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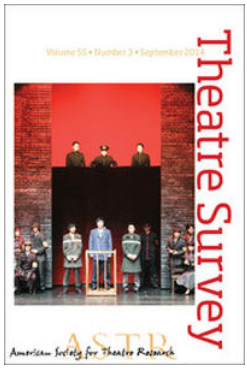

Nomadic Chutzpah: The Vilna Troupe's Transnational Yiddish Theatre Paradigm, 1915–1935

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Debra Caplan

NOMADIC CHUTZPAH: THE VILNA TROUPE'S TRANSNATIONAL YIDDISH THEATRE PARADIGM, 1915–1935

Consider an unlikely scenario. In the midst of World War I, a motley group of Jewish refugees in their teens and early twenties becomes obsessed with the idea of creating a "Yiddish art theatre" modeled upon Stanislavski's famous Russian company. By day they work as laborers, storekeepers, housepainters, and wartime smugglers; by night they teach themselves the basics of acting and stagecraft from outdated Russian and German books. The only theatre building where they can afford to perform is a dilapidated former circus on the outskirts of town, repurposed by the German army as a military stable. The roof leaks, and the stage reeks of horse dung. It is a bitterly cold winter, and since there is no money for heat, the actors rehearse with frozen limbs and thaw their stage makeup over the footlights. They eat one meal a day—a single boiled potato—and rehearsals are routinely interrupted when actors faint from hunger.

Within a few months, however, these same actors are performing in the most extravagant theatre in their city, a building that has never before permitted Jews, let alone Yiddish, upon its stage. Within a year, they are the most famous Jewish theatre company in Eastern Europe, and their productions are frequently reviewed by the Polish, Russian, and German press. In five years, they have become a global sensation, drawing the attention of prominent Jewish and non-Jewish theatre artists, politicians, and intellectuals from across Eastern and Western Europe, North and South America, and beyond. They are widely regarded as one of the foremost avant-garde theatre companies in the world.

This was the improbable rise of the Vilna Troupe, a Yiddish theatre company that became a global sensation between the two world wars. The amateur actors who founded the company were wartime refugees who came together in Vilna after a Russian military decree forced them to evacuate the cities where their families had lived for generations. Most were scarcely out of their teens

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and had no formal theatrical training or professional experience. Yet in spite of these obstacles, the actors who made up Vilna Troupe toured on an almost constant basis between the company's founding in 1915 and its dissolution in 1935: first to other modest cities and towns in Poland, then to the unofficial capital of Yiddish culture in Warsaw, and subsequently to Austria, Romania, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, England, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Australia, New Zealand, and throughout the United States, traveling in complex patterns of multidirectional migration across countries and continents. Buoyed by a global audience base and unconfined by the geographical-linguistic boundaries that limited the national theatres of their neighbors, these Yiddish actors were uniquely able to develop a theatre company that operated on a global scale.

Yiddish, the primary vernacular of Eastern European Jewry, had always held a decidedly low position within the multilingual hierarchy of Ashkenazic Jewish culture. Hebrew was the holy language of the Torah and prayer, and Aramaic was the intellectual language of the Talmud and rabbinic law; but Yiddish, as the language of the masses, did not share the same linguistic prestige. Similarly, Jewish intellectuals regarded the first generation of professional Yiddish theatre companies that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as unworthy of serious attention and derided the Yiddish stage in caustic and unsparing terms as "a sea of manure" or "a flood of trash."[1] In a sudden reversal, however, the Vilna Troupe succeeded in earning the devotion not only of these Yiddish-speaking intellectuals but also of a diverse global audience that cut across religious, linguistic, and national divides with ease.

It was through the productions of the Vilna Troupe that hundreds of thousands of theatregoers around the world first encountered the Yiddish stage, and for many, the encounter was significant. In Paris, a gravely ill Sarah Bernhardt defied her doctor's orders and insisted on being carrying into the theatre on a litter just to see the Vilna Troupe perform before she died.[2] In Bucharest, a young Eugene Ionesco attended every performance of the visiting Yiddish artists; decades later, he would credit the Vilna Troupe's aesthetic with inspiring his career as an absurdist playwright.[3] In Antwerp, the Belgian monarchy refused to allow the Vilna Troupe to pay to rent the city's finest theatre and insisted on personally subsidizing the company's expenses, citing an obscure provision in the royal charter that "true art" should be shown for free.[4] In London, every theatre in the city shut down for the Vilna Troupe's opening night so that their actors could learn from the visiting Yiddish players who had attracted international acclaim.[5] The Vilna Troupe was Harold Clurman's favorite Yiddish theatre company, and Clurman and Stella Adler dined regularly with founding members of the Vilna Troupe during their Group Theatre years.[6] Broadway producer and director David Belasco regularly attended Vilna Troupe productions in New York and wrote the actors fan mail, which the actors then translated and reprinted in full-page advertisements in the Yiddish press.[7] Other devotees included playwrights George Bernard Shaw and Israel Zangwill; the artistic director of the Romanian National Theatre; and the kings of Romania and Greece, who requested special royal command performances in their palaces.[8] These responses are all the more surprising when we recall that the Vilna Troupe performed exclusively in Yiddish, a language with historic low-culture

associations that a significant percentage of its well-heeled European audience members did not speak or even understand. How, then, can we account for the meteoric rise of this Yiddish company from an obscure group of teenage amateurs to a central fixture of the interwar theatrical avant-garde?

My contention is that the Vilna Troupe's unlikely success was enabled by the company's embrace of transnational itinerancy as its central organizing principle, artistic ideology, and marketing strategy. I call this approach "multimodal transnationalism," by which I mean a method of theatre making that is predicated upon multiple kinds of frequent and sustained movement across a large geographic territory. Encompassing nine distinct companies, hundreds of actors, and dozens of directors and designers across five continents at the height of its influence, the Vilna Troupe was a transnational theatre phenomenon on a scale unparalleled in its era.

This article considers the Vilna Troupe as a turning point in the history of transnational theatre practice. The case of the Vilna Troupe offers the theatre historian unique insight into how audiences and critics responded to one of the earliest documented transnational phenomena of the modern stage, albeit one that has been almost entirely excluded from the English-language historical record.[9] For decades, the artists of the Vilna Troupe have been unfairly confined to the margins of theatre history, their names—Dovid Herman, Leib Kadison, Alexander Azro, Sonia Alomis, Noah Nachbush, Chaim Shniur, Bela Belarina, Mordechai Mazo, Miriam Orleska, Joseph Buloff, Luba Kadison, Jacob and Yocheved Waislitz, and hundreds of others—virtually unknown to scholars. In fact, as this article will demonstrate, the Vilna Troupe was a seminal institution in the development of the modern theatrical avant-garde, and its productions influenced an entire generation of both Jewish and non-Jewish theatre practitioners to reconsider their activities in more self-consciously global terms. The Vilna Troupe modeled the artistic and economic rewards of adopting transnational theatre practices before a diverse global audience that included some of the most prominent theatre practitioners of the twentieth century, including Reinhardt, Belasco, Bernhardt, Clurman, Adler, Ionesco, and others. In arguing for the Vilna Troupe's centrality to modern theatre history, I am suggesting that we cannot fully understand these artists or the trajectory of the twentieth-century stage without accounting for the activities of these Yiddish performers. The transnational rise of the Vilna Troupe, I contend, is thus no minority branch of modern theatre history but in fact is one of its most central and little-known chapters.

