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VOICES OF THE PAST: David Weintraub works on the narration for his documentary about Yiddish vaudeville, *Where Neon Goes to Die*.

SEARCH FOR HISTORY

Filmmaker David Weintraub is preserving Miami Beach's Yiddish vaudeville

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Before it was Mansion, Club Z, Club 1235, or Glam Slam, 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 \$1.05. 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 Ari Fuhrman, 81, who now makes his living building prosthetic eyes and still performs Yiddish skits at Century Village in Pembroke Pines.

MIAMIHERALD.COM: SYLVIA ROEBUCK AND MIMI SLOAN, AKA THE FEDER SISTERS, SING A SONG FROM THE 1950 MOVIE 'CATSKILL HONEYMOON'. THE PAIR TALKS TO SOUTH FLORIDA FILMMAKER DAVID WEINTRAUB ABOUT THE GOLDEN AGE OF YIDDISH THEATER ON MIAMI BEACH.

"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," Fuhrman 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 1980s, 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

mimics Lenny Bruce's famous put-down of South Beach).

Heavy on nostalgia, Klezmer music and slices of over-the-top performances, Weintraub's project brings together archival scraps of an American theatrical tradition that spanned several decades then disappeared with barely a trace.

ELUSIVE FILM

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

"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 1,000-year-old language that blends Hebrew, Aramaic, German, Slavic and bits of Romance languages.

"People used to love to come there and hear their original language spoken," said Sylvia Roebuck, 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."

Roebuck 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 German-occupied Austria in 1938 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 condos.

"I'm well known in this area," said Cooper, who starred in *Goodbye Koptzin* (Goodbye Pauper) 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 cul-

ture waned as Jews assimilated and stopped speaking the *mama-loshn*, 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's Jewish population swelled to more than 140,000, up from just 16,000 before World War II. South Beach suddenly became a refuge for a dwindling language and culture that survived European pogroms, the Holocaust and decades of North American assimilation.

In an era when Yiddish theater was declining in other parts of the country, Miami Beach had six Yiddish theaters: the Plaza Theater on Washington Avenue and First Street; the Cameo Theater on 14th Street; the Roosevelt theater on Arthur Godfrey Road; the Beach Theater on Lincoln Road; the Konover 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 speakers 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 gems 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."



MYRNA AND SETH BRAMSON COLLECTION



ANDY SWEET

ALL THE RAGE: South Beach fashion was somewhat different when vaudeville was performed in Yiddish at the Beach Theater on Lincoln Road.