

Molly Picon: **Yiddish Star, American Star**



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The Vincent Astor Gallery

The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center

“[T]eater iz shpil un mitshpil—shpil funem aktyor un mitshpil fun dem oylem inem teater” [Theatre is a partnership of players—one player is the actor, the other player is the audience in the theatre].

Leon Kobrin, Yiddish Dramatist

Between 1880 and 1920, because of waves of persecutions in Eastern Europe, more than three million Jews came to America. They came with their goose-feather pillows. They came with their silver Sabbath candlesticks. They came with their hopes and dreams for a better life for themselves and their children in *dos goldene land* [the golden land] America!

In the end, poor, friendless, and without knowledge of English, hundreds of thousands of them settled on New York’s Lower East Side. There they lived in unsanitary, overcrowded tenements. There they usually worked in the many sweatshops throughout the district and adjacent to it. And there most of them labored in the “apparel industry,” or as we in the vernacular refer to it, the “*shmate*” [rag] business. This meant that most “sweated” at their jobs—often under terrible working conditions—from early morning till late at night for subsistence wages.

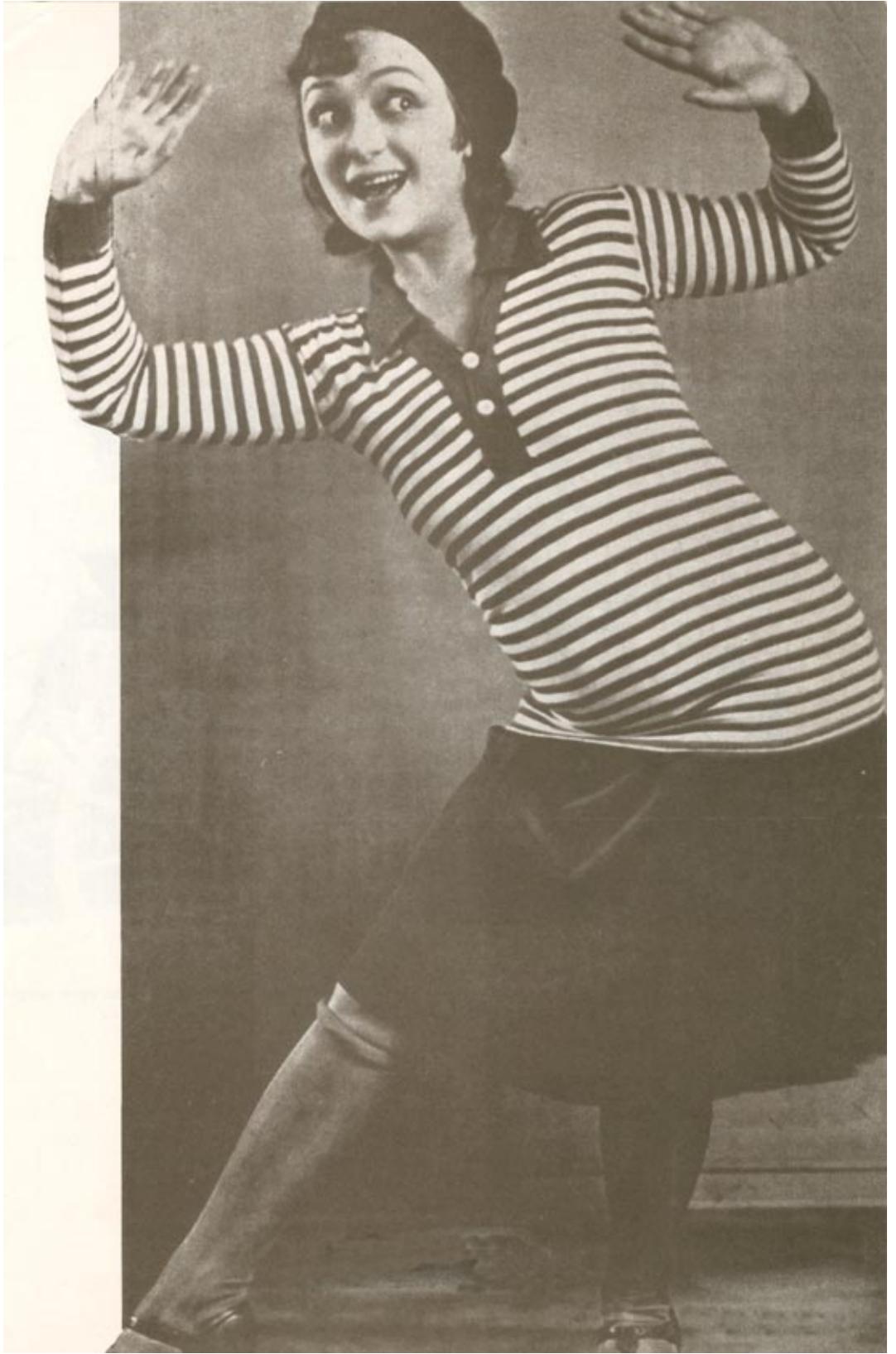
Needless to say, this was *not* the life these immigrants had dreamed of. Moreover, there was the terrible spiritual emptiness they felt . . . Put simply, they were homesick and missed many things. They missed their *landsmen* [fellow countrymen]. They missed the Yiddish communal life they had known. They missed the morals and culture of their Eastern European heritage. And they began, ever increasingly, to miss the hopes and dreams born of that heritage.

