

## STANDARD THEATRE



Interior of the Victory Theatre, Toronto. *Jewish Life*, April 1948, p. 17. Ontario Jewish Archives, MG9.

### “Setting the Stage” for the Standard Theatre

It's time to open the curtain on the new **Yiddish** theatre in Toronto! It's August 30, 1922. The city's top Jewish theatre producer, Isidore Axler, is waiting to say hello to people in the lobby of the Standard Theatre. The orchestra is ready to play, and the choir of men and boys are ready to sing. Lots of people are coming to see the first show, called *An Eye for an Eye*. It's a new Yiddish musical with a famous American actor, Jacob Cone.

After the show, everyone will go to Caplan's café on Spadina Avenue, where people will talk about the show and share their thoughts. Actors will gather to sing and have fun together. The

audience can meet the actors, local talent, and even big stars. They can enjoy a cup of soup before going home to rest for another day of work in the clothing factories or shops.

### The Standard Theatre: A Jewish Community Treasure

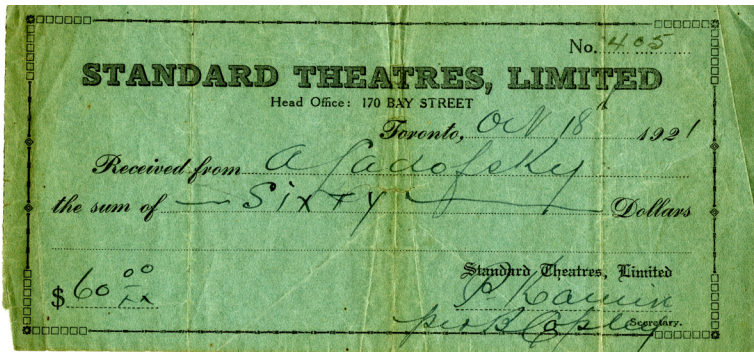
For many years, people enjoyed different plays at the Standard Theatre. They also liked going to Caplan's Cafe nearby. The Standard Theatre was in the middle of Toronto's immigrant Jewish neighbourhood. It opened in 1922 and was one of the first Yiddish theatres in Canada. Before that, Yiddish shows were performed in rented spots around the city. The Standard Theatre was new and special, and it was made by and for the Jewish community. It had 1,500 seats and many exciting features like **telephone booths**, a coat room, and dressing rooms for everyone.

The Standard Theatre was made to show off Yiddish plays from near and far. On opening night, even the mayor of Toronto came! A newspaper said it was a big deal for the Jews of Toronto. Mayor Maguire thanked the Jewish community for making the theatre and for adding something special to the city.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “New Yiddish theatre an asset to Toronto.” *The Canadian Jewish Review*, 8 September 1922. Reprinted in <http://www.billgladstone.ca/new-yiddish-theatre-an-asset-to-toronto-1922/>.

A theatre might not seem important for people who move to a new place. They have other **basic needs** that come first. However, like other immigrant communities, the Jewish people wanted shows in their own language, and Yiddish actors needed people to watch them. So, they made a theatre.

Everyone in the Toronto Jewish community helped the Standard. They paid money to build the theatre. In return, they got cheaper tickets to shows.



A Standard Theatres Ltd. receipt for \$60. This receipt was likely for the purchase of shares in the theatre. The Ladovsky family, who ran a popular bakery across the street from the theatre, were among the big supporters of the theatre. Ontario Jewish Archives, fonds 83, file 5.

## Yiddish Theatre: A Global Stage

Big stars from Europe and America came to the Standard. They spoke Yiddish in their plays. Sometimes, they performed original Yiddish plays and sometimes they performed old plays like Shakespeare, but in Yiddish. People in Toronto loved watching them. Mr. Axler, Toronto's top Jewish theatre producer, brought the best groups from America to perform at the Standard.



