

THE WORLD OF SHOLEM ALEICHEM

Beyond the importance of this experience in itself, it opened another important door for me, professionally, politically and personally. The actor Howard DaSilva and the writer Arnold Per, both totally wiped out of employment by the Blacklist in Hollywood, Television and Radio, had come to Proctor to ask him to be Press Agent for a theater project they had created, "The World of Sholem Aleichem". They had carved it out of short stories by Sholem Aleichem, Gymnasium, and Isadore Peretz, Bontche Shweig, and Yiddish folklore centered about the foolish people of Chelm, They had raised enough money to put it on for a limited number, 17, of performances on an irregular schedule in the auditorium of a hotel, the Barbizon Plaza, a space never before used as a theater. They had cast it with Blacklisted actors, principally DaSilva, Morris Carnovsky, Jack Gilford, Ruby Dee (Mrs. Ossie Davis), Phoebe Brand (Mrs. Carnovsky), Sarah Cunningham (Mrs. John Randolph), Will Lee and Gil Green, with costumes by Aline Bernstein, music by Serge Hovey and directed by DaSilva. The title page of the program would read like a page out of Ted Channels. While the play would be unique in its mining of the Yiddish culture and, they hoped, would be received as an off-Broadway production, its main thrust could not be more obvious. Theater artists could be Blacklisted, obliterated from the entertainment mainstream venues, but, they lived, their talent remained and could still be utilized. There also was no avoiding its being viewed by many as an act of defiance, by both those who opposed the Blacklist and by those who created and fomented it. Nevertheless, and hopefully, it would hold its own as lovely, well-crafted theater piece.

For a number of reasons, principally financial, Him turned it down. I believe that he also worried about adding another "subversive" credit to his already burdensome list and was unfamiliar with the off-Broadway scene. They had approached Jim first because of their common past political activities and knew he would be simpatico. After he turned it down, they went to other well known press agents with whom they felt comfortable, all of whom turned it down, not surprising given the National political psychosis that prevailed. Jim spoke to me about the project, citing all of its potential negatives, lauded all the participants and the work itself and asked if he could recommend me to DaSilva and Perl. Because of DaSilva and Perl's political persecution, I was well aware of the problems inherent in connecting with and trying to promote the effort, but, in fact, I lusted for the opportunity and encouraged him to give it a shot. He did, they agreed and off I roamed into all kinds of rewarding adventures.

I signed an ATPAM off-Broadway contract, Jim, generously permitted me to work out of his office and the show went into rehearsal. Bernard Gersten, I think, was to light the show, but more importantly, because Da Silva and Perl had no experience, he and I assumed much of the Producer and General Manager functions. The Barbizon-Plaza auditorium had seldom been used by a Legit presentation and we set up the box-office, stage-hands, arranged for the signing of contracts for actors, creative elements, worked with the Hotel Manager for obtaining house personnel, worked out the performance schedule around the prior bookings in the space and etc. I collaborated with Harold Friedlander of Artcraft to produce the print materials and Blaine Thompson to make-up ads and ad schedules. DaSilva and Pearl had spoken with the fabled artist, Ben Shahn, who generously agreed to create the remarkable Art Work for the production and _____, the Art Director of CBS, to fashion the Art Work into all of its many potential uses. All contributed their talents as their participation in the political as well as artistic significance of the production. They too were well aware that it was being presented in a manner outside the norm of a

theater production. The political environment, a non-theater Theater, rarely tapped cultural material, a brief and spattered effort. The attitude of all involved was the despite the unpredictable outcome it would be an important moment in our lives.

All the artistic elements came together in a result that exceeded even our hopeful expectations. The show was very special, supremely entertaining, expertly acted and beautifully presented on the stage using a minimum of scenic and costume elements and musical instruments all carefully husbanded and artistically fashioned. It was a consummate realization of simplicity and skill seldom realized on the stage. There was a first audience, politically aware persons who grasped and wanted to support the effort. We also noted a smattering of individuals who were instrumental in the constructing and fomenting of the Blacklist. We enjoyed the irony of these "devils" having the buy their way into a further pursuit of their nefarious activity.

