



STANDARD THEATRE



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

Historical Context: “Setting the Stage” for The Standard Theatre

It’s time to open the curtain on the “New Yiddish Temple of the Drama,” the great Yiddish theatre of Toronto! It’s August 30, 1922, and the city’s leading Jewish theatre producer, Isidore Axler, is waiting to greet audiences in the lobby of the Standard Theatre at the corner of Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street. The orchestra is ready in the pit, and the choir of men and boys are waiting to sing. Audiences are arriving in the hundreds for the opening night play, *An Eye for an Eye*, a new Yiddish-language musical starring the famous American actor Jacob Cone.

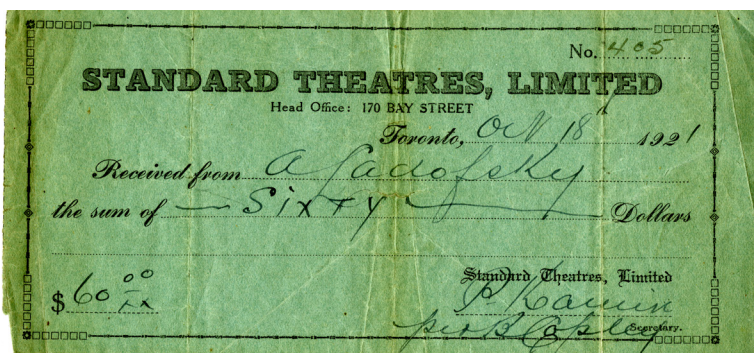
After the show, everyone will go to Caplan’s on Spadina Avenue, a European-style cafe where the air is filled with spontaneous reviews and arguments over the evening’s performances. Here, the actors will gather to roast and toast each other and sing into the night. The audience will mingle with the actors, meet the local talent and international stars, and enjoy a cup of soup before heading home to prepare for another day of work in the clothing factories or the shops.

The Standard Theatre: “A Monument to Jewish Enterprise in the City”

This kind of scene would repeat itself over and over for more than a decade, with different plays and different visitors but always anchored at the Standard Theatre and the bustling Caplan’s Cafe nearby. Located in the heart of Toronto’s immigrant Jewish neighbourhood, the Standard Theatre, which opened in 1922, was the first purpose-built Yiddish theatre in Canada. Since the late 1890s, troupes of performers had staged Yiddish performances in rented locations around town, but the Standard was a brand new effort by and for the Jewish community. The theatre could seat 1,500 people and had all the modern furnishings: telephone booths, a coat check, and dressing rooms for women as well as for men.

The Standard was built to showcase both local and international Yiddish-language talent. The mayor of Toronto attended the opening night and the *Canadian Jewish Review*—a newspaper that reported on Jewish news in Canada and around the world—reported the new theatre as “a monument to Jewish enterprise in the city.... Mayor Maguire congratulated the Jews of Toronto on having acquired the theater, and on possessing men with courage and foresight to undertake so difficult an enterprise.”¹ Toronto’s Jews were making their mark on the cultural landscape of the city.

A theatre might not seem like an important financial priority for an immigrant community. There are other, more basic needs that people have to meet before they can start to plan their entertainment. But just as Ukrainian, Finnish, Hungarian, Chinese, and Latvian communities in Canada developed theatre in their languages in the 1920s and 1930s, the Jewish community also yearned for entertainment in the familiar sounds of its home language, and Yiddish performers—some of whom had trained in the performing arts in Europe—needed an audience.



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.

The Standard had the support of the whole Toronto Jewish community. The building’s construction was funded by community members who bought shares in the theatre, in exchange for which they would get discounted tickets to performances.



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 Theatre: A Global Stage

Toronto’s homegrown Yiddish theatre groups pleased audiences, but the real thrill was to see the greatest European and American Jewish actors at the Standard—people like Jacob Cone, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, Molly Picon, and Jacob Ben-Ami, “known as one of the most intense and brilliant

¹ “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/>.

Jewish actors ever heard in Canada.”² Sometimes, they would perform original Yiddish plays, and sometimes they would perform Shakespeare and modern Russian theatre, translated into Yiddish. Toronto Jewish audiences were lucky that Mr. Axler, Toronto’s leading Jewish theatre producer, was able to bring the best and the brightest professional theatre companies from America. These companies would tour North America and Toronto’s Standard Theatre was one of their frequent stops. Yiddish theatres across North America gave immigrant Jews and their children a deep sense of belonging. The performances connected Toronto’s Yiddish-speaking community to their European roots and to Jewish communities in other North American cities, such as Montreal and New York. The shared language of Yiddish and the stories and characters of the Yiddish stage were enough to powerfully bind together hundreds of strangers looking for something familiar in a new world where so much was strange and foreign.

When movies became more popular than theatre, many of the actors of the Yiddish stage moved onto the screen, and many of the theatre producers and operators, like Isidore Axler, converted their businesses into movie houses.

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.

More than a Theatre: A Centre of Community Life

From the beginning, the stage at the Standard was used for more than professional Yiddish arts and culture. All the organizations that were the backbone of the Jewish community found a home in this theatre. The theatre was frequently rented out as a meeting place for lectures, union meetings, and fundraisers for projects like Mount Sinai Hospital and different mutual benefit societies in the Jewish community (see *Ostrovitzer Hilfs Farein* article). A new immigrant looking for people from their hometown might get this advice: “Look in the paper for the next benefit given by your *landslayt* [the people from your hometown]. Go stand outside the theater. If you don’t see anyone you know, just start asking people; for sure, somebody there will be able to tell you where they are.”³

² “Yiddish Art Group Comes to Victoria.” *The Toronto Daily Star*. 27 December 1941, p. 24.

³ Sandrow, Nahma. *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996. p. 82.

Many community groups also rented the stage as a venue for their special events. Gerry Kane, a long-time creative director in advertising, remembers what it was like to be a child performing on the stage of the Standard in the early 1940s, when his school would do their plays and their annual concerts there:

“ Hundreds of kids would pass through the Standard Theatre, doing plays from [secular Yiddish playwrights] Sholem Aleichem, I. L. Peretz, and more. When I was a kid, 7 or 8 years old in the early '40s, it was marvelous. You were maybe four-foot tall but [being on that stage] made you feel powerful! We learned not to be ashamed of what we produced and who we are.

The Standard Theatre was the centre of a huge political movement that was engaged in focusing on Jewish culture. Yiddish culture was the vitamin that gave strength to the Jewish community... They did new plays written for the moment, a reflection of what was happening in the community and a reflection of how Yiddish theatre was changing in New York.

When the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) [television] started, so many of their young producers and directors came out of the Yiddish young people's theatre.⁴ ”

The Standard was also a rental venue for other community groups from its earliest days. In 1922, for example, a touring Chinese opera company performed on the stage for a largely Chinese audience that lived in the neighbourhood next door.

A Changing Landmark

For a decade, the Standard's seats were full. Still, it was very hard to make Yiddish theatre a commercial success when the community was adapting to English-language culture in Canada and when movies became more appealing to modern audiences. The Standard had to change its role in the community. It closed briefly in 1934 and re-opened under a new name, the *Strand*, as a movie theatre in 1935. In 1941, it was transformed into the *Victory Cinema* to show support for the Second World War effort, and in 1961 to the *Victory Burlesque*, which closed in 1975. In 1975, it would become the *Golden Harvest* movie theatre, which was the first place in Toronto where you could see the martial arts action movies of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Now, a new group of immigrants who had come to Toronto from Hong Kong in the 1960s and '70s could enjoy their homegrown culture in their native language while they adapted to Canadian life, just as European Jews had done in the same building several decades earlier.

⁴ Gerry Kane, telephone interview with the author. 16 September 2024.

Connections

- 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/>