The result? With the precious little time they had left for themselves, religious Jews often turned to the synagogue to fill the lonely void. Many secular Jews gravitated to the Yiddish theater, founded in New York in those years by Boris Thomashefsky, himself an immigrant. There, in the theatre, everyone could meet . . . and meet their familiar Yiddish-speaking world again... in the audience and on the stage.

By the early 1920s, when Molly Picon came on the scene, the *many* Yiddish theatres in New York were in the midst of moving from their first home on the Bowery to a better neighborhood on Second



Molly Picon in *Der kleyner mazik* [The Little Devil] opening at the the David Kessler Second Avenue Theatre, September, 1926. Photograph by Rappoport. Museum of the City of New York.



Molly Picon in *Oy, iz dos a meydle* [Some Girl] opening at the David Kessler Second Avenue Theatre, December, 1927. Photograph by Rappoport. Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.



The Second Avenue Theatre, 1934. Photograph by Sperr. US, State and Local History Division, The New York Public Library

Avenue. The bill of fare offered to Yiddish theatre audiences was basically set. Theatres presented popular entertainments—shows comic or melodramatic, full of Yiddish song, dance, spectacle, and a good deal of improvisational acting and dialogue on themes ranging from the biblical to the present day. Theatres presented literary productions—first introduced by the playwright Jacob Gordin—that were realistic, earnestly examined societal problems, and took acting and the writer’s words more seriously. And, even though immigrants *in* America were already beginning to assimilate and turn to English-language entertainments, and even though Jewish immigration *to* America was much less than in years past, Yiddish theatre was still a bustling and exciting place with audiences passionate and vocal about the shows they saw

and the stars they adored, both *during* and *after* the performance. Indeed, a new generation of Yiddish stars was beginning to replace earlier Yiddish theatre greats like Boris Thomashefsky, David Kessler, Jacob P. Adler, Keni Liptzin, and Bertha Kalish.

On December 24, 1923, after a European “tryout,” twenty-five year old Molly Picon—charming, warm, and a bundle of talent—made her New York debut in the Jacob Kalich/Joseph Rumshinsky Yiddish musical *Yankele* at the almost 2,000 seat David Kessler Second Avenue Theatre. It was a smash hit. Audiences fell in love with her. Critics raved about her. A new and “effervescent” light on the Yiddish stage was born. And her joyful, somersaulting *Yankele* was just the beginning . . .

