

November 3, 2004

The New York Times
nytimes.com

A Wee Bit of Yiddish Wisdom

By EMILY EAKIN

The instructor for "Great Dramas of the Yiddish Stage," a lecture series that is part of the 92nd Street Y's celebration of the 350th anniversary of Jews in America, Caraid O'Brien must rank among Yiddish culture's most ardent and least likely champions. An actress, playwright and translator, she is 29, Irish and Roman Catholic, a big-boned, cherubic blonde - a goy! - with a bachelor's degree in Yiddish literature who speaks English with a hint of lilting brogue and Yiddish with disarming fluency.

For an hour and a half on most Wednesday evenings through Dec. 1, Ms. O'Brien can be found in a kindergarten classroom on the sixth floor of the Y, energetically expounding on the wonders of a cultural movement that spawned one Nobel Prize winner (Isaac Bashevis Singer) and a smorgasbord of novelists, playwrights, actors, singers and impresarios but that has often been dismissed by Hebrew-speaking Jews as unsophisticated or lower class.

"The best of Yiddish literature is on par with the best literature all over the world, and yet it still has to be defended," Ms. O'Brien gently admonished her audience last Wednesday. Her listeners numbered just a half dozen, including a frail old man in the front row leaning heavily on his walker, but they were rapt.

The evening's topic was "Classics Rewritten for the Yiddish Stage." Ms. O'Brien's creamy complexion turned bright pink as she conjured up a vision of the Yiddish theater in Manhattan during its feverish heyday, the 1910's and 1920's, when more than a half-dozen Broadway-size houses, some with 2,000 seats, lined Second Avenue on the Lower East Side. They showed Yiddish versions of "King Lear" and "Hamlet," she said, along with more recognizably Jewish fare, with its pungent depictions of everyday life.

By the end of her lecture, Ms. O'Brien had aroused as much curiosity about herself as about her material. Pronouncing her "a treasure," one man in the audience wanted to know whether her expertise extended to her native literary tradition as well.

In fact, Ms. O'Brien insisted over breakfast the next day at the Edison Cafe, a tattered theater-district hangout known as the Polish tearoom, Irish and Yiddish literature have more in common than one might think.

Born in Galway, Ms. O'Brien, whose first name Caraid (pronounced KAH-rid) is the old Irish word for friend, moved to the United States as a 12-year-old when her father, a pathologist, accepted a faculty position at the Boston University School of Medicine. She discovered Yiddish literature as a junior at an all-girls Catholic high school in Hingham, Mass., when she read a novel by Singer for English class. Intrigued, she searched the school library and found books by Singer's brother Israel Joshua, and by Chaim Grade.

"They reminded me of Irish writers, like Patrick Kavanagh, whom my father had read to me," she said. "They were about a world of poverty and life absolutely defined by religion. They shared the same self-deprecating humor."

Ms. O'Brien was hooked. As an undergraduate at Boston University she designed her own major in Yiddish literature, taking classes at Hebrew College in Brookline, Mass., and with the eminent Yiddishist Ruth Wisse at Harvard. She spent her junior year at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and was among the first non-Jewish students to intern at the National Yiddish Book Center, an organization in Amherst, Mass., that collects and preserves Yiddish books. Her senior thesis was on Grade's memoir, "My Mother's Sabbath Days," which Ms. O'Brien called "one of my favorite books of all time."

In the tiny, Yiddish-speaking world, she said, not being Jewish can at times be an advantage. While she has occasionally encountered suspicion - could she be a missionary working undercover? - far more often, she said, people seem thrilled by her interest.

"Everyone is interested in the idea of this strapping Irish girl with Yiddish coming out of her mouth," Ms. O'Brien said with a smile. "It gets me into a lot of parties."

She moved to Manhattan in 1997, planning to become an actor. At one of her first auditions she befriended Aaron Beall, a founder of the New York International Fringe Festival and the Todo Con Nada theater company. Together they saw a production of "God of Vengeance" by the Yiddish playwright Sholem Asch. An indictment of religious hypocrisy set in a brothel and featuring a lesbian love scene, the play was shut down on obscenity charges when it was first produced in English in Manhattan in 1922. Ms. O'Brien thought the production she saw was terrible and blamed the translation.

"I told Aaron, 'It's not the play I read.' He said, 'O.K., why don't you translate it? If you do a good translation, I'll direct it.'"

A year later, in 1999, Ms. O'Brien appeared as a prostitute in a Todo Con Nada production of the play based on her translation. Staged on the go-go platform at Show World, a former peep show near Times Square, the production - including Ms. O'Brien's vernacular translation - was well received. She went on to translate two more plays from what she called "Asch's underworld trilogy": "Motke the Thief" and "The Dead Man." Along the way, she consulted with Yiddish-speaking mentors, among them the former Second Avenue celebrities Seymour Rexite, known as the Yiddish Frank Sinatra, and Luba Kadison, a stage and movie actress, now 97 and blind. (Mr. Rexite died in 2002, but Ms. O'Brien has a "standing date" to see Ms. Kadison every Sunday.)

They were among the ambitious Eastern European Jews who helped bring Yiddish drama out of wine gardens and shtetls and turn it into a secular, urban art. In her lecture, Ms. O'Brien also cited Avrom Goldfaden, the rabbinical school dropout who staged the first professional Yiddish theatrical production in Romania in 1876; Boris Thomashefsky, the actor who, as a 16-year-old cigarette factory worker, founded a Yiddish theater on East Fourth Street in the building that is now home to La MaMa; and Jacob Gordin, a socialist playwright and intellectual who helped popularize the nebbishy archetype most famously embodied by Jerry Lewis.

Yiddish plays are teeming with sex, crime, incest, adultery, abortion and sacrilege, Ms. O'Brien said. She read a passage in Yiddish from Gordin's Faust play, "God, Man and Devil" (1900), in which the devil tempts a man into abandoning his faith by presenting him with a winning lottery ticket.

"I want to give you a sense of what was happening here in the late 1800's and early 1900's, before Eugene O'Neill," she told the group. "These were plays with a social agenda, a political agenda. Even the musicals had social content."

Lately, Ms. O'Brien has delved into her own heritage for dramatic inspiration. Her play "The Sandpiper," a comedy in verse partly inspired by her paternal grandmother, a traditional Irish storyteller, will be performed - with Ms. O'Brien playing a role - at Symphony Space in December. She has also written a novel, "Pleasurepig," as yet unpublished. "It's my 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman,' " she laughed.

To make ends meet, she writes theater reviews for the online zine offoffoff.com and works part time as an in-house producer at Symphony Space, where for the last two years she has directed its annual Bloomsday festivities.

But she stressed that she had not finished with Yiddish. "I have a long, long list of plays I'd like to translate," Ms. O'Brien said. "It's hellish work. It makes me want to tear my hair out. My advisers are dying. I try to work as fast as I can."