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# TEN YEARS ARTEF

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SCENE FROM "DOSTIGAYEV" BY MAXIM GORKY



FIRST ACT OF "CHAINS" BY H. LEIVICK





## AN ISLAND OF CREATIVE ACHIEVEMENT

By JOSEPH FREEMAN

*Editor of the New Masses*

IT IS a wonderful thing to watch the transformation of the small and obscure artistic experiment into a recognized force. I remember the Artef confined to the "movement", and not even the whole of the movement. It belonged to the Jewish comrades, to that rich cultural world around the Freiheit which the rest of America ought to know but doesn't because of language barriers. It belonged to the advanced needle trade workers, to some of the Yiddish-speaking intelligentsia.

And now Artef is on Broadway, part of America's theatre. Leading American writers, artists, actors, directors, journalists—men and women who do not understand Yiddish when they hear it but know great theatre when they see it—come to enjoy, to pay tribute, to learn. In the sea of commercial production they greet an island of creative achievement, profound imagination, rich emotion—everything that the theatre at its best should have.

This is due in part to the fact that the "movement" itself has come out of its old restricted world and has entered the national life as a respected force. Proletarian art in various forms has become a mighty stream in American art; the voice of the worker striving for a better world has been heard across the land through the medium of the writer, painter and actor who, for this reason or that, also wants a better world. America was prepared by the economic crisis to hear the message of social struggle and social transformation.

Under these circumstances, Artef had

special advantages: it was not the product of mere concept. This working-class theatre was created by workers whose life was made up of the factory by day and the stage at night. There was emotional continuity; the life reflected on the stage was the life actually lived at the machine, on the picket line, in the tenement, at the May Day parade.

Men and women who made Artef had both the integrity and the courage of the proletariat, and theirs was the greatest gift an artist could have: their art was an inseparable aspect of their living world.

What brainstorms, what heartaches the middle-class artist has before he bridges the gulf between his education and his dawning understanding of the contemporary social struggle! What debates over art and propaganda, content and form, individual and class! With the Artef things were more clear. Life was the life of the workers; theatre was the dramatic method of presenting.

Thanks to the talent, the self-sacrifice and the courageous imagination of the men and women of Artef, we have this remarkable theatre; but thanks too to the class from which they sprang, of which they are a part, from which they draw their artistic sustenance.

Perhaps the impact which Artef has had upon the recognized American theatre will open the way to further contact between English-speaking Americans and those vast minority groups (most of them workers) whose own American life has produced a rich art in other languages—Yiddish, Italian, Hungarian, Slovak, Greek. Perhaps, too, the English-language theatre of the left will learn (it is always anxious to learn) the meaning of pure-hearted devotion to a theatre of the people whose democratic nature is itself a source of artistic strength.





## AN INSPIRATION AND AN EXAMPLE

By JOHN HOWARD LAWSON

During the past two years there has been a growing recognition that the Artef is far more than a talented foreign language producing group—that it represents, in fact, one of the most vital forces in the development of the American drama as a whole. Although this recognition has been slowly dawning on theatre people and on the theatre-going public, the applause which the Artef has received has remained too small in proportion to the group's accomplishments.

The significance of the Artef lies in the fact that it is the only presently functioning collective in the production field; as such it has been able to achieve a degree of style and technical facility in ensemble work which cannot be attained under the slipshod conditions of commercial production. The secret of the Artef's glowing productions lies in the form of organization which it has adopted and in the magnificent artistic integrity which has served to preserve and strengthen the collective method. The Artef has operated modestly, on a semi-profession-

al basis; the acceptance of this limitation, the avoidance of the competitive battle of Broadway, has accounted in large measure for its ability to advance coherently, and to maintain its work on a sound social basis.

The Artef's strong progress may be contrasted with the uneven and confused development of the Group Theatre. In the case of the Group, the pressure of the Broadway system has obstructed the attempt to work collectively. Thus the brilliant individual talents assembled in the Group remained individual; this was reflected both in the organizational character of the Group and in the lack of unified style in its productions.

The Artef's history is a story of slow and painstaking accomplishment, of grueling work and devotion, of serious sacrifices which have led to impressive accomplishments. At the present time, the Artef faces what will probably be the most fruitful and most creative period of its career. To all those who believe in the theatre as a socially valid art, it serves both as an inspiration and an example.



