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Filmmaker David Weintraub is preserving Miami Beach's Yiddish vaudeville

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Before it was Mansion, Club Z, Club 1235, or Glam Siam, the trendy South Beach venue was Cinema Theater, a popular movie house where for almost 30 years the hot attraction was Yiddish-American vaudeville.

"Mission cost: $2.05. Elderly crowds filed down Washington Avenue and wrapped around 13th Street, waiting for the 3 p.m. matinee and floor show. Headliner acts included local comedy legend Art Furman, 81, who now makes his living building prosthetic eyes and still performs Yiddish skits at Century Village in Pembroke Pines.

"We used to call it the coal mine, because you walked in at 3 o'clock and you didn't walk out until after 10," Furman said of Cinema Theater, where performers sometimes put on three shows a day, seven days a week.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, Yiddish drama thrived on South Beach, a haven for snowbirds and European Jewish immigrants. Miami Beach's six Yiddish theaters drew comedians from the Catskills and classically trained character actors from New York City. Some packed in audiences of 300 to 400.

But like other cultural relics of old South Beach, Yiddish acts went the way of the $3.69 cafeteria lunch special. Displaced by the Art Deco revolution in the 1930s, when developers helped reinvent the Beach as a party paradise, Yiddish theaters and many of their patrons moved north, assimilated and died out.

Now David Weintraub — lawyer, Yiddish enthusiast and budding documentary filmmaker — hopes to write Yiddish vaudeville a worthy epitaph in his forthcoming film Where Neon Goes to Die. (The title
EULUSIVE FILM

"Finding archival footage about this era has been nearly impossible, and that's part of the story," said Weintraub, executive director of the Doris Streisand Center for Yiddish Culture in Pinetrest.

"In a way, Yiddish and all the ethnic legacies that planted themselves in such fertile tropical soil have been lost. We live in such a historical place where everything is about today. We recycle this place."

The film — which is scheduled to premiere at the Miami Jewish Film Festival in January — depicts the old South Beach as a cultural playground for people who spoke Yiddish, a 2,000-year-old language that blended Hebrew, Aramaic, German, Slavic and bits of Romance languages.

"People used to love to come there and hear their original language spoken," said Sylvia Rieck, one of the "Feder Sisters," a sister act that performed in Yiddish, French, German, Spanish, Russian and Polish at the Beach Theater on Lincoln Road.

"We have such a diverse and varied history. It's a shame that the Yiddish language isn't spoken more now."

Rieck and other prominent Yiddish actors have lingered in South Florida. Ari Fuhrman still puts on some Yiddish acts, though much of his material is now in English, he said. So does Charlotte Cooper, a third-generation Yiddish actor, who fled Germany during World War II after her father convinced a New York theater company to sponsor her work visa. Cooper, who lives in Pembroke Pines, still performs her one-woman comedy routine in senior citizens' homes, synagogues and cafes.

"I'm well known in this area," said Cooper, who starred in Goodbye Koptin (Goodbye Fauber) at Miami Beach's Roosevelt Theater.

"I'm booked until New Year's."

Yiddish theater took root in the United States around the turn of the 20th century, when Jews fleeing anti-Semitism in Europe settled in New York. By the 1920s, there were more than 20 Yiddish theaters clustered in Manhattan's lower East Side. But Yiddish culture waned as Jews assimilated and stopped speaking the language, the mother tongue, said Stefan Kanfer, author of a forthcoming book on Yiddish theater.

"Gradually, it became an unused tongue, and only now has it been revived," he said.

Yiddish culture underwent a second growth spurt in South Florida in the 1950s and 1960s, when Miami Beach had six Yiddish theaters: the Plaza Theater on Washington Avenue and First Street; the Cameo Theater on 14th Street; the Roosevelt theater at Arthur Godfrey Road; the Beach Theater on Lincoln Road; the Konoover Theater on Collins; and Cinema Theater, Miami's longest running Yiddish theater, which closed in 1975.

A RESURGENCE

Today, aficionados like Weintraub are leading a Yiddish cultural resurgence.

Weintraub grew up immersed in the Yiddish spoken by his Russian grandparents. The former civil rights lawyer now spends his days translating Yiddish poetry, teaching online Yiddish classes and putting together lectures and exhibits on Yiddish.

The film project began as a family history project. Weintraub always wondered what his grandparents and other Yiddish-speaking actors did for fun in South Beach, he said. It quickly turned into a cultural scavenger hunt.

He scoured Jewish museums, he put ads in The Miami Herald, the Jewish Journal and The Sun-Sentinel looking for Yiddish-speaking actors, radio hosts and theater fans. He sifted through newspaper archives, Jewish magazines and old TV footage.

His search turned up a dozen photographs and some archived footage of Yiddish "friendship circles," impromptu musical gatherings on Ocean Drive.

"The few gams I have just demonstrate what a paradise this must have been for those folks," Weintraub said. "They saw Miami Beach as a tropical shtetl [village]. It was a place where they could get back to where they left off in Europe."