathy: "Does he not, in fact, symbolize the attempt made in recent years—from both sides of the divide—to understand one another better, that is to say, to love one another more?"[72]. Jewish playwright Fernand Nozière—Fernand Aaron Weyl—took this critique further, observing that Baty seemed influenced by Christian art, and implying that the French director had, in a sense, "Christianized" the Hasidic drama by "de-Judaizing" it[73]. Didn't Jewish actress Shoshanna Avivith—engaged by Baty for the role of Leah, which she had alternated with Hanna Rovina at Habimah—reportedly walk out of rehearsals, finding some of the director's instructions incompatible with the inner truth of Jewish ritual[74]?

It is exactly by stripping the play of its *Yidishkeyt* that Baty weakened its expressive power. Habimah's intensity came from *within*; Baty's theatricality was imposed from ***without***. This contrast reveals how intercultural dialogue is also a site of mutual resistance, where "performative translation" inevitably alters meaning and cultural significance by generating something *different*. A deeply Catholic director, Baty discarded Vakhtangov's ironic distortions and offered a spectacle shaped by Christian concern with redemption, spiritualizing the tale into a universal—but decontextualized—drama that strayed from its intrinsic truth.

Conversely, the following section explores a parallel yet inverse dynamic: how Jewish actors portrayed non-Jewish roles, revealing yet another layer of cultural negotiation between Jewish and French spheres.

Jewish portrayals of French characters

The Yiddish theatrical repertoire is rich in translations of Russian, German, English, Swedish, and French literature. Unlike Lovinescu's or Casanova's views of translation as a quest for legitimacy, these adaptations reflect a desire—encouraged by *maskilim*[75], literati, and Yiddish or Yiddishist cultural figures,

[72] René Wisner, « Le Dibbouk », in *Menorah*, 7e année, N° 4, 15.2, 1928, p. 54–55. [Emphasis added].

[73] Odette Aslan, *op. cit*., p. 237–238.

[74] Shoshana Avivith, « Les origines d'Habima », in *Le Monde juif*, N° 9–10, 1947, p. 15.

[75] The *maskilim* (plural of *maskil*) are the proponents of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment, a movement that emerged in 18th-century Europe advocating for secular education, linguistic assimilation, and integration into wider European society, while promoting internal reform within Judaism. See also note 6.

to engage in dialogue with internationally recognized cultures, to educate audiences, and to discover echoes of their concerns in this foreign heritage. Molière, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, and Romain Rolland figured among the canonized French authors performed in Yiddish in interwar Paris.

Is it a coincidence that *Der karger* ("The Miser") was a favorite among Jewish actors, or rather a propensity toward self-mockery on the part of a group long stereotyped for their supposed love of money? Consider what happens when French classics are performed in Yiddish. Another signature role for Charles Dullin, the character of the miserly bourgeois appears in his version as a soberly dressed gentleman of the *Grand Siècle*, clutching his cash box as a fetish object. Jewish actors, by contrast, often portrayed Harpagon with humbler clothing, a key ring at the waist, a hunched back, and an inquisitive, dazed look—drawing on commedia dell'arte traditions as well as on their own burlesque style. To underscore the old man's obsession with money, some actors—like Joseph Buloff—did not hesitate to add a prosthetic "Jewish" nose in a gesture of biting self-mockery (Fig. 5).

Since very few records survive, we must rely on available photographs to reconstruct staging. These scarce materials suggest, however, that French characters were "Yiddishized" through gestures of parody and exaggeration, echoing the spirit of the *Purimshpil*[76]—the comic dramatization of The Book of Esther—widely regarded as the precursor of Yiddish theatre. Rooted in festive transgression and inversion, it allowed Jewish communities to explore identity through laughter and masked performance. Far from concealing the self, the carnival mask revealed hidden dimensions, allowing for momentary freedom from social constraints.

That subversive tradition infused Yiddish theatre at large, whether in operettas, melodramas, or artistic plays, but also in the broader Jewish cultural sphere. As French historian Jean Baumgarten puts it:

> "Parody, mockery, and laughter appear to play a cardinal role within Jewish communal life—fundamental modes of expression through which the inversion of taboos, the undermining of social hierarchies, and the temporary release from certain social constraints are manifested"[77].

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[76] The *Purimshpil* (Yiddish for "Purim play") is a traditional popular performance staged during the Jewish festival of Purim, featuring comic, satirical, or parodic retellings of the Book of Esther, and incorporating music, dance, and improvisation.

[77] Jean Baumgarten, « Le *Purimshpil* et la tradition carnavalesque », in *Pardès*, n°15, 1992, p. 37.

