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## Review/Theater; A Musical Cavalcade In Yiddish and English

By RICHARD F. SHEPARD

Like a glass of cold seltzer, "Those Were the Days," the new revue at the Edison Theater, brings sparkle to the eye and a tickle to the throat. It's in Yiddish and English, practically a self-translating effusion of song and dance. Yiddish, a dead language? At the Edison, it bounces like a baby.

There is no plot, no set, maybe a prop or two and an image on the backdrop, and that is all to the good because one is too busy taking in the superb performances of the troupe of five performing to the tune of an orchestra equipped to play anything, from lean to schmaltz. "Survey" is an off-putting word with overtones of seminars and droning, so although "Those Were the Days" covers a lot of musical ground and time in its romp from shtetl to Lower East Side, let's call it a cavalcade. Whatever it is, it is a humdinger of a hum-along.

This is third revue of its kind fashioned by Zalmen Mlotek and Moishe Rosenfeld, who, with "The Golden Land" and "On Second Avenue," pioneered a way to stage programs of old Yiddish song in contemporary theatrical modes. This mating of the ages naturally puts one in the mood of a wedding, and it is an especially happy marriage at the Edison.

And why not? There is something old ("Romania, Romania," delivered with stunning dexterity of tongue by Bruce Adler); something, er, nu? ("Litvak/Galitsyaner," the ancient north-south Polish conflict, fought in wounding words by Mr. Adler and Eleanor Reissa); something borrowed ("Figaro's Aria," sung operatically, with neat Yiddish lyrics, by the resonant Robert Abelson); and something blue ("My Yiddishe Mama," hauntingly crooned by Ms. Reissa and still as blue as it was when sung by the red-hot mama, Sophie Tucker).

Ms. Reissa, who is also director and choreographer of the undertaking, keeps the cast in constant motion, from the batting of an eye to an ensemble dance in which the five can conjure up a mass celebration. She and her stage mates are an unusual assortment of young and not so young, of Yiddish-born fluent in English, of those born to English and fluent in Yiddish. Mina Bern, the seasoned veteran of the Yiddish stage, emerges as a superlative comic. She gives a hilarious, if sometimes painfully accurate, monologue of the old mother who proudly tells of her three children, none of whom let her live with their families for more than a few months at a time. Ms. Bern is beguilingly manipulative as she leads the audience in a sing-along, tartly chiding a man up front for

just nodding his head and not singing out.

Lori Wilner, a woman for all seasons, manifests uncommon versatility in characters from a shtetl child playing out "Who Will Laugh First?" to a femme fatale giving a sexy rendition of "Shpil Gitar." Mr. Abelson, a real-life cantor with credits from opera and Sammy's Famous Romanian Restaurant on the Lower East Side, is a sonorous musical presence who doubles nicely in comedy. As for Mr. Adler, what is there that this anchor man can't do? He kazotskys, he soft-shoes, he fandangos, or something in reasonable facsimile. He makes the oldest jokes fresh and funny in his nonstop hooper break-two-three-four vaudeville routine, "Hootsatsa." He plays the bemused restaurant customer who can't find anything to eat in a Sholom Aleichem skit. Yiddish, English, whatever, he sets a funny pace.

If one good turn deserves another, the many good theater turns of "Those Were the Days" amount to the ultimate good turn, a musical mitzvah. Those Were the Days Concept and continuity, Zalmen Mlotek and Moishe Rosenfeld; directed and choreographed by Eleanor Reissa; musical director, Mr. Mlotek; lighting, Tom Sturge; costumes, Gail Cooper-Hecht; sound, Jim Badrak and Alan Gregorie. Presented by Moe Septee, in association with Victor H. Potamkin, Mr. Mlotek and Mr. Rosenfeld. At the Edison Theater, 240 West 47th Street. WITH: Bruce Adler, Mina Bern, Eleanor Reissa, Robert Abelson, Lori Wilner and the Golden Land Klezmer Orchestra.

Photo: Eleanor Reissa performing in "Those Were the Days." (Martha Swope/"Those Were the Days")