

DER "HAMMER"

APRIL, 1926

WORKS IN THE MERRILL C. BERMAN COLLECTION

FROM THE "PALE OF SETTLEMENT" TO BROADWAY: THE WORK OF BORIS ARONSON  
FROM THE MID-1920s TO THE EARLY 1930s

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# **FROM THE “PALE OF SETTLEMENT” TO BROADWAY**

**THE WORK OF BORIS ARONSON FROM THE MID-1920s TO THE EARLY 1930s**

Published by the Merrill C. Berman Collection  
Series no. 41

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Cover: Journal cover (in Yiddish): *Der Hammer* (The Hammer), no. 2 (April 1926)  
Lithograph, 10 3/4 x 8 1/8" (27.3 x 20.6 cm) (p. 135)

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## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the staff of the Billy Rose Theatre Division of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York, for their assistance with the research for this publication.

## Transliteration of Cyrillic (Russian and Ukrainian)

For this catalogue, we have adopted the system of transliteration employed by the Library of Congress. For artists who were chiefly active in the Russia, we have transliterated their names according to the Library of Congress system even when more conventional English versions exist (e.g. Aleksandr Tyshler, not Alexander Tyshler). Surnames with an “ii” ending are rendered with an ending of “-y” (e.g. Pyotr Konchalovsky). Soft signs are not used in artists’ names but are retained elsewhere (e.g. Natan Altman, not Natan Al’tman). For brevity, in the text of the essay we have used only first and last names of the artists and omitted patronymic names.

We have retained the distinction in spelling between Russian and Ukrainian names, e.g. Aleksandr (Russian) and Oleksandr (Ukrainian), except when they are well-known in the West (e.g. Alexander Archipenko).

For brevity, in the captions for the illustrations in the essay we have used only translated titles; however, both transliterated and translated titles are used in the List of Illustrations and Plates sections.

## Transliteration of Hebrew

This publication relies almost exclusively on the YIVO (Yidisher visnshaftlekher institute; Yiddish Scientific Institute) system of transliteration from the Hebrew alphabet. For words of Hebrew/Aramaic origin, we have transliterated the Yiddishized pronunciation in accordance with the YIVO system. Many Hebrew-origin or Hebrew-related names are routinely transliterated in various ways (e.g. Jacob, Yakov, and Yankev). In such cases, we have tried to discern how that particular person’s name was pronounced and to reflect that in the spelling, or have simply defaulted to the most common Yiddishized spelling.

## Preferred Spelling and Nomenclature

*St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad:* In the text, we respect the historical naming of the city originally named St. Petersburg which was known as Petrograd between August 1914 and January 1924 and was known as Leningrad between January 1924 and September 1991.

*Kiev vs. Kyiv:* Before the fall of the Soviet Union, the name of the capital of Ukraine was often written in English as “Kiev,” following the Russian transliteration. In this publication, we use the spelling “Kyiv,” following the Ukrainian transliteration of the name. Following the same logic, we use Chernihiv (rather than the Russian Chernigov).

*Theater vs. Theatre vs. Teater:* In the text of this catalogue, we use the standard American spelling of “theater,” except when referring to the proper names of establishments, where we respect the spelling of the time: “theatre” or “teater” (as transliterated directly from Yiddish).

## From the “Pale of Settlement” to Broadway: The Work of Boris Aronson from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s

Alla Rosenfeld, Ph.D.

This publication celebrates the work of Boris (Borekh, Borukh, Boruch, or Baruch) Aronson (1898–1980), one of the important innovators in stage design, who helped revolutionize and transform American theater productions into a high art form [Fig. 1]. Between 1923 and 1976, Aronson designed sets for over one hundred stage productions in the United States both for the Yiddish theatre and on Broadway. The Merrill C. Berman Collection includes a significant representation of Aronson's costume and stage designs for the Jewish theaters of New York, as well as his drawings, prints, and designs for books and periodicals of the 1920s. Taken together, these works document the seemingly contradictory impulses of the work of this important Jewish artist who sought to give modern artistic form to traditional Jewish folklore and symbolism.

Aronson's work and career have already received substantial attention in the form of publications and exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> However, the wide range of Aronson's professional interests and his constructive contribution to the “Jewish Renaissance” in early Soviet Russia merit even further recognition and evaluation. Focusing on Aronson's early work, from the mid-1920s to the early 1930s, this essay demonstrates the connection between Aronson's work and the intellectual and artistic debates of the period, placing his work in the Berman Collection in a broader artistic and political context.

Information in this essay draws in part on the Aronson Papers in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.<sup>2</sup> This is the largest repository of material from Aronson's estate and includes not only his original costume and stage designs, preliminary studies, and sketches, but also the artist's notes,

recollections, press clippings, and scrapbooks with photographs of stage set models and various theater productions.

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Born in Nezhin, Chernihiv (Chernigov) Province, now in Ukraine but then a part of the Russian Empire, Boris Aronson was one of ten children of Solomon (Shlomo) Aronson (1863–1935), the town's rabbi, and his wife Dvoira Turovskaia. The Aronson family, like most Jewish families in the Russian Empire, lived their lives mostly within the Jewish community. As historian Michael Stanislawski has noted, during that period, ethnic Russians and Jews “seemed to inhabit two distinct semantic spheres, no matter how much they interacted or intersected.”<sup>3</sup> In 1903, Aronson's family left the small town for the more sophisticated city of Kyiv (Kiev), where Shlomo Aronson was appointed the city's Grand Rabbi.

Until the age of 12, Boris attended a *kheder* (Jewish elementary school for young boys) while also studying Torah and Gemara at home under his father's guidance. Aronson's love of the theater began with satiric plays performed during religious Jewish holiday of Purim. Purim plays, which made heavy use of masks, were traditionally performed in the courtyard of the synagogue because they were considered too profane to be performed inside the building. Purim allowed for a degree of frivolity and offered occasions for plays (*shpiln*) featuring often satirical and topical songs, jokes, and lighthearted renditions of Jewish history and contemporary life.<sup>4</sup>

To understand Aronson's artistic background before

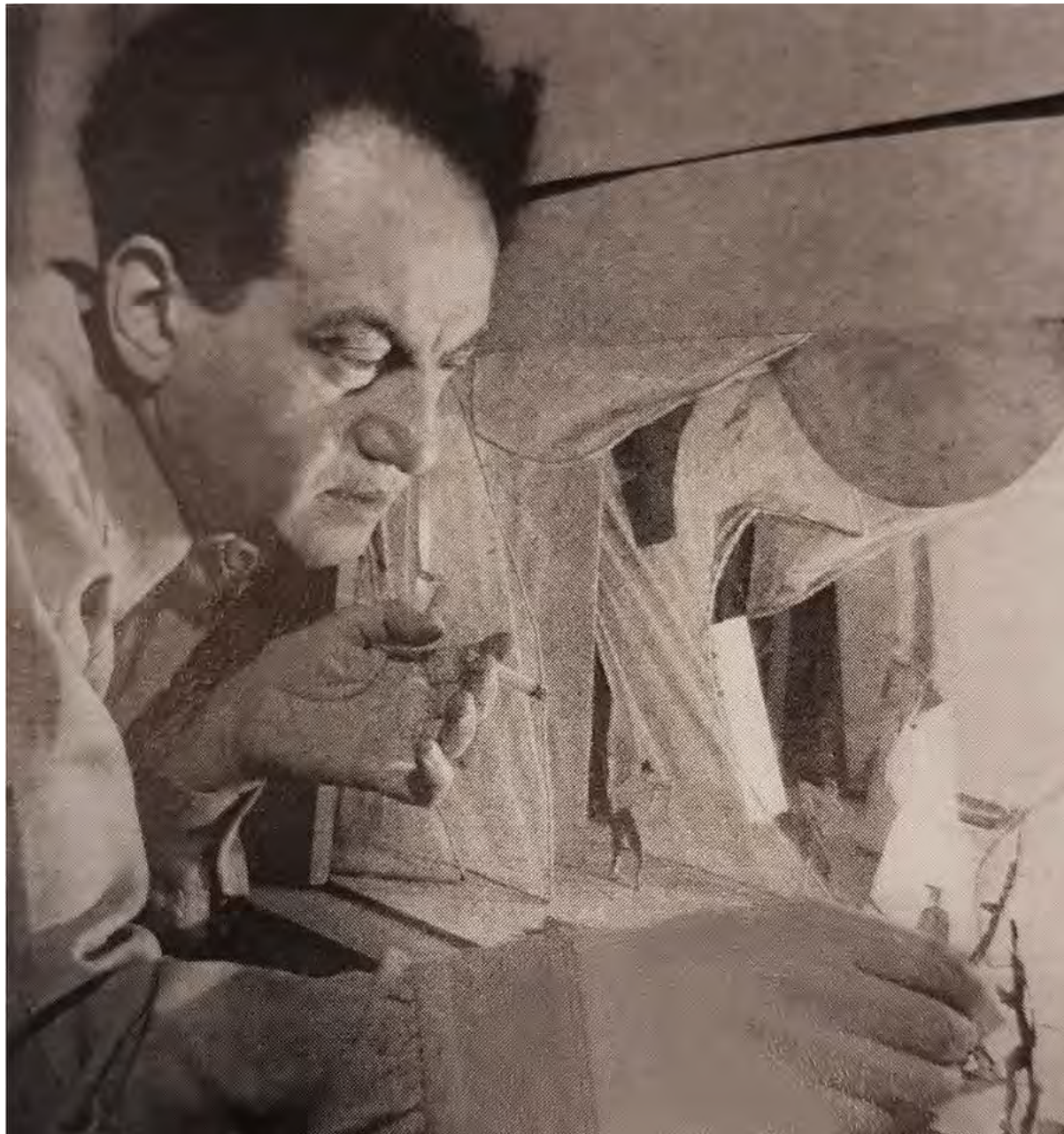


Fig. 1. Boris Aronson in his New York studio, shifting a figure on one of the miniature stage sets he used for design purposes, n.d

his emigration to the West, at least a brief discussion of the major developments in Jewish culture in pre-revolutionary and immediately post-revolutionary Russia is required.<sup>5</sup> This also offers a lens through which to understand the artist's understanding of the tangled relationships between concepts of modernity and Jewish national identity. As scholar John Bowlt has noted, during the 1910s and 1920s, the issue of Jewish artistic tradition and innovation received unprecedented attention in Russia, inspiring not only the search for and rediscovery of the Jewish literary, musical, and artistic heritage, but also the creation of a new Jewish visual art.<sup>6</sup>

A revival of interest in Jewish folk traditions was spurred by the *Evreiskoe istoriko-etnograficheskoe obshchestvo* (Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society), inaugurated in St. Petersburg in 1908. The Society was instrumental in documenting the history of Jewish life and in studying Jewish folk art. It launched the first major ethnographic expedition into the so-called Pale of Settlement—the area of Tsarist Russia in Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia, Ukraine, Bessarabia, and the Crimea to which Jews were confined by laws of 1791 and 1835.<sup>7</sup> The Expedition's main goal was to explore, collect, and record in a scholarly and objective manner religious and other artifacts of traditional Jewish village culture in areas of the Pale of Settlement including Volhynia, Podolia, and part of Kyiv Province.<sup>8</sup> Between 1911 and 1914, the expeditions were led by the scholar, folklorist, and writer Semyon An-Sky (Shloyme-Zanvl Rapoport; 1863–1920).<sup>9</sup> An-Sky's nephew, the young Jewish artist Solomon Yudovin (1875–1960), took part in these expeditions, drew and photographed Jewish religious objects and gravestones, copied ornaments of Jewish folk art and decorations in synagogues, and depicted Jewish people of the Pale of Settlement.<sup>10</sup> Although not part of the original An-sky team, El Lissitzky (1890–1941) [Fig. 2], just as he was preparing his illustrations



Fig. 2. El Lissitzky. Sheet music cover: *Society of Jewish Music*, no. 47: Alexandre Crein, *J'jaillit une Larme / Noteif Nofoh*. Moscow: Obshchestvo evreiskoi muzyki, 1919

for *Sikhes khulin* (The Legend of Prague), also took part in an ethnographic expedition financed by the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society in 1916. This expedition included Aronson's friend the artist Issachar Ber Ryback (1897-1935), who, together with Lissitzky, studied the synagogues along the River Dnieper (Dnipro).<sup>11</sup> In subsequent years, images of Jewish religious and folk objects as well as portrayals of Jewish life in shtetls would serve as important source material for the work of modern Jewish artists, including, for example, Natan Altman's (1889–1971) and Ryback's graphic cycles and Yudovin's woodcuts [Figs. 3–8].

In 1916, all the materials collected during the An-sky ethnographic expeditions, which included about 700 household items found in Jewish towns and villages, over 100 authentic historical documents, and 2,000 photographs, formed the basis of the *Muzei Peterburgskogo Evreiskogo istoriko-etnograficheskogo obshchestva* (Museum of the St. Petersburg Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society), where Yudovin was appointed curator.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 5 Issachar Ber Ryback. Drawing: "My home destroyed, a memory," frontispiece for the book *Shtetl* (Berlin: Shwollen, 1923), c. 1923



Fig. 3. Natan Altman. Cover of film program for the movie *Jewish Luck*, 1926



Fig. 7. Ber Ryback. Cover design: *To One's Self*, 1919

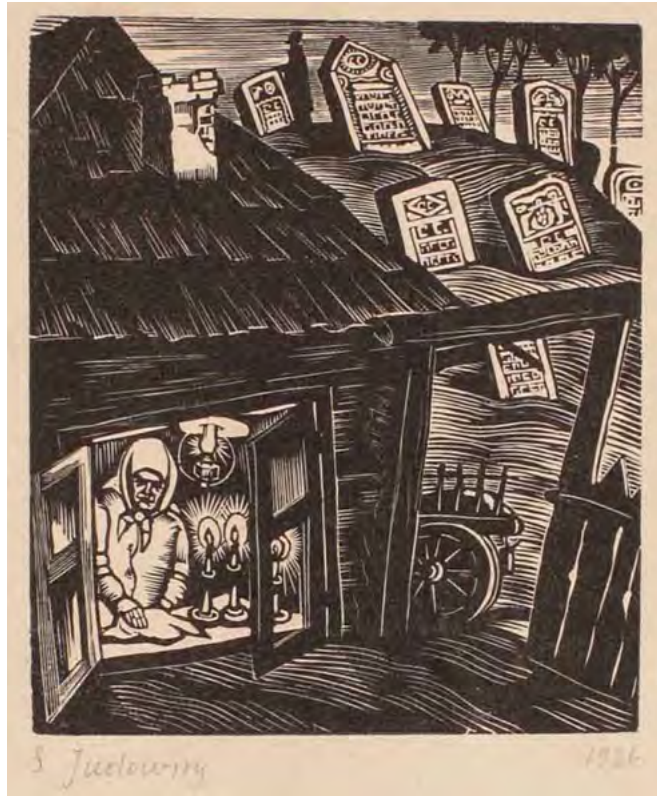


Fig. 4. Solomon Yudovin. Print: Untitled, 1926



Fig. 6. Solomon Yudovin. Print from the series *The Bygone Era: Rumors about the Pogrom*, 1928



Fig. 8. Solomon Yudovin. Print from the series *The Bygone Era: Street in the Shtetl*, 1926

In the decade immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Jewish population in Moscow grew from 10,000 to 120,000. Jewish schools were opened, Yiddish and Hebrew newspapers were established, and many Jews held important positions in the city's cultural life. Between February 1917 and the consolidation of Bolshevik power in 1919 and 1920, Russia and Ukraine became the sites of the most ambitious programs of Jewish cultural formation. With unprecedented support from private patrons and even public authorities,<sup>13</sup> Hebrew and Yiddish literati in Moscow, Kyiv, and Odessa organized literary journals and published avant-garde anthologies and literary translations through some dozen publishing houses.

The chief branch of the *Evreiskoe obshchestvo pooshchreniia khudozhestv* (Jewish Society for the Encouragement of the Arts) in Petrograd, founded in late 1915 by a group of Russian Jewish art patrons and artists, mounted an impressive exhibition of works by its members in April and May 1916.<sup>14</sup> In the spring of 1917 a second exhibition was planned for Petrograd, but the initiative was taken over by the Moscow branch of the Society. The following winter, the *Vystavka kartin i skul'ptury khudoznikov-evreev* (Exhibition of Pictures and Sculptures by Jewish Artists) opened at Moscow's Lemerier Gallery. The ethnic principle prevailed over the artistic and aesthetic in organizing the exhibition, and works by such experimental artists as Marc Chagall (1887–1985), El Lissitzky (1890–1941), and Isaak Rabinovich (1894–1961) were shown alongside those of artists who worked in a traditional academic mode.

Aronson lived in Kyiv, which, at the time, was home to the largest Jewish community in the Russian Empire. Thus, when the Central Rada (Council) declared Ukraine's autonomy in 1917, it issued its proclamation in four languages: Ukrainian, Yiddish, Russian, and Polish. Seeking complete independence in 1918, the Ukrainian National Republic also introduced national

autonomy for the minorities of Ukraine, including Jews.<sup>15</sup>

In 1918, Aronson became a founding member of the Arts Section of the Kultur-Lige (Yiddish Culture League) in Kyiv, a secular organization established at the end of 1917.<sup>16</sup> The Kultur-Lige promoted Yiddish culture as a means of forging a modern identity. As Yiddish educator Abraham Golomb has noted, the Kultur-Lige “developed miraculously quickly into numerous branches in almost all towns of Ukraine—it became a legend. It established schools, training courses for teachers, a publishing house with a printing shop, [and] a big bookstore [...]”<sup>17</sup>

The question of Jewish identity was frequently discussed by artists of Jewish origin in Russia and Ukraine. Aronson laid out his own views in an article co-authored with Ryback entitled “Di vegn fun der yidisher malerai: Rayoynes fron kinster” (The Paths of Jewish Painting: Thoughts of an Artist), a Jewish artistic avant-garde manifesto, which appeared in the 1919 Kultur-Lige miscellany *Oyfgang Ershtyr zamlbukh* (Dawn: First Compendium).<sup>18</sup> Aronson and Ryback



Fig. 9. Joseph Tchaikov (Chaikov). Cover for the catalogue *Jewish Art Exhibition*, organized by the Kultur-Lige Arts Section, Kyiv, 1920



argued that the defining characteristics of Jewish folk art included flatness, ornamental design, the autonomy of the Hebrew letter, and symmetry: "Form is the essential element of art, whereas content is evil. The composition of a painting is more important than its idea, and the richness of color means more than the realistic rendering of objects [...] Pure abstract form is precisely what embodies the national [ethnic Jewish] element. Only via the principle of abstract painting, free of any literariness, can the expression of one's own national foundation be achieved."<sup>19</sup> In their article, Aronson and Ryback stressed the contributions of such artists as Natan Altman, Robert Falk (1886–1958), and Chagall, who, in the authors' words "[...] perceived the modern abstract form in [an] idiosyncratic manner."<sup>20</sup> According to Aronson and Ryback, a special place in the development of Jewish artistic identity was occupied by Chagall, who "[...]

uncovered both his own painting style and national substance [...]. He took up all modern achievements, including Futurism, and succeeded to incarnate them in a specific manner."<sup>21</sup>

Aronson participated in the *Evreiskaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka* (Jewish Art Exhibition), the first show of Jewish art in Kyiv [Figs. 9, 10].<sup>22</sup> This exhibition, which took place from the end of February to April 15, 1920, was organized by the Arts Section of Kultur-Lige. Aronson oversaw the exhibition committee. The exhibition catalogue's unsigned essay stated that the Jewish graphics "[...] stem from several sources: 1) engravings from the period when Jewish communities thrived in Spain, Italy and Holland; 2) primitive engravings from Galicia and Lithuania; [and] 3) the picturesque graphics which are a result of research by the modern painter, and



Fig. 10. Group of Kyiv Kultur-Lige activists with two American delegates, May 1920



Fig. 11. Alexandra Exter, Constructivist stage design for *Ballet Satanique*, music by A. Scriabin, 1922

which are based on the play of black and white." The main source of Jewish graphics, according to the essay article, is "the Hebrew letter and the ornament of old Jewish prayer books and religious artifacts."<sup>23</sup> The article's author also stressed that "Modern Jewish art seeks to recreate our artistic inheritance in national forms, in which it expresses the accomplishments of modern art."<sup>24</sup>

Aronson helped to find some examples of Jewish folk art for the collection of the Kultur-Lige's *Muzei plasticheskikh iskusstv* (Museum of Visual Arts), which officially opened in Kyiv in September 1921. He combined administrative work for the museum with teaching in the Kultur-Lige's art studio and establishing the League's library. Aronson was also one of the organizers of the *Evreiskii literaturno-khudozhestvennyi klub* (Jewish Literary Artistic Club) in Kyiv, where Jewish artists and writers presented lectures and discussed Jewish art.<sup>25</sup>

In both his artwork and his writing, Aronson promoted a new Jewish art that combined elements of Jewish folk traditions with the latest achievements of the European avant-garde. Aronson was able to acquire an immediate understanding of the latest and most important developments in modern art without having to travel to Paris.<sup>26</sup> He became intoxicated with modernism after visiting Moscow in 1909 and seeing



Fig. 12. Vladimir Stenberg and Georgii Stenberg. Poster: *Moscow Kamerny Theater performances in Paris* (March 6–23, 1923), 1923

firsthand the latest paintings by modern French artists, from Monet and Degas to Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse, in the collection of Sergei Shchukin (1854–1936).<sup>27</sup>

Iakov Tugendkhold (1882–1928),<sup>28</sup> an influential Russian art critic, explained the significance of Shchukin's collection in a 1914 article: "Only in Shchukin's collection can Matisse be studied and understood. Although I have had many opportunities to see his exhibitions in Paris and view his works in his own studio, I did not know Matisse until I visited Shchukin's home. Not only are there a great many of his pictures here (thirty-seven), but they are arranged in most favorable surroundings. Like hothouse flowers, certain pictures need a suitable environment; this is a disadvantage of the museum, which lacks it, and an advantage of the private collection."<sup>29</sup>

Shchukin made his collection available to the public every Sunday free of charge from 1908 onwards.<sup>30</sup> Aronson probably did not know that the access to the

collection was so limited. He traveled to Moscow and, as the story goes, after spending a night sleeping on a Moscow street,<sup>31</sup> was, to his great disappointment, turned away by a servant because it was not Sunday. Shchukin himself suddenly appeared at the gate and, taking pity on the young man, gave him a personal tour of his collection.<sup>32</sup>

Like Moscow, the multicultural city of Kyiv, then also part of the Russian Empire, was a major player in the dialogue of artistic ideas taking place between important modernist figures in European cultural centers such as Paris and Vienna. From 1912 to 1916 Aronson attended the *Kievskoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche* (Kyiv Art School) where he established strong connections with his fellow young Jewish modernist artists, including Ryback, and became a fervent advocate for the creation of a new Jewish Yiddish culture.<sup>33</sup> Aronson also took lessons at a thriving center of modernist culture—the private studio of the well-known Kyiv artist Oleksandr Murashko (1875–1919), one of the first Impressionists in Ukraine.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps most significantly, however, Aronson continued his art studies at the Kyiv workshop of the Cubo-Futurist painter Alexandra Exter (1882–1949), one of the foremost women artists of the Russian avant-garde. In his many later interviews with various American newspapers and magazines, Aronson always mentioned the tremendous impact Exter had on his artistic development.<sup>35</sup>

Having learned about Cubism firsthand in Paris, Exter often acted as an intermediary among the avant-garde artistic communities of Paris, Moscow, and Kyiv, acquainting the leading members of the Russian avant-garde with the paintings of Picasso and other Cubists. In 1912, Exter took part in one of the major events of the Cubist movement: the Salon de la Section d'Or of 1912.<sup>36</sup> In Paris, where Exter spent the winters of 1912, 1913, and 1914, she also frequented the circle of artists associated

with the important journal *Les Soirées de Paris* (1912–1914). Through the journal's editor-in-chief, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, the group was closely linked to the Cubist experiments of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso.<sup>37</sup> French Cubism and Italian Futurism provided the foundations of Exter's painting until 1914. She became acquainted with a number of the Italian Futurists, including the painter and writer Ardengo Soffici (1879–1964). Her theater designs paralleled her pictorial evolution, and her career as a stage designer began in 1915 with the experimental Kamerny (Chamber) theater of Aleksandr Tairov (1885–1950) in Moscow.