The Jewish *vis comica*, intimately tied to Purim and other folk traditions like commedia dell'arte, draws its strength from the cultural matrix of *Yidishkeyt* itself. Blending sacred and profane, parody and pathos, this spirit is also a means of self-defense —a release valve relieving the pressures of marginalization and oppression, turning laughter into resilience and resistance. Such comic energy is what Jewish actors drew upon when "Judaizing" French characters like Molière's *Miser*, reframing them through irony, self-mockery, and historical memory. These Yiddish adaptations reflect Even-Zohar's model, as they position canonical French texts within a peripheral system to serve new cultural, ideological, and identity-forming functions.

Judaizing was not only a performative gesture of disguise and revelation—it also carried social and political weight. *Les deux cents millions de Gladiator* (*Gladiator's Two Hundred Million*) by the French dramatist Eugène Labiche, translated into Yiddish as *Der Milyoner, der tseyndokter un der oreman* (*The Millionaire, the Dentist and the Pauper*), and performed by the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre ("Goset") in 1934, offers a persuasive example of how a classic French vaudeville was reimagined through a Jewish prism—infused with class critique, communal irony, and the socio-political tensions of the interwar Soviet context. Though never staged in Paris, it stands as an eloquent case study in ideological translation.

The production was directed by French communist writer and art critic Léon Moussinac, who documented his three-month stay with the troupe during its 1934 Russian tour in his travel journal *Avec les comédiens soviétiques en tournée*[78] *("With Touring Soviet Actors").* Published in 1935, this 64–page booklet allowed the French author to offer an insider's view of Soviet stage life—its organization, working methods, and the distinctive nature of the relationship between actors and spectators, as well as the very conditions of dramatic creation and the osmosis between theatre and the new society. More specifically, it allowed him to reflect on the first six rehearsals of *Les deux cents millions* along with the collective's thoughts, questions, and hesitations, most notably those of lead-actor Mikhoels, who, shaped by Granovsky's methods, was deeply uneasy about venturing into a genre he considered—at least initially—incompatible with Goset's repertoire[79].

[78] Moussinac's (1890–1964) writings often reflected Marxist cultural theory and aligned with the party's ideological commitments, see Léon Moussinac, *Avec les Comédiens soviétiques en tournée*, Paris, Éditions Sociales Internationales, 1936, p. 5–6.

[79] *Ibidem.*

This four-act play, a vaudeville comedy from 1875, follows Eusèbe Potasse (Benjamin Zuskin), assistant in the Bigouret pharmacy, in love with Suzanne de La Bondrée (Sarah Rotbaum), a fake countess and real courtesan chasing a wealthy American, Richard Gladiator, whose arrival in Paris is eagerly awaited. After a failed romance, Eusèbe attempts suicide but is rescued by the dentist Gredane (Solomon Mikhoels), who takes him home. There, his daughter Agnès (Eda Berkovskaia, Zuskin's wife), fiancée of Bigouret, falls for Eusèbe.

One might well ask how Labiche ended up at Goset. Moussinac himself posed the question from the outset: "What can this master entertainer of the petty-bourgeoisie possibly offer audiences familiar with *200.000*, *The Sorceress*, and *The Travels of Benjamin the Third*, who know the way to Malaia Bronnaia?"[80]. Despite the significant resistance of the troupe, he remained convinced that the material could be adapted "to various compelling aspects of Soviet contemporary life". According to him, the amorous adventures of an American who comes to France to buy everything he couldn't find at home—including transactional love—held the potential to deliver social critique on two levels: a vertical one—money as the ruler of the world, and a horizontal one, embodied by the gallery of characters in the play, representative of the respectable middle-class mentality that, seventeen years after the October Revolution, still lingered in Soviet society.

This position required heavy reworking of the play: the character of Gladiator—"a representation of capitalism in its crudest forms"[81]—was brought to the fore at the expense of the demi-mondaine Suzanne, who had been the linchpin of the original Labiche plot. The dentist Gredane, a sort of double of Perrichon, hesitated until the last moment between his emotions and his interests—"selling" his daughter to the wealthy pharmacist Bigouret rather than to the penniless clerk Eusèbe, the man he had saved. The action was moved from 1874 to 1900—the year of the Paris World's Fair and the peak of France's colonial and financial capitalism. Three acts replaced the initial four, cutting culturally specific references and emphasizing character absurdity and petty-bourgeois corruption "to the point of provoking a clear reaction in the spectator"[82]. This meant not only cutting references that would be intelligible only to a French audience, but also reworking the dialogue and stage direction with the help of painters (Labas and Stepanov) and composer Pulver to craft

[80] The location of the Moscow State Yiddish Theatre.
[81] Léon Moussinac, *op. cit*., p. 14.
[82] *Ibidem.*

a caricature of the *curve*, the symbol of the modern style of the time—a task radically different from what Granovsky had previously demanded from his former collaborators, and a considerable challenge for them, despite their initial expectation that this would be a "very easy"[83] production.

All in all, while Moussinac conceived the project as "an experiment in using a French vaudeville by a Frenchman for the entertainment and instruction of Soviet audiences in 1934–1935"[84], Mikhoels saw it as a necessary struggle—both for the actors and the audience—because it would determine the success or failure of the entire endeavor. From the actor's perspective, this unexpected repertoire piece offered intriguing possibilities for performance. Vaudeville, he argued, demands truthful acting in false situations—or vice versa—which calls for new techniques[85]: "one must find striking shortcuts in the flash of an intonation, a gesture, a posture, a movement," without slipping into mannerism—an approach still unfamiliar to Soviet theatre. To perform Labiche, "one must play the tone," because the text hardly stands on its own; unlike in comedy, in vaudeville, "it is the situation that determines the characters". Despite his theoretical statements about how he approached the role, the actor ultimately admitted: "I haven't yet found myself in Labiche, which is why I act more convincingly in some scenes than in others".

From his side, Zuskin, who drew inspiration from Chaplin and Buster Keaton for his portrayal of Eusèbe, complained that the Yiddish version was "linguistically heavy," leading to a "careful" revision of the script to lighten certain lines[86]. The work of the set painter also provoked considerable resistance, particularly from stage manager Stepanov and the stagehands, who were used to working with sturdy, simple materials rather than the delicate, lightweight fabrics preferred by Labas. The result? A production that would not appear overtly French—only a few characteristic details were retained so that the Soviet spectator "would not suspect that the action takes place in Paris in 1900 or that the characters are French"[87]—and was recast as a Soviet parable.

Whether Soviet audiences—Jewish or not—enjoyed the play remains unknown. Moussinac nonetheless praised the Goset collective, contrasting its relative unity with the rivalries of Dullin's or Copeau's troupes in France.

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[83] *Ibidem.*
[84] *Ibidem.*
[85] *Idem*, p. 16.
[86] *Idem*, p. 22.
[87] *Ibidem.*

Ultimately, *Gladiator*'s adaptation underscores the complexity of performative translation. Far from a straightforward cultural transfer, the process involved a layered negotiation between form and meaning, laughter and critique, entertainment and ideology, tradition and political utility. For Jewish actors like Mikhoëls and Zuskin, interpreting Labiche meant confronting a theatrical heritage rooted in bourgeois frivolity and reshaping it into a socially resonant, politically aware performance. Their challenge was not only to embody roles from a different cultural register, but to reinterpret them in light of Jewish theatrical aesthetics and Soviet ideology. The outcome was not a mere parody of French society, but a self-reflective act of theatrical performative translation, where irony, satire, and estrangement became tools for both critique and survival. In this way, *the play* reflected not Parisian life, but the contradictions Jewish artists faced in negotiating inherited performance traditions under new ideological demands. It is here that Even-Zohar's theory of cultural transfer within a polysystem finds confirmation: translations from a dominant culture—like Labiche's vaudeville—can be repositioned and refunctioned within peripheral systems not as mere substitutes, but as catalysts for ideological critique and creative innovation.

Concluding Thoughts: Performing Cultural Asymmetry on Stage and Beyond

The application of Even-Zohar's polysystem theory corroborates that theatrical exchange extends far beyond the realm of textual translation and operates within a multidimensional cultural system shaped by uneven flows of cultural authority, where elements such as staging, performance, interpretation, and reception are as crucial as the written text. Within this expanded framework, Yiddish theatre in interwar Paris emerges not as a passive periphery on the margins of dominant culture but as an active and dynamic force within a broader transnational theatrical polysystem.

Of the three theoretical approaches considered—Lovinescu, Casanova, and Even-Zohar—the latter most effectively captures the complexities of the theatrical exchanges discussed above. While Lovinescu's synchronization model helps to explain temporal disjunctions in cultural development, and Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* foregrounds the power dynamics between dominant and minor literatures, both remain predominantly text-centered and therefore limited in their capacity to address the fluid, performative, and context-sensitive

nature of theatre. Even-Zohar, by contrast, offers a more adaptable and integrative framework—one that accommodates textual, performative, and systemic dimensions, allowing for bidirectional flows of influence between center and periphery. Crucially, this performative dimension is where cultural asymmetry becomes legible—not only through symbolic hierarchies, but through the embodied and negotiated space of theatrical practice.

The conceptual flexibility of Even-Zohar's model has left a lasting imprint on subsequent theories of world literature. Franco Moretti (b. 1950)[88], for instance, draws on key polysystemic concepts such as center-periphery dynamics and system asymmetry—to rethink how literature circulates and gains prominence on a global scale. In his "Conjectures on World Literature," he proposes a model of world literature that is "simultaneously one and unequal,"[89] a triangulated "system of *variations*"[90] rooted in comparative morphology and global diffusion, where foreign form (plot), local material (characters), and local form (narrative voice)—a key but unstable variable—"interfere" with one other[91]. Similarly, Pascale Casanova, though less directly, echoes the Israeli theorist's framework in her discussion about translation as "literarization," wherein translation mediates the unequal struggle for symbolic legitimacy between source and target languages.

While both theorists foreground asymmetry in the literary sphere, their models remain largely text-focused. In contrast, the case of Yiddish theatre in Paris underscores how asymmetries are not only written but also enacted—performed, resisted, and reconfigured through the embodied practice. This shift in focus from text to performance reminds us that cultural negotiation unfolds as much in physical, intercultural encounters as in written discourse.

From this perspective, the traditional model of cultural dominance, structured around a fixed center and a subordinate periphery, appears more contingent and context-dependent than previously assumed. At times, French theatre asserted authority, as in the interpretative control exercised by figures like Gémier and Baty. At others, Yiddish theatre asserted its creative agency, reimagining and recontextualizing canonical French texts such as those of Molière or Labiche

[88] Franco Moretti (b. 1950) is an Italian literary scholar best known for his work on world literature, literary geography, and quantitative approaches to literary history. His concept of "distant reading" challenges traditional close reading by focusing on large-scale literary patterns across time and space, see Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," in *New Left Review*, 2000, p. 55–67.

[89] *Idem*, p. 56.

[90] *Idem*, p. 64.

[91] *Idem*, p. 65.

for new—Yiddish-speaking—audiences, by using distinct performative codes and cultural framing.

Ultimately, theatrical representation makes asymmetry tangible—not merely through words, but through directorial choices, embodied expression, audience response, and critical discourse. The encounters between Yiddish and French theatre in interwar Paris exemplify this dynamic: rather than a one-way transfer of influence from dominant to minor culture, they reveal a complex and reciprocal process of symbolic exchange—a mutual, if asymmetrical, act of theatrical translation.

Fig. 1: *Charles Dullin in the role of the pimp Yankl Tshaptshovitch (Photo Henri Manuel, P.B., Le Temps, [s.d.], 1925)*

Fig. 2: *Firmin Gémier in the role of Shylock, Théâtre Antoine (1919), Comoedia Illustré, 5.11.1919*

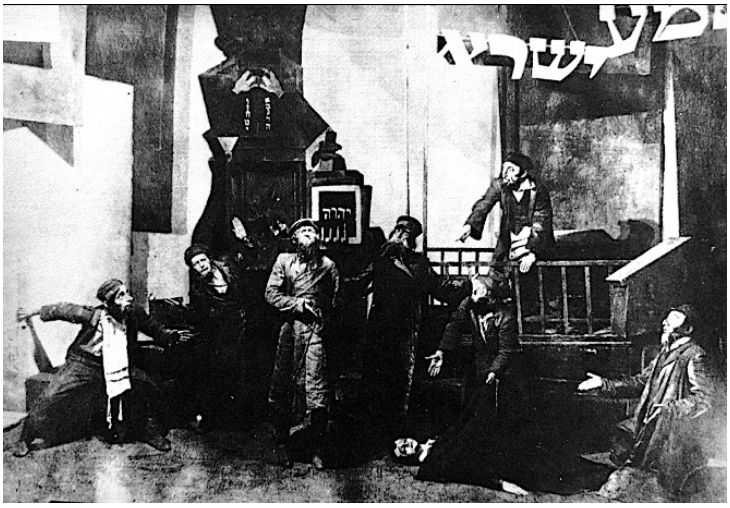

Fig. 3: *Khonen's death, Habimah (O. Aslan, « Les voies de la création théâtrale »)*

Fig. 4: *Khonen's death, G. Baty (Optima, 8.3.1928, Photo Henri Manuel)*

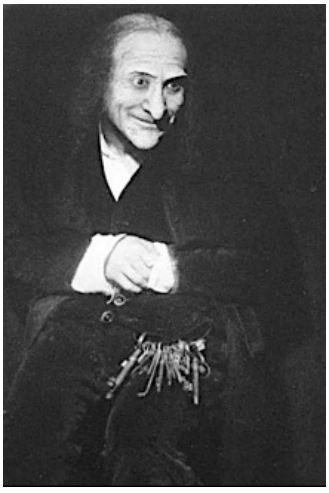

Fig. 5: *Joseph Buloff in the role of Harpagon (The Israel Goor Theatre Archives, Jerusalem)*

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