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## OUT OF THE SWEATSHOPS

By EMANUEL EISENBERG

THERE ARE probably as many ways of learning how to act as there are of acting: ask a practitioner, a teacher or a critic, and each will advise you along the lines of his background or prejudice. Go to a dramatic school; join the company of a versatile star; get your trimming in winter or summer stock; learn to act by acting (which is to say, taking anything whatever that comes along for the sake of picking up all you can). This is some of the counsel distributed to the young and the seeking. But during the last few years an entirely new method of studying acting has arisen. Of a Sunday night you take the long trail to 247 West 48th Street, where the striking name of Artef stands in neat little electrics above the small marquee. And it doesn't particularly matter which production of theirs you are going to see, because you are going mainly to learn about the art of acting.

One says Sunday because Sunday is the evening when actors occupied in the English-speaking theatre are free, whereas the performers in the Yiddish-speaking Artef prefer to halt from their labors on Monday nights, the week-end being the time of their greatest attraction. Of course you can go on any night at all—and you probably will. For when the Artef makes a devotee, it makes it hard and fast. It was in no way unusual for actors and other theatre workers to come to see "Recruits" as many as six or eight times two seasons ago; and the repeaters have been almost as frequent and ardent with "200,000," the current success.

No one anywhere has had the training of these Artef players, because no one anywhere in the world of passionate theatre competition is willing to halt and take life in a slow, steady stride of learning and growth. The same thirty people have been together for ten years now and not even the severest difficulties have ever threatened even



remotely to break them up. Most of them are in and about the age of thirty. The prospect is that they will go on and on this way, unbroken. Because what keeps them together is a concept and an ideal as fixed and profound as the one that animated Stanislavsky's company in Moscow. Even with the relative success of such efforts at a permanent company in America as Eva La Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre, the Group Theatre and the Actors' Repertory Company, the Artef is the only one which can fully lay claim to comparison with the Moscow Art Theatre—in its method of operation, its ensemble work and its widely acknowledged artistic accomplishments.

Artef is a contraction of Arbeiter Theater Verband, meaning Workers' Theatre Group—which is in itself the key to the organization. It was not quite eleven years ago that the Freiheit, a daily Yiddish newspaper, issued a call to all young workers interested in the formation of a dramatic studio. The springboard to activity was intense discontent with the antiquated vulgarities and incredible melodrama of the Second Avenue show-shops.



With the lone exception of Maurice Schwartz, who intermittently offered a production of merit and stature, the Yiddish theatre was bare of anything approximating a sober and significant treatment of the problems of the world around us. The group of young workers who responded to the call of the Freiheit had neither the personal equipment as yet nor the technical wherewithal for production to alter the situation that they minded so much. Before anything else, a new approach had to be found, and they were there with patience to find it. Production was still very far from anybody's mind; they wanted to learn and they wanted to learn together.

Evening classes were accordingly begun in diction, dramatic literature, dancing and character interpretation. The people worked during the day at their various trades and no one was free to come at any time except at night, so that progress was even slower than it would normally be with such modest and humble beginnings. They had done two experimental productions with their teacher, Jacob Mestel, when they realized that among

the elementary knowledge they should be acquiring was the art of make-up. The famous Habima theatre had recently visited New York and then split its ranks—half of them going off to Palestine to form the national theatre there, the other half spreading out over the country here. One Benno Schneider seemed to be available and interested. They invited him and he came. A new breath suddenly entered their quiet ranks—a breath of confidence and professionalism and courageous vision. Schneider was apparently teaching only the makeup problems for which he had been engaged, but imperceptibly he was insinuating a point of view and a sense of directorial style which was gradually taking firm hold of all of the students.

The sense of professionalism began to grow; the young workers were acquiring such crafts in the theatre as went into their own trades during the day's work. By the time the third production (Schneider's first) was ready—the "Aristocrats" of Sholom Aleichem—they had been working together



SCENE FROM "THE THIRD PARADE" BY CH. WALKER AND P. PETERS



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SCENE FROM "YEGOR BULICHEV" BY MAXIM GORKY

night after night for three seasons. And they presented themselves for a week-end of performances at the American Laboratory Theatre in the East Fifties with great trepidation. The result was electrifying. A homogeneous band of youthful performers had importantly come together to give quality and color to the drama in Yiddish, and the work of an extraordinarily inventive director was very much in evidence. But such a week-end of performances was all they could do, for they had no theatre of their own—no audiences they could rely upon for regular attendance—no funds for the making of production, and (apparently the most insoluble difficulty of them all), no real time to get plays ready with any frequency because of their daily jobs and the limitations of rehearsal and study to the evenings.

But they knew there was a demand for them. They knew they had the material for significant ensemble work. They knew the kind of plays they wanted to do were hungered for by many, the play of social satire and social analysis. And they knew they had a director without peer on the Yiddish stage. It was to be several years before they would learn that many in the English-speaking theatre considered Schneider without peer there, too. So they continued doggedly, with an average of one production a season, painfully put together with painfully acquired funds—sometimes at the Heckscher Theatre on 103rd Street, other times at the Fifth Avenue Theatre on 26th Street, then again at the American Laboratory Theatre. The runs grew; their audiences were developing and looking forward to their work to the point of taking parties in advance which would guarantee





SCENE FROM "HIRSH LECKERT" BY A. VEYORKE

the evening's receipts. Critics began to follow and examine their offerings. An executive staff came into serious being and aspired to make the Artef an intrinsic part of progressive Yiddish cultural life by establishing increasingly firmer contacts with audiences and organizing their support.

And the great day came. The tiny Edyth Totten Theatre in West 48th Street near Eighth Avenue, in very limited demand because of its intimacy and the seating capacity of 298, was suddenly available for a year's lease. The slight accumulation of funds was hastily examined; a campaign for subsidies was passionately entered upon; loans were frantically negotiated; and they took the house, renaming it the Artef and putting out a sign which announced that they were performing a comedy called "Recruits." For weeks no one was interested. The few who knew anything about it felt it was all very charming for a group ardent amateurs to be devoting their nights to play-making, but they spent their days in shops and factories, and that meant they couldn't be **really** professional. Also, it was known (to the same few) that the Artef players constructed and painted their own settings, sewed their own costumes, manipulated their own lights and shifted their own scenery during intermissions. All this sounded very much on the side of little theatre zeal, and almost

nobody was willing to believe that it could honestly be good. And then the storm broke. It is hard to say how it began, whether it was Sam Jaffe or Herman Shumlin or Edward G. Robinson, or all of them, or just a natural concatenation of events which brought the Artef into the high glare of fame. Because they started to pour—the people from Broadway and the people who had hitherto thought all Yiddish theatre was restricted to the carnival noise and glitter of Second Avenue.

The originality and audacity of "Recruits", the assured extravagance of acting style, the flights of wit and fancy in interpolated song and dance, the naturalness of such song and dance within a legitimate play, the interplay of performers in large and dazzling patterns—all this took the town by its well-known ears. Plain ordinary decent folk couldn't even get a look-in for a time; they were trampled down by actors and directors and producers and even writers who were coming to find out how the miracle of an ensemble company had been worked. Actors had been practically ordered to attend by the producers whose works contained them. This is probably one of very few instances on record where sheer watching was supposed—or hoped—to impart the spectator with an equal gift.

So the Artef's invasion of Broadway was spectacularly successful as artistry; the critics



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from the English dailies came and cheered and renown spread wide. But it was still an experiment with these courageous young workers. In one season they obviously could not tell how surely to predict their existence as the tenants of their own playhouse on a year's lease. Before the following season, perhaps, they could calculate a really sound and professional program. Meantime they must continue as they always had in order not to be caught by privation. So daily shop-work went on, and every night they came to the theatre to perform and shift scenery, and every Monday night (supposedly their evening off) they came to rehearse and study. And no one was paid at all for his work in the theatre; his living was understood as coming entirely from his daily trade. The toll of such a regime was naturally tremendous at the end of the season; there was sickness and even collapse from overwork. For whatever little money came in had to go to the maintenance of the theatre as an establishment and this was as everybody chose.

The following season, their second on Broadway, a slight adjustment was made: a nucleus of five was selected as so important to the basic activities of production that they would have to abandon their bread-earning trades and work as full-time theatre function-

aries, supported by such funds as could be secured during the course of the season. Miraculously, it worked. But the problem of the rest of the company was still not solved. This time a revival of "Aristocrats" set the town agog and had all the actors in town piling into the tiny theatre again on Sunday nights to pick up some pointers.

This year, the tenth of their existence, complete professionalism has set in: no one works in shops during the day at all; and no actor shifts scenery now. For there are stage hands and an electrician and a house manager and all of the crew that go with a full-functioning theatre as such. Their audiences are now sturdy and constant their position in the world of social theatre is high. Such an organization as the Theatre Union Acknowledges that it could scarcely have come into existence without the example of the Artef. The initiative of an active newspaper, the privations and devotion of a group of thirty young socially minded shop workers, and a director who originally thought he wanted to teach makeup, have all come nobly through to form one of the staunchest, most courageous and incorruptible permanent theatres in English or Yiddish that we have today.