Transnationalism and the Case of the Yiddish Theatre

One must be especially cautious about terminology when discussing transnationalism. In simple terms, "transnational" refers to individuals, organizations, and phenomena that operate across rather than within national borders. But as scholars in many disciplines have noted, the term is often used with little conceptual grounding. ("The concept's sudden prominence," note sociologists Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith, "has been accompanied by its increasing ambiguity.")[10] "Transnationalism" has been used variously to describe a way of thinking, a mode of economic exchange, a political construct, a means of cultural production, and a method of ideological dissemination.[11] As social

anthropologist Steven Vertovec has argued, although there are many kinds of "global activities" among individuals, groups, and institutions that "share the adjective 'transnational,'" much of the extant scholarship shies away from a precise definition of the term.[12]

Likewise—indeed, perhaps even more than our social science colleagues—when theatre historians and scholars of contemporary performance talk about "transnationalism," we are all too often not speaking the same language. What criteria must be met for a particular theatrical phenomenon to qualify as "transnational?" Must it include performers or directors who physically travel? Border-crossing repertoire? International aesthetic exchange? A global reception? Does transnationalism connote unidirectional movement (i.e., a theatrical technique or play traveling from one geographical location to another) or does it refer to regular back-and-forth migration? Are all touring companies necessarily transnational? Are some more transnational than others? Arriving at a rigorous definition of "transnationalism" in theatre studies is further complicated by the semiotic multiplicity of our subject. After all, "theatre" is itself a contested term that describes an interconnected array of artistic phenomena. The physical presence of bodies on a stage is juxtaposed with ever-present reminders that everything the spectator sees refers to something else: a dramatic source text, the aesthetic universe of the stage production, the outside world.[13] Determining precisely *who* or *what* travels in transnational theatre is thus no simple task.

Although there is a growing body of work on the increased prevalence of transnational practices in contemporary theatre, there has been little scholarship on the historical origins of theatrical transnationalism. While some, most notably Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (in their volume *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater* [Ashgate, 2008]) and Christopher Balme and Nic Leonhardt (with their ongoing Global Theatre Histories Project), have documented the existence of transnational performance practices in the past, the historical development of transnational theatre is still not well understood. The underlying assumption is that contemporary transnational theatre is a by-product of technological advances in communication and transportation, not the result of any particular historical occurrence or encounter.

Yiddish theatre has never been included in this emerging discourse on transnational theatre. However, Eastern European Jews could be considered the archetypal transnationals of the modern period. As historian Rebecca Kobrin has argued, any positioning of transnationalism as a contemporary or postmodern phenomenon automatically excludes Ashkenazic Jewish culture, which came of age in the context of large-scale forced and voluntary migrations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[14] "Transnationalism is nothing new," asserts Kobrin. "East European Jews behaved like the quintessential transnational migrants."[15] If Kobrin is right, if Ashkenazic Jews are the original, prototypical modern transnationals, then it stands to reason that their theatre would have much to offer the student of transnational performance.

Most studies of transnational theatre circulation must still contend with the dynamics of the particular national-linguistic context from which its artists emerged. An Italian actor performing in France is still an Italian actor, and regardless of

personal preference or citizenship, he or she retains an inextricable link to a particular geographical locale and national identity. But interwar Yiddish theatre dismantles conventional notions of transnational theatre because it operated in the total absence of a national infrastructure. Between the two world wars, Yiddish speakers were scattered around the world without access to the government subventions, dramatic academies, established performance spaces, or any of the other benefits nationally based theatres tend to have at their disposal, and constant travel was virtually the only way for a Yiddish theatre company to survive. The Vilna Troupe thus did not "go on tour" in any traditional sense; rather, we might say that the Vilna Troupe was *always* on tour. There was rarely a stable home base to which the actors could return after their travels, rarely a theatre building, town, city, or even country that "belonged" to the Vilna Troupe in the sense that Moscow "belonged" to the Moscow Art Theatre. Instead of representing a particular nationality or geographic territory, the artists of the Vilna Troupe considered themselves to be representatives of a global Yiddish culture and aligned themselves with the Jewish political movement for a cosmopolitan nationalism ("diaspora nationalism") that regarded location-based national identification as a relic of the past.[16]

Though the company's name implied a connection with a fixed location (the city of Vilnius or, as it was called in Yiddish, Vilne), Jewish audiences always understood that the company's name was merely a performance of locational stability (non-Jewish spectators, understandably, were often less certain). In fact, although the Vilna Troupe originated in Vilna, the company performed in that city only a handful of times after its initial departure in 1917. A Vilna Troupe actor, regardless of his or her city or country of origin, belonged most fully to the global Yiddish theatre networks established by the company, not to the Eastern European nations with rapidly shifting borders from whence they had come.[17]

The case of the Vilna Troupe thus poses a particular set of challenges that have not yet been addressed by the emerging discourse on transnational theatre. Without the reference point of an official or location-based national culture, how do theatrical ideas travel across borders? What does transnationalism mean in a diasporic context? What can an itinerant-by-design theatre offer that distinguishes it from fixed-location counterparts? These questions, I would like to suggest, are not tangential but rather are necessary for understanding how performers, dramatic repertoire, and theatre practices travel. It is not enough to simply tag a theatrical endeavor as "transnational"—we must also ask *how* its transnationalism works and how it might relate to other transnational theatrical phenomena both past and present.

The Vilna Troupe's Multimodal Transnational Paradigm

The Vilna Troupe developed a multimodal transnational theatre practice that relied upon several types of movement across borders: structural, aesthetic, and economic. In designating the Vilna Troupe's transnationalism as multimodal, I follow sociologists such as Waldinger and Fitzgerald in foregrounding the multidirectionality of transnational activity—that is to say, a sustained pattern of multiple exits and entries across national borders.[18] The Vilna Troupe's transnational approach also relied heavily on the simultaneous travel of multiple incarnations

of the company. The Vilna Troupe's multimodal, multidirectional transnationalism operated concurrently on three axes:

1. *structural transnationalism*—the reliance of a theatre company upon the constant, steady migration of bodies across borders;
2. *artistic transnationalism*—the global circulation of aesthetic ideas, techniques, texts, and/or stylistic elements; and
3. *economic transnationalism*—the movement of capital without regard to national taxes or regulations and/or a global marketing strategy that seeks to develop an internationally recognized brand.

In the case of the Vilna Troupe, as we shall see, all of these factors were inextricably intertwined. Taken together, these strategies allowed the troupe to experiment with theatre in ways that surprised and delighted audiences.