A cooperative effort of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the Museum of the City of New York, this exhibition, organized chronologically— with over two hundred priceless items of theatrical memorabilia, including rarely seen production photos, programs, original sheet music, set designs, scripts, costumes, posters, and more—traces the unique and wonderful career of Molly Picon. It begins with Molly becoming the “sweetheart” of New York’s Lower East Side Yiddish-speaking community, and a star in the Yiddish entertainment world. It follows her as she increasingly appears in English-speaking roles and becomes an American star. In fact, the move from Yiddish to American star is one few performers would make so *very* successfully. But then, Molly and her audience “moved” together, with native English-speakers coming to love Molly as much as those who knew her when . . .

With the success of *Yankele* in 1923, and the guidance of Jacob Kalich—her dedicated manager, playwright/adaptor, director, occasional fellow actor, and husband—Molly stayed on at the Second Avenue Theatre for the next few years, solidifying her position. She did many Rumshinsky/Kalich hits there, touring them throughout America at the conclusion of the theatrical season, generally about thirty weeks. Each presentation offered up a different Molly and some new talent of Molly's. In *Tsarevitsh Fiodor* [The Little Czar] (April, 1927), she played the xylophone; in *Reyzele* (September, 1927), she made her entrance on a horse; in *Dos tsirkus meydel* [The Circus Girl] (September, 1928), she did a trapeze act; and in *Di komediantke* [The Little Clown] (March, 1930), she did a high dive into a tank. Molly wrote many of the lyrics to the songs in her shows. In the midst of all this, she was also performing in American English-language vaudeville houses. Indeed, it was because of her exceptionally successful appearances in vaudeville at this time, specifically at the Palace Theatre, that she was asked to sit for a caricature to hang at Sardi's.

In the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, Molly was dramatically branching out and reaching out. In 1936 and 1938, respectively, she made her two Yiddish film classics: the Joseph Green/Jan Nowina-Przybylski *Yidl mitn fidl* [Yidl with a Fiddle], and the Joseph Green/Konrad Tom *Mamele*. She started doing Yiddish radio. At the same time, she also started doing much more in English. She did more English-language vaudeville all over the world. She made some English-language films, among them *A Little Girl with Big Ideas* (1933), and *Vitaphone Hippodrome* (1936), both Vitaphone shorts. By 1941 her radio program, *Nancy from Delancey*, was just about completely broadcast in English. She started writing more in English. Finally, she began to appear more in English-language stage productions like Sylvia Regan's *Morning Star* (1940), while making some forays into television. In the 1950s she was on Ed Sullivan's *Toast of the Town*. In sum, Molly was moving with her audience . . . into the American mainstream.

Thus, by 1961, Molly's Yiddish audience and their children—now English-speakers—were in the theatre, sitting next to native English speakers, when she opened at the Martin Beck Theatre in the Jerry Herman/Don Appell musical *Milk and Honey*. They cheered when she somersaulted, as she had so many years ago in *Yankele*. They were proud when she was nominated for a Tony award for her role in *Milk and Honey*. In 1961 through 1963, they, along with all of America, delighted in her as the wacky Mrs. Bronson on television's *Car 54, Where Are You?* Everyone enjoyed it when she played Frank Sinatra's *Yiddishe Mama* in the 1963 film *Come Blow Your Horn*, and was nominated for a Golden Globe award for her role in it. Meanwhile, her first book came out, *So Laugh a Little* by Molly Picon as told to Eth Clifford Rosenberg, and everyone couldn't wait to read it. Then, not surprisingly, in 1971, when she was in Norman Jewison's film *Fiddler on the Roof* playing the role of Yente . . . everyone "*kvelled*" (overflowed with happiness for her).

In the later part of the 1970s and early '80s, Molly, herself getting into her eighties, published her autobiography, *Molly!* written with Jean Bergantini Grillo. She did some television appearances. But mainly she did concerts, *big* concerts . . . that felt more like *simchas* [joyous family gatherings]. People came who first saw Molly in the Yiddish theatre.

People came who first saw her in her English-language roles. When she made her entrance on stage the applause was thunderous. When she sang and spoke the audience couldn't get enough of her. When she danced, they applauded more. For, indeed, *everyone* loved Molly. . . a Yiddish Star and an American Star. In 1981 Molly Picon was elected to the Broadway Hall of Fame. In 1985 the Congress for Jewish Culture awarded her a "Goldie" "for her lifetime contributions to Jewish culture and art."

Visitors can hear almost two dozen recordings—all from the Rodgers & Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound— from her Yiddish and English shows, and watch excerpts from her appearances in Yiddish and English films.

The exhibition is presented in cooperation with the Museum of the City of New York, which is presenting the exhibition *The Jewish Daily Forward: Embracing an Immigrant Community*, April 22, 2007 - September 17, 2007.

*A note on transliteration: All transliterations from Yiddish to English follow the rules set down by the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York. All translations from Yiddish to English are by this curator, unless otherwise noted.

The exhibition was curated by Dr. Diane Cypkin, Professor,
Media and Communication Arts, Pace University.



The marquee of the Second Avenue Theatre, promoting *Abi gezunt* [As Long As You're Healthy] 1949. Archive Photos. Picture Collection, The New York Public Library.

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Material in this exhibition is from the research divisions of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts: Billy Rose Theatre Division, Theatre on Film and Tape Archive; Jerome Robbins Dance Division, Music Division, and Rodgers & Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound; and from the Dorothea B. and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History & Genealogy Humanities and Social Sciences Library; as well as the Picture Collection and Donnell Media Center, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library. Additional materials are from the Museum of the City of New York; the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, New York, Jesse Aaron Cohen, Assistant Photo and Film Archivist; and the *Forward* Association, Chana Pollack, Photo Archivist. We thank the following for the loan of artifacts: Bruce Adler, Ergo Media Inc., Chava Jarvis, Paulette Muller-Girard, Esta Saltzman-Lubin, Sardi's Restaurant, Kenneth James Stoller, Mrs. Julia Tsiropinas, and Dr. Marie Werner. We are grateful to the following for permission to show examples of Picon's performances on stage and film: Sharon Pucker Rivo and Richard Pontius of The National Center for Jewish Film at Brandeis University; United Artists; and the Coalition of Broadway Unions and Guilds. Vitaphone short films have been provided through the courtesy of Ron Hutchinson, The Vitaphone Project. For their assistance in so many different ways throughout the development of this exhibition, thanks to (in alphabetical order): Bill Appleton, Esther Enzer, Sir David Frost, Ramanie Garrett, Dr. Mary C. Henderson, Brian Jennings, Professor Robert M. Klaeger, Sidney Lumet, Gabriel Moreno, Pace University, and Sheldon Secunda.

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[cover image] Molly Picon broadcasting *I Give You My Life* on radio station WMCA, 1938. Photograph by Newspictures, Inc. Billy Rose Theatre Division.

Public Programs

These programs will be held at the Bruno Walter Auditorium, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center. Admission is free and on a first-come, first-served basis. Telephone (212) 642-0142 for information about the Library's public programs.

Tuesday, June 26, at 3:00 p.m.

The Yiddish Cinema: Molly Picon's Celebration of Jewish Life
Lecture by Eric A. Goldman

Wednesday, June 27, at 3:00 p.m.,

Molly Picon and Her Yiddish Music, Lecture-Concert by Dr. Diane Cypkin;
Lena Panfilova, piano.

Thursday, June 28, at 6:00 p.m.

Molly Picon and *Milk and Honey*: Memories of the 1961 Broadway musical
With Stuart Hodes, Donald Saddler, and others.



Molly Picon. Portrait distributed by the William Morris Agency, 1963. Billy Rose Theatre Division.