Exter became one of the leading innovators in the modern theater to introduce Constructivism to the art of stage design [Fig. 11]. A significant proportion of Soviet theatrical design in the 1920s was defined by Exter's innovations and style, which were widely known both in Soviet Russia and abroad as a result of her teaching in Kyiv, Odessa, Moscow, and, after 1924, Paris.

Exter's private studio in Kyiv formed the main breeding ground for Jewish artists interested in developing Jewish art as part of larger "Yiddishist" project. During the period that Aronson studied at Exter's



Fig. 13. El Lissitzky. Book cover: Alexander Tairoff, *Theater Unbound: Notes of a Director*. Potsdam: Verlag Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1923

studio, between 1918 and 1919, her pedagogical system rejected academic training, and focused instead on non-representational art.<sup>38</sup> As Russian theater scholar Georgiy Kovalenko has noted, "One of the most important points of Exter's educational system was the essential and mandatory analysis of the works by artists such as Poussin, Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso."<sup>39</sup> Exter always wanted her students to analyze any classical and academic work of art "through the prism of contemporary art" and taught classes on rhythm, color, and texture.<sup>40</sup> Becoming one of Exter's principal assistants, Aronson explored the systems of French Cubism and Italian Futurism and the syntax of abstract painting under Exter's tutelage. Aronson noted that his and Ryback's attachment to Cubism and Futurism also had to do with such art's aesthetic compatibility with Jewish folk art.<sup>41</sup>

In 1920, Exter moved from Kyiv to Moscow, where she continued working as a principal designer for Tairov's Kamerny (Chamber) Theatre. Following his mentor, Aronson also moved to Moscow in the fall of 1921, and both Exter and Tairov profoundly influenced his subsequent development. Tairov was a crusader against "naturalistic" theater and instead sought a kinetic and architectonic, rather than a literary, theatrical experience [Figs. 12, 13]. Exter and Tairov aspired to a dynamic fusion of drama, movement, and design known as "synthetic theater." Tairov had promoted a new conception of the stage designer's function: rather than simply painting the backdrop, the artist would construct the whole three-dimensional stage. As Tairov argued in his 1921 article "Stenicheskaia atmosfera" (Stage Ambience): "The actor expresses his art by using his body. Therefore, the stage should be designed in such a way as to help the actor's body to assume the necessary shapes, and to respond easily to all the challenges required by the body's motion and rhythm. It then follows that the most important part of a stage, which

needs to be planned for each production, is the stage floor, the so-called stage area, because it is there that the actor moves and realizes in a visible form his creative purpose. Thus, the stage artist must focus his attention on the floor of the stage, having broken away from his fascination with the backdrop."<sup>42</sup>

Aronson's ideas about stage design grew out of his exposure to and participation in Russian experimental revolutionary theater. Aronson recalled: "In Russia, I grew up at the time of revolt against the Naturalism and Realism of the Moscow Art Theatre [...]. The wonderful achievements of the Stanislavsky theatre were in the performance of the plays. Very little attention was given to scenery as a work of art. [...] In the Tairov Theatre, it was just the other way around. The productions were fascinating. The actors were also dancers and acrobats."<sup>43</sup>

Exter made Aronson her assistant in creating the scale models for Tairov's 1921 production of *Romeo and Juliet*. At the Kamerny Theatre, primary attention was paid to the actor's technique, and movement was considered a central component of the overall stage design. In her designs for *Romeo and Juliet*,



Fig. 14. Boris Aronson. Costume design for a group of actors in an unspecified production

*Romeo and Juliet*, 1921



Fig. 15. Photograph of a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, staged by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerny (Chamber) Theater in Moscow, 1921



Fig. 16. Alexandra Exter. Stage design for Juliet's bedroom in *Romeo and Juliet*, staged by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerny (Chamber) Theater in Moscow, 1921

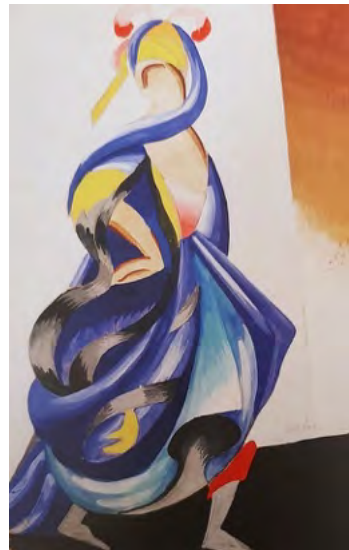


Fig. 17. Alexandra Exter. Costume design for Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, staged by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerny (Chamber) Theater in Moscow, 1921

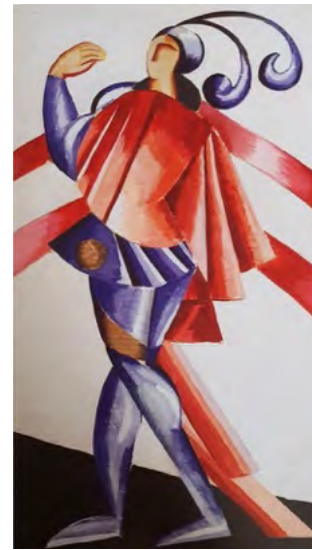


Fig. 18. Alexandra Exter. Costume design for Paris in *Romeo and Juliet*, staged by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerny (Chamber) Theater in Moscow, 1921

*Day and Night*, 1924



Fig. 19. Photograph of a scene from *Day and Night* showing the Devil in contemporary dress. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923-2000*



Fig. 20. Photograph of a scene from *Day and Night* showing "the Devil's slavish assistant." *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923-2000*



Fig. 30. Boris Aronson. Costume design for the grief-stricken bride and groom in *Day and Night*

Exter used staircases, platforms, and mirrors, creating the illusion of intersecting spatial planes as a metaphor for the intrigues of Shakespeare's tragedy [Figs. 15–18]. In the words of art critic Abram Efros (1898–1954), Exter wanted her designs for *Romeo and Juliet* to be “the most Cubist Cubism, the most Baroque Baroque.”<sup>44</sup>

Working in close collaboration with Exter on the scale models for *Romeo and Juliet*, Aronson learned from his mentor how to arrive at a new relationship between actors in abstract costumes moving in harmony with the abstract shapes and forms of the “constructed” scenes [Figs. 19, 20]. Aronson later noted that in his work for the theater he was influenced by the attention to the arrangement of actors on stage as it was practiced in the Russian theater: “The picture—the composition—the *mise en scène*—in the Russian Art Theatre is in the placing—the arrangement—of the actors on the stage in relation to each other and to the props. In the sense of a composed painting. The actors are arranged just like the elements in a painting.”<sup>45</sup>

Later in Aronson's career, when he worked for the Jewish theaters in New York in the mid-1920s, he remembered Exter's lessons and continued to be inspired by modern European art movements, especially Fauvism and Cubism, and used them to revitalize representations of Jewish subjects on stage. But the groupings of actors and the emphasis upon designing them were very similar to what Aronson observed in experimental Russian theater [Fig. 14].



Fig. 21. Isaak Rabinovich, Costume design for eight actors in *The God of Vengeance* by Sholem Asch, staged by the *Gosudarstvennyi Evreiskii teatr* (GOSET), Moscow, 1921

While in Moscow, Aronson also attended classes taught by Ilya Mashkov (1881–1944) at VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops), an important center of artistic experimentation. VKhUTEMAS brought together educators with different views and artistic approaches who aimed at shaping free-thinking artistic personalities. Mashkov was a member of the group of experimental artists called *Bubnovyi valet* (Jack of Diamonds). The inaugural exhibition of the group (December 10, 1910–January 16, 1911) showcased works by the French Fauves and German Expressionists alongside works by their Russian counterparts.<sup>46</sup> With Mashkov, as with Exter in Kyiv earlier, French modernist painting was emphasized.

Aronson was also shaped by the modernist revolution in Jewish theater in Moscow, and he maintained close ties with the Moscow branch of Kultur-Lige. The Moscow Yiddish Theater (later called GOSET) was founded in 1919 and soon became one of the most remarkable avant-garde theaters in Europe [Fig. 21]. As was stated in the collection of essays published for the theater's tour of Jewish Ukraine: “The chamber theater conquered the proletarian and hard-working milieu. There is no laborer, no hard-working person, who just observed the theater and didn't speak about it with excitement. On the contrary, you can feel the contempt and partial boycott of the Jewish bourgeoisie, the clerics, and to some extent also the old Jewish actors [...]. The Zionist, the Jewish rich man, squirms with his ugly grimace; the *shtrayml* [fur hat], the synagogue, hurls dead curses and excommunications. But all the simple folk storm around enthusiastically [...]. The Yiddish Chamber Theater is a political-cultural force. No doubt it is becoming the revolutionary's people's theater.”<sup>47</sup> In Moscow, Aronson met and became friends with Chagall, who was designing for GOSET, including his murals for the theater in 1920. These murals became a landmark work for both the painter and GOSET and



Fig. 22. El Lissitzky. Catalogue cover: *First Russian Art Exhibition*. Galerie von Diemen, Berlin (October 15–December 1922), 1922  
 Fig. 23. El Lissitzky. Book cover: Ilya Ehrenburg, *Six Stories with Easy Endings*. Moscow and Berlin: Heiklon, August 1922  
 Fig. 24. El Lissitzky. Journal cover: *Veshch / Objet / Gegenstand* (Berlin: Verlag Skythen), no. 1–2 (March–April 1922)

made an important impact on the young artist.<sup>48</sup>

The Jewish cultural intelligentsia entered 1917 sharply divided into two increasingly irreconcilable Hebraist and Yiddishist camps, each of which claimed to represent Jewish national culture and sought to win East European Jewry over to their side. Along with Aleksei Granovsky's (1880–1937) Yiddish theater in Moscow, there was HaBima, a new theater founded in 1917 with performances in the newly revived language of Hebrew. The HaBima also drew on the Yiddish literary tradition, translated into Hebrew. Hebrew, a solemn language, was far from colloquial, and biblical language influenced the pathos and elevated style of HaBima, which did not have the humor typical of Yiddish culture. While HaBima fostered the Hebrew genre of high tragedy, GOSET mostly showcased the Yiddish genre of comedy.<sup>49</sup> Scholars have noted that Aronson designed the costumes and decorations for Ayzik Waiter's (c. 1878–1919) play *Fartog* (Dawn; 1907), which premiered in March 1921 at GOSET.<sup>50</sup>

Both HaBima and GOSET also derived their strength from the Jewish folk art tradition. At the same time,

they both drew on the achievements of the Russian avant-garde theater, although HaBima, still in the tradition of actor and theorist Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863–1938), was more conservative. Efros called HaBima “Stanislavsky's bastard child by an accidental Jewish mother.”<sup>51</sup> As he commented about HaBima in his 1928 article “*Khudozhniki teatra Granovskogo*” (The Artists of Granovsky's Theater): “It was supported by an amazing amalgam of Zionists, the Rabbinate, parts of the Communist Party, and those liberal anti-Semites who considered the language of the Bible the only thing bearable about the Jews.”<sup>52</sup>

The flowering of Jewish culture in post-revolutionary Russia was short-lived, and as the 1920s progressed, it was gradually stamped out.<sup>53</sup> Many Jews themselves were also forced to emigrate as a result of the so-called *pogroms* (ethnic riots).<sup>54</sup> Between 1918 and 1921, during the period of the Russian Civil War, over one hundred thousand Jews were murdered in Ukraine during the pogroms. Two groups were particularly active participants of these pogroms, the anti-Bolshevik Volunteer Army, commanded by General Anton Denikin (1872–1947); and forces loyal to the Ukrainian national government,

the so-called Directory, headed by Simon Petliura (Petlyura) (1879–1926).

In 1922, Aronson left Russia and traveled first to Poland and then to Germany, settling briefly in Berlin, which was a temporary home to hundreds of thousands of Russians between 1919 to 1923. The Berlin of the Russian émigrés represented “Russia’s other half,” the complement to Petrograd, Moscow, Kyiv, and Odessa. In Berlin, Aronson studied etching and decorative arts under German-Jewish graphic artist Herman Struck (born Chaim Aaron ben David; 1876–1944) and participated in theatrical productions of the House of the Arts.<sup>55</sup> A number of Aronson’s experimental woodcuts were included in the famous show *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* (First Russian Art Exhibition) in Berlin’s Galerie Van Diemen. Opening on October 15, 1922, this landmark exhibition offered a unique opportunity for a broad Western audience to view the most recent artistic developments in Russia, from academic to avant-garde works.<sup>56</sup> With more than seven hundred works on display, including theater designs and architectural models, and a decidedly avant-garde catalogue cover designed by Lissitzky [Fig. 22], this event generated great excitement in the European art press.

While in Europe, Aronson created costume designs for the Hasidic and the Yemenite dances of Baruch Agadati (pseudonym of Boris Kaushansky, 1895–1976), one of the pioneers of Jewish modern dance [Figs. 25–27; p. 145].<sup>57</sup> Agadati, who performed in Berlin in 1922 and 1923, was known for interpreting Jewish folk dances in an expressionistic style. Aronson’s “portraits in movement,” depicting a costumed Agadati in modern dance postures, are created in a Cubo-Futurist mode, and their debt to Exter’s costume designs for the Moscow Kamerny (Chamber) Theater is unmistakable [Figs. 26, 28; p. 151].

By 1924, Berlin had almost eighty Russian publishing

houses, and in the five previous years, up to 2,300 titles had been published (see, for example, [Figs. 23, 24].<sup>58</sup> Aronson published two books in Berlin: a critical study of the work of his friend Chagall, first published in Russian in 1923, and then in German and Yiddish translations in 1924 [p. 118];<sup>59</sup> and *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika* (Modern Jewish Graphics), in which he analyzed the work of such major Russian Jewish artists as Chagall, Altman, and Lissitzky, among others [p. 112]. In his writings, Aronson articulated some of the theoretical principles that later guided his work. He pointed out that “Jews have never had a naturalistic art. Jewish art is of a religious, sublime, and abstract character [...] created out of fantasy. Jewish artists did not stress the true features of the animals they represented, perhaps because these animals were not familiar to them, but were rather symbolic images, which these artists took from fairy tales, legends, and poetic fables.”<sup>60</sup> He noted: “When we speak of creating a national art and defining its character, we must first of all turn to graphic art. The main feature of Jewish folk art is its two-dimensional quality [...] this has been dictated by religious prohibitions against three-dimensional artistic representations.”<sup>61</sup>

Later in his life, Aronson described his mindset after having earned some money from his artistic commissions in Europe: “With four hundred dollars (my prosperity) I considered myself well-to-do and decided to go to America.”<sup>62</sup> In November 1923, he arrived in New York on the RMS *Aquatoria*, a British transatlantic ocean liner. Aronson characterized his meager luggage as “awkward [...] some drawings, two books, a pair of socks, a membership in a union of German artists, paintbrushes, crowded emotions, little money and less English”<sup>63</sup> [Fig. 29].

To make a living in his early days in America, Aronson illustrated Jewish children’s books, some designs for which are in the Berman Collection [pp. 120–123, 125–127, 129]. In his book illustrations, Aronson



Fig. 25. Postcard: Boris Aronson’s costume for the Hasidic and the Yemenite dances of Baruch Agadati



Fig. 26. Boris Aronson. Chassidic (Hasidic) dance costume design for Baruch Agadati, c. 1923



Fig. 27. Postcard: Boris Aronson’s costume for the dancer Baruch Agadati, c. 1923

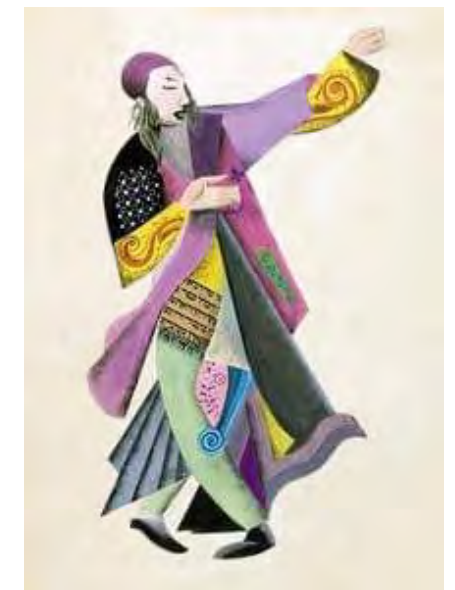


Fig. 28. Boris Aronson. Costume design for a Hasidic figure

employed a style characterized by two-dimensionality, an absence of illusionist space, and perspectival reduction. Opposed to excessive ornamentation, Aronson showed in his designs no trace of the decorativeness of pre-revolutionary children's books typical, for example, of the artists of the World of Art group. Aronson explored the possibilities of modernism within the Jewish cultural tradition and continued the experimental work in Jewish children's book design pioneered by such artists as Chagall and Lissitzky. The artistic expressiveness of Aronson's illustrations is based on the contrast between extremely generalized forms of animals and a few well worked-out details, emphasizing only the most typical and expressive body parts. Each animal depicted has its own character and specific plastic movement. Although remaining figurative, Aronson's illustrations are highly abstracted.

Recalling the beginning of his career in New York, Aronson wrote: "I wound up in a tiny theatre on 180th Street in the Bronx called Unser Theatre. Unser Theatre (Our Theatre) was originated by the Society for the Promotion of Jewish Dramatic Literature. Out of seventeen Yiddish theatres in New York, Unser Theatre was the Yiddish version of Off-Off-Broadway [Figs. 31, 32]. No one knew for sure if they would be paid, but they had an adventurous spirit and were concerned with the avant-garde and the experimental."<sup>64</sup> Elsewhere he noted: "My going into the Yiddish Theatre was a necessity, it wasn't a matter of choosing—just a matter of reality because when I arrived here, I did not speak one word of English."<sup>65</sup>

Aronson's first designs for the Unser Teater (as it was then spelled) reflected the lessons the artist learned in Moscow from Exter and Tairov. He broke new ground by introducing Constructivist style sets and costumes in his designs for the dramatic poem after S. An-sky's last play *Tog un nakht* (*Day and Night*; 1924) [Fig. 30; pp. 65, 73] and for the 1925 four-act tragicomedy

*The Final Balance* by David Pinski (1872–1959) [pp. 70, 71, 146, 147], both of which were staged at the Unser Teater.<sup>66</sup> An-sky had put only fragments of *Day and Night* into writing, but relayed his ideas for the play to Sofia Sorkin-Binshteyn shortly before his death.<sup>67</sup> The Yiddish playwright and photographer Alter Sholem Kacyzne (1885–1941) completed a draft of the play so it could be produced.<sup>68</sup> For this drama, rather than recreating a realistic image of the *shtetl* onstage, Aronson created what he described as an atmospheric set, architecturally framing the action of the tragedy. His set for the opening scene was made up of irregular black-and-white geometric shapes and staircases upon which the Devil ran riot. As Aronson wrote in his manuscript "Notes—My approach to design": "I am mostly interested in what is known as acting areas [...]. Very seldom did I design a symmetrical set, where one half of the set is identical to the other."<sup>69</sup>

Act I showed a room in the Rabbi's house, which included Constructivist-inspired steps and benches and abstract shapes painted on the curved wall of the house instead of real furniture. Act II represented the



Fig. 29. Boris Aronson in America, mid-1920s. His two books were published Berlin in 1923 and 1924—*Marc Chagall and Contemporary Jewish Graphics*



Fig. 31. [Markowitz]. Poster: *The Rabbi's Family*, Peoples Theatre, New York, c. 1923–1930



Fig. 32. Designer unknown. Poster: *The Bandit/s*, Irving Place Theatre, New York, c. 1923



Fig. 33. Designer unknown. Poster: *Eshter'ke*, Yiddish Art Theatre, New York, c. 1920

ruins of a mill, which was the Devil's meeting place, at midnight. Aronson used his sets to physically embody the Rabbi's conception of evil, featuring tense, curved forms and alluding to the moral struggles of the leader of the Hasidic community. The forms of the house threatened to collapse at any moment, as if mimicking the Rabbi's mental and physical state. The grotesque poses of the actors echo the highly contorted scenery.