As a multimodal transnational enterprise, the Vilna Troupe was unusual for its era, and it was precisely this approach that distinguished its productions from its competitors and enabled it to become the interwar equivalent of a viral sensation. Although European theatre companies routinely crossed European borders prior to World War I, entire troupes rarely made transatlantic voyages. *Individual* performers, however, traversed the Atlantic much more frequently.[19] Though some theatre artists traveled on a global scale (e.g., as Christopher Balme has documented, impresarios such as Daniel E. Bandmann and his son, Maurice Bandmann, who toured a series of theatre companies across North and South America, northern Africa, and the Far East in the first decades of the twentieth century), these efforts tended to be led by a single artist working with a succession of theatre companies, each with its own repertoire, aesthetic, and audience.[20] But the Vilna Troupe developed a mode of transnational theatre circulation that relied upon vast networks of interconnected artists to promote a single brand simultaneously in multiple locales. The Vilna Troupe thus bears strong resemblance to exactly the sort of transnational theatrical activity have become increasingly prevalent today—for example, the global branding and marketing of Broadway musicals (which often, as in the case of *Phantom of the Opera*, run simultaneously in multiple countries with the same logo (Figure 1), staging, aesthetic, and design).[21] Today, the fundamental organizing principles of the Vilna Troupe—frequent back-and-forth travel, multimodality, global branding, and simultaneity—are common features of the contemporary stage.

The Vilna Troupe thus represents a turning point in the history of theatrical transnationalism, the bridge between nineteenth-century models of theatrical travel, based largely upon the voyages of individual performers and impresarios, and contemporary multimodal transnational performance practices. The Vilna Troupe's vision of itself as a world theatre with a global reputation and its insistence that itinerancy could be a distinct artistic advantage showed other theatre practitioners new methods of transnational theatre making and inspired many to follow its lead. Unlike most of their contemporaries, these Yiddish theatre artists were completely itinerant, which meant they had little to lose in an artistic gamble: if a play was poorly received, if a politician spoke out against them, if taxes or

Figure 1.
Cover of the program for the Vilna Troupe's production of *Der dorfsyung* (Vilna, 1916), RG 8, box 41, item #176744. From the Archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York.

regulations were too onerous, or if local interest vanished, they could simply pack up and move on to the next town, country, or continent.[22] The Vilna Troupe's entire existence was so precarious that there was little incentive to be cautious.[23] It was this attitude embraced by the artists of the interwar Yiddish theatre, this "nomadic chutzpah," that fueled their unlikely success.

Structural Transnationalism: The Sun Never Sets on the Yiddish Stage

In 1979, Joseph Buloff—one of the last surviving members of the Vilna Troupe—was invited to give the keynote speech at a regional festival of Jewish

culture. When he first came to America in 1924 with the Vilna Troupe, Buloff told his audience, there were twenty-four professional Yiddish theatres in the United States, sixteen in Poland, six in Russia, six in Buenos Aires, four in Romania, three in Lithuania, and two each in Latvia, South Africa, France, England, and Canada. "They used to refer to the Yiddish theatre as to the British Empire where the sun never sets," Buloff quipped. "When the curtain comes down in Britain, the curtain comes up in N.[ew] York."[24] Left unmentioned was the fact that the vast majority of these interwar Yiddish companies were run by members of the Vilna Troupe, which was, in fact, a network of hundreds of Jewish theatre artists who marketed their performances under a single moniker.

The Vilna Troupe relied upon the constant cross-fertilization of Jewish directors, performers, playwrights, designers, and theatre critics across geographical borders. Traversing countries and continents as a matter of course, the members of the Vilna Troupe encountered new repertoires, theatrical techniques, and aesthetic trends that other theatre artists around the world were using and then adopted these globally sourced models into their own productions. This rich transnational exchange of theatrical ideas was a by-product of the Eastern European Jewish experience during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when persecution and political instability compelled millions of Jews to migrate across vast distances. These large-scale migrations led to the creation of specific pathways for transnational cultural circulation among an interconnected network of Yiddish-speaking communities across the globe. The development of a thriving cross-continental Yiddish press, for example, laid the groundwork for the emergence of a global theatre movement by creating a Yiddish-speaking audience base that was globally dispersed *and* in constant communication. In parallel with the transnational circulation of Yiddish literature and the Yiddish press, the Vilna Troupe operated on a global scale over the course of its twenty-year tenure.

Or rather, we might say more precisely the Vilna *Troupes*. Beginning with the first of many quarrels among Vilna Troupe actors in 1918 (sparked in this case by a love triangle and a surprise elopement), there were always several Vilna Troupes operating simultaneously in multiple locales. Over the course of two decades, well over two hundred individual actors performed under the mantle of what we might better call "the Vilna Troupe phenomenon." Not only did each individual Vilna Troupe travel more frequently and extensively than other companies of the period, but also the simultaneous existence of multiple Vilna Troupes created a globally recognizable brand. With each Vilna Troupe performing in an average of forty to sixty cities a year, it often seemed to theatregoers that the company was everywhere at once. The Vilna Troupe's geographical multiplicity was perhaps the company's greatest achievement, enabling any theatre artist who could call himself a *Vilner* (a member of the troupe) to have the same loyal audience base and high-art reputation no matter where he or she traveled.

In its early years, the Vilna Troupe was a small and discrete company of fifteen actors that performed across a limited region of Eastern Europe.[25] By 1921, two Vilna Troupe companies were touring simultaneously across Eastern and Western Europe. Private train cars were reserved to carry the company, their sets, and their costumes from town to town: from Kishinev (Chișinău) to

Cracow (Kraków), from Lemberg (Lviv) to Czernowitz (Chernivtsi), from Łódź to Belz, stopping in dozens of small towns along the way. It was not uncommon for impoverished rural Jews to travel great distances to see the Vilna Troupe perform, carrying a chicken or a goose in the hope of bartering the animal for a ticket.[26] As the actors prepared to leave each locale, they found dozens of eager amateurs at the train station hoping to join the troupe as extras. The troupe designated a special train car for these volunteer actors and carried hundreds of them across Eastern and Western Europe.[27] In 1924, a branch of the Western European contingent departed for the United States, and another Vilna Troupe company formed in their absence. By the mid-1920s, there were four Vilna Troupes with a total of seventy actors performing from Odessa to Los Angeles.

The existence of multiple, simultaneous Vilna Troupes gave the company the illusion of omnipresence, thus enabling it to develop a global reputation in the space of a few years. In a single week of a 1924 Warsaw newspaper, for instance, a Yiddish reader might have come across:

- a telegram announcing that the Vilna Troupe had finished its tour in Yugoslavia, was now performing in Czechoslovakia, and would soon arrive in Vienna;
- a letter to the editor about a current Vilna Troupe production in Lemberg;
- an advertisement for the Vilna Troupe's upcoming season in Warsaw;
- a review of the Vilna Troupe's tour of Belgium and Holland;
- a review of the Vilna Troupe's recent performances in New York; and
- an announcement that the Vilna Troupe would soon be performing in Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore.[28]

Although each incarnation of the Vilna Troupe vehemently denied the existence of the others, all of the Vilna Troupe branches remained remarkably consistent in their repertoire and aesthetic. Indeed, they were in constant communication with one another, as actors and directors frequently switched affiliation among various branches of the Vilna Troupe to settle artistic differences or romantic quarrels or to suit family or personal preferences.

