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Yiddish theatre on film

By Walter J. Lyng

Before the second edition of the Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival gets under way at the Segal Centre, those interested can find out about the birth of the festival thanks to Ben Gonshor's and Raphael Levy's documentary *Mending The Torn Curtain*.

Airing June 2 on PBS, the film tells the story of the festival's inception along with how all the surviving Yiddish theatres from around the world were gathered for a week long celebration of theatre, cinema, music, outdoor events and learning exchanges.

"Originally when I was working at the Segal Centre, I had hired Raphael to do a short 10-15 minute documentation of the festival because I knew it was a historic event," says producer Gonshor. "It was the first time in 130 years of Yiddish theatre that a festival of this kind was put together."

"We recorded about 100 hours of footage and as Raphael was going through it, he said, 'Look, Ben, I think there's a bigger story that can be told here.'"

Coming from Middle Eastern decent, director Levy was entering an unfamiliar world.

"My exposure to Yiddish was fairly minimal so what I was really hoping to bring was a fresh perspective, sort of an outsider's point of view," he says. "It wasn't mired in old thoughts and old stereotypes. It was about discovery at every step."

The film takes its title from a phrase used to describe the goals of the festival's founder.

"Mending the torn curtain as a term was really meant to represent the work that Dora Wasserman was trying to do in rebuilding Yiddish theatre after the Second World War," says Gonshor. "The torn curtain is meant to symbolize the annihilation of a civilization and, specifically, the death of Yiddish theatre in Europe."

In the near future, Gonshor says he hopes to sell DVDs of the film to educational institutions

"We think that it's a historic document," he says.

"We think that it's something that gives people a taste of modern Jewish culture that they otherwise wouldn't experience."

For more information, visit mendingthetorncurtain.com

The Gazette

A new nameplate for The Gazette in Montreal

Montreal Gazette
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Actors take part in this year's festival, which closes with a screening of filmmaker Raphael Levy's documentary chronicling the 2009 edition of the Yiddish Theatre Festival, the first such gathering in more than 130 years.

Photograph by: Robi Cohen

MONTREAL - Some stories take on a life of their own. That's what happened with *Mending the Torn Curtain*, a documentary about the inaugural edition of the Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival, in 2009.

It all started when Ben Gonshor, then marketing director of the Segal Centre, contacted filmmaker Raphael Levy to make a short video about the event.

"I wanted to archive the festival," Gonshor said. "It was the first time in over 130 years of Yiddish theatre that any type of gathering like this had taken place. It was a historic occasion.

"I figured he'd do a 10- to 15-minute 'making of the festival' documentary. That's what we set out to do. But over 10 days, he ended up with over 100 hours of footage. He said, 'Look, I'll make a shorter version, but I think there's a feature documentary in there, and I'd like to make it.' "

Gonshor came on-board as producer and co-writer for the film, and off they went. *Mending the Torn Curtain* tells the story not only of the festival, but of Yiddish theatre in Montreal, by delving into the backstory of Yiddish theatre actress and teacher Dora Wasserman. Through black-and-white photos and archival footage, we get a sense of Wasserman's commitment to the art form and her influence on an entire generation of Montrealers.

Her enthusiasm was passed on to daughter Bryna Wasserman, director of the Yiddish Theatre Festival and the Segal Centre, who in July will move on to become executive director of New York-based National Yiddish Theatre – Folksbiene.

"I don't think there would be a film or a festival without her," Levy said of Bryna Wasserman. "The

Wasserman is the central character of Levy and Gonshor's film, ever rallying the troupes as she brings together Yiddish theatre groups from Poland, Romania, Israel, Australia and the U.S.

"There are two parts to the story," Gonshor said. "Bryna's story – the passion of one person to see things through – and then the festival itself. What really stood out for me was the interest these theatres had in wanting to come and be part of (the festival).

"It wasn't just some gig they were going to ... Everyone felt like the festival belonged to them." Mending the Torn Curtain marks a turning point in both Gonshor and Levy's careers.

Though he has a Master's degree in film production from the University of Southern California, this is Gonshor's first feature film.

"It's really a passion project for me," he said. "I grew up in the Yiddish theatre of Montreal. For me, the festival is the culmination of a lifelong association with a community I was really close to." Gonshor is currently writing his first screenplay, a psychological thriller.

Levy's previous film experience had been mostly in fiction. Mending the Torn Curtain is his first foray into documentary, but not his last.

"Making this documentary inspired me to make more," he said. "Sometimes things happen in strange ways."

Mending the Torn Curtain closes the Yiddish Theatre Festival with a screening Tuesday at 8 p.m. at the Segal Centre for Performing Arts, 5170 Côte Ste. Catherine Rd. Call 514-739-7944 or visit www.segalcentre.org

For more information, see www.mendingthetorncurtain.com.

THE Montrealer

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***Mending the Torn Curtain* – a film celebrating the first Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival**

Montreal filmmakers produce an exceptional film about a unique festival
By Peter Kerr

Filmmakers Ben Gonshor and Raphael Levy are excited about the early acceptance of their documentary film – *Mending the Torn Curtain*. The first screening in Los Angeles in early May elicited a positive reaction. Based on reports from the LA Festival, a representative from the Atlanta Jewish Film Festival has already requested a “screener” (film industry speak for a sample) so that they could consider *Mending the Torn Curtain* for the upcoming Atlanta festival. When they sent a screener to the Vermont PBS affiliate Mountain Lake Television, Ben and Raphael received an immediate positive response, and their documentary aired on June 2.

Their film is also scheduled to be the major closing event at the Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival, which is both an honour and fitting – the latter because the documentary was created as both a record and celebration of the first Montreal International Yiddish Festival in 2009. The Segal Centre Artistic Director had the idea of staging and hosting an International Yiddish Festival to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of her mother’s theatre company – The Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre.

