



November 4, 2007

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

In the Mother Tongue, Songs With a Wide Appeal

By [ROBERTA HERSHENSON](#)

YIDDISH may seem inseparable from nostalgia, but Eleanor Reissa, a noted performer, revels in its more earthy qualities. “Yiddish is so gorgeous,” she says, “so luscious and sensual and poetic a language, that it’s funny people think of it as dead. The reality is it bursts with life.”

Close to a thousand years old, evolved partly from medieval German, Yiddish at its height was spoken by millions of Jews across the world. As Jews assimilated into other cultures, the language became less dominant, though a literary Renaissance in the 19th century produced a trove of written materials. In its spoken form, Yiddish nearly perished in the Holocaust; for many today, the sound of mamaloshen, or the mother tongue, contains both sweetness and sorrow.

Ms. Reissa, who will present her musical show “Hip, Heymish and Hot!” at the White Plains Performing Arts Center next weekend, can relate to the nostalgic aura Yiddish produces. She is the American-born child of Holocaust survivors, who have since died, and spoke mostly Yiddish until she was 5. But the language today is far more than a trip to the past, she says. “It’s contemporary and alive and sexy and warm.”

That is especially true the way Ms. Reissa sings it in her youthful, jazzy style. At a recent rehearsal for the show, she sang songs with universal appeal: about a girl as pretty as the moon; about singing for a lover; about being happily in love. While the lyrics were in Yiddish, Ms. Reissa’s face and gestures conveyed their meaning. Neither Grant Sturiale on piano nor Marty Confurius on bass understood the words she was singing, but both said it didn’t matter. “The emotions they convey are so deep,” Mr. Confurius said. “The humor and sadness, the contrast, comes through.”

Even most of the happy songs, Ms. Reissa said, are sung in a minor key.

Ms. Reissa, who lives in Manhattan and Carmel, said she learned a lot about Yiddish grammar and vocabulary while working in the theater. She was artistic director of the Folksbiene Theater in Manhattan from 1998 to 2003, and was nominated for both a [Tony Award](#) and a Drama Desk Award for directing “Those Were the Days,” performed in Yiddish and English, in 1991. As an actress she played the title role in “Yentl” at the Folksbiene and toured with shows like “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest” and “Lost in Yonkers.” She is also an award-winning playwright.

Knowing that most of her audience members do not speak Yiddish, and that many are non-Jewish, Ms. Reissa engages in playful patter that will draw people in. She intersperses Yiddish with English in songs like “Que Sera, Sera” (“whatever will be, will be” becomes “vos vet zayn, vet zayn”), “Brother, Can You

Spare a Dime?” and even “Yankee Doodle.” She tailors her concerts to each audience, she said, to make everyone feel included.

Westchester has a lively interest in Yiddish that is reflected in the various informal conversation groups — known as vinkles, the word for corner — that are sponsored by synagogues across the county. Westchester also ranks 16th on a list of American counties with the most Yiddish speakers, compiled from the 2000 census by the U.S. English Foundation. For people like Laura Rothman, who leads a vinkle at Congregation Anshe Sholom in New Rochelle, the conversation groups offer a way “to keep this marvelous language alive.”

Ms. Reissa has a similar goal. “Part of the concert,” she said, “is an opportunity to communicate this stuff and pass the baton of it to people who don’t understand — to bridge two worlds.”

“Hip, Heymish and Hot!” at the White Plains Performing Arts Center, 11 City Place; Nov. 10 at 8 p.m. and Nov. 11 at 2 p.m. Tickets (\$30 and \$35) at: (914) 328-1600 or www.wppac.com.

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