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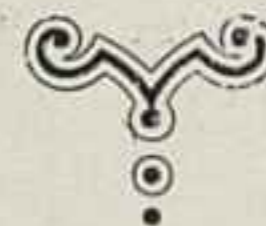
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פ. גאלדבערג, ס. קליין, ב. אליווער,  
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א. לייב, ז. מענדאָרף, פ. גאַלדשטיין,  
וו. טשודנאַווסקי, ל. שניצער, ס.  
מאַנדעל, י. זעל, ס. ראָזען,  
פּרוי. מענעס.



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# JUBILEE CELEBRATION TEN YEARS ARTEF

Saturday Evening, March 13, 1937

at the HIPPODROME

## PROGRAM

### PART I

- 1) FREIHEIT GESANG FAREIN .....SONGS
- 2) JOSEPH BULOFF .....RECITATIONS
- 3) DR. A. MUKDONI .....GREETING
- 4) CELIA ADLER .....“TELEGRAM” (Scene)
- 5) S. LIFSCHITZ .....TEN YEARS ARTEF
- 6) LILLY SHAPERO .....DANCE

INTERMISSION TEN MINUTES

### PART II

- 7) MENACHEM RUBIN .....SONGS
- 8) LILLIAN TAIZ .....IN A SCENE
- 9) M. OLGIN .....GREETING
- 10) “KOIFT, KOIFT KOINEM”

Goldfaden Musical Review by MORRIS SHIFRIS

Music Arranged by Morris Rouch—Dances by Lillian Shapero

Sets Designed by Moi Solotaroff—Costumes by Moi Solotaroff and Sol Anisfeld

Direction by Jacob Mestel and Benno Schneider

### CAST OF CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE

|                                 |                      |   |                         |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|---|-------------------------|
| 1st Herald .....                | Ch. Brisman          | Sholemuni .....   | H. Bender               |
| 2nd Herald .....                | A. Horwitz           | Kuni--lemel .....   | M. Goldstein            |
| Bobé Yachne .....               | S. Silverberg        | Kalmen-Shadchun .....   | A. Cohen                |
| Bassia .....                    | D. Drute             | Eliokem .....   | S. Levine               |
| Mirele (Her Step Daughter)..... | A. Babad             | An Old Woman .....  | Ch. Shpiner             |
| 1st Peddler .....               | S. Nagoshiner        | A. Peasant .....  | J. Levenstein           |
| 2nd Peddler .....               | M. Freidman          | Organ Grinder .....   | J. Gostinsky            |
| 3rd Peddler .....               | A. Eisen             | A Beggar .....  | M. Schaff               |
| 4th Peddler .....               | L. Rymer             | Turks: Gwartzman, C. Don, Holtz, A. Sandroff,<br>Zucker, Schneiderman   |                         |
| 5th Peddler .....               | T. Todrina           | Children: T. Brandt, D. Goldstein, S. Gritz, R.<br>Guion, F. Lerman, B. Molotnik, G. Russler,<br>H. Rubin.            |                         |
| 1st Fish Peddler .....          | S. Anisfeld          | Women: H. Bailey, S. Kallenberg, E. Sharoff.  |                         |
| 2nd Fish Peddler .....          | M. Kirsh             | Men: Gwartzman, C. Don, Holtz, A. Lipton,<br>A. Sandroff, Zucker, M. Klapper, Schnei-<br>derman, B. Schecter, Kannar. |                         |
| 1st Butcher .....               | A. Hirshbein         | Solo (“Shtei Oif Mein Folk” and a “Turkish<br>Song”)  |                         |
| 2nd Butcher .....               | A. Shapiro           | I. GLADSTONE  |                         |
| 3rd Butcher .....               | A. Sandroff          | Stage Manager .....   | S. Levine               |
| Policeman .....                 | M. Eisenberg         | Assistants.....   | H. Bender, M. Eisenberg |
| A Customer .....                | F. Low               |   |                         |
| Her Maid .....                  | Z. Lerner            |   |                         |
| Pancake Vendors .....           | G. Ruslser, L. Rymer |   |                         |
| Max .....                       | I. Welichansky       |   |                         |
| Hotsmach .....                  | L. Freilich          |   |                         |
| A Little Girl .....             | G. Russler           |   |                         |

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