Ben provides some background. “Raphael is an accomplished filmmaker, and he and I were

working together when I was Director of Marketing and New Media at The Segal Centre. I had asked him to film enough of the Yiddish Festival so that we’d have a 10–15 minute archive of the event.”



Co-producers Raphael Levy and Ben Gonshor attend the screening of *Mending The Torn Curtain* at the Los Angeles Film Festival, where their film earned solid reviews

Raphael picks up the conversation; "I was fascinated by Bryna's enthusiasm and her passion for bringing together Yiddish Theatres and scholars. I became fascinated with her dedication and the wonderful singing, dancing and general celebration during the festival. It was like a summer camp for Jewish Baby Boomers!" As the 2009 festival drew to a close – Raphael had over 100 hours of film. Ben continues; "Raphael saw a feature length movie in that footage, and so we started to work."

Bryna Wasserman is the central figure, beginning with her decision to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of her mother's Yiddish theatre company with an international festival. "The Festival is unique and therefore the film is also unique," notes Ben. "Yiddish theatre has a thousand year tradition. Before WWII, there were hundreds of Yiddish theatre companies all over Europe. Now you can count them on your fingers. That's one of the reasons the festival was so exciting and successful. There hasn't been a festival in 140 years! I believe that Raphael has captured the festival's excitement."

Ben and Raphael showed early versions of the film to friends and film industry associates. "They all said that we should include more scenes with people enjoying the festival. So back we went into the studio, with Raphael's 100 hours of footage and we re-worked the film." It appears that listening to those opinions was a wise decision; based on the response from the Los Angeles screening in May and the immediate acceptance by PBS affiliate, Mountain Lake Television.

Mending the Torn Curtain will be shown to close out the Montreal International Yiddish Festival on June 23 in The Segal Centre's Le Studio. Tickets: 514-739-7944 You may also purchase the DVD from the website: www.mendingthetorncurtain.com

The Canadian Jewish news

Canadian Jewish News
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Co-writers mend torn curtain of Yiddish theatre

Ben Gonshor and Raphael Levy thought they were putting together a 10-minute archival short on the making of the first Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival in 2009.

Both were working for the Segal Centre for Performing Arts at the time, Gonshor as marketing director and Levy as a contract videographer.

Upon completion of the short, the centre was delighted with the product. The two collaborators, however, felt unfulfilled, left with 100 hours of footage and the conviction that a story still lay in their raw materials.

"That's how the process of making *Mending the Torn Curtain* began," says Gonshor. "The festival was in the summer, and by the fall, Raphael was saying, 'Let's make a movie.' We sort of backed ourselves into a 70-minute film. It's not like we wrote

it first and then shot it."

They rescued comprehensive interviews with Bryna and Ella Wasserman, daughters of Dora Wasserman, who were heading the festival, and the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre (DWYT) 50th anniversary reunion celebrations. They salvaged stills of Dora in the 1950s as she sowed the seeds of her theatre company.



Arts Scene

Heather Solomon

They saved enthusiastic chats, often through interpreters, with the artistic directors of the festival's visiting troupes from Romania, Poland, Israel, the United States, Australia, Austria, France and Canada, and the colourful footage of these companies in full costume against sets like the one inspired by Chagall's paintings of floating folklore.

"My passion is making films and telling stories, but being Sephardic, I'd had no connection to Yiddish before. I was surprised and amazed," says Levy, the director, whose parents were born in Egypt. "I asked someone who came from Australia why they would travel 30 hours to come to this festival, and he said when you think of the 140 years of history of the Yiddish theatre, there has never before been a festival of this kind where theatres have come together, so what's 30 hours in 140 years?"

Gonshor already knew the significance of the gathering, having grown up in the DWYT as an actor (David in *Lies My Father Told Me*, Khonen in *The Dybbuk*), playwright (the musical *Houdini* that wowed the Montreal Jazz Festival) and bass guitarist (*Those Were the Days*).

His master's of fine arts in motion picture producing from the University of Southern California prepared him to produce *Mending the Torn Curtain*.

"The Segal's special projects co-ordinator Edit Kuper came up with the title and allowed us to use it. It's a beautiful line that speaks to what Dora was trying to do when she immigrated to Canada, which is mend the torn curtain of her beloved Yiddish theatre after it was ripped apart by the war," says Gonshor. "The film is about capturing the historic moment of the first festival."

Out of the festival came the realization that Yiddish theatre must remain "a dichotomy.

Romania brought the classic *Mirele Efros* and also a new piece called *A Wedding and a Divorce*. "Israel presented a Neil Simon adaptation and a brand-new play to show



Film director Raphael Levy, left, and producer Ben Gonshor co-wrote *Mending the Torn Curtain*.

[Heather Solomon photo]

that Yiddish is alive and well in Israel and evolving," says Gonshor.

"As the head of Yiddish theatre in Australia said, just as the Royal Shakespeare Company has as its mandate to safeguard the legacy of Shakespeare and his canon, so too must Yiddish theatre. But the Polish company argued that Yiddish theatre should go with the times and be cutting edge. I think for the future, it has to be a mix of the two."

Gonshor and Levy hopped a plane to Los Angeles to present the film in its world premiere May 11 at the Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival. On June 2 at 9 p.m. it will be screened on Mountain Lake PBS television.

The film closes the second edition of the Yiddish theatre festival at the Segal's Studio on June 21 at 8 p.m., then it moves on to more festivals and the curricula of Jewish studies departments around the world.

The DVD is available through www.mendingthetorncurtain.com and has, as its mandate, to show that the spirit of Yiddish theatre is alive and well, still mending the torn curtain for future generations.