The huge dilemma confronting us was how to break into a somewhat reluctant media and attract the customary theatergoers. While this was a constant in all theater production, it was much more so with "The World of Sholem Aleichem". While the entertainment media was acquainted with the creators and actors involved, they were, to regard the brief and interrupted performance schedule of an "away from Broadway" presentation and somewhat confused by the title. Some, sloppy journalists, assumed it to be in Yiddish and Off-Broadway, at this time, did not command the attention of the media it later would. These elements, except for the political, also served to put off potential theatergoers. This added up to a sweaty, conflicted press agent, pleased to be associated with a remarkable artistic accomplishment but unhappy with the results of his basic assignment, critical and editorial acknowledgement of the accomplishments of everyone else involved. The success of what was on the stage had heightened everyone's expectations of the public response and while no fingers were pointed and nothing said, I felt everyone's eyes on my back. While I was able to break through the secondary press who were probably flattered by the unusual persistency of the press agent, particularly the Yiddish journals, the mainstream media responded as if they were being broached by someone inviting their attention to a befouled event. Fortunately, that critical element, "world of mouth" took over and the show became a sold-out, run-away hit. Nevertheless, this did not obviate the collective's reasonable lust for deserved recognition and my discomfort continued. Enter Eline Bernstein, the costume designer for the show. Mrs. Bernstein, was a true notable, an established designer; notorious, resulting from a torrid newsworthy affair with Thomas Wolfe who dedicated his novel "Look Homeward Angel" to her; founder of a number of important institutions, most notably, the Costume Collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and the first woman to be accepted into the Union of Scenic and Costume Designers. She was a personage, well known, respected and admired by all in the Theater and a familiar with many of the mighty, including Brooks Atkinson, the make or break drama critic of the New York Times. She was sensitive to all around her and with no prompting, she purposely invited me to tea during which she asked if I would mine if she call Atkinson and ask him to meet with me.

Timorously, I agreed, she did, I called and was put directly through to the Godlike figure who agreed to meet with me the very next day. Bernstein was unquestionable a heavy hitter.

I spent a sleepless night attempting to formulate a proper approach to Atkinson. I knew that for me to touch on the political aspects of the production would be an affront to his

propriety and to propose that the show was so good he could not responsibly ignore it would violate his journalistic and critic's integrity. In the world of theater, he was a seasonal All-Star, a .400 hitter who led the League in Home Runs and put-outs. He was an infallible fastball hitter and would bash a curve out of the ballpark. I concluded that my only pitch would be a "change of pace." I literally dragged my frightened self to the times, met the awesome Lion at the Gate, Clara Rotter, the Drama Department's secretary, announced my appointment and was ushered directly into the almighty presence.

Atkinson was always neatly dressed, wore a bow-tie, thin rimmed metal spectacles sat delicately on his nose atop a discreet moustache and guarded his speaking with the inevitable pipe between his teeth. He was New England polite and proper and immediately attempted to put me at ease, speaking directly, concisely and sensitively. I acknowledged all the mechanical journalistic reasons for he and the Times not including "Sholem Aleichem" in its reviewing schedule which surprised him somewhat and I simply offered the modest plea that a theatrical effort was not complete without a review in the Times, which bannered its slogan "All the News fit To Print". I cited all the professionals involved in the production whose careers earned his consideration, including Aline Bernstein. He gently and correctly pointed out that if he did attend a performance and filed a review, our schedule would have the show close before Times readers could decide whether or not to buy a ticket. I summoned up what courage I had and suggested that it was important for the record, regardless of what his opinion might be and then proffered the honest quest. I told him just enough and beat a hasty retreat.

The afternoon Clara Rotter, reknowned as the devourer of press agents, called, very friendly, to arrange tickets for Atkinson for the following evening. He did not file a review, but in his next Sunday column he wrote a couple of paragraphs extolling the work that did make easy the raising of the capitalization and set the show up royally for its Fall reopening. This gentleman was the best this country could produce, exemplifying all the remarkable qualities theoretically inherent in its creation and unhappily too often ignored. His was a lifetime of Journalism accomplishment in an untarnished fashion. I am so fortunate to have met him and later enjoyed a number of occasions where we intersected, professionally and personally. Subsequently, largely due to my efforts in behalf of the Shakespeare Festival, his cordiality towards me – he referred to me as "Professor Debuskey" - became known throughout the Times and gave me 2 legs up as a press agent.