Yiddish Art Theatre. This theatre troupe was one of many Yiddish-language performing groups from New York that traveled across North America, presenting touring productions of their shows. These professional troupes brought a higher quality of performance to places like Toronto, where the local groups were sometimes less well developed. The Yiddish Art Theatre performed at the Standard on many occasions in the theatre's first decade, and performed at other Toronto theatres, as well. They presented original Yiddish plays as well as Yiddish-language or Russian-language interpretations of William Shakespeare, or more modern European playwrights like Anton Chekhov (Russian) and Henrik Ibsen (Norwegian). Even after the Standard became a movie theatre, these companies would come to other theatres in Toronto for special performances into the 1950s

Yiddish theatres helped Jewish immigrants feel at home. They saw plays in their own language, which connected them to where they came from and to other Jewish communities in big cities. It made them feel like they belonged. The stories and characters were familiar, even in a new place.

When movies got more popular than plays, many Yiddish actors started acting in movies. People like Isidore Axler turned their theatres into movie theatres.

## More than a Theatre: A Centre of Community Life

The Standard Theatre was used for many things. It was a place for the Jewish community to connect with each other. Sometimes it was used as a meeting place and sometimes it was used for fundraising

events. New immigrants could also go to the Standard Theatre to find friends from their old hometown. If you were new to Toronto, you could go to the theatre and ask people for help.

**Dont Forget . . .**  
**The Mount Sinai Hospital**  
**IT NEEDS YOUR SUPPORT**

COME to our Theatre Night, which takes place DECEMBER 23rd at STANDARD THEATRE, Dundas and Spadina.  
The finest Jewish Play will be staged that night, having not yet been produced this season.

Tickets can be obtained from  
**Mrs. H. Dworkin - 525 Dundas St. W.**

*The Standard was frequently used for community fundraisers to benefit local projects like Mount Sinai Hospital and the city's many Jewish mutual benefit societies. Here, the fundraiser is "the finest Jewish play" and the sale of tickets would support the hospital's growing needs. Since the ad does not mention the play's title or actors, it seems that the project of raising money for Mt. Sinai was enough of an encouragement to buy a ticket. Canadian Jewish Review, December 19, 1924, page 10.*

Lots of groups used the Standard Theatre for their special events. Gerry Kane, who worked in advertising, remembers being a kid performing there in the 1940s. His school did plays and concerts at the theatre.

The Standard Theatre was a special place for many kids. They acted in plays by famous writers like Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz. Being on stage made them feel big and powerful. They learned to be proud of their work and who they were. The theatre was also important for Jewish culture. It showed new plays about what was happening in the community. Many people who worked at the CBC, a big TV company, started at this theatre.<sup>2</sup>

The Standard Theatre was also a place where other groups could perform. In 1922, a Chinese opera group sang and acted on the stage. Many people from the nearby Chinese neighborhood came to watch.

## **A Changing Landmark**

For ten years, the Standard Theatre was very popular. However, people started to use English more and movies became more popular than plays. The theatre closed and became a movie theatre. It also changed names many times. In 1975, it became the Golden Harvest, a Chinese movie theatre. This is where people could watch action movies with stars like Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Now, people from Hong Kong could watch movies in their own language, just like the Jewish people had done in the same building years before.

<sup>2</sup> Gerry Kane, telephone interview with the author. 16 September 2024.

## Connections

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- What do you and your family/friends do for entertainment? Why is time together important or special? Are there places in your community where people can enjoy plays or movies in a language other than English or French?
  - How did the Standard Theatre change over the years?
  - How is entertainment in the 1900s similar to entertainment today? How is it different?
  - How can music, movies, plays or other arts help make people feel like they are part of a community?
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## Supplementary Resource

Video about the Standard Theatre. <https://ojascrollingspadina.org/project/stop-6-standard-theatre/>

## A Note to Teachers

Primary source quotes and texts, including quotes taken from diaries and scholarship, have been synthesized into more accessible language.