It was through the contrast in design styles—the old and the new—that Aronson made his statement about traditional Hasidic folklore on the one hand, and modernity on the other. While the Hasidic characters in this production all wear the traditional Jewish costume of the *shtetl* [Fig. 30], the costume designs for the Devil, on the contrary, are based on contemporary dress, including suits, shirts, derby hats, tuxedos, and bowties. In designing the Devil's costumes in this way, Aronson alludes to a direct comparison between sin and the latest trends in fashion.

In Aronson's designs for his second production for the Unser Teater, *The Final Balance*, the first three acts represented the same small room in a flour merchant's home [pp. 65, 70, 71, 146, 147]. As described in the program for *The Final Balance*, an old woman tells the moral of the story in the prologue for this production. She tells of the timeless struggle for power and gold and the havoc it wreaks, and she deplors the fact that to gain gold and power, human beings will stop at nothing—they will hurt, ruin, and destroy one another, even their own kin. But she warns all who would join in the pursuit that when the conquerors stop at last to make a reckoning, the final balance does not tally; despite their profits and acquisitions, they still find themselves at some loss.

At the beginning of the play, the room's interior is realistically rendered by Aronson. The merchant dreams that he is getting rich, and as he grows richer,

his interior becomes more and more lavish. In Act II, a touch of his imaginary wealth is shown by the addition of arches to the room; in Act III, as the dream becomes more developed, the old space disappears, and the old-fashioned furniture has been replaced by modern furniture.

Aronson's designs for *The Final Balance* contained Constructivist elements, especially visible in Act IV, with its steps, ramps, and platforms. His set represented a city street with a flickering electric sign for advertising, echoing the paintings of American artist Stuart Davis (1892–1964) [p. 71]. Aronson had once been interested in designing such signs himself: "The peak of my ambition when I arrived in New York was to design one of the huge electric signs on Times Square for Wrigley's Chewing Gum—working with colored electric lights as a new medium—using them as one would use tubes of paint. But—it didn't work out that way [...]."<sup>70</sup>

For the interior of the auditorium of the Yiddish Unser Teater, Aronson created designs for a frieze-like mural, with images of costumed actors [Fig. 34]. The mural reflects the evolution of Jewish theater, from its traditional Jewish folkloric forms to the avant-garde.<sup>71</sup> While working on his mural, Aronson was probably inspired by Chagall's earlier mural for the GOSET theater in Moscow.

In 1925, the Unser Teater was taken over by the actor Rudolph Schildkraut (1862–1930), who had come to the United States from Germany, where he had been a reigning stage star. Aronson not only created costume and stage designs for Ossip Dymov's (1878–1959) comedy *The Bronx Express* (1925) at the Schildkraut Theatre in Bronx, but also co-directed it [Fig. 35; p. 74]. A parody of modern Jewish life, it was Aronson's first Jewish-American play. In the play, set inside the New York City subway, Schildkraut starred as a tired button maker who goes home after a long day and falls asleep in the subway car.



Fig. 34. Boris Aronson. Design for a mural in the auditorium of the Unser Teater, 1925

Aronson's set designs for this production represent a dream sequence where images of the protagonist's youth in Eastern Europe are mixed with reality of his present-day American life, and people depicted in subway advertisements seem to come to life. The set changes as the locations in the dream change, and it is only the ceiling of the subway car that remains the same.

"My work with the Unser Theatre was yet a residue of my Russian experience, as most of the plays dealt with allegory or mysticism. My dream was to get a job with Maurice Schwartz, who was the head of the Jewish Art Theatre on Second Avenue," wrote Aronson in a later memoir [Fig. 33].<sup>72</sup> Second Avenue between Houston and 14<sup>th</sup> Streets was the entertainment center of Yiddish New York from the 1920s to the 1950s. A thriving Yiddish theater culture blossomed on Manhattan's Lower East Side, entertaining over one and a half million first- and second-generation Eastern European Jewish immigrants from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.<sup>73</sup> Along with the Yiddish newspapers, Yiddish theater played an important role in the lives of the Yiddish-speaking Jews, providing both a reprieve from the difficulties of adapting to life in America and making European and American literature available to them. Yiddish theater in New

York was attended by the rich and poor, the educated and the semi-illiterate, the observant and atheists. Early Yiddish productions tended to swing between light musical entertainment and melodramas. Some young Jewish intellectuals were contemptuous of the popular Yiddish theater, labeling it *shund* (trash). They called instead for a diverse, high-quality repertoire produced according to the highest artistic standards. Soon Jewish audiences were introduced to the works of Henrik Ibsen, Gerhardt Hauptmann, Leo Tolstoy, and Maxim Gorky.<sup>74</sup> Even though Yiddish theater was initially aimed primarily at an immigrant Jewish audience, it soon became a respected institution in New York City, and Yiddish-language plays were reviewed in *The New York Times*. The Yiddish stage was often viewed as a site of sophisticated experiments, on the cutting edge of performance practice and inspired by the latest trends of the European, particularly the Russian, stage.

Aronson's theater designs for Yiddish productions by An-sky, Pinski, and Dymov, which he produced for the Unser Teater and the Schildkraut Theatre in the Bronx, soon began to attract attention from far beyond that neighborhood, and his growing reputation finally led to an offer of employment at Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre in 1925. During the next four years, Aronson's work in this theater comprised some



Fig. 35. Boris Aronson. Stage design for Ossi Dymov's *The Bronx Express*, Schildkraut Theatre, The Bronx, 1925

of his most experimental designs.

Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre was devoted to performing Yiddish literary plays and translations and adaptations of the Western canon.<sup>75</sup> The name "Yiddish Art Theatre" was an homage to Stanislavsky's much-admired *Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr* (Moscow Art Theatre). Schwartz, undoubtedly a good manager and producer, was also a talented actor, and he usually cast himself in the lead role [Fig. 36]. Both Charlie Chaplin and Albert Einstein were great fans of Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre and even posed with the cast of his productions for photos.

Aronson recalled: "Maurice Schwartz was extremely ambitious. He presented plays by Gorki and Andreyev and the most famous European playwrights, often personally translating them into Yiddish [...] When he opened his theatre at Second Avenue and 12<sup>th</sup> Street (which is now the Eden Theatre), it was called a million-dollar operation, ornamented with a star of David on the ceiling which took an entire congregation of Italian workers months to plaster. It was elaborate and aroused great amounts of talk. When the building was completed, the discovery was made that the star

was visible mainly to the actors and stagehands."<sup>76</sup>

In 1926, Aronson designed sets and costumes for a musical *The Tenth Commandment*, the opening extravaganza of Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre, on the occasion of its relocation to its purpose-built Second Avenue location in New York [Figs. 36–41; pp. 64, 66, 67, 148, 149]. *The Tenth Commandment*, an adaptation of the 1882 play by Avrom (Abraham) Goldfadden (1840–1908), chronicles the struggle between the angel of good and the angel of evil as it impacts the lives of two unsuspecting Jewish couples.<sup>77</sup> The angel of evil attempts to make the two couples break the tenth commandment: "Thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife." However, goodness prevails and neither couple breaks their marriage vows. Focusing on temptation, adultery, and redemption, the play is about faith in the inherent goodness of humanity.

Schwartz approved Aronson's overall design concept for this production but asked the artist "to soften the hard edges and angles." As Aronson commented, it was his "first exposure to the need to tame the Constructivism" in his work.<sup>78</sup> Aronson's Constructivist rendition of some of the stage sets for *The Tenth Commandment* clearly demonstrated the artist's rejection of naturalism in design. As a case in point, the artist's imaginary representation of Hell for *The Tenth Commandment* was a metal construction in the shape of a human skull [p. 64]. The set depicted the fragmented frame of a human profile with the tangible atmosphere of a factory on a hot day, set in a man's brain contained inside the head. As Aronson commented in his scrapbook, "A Hell [is represented] as a head because the conception is mental... The construction is of a fire escape, which is a symbol of trouble and emergency... The actors could slide down the pole from a platform above, come to the staircase away from the audience's gaze, and climb the fire escapes to the platform again; thereby, each

## The Tenth Commandment, 1926



Fig. 36. Maurice Schwartz in one of his eight roles in the play *The Tenth Commandment*; here, as a woman, with co-star Joseph Bulof



Fig. 37. Model for Aronson's stage set "The Castle Ballroom" in *The Tenth Commandment*, with its playing areas.



Fig. 38. Ella Barnett. Photograph of the outside of the house with actors. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs*, 1923–2000



Fig. 39. Ella Barnett. Photograph of the outside of the house. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs*, 1923–2000



Fig. 40. Ella Barnett. Photograph of the inside of the house with actors. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs*, 1923–2000



Fig. 41. Ella Barnett. Photograph of the inside of the house. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs*, 1923–2000



appearing as several people. Twenty actors gave the effect of hundreds in this set."<sup>79</sup> Aronson was confronted with the problem of affording a large cast of actors sufficient planes on which to distribute themselves. In this production, there were some seventy actors in addition to the four leads played by Schwartz, Joseph Buloff, Celia Adler, and Berta Gersten.

*The Castle Ballroom*, the stage set for the finale of the Act I, included different platforms and steps, giving many possibilities for dynamic action by actors on many levels and at many angles [Fig. 37; pp. 78–79]. These levels and steps liberated the action and gave it a dynamic quality that, in the words of one critic, “[...] runs far afield of the ordinary production methods known in New York.”<sup>80</sup> Aronson’s designs, with their dynamic compositions in which traditional decorative, painterly stage sets were supplanted by the search for a rhythmic construction, are reminiscent of those of his mentor, Exter.

Because *The Tenth Commandment* was a review rather than a play, the sets were varied. The Berman Collection features a design for the opening scene, “Little House in the Woods” [pp. 148, 149]. According to Aronson’s idea, the scene begins with the exterior of the house [Figs. 38, 39], after which the roof and sides open up to reveal its interior, and the action continues indoors [Figs. 40, 41]. Stylistically, this scene echoes the work of Chagall, while both in design and technique the house anticipates Tevye’s home as designed by Aronson for *Fiddler on the Roof* in 1964.

Schwartz directed *The Tenth Commandment* and played eight parts, one of them female. There were twenty-five scene changes and 360 costumes. The Berman Collection includes Aronson’s designs for three important costumes: a Hypocrite, two Hasids, and one (role unidentified) for the actor Joseph Buloff (1899–1985) [p. 150]. The costume design for

Buloff depicts this well-known Lithuanian-born actor, who had joined the famous Vilna Troupe in the early 1920s and soon became a lead actor. The Troupe had built an enviable reputation, putting on plays by Russian writer Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) as well as Yiddish writers from throughout Eastern Europe. In 1922 the Troupe went to Romania, where they were enthusiastically welcomed. By 1923, however, the Vilna Troupe had fractured, with one branch leaving to work in Berlin and other Western capitals. Schwartz’s own Yiddish Art Theatre had been inspired by the Vilna’s ideals and practices. In 1927, Buloff was invited by Schwartz to join his theater.<sup>81</sup>

In Aronson’s costume design for a pair of Hasidic Jews dancing [p. 151], their sleeves and stockings are made from torn-out pages from prayer books. This costume design is closely related to the artist’s earlier sketches for Baruch Agadati’s *Dances Assidiques* (Hasidic Dances) [p. 145].

Evaluating Aronson’s work for *The Tenth Commandment*, Schwartz noted: “Aronson gives his own conception to the productions he designs. He, like Chagall, Falk, and Altman, has adopted the most modern form of theatre [...]. I became convinced that here indeed is a man of original conceptions. He has constantly in mind the actor, the composition, movement, lighting, and direction [...]. As far as scenery and costumes are concerned, I consider *The Tenth Commandment* one of the finest productions conceived in America within the last few years. The Yiddish Art Theatre is proud of what Aronson designed for it [...].”<sup>82</sup>

*The Tenth Commandment* was not a financial success, and one critic called it “a splashy flop.” Yet John Mason Brown (1900–1969), one of the most astute theater critics of that period, stressed the originality of Aronson’s designs in his review of the production in *Theatre Arts Monthly*: “[...] the settings and costumes of B. Aronson are the bravest

experiments in scenic design that the present season has disclosed. His endless costumes are thoroughly thought out in terms of individual detail as well as being tonal factors in the large ensembles. By employing not one, but many constructivist settings, which range from heaven to hell, he conditions the style of the entire production, and brings a welcome vigor and originality into our theatre.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Aronson was the best representative of the new modernist stagecraft. When Aronson arrived in New York, the creation of theater design was often the work of mediocre craftsmen who usually created realistically painted backdrops, and sometimes even utilized stock scenery that could be employed interchangeably among many different productions.<sup>84</sup>

During that same period, Aronson created costume and stage designs and also directed the Yiddish production of *Tragedie fun gomisht* (The Tragedy of Nothing), which was based on the play by Moisha Nadir (1885–1945) and produced by the Art Circle at the Irving Place Theatre in 1927 [pp. 76, 153]. For this production, Aronson created a unit transformable into five different sets. By closing and opening the gate and changing the lights on the forms, the different sets presented, for example, the throne of the king, the court, or the view of the palace.<sup>85</sup>

During the 1920s, Aronson’s rich graphic legacy included woodcuts, posters, and magazine illustrations, and was diverse in style. In 1926 and 1927, the artist created expressionistic woodcuts and designed covers for *Der Hammer* (The Hammer), a communist journal [Fig. 42].<sup>86</sup> His designs for *Der Hammer* in the Berman Collection use such elements of Constructivist typography as geometric and linear form and dynamism and actively employ the collage technique [pp. 134, 135]. These designs demonstrate how successfully the artist moved from his early, Chagall-inspired Jewish children’s books to much more experimental imagery. Photography

is integrated with text, creating a visually exciting composition.

Aronson’s poster for the documentary film *The Red Russia: The Waking Giant* [p. 141] also reveals the artist’s close knowledge of and his links to the Russian Constructivist movement. The documentary, called on the poster “picture of the year,” consisted of “Six Vivid Reels of an Industrial Everyday Life in Soviet Russia” and was dedicated to the Kuzbass autonomous industrial colony, a utopian commune created in 1921 in the coal-mining town of Kemerovo. It was organized by American workers, who took on the obligation of inviting from the United States and Western Europe some 8,000 skilled workers and specialists to industrialize the Kuzbass.<sup>87</sup> Aronson’s design for *The Red Russia* is based entirely on English-language text in sans serif lettering and simple geometric shapes.

Aronson’s artistic reputation grew further after December 1927, when some of New York’s most influential theater critics arranged for an exhibition of Aronson’s work at the Anderson Gallery in midtown



Fig. 42. Boris Aronson. Proof for magazine cover: *Der Hammer*, New York, 1927

Manhattan [pp. 53–88]. It comprised some twenty-five set models, one hundred set and costume designs for the Yiddish theater, woodcuts, pen-and-ink drawings, and photographs. The show aroused a great deal of critical enthusiasm and approval. The following summer, the exhibition traveled to Paris, where Waldemar George, one of the city's leading art critics, published his book on Aronson as part of the distinguished series *Les Maîtres de l'Art* [Fig. 43].<sup>88</sup>

In 1929, Aronson designed sets and costumes for an unrealized project at the Yiddish Art Theatre, *Der Goylem* (The Golem) by Halpern Leivick (1888–1962) [Fig. 44; p. 154]. One of these designs in a Constructivist mode is included in the Berman Collection. In Jewish folklore, the mythological figure of the golem is most widely known as an artificial creature created by magic, often to serve the creator.<sup>89</sup> In the sixteenth century, the golem acquired the character of a protector of the Jews in times of persecution, but it also had a frightening aspect.<sup>90</sup> As the writer Isaac Bashevis Singer noted in the catalogue *Golem! Danger, Deliverance and Art*, the myth of the golem has interested many creative



Fig. 43. Waldemar George. Title page: *Boris Aronson et l'art du théâtre*. Paris: Éditions des Chroniques du Jour, 1928

people in the past and continues to do so even in our epoch of science and technology.<sup>91</sup> Based on a faith almost as old as humanity that dead matter is not really dead but can be brought to life, this legend possesses the tension and the suspense of the supernatural.<sup>92</sup>

Leivick, the author of the play *The Golem*, identified with the American-Yiddish literary group *Di yunge* (The Young) and established himself as a poet before turning to the stage. Leivick's play was not performed until 1925, and then not in Yiddish, but in Hebrew, by the HaBima Theater in Moscow. *The Golem* became one of the HaBima's greatest successes, and it toured throughout Europe, Palestine, and the United States. Maurice Schwartz planned a production of Leivick's play in 1928 that was never realized. Schwartz wrote to Aronson, who was in Paris at the time, setting forth his ideas for staging the play and asking Aronson to design the sets and costumes. Aronson began work on the costumes and completed a gouache presenting his ideas for a set. The artist's anti-naturalistic ideas about the theater are evident in his set design in the Berman Collection [p. 154]. Stark in its simplicity, the sharp edges and abstract geometric forms of Aronson's design vividly express the essence of Leivick's play.

In the late 1920s, Aronson created theater designs for a number of other important productions staged at the Yiddish Art Theatre, including a stage set for *Jew Süß*, by Lion Feuchtwanger, and the 1929 production of *Stempenyu, The Fiddler*, by Sholom Aleichem, which anticipated the artist's celebrated 1964 production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. While working for the Yiddish theater, Aronson often designed plays with a mystical and allegorical bent, where heaven and hell were frequent settings, as in a "Concert Hall in the Skies of Hell," a scene in the humorous production of the play *Malokhim oyf der erd* (Angels on Earth) by Chone Gottesfeld (1890–1964) [Fig. 45].

The American writer and director Garson Kanin (1912–1999) commented: "Boris was always proud of the fact that he had no particular 'style,' and considered that each play, each production, deserved what he called 'its own handwriting.' The theatre, [Aronson] once observed, was one of the few of the last 'handmade' elements in our civilization."<sup>93</sup> Aronson's approach to researching the stage design for each production varied greatly, but it was always a quite laborious process. "First of all, I study the play very carefully. I try to find out the author's intention, what it represents, what it means."<sup>94</sup> Aronson stated that he found that almost anything can serve as a source of inspiration: a toy, a Japanese woodcut, a tool. Lisa Aronson, his wife and artistic collaborator of more than twenty-five years, noted that her husband kept a collection of toys he would sift through each time he started a new show. "He picked up windup toys and comics in case he might use them."<sup>95</sup>

For Aronson, Constructivism was not a dogma, and certainly not a system to be accepted without interrogation. While Russian Constructivist artists resolutely rejected anything that would have distracted the eye from its "constructivity," and no décor was allowed, Aronson's artistic language of Constructivism, the language of clear and simple geometrical forms, was often combined with elements of other artistic styles and movements, including Cubo-Futurism, Expressionism, and Fantastic Realism. Aronson rarely adheres to one particular formula. At certain times, he is utilitarian, practical, and expedient; at others, he is decorative.

Aronson noted that "there is a long process in trying to develop a design of sketches, models, plans, until one arrives at what is known as the final solution."<sup>96</sup> Supporting materials in the Aronson Papers at the New York Public Library of Performing Arts that document Aronson's inspirations in his elaborate design process include reproductions of completely

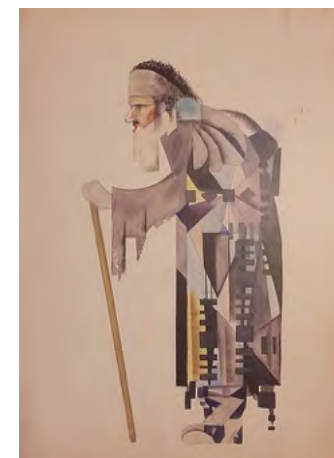


Fig. 44. Boris Aronson, Costume design for a beggar in *The Golem* by Halpern Leivick, 1929

different types of imagery, from Gilbert Stuart's (1755–1828) portrait of Thomas Jefferson to the portraits of Chaim Soutine (1893–1943); from postcards to photographs of ancient ruins, sculptural reliefs, and monuments; and from Renaissance images of Madonnas to the scenes of the Crucifixion. [Figs. 25, 46, 48]. Aronson explored not only material from a specific time and place, but the works of other artists that embodied the proper mood. Some of Aronson's work alludes to styles as diverse as those of Paul Klee (1879–1940), Edward Hopper (1882–1967), Chagall, Matisse, René Magritte (1898–1967), and Francis Bacon (1909–1992). To Aronson, stage design was



Fig. 45. Boris Aronson. Stage design for the prologue "Concert Hall in the Skies of Hell," which opens the play *Angels on Earth*, 1929



Fig. 46. Photograph of the Beggar, Ben Chaim, a character in the unidentified production of the HaBima Theater, Moscow, 1922

Fig. 47. Boris Aronson. Sketches for costume designs for an unidentified production at the Jewish theater. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000*

not merely an adjunct of architecture or painting, but a sophisticated art in its own right. Aronson transformed each of his settings into environments that did not replicate reality so much as they created abstract visual metaphors [Fig. 47].

It was during the period of his work for the Yiddish theater that the artist perfected design techniques which he later applied to his most successful Broadway productions. “He felt he did much more unusual things in the Yiddish theater than he ever did later in his life,” Lisa Aronson said. “It was the time he really experimented.”<sup>97</sup> Although from the late 1880s to 1926, New York City’s Yiddish theater experienced unprecedented commercial success, by the late 1920s it was in decline. Theater scholars generally attribute this to a decline in Jewish immigration to New York beginning in 1924,<sup>98</sup> assimilation, and the migration of many Jews from the Lower East Side to other areas of New York as they became more affluent.<sup>99</sup> Aronson worked regularly at Schwartz’s Yiddish Art Theatre until 1930.

Lee Simson, one of the major American designers

of the era, complained in *The Nation* on June 12, 1929, “Boris Aronson [...] is a Russian, typical of a group of Soviet designers whose backgrounds and costumes have made the productions of the Chamber (Kamerny) and HaBima theaters the center of excited discussion on their tours of European capitals. But his work remains as characteristically Russian as though it had been done for any one of a dozen Soviet playhouses, an exact counterpart in method and manner of Moscow’s experiments [...]. It has therefore remained an exotic and transplanted thing despite Aronson’s technical proficiency, his intelligence, and his ingenuity.”<sup>100</sup> Simson concluded by writing that he hoped “[...] Aronson will be able to divest himself sufficiently of his Russian dogmas so that his undoubted talents can be more readily used to express the current realities of the American stage.”<sup>101</sup>

Aronson received his first Broadway commission in 1932 when he designed the sets for the English-language musical *Walk a Little Faster*.<sup>102</sup> Staged at the St. James Theatre, this musical was based on a book by S.J. Perelman; with music by Vernon Duke and lyrics by E.Y. Harburg. However, the abstraction and bold experimentation that the artist introduced in his designs for the Yiddish theatre gradually gave way to realism. Juxtaposing his work for Broadway with his earlier experience in the Yiddish theater, Aronson wrote, “In the Yiddish theatre most of the settings were either Heaven or Hell. On Broadway I had to get down to earth—Coney Island, Ozone Park. As I discovered the reality of the American scene my work progressed from literal representation with illustration and documentation of a certain locale to a grasping for essence.”<sup>103</sup>

As Aronson noted, during the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, when he was a young man, Moscow “[...] barely had electricity” while “[...] the mechanical inventions of America represented romantic

fantasy.”<sup>104</sup> Trying to explain his transition from avant-garde design to the more realistic approach in some of his Broadway productions, the artist pointed out: “In 1926, there was an exhibition of international stage design in New York. The Russian sets were full of revolving doors, skyscrapers, escalators, and all the things which were ‘romantic’ to them, but which were part of everyday American life. American designers like Robert Edmond Jones, on the other hand, were doing a very different kind of ‘romantic’ set. The Russian sets merely reproduced what you could see by looking out of a New York skyscraper window. American designers simply weren’t interested in repeating their own milieu. That was a very great lesson to me.”<sup>105</sup>

From 1930 onward, Aronson was one of the most prominent and influential figures in Broadway theater design, winning eight Tony Awards. His inventive designs breathed new life into American scenography and were highly influential. As noted in *The New York Times* in October 1989: “Hardly a season went by on Broadway between the 1930s and the 1970s without at least one production with sets by Boris Aronson. The Russian-born artist liberated American stage design from dogged realism, using painterly images to magnify the content of whatever play, musical or opera he was working on.”<sup>106</sup> The American set designer Robert Mitchell pointed out that the term “theatre designer” never described Aronson, who was a philosopher and a cosmopolitan. As Mitchell argued: “Though assimilated and highly sophisticated about what it meant to live in America, he never left Russia in a sense. He was rooted here and not rooted here—a series of contradictions. He loved to upset people by not conforming.”<sup>107</sup>

In his pioneering career spanning five decades, Aronson transformed American set design from decorative backdrops into sophisticated avant-garde design. As Aronson once said, “There is no such

thing as a stage designer. Anyone who successfully designs for the theater is also a painter, sculptor, architect, or engineer. In rare instances, he is all of these.”<sup>108</sup>

1. See the Selected Bibliography and Chronology in this volume.

2. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, New York. Aronson's later work for the Broadway theater is outside the scope of this essay. For a detailed discussion of this later work, see Frank Rich and Lisa Jalowetz Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

3. On the history of the Jews in Russia and the Soviet Union, see Michael Stanislawski, "The Jewish and Russian Culture and Politics," in Susan Tumarkin Goodman, ed. *Russian Jewish Artists in the Century of Change, 1890–1990* (Munich and New York: Prestel, in collaboration with the Jewish Museum, 1995), p. 16.

4. While many Purim plays told the story in the Book of Esther commemorated by the Purim holiday, others used other stories from Jewish scripture, such as the story of Joseph being sold by his brothers or the sacrifice of Isaac.

5. For a thorough discussion see Seth L. Wolitz, "The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia," in Ruth Apter-Gabriel, ed. *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912–1928* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1988), pp. 21–42.

6. John E. Bowlit, "From the Pale of Settlement to the Reconstruction of the World," in *Tradition and Revolution*, 1988, pp. 43–60.

7. The Pale of Settlement was the area of Tsarist Russia in Poland, Lithuania, Belorussia, Ukraine, Bessarabia, and the Crimea to which Jews were confined by laws of 1791 and 1835. For reasons both religious and economic, the Russian state from the late eighteenth century to the middle of the First World War refused to allow Jews to move from these provinces of the Russian Empire to the interior of Russia itself, where the ethnic Russian population lived. In the Pale of Settlement, life in the small towns [shtetls] was centered around synagogues. The Jews in shtetls usually worked as traders, peddlers, grocers, and administrators of property owned by nobility. Set apart from Christian society by Yiddish or Hebrew languages and religion, they faced varying degrees of restriction and persecution. However, wealthier Jews and those with university education or training as artisans were permitted to reside outside the Pale. Residency outside of Pale was regulated by permits. By 1905, when Tsar Nicholas II was forced to concede reforms that transformed Russia from an autocracy into constitutional monarchy, many of the legal restrictions pertaining to the Jews had been modified. The Pale of Settlement was abolished in March 1915.

8. The Jewish ethnographic expedition was underwritten by Baron Horace Guenzberg. On the An-sky expeditions, see John E. Bowlit, "Ethnic Loyalty and International Modernism: The An-sky Expeditions and the Russian Avant-Garde," in Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein, eds. *The World of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 307–319.

9. Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport wrote poems, fiction, and plays under the pen name S. An-Sky. Of these, the most famous is his still-popular 1914 Russian play *The Dybbuk*, or *Between Two Worlds*, the story of a young bride possessed by an evil spirit on her wedding day.

10. According to Bowlit, in spite of their remarkable diversity, these collections, which included artifacts, books, manuscripts, photographs, and sound recordings, became accessible only in 1914 at the exhibition in Petrograd and then in 1916, at the Museum of the Jewish Institute of the Ethnographical Society in Petrograd to which An-sky transferred the materials from his expeditions. See Bowlit, "Ethnic Loyalty and International Modernism," pp. 315–316.

11. Ibid, p. 318.

12. At the end of 1929, the Museum of the St. Petersburg Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society was shut down, and its library of over four thousand volumes and the archive were transferred mainly to the National Public Library in Leningrad. The museum's exhibits were largely transferred to the ethnographic department of the State Russian Museum. On the history of the Museum of the St. Petersburg Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society see V. E. Kel'ner, "Vremia sobirat' kamni" (k istorii Evreiskogo istoriko-etnograficheskogo muzeia i ego kollektsii). *Voprosy muzeologii*, 2019, 10 (1), pp. 43–55.

13. In January 1920, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar of Education in Lenin's government, allocated a subsidy for the Kultur-Lige (Yiddish Culture-League).

14. Participants included Marc Chagall, Natan Altman, Moshe Maimon, Petr Geller, Simka Simkhovitch, and Arnold Lakhovsky, among others.

15. See Irena R. Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz, eds. *Modernism in Kyiv: Jubilant Experimentation* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 7.

16. On the history of the Kultur-Lige see Hillel Kazovsky, *Khudozhniki Kultur-Lige* (The Artists of the Kultur-Lige) (Jerusalem: Gesharim, 5763 and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Bibliotheca Judaica; published in collaboration with *Mosty kul'tury* [Moscow], 2003); and Gennady Estraiikh, "The Yiddish Kultur-Lige," in *Modernism in Kyiv*, 2010, pp. 197-217.

17. Abraham Golomb, *A halber yorhundert yidishe dertsung* (Rio de Janeiro: Monte Skopus, 1957), p. 98, as quoted in: Gennady Estraiikh, "The Yiddish Kultur-Lige," in *Modernism in Kyiv*, p. 200. Per Estraiikh, The Kultur-Lige in Ukraine had ninety-nine branches with 283 institutions, including sixty-three schools, fifty-four libraries, seven children's clubs, and fifty-three orphanages and children's homes (ibid, p. 207).

18. Boris Aronson and Isaachar Ryback, "Di vegn fun der yidisher malerai (Rayoynes fron kinstler), *Oyfgang-ershter zamlbukh* (Kiev: Farlag Kultur Lige, 1919), pp. 99–124. Reuben Szklowin's English translation of the final part of this Yiddish-language article (pp. 119–124) appears in *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912–1928*, p. 229.

19. Aronson and Ryback, "Di vegn fun der yidisher malerai," *Oyfgang*, No. 1 (1919): p. 3. Quoted in translation from Yiddish in Bowlit, "Ethnic Loyalty and International Modernism," in *The World of S. An-sky*, p. 319.

20. Aronson and Ryback, "Di vegn fun der yidisher malerai," 1919, as translated from the Yiddish in *Tradition and Revolution*, p. 229.

21. Ibid.

22. The other participants of the exhibition were Yudi Yafe, Mordechai Kaganovich, Mark Epstein, Yosef Elman, Lissitzky, Joseph Tchaikov, Isaac Pales, Aleksandr Tyshler, Nisson Shifrin, and Isaak Rabitchev. The *Jewish Art Exhibition* was mainly an exhibition of Kyiv artists, and because the city was isolated due to the civil war, no oil paintings by Chagall, Altman, or Falk were included in the show.

23. [Author unknown], *Yidishe kunst-oysshtelung. Skulptur, grafik un tsaykhnung* (Jewish Exhibition of Sculpture, Graphics and Drawings). Kiev: Fevral-mart (February–March) 1920. Organizirt durkh der Kunst-sektsie fun der Kultur-Lige (Organized by the Arts Section of the Yiddish Culture League).

24. Ibid.

25. Kultur-Lige. "Sektsies baym Tsentral-komitet," *Snul un lebn* (Kiev), 1919, no. 4–5, p. 113

26. In the years leading up to the First World War, two Moscow textile magnates and merchants, Sergei Shchukin (1854–1936) and Ivan Morozov (1871–1921), amassed significant private collections of modern French art of such quality that they were without counterpart anywhere in Europe. Schchukin was seventeen years older than Ivan Morozov and started collecting much earlier; his collection of 257 works was radically modern. He collected the Impressionists until 1904, showing a particular predilection for Monet; he owned thirteen of his paintings. Between 1904 and 1910, he turned mainly to the Post-Impressionists. In 1903, Shchukin bought eight of Cézanne's paintings and four works by Van Gogh from Durand-Ruel. Sixteen pictures by Gauguin were hung in Shchukin's main dining room. As early as 1906, Shchukin bought his first Matisse; all in all, he owned thirty-seven of Matisse's paintings. It was Matisse who took Shchukin to Montmartre to meet Pablo Picasso in the autumn of 1908, which led to him purchasing Picasso's

early Cubist painting *Femme tenant un éventail* (1907) from Clovis Sagot in the spring of 1909. By 1914 Picasso was represented in Shchukin's collection by fifty-one works, the largest collection of Picasso's work anywhere in the world at that time. Morozov would only grant access to his collection to prominent foreign visitors upon special request and to some selected Russian artists whose works he bought. He never opened his collection to the general public. Shchukin, by contrast, made his collection available to the public. For detailed information on Shchukin's and Morozov's collections and for contemporary reviews of these collections, see Ilya Doronchenkov, ed., *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art, 1890s to mid-1930s*, trans. Charles Rougle (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 77–99; Natalya Semenova, *Morozov: The Story of a Family and a Lost Collection*, translated by Arch Tait (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020); Anne Baldassari, *Icons of Modern Art: The Morozov Collection*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Foundation Louis Vuitton and Gallimard, 2020); and Natalya Semenova and Andre Delocque, *The Collector. The Story of Sergei Shchukin and His Lost Masterpieces* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2018).

27. Although by 1914 Picasso was represented in Shchukin's collection by as many as fifty paintings and drawings, Shchukin bought his first Picasso in 1909, so Aronson would not have seen works by this artist during his first visit to the collection. However, after Aronson moved to Moscow in 1921, he would undoubtedly have seen Picasso's works. In August 1918, Shchukin left Bolshevik Russia in secret, with his eldest son, Ivan, eventually settling with his wife and their daughter in Paris. On November 18, 1918, the decree "On the Nationalization of the Art Gallery of S.I. Shchukin" was issued by Russian revolutionary government and the collection was seized for the Soviet State. In June 1919, the collections of Shchukin and Ivan Morozov were renamed the First and Second Departments of the Museum of New Western Painting, respectively. In March 1923, they were merged and renamed the State Museum of New Western Art.

28. Iakov Tugendkhold (1882–1928) later headed the Art Section of Glavpolitprosvet (from 1923) and the arts sections of the major newspapers *Izvestiia* (1922–1926) and *Pravda* (1929) and wrote extensively on modern Western art.

29. Iakov Tugendkhold, "S.I. Shchukin's French Collection, "Apollon (Apollo) 1–2 (1914). Translated into English in in Doronchenkov, ed., *Russian and Soviet Views of Modern Western Art*, 2009, p. 84.

30. Ibid.

31. Throughout the 19th century, most Jews continued living within the economically restricted area of the Pale of Settlement, and only Jews with special privileges could settle legally in Moscow. The Provisional Government formally abolished the Pale only in April of 1917.

32. The story about Boris Aronson's meeting with Sergei Shchukin in Moscow is retold in Rich and Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*, p. 4.

33. Among Aronson's Jewish friends in the Kyiv Art School were also future important artists Alexander Tyshler (1898–1980), Solomon Nikritin (1898–1965), Mark Epstein (1897–1935), Sarra Shor (1897–1981), and Isaac Pailles (1895–1978).

34. Oleksandr Murashko (1875–1919) began his art studies at the Kyiv Drawing School (1891–1894) and continued his training from 1894 to 1900 at the St. Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts under the major Russian Realist painter Ilya Repin (1844–1930). After Murashko was awarded the Academy's gold medal in 1900 for his diploma painting, he was sent on the Academy's fellowship to study in Paris, where he stayed from 1902 to 1904, also attending the Munich Academy of Arts. He was a member of the New Society of Artists in St. Petersburg and participated in its annual exhibitions from 1904 to 1914. In 1907 he settled in Kyiv, where he taught painting at the Kyiv Art School (1909–1912) and at his own studio (1912–1917). In 1909, Murashko was awarded the main prize at an international exhibition in Munich. In 1910, two of his paintings were included in the international exhibition in Venice. From 1911, he exhibited with the Munich Secession group. In 1916, Murashko joined the *Peredvizhniki* (Wanderers) association and became a founding member of the Kyiv Society of Artists. He was also a cofounder of the Ukrainian State Academy of Arts. Murashko established an international reputation and had a strong influence on the development of Ukrainian portraiture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In Murashko's studio, Aronson met the artists Nisson Shifrin (1892–1961) and Isaac Rabinovich (1894–1961), who became his friends.

35. See Georgiy Kovalenko, "Boris Aronson and Alexandra Exter," in Kovalenko and Hillel Kazovsky. *Boris Aronson: Der Yidish Teater*. Paris and Tel Aviv: Galerie Le Minotaure, 2010, pp. 10–17.

36. That same year, Exter contributed an article to the Kiev journal *Iskusstvo* titled "Novoe vo frantsuzskoi zhivopisi" (New Tendencies in French Painting), in which she discussed the work of the French Cubists. Exter was also the moving force behind the first monographic Russian-language study on Picasso, *Pikasso i okresnosti* (Picasso and the Environs), written by Ivan Aksenov in Paris in June 1914 on Exter's instigation and published in Moscow in 1917 with a cover design by Exter. Upon the outbreak of World War I, Exter ceased all European travel, dividing her time between Moscow, Petrograd, and Kiev. She pursued a variety of projects, including painting, illustrating books by Russian Futurist poets, and creating costumes and sets for theatrical productions.

37. *Les Soirées de Paris* earned a reputation as the major champion of the Cubist movement. Exter's contacts with this circle, who included not only Braque and Picasso but also Fernand Léger, Alexander Archipenko, and Robert Delaunay, played a major role in her creative development.

38. One of the few members of the Russian avant-garde to create a school, Exter counted among her pupils Oleksandr (Aleksandr) Bogomazov, Aleksandr Khvostenko-Khvostov, Simon Lissim, Vadim Meller, Anatolii Petritsky, Isaak Rabinovich, Pavel Tchelitchev, and Aleksandr Tyshler.

39. See Kovalenko, "Boris Aronson and Alexandra Exter," in *Boris Aronson: Der Yidish Teater*, p. 12.

40. Ibid.

41. Avram Kampf, *Chagall to Kitaj: Jewish Experience in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art*. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), pp. 25–26.

42. Aleksandr Tairov, "Stsenicheskaia atmosfera" (Stage Ambience) (1921), in P. Markov, ed., *A.I. Tairov* (Moscow: VTO, 1970), pp. 160–161. Republished in English translation in *Theatre in Revolution*, p. 182.

43. "Good Morning, Mr. Aronson. Would you answer 44 simple questions?" (n.d.) Typewritten manuscript, pp. 38–39. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

44. Abram Efros, *Kamernyi teatr i ego khudozhniki* (The Kamerny [Chamber] Theatre and its Artists) (Moscow: VTO, 1934), XXXI–XXXII.

45. Boris Aronson, "Composing the Movement of the Actors" (n.d.) in *Notes-6*. Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

46. The inaugural exhibition of the *Bubnovyi valet* (Jack of Diamonds) was held at the Levisson house on Bolshaia Dmitrovka Street from December 10, 1910, to January 16, 1911, and organized on the impetus of Natalia Goncharova, Pyotr Konchalovsky, Mikhail Larionov, and Aristarch Lentulov. Many of Mashkov's own works were evocative of Cézanne and also exemplified Russian Neo-Primitivism. The latter movement encompassed works which were executed in naïve style and frequently referred to *lubki* (popular prints), shop signs, hand-painted trays, and embroidery.

47. Quoted in English translation in Benjamin Harshav, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater: Art on Stage in the Time of Revolution*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 33. Originally published: Abram, L. "No Doubt!" in *Idisher kamer teatr* (1924) [Yiddish]. The "Jewish rich man" is an allusion to the *nouveau riches* of the NEP (New Economic Policy), which enabled the temporary emergence of a new entrepreneurial class.

48. See Marc Chagall, "My Work in the Moscow Yiddish Theater," (1921–1928, Yiddish); translated into English in Harshav, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater*, pp. 70–75. Originally published in *Di yidishe velt: Monthly for Literature, Criticism, Art, and Culture*, no. 2 (Milna, Poland: B. Kletskin Publishing House, 1928).

49. Harshav, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater*, p. 32.

50. However, V. V. Ivanov, theater scholar and the author of a book on GOSET (see "Selected Bibliography" in this volume), points out that it was Aleksei Granovsky who was not only the theater director but also the designer for this production.

51. Abram Efros, "Khudozhniki teatra Granovskogo," *Iskusstvo* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo GAKHN), vol. 4 (1928), books 1–2, p. 55.

52. Abram Efros' article "Khudozhniki teatra Granovskogo" was originally published in *Iskusstvo* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo GAKHN), vol. (1928), books 1–2, pp. 53–74. This excerpt is translated by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav and published in Harshav, *The Moscow Yiddish Theater*, 2008, pp. 57–70.

53. The last Jewish-based art exhibition in the Soviet Union, in which works by Altman, Chagall, and David Shterenberg (1881–1948) were exhibited, took place in 1922. In 1939, the State Museum of Ethnography in Leningrad organized the exhibition *Jews in Tsarist Russia and the USSR*; it was the last official exhibition devoted to Jewish culture in the Soviet Union. The national policy of the Communist Party, set against "cosmopolitans" and advocates of ethnic development, resulted in the cessation of a visible Jewish culture in the USSR.

54. The term "pogroms" came into widespread usage after the riots of 1881 and 1882 in the Russian Empire. The first Odessa pogrom, in 1821, was linked to the outbreak of the Greek War for Independence, during which the Jews were accused of sympathizing with the Ottoman authorities. The pogroms of 1881 and 1882, which occurred in waves throughout the southwestern provinces of Russian Empire, were the first to assume the nature of a mass movement. Another notorious pogrom, the Kishinev pogrom, began on Easter Day, April 6 (April 18), 1903, in the capital of the Russian province of Bessarabia. Anti-Jewish violence assumed a mass character during the events of the Russian Revolution of 1905 to 1907. Sporadic anti-Jewish violence continued in the aftermath of the Revolution, most notoriously on June 1 (June 13), 1906, in Białystok, in the Kingdom of Poland. See John Klier, YIVO/Pogroms. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org> (accessed January 2022).

55. Struck was best known as an etcher, having written the book *Die Kunst des Radierens: Ein Handbuch* (The Art of Etching: A Handbook) in 1908. In 1915, he enlisted in the German army and served in Russia, where he created many prints, including views of *shtetls* and Jewish character studies. Struck later taught graphic techniques to a number of important artists, among them Chagall, Lovis Corinth (1858–1925), and Max Liebermann (1847–1935).

56. Organized by Altman, Naum Gabo (1890–1977), and Shterenberg, the *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* (First Russian Art Exhibition) in the Galerie Van Diemen included works by Alexander Archipenko (1887–1964), Chagall, Gabo, Lissitzky, and Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), among others. The exhibition had been organized by Narkompros (People's Commissariat for Education) to aid people suffering from the famine in Russia.

57. Baruch Kaushansky (later known as Agadati) was born in Bendery, Bessarabia Governorate (Russian Empire) in 1895. In 1910, he emigrated to Palestine, where he studied at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem from 1910–1914. In the summer of 1914, when the First World War broke out, he was visiting his parents in Odessa and could not return to Palestine. In Odessa, he studied classical dance and danced with the Odessa Opera and Ballet Theater. After Agadati returned to Palestine in 1919, he began to give solo dance recitals and became one of the pioneers of cinema in Israel.

58. See Ruprecht Stoltz and Inge Lange, *Die Russen in Berlin, 1910–1930* (The Russians in Berlin, 1910–1930). Exhibition catalogue. September–December 1995. Berlin: Stolz, 1995, p. 25

59. Chagall's fantastical Cubist paintings based on Aleichem's stories would later inspire Aronson's sets for his famous production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. See discussion below.

60. From Boris Aronson, *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika* (Modern Jewish Graphics) (Berlin: Petropolis, 1924), chapters 3–6. Translated from Russian by Luba Freedman and abridged by Malka Jagendorf, in *Tradition and Revolution*, p. 235

61. Ibid.

62. Boris Aronson, "Arrival" (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

63. Quoted in Frank Rich and Lisa Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*, p. 9.

64. Boris Aronson, "The Bronx" (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

65. Aronson, "Notes."

66. The theater society "Our Theater" was founded in 1923 in the Bronx by such luminaries of the Yiddish theater as Peretz Hirshbein, H. Leivik, and Mendel Elkin. The society included not only art theater but also dramatic studios, and a journal, *Tealit*, that was published in five issues from 1923 to 1924. The society and the theater both ceased to exist in 1926.

67. YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, see <https://ruthrubin.yivo.org/items/show/2116> (accessed January 2022).

68. Ibid.

69. Boris Aronson, "Notes—My Approach to Design" (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

70. Quoted in Rich and Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*, p. 9.

71. Aronson copied the images of two Hasidic characters in his mural from the cover of the comedy *The Two Kuni-Lemis* by Abraham Goldfadden. The mural was lost when the theater was torn down in 1966.

72. Boris Aronson, "Maurice Schwartz" (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

73. Between 1881 and 1925, nearly three million Jews immigrated to the United States. Most settled in the overcrowded, tenement-filled Lower East Side.

74. On the history of Jewish theater in New York, see Edna Natshon, ed. *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, in association with the Museum of the City of New York, 2016). The roots of Yiddish theatre can be traced back to the Middle Ages, in the performances of Purim plays, wedding minstrels, wandering troubadours, and other entertainments. The professional Yiddish theatre was launched in Jassy (Iasi), Romania, in 1876, when the Russian-Jewish intellectual and impresario Avrom Goldfadden (1840–1908) formed his first troupe and produced the first Yiddish-language operettas. The first Yiddish theatrical production in America took place in New York in 1882.

75. As the scholar Rachel Field has noted, "Among the theatres that appeared after 1918 was the Louis N. Jaffe Theatre, also known as the Yiddish Art Theater and Yiddish Folks' Theater, located at 181 Second Avenue. The theatre was built by Russian lawyer Nathaniel Jaffe for Yiddish actor Maurice Schwartz, who in 1918 established the Yiddish Art Theater (first located in the Irving Place Theater at 118 East 15<sup>th</sup> Street) [...] The building included stores and offices, a school established by Schwartz for training young actors, as well as Jaffe's film corporation [...] Shortly after the theatre opened, a conflict arose between Jaffe and Schwartz, Jaffe severed his ties with Schwartz." In 1928, the building was sold and renamed the Yiddish Folks' Theatre. See Rachel Field, "Louis N. Jaffe Theatre (Yiddish Art Theater)—Mapping Jewish New York." <https://jewishstudiescolumbia.com/myny/theater/ref2129/> (accessed January 2022).

76. Boris Aronson, "Maurice Schwartz" (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

77. The play's full title is *Dos Zenteh Gebot, oder Lo Tachmod* (The Tenth Commandment, or Thou Shalt Not Covet).

78. Boris Aronson, "The Ten Commandments" (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

79. Boris Aronson, "Hell Scene in *The Ten Commandments* by Goldfadden" (n.d.). A page from a scrapbook, Box 148. Series IX: Oversized Materials. Biographical Materials. General Research. Folder 4: Scrapbooks, 1924–1932. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

80. [Review of *The Tenth Commandment*] in *Theatre Arts Monthly* (January 19, 1927). *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

81. In addition, Buloff and his wife Luba Kadison established their own theater, the Folks Theater, at 149<sup>th</sup> Street, where they tried unsuccessfully to run the Vilna Troupe.

82. Maurice Schwartz, director, Yiddish Art Theatre. Statement in *The Sponsors Say a Word*, two typed pages (n.d.), p. 31. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

83. John Mason Brown, "The Gamut of Style," in *Theatre Arts Monthly* (February 1927), pp. 89–90.

84. Natshon, *New York's Yiddish Theater*, 2016, p. 196.

85. Box 148. Series IX: Oversized Materials. Biographical Materials. General Research. Folder 4: Scrapbooks, 1924–1932. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

86. The arrival of new immigrants radicalized by the 1905 uprising in Russia and the pogroms that followed in its wake, as well as the Russian Revolution of 1917, led to the founding of the New York Communist daily *Morgen Freiheit* in 1922 and its monthly magazine *Der Hammer* (The Hammer), published during the years 1926–1939. The Communist press adopted the view that Yiddish language and a total dedication to radical causes were the only acceptable expressions of Jewish national identity and used Yiddish to disseminate Soviet propaganda.

87. The Communist International (Comintern) and the Soviet government turned over to the colonists a number of Kemerovo mine shafts and an unfinished coking plant. To recruit volunteers to work in Siberia, a "Kuzbass Bureau" was opened in New York. Between January 1922 and December 1923, however, only 566 persons arrived to work in the Kuzbass. Settlers of 30 nationalities included workers and highly trained specialists from America, Canada, the Netherlands, France, Australia, and other countries. The International Industrial Organization operated in Kuzbass from 1921 to 1927.

88. Waldemar George, *Boris Aronson et l'art du théâtre* (Paris: Éditions des Chroniques du Jour, 1928).

89. The word "golem" appears only once in the Bible (Psalms 139:16). In Hebrew, "golem" stands for "shapeless mass." The Talmud uses the word to mean "unformed" or "imperfect." According to Talmudic legend, Adam is called "golem," meaning "body without a soul," for the first twelve hours of his existence.

90. The most well-known story of the golem is connected to Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (1513–1609), the ashram of Prague. It was said that he created a golem out of clay to protect the Jewish community from blood libel and to help with physical labor, since golems are very strong.

91. Emily D. Bilski. *Golem! Danger, Deliverance and Art*. Foreword by Isaac Bashevis Singer. With essays by Moshe Idel and Elfi Ledig (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1988), p. 6.

92. Ibid, p. 6.

93. *Boris Aronson. From His Theatre Work*. Catalogue. The Vincent Astor Gallery, The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center (March 31–August 15, 1981), p. 8.

94. "Good Morning, Mr. Aronson..." (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript, pp.38–39. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs,*

1923–2000 (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

95. Quoted in Eric Weitz, "A Theater Critic's Aronson Tribute" in *The News Times*, (October 22, 1989), i-5.

96. Boris Aronson, "Notes—My approach to design" (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

97. Ibid.

98. The Immigration Act of 1924 severely limited the number of Jewish immigrants allowed into the United States. As a result, the Yiddish theater audiences were no longer replenished by incoming waves of Yiddish-speaking immigrants.

99. See Rachel Field, "Louis N. Jaffe Theatre (Yiddish Art Theater)—Mapping Yiddish New York," <https://jewishstudiescolumbia.cm/myny/theater/ref2129> (accessed January 2022)

100. Lee Simson, "Russian Theory in the American Theater," *The Nation* (New York), no. 3336 (June 12, 1929), p. 718.

101. Ibid.

102. Aronson's first foray into English-speaking theater was the 1927 production *2 x 2 = 5* by Gustav Wied at the Civic Repertory Theatre [facsimile-19]. As the Great Depression progressed, Aronson designed productions for Radio City Music Hall. He joined the Group Theatre, founded in 1931 by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg and based on the principle of ensemble acting, which had first been seen in the Moscow Art Theater.

103. Boris Aronson, "Notes" (n.d.). Typewritten manuscript. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA.

104. Ibid.

105. "Good Morning, Mr. Aronson..."

106. "Boris Aronson," *The Guide, The New York Times (Westchester Weekly)* (Sunday, October 8, 1989).

107. Quoted in *Preparing the Miracle: From the Bronx to Broadway, Boris Aronson, and the Yiddish Theatre*. Exhibition catalogue. Vallois America, (November 14–December 23, 2015).

108. Quoted in *Boris Aronson: Stage Design as Visual Metaphor*. Exhibition catalogue. Guest Curator Frank Rich. The Katonah Gallery. Katonah, New York (October 8–December 31, 1989). Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts (March–April 1990), n.p.

## List of Illustrations

Captions to the essay illustrations are as complete as possible. Where information regarding date, medium, dimension, or current whereabouts is not included, it was unavailable to us.

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**Fig. 2** El Lissitzky. Sheet music cover: *Société de la musique hébraïque* (Society of Jewish Music), no. 47: Alexandre Creïn, *Ijaillit une Larme / Noteif Notfoh*. Moscow: Obshchestvo evreiskoi muzyki, 1919. Letterpress, 12 1/8 x 9 5/8" (32 x 25 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

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**Fig. 4** Solomon Yudovin. Print: Untitled, 1926. Wood engraving, 8 5/8 x 6 3/4" (21.9 x 17.1 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

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**Fig. 7** Issachar Ber Ryback. Cover design: *Eygins* (To One's Self), 1919. Ink on paper, 9 5/8 x 6 1/2" (24.5 x 16.5 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Fig. 8** Solomon Yudovin. Print from the series *Byloe* (The Bygone Era): *Ulitsa v mestechke* (Street in the Shtetl), 1926. Wood engraving, 8 1/2 x 6 5/8" (21.6 x 16.8 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Fig. 9** Joseph Tchaikov (Chaikov). Cover for the catalogue *Evreiskaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka* (Jewish Art Exhibition), organized by the Kultur-Lige Arts Section, Kyiv, 1920. Private collection, Israel

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**Fig. 11** Alexandra Exter, Constructivist stage design for *Ballet Satanique*, music by A. Scriabin, 1922. Pencil and gouache on paper, 19 1/10 x 21 7/10" (48.7 x 55.1 cm). Bakhrushin State Theater Museum, Moscow

**Fig. 12** Vladimir Stenberg and Georgii Stenberg. Poster: *Moscow Kamerny Theater performances in Paris* (March 6–23, 1923), 1923. Lithograph, 31 7/8 x 21 7/8" (81 x 55.6 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Fig. 13** El Lissitzky. Book cover: Alexander Tairoff, *Das Entfesselte Theater: Aufzeichnungen eines Regisseurs* (Theater Unbound: Notes of a Director). Potsdam: Verlag Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1923. Lithograph and letterpress, 9 5/8 x 6 5/8" (24.5 x 16.8 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Fig. 14** Boris Aronson. Costume design for a group of actors in an unspecified production. Gouache and pencil on cardboard, 21 x 17 1/8" (53.5 x 43.5 cm)  
Image source: Georgui Kovalenko and Hillel Kazovsky. *Boris Aronson: Der Yiddish Teater*. Paris and Tel Aviv: Galerie Le Minotaure, 2010, repr. p. 152.



[Romeo and Juliet, with sets and costumes by Alexandra Exter, staged by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerny \(Chamber\) Theater in Moscow, 1921.](#)

**Fig. 15** Photograph of a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*, staged by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerny (Chamber) Theater in Moscow, 1921. Design: Alexandra Exter. As reproduced in *Gastspiel im Deutschen Theater, Berlin: Moskauer Kamerny Theater* (Berlin: Deutschen Theater, 1923), p. 5. Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Fig. 16** Alexandra Exter. Stage design for Juliet's bedroom in *Romeo and Juliet*, staged by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerny (Chamber) Theater in Moscow, 1921. Glue paint, bronze paint, and graphite on cardboard, 18 7/8 x 25 1/4 " (47.7 x 64.2 cm). The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow  
Image source: Georgy Kovalenko, *Alexandra Exter. Monografiia. Izdanie v 2kh tomakh*. Moscow: Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2010, vol. I, repr. p. 241.

**Fig. 17** Alexandra Exter. Costume design for Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet*, staged by Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamerny (Chamber) Theater in Moscow, 1921. Metallic paint and gouache on cardboard, 20 5/8 x 13 3/8" (52.4 x 34 cm). Bakhrushin State Theater Museum, Moscow  
Image source: Georgy Kovalenko, *Alexandra Exter. Monografiia. Izdanie v 2kh tomakh*. Moscow: Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2010, vol. I, repr. p. 254.

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Image source: Georgy Kovalenko, *Alexandra Exter. Monografiia. Izdanie v 2kh tomakh*. Moscow: Moscow Museum of Modern Art, 2010, vol. I, repr. p. 254.

[Semyon An-sky, Day and Night, with sets and costumes by Boris Aronson, Unser Teater, Bronx, 1924.](#)

**Fig. 19** Photograph of a scene from *Day and Night* showing the Devil in contemporary dress. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

**Fig. 20** Photograph of a scene from *Day and Night* showing "the Devil's slavish assistant." *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

**Fig. 30** Boris Aronson. Costume design for the grief-stricken bride and groom in *Day and Night*. Gouache and pencil on cardboard. 21 7/8 x 14 " (55.5 x 35.5 cm)  
Image source: Georgy Kovalenko and Hillel Kazovsky. *Boris Aronson: Der Yiddish Teater*. Paris and Tel Aviv: Galerie Le Minotaure, 2010, repr. p. 82.

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**Fig. 22** El Lissitzky. Catalogue cover: *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* (First Russian Art Exhibition). Galerie von Diemen, Berlin (October 15–December 1922), 1922. Letterpress on paper, 8 7/8 x 5 3/4" (22.5 x 14.6 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Fig. 23** El Lissitzky. Book cover: Ilya Ehrenburg, *Shest povestei o legkikh kontsakh* (Six Stories with Easy Endings). Moscow and Berlin: Helikon, August 1922. Letterpress, 7 7/8 x 5 1/8" (20 x 13 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Fig. 24** El Lissitzky. Journal cover: *Veshch / Objet / Gegenstand* (Berlin: Verlag Skythen), no. 1–2 (March–April 1922). Letterpress, 12 1/8 x 9 1/8" (30.8 x 23.5 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection

**Fig. 25** Postcard: Boris Aronson's costume for the Hasidic and the Yemenite dances of Baruch Agadati (pseudonym of Boris Kaushansky, 1895–1976)

**Fig. 26** Boris Aronson. Chassidic (Hasidic) dance costume design for Baruch Agadati (pseudonym of Boris Kaushansky, 1895–1976), c. 1923. Gouache and collage on cardboard, 25 x 19" (64.5 x 48.4 cm). The Israel Museum, Jerusalem

**Fig. 27** Postcard: Boris Aronson's costume for the dancer Baruch Agadati (pseudonym of Boris Kaushansky, 1895–1976), c. 1923. Lithograph, 5 7/8 x 4" (15 x 10 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection.

**Fig. 28** Boris Aronson. Costume design for a Hasidic figure. Gouache and collage on paper, 24 7/8 x 20 7/8" (63 x 53 cm)  
Image source: Georgy Kovalenko and Hillel Kazovsky. *Boris Aronson: Der Yiddish Teater*. Paris-Tel Aviv: Galerie Le Minotaure, 2010, repr. p. 145.

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**Fig. 34** Boris Aronson. Design for a mural in the auditorium of the Unser Teater, 1925. Gouache, pencil, and gold paint on cardboard, 7 5/8 x 21 7/8" (19.5 x 55.5 cm)  
Image source: Georgy Kovalenko and Hillel Kazovsky. *Boris Aronson: Der Yiddish Teater*. Paris and Tel Aviv: Galerie Le Minotaure, 2010, repr. pp. 70–71.

**Fig. 35** Boris Aronson. Stage design for Ossip Dymov's *The Bronx Express*, Schildkraut Theatre, The Bronx, 1925. Gouache and pencil on cardboard, 10 5/8 x 10 5/8" (27 x 27 cm). *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

[Abraham Goldfadden, The Tenth Commandment: An Old Play in Sixteen Scenes. Directed by Maurice Schwartz; choreography by Michel Fokine. Designer: Boris Aronson. Yiddish Art Theatre, New York, 1926.](#)

**Fig. 36** Maurice Schwartz in one of his eight roles in the play *The Tenth Commandment*; here, as a woman, with co-star Joseph Buloff.  
Image source: Frank Rich and Lisa Aronson. *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987, repr. p. 41.

**Fig. 37** Model for Aronson's stage set "The Castle Ballroom" in *The Tenth Commandment*, with its playing areas.  
Image source: Frank Rich and Lisa Aronson. *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987, repr. p. 45.

*Aronson's set for the "Little House in the Woods" in The Tenth Commandment (Act 1, Scene 2). The action begins outside the house, then the roof and sides open and the action continues inside.*

**Fig. 38** Ella Barnett. Photograph of the outside of the house with actors. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

**Fig. 39** Ella Barnett. Photograph of the outside of the house. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

**Fig. 40** Ella Barnett. Photograph of the inside of the house with actors. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

**Fig. 41** Ella Barnett. Photograph of the inside of the house. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

**Fig. 42** Boris Aronson. Proof for magazine cover: *Der Hammer*, New York, 1927. 10 7/8 x 8 3/4" (27.5 x 21 cm)

Image source: Georgui Kovalenko and Hillel Kazovsky. *Boris Aronson: Der Yiddish Teater*. Paris and Tel Aviv: Galerie Le Minotaure, 2010, repr. p. 55.

**Fig. 43** Waldemar George. Title page: *Boris Aronson et l'art du theater*. Paris: Éditions des Chroniques du Jour, 1928. Private collection, New York

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**Fig. 45** Boris Aronson. Stage design for the prologue "Concert Hall in the Skies of Hell," which opens the play *Malokhim oyf der erd* (Angels on Earth), 1929. Gouache on paper, 13 x 18 1/8". (33 x 46 cm). *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923-2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

**Fig. 46** Photograph of the Beggar, Ben Chaim, a character in an unidentified production of the HaBima Theater, Moscow, 1922. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

**Fig. 47** Boris Aronson. Sketches for costume designs for an unidentified production at the Jewish theater. *Boris Aronson Papers and Designs, 1923–2000* (T-VIM 1987-12), NYPL-PA

## Facsimile reproduction

*B. Aronson Theater Exhibition / Art in the Theatre: An Exhibition by Boris Aronson.* Exhibition catalogue. Introduction by John Mason Brown. Anderson Galleries, New York (December 13–23, 1927), 1927

Letterpress

9 5/8 x 6 1/8" (24.4 x 15.5 cm), closed

Note: Aronson's cover for this exhibition catalogue deliberately recalls El Lissitzky's catalogue cover for the landmark *First Russian Art Exhibition* held in Berlin in 1922 (p. 20, Fig. 22), functioning as an homage to the Constructivist tenets that Aronson had introduced to the American stage since his arrival.

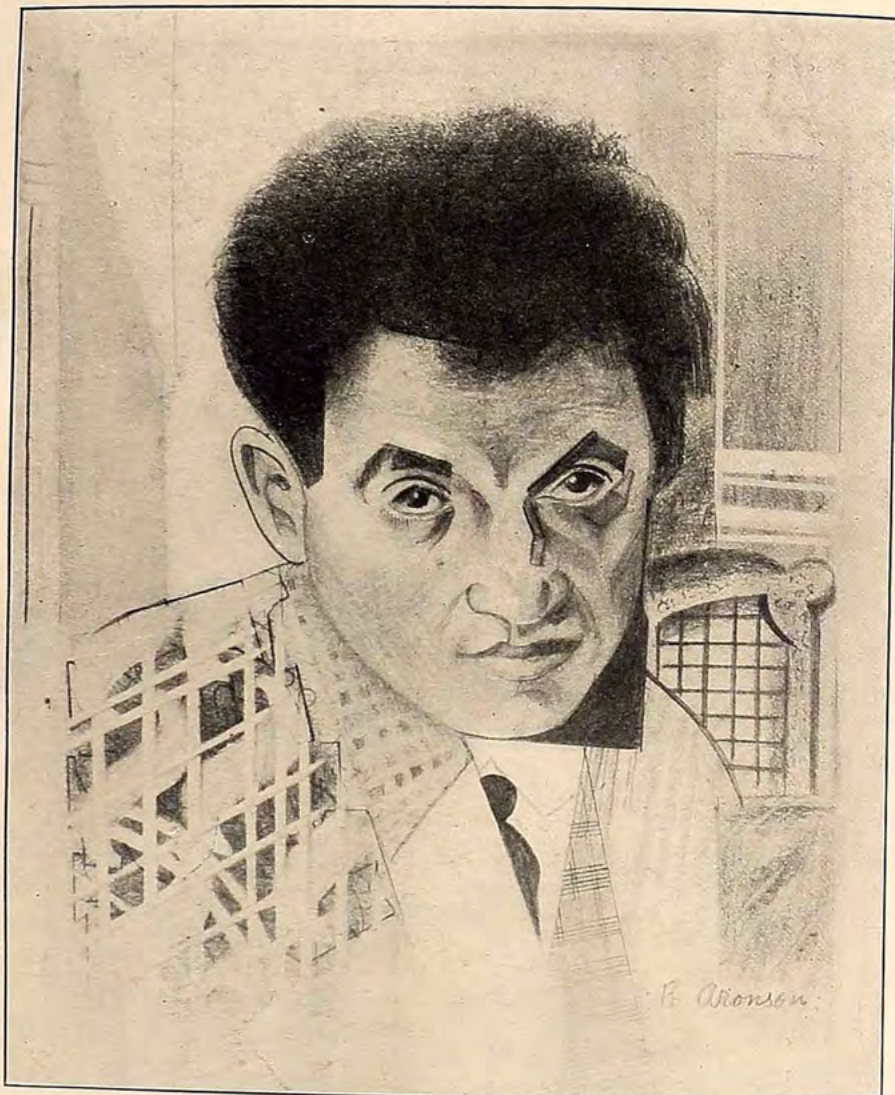
This exhibition traveled to the Odeon Theatre in Paris in the summer of 1928. Coincident with the Paris showing, the Polish-born French art critic Waldemar George published his book *Boris Aronson et l'art du théâtre* (Paris: Éditions des Chroniques du Jour, 1928) as the first in the series *Maîtres de l'art étranger* (Masters of foreign art).

**B**  
**Aronson**  
**THEATRE**  
**XHIBITION**

*B. Aronson Theatre Exhibition*



ANDERSON GALLERIES      NEW YORK



SELF-PORTRAIT  
by B. ARONSON

[page two]

# Art in the Theatre

*An Exhibit By*

**B. ARONSON**

*with an Introduction by*

JOHN MASON BROWN

*Sponsored by*

Edith J. R. Isaacs  
John Mason Brown  
Sheldon Cheney  
J. Brooks Atkinson  
Cleon Throckmorton  
Kenneth Macgowan  
Maurice Schwartz

ELLA BARNETT, *Secretary*



Dec. 13-23, 1927

**ANDERSON GALLERIES**  
New York City

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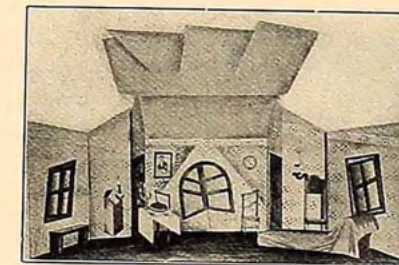
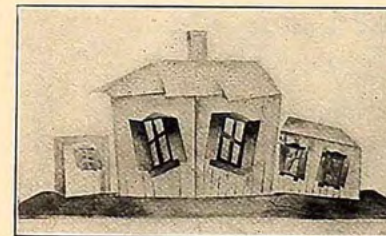
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### LITTLE HOUSE IN THE WOODS

in the "Tenth Commandment," by Goldfadden, a play with music. At first the action takes place outside this little house; then the roof and sides open, in full view of the audience, and the action continues indoors.

*Settings designed by B. Aronson.*

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Large art curtain in the Civic Repertory Theatre, New York, for Gustav Wied's comedy, "2x2=5". The poet and the cartoonist sit in loges and the center of interest lies in the little god of love over the bed. The city's stone towers form the background and the prosaic parents-in-law look down scornfully from a self-inflicted height.

*Designed by B. Aronson.*

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## *Announcing Aronson*

An Introduction by

JOHN MASON BROWN

**T**RUE to the fable of "The Vision of Sir Launfal," the majority of our theatre people have searched the wide world over for an inspiration which is really at our very doorsteps. And it is for just this reason that the settings, models, and costume designs of Boris Aronson hold an uncommon interest for us. He has seen behind the ugliness of those gaunt steel ribs which pierce Manhattan's everchanging skyline and has understood the strength and restlessness and power that they represent. He has been able to see them as symbols of the age and to use them for their full symbolic content in the theatre.

As a Russian, born near Kiev in 1898, who had dreamed about America long before he came here, Mr. Aronson gained a perspective on the strident terror of skyscrapers jammed together and soaring heavenwards which we, perhaps, could never have achieved. And as a Russian who saw his whole world crumble and change and come into a new and exciting life under the Revolution, Mr. Aronson not only dreamed his dreams of a vast and distant city of skyscrapers, but experienced the crowded emotions which came from seeing insurgent proletarians pack the theatres of Moscow for the first time. He saw in his mind's eye the outlines of a visionary metropolis, even while he was living through the stirring upheaval of a big city close at hand.

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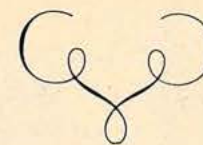
Like so many Russians, his theories of art shifted radically with the fresh impulses the Revolution unleashed. As a student, he had painted conventional realistic pictures and had been content to work in a hackneyed medium, when suddenly rebellion broke loose in his own soul. During his summer vacation in 1914, he made the required sketches in his art school but the fall exhibition of his independent summer's work showed that deep within himself he was already registering a protest against the conventionality which pleased his masters. His feeling was intensified by work in the studio of Alexandra Exter, that great leader among radical Russian stage designers. Two years later he deserted Kiev for Moscow, where his own desire for experiment was whetted by the sad, trying and thrilling years ahead of him. He saw all sides of a suffering city's life and began to realize, as many artists in present-day Russia believe, that art must bear a vital relationship to life. He felt this so keenly that he devoted his talents (and they were many and varied) to posters because they offered an art form which bore distinctly on events, and by means of which he could test his popular influence.

From his boyhood in Kiev, he had tinkered with the theatre. Now he put dalliance behind him because he saw that of all the arts the theatre's is most intimately connected with living. In revolutionary Russia, where the stage was used without disguise or shame as an all-powerful propaganda agent, he knew this to be particularly true. It was not the Revolution, however, that he cared for but what the Revolution meant to him as an artist. As a Jew, it freed him and opened the doors of the theatre for his race. And as a man, it stirred in him a hungry, aching desire to express an art form for the people that belonged to their immediate present. For a proletarian audience, he saw that the steel girders of New York's skyscrapers offered a raw material with which they were accustomed to work. And he began to sketch from his imagination the strength and chaos that far-off New York spelled for him.

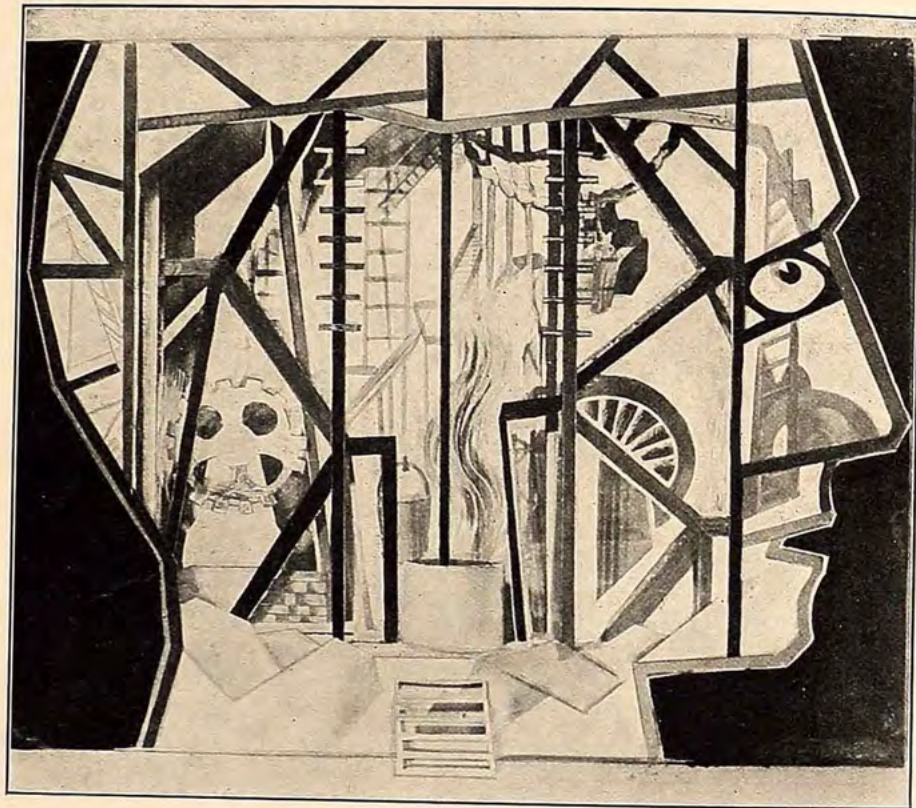
But the desire to be a part of this city he dreamed of became too strong to resist. He pushed on to Berlin, trying his hand at etching, woodcuts, teaching and writing, while both his ambition

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to see New York and to work permanently in the theatre grew stronger each day. Finally, in 1923, he landed here—with little money and less English at his disposal. In the past four years, he has worked his way from Unser Teater in the Bronx to Maurice Schwartz' Yiddish Art Theatre on Second Avenue and has, at the present writing, in "2x2=5", a production in an important English-speaking theatre. Those four years have brought him many commissions and an increasing respect from an increasing public. For in him, New York has at least one finely equipped theatre artist who is eager and able to find inspiration in the city at our doorsteps. His work is strident, lovely, witty, and not a little madcap, but it has a strength and vigor, and a freedom of form and rebelliousness of spirit that is as important for our theatre as it should be welcome.



[page nine]



HELL SCENE IN "TENTH COMMANDMENT"

by GOLDFADDEN

*a play with music.*

The wheels of industry, the flames of work and passion, the ladders of the laborers at eternal drudgery—all are in the individual's brain. Red, of course, is the predominating color.

Setting by B. Aronson.

[page ten]

THE CATALOGUE



PRODUCTIONS

**Day and Night**, a dramatic poem in three scenes, after fragments by S. Ansky, produced at Unser Teater in the Bronx, New York, Dec. 1924.

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| 1 Model   | Act. I. A room in the Rabbi's house <sup>1</sup>   |
| 2 "       | Act II. Ruins of the mill at Midnight, when they are headquarters of the Devil. <sup>1 2</sup> |
| 3 Costume | The Rabbi  |
| 4 "       | Rabbi's mother   |
| 5 "       | Hannaiah, secretary to the Rabbi   |
| 6 "       | Member of rabbinical council   |
| 7 "       | Lillith in modern dress  |
| 8 "       | The pensive Jew  |
| 9 "       | Grief-stricken bride and groom <sup>1 2</sup>  |
| 10 "      | The Devil  |
| 11 "      | An assistant to the Devil  |
| 12 "      | First assistant to Devil, in disguise <sup>2</sup>   |
| 13 "      | Second assistant to Devil, in disguise   |
| 14 "      | Third assistant to Devil, in disguise  |
| 15 "      | Another devil  |
| 16 "      | A holy Jew   |
| 17        | Six photographs from Act I in one frame  |
| 18        | Four photographs from Act II in one frame  |

**Final Balance**, a tragi-comedy in four acts, by David Pinski, produced at Unser Teater in the Bronx, New York, Jan. 1925.

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| 19 Model   | containing three miniature stages—Acts I, II, and III. All show the same room in the flour merchant's house but each represents a further step on the road to wealth. <sup>1</sup> |
| 20 "       | Act IV A street in the city <sup>1</sup>   |
| 21 Costume | Wife of the flour merchant   |
| 22 "       | Laborer  |
| 23 "       | Money lender   |
| 24 "       | Three salesmen for the flour merchant  |
| 25 Photo   | People on the street, Act IV   |

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated in this catalogue.  
<sup>2</sup> Photographic reprint at desk.

[page eleven]

**Bronx Express**, a comedy in three acts and a prologue, by Ossip Dymow, produced at the Schildkraut Theatre in the Bronx, New York, Sept. 1925.

- 26 Model Prologue. The subway car <sup>1 2</sup>
- 27 " Act I Home of Hungerpride, in the dream<sup>2</sup>
- 28 " Act II Palace of Mr. Pluto Water, in the dream<sup>1 2</sup>
- 29 Sketch Act II ditto
- 30 " Act III Atlantic City, in the dream

**Tenth Commandment**, an old play with music by Abraham Goldfadden, in sixteen scenes, produced at opening of Maurice Schwartz' new Yiddish Art Theatre, Nov. 1926.

- 31 Model Castle ballroom<sup>1 2</sup>
- 32 " Hell<sup>1 2</sup>
- 33 " Heaven
- 34 Costume Ahitophel, the Devil
- 35 " Devil disguised as a Palestinian Rabbi
- 36 " Devil as a seductive French lady
- 37 " Good angel <sup>2</sup>
- 38 " Frumke, the modest virtuous wife <sup>2</sup>
- 39 " Mathilda, the German countess<sup>2</sup>
- 40 " A cavalier
- 41 " A smug banker and his wife
- 42 " Butler<sup>1 2</sup>
- 43 " Ludwig, the salesman, about to commit murder
- 44 Costume Two gentlemen from Tyrol
- 45 " Fritz, the waiter
- 46 Illus. Little house in the woods—closed<sup>1 2</sup>
- 47 " the same, open<sup>1 2</sup>
- 48 Costume Hypocritical priest<sup>2</sup>
- 49 " Ladies of the Kosher Dance<sup>2</sup>
- 50 " same, consoling Frumke in her grief
- 51 " Two Jewish tobacco-snuffers<sup>2</sup>
- 52 " Hell's furnace tender
- 53 " Theatre manager in Heaven
- 54 " Modern angels, for ballet scene in Heaven
- 55-56 Sketches Two pencil drawings: (a) Front of castle and (b) Grave of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, to illustrate striking stage changes with minimum of re-arrangement.
- 57 Sketch Prologue in the clouds
- 58 Real costume on figure
- 59 Photo Inside the little house
- 60 " Goblins at the castle doors
- 61 " Castle scene<sup>1</sup>
- 62 " Devils vanquished by angel in disguise
- 63 " Hell<sup>1 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated in this catalogue.  
<sup>2</sup> Photographic reprint at desk.

- 64 Photo Hell in action
- 65 " Theatre manager being judged by the Devil, in the Hell scene
- 66 " Heaven, scene 16.

**Yoschke Musikant**, a tragi-comedy by Ossip Dymow (first entitled "Singer of His Own Sadness"), produced at Yiddish Art Theatre, New York, in Feb. 1927.

- 67 Model The kitchen

**Tragedy of Nothing**, a fantasy in seven scenes by Moisha Nadir, produced by the Art Circle at the Irving Place Theatre, New York, Jan. 1927.

- 68 Model Apothecary shop<sup>2</sup>
- 69 " The Court<sup>1 2</sup>
- 70 " Portals of the palace<sup>1 2</sup>
- 71 Costume The King<sup>2</sup>
- 72 " The Queen<sup>2</sup>
- 73 " King's messenger<sup>2</sup>
- 74 " Astronomer<sup>1 2</sup>
- 75 " The Fool<sup>1 2</sup>
- 76 " Good Devil<sup>2</sup>
- 77 " The druggist
- 78 " Court attendant
- 79 " Ghosts<sup>1 2</sup>
- 80 Photo Court scene with figures<sup>1</sup>
- 81 " Apothecary shop
- 82 " Pantomime at Portals of the palace

**2x2=5**, a comedy by Gustav Wied, translated into English from Danish by Ernest Boyd and produced in Eva Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre, New York, Nov. 28, 1927.

- 83 Model Act I Paul Abel's home<sup>1</sup>
- 84 " Act II His bachelor quarters<sup>1</sup>
- 85 " Act III His cell in jail
- 86 Sketch of large art curtain in the theatre<sup>1</sup>

**Biblical production** (unnamed), conceived by Aronson to show effective changes of locale into four acts, by re-arrangement of the same scenery.

- 87 Model Primeval desert of Great Stones, Act I.<sup>2</sup>
- 88 Photo Act II<sup>2</sup>
- 89 " Act III<sup>2</sup>
- 90 " Act IV<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated in this catalogue.  
<sup>2</sup> Photographic reprint at desk.

### For a Chinese Drama

- 91 Costume Husband
- 92 " Lover
- 93 " Servant
- 94 Sketch Setting for the play

### OTHER COSTUMES AND SKETCHES

- 95 Costume Oriental dance<sup>1 2</sup>
- 96 " Oriental dance<sup>2</sup>
- 97 " Oriental dance
- 98 " for ballet
- 99 " Devil in a ballet
- 100 " Movement: moment in a dance<sup>2</sup>
- 101 " Chassidic Dance<sup>1 2</sup>
- 102 " Jewish design
- 103 Sketch for Sholom Asch's drama, "The String of Pearls"
- 104 Cafe a composition made from separate tiny photographs clipped from newspapers and pasted in place.

### ILLUSTRATIONS IN BLACK AND WHITE

#### Children's story by Peretz Hirschbein: "The Bear"

- 105 Bear and horse
- 105 Bear and dog
- 107 Bear and cat
- 108 Two bears
- 109 Mother bear and cub

#### Children's play by Sholom Aleichem: "Channuke."

- 110 Six drawings in one frame:  
(left to right): Cousin Benny, Seidel the father, Edel the mother, Mattel the boy, the stern parent and Cousin Moisha, a miser.

#### Children's story by Sholom Aleichem: "The Living Soul."

- 111 Illustration (left to right): The father, the Soul, the mother, the son.

#### Children's story by Rachel Luria: "The Stone that Talked."

- 112 Illustration The stone

#### Illustrations for children's books:

- 113 Child at door
- 114 Puss in boots
- 115 Mary and her lamb
- 116 Child in woods
- 117 Child and bird

<sup>1</sup> Illustrated in this catalogue.  
<sup>2</sup> Photographic reprint at desk.

[page fourteen]

- 118 A bowl of sweets
- 119 Mother and child
- 120 Cat and bird's nest
- 121 Child with horse, dog and cat

### Other illustrations

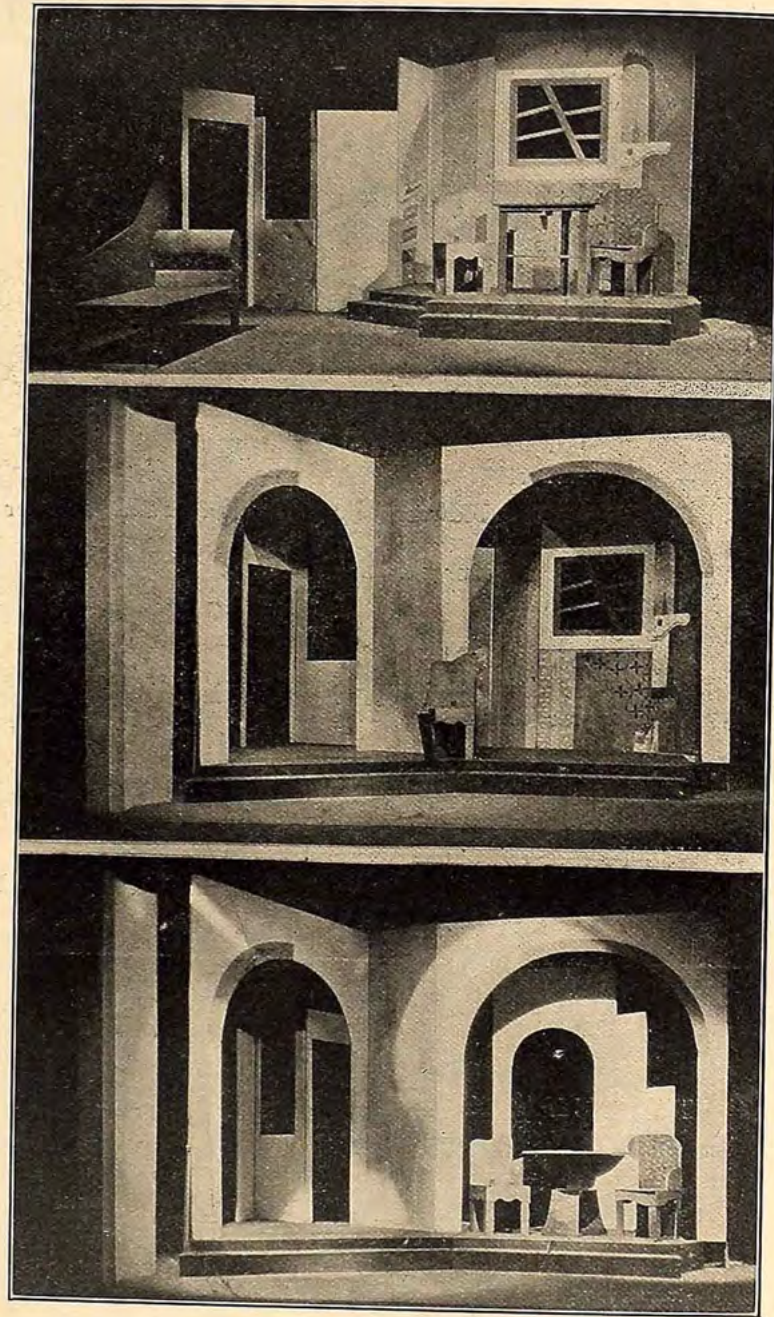
- 122 Gabriel blesses the pious Jews
- 123 Prayer for help
- 124 A biblical story
- 125 Evreinoff, the playwright, gazes at Arabs in Algiers
- 126 Pen-and-ink design Passover dish
- 127 " " Channuke candles
- 128 " " Zucckes, the harvest festival

### WOODCUTS

- 129 Two ornaments
- 130 Cover for "Cut Flowers," by the Hebrew poet Schneyer
- 131 The mirror
- 132 Old peasant and her cat before the fire
- 133 Two women
- 134 The Jew
- 135 Stylized head of old Jew
- 136 Lithuanian village scene
- 137 First impression of New York

### PAINTED SILKS

- 138 Russian costume, life-size, made from two large shawls
- 139 Large painted shawl  
—Costume from "Tenth Commandment," life-size, see Cat. No. 58

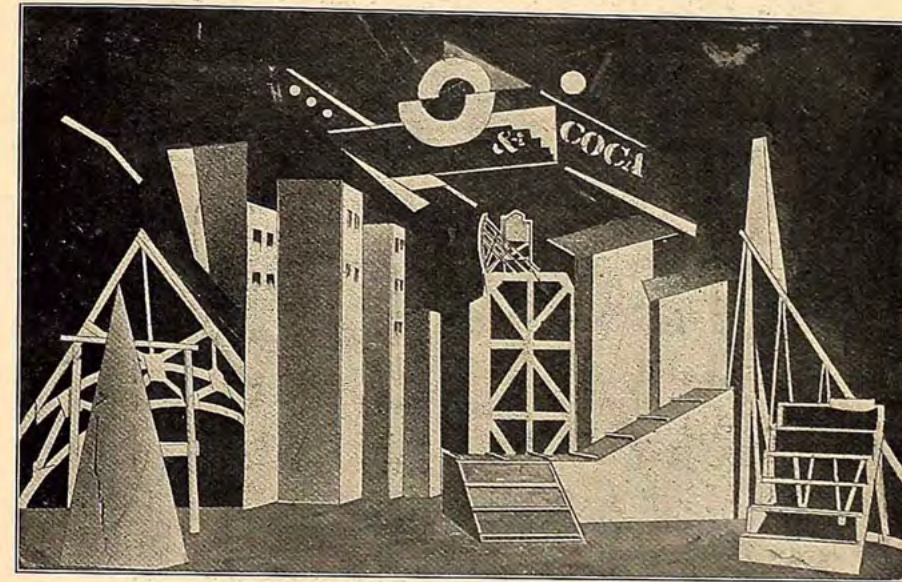


**THE FINAL BALANCE**

ACTS I, II AND III.

Settings by B. Aronson

[page sixteen]



**THE FINAL BALANCE**

*a tragi-comedy in four acts by David Pinski*

ACT IV A street in the City

Acts I, II and III all represent the same room in the flour merchant's home which grows more pretentious as the owner grows richer. In Act II the touch of wealth is shown by addition of arches to the room; in Act III the old-fashioned furniture has been replaced by a modern chair and table.

Settings by B. Aronson

[page seventeen]



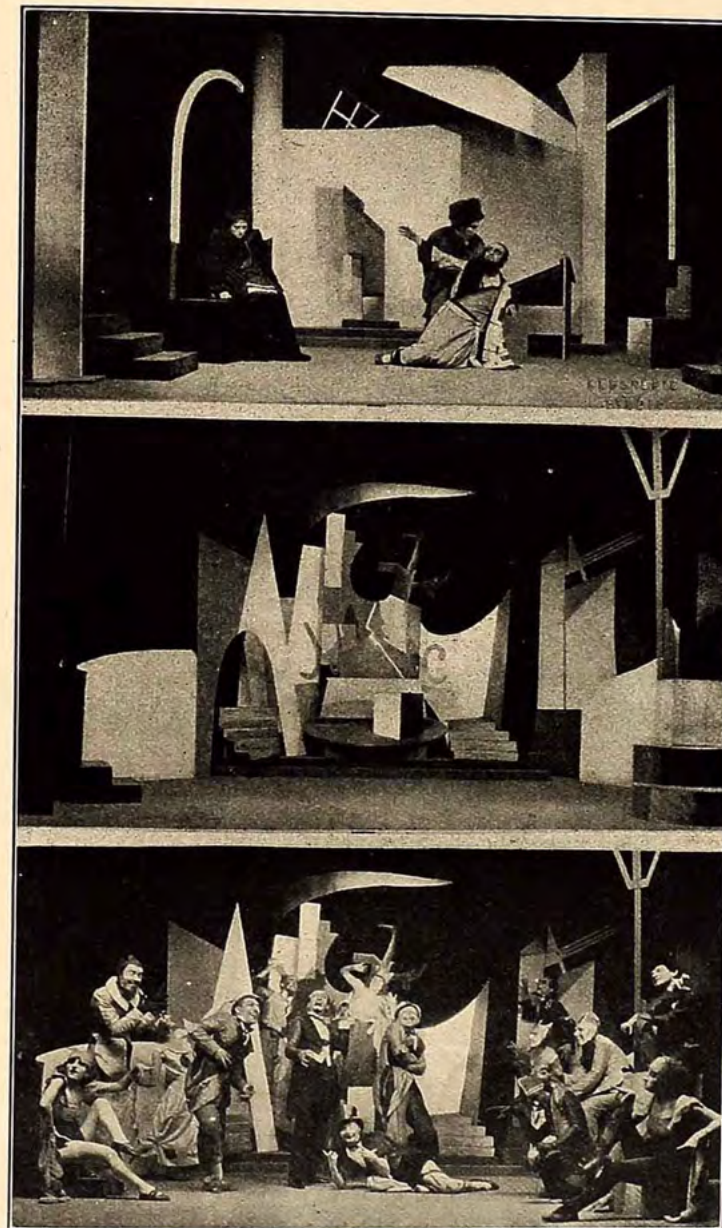
Courtesy of Theatre Arts Monthly.

**Grief-stricken Bride and Groom**

in Ansky's "Day and Night"

Designed by B. Aronson

[page eighteen]



**DAY AND NIGHT**

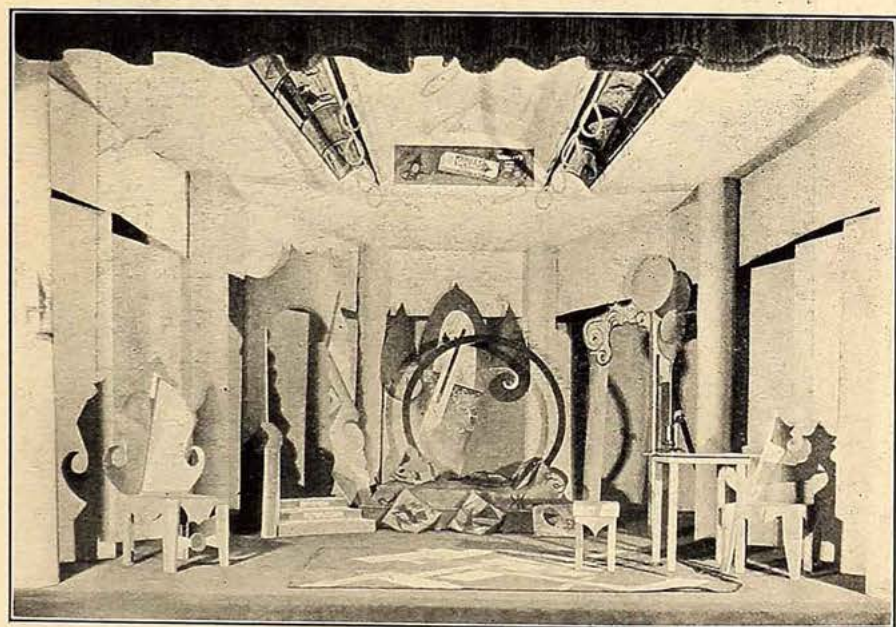
a dramatic poem, after fragments by S. Ansky

ACT I, Room in the Rabbi's House

ACT II, (upper without figures and lower with figures.) Ruins of the mill at midnight, the devil's meeting-place.

Settings by B. Aronson.

[page nineteen]



**BRONX EXPRESS**

*a comedy by Ossip Dymow*

(upper) Prologue, The Subway Car  
 (lower) Palace of Mr. Pluto Water, in the Dream, with suggestion of the subway  
 at the ceiling.

Settings by B. Aronson.

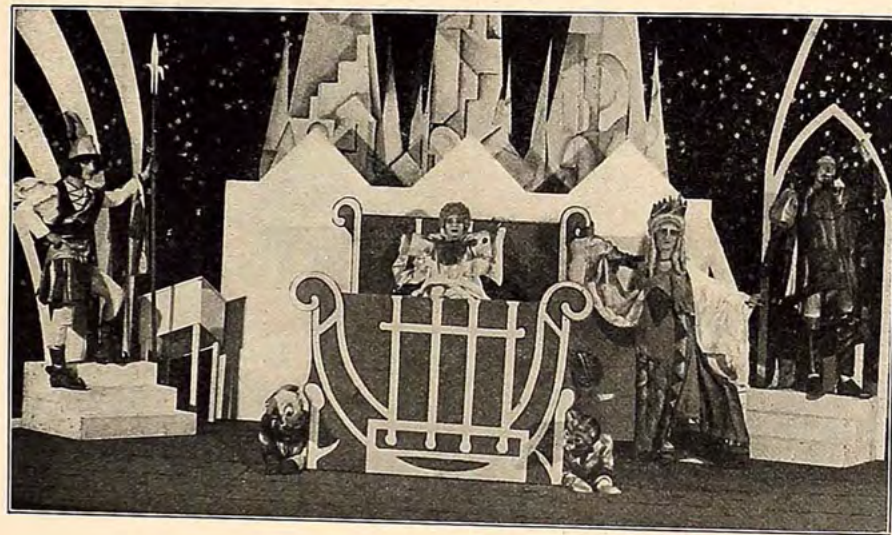
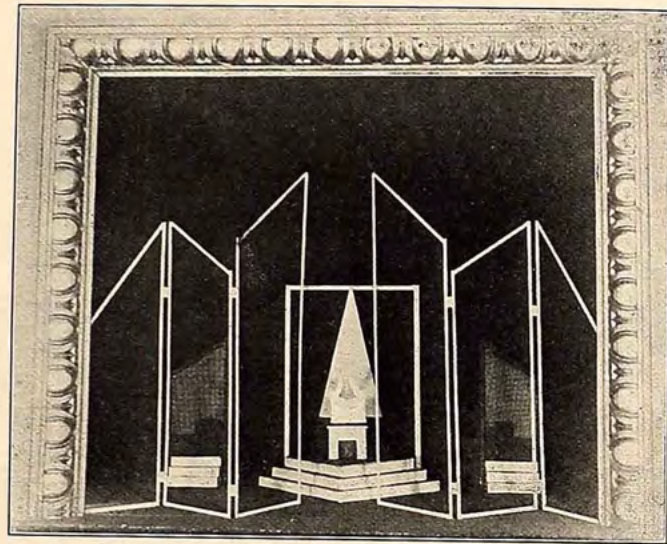
[page twenty]



**CHASSIDIC DANCE**

*designed by B. Aronson*

[page twenty-one]



## TRAGEDY OF NOTHING

*a fantasy by Moisha Nadir*

(upper) Portals of the Palace  
 (lower) Court where the Young Prince lies dying.  
 The Queen is at the right. Cat and Dog at foot of the bed are a sort of  
 Greek Chorus throughout the play, to echo the action.

Settings by B. Aronson.

[page twenty-two]



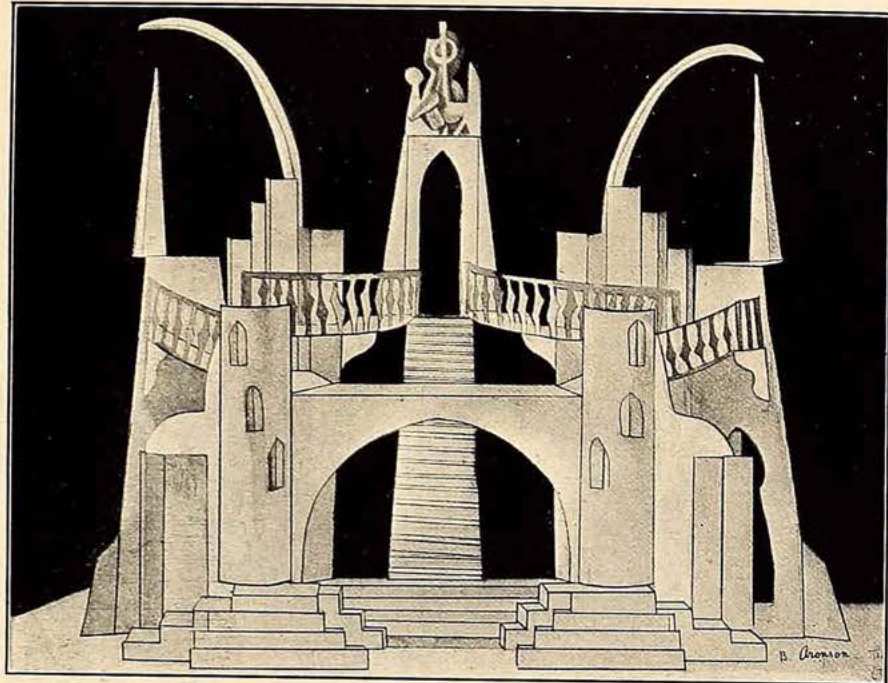
## THE FOOL

*in the fantasy, "Tragedy of Nothing."*

Designed by B. Aronson

[page twenty-three]





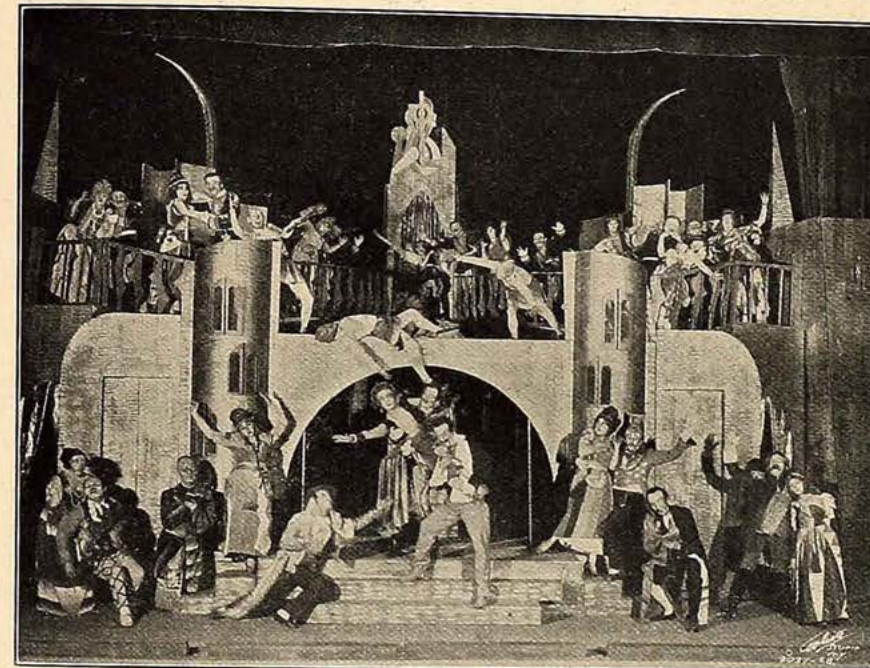
Courtesy of Theatre Arts Monthly.

**CASTLE BALLROOM**  
in "TENTH COMMANDMENT"

This set for the finale of the first act made possible masses of movement on many levels and at many angles.

*Designed by B. Aronson.*

[page twenty-four]



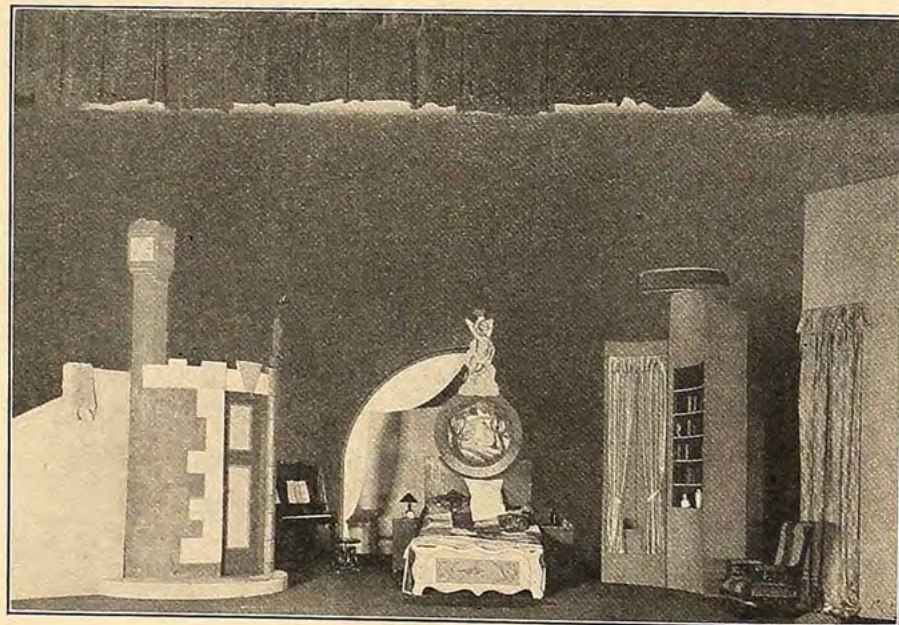
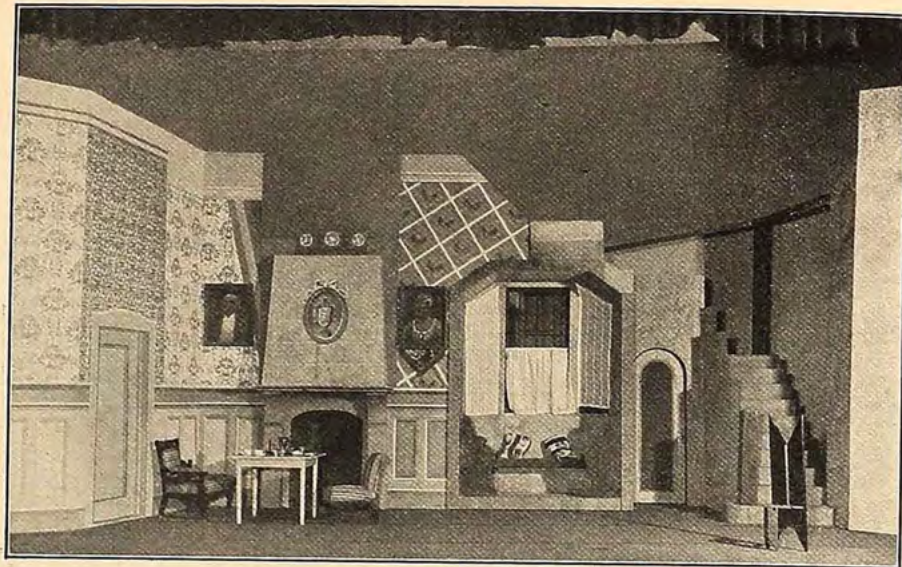
Courtesy of Theatre Arts Monthly.

**CASTLE BALLROOM**  
in "TENTH COMMANDMENT"

Photograph of the play in action shows how the sketch opposite was realized on the stage.

*Designed by B. Aronson.*

[page twenty-five]



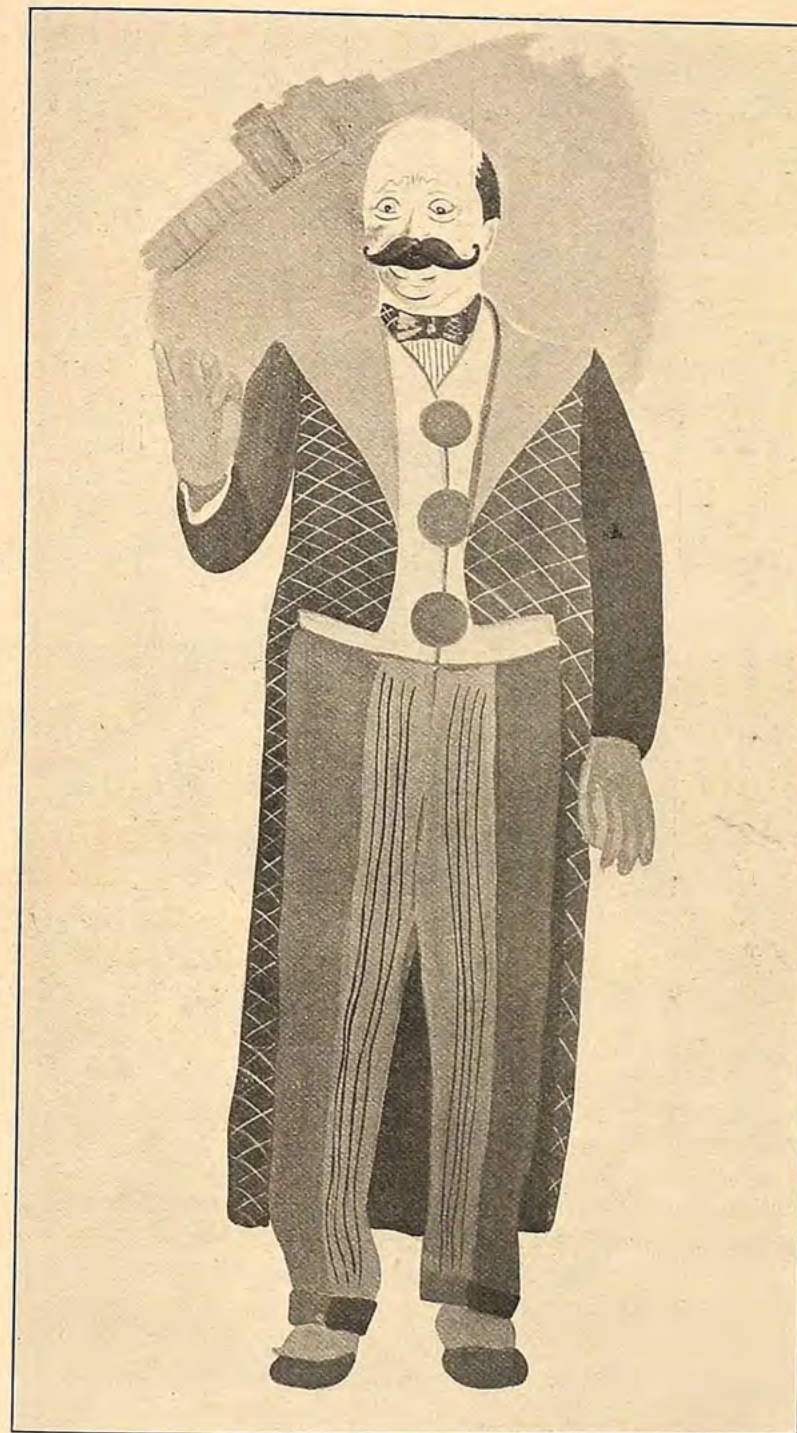
2x2=5

comedy by Gustav Wied  
at Civic Repertory Theatre

(upper) ACT I. Paul Abel's Home  
(lower) ACT II. His bachelor quarters

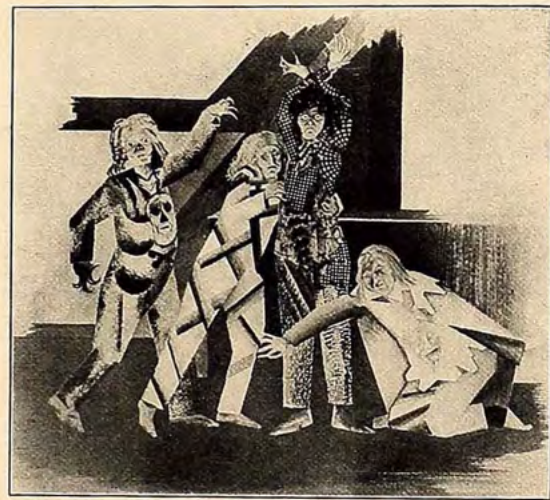
Settings by B. Aronson.

[page twenty-six]



THE BUTLER

in the "TENTH COMMANDMENT" Designed by B. Aronson  
[page twenty-seven]



**GHOSTS**  
*a moment in the "Tragedy of Nothing"*

[page twenty-eight]

## *The Sponsors Say a Word*



We wait for Aronson's designs with keen pleasure at THEATRE ARTS MONTHLY; not only because of the strength, vitality and modernity which characterizes his work, and his skill in interpreting a play, but because of his rare sense of humor that, some how or other, manages to get itself into his line and color and form.

We have watched him work his way from the outskirts of the city theatre nearer and nearer to its heart, and feel that the theatre has gained by his coming.

—EDITH J. R. ISAACS,  
*editor, Theatre Arts Monthly.*

\* \* \*

Of course what the theatre needs today is not so much new decorators and decorations as new playwrights and plays, understanding directors and direction, and inspired actors. In America the so-called decorators have outrun these other groups: they are more accomplished in their stage work, more imaginative, with a wider range of vision, more thoroughly craftsmanlike. But a man like Aronson is worth watching, and exhibiting, because he goes beyond what is ordinarily understood as decoration. He knows what the actors and directors are doing on the progressive stages of the world, and he doesn't mistake realistic and journalistic plays as the sum of all playwriting. He sees other drama coming, and he designs from ideas of what the all-essential actor may be doing when imaginatively directed in that drama. He is arrestingly alive in his designs for today, but perhaps he is most important as a warrant that the next ten years of staging in America will be as changeful, exciting and fruitful as the last.

—SHELDON CHENEY,  
*writer on newer movements in the theatre.*

[page twenty-nine]



THE ASTRONOMER  
in the "TRAGEDY OF NOTHING"

[page thirty]

Mr. Aronson's designs for Goldfadden's "Tenth Commandment" at the Yiddish Art Theatre first directed general attention to this Russian's boldness and imagination. Those are qualities that become increasingly more essential to the décor of the modern stage. Like all the best scene designers, Mr. Aronson is a versatile artist whose work in general illustration is as much alive as his settings and costume drawings. This exhibition displays the many sides of Mr. Aronson's talent; it should also stimulate general interest in the possibilities of stage design for the imaginative theatre.

—J. BROOKS ATKINSON,  
*dramatic critic, N. Y. Times.*

\* \* \*

When Boris Aronson takes up his brush, it is exciting to watch his keen and simple analysis of the play at hand into its dramatic units of mood and tempo. There is no "waste motion" and each line of the composition has a definite dramatic significance and deals directly with the drama itself. We fellow craftsmen welcome this courage in the theatre, as a fresh and frank feeling about things—knowing full well how prone we are to add to our own stature at the expense of the play we are mounting.

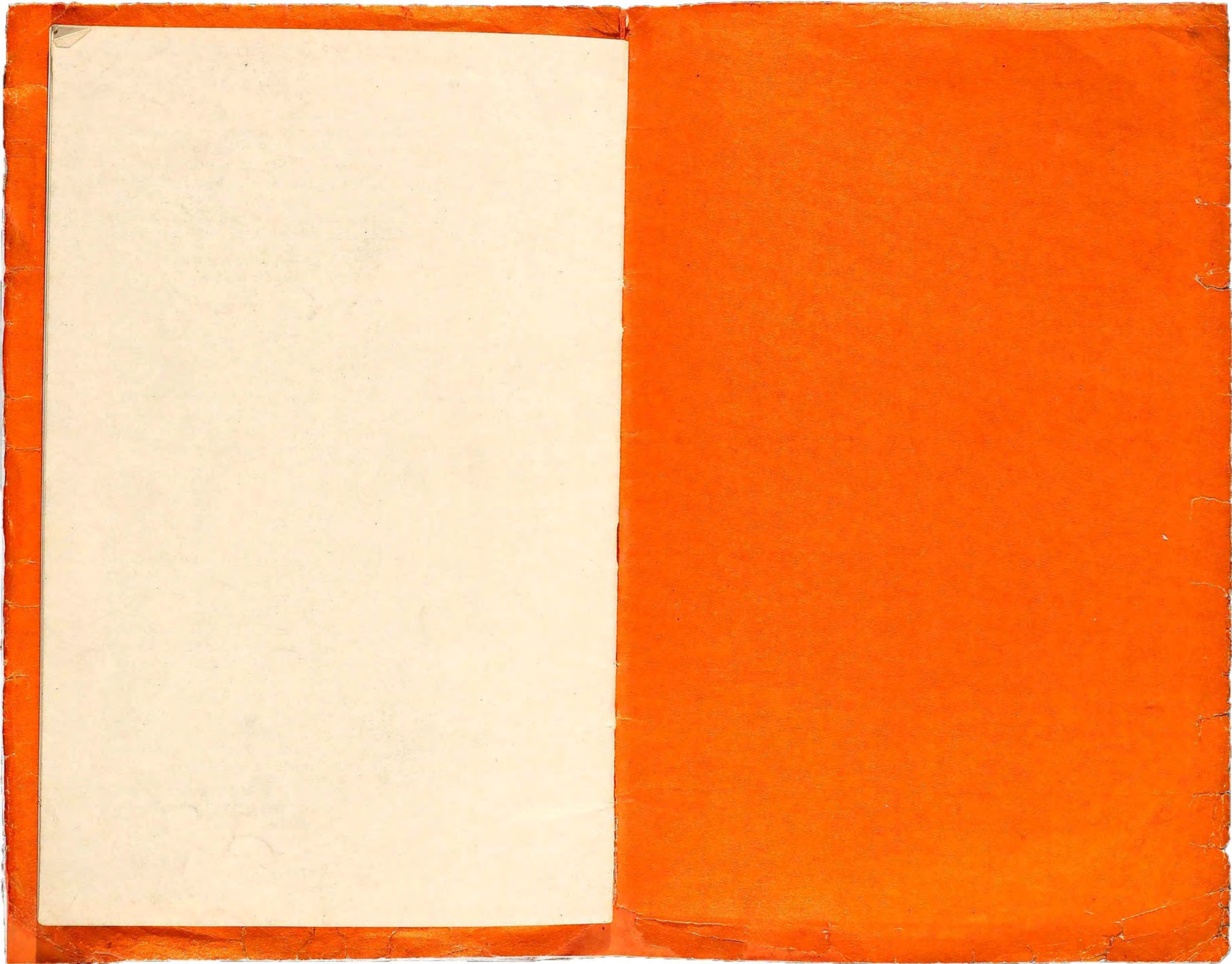
—CLEON THROCKMORTON,  
*scenic designer.*

\* \* \*

Aronson gives his own conception to the productions he designs. He, like Shargal, Falk and Altman, has adopted the most modern form of theatre and in looking at a production of that group, it is sometimes difficult to tell one from the other. Or, rather, so I thought at first; but in watching Aronson's work, as production followed production, I became convinced that here indeed is a man of original conceptions. He has constantly in mind the actor, the composition, movement, lighting and direction. He is entirely theatre—one might even say, he breathes theatre. As far as scenery and costumes are concerned, I consider the "Tenth Commandment" one of the finest productions conceived in America within the last few years. The Yiddish Art Theatre is proud of what Aronson designed for it and, as its director, I feel that his exhibition will mean much not only to this young Russian scenic artist but also to all the better theatres of America.

—MAURICE SCHWARTZ,  
*director, Yiddish Art Theatre.*

[page thirty-one]





## Early Chronology

Boris (Borukh, Boruch, or Baruch) Solomonovich Aronson (American, born Russian Empire [now Ukraine]. 1898–1980)

**1898.** Born in Nezhin, Chernihiv (Chernigov) Province (now in Ukraine), then part of the Russian Empire, as one of ten children of Solomon (Shlomo) Aronson (1863–1935), the rabbi in Nezhin, and his wife Dvoira Turovskaia.

**1903.** The Aronson family moves to Kyiv, where Shlomo Aronson had been appointed the city's Grand Rabbi.

Until the age of 12, Boris Aronson attends a *heder* (religious school for young boys). He studies Torah and Gemara at home under the guidance of his father, and also attends a general public school in Kyiv.

**1909.** Visits Moscow, where he sees the collections of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov and becomes acquainted with the latest modern French paintings, including works by Monet, Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse.

**1912–1916.** Attends the Kyiv Art School. Becomes close with a circle of the Art School's Jewish students, including Issachar Ber Ryback (1897–1935), Aleksandr Tyshler (1898–1980), Solomon Nikritin (1898–1965), Mark Epstein (1897–1935), Sarah Shor (1897–1981), Isaac Pailles (1895–1978), and others.

Takes lessons at the private studio of the well-known Kyiv artist Oleksandr Murashko (1875–1919), one of the first Impressionists in Ukraine. In Murashko's studio, Aronson meets the artists Nisson Shifrin (1892–1961) and Isaac Rabinovich (1894–1961), who become his friends.

**1918.** Becomes a founding member of the Kultur-Lige (Yiddish Culture League) Arts Section in Kyiv, an organization that promotes Yiddish culture.

Begins his studies at the Kyiv workshop of the Russian Cubo-Futurist painter Alexandra Exter (1882–1949), who was also a pioneering Constructivist stage designer. Exter's teaching focused on non-representational art. Aronson becomes one of Exter's principal assistants.

Works for the city government of Kyiv on conceiving and executing decorations and posters for street festivals and pageants.

**1919.** Promotes the new Jewish art, which combines the achievements of the European avant-garde with elements of Jewish folk traditions. Together with Isaachar Ber Ryback (1897–1935), publishes the article "Di vegn fun der yiddisher moleray: Rayoynes fron kinstler" (The Paths of Jewish Painting: Thoughts of an Artist), a Yiddish-language manifesto of the Jewish artistic avant-garde, in *Oyfgang Ershtyr zamlbukh* (Kiev, 1919).

**1920.** In February and March, participates in the *Pervaia evreiskaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka* (First Jewish Art Exhibition) in Kyiv, organized by the Arts Section of the Kultur-Lige. Acts as a manager of the exhibition's committee.

Exter moves permanently to Moscow, where she continues working as a principal designer for the Moscow Kamerny (Chamber) Theatre of Aleksandr Tairov (1885–1950), a crusader against "naturalistic" theatre. She makes Aronson her assistant in creating the scale models for Tairov's 1921 production of *Romeo and Juliet* at

the Kamerny (Chamber) Theatre.

**1921.** Aronson helps to find objects of Jewish folk art for the collection of the Kultur-Lige's *Muzei plasticheskikh iskusstv* (The Museum of Jewish Art), which officially opens in Kyiv in September 1921; combines organizational work for the Museum with teaching in the Kultur-Lige's art studio and forming the Kultur-Lige's library.

In the fall, moves to Moscow, where he lives for almost a year. Attends classes taught by the avant-garde artist Ilya Mashkov (1881–1944) in VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops). Maintains his ties with the Moscow branch of Kultur-Lige.

**1922.** Travels to Poland, then Germany; in fall 1922, lives briefly in Berlin, where he studies etching and decorative arts under German-Jewish graphic artist and professor Herman Struck (1876–1944).

Participates in theatrical productions of the House of the Arts.

Participates in the *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* (First Russian Art Exhibition), which opens on October 15 at Galerie Van Diemen in Berlin. This landmark exhibition offers a unique opportunity for a broad Western audience to view firsthand the most recent artistic developments in Russia. Aronson exhibits three woodcuts: *Dorf*, *Interieur*, and *Figuren*.

**1923.** Publishes early critical study of the work of his friend Marc Chagall (1887–1985) (in Russian, German, and Yiddish editions) [p. 118].

Creates costume designs for the Hasidic and the Yemenite dances of Baruch Agadati, pseudonym of Boris Kaushansky (1895–1976), one of the pioneers of Jewish avant-garde choreography, who performs in Berlin in 1922 and 1923 [p. 145].

In November, arrives in New York on the British ocean liner RMS *Aquatoria*.

**1924.** Publishes the book *Sovremennaia evreiskaia grafika* (Modern Jewish Graphics; in Russian; Berlin: Petropolis; [p. 112] in which he analyzes the work of Chagall, Natan Altman (1899–1971), El Lissitzky (1890–1941), and Iosef Chaikov (1888–1979), among others.

**1924–1925.** Illustrates Jewish children's books [pp. 120–129]. Designs cover of the Jewish almanac *Fun tsayt tsu tsayat*.

Works as a principal stage designer for the Unser Teater (Our Theatre) on 180<sup>th</sup> Street in the Bronx. The Yiddish version of Off-off-Broadway and one of the seventeen Yiddish theaters in New York, Unser Teater was founded by the Society for the Promotion of Jewish Dramatic Literature. As Aronson commented, his work with the Unser Teater “was a residue of my Russian experience, as most of the plays dealt with allegory or mysticism.”

Creates costume and stage designs for two Unser Teater productions: *Tog un nakht* (Day and Night; 1924), based on fragments of a play by S. An-sky; and *Der letster sakhaki* (The Final Balance; 1925), a play by David Pinski.

Co-directs the production of *The Bronx Express* (1925) by Ossip Dymov; creates costume and stage designs for this production at the Schildkraut Theatre in the Bronx.

Creates designs for a mural for the auditorium of the Unser Teater.

Becomes a member of the *Arbeter Teater Farband* (ARTEF; Worker's Theatrical Alliance).

**1926.** Designs sets and costumes for the musical *The Tenth Commandment*, the opening extravaganza of Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre on the occasion of its relocation to its purpose-built Second Avenue location in New York. Works regularly at Schwartz's theater until 1930.

Sees his work included in the landmark *International Theatre Exposition*, Steinway [Exposition Hall] Building (February 27–March 15, 1926), organized by Jane Heap and Friedrich Kiesler.

**1926–1927.** Designs covers for the magazine *Der Hammer*, using elements of Constructivism and collage technique (pp. 134–135). Creates expressionistic woodcuts.

**1927.** At the Irving Place Theatre, creates costume and stage designs and directs the Yiddish production of *Tragedie fun gomisht* (*The Tragedy of Nothing*), based on the play by Moisha Nadir and produced by the Art Circle.

Designs stage set for the *Yoshe Musikant* (Singer of His Own Sadness) by Ossip Dymov at the Yiddish Art Theatre.

In November, designs stage set and costumes for his first English-speaking assignment, the experimental play  $2 \times 2 = 5$  (1906) by the Danish writer Gustav Johannes Wied (1858–1914), staged at the Civic Repertory Theatre.

In December, the first exhibition of Aronson's Yiddish theatre designs opens at the Anderson Galleries on Park Avenue. It includes twenty-five set models, 100 costume designs, woodcuts, pen-and-ink drawings, and photographs (see pp. 54–88).

**1928.** The book *Boris Aronson et l'art du théâtre* by the famous French critic Waldemar George published by Éditions Chroniques du Jour in Paris.

**1929.** Designs sets and costumes for *Der Goylem* (The Golem), by H. Leivick, an unrealized project at the Yiddish Art Theatre.

Designs sets and costumes for *Stempenyu*, *The Fiddler*, by Sholom Aleichem; stage set for *Jew Süss*, by Lion Feuchtwanger; and set and costumes for *Angels on Earth*, by Chuno Gottesfeld; all of which are staged at the Yiddish Art Theatre.

**1932.** Receives his first Broadway commission for an English-language musical, *Walk a Little Faster*, by S.J. Perelman (book), Vernon Duke (music), and E.Y. Harburg (lyrics), staged at the St. James Theatre.

From 1930s onward, Aronson was one of the Broadway's most prominent and influential designers, creating multiple award-winning sets and costumes for plays, operas, ballets, and musical comedies. During the 1940s he continued to innovate his designs by using colored slides to create projected scenery. Among the highlights of his later career were the sets he created for Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), *Cabaret* (1967), and *Company* (1971).

In 1945, he married Lisa Jalowetz, who worked with him throughout his career and attended to his legacy thereafter.

Aronson died in New York in 1980.



## Selected Awards and Fellowships

Guggenheim Fellowship, 1950

Antoinette Perry (Tony) Awards for his set designs for *The Country Girl* (1950), *Season in the Sun* (1950), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Cabaret* (1967), *Zorba* (1969), *Company* (1971), *Follies* (1972), and *Pacific Overtures* (1976)

Ford Foundation grant, 1962

Joseph Maharam Foundation awards for his designs for *Fiddler on the Roof* (1965), *Cabaret* (1967), *Company* (1971), *Follies* (1972), and *Pacific Overtures* (1976)

Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, 1969

## Selected One-Person Exhibitions

*B. Aronson Theater Exhibition / Art in the Theatre: An Exhibition by Boris Aronson*, Anderson Galleries, New York (December 13–23, 1927)

*Boris Aronson: Stage Designs and Models*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (June 24–October 10, 1947)

Brandeis University, Common Room in The Castle, Waltham, Massachusetts (November–December, 1949)

*Retrospective Exhibition of Boris Aronson: Paintings, Encaustics, Collages, Stage Designs, Stage Models and Metal Bas-Reliefs*, Storm King Art Center, New Windsor, New York (September 1–November 3, 1963)

Wright-Hepburn-Webster Gallery, New York, New York (1968)

*Boris Aronson: From His Theatre Work*, Vincent Astor Gallery, The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, New York (March 31–August 15, 1981)

*Boris Aronson: Stage Design as Visual Metaphor*. Guest Curator Frank Rich. The Katonah Gallery, Katonah, New York (October 8–December 31, 1989). Traveled to Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts (March–April 1990)

*Boris Aronson and the Avant-Garde Yiddish Theatre*, c. 1917–1929, Ben Uri Museum, London (April 18–June 30, 2013)

*Preparing the Miracle: From the Bronx to Broadway, Boris Aronson and the Yiddish Theatre*, Vallois America Gallery, New York, New York (organized by Galerie Le Minotaure in Paris) (November 14–December 23, 2015)

## Selected Bibliography

All sections are organized chronologically except Secondary Scholarship, which is organized alphabetically.

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*Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers*, Performing Arts Collection (PA-00007), Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

### II. By Aronson

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### III. Early References

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#### IV. Secondary Sources

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Zhidkov, V. S. *Teatr i vlast', 1917–1927* (Theater and Power, 1917–1927). Moscow: Aleteya, 2003.

**PLATES**

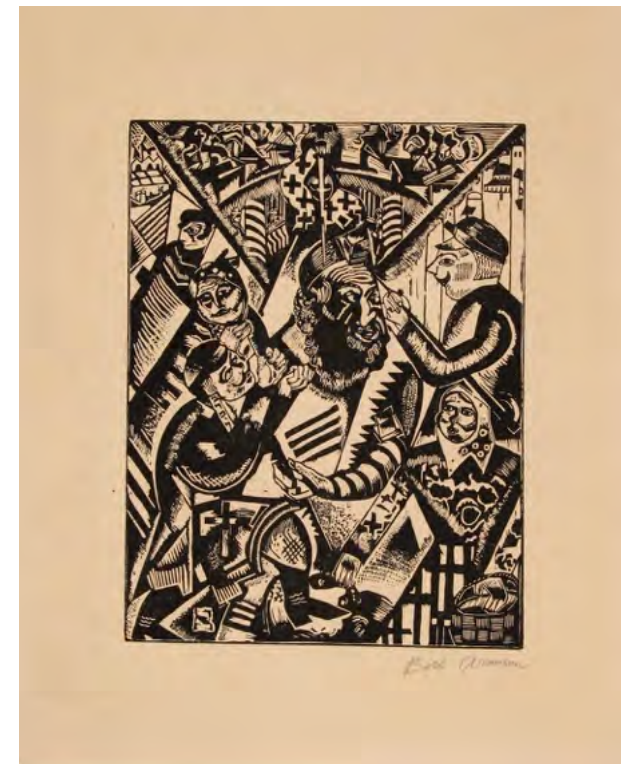
## PRINTS



Documentary photograph of the print: *Ornamentika k stikham Shneera* (Ornamental decoration for poems by Zalman Shneur [Shneour; 1886–1959]), 1920  
 Gelatin silver print mounted on board  
 5 5/8 x 4 1/2" (14.3 x 11.4 cm)  
*Modern Jewish Graphics* 1924, repr. p. 19 (see p. 113 in this volume)



*Mestechko* (Shtetl), 1920  
 Woodcut  
 6 3/4 x 8 1/2" (17.1 x 21.6 cm)  
*Modern Jewish Graphics* 1924, repr. p. 44 (see p. 114 in this volume)



Untitled, 1920  
 Woodcut  
 10 x 7 7/8" (25.4 x 20 cm)  
*Modern Jewish Graphics* 1924, repr. p. 57 (see p. 114 in this volume)



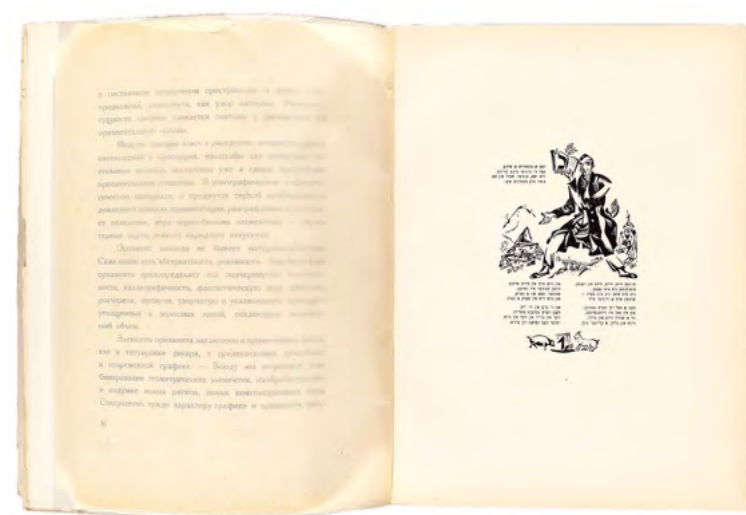
*Freiheit* (Freedom), c. 1929  
 Woodcut  
 12 3/8 x 7 3/4" (31.4 x 19.7 cm)  
*Enlightened Roads* 1929, repