

SIX PLAYS OF THE YIDDISH THEATRE

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Six plays of the Yiddish theatre by Isaac Goldberg

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ISAAC GOLDBERG

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By

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE plays offered to the English reading public in this volume are not presented as the crowning achievement of a national stage which is ready to assume its place among the great theatres of the world. The purpose of their publication is rather to show the present stage of development in a dramatic literature which bids fair to give articulate expression to the esthetic sense of a widely scattered people whose social isolation has preserved to them traditions, customs and habits of thought which, with but slight variation, have persisted from the earliest period of recorded history and are alien to the people among whom they dwell.

Drama springing from such a source naturally limits itself at the outset to the rather elastic class of compositions designated as "folk plays," in which a simple motivation is employed to depict incidents of daily life and characters drawn from the common types familiar to author and audience alike.

The Yiddish Theatre while presenting some of its most characteristic work in that class of drama has in addition a background of Oriental and Biblical tradition rich in poetic imagery, from

which its playwrights draw with a sympathy and felicity that is strikingly effective.

Unlike the recent dramatic movement in Ireland with which all students of the stage are familiar, the Yiddish Theatre has produced no masterpiece comparable with, say "Riders to the Sea," nor can it boast a dramatist that the commending genius of Synge does not overtop. But on the other hand while the Irish Theatre considered as a whole never gave promise of becoming more than a reflection of local characteristics and after a short period of brilliant creation, within very narrow limits to be sure, came to a dead halt, the Yiddish Stage shows every evidence of a tendency to so broaden its scope as ultimately to establish a well balanced drama of permanent vitality that will find its place in the great stream of drama the current of which flows through the literature of all intellectual peoples.

The reader should bear in mind the peculiar difficulties under which this attempt at dramatic expression has labored from the start, the limited vision of an uneducated audience, and particularly the absence of a dramatic stage tradition among the Jews,—a matter of great significance to a people whose life is much influenced by tradition.

It should be remembered also that the deep, often terrible significance, associated with the observance or infraction of certain religious customs

affords Yiddish dramatists a means of producing intensely dramatic effects that would be entirely lost on an audience or reader not familiar with their meaning.

In brief these plays, several of them somewhat crude, are representative of a dramatic movement in its making, a stage of development perhaps of greater interest to the student of the drama than one in which the ultimate possibilities of development have been reached, giving as it does an opportunity to forecast the branches that will expand their buds and blossom, and those that will shrivel up, blacken, and in the end fall to the ground to lose themselves in the litter.

And yet, notwithstanding these crudities one may search far for a bit of drama more suggestive, in composition and color, of a nocturne by Blacklock or Whistler than is "The Sinner," or a piece of more florid tone, drawn in with more sweeping curves and with a broader line than in the fine Biblical drama of "Abigail."