Everyone was ecstatic. The future was assured. Everyone was guaranteed of being re-employed with acknowledgement of their salaries being raised commesurate with the expected weekly grosses. Sometime in the middle of that summer I read an item in the Post about the show. I Called Frances Herridge who had signed the piece and asked her where it came from. Somewhat embarrassed she told me it was sent in by Barry Hyams, an ATPAM press agent, who claimed to have been engaged to handle the show. Not only was I surprised, I was deeply hurt. My chums with whom I had attacked the improbable and had made a significant contribution to its happy outcome had knifed me in the back. Those involved in the production with whom I had become close and lasting friends, Jack Gilford, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Bernard Gersten and Gil Green were upset, confused and uncertain of what to do. Jim Proctor found out that Victor Samrock, one of Broadway's top General Manager, had seen the show, spoken with Howard and Arnold and advised them to replace me with Barry Hyams who was a Yiddishkite and had represented the attractions of Sol Hurok, Americas's leading impresario. He had obtained that enviable position not because of his expertise as a press agent, but because he had married Hurok

's daughter. His employment was terminated at the same time as his divorce from Hurok's daughter. I decided to at least satisfy myself by confronting Howard and Arnold and telling them what I thought of them. I did. They were apologetic, expressed remorse and would immediately correct their lousy action. I think that the world had gotten about both in the theater community, the media and the potential investors from Left circles. This may have been more forceful than their consciences in repairing their dastardly deed. Despite this experience, I decided to continue and set about preparing the re-opening.

The producers had opened an office and Gersten and I gave up all other employments, took up residence there and began acting and surrogate producers in all but artistic areas. We hired a General Manager, Carl Abrams, an old ATPAM member with considerable experience in the Yiddish Theater and George Smith as Box-Office Treasurer. Smith had been the ticket manager for Mike Jacobs, the famed Boxing Promoter, and as such became the magnet for all kinds of characters and ticket shenanigans during Boxing's glory days, highlighted by Joe Louis, Max Baer, Primo Cnero, Max Schmeling, Barney Ross and other fighting luminaries. Smith's famed resolutions to disputations was a smash in the mouth. He modified his behavior during our relationship and in its place substituted a colorful, magnificent and unique vocabulary which awed me my despite my acquired street smarts, extended College education and my years in the Navy. George introduced Gersten and me to "ice" which we refused to accept, cautioned him about its technical illegality, confusing him, but we knew did not stop his adding to his already considerable and carefully concealed stash.

Atkinson's Spring piece had opened up the media for my imprecations and I was able to land a lot off stuff, especially in the Times, and with the expected ignoring by the Hearst papers. The reviews were ecstatic. Atkinson wrote two pieces, declaring the reopening as "a time for rejoicing", "The tree little plays in English that Arnold Perl has culled out of Jewish lore and original and beautiful and they are acted with remarkable sensitivity", "fine theater and splendid humanity" and "a lot of skill in the theater and native understanding of people has transmuted simple things into humor, pathos, wisdom and beauty." He was practically gushing in his approbation. His and the other flattering reviews would be classified as 1A Box-Office notices and the show immediately became the hottest ticket in New York. A veritable gold mine.

The pressure on House Seats was crucifying and Smith's brokerage deals became a fixture in off-Broadway lore.

Inevitably, the show wove itself in to the political fabric garbing the entertainment world and often in curious ways. It infuriated the sniveling bastards who supported the Blacklist, a rewarding aspect we heard about from Union meetings and from conversations Elliot Sullivan, a Blacklisted actor had with Vincent Hartnet, the principal of Counterattack, the journal that chronicled the professional and personal lives of those in the entertainment industry it labeled subversive. The two lived near one and other in Peter Cooper Village and Hartnet attempted to befriend Sullivan and convert him into a Born Again American. For a small fee. They would converse when they bumped into one another strolling the Village's paths. He was obsessed with the existence of "Sholem Aleichem" but did not know how to destroy it as everyone was already Blacklisted. Another was exemplified by the individuals who would come backstage after the show to congratulate and chat with the actors and those who did not. The Show of Shows starring Sid Caesar was the reigning television comedy show and performers and writers flocked to the show. On one evening, Caesar, Carl Reiner, Howie Morris, Imogene Coca and several writers came to the show.

Ager the final curtain Reiner, Morris and a couple of writers went backstage. Caesar and Coca did not. Reiner said that he and Morris had tried to persuade them to go back but failed. Guilt by association, even so slight, was feared by many. This became a common syndrome during the run of the show.