A successful production by any one branch of the Vilna Troupe would usually lead to a nearly identical production of the same play by all of the other branches in rapid succession, thus quickly developing a global reputation for that play that was disseminated by the Vilna Troupe's network of nomadic performers. For example, the 1920 world premiere of *The Dybbuk* in Warsaw by one branch of the Vilna Troupe was followed by a virtual copy by another branch in Berlin a few months later, directed by the original director (who had switched his Vilna Troupe affiliation) with a new cast. Since spectators and critics were unaware that the production was a second original, the reviews coming out of Eastern Europe served only to further *The Dybbuk*'s growing reputation in the West and vice versa. Similarly, *The Dybbuk*'s reception in New York City was augmented by the effusive press coverage of another branch's nearly simultaneous *Dybbuk* tour in Bucharest and Odessa.[29] In total, during the 1920s and 1930s nearly half a million theatregoers attended the Vilna Troupe's touring productions of *The*

Dybbuk as "*Dybbuk* mania" swept across dozens of countries.[30] *The Dybbuk*'s reputation as a global sensation was a product of the Vilna Troupe's structural transnationalism—its ability to appear to be simultaneously present in multiple places at once.

Several more Vilna Troupes emerged during the 1930s, but these new companies continued to travel the same established circuits as previous incarnations (though American-based Vilna Troupes did expand slightly to include Montreal, Toronto, Mexico City, and Winnipeg). By the mid-1930s there were more than two hundred actors affiliated with one of five distinct Vilna Troupe companies—each of which considered itself to be the only *real* Vilna Troupe and, at least in public, vehemently denied the existence of the others.[31]

However, it is only when we add the travels of individual Vilna Troupe actors to this map that we can see the true scope of the company's transnational reach. It was not uncommon for an affiliated actor working in São Paulo, Bulawayo (in what was then Southern Rhodesia), or Auckland to publicize his or her independent projects using the famous Vilna Troupe name. When founding Vilna Troupe members Alexander Azro and Sonia Alomis did a show in Glasgow in 1935, in Brooklyn in 1936, or in Mexico City in 1942, they billed themselves as "Principles of the World Famous Original Vilna Troupe" and prominently displayed the company's logo.[32] These appropriations of the Vilna Troupe brand by the company's former members may have been unofficial, but they were also an integral part of the Vilna Troupe phenomenon. Mapping the career of Vilna Troupe actor Joseph Buloff, for instance, expands the geographical territory of the troupe's influence to include Argentina, Brazil, and Israel.

If we then examine the career of a Vilna Troupe actor such as Jacob Waislitz, who used the Vilna Troupe logo to market his productions for decades after leaving the company, the territory expands again to include Sweden, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Australia, and New Zealand. Adding the Vilna Troupe–branded performances of actor Avrom Taytlboym to the map demonstrates how affiliated actors frequently migrated back and forth between Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the United States while performing with different branches of the company. Similarly, mapping the theatrical career of Vilna Troupe actor Shmuel Iris expands the territory yet again to include Harbin (in northern Manchuria), and Moscow, where Iris performed during World War I just prior to joining the troupe. Iris would go on to perform with various incarnations of the Vilna Troupe in Romania and New York City, and later as a solo artist marketing his work with the Vilna Troupe brand name and logo in Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro.

Though no Vilna Troupe was ever formally active in South America, Africa, or Australia, affiliated actors such as Buloff, Waislitz, and Iris traveled to these countries and staged classics from the Vilna Troupe repertoire, advertised their connection to the company, and used the famous Vilna Troupe logo in their posters and programs. The Vilna Troupe was thus less a discrete theatre company than a global network of Yiddish performers, all of whom adopted the same repertoire, aesthetic style, and brand identity. The Vilna Troupe built its reputation upon this structural transnationalism, in which individual companies and artists, operating

more or less independently across dozens of countries, claimed affiliation with a single overarching organization. The Vilna Troupe could be anywhere or anyone. To some extent, it was every*where* and every*one*, encompassing nearly every country, city, or town where Yiddish theatre was performed and including nearly every major figure of the interwar Yiddish stage among its ranks.

Artistic Transnationalism: The Aesthetics of Itinerancy

In addition to this structural transnationalism, the Vilna Troupe adopted an aesthetic strategy in which the artists envisioned their own position of geographical precariousness as a source of theatrical creativity. The basic aesthetic strategy of the Vilna Troupe was to embrace itinerancy as an artistic advantage, thus reconceptualizing what had long been perceived as Jewish theatre's greatest liability—its geographical instability—as a virtue.

Unlike most avant-garde theatre companies of the period, whose productions typically depended upon access to specific theatre spaces, state subsidies, and the gradual cultivation of an audience specific to a given locale, the Vilna Troupe had to design all of its productions to travel across great distances. Sets, costumes, lighting, and properties always had to be eminently portable, regardless of a director or designer's artistic desires. Each set piece had to be dismantled to fit into a train car, props and costumes were carefully designed to be lightweight and to occupy the minimum amount of space, and every lighting design had to be readily reproducible in a range of performance spaces, from grand proscenium stages in Europe's urban capitals to converted barns and hastily erected tents in rural hamlets. As the vernacular theatrical tradition of a nomadic people, Yiddish theatre had always required its artists to improvise under changing circumstances; but Yiddish actors and critics alike had long lamented that all of this wandering had prevented the Yiddish stage from reaching the artistic heights of its peers. The Vilna Troupe was the first Yiddish theatre to leverage the itinerant circumstances of Jewish theatre artists as fodder for creativity.[33]

The Vilna Troupe's productions drew stylistic inspiration from the various aesthetic influences its members encountered as they traveled, combined with the actors' own ideas about avant-garde staging and design. The stylistic elements that the Vilna Troupe's critics lauded as "innovative" were more often than not borrowed from other theatre artists: the ensemble-based style of the Moscow Art Theatre, the Romanticism of Stanisław Wyspiański, the repertory theatre system and directing style of Max Reinhardt, the stylized modernism of the avant-garde Polish stage, the flexible staging of Adolphe Appia and his followers, the constructivism of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the technological innovations introduced by David Belasco, and repertoire drawn equally from Eastern Europe, Western Europe, and the Americas—all combined with auditory and visual elements based upon liturgical melodies, synagogue aesthetics, and the gestural vocabulary of traditional Jewish religious practice.

For example, the Vilna Troupe's 1920 world premiere of *The Dybbuk*, the most successful production in the company's history and a landmark of twentieth-century theatre, featured staging modeled upon recent work by Max Reinhardt and

a set design that strongly resembled German expressionist designs of the period. Yet the entire action of the play was also framed by a gigantic *tallis*, or Jewish prayer shawl, that served as a constant visual reminder of the play's Jewish specificity (Figure 2).

For Jewish spectators, the opening and closing of the *tallis* curtain at the beginning and end of each act invoked familiar rituals: the opening and closing of the synagogue ark to reveal the Torah, the wrapping of one's body in a prayer shawl during silent prayer, the ceremonious shrouding of a Jewish corpse in the *tallis* of the deceased, and so forth. Similarly, the ritualized atmosphere evoked by the prayer shawl curtain was reinforced by stylized vocals in which the actors adopted liturgically inflected melodic speech patterns that incorporated traditional Jewish melodies into nearly every line of dialogue. Yet the Vilna Troupe's interweaving of liturgical music into the action of the play was also modeled upon the "sacred act" performance style associated with Polish director Juliusz Osterwa, in which spectators were invited to "bear witness" to "holy rituals"—that is, ritualized performance practices embedded in modernist productions.[34]

This strategy of global aesthetic borrowing, in which elements from a wide range of non-Jewish theatrical avant-gardes were fused together with distinctly Jewish influences, enabled the Vilna Troupe to attract diverse audiences to the Yiddish theatre. It was not uncommon for a Vilna Troupe audience to include Yiddish-speaking Jews sitting side by side with prominent non-Jewish intellectuals, Russian and German military commanders sitting with Jewish refugees, or religious Jews in dark coats and fur hats sitting next to politicians and European royalty. Nearly every Vilna Troupe production, regardless of branch or locale, was accompanied by a program that consciously cultivated this diverse audience through fully bilingual cast and crew listings, playwright biographies, and extensive scene-by-scene plot summaries for the non-Yiddish-speaking spectator. The Vilna Troupe's highly theatrical, visually arresting production style and the company's early emphasis on the precise layering of spoken dialogue with visual and aural cues also contributed to its appeal for non-Jewish theatergoers.

Supported by an international audience and fueled by a globally sourced artistic sensibility, the Vilna Troupe was perfectly positioned to develop a transnational reputation for theatrical creativity. Individually, the actors may have longed for a home, as indeed many did; but collectively, the Vilna Troupe was able to create innovative theatre art precisely because of its perpetual homelessness.

For the company members, however, this globally sourced aesthetic was hardly intentional or even conscious. The members of the Vilna Troupe were accidental innovators whose aesthetic contributions to the modern stage had more to do with the conditions of Jewish life in Eastern Europe than with avant-garde ambition. Often, chance mishaps during travel led to the adoption of new design or staging strategies. Once while traveling in the Polish countryside, for example, a Vilna Troupe branch unexpectedly ran out of cash and could no longer afford electricity to light the stage. In desperation, the actors spent hours manually rigging wires to override the theatre's electrical system, producing an eerie and unusual lighting effect in the process that delighted their urbane Polish critics.[35] On another occasion, Vilna Troupe director Mikhl Weichert charmed Warsaw audiences by

Figure 2.
The Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk*, Paris, 1922. Photo: Laurence Senelick Collection.

using a homemade Linnebach projector, modeled on projectors that he had observed in Western Europe, to project twenty-five dynamic settings onto dyed curtains, thus freeing up enough space in the train cars to enable the company to mount an epic production on a scale unprecedented in the Yiddish theatre, including a full orchestra, choreographed battle scenes with hundreds of extras, and more than a hundred and fifty costumes. Weichert's interest in projected sets was motivated more by the medium's portability than by aesthetic considerations ("We had to project them, so that they would fit on every stage—even the most primitive ones—and so that they could change as quick as lightning," he told journalists), but spectators and critics interpreted the production as an artistic landmark.[36]

Decades later, Vilna Troupe actor Joseph Buloff attending his first Beckett production would respond to claims of the playwright's singular achievements: "Modern style, my foot! I pioneered Theater of the Absurd back in the twenties!"[37]

> By its nature, the infant Jewish theatre had to be absurd because it grew out of the absurd situation of the Jews of Czarist Russia. . . . When [Jewish actors] recognized spies entering the makeshift theatre and infiltrating the audience, they would send a signal to the stage. Then, abruptly, the actors would switch from the Yiddish script they were performing. An actor from Poland would begin declaiming in Polish. A Hungarian actress would answer him in Magyar. A couple of actors who only knew Yiddish would carry on a dialogue in meaningless gibberish—"Nov shmoz kapop. . . ." And so on. The audience, in on the ruse, would listen to this babble impassively. . .. There you have it: a dozen actors on a bare stage, each one speaking a different language. Alienation, failure of communication, absence of objective meaning—all the elements of Theatre of the Absurd. And it was invented a century ago by Jewish actors out of grim necessity.[38]

Coy though it may be, this description of a modernist playwright unconsciously adhering to an aesthetic sensibility invented by Eastern European Jews reflects how the artists of the Vilna Troupe thought of their work. Simply put, they believed that the Yiddish theatre—itinerant, global, teetering on the edge of economic and political precariousness—was, *precisely for these reasons,* uniquely positioned to stand at the vanguard of the theatrical avant-garde.

Economic Transnationalism: Branding and the Business of Global Theatre Making

The structural and aesthetic transnationalism of the Vilna Troupe was augmented by the company's creation of a brand identity that also operated on a global scale. Each Vilna Troupe employed a particular nexus of practices that conveyed a fixed identity to spectators and critics: an instantly recognizable name and logo, an avant-garde performance style that drew from the work of other theatre practitioners around the world, and a single repertoire. Any Yiddish theatre artist who could demonstrate his or her connection to the Vilna Troupe could use this

brand identity to develop an instant audience base virtually anywhere in the world where Yiddish-speaking Jews resided. In the 1920s and 1930s, this was a substantial global population: in 1939, there were nearly 12 million Yiddish speakers worldwide, with millions in Europe and North and South America, hundreds of thousands in Asia, and tens of thousands in Africa and Australia.[39]

As is well documented in business research, effective branding requires more than the simple material distribution of brand markers (logos, names, designs, etc.) to consumers. A brand identity emerges only when these symbols are imbued with a particular set of consumer experiences in the form of a narrative.[40] The most successful brands thus function as repositories of collective storytelling and act as "vessels of self-expression" for consumers, who value these brands for their perceived "identity value."[41] Moreover, as contemporary scholarship on international branding has documented, the mere perception that a brand is "global" tends to create positive associations for consumers about the product's quality.[42]

Beyond the aesthetic value of its productions, the Vilna Troupe's unlikely success on the world stage can be explained, in part, by its deployment of a highly effective transnational branding strategy. To borrow from Douglas B. Holt's theory of cultural branding, the Vilna Troupe brand became a "cultural icon"[43] for Ashkenazic Jews dispersed around the world and functioned as a kind of shorthand for modern Yiddish culture's myriad successes during the interwar period. "Vilna," as one journalist reflected on the fifteenth anniversary of the company's founding, "is no mere name but, rather, an idea."[44] Individual actors and directors were by and large irrelevant to this brand identity; instead, the Vilna Troupe brand was associated with a more abstract notion of what the troupe represented for its members: a demonstration of Yiddish cultural validity and an instrument of transnational cohesion for Yiddish-speaking Jews dispersed around the globe.

The Yiddish press, which was just as globally interconnected as its Jewish readers, played a significant role in the worldwide dissemination of the Vilna Troupe brand. Since readers tended to maintain their subscriptions even as they migrated across vast distances, interwar Yiddish newspapers and journals regularly reviewed theatre productions in other countries and even other continents. A daily such as *Haynt* (Today), for example, may have been published in Warsaw, but it also maintained a significant circulation in Western Europe, the United States, South America, and British Mandate Palestine. Collections of Yiddish newspapers in libraries and archives around the world thus often bear the address labels of local subscribers: a New Yorker with a subscription to a Buenos Aires Yiddish journal, an Australian who followed the Polish Yiddish press, a Parisian Jew with a subscription to a Romanian Yiddish paper, and so forth.[45] A collection of *Haynt* in Tel Aviv bears the characteristic inscription of a loyal, itinerant reader:

> *Haynt*, my beloved paper that I read as long as you existed. I was never able to part with you… Wherever I was and whenever I happened to be, you were there with me. I collected all of your issues and carried them across oceans, and when I arrived in our land, I collected you again…[46]

A network of foreign theatre correspondents kept the Vilna Troupe in the public eye of the global Yiddish press for a full two decades, regardless of where any individual branch of the company performed. As early as 1919, during the first major international flowering of the Vilna Troupe's reputation, Abraham Cahan, the editor in chief of New York's Yiddish daily *Der forverts*, ventured across the Atlantic to find out if the troupe was as good as the Polish Yiddish press had indicated. Delighted by the company's production of Peretz Hirschbein's naturalist drama *Dem shmids tekhter* (The Blacksmith's Daughters), Cahan continued to time his voyages to Europe over the next five years to coincide with major Vilna Troupe premieres, until he was finally able to convince a few members to defect and form their own Vilna Troupe in New York City.[47] Notices about the Vilna Troupe's Eastern and Western European activities appeared in *Der forverts*'s theatre page on a weekly basis throughout the mid-1920s. New York audiences were thus already well acquainted with the Vilna Troupe brand by the time the first actors arrived on American soil in 1924. This pattern—in which the Vilna Troupe's global reputation arrived in a city or town long before the actors themselves—was repeated over and over.

During the 1920s, a Yiddish-speaking Jew almost anywhere in the world could open up a morning newspaper and find conflicting reports of the Vilna Troupe's presence in dozens of cities at once. Adding to the confusion, reviews of the troupe's productions tended to be remarkably similar. As one Warsaw correspondent for the *Forverts* commiserated with his American readers:

> You wake up and read in the paper:
> "THE VILNA TROUPE IN BERLIN: For the past week, the Vilna Troupe has performed to enormous acclaim in Berlin. They presented *The Dybbuk* for their first performance, and on the second night they performed *The Abandoned Inn*. The third night—*The Family*, and they are currently preparing *Day and Night* and *Amnon and Tamar*. Their performances were attended by the most eminent German artists and critics of Berlin."
> But then you pick up a second paper and read:
> "THE VILNA TROUPE IN VIENNA: The Vilna Troupe, which has been performing here for a week, has had extraordinary success. Besides *The Dybbuk*, *The Abandoned Inn*, *The Family*, and *Day and Night*, they are preparing a production of *Amnon and Tamar*. Their performances were attended by the most prominent Christian critics and artists of Vienna. . .."
> Another paper: "THE VILNA TROUPE IN PARIS"
> And yet another: "THE VILNA PLAYERS IN HOLLAND"
> You leap up as if scalded. What the heck is this?? At the same time as they are performing in Amsterdam, they are a hit in Paris, and on the very same day that they are a sensation in France—their performance delights the Dutch press?[48]

Articles about the Vilna Troupe that had been commissioned by North and South American papers were often reprinted in the European Yiddish press and vice versa. These articles enabled Yiddish theatregoers in the Americas and

beyond to participate, albeit remotely, in the Vilna Troupe's initial rise to fame. By the time the Vilna Troupe embarked on its first transatlantic voyage, the company had already been present on the American Yiddish theatre scene for years.

Just as a consumer approaches a brand-name commodity because of particular associations, for spectators and critics the title "Vilna Troupe" carried certain expectations about how the companies would perform and how they ought to be received by audiences. These expectations, in turn, impacted the spectator's experience of the performance event, coloring every Vilna Troupe production with the aura of how other productions had been received around the world. When people heard that the Vilna Troupe was coming to town, wrote one journalist, the reaction was always the same:

> Who? The Vilna Troupe? Ah, yes. We know them already ... and we will attend! Nobody asks: Who is performing? What are they performing? What difference does it make who or what? This is the Vilna Troupe! It's a sure thing, a brand.[49]

A Vilna Troupe production was virtually guaranteed to make international headlines wherever it was being performed, regardless of the play's merits or the specific individuals involved. Because of the Vilna Troupe's successful global branding, the actors were able to ensure that Jewish spectators and critics around the world would enter each and every Vilna Troupe production primed by years of effusive accolades from the Yiddish press.

Itinerancy from Liability to Virtue

In 1919, a group of theatre artists affiliated with the Vilna Troupe founded Poland's first Jewish Actors' Union (Yidisher Artistn Fareyn, or YAF).[50] Officially, according to the terms of its registration with the Polish government, the YAF was simply the Jewish equivalent of the Union of Polish Theater Artists (Związek Artystów Scen Polskich). Like its Polish counterpart, the YAF was an active member of the short-lived International Union of Theater Artists, which included twenty-one constituent theatre unions from across Europe and the United States.

But while the other organizations in the International Union each represented theatre artists from a single country, the YAF's activities extended far beyond the borders of Poland to the outermost reaches of the transnational interwar Yiddish theatre. The Dansk Skuespiller Forbund represented Danish actors, the Svenska Teaterförbundet represented Swedish actors, the Budapesti Színészek Szövetzége represented Hungarian actors, and the Actors' Equity Association represented American actors. In Yiddish, however, actors unionized across national borders.[51] In its official documents and correspondence, the union maintained the fiction that it was a national actors' union just like the others, but its membership rolls revealed the truth. At any given time, nearly a quarter of the YAF's active members resided abroad. Those who provided permanent addresses in Poland were out of the country more often than not, and the YAF thus maintained

active correspondence with actors and Yiddish theatre companies in twenty-five countries: Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, Czechoslovakia, Danzig (an independent city-state during the interwar period), Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Mexico, British Mandate Palestine, Romania, South Africa, Switzerland, the United States, the USSR, and Yugoslavia.[52]

There could be no such thing as a national actors' union for the artists of the interwar Yiddish theatre, for theirs was a theatre with outposts everywhere Ashkenazic Jews resided. More than any other group, the Vilna Troupe was responsible for transforming the Yiddish stage into a theatre more resolutely *transnational*—in its structure, aesthetics, and economic strategy—than its audiences had ever encountered. Indeed, the Vilna Troupe's supporters consciously cultivated the idea that the company's global success heralded a new era of cosmopolitanism for the modern theatre. As one critic humorously described the potential advantages of transnationalism:

> Soon there will be such a strong link between the Yiddish theatres of America and Europe that companies will travel from Warsaw to New York, just as today actors set out on a tour from New York to Boston or from Chicago to Detroit. *The very notion of great distance is vanishing altogether,* and soon there will come a time when, if a Yiddish theatre company from America is on their way to Europe and realizes that somebody forgot to bring along Dovid Moyshele's beard, they will simply send the stage manager on an airplane from the middle of the ocean, and he will meet the company in Europe with the beard.[53]

The Vilna Troupe's success was understood to mark a turning point for the Yiddish stage, in which geographical distance could no longer artificially constrain a theatrical tradition that thrived upon transnational border crossing. The Vilna Troupe's global network of affiliated companies and theatre artists had a lasting impact on modern theatre, even after the dissolution of the last branch of the company in 1935. As for the Théâtre Libre after 1896 or the Group Theatre after 1941, echoes of the ideology, aesthetic vision, and repertoire developed by the Vilna Troupe continued to linger long after the company's demise. Without the Vilna Troupe, we might never have had a Eugene Ionesco or a Harold Clurman. An entire generation of groundbreaking scenic designers—including Mordecai Gorelik, Sam Leve, and Boris Aronson in the United States and Szymon Syrkus and Andrzej Pronaszko in Poland—learned their craft working alongside former Vilna Troupe members. The troupe also served as a major transatlantic and transhemispheric conduit for dramatic repertoire between the wars. For example, the company was responsible for introducing the work of Eugene O'Neill to the Eastern European stage.[54] As members of a nonterritorial theatre tradition that was most at home on the borderlines between nations, the globally dispersed network of performers that constituted the Vilna Troupe was uniquely positioned to transmit theatrical ideas across borders in a period long before advances in transportation and communication would enable virtually any theatre artist to exert a global presence.[55]

ENDNOTES

1. Alexander Mukdoyni, "Zikhroynes fun a yidishn teater-kritiker: Yidisher teater in Poyln fun 1909 biz 1915," in *Arkhiv far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame*, ed. Jacob Shatzky (Vilna and New York: YIVO, 1930), 341–421, at 354. These and other translations from Yiddish sources, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

2. Halina Chybowska, "David Herman and the Jewish Theatre in Poland," *Polish Review* 4.17 (3 May 1944): 11–12, at 12.

3. Joseph Buloff, "How the Yiddish Theatre Invented Theatre of the Absurd," Folder BG22, Papers: Collection 5, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Collection, Harvard Library, Judaica Division, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

4. Chybowska, 12.

5. Ibid.

6. On Clurman's abiding interest in Yiddish theatre, see his retrospective article "Ida Kaminska and the Yiddish Theater," *Midstream: A Monthly Jewish Review* 14.1 (January 1968): 53–7.

7. "Dovid Belasko shraybt tsu der 'Vilner trupe,'" *Forverts*, 7 March 1924, 7.

8. Shaw wrote to the troupe: "In the name of art, I wish the Vilna Troupe every success." Israel Zangwill, the famous English playwright and author of *The Melting Pot*, was also reportedly awed by the Vilna Troupe. "I took a very experienced English manager to see the Vilna Troupe," Zangwill told reporters in 1922. "He was as full of admiration as of envy. 'If only I could get such actors,' he said, 'for the British drama.' What cleanness of attack! What vitality! What a *Romeo and Juliet* I could get from them! They are not afraid of feeling or making the audience feel." Program, *The Dybbuk* (1936), Program 175267A/4298, Box 60, RG 8: Esther-Rachel Kaminska Theater Museum Collection, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY. On the Vilna Troupe's royal performances, see Joseph Buloff, "A briv vegn der Vilner trupe in Rumenien," *Literarishe bleter* 59, 19 June 1925, 5.

9. The extant English-language scholarship on the Vilna Troupe includes a master's thesis on the company's wartime origins and a few dozen pages in scholarly books and articles. These include Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 213–21; Shane Baker, "Beginnings of the Vilna Troupe: Jewish and German Politics in the Formation of a Yiddish Art Theater" (M.A. thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2002); and Shelly Zer-Zion, "The Birth of Habima and the Yiddish Art Theatre Movement," in *Jewish Theatre: Tradition in Transition and Intercultural Vistas*, ed. Ahuva Belkin (Tel Aviv: Assaph, Tel Aviv University, 2008), 73–88.

10. Luis Eduardo Guarnizo and Michael Peter Smith, "The Locations of Transnationalism," in *Transnationalism from Below*, ed. Michael Peter Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 3–34, at 3.

11. Steven Vertovec, "Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22.2 (1999): 447–62.

12. Steven Vertovec, "Migration and Other Modes of Transnationalism: Towards Conceptual Cross-Fertilization," *International Migration Review* 37.3 (2003): 641–65, at 642.

13. See Fernando de Toro, *Theatre Semiotics: Text and Staging in Modern Theatre*, trans. John Lewis, rev. and ed. Carole Hubbard (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 86–90; and Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

14. See David E. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

15. Rebecca Kobrin, *Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5–6.

16. On diaspora nationalism, see Simon Rabinovitch, "Diaspora, Nation, and Messiah: An Introductory Essay," in *Jews & Diaspora Nationalism: Writings on Jewish Peoplehood in Europe and the United States*, ed. Simon Rabinovitch (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012), xv–xli.

17. Among Eastern European cities during this period, Vilna was particularly subject to political instability as a result of rapidly changing borders. In a single eight-year period (1914–22), Vilna changed hands nine times as the city was variously occupied by Tsarist Russia, Germany, Poland, the Soviet Union, and Lithuanian independence fighters. On Vilna during World War I, see Israel Cohen, *Vilna* (1943; repr., Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 358–88; and Jacob Wygodski, *In shturm: Zikhroynes fun di okupatsye tsaytn* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1926). On Vilna during the Polish–Soviet War and the Lithuanian Wars of Independence, see Alfred E. Senn, *The Great Powers, Lithuania, and the Vilna Question, 1920–1928* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966); and Alfonsas Eidintas and Vytautas Žalys, with Alfred Erich Senn, *Lithuania in European Politics: The Years of the First Republic, 1918–1940,* ed. Edvardas Tuskenis (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

18. Roger Waldinger and David Fitzgerald, "Transnationalism in Question," *American Journal of Sociology* 109.5 (2004): 1177–95.

19. On transatlantic performers and producers in the early twentieth century, see Leigh Woods, *Transatlantic Stage Stars in Vaudeville and Variety* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Marlis Schweitzer, "Networking the Waves: Ocean Liners, Impresarios, and Broadway's Atlantic Expansion," *Theatre Survey* 53.2 (2012): 241–67.

20. On Maurice Bandmann, see "Mapping Global Theater Histories," *http://sb.dhpress.org/globaltheatres/* accessed May 1, 2014; and Christopher Balme, "Maurice Bandmann and the Beginnings of a Global Theatre Trade," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Society for Theatre Research, Montreal, Quebec, 17–20 November 2011.

21. David Savran, "Trafficking in National Brands: Notes on the Political Economy of Theater," lecture at the Mellon School of Theater and Performance Research, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 4 June 2013.

22. For example, when Polish lawmakers imposed a draconian 10 percent tax on productions of all plays by "foreign" writers, which included all Yiddish playwrights regardless of their country of origin, the branch of the Vilna Troupe that frequented Warsaw responded by leaving the city, to the acute disappointment of its Polish fans. See "Rekhtlozikayt un negishes fartrayben di Vilner trupe fun Varshe," *Haynt*, 10 May 1929, 10.

23. Yiddish theatre historian Michael Steinlauf has made a similar claim about the inventiveness of Polish Yiddish theatre at large, which he attributes to its "permanent economic crisis." Michael C. Steinlauf, "Polish-Jewish Theater: The Case of Mark Arnshteyn. A Study of the Interplay among Yiddish, Polish, and Polish-Language Jewish Culture in the Modern Period" (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1988), 263–4.

24. Notes for Buloff's 1979 keynote speech at an unidentified Jewish culture festival, Folder BG31, Papers: Collection 4, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Collection.

25. For digital maps documenting the proliferation and global presence of actors and branches of the Vilna Troupe from 1915 to 1935, visit *www.debracaplan.com/maps.html*.

26. Actress Luba Kadison recalls poor Jews coming to the theatre and saying, "I'll give you this chicken if you let us into the theatre. We want to see *The Dybbuk!*" Luba Kadison, interview with Leah Shlanger for Kol Yisrael, 1987, Tape Recording JSCRC 236 (1), Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Collection.

27. Luba Kadison and Joseph Buloff, with Irving Genn, *On Stage, Off Stage: Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theatre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Library, Judaica Division, 1992), 33.

28. Mikhl Weichert, "Di shefe fun Vilner trupes," *Literarishe bleter*, 25 July 1930, 560–561 at 560.

29. Chaim Geler, "Di 'Vilner' in Yerusholayim d'Rumenie," *Literarishe bleter*, 7 August 1925, 9.

30. See Nakhman Mayzel, *Geven a mol a lebn: Dos yidishe kultur-lebn in Poyln tsvishn beyde velt milkhomes* (Buenos Aires: Tsentral-Farband fun Poylishe Yidn in Argentine, 1951), 118–23; Ben Zion [B. Khilinovitsh], "Der dibek in a nayer geshtalt," *Der moment*, 18 January 1921, 2; Michael C. Steinlauf, "'Fardibekt!': An-sky's Polish Legacy," in *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish*

Intellectual at the Turn of the Century, ed. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 232–51; B. Karlinius, "Dos ekho: tsum 50-ter offirung fun dibek," *Der moment*, 28 January 1921, 6.

31. A digital map showing the geographical trajectories of the Vilna Troupe branches is available at *www.debracaplan.com/maps.html*.

32. These programs can be found in Box 16292, Theater: Series B, Collection 3, Eastern Europe, Judaica Ephemera Collection, Harvard Library, Judaica Division, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

33. Although the transnational orientation of the Vilna Troupe provided it with distinct advantages compared to other theatre companies, many of its artists still longed for a permanent home. "We remain artistically uncongealed, for all of our energy goes towards finding cities and countries where we can perform," lamented Vilna Troupe member Alexander Azro in 1924. "When we carry walking sticks in our hands, we cannot devote ourselves as we wish to our artistic development." Alef Alef, "Dos naye in der Vilner trupe," *Morgn zhurnal*, 18 January 1924, 6.

34. For example, Osterwa's 1926 production of Juliusz Słowacki's *The Constant Prince* (adapted from Calderón) framed the entire play as a sacrificial ritual with the tragic hero as a Christ-like martyr. See Kazimierz Braun, "Religious Theatre in a Totalitarian Atheistic State: The Polish Experience," in *Theatre and Holy Script*, ed. Shimon Levy (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 111–27. As Braun describes, "In the collective consciousness of the Poles a link and an analogy were forged between the Catholic Church and the Polish theatre," and Polish stage productions thus always had a "peculiar, semi-religious character" (115).

35. Luba Kadison, interview by Louise Cleveland, 1980, Tape Recording JSCRC 236 (6), Joseph Buloff and Luba Kadison Buloff: Recordings of Interviews, Readings, Lectures; 1960's–1980's, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Collection.

36. Y. B., "Hinter di kulisn fun der *Kidush-hashem* oyffirung: A shmues mit Mikhl Vaykhert," *Literarishe bleter*, 25 May 1928, 410–411 at 410. Critics compared this production favorably with Polish director Leon Schiller's acclaimed expressionist adaptation of Stefan Żeromski's novel *Dzieje grzechu* (The Story of Sin) at Teatr Polski in 1926. See also "Gdzie byłam, co widziałam," *Ewa: pismo tygodniowe*, 13 May 1928, 6; and Jakób Appenszlak, "Scena Żydowska," *Nasz Przegląd*, 4 May 1928, 5.

37. Buloff, "How the Yiddish Theatre " (written after attending an unidentified production of two short Beckett plays directed by Jack Garfein at the Clurman Theatre, probably in the early 1980s).

38. Ibid. On Czarist spies trying to determine the language of Jewish theatre productions during the Russian Empire's ban on Yiddish theatre, see Sandrow, 57–8.

39. Salomo A. Birnbaum, *Yiddish: A Survey and a Grammar* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979), 41.

40. Douglas B. Holt, *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2004), 2–3.

41. Ibid., 3.

42. Jan-Benedict E. M. Steenkamp, Rajeev Batra, and Dana L. Alden, "How Perceived Brand Globalness Creates Brand Value," *Journal of International Business Studies* 34.1 (2003): 53–65.

43. Holt, 2.

44. Yitskhok Katznelzon, "Der koyekh fun di Vilner," *Literarishe bleter*, 20 February 1931, 15–16 at 15.

45. On the global dimensions of Yiddish newspaper readership, see Kobrin, 189–90. It was also not uncommon for Yiddish newspapers to migrate between cities or countries due to political pressures and censorship issues. See Fishman, 21–4.

46. Letter from Mordkhe-Yosif Huberman, quoted in Chaim Finkelstein, *Haynt: A tsaytung bay yidn, 1908–1939* (Tel Aviv: I. L. Peretz Publishing House, 1978), 5.

47. Cahan traveled to Europe to attend Vilna Troupe productions in 1919 (Warsaw), 1921 (Berlin), and 1923 (London).

48. Pinkhes Katz, "Di barimte Vilner teater trupe—oder beyde kuni-lemels," *Forverts*, 30 December 1922, 3.

49. Katznelzon, 15.

50. The union was officially registered with the Polish government as Związek Artystów Scen Żydowskich (ZASŻ). See Marek Web, "Yiddish Actors Union," in Gershon David Hundert, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 2:2058–9. Online at *www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Yiddish_Actors_Union* (accessed 24 May 2014).

51. The only other exception was the Union des Artistes de la Langue Française, which had one branch for French actors and another for Belgian actors. Correspondence with the International Union of Theater Artists, 1927–1929, Box 1, Folder 240, Yidisher Artistn Fareyn Papers (RG 26), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

52. Ibid.

53. "Di Vilner in Nyuyork un di Nyuyorker in London," *Forverts*, 22 February 1924, 3; my emphasis.

54. The Vilna Troupe's Yiddish-language production of *Desire under the Elms* opened in Warsaw in October 1928. Just over a year later, in November 1929, a production of O'Neill's *Anna Christie* opened at Teatr Nowy in Warsaw, where it was falsely advertised in the Polish press as "O'Neill's first play in Poland." Polish productions of *Desire under the Elms* and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* soon followed. See Helena Griess, "Święto teatru żydowskiego," *Ewa: Pismo tygodniowe*, 21 October 1928, 4; and Halina Filipowicz-Findlay, "O'Neill's Plays in Poland," *Eugene O'Neill Newsletter* 3.1 (1979), *www.eoneill.com/library/newsletter/iii_1/iii-1e.htm*, accessed 18 November 2012 (which also inaccurately calls Anna Christie "O'Neill's first play to be produced in Poland").

55. According to linguist Salamo Birnbaum, "the territory of Yiddish, to express it paradoxically, consists of borderlines." Birnbaum, 40.