The show's financial and popular success led DaSilva and Perl to attempt several other productions. We leased the Carnegie Playhouse where Perl's adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's "Tevya and His Daughter" was not the hit of "The World of", but did reasonably well as did "The Best of Burlesque! Starring that celebrated intellectual stripper, Sherry Britton and a covey of burlesque comics. Perl later made fortune when "Tevya" was adapted into the monumental hit musical, "Fiddler on the Roof". In addition, a touring production of Sholem Aleichem was produced starring Jacob Ben-Ami and Celia Adler and with the actress Pearl Somner playing the Defending Angel. Gersten and I hit the cities on the tour to sell Theater Partys to Jewish Organizations, left leaning unions and political entities in order to secure an audience base in advance of the box-office sales. In Toronto, the Jewish groups labeled us "the banditen". Together, in the lobby of Boston's Hotel Touraine, did we watch the remarkable Hearing wherein Lawyer Welch demolished the insidious Senator Joe McCarthy. It was a joyous occasion.

For a brief but meaningful period for me, we had as a secretary a young, lovely Black woman by the name of Lorraine Hansberry. We became good friends, she was married to Robert Nemeroff whose parents for many years had institutionalized a Russian restaurant in the Village. I was then living on the top floor of small 4 story building in the heart of the Village, 104 Washington Place. The restaurateurs lived on the 2nd floor, their tantalizingly odorous menu emerged from their popular small public dining room on the 1st. Lorraine often helped out as a waitress and after hours pastry maker. The Nemiroffs insisted I was on Russian descent and Mrs. Nemeroff adopted me, a single young man, and persisted in caressing my plate with the cuisine of my ancestors. Many an evening when I came home late and the restaurant was closing up she would insist that I join them and the Village's fabled Romany Marie in eating from the leftovers, enter the momentous conversations and join in the making of their storied Russian pastry, recipe top secret. The making of this delicious dessert required a team effort and I was often a participant. A couple of tables would be placed end to end, covered with a table cloth, and the very thin and delicate pastry dough would be spread over it and filled with the secret filling. We would line up on one side of the tables, pick up the edge of the tablecloth and gently a very carefully flip it, rolling it around the filling into a 3 table long tube, which would be cut into serving size and baked the next day. The process was enhanced by random disputations and the recorded sound of the Weavers. What a Life!!

Much of my future was formed by the association growing out of this experience. Ossie and Ruby became my guides into the Civil Rights movement; Jack Gilford and Gil Green became intimates with whom I happily shared the years to come; I was inevitably drawn into the fight to combat the Blacklist. My apparent willingness to accept the realistic danger inherent in publicizing then "politically unpopular causes" led to my being invited to participate in numerous battles yet to come. The evidence of these participations is contained in my FBI/CIA report subsequently obtained through the "Freedom of Information Act", five pages of citations all blacked out and stamped "NY State Subversive". I appealed to the Justice Department who affirmed the deletions for reasons of National Security. The effort, time and money expended by these Agencies in shadowing me and thousands of persons like myself exemplifies the waste and

misdirection of the government's Security forces, so awfully evidenced on September 11, 2001. I do not know to what extent their absurd pursuit harmed me as my professional activity was largely confined to the Theater which had resisted governmental interference. My function in behalf of these causes was to reveal our beliefs and argue them as publicly as possible, not to conceal them.

My unformed political views began to coalesce into shape best described in political terminology as "Progressive". My early years did not provide any practical political tenets. My only childhood education was an unsophisticated support of President Roosevelt's programs, a growing fear of Fascism and anti-Semitism and an awareness of my Father's involvement as a Democrat in local politics. At the University of Virginia there were no political discussions, just an un-questioning awareness of WWII and our imminent involvement. During my Navy service we had but one belief, the need to destroy our recognizable enemies. The one twist came when we were assigned tasks in China and Korea after the war where one began to question the wisdom of our Government's choices. We, or at least I, believed that our Government's support of the Chinese Nationalist Government was bootless. It was corrupt, did not represent its people and was destined to be defeated by the Mao forces. Also, after the war had ended, we had been directed to become involved in the secret (held "Confidential for 50 years") action in behalf of the Nationalists in China's Civil War – an invasion of Manchuria. We were eyewitness to the blunders our government made in Korea. Nevertheless, I was convinced of our nobility during the war and was proud of your installing a Democratic attitude among our conquered foes, Germany, Italy and Japan.

Once back home, I was proud of our Marshall Plan in Europe and the wisdom of our influencing the political direction of post-war Japan. I admired the resistance of Russia's people during the war and hoped we would remain allies. I now became aware of Spain, the history of its Civil War, our failure to realize the effect of its outcome, the emergence of Franco and worried about our relationship with a Fascist government. I had read *Mein Kampf*, *Das Kapital* and the *Communist Manifesto*. My overriding belief, however, was in the remarkable formulations of our Founding Fathers, the writings of Jefferson, Hamilton, Adams, Madison, Franklin and Washington. From Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

And, From the "Bill of Rights".

"Amendment I: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibit the free exercise thereof, or abridge the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

My guide to democratic principles in those early years and to this very day was Thomas Paine whose writings had him sentenced to the guillotine, a final cut he fortunately avoided. His "Common Sense" was seminal to the Revolution and his "The Rights of Man" formed my early doctrine. How appropriate for today is his line, "These are the times that try men's souls." One can but wonder what he would think were he alive today. My guess would be the words of Joseph Ellis in his *New York Times* book review of Thomas Paine and the Promise of America by Harvey J. Kaye, bringing Paine's words and ideas into our world is like trying to plant cut flowers."

These Founding Fathers were not from among the “common man”. Most were well educated, wealthy, plantation owners and slave holders, yet they invented the most democratic form of government known to man and remains so to this day. Not that there were not attempts over the years to abjure some of its more significant declarations. None more fervid than today.

During my one year at John Hopkins I encountered a good deal of current political theories being promulgated, especially among the young and began to get actively involved, principally with the newly created, “Liberal”, American Veterans Committee. I knew there existed a Communist and Socialist party but had no contact with either. Before I left Baltimore for New York, in the AVC, I perceived the beginnings of the “Red-Baiting” within a liberal organization, did not fully understand it, but did not like the attacks on individuals whom I thought were good guys with variant political opinions which they expressed openly. I believe that the justification was that for an organization to include suspected or known Communists would weaken it in its attempt to promulgate liberal ideas. Unhappily, it only served to foster the hysterical anti-communist psychosis that was soon to envelop the country and led to their implosion. In 1948 I supported the 3rd party candidacy and voted for Henry Wallace simply on the basis of his position integral to life in the US, repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act, Rent and Price controls, rights for minorities, curbs on monopolies and support of Labor Unions. It may have been my most weighty vote as Wallace only received 2.6% of the popular vote. Somewhere in this period did I become active in the Committee For the Arts Science and Professions and the Entertainment Chapter of the AVC. One meeting of the AVC focused on an attempt to purge itself of the composer Earl Robinson, as sweet, harmless and gentle a man as he was talented. He had written so positively of America with *The House I Live In* and *Ballad for Americans* made into standards by the respecting recordings of Frank Sinatra and Paul Robeson. As the discussion heated up, the floor was taken over by John Henry Falk who, in his inimitable, devastatingly humorous fashion, delivered a defense of Robinson that was undeniable. I was mesmerized, introduced myself to Falk and initiated a relationship that would be eventful and last his lifetime.

These were two great Americans who would suffer grievously for their insistence on heralding the virtues of our unique heritage.

DaSilva and Perl, now formally established as Rachel Productions, moved on to prepare a musical, “Sandhog” with a score by Earl Robinson and book adapted by Waldo Salt from Theodore Dreiser’s novel, *St. Columba and the River*. Both were Blacklisted. I was centered about the lives of the men who dug the tunnels under the Hudson River, sandhogs. It would be a big production by any standard and especially so when compared to their previous presentations. They were unable to raise the capital and searched around for co-productions possibilities, ultimately archived when they were joined by the Phoenix Theater. I agreeably had performed the pre-production publicity campaign as part of the producing company’s overall activity and because I was admiring of the work and its creators. I had suggested Jack Cassidy for the leading role and he was signed. This was not uncommon, press agents worked more shows than producers produced and, consequently, were able to meet and know the work of more actors. I knew Jack’s work, but the connection was tightened by living amid the network of a tight theater community held together by work and social mingling. Jack later married Shirley Jones and they produced *Patrick, Shawn and David*, enlarging my Show Biz contacts exponentially. In negotiating the co-producing arrangement, DaSilva and Perl gave the Phoenix the choice of their own press agent and I was sloughed off with, “what else could we do?” Gersten was signed as Production Stage Manager. Unhappily, theatrically, the show leaked was

flooded with adverse criticism and vanished in short order. I took my leave of Rachel Productions although I remained quite friendly with Perl, supporting him through his unpleasant divorce and subsequent marriage to Nancy Reals. DaSilva was a great actor, almost infallible in his many and varied characterizations, politically courageous, but I thought him an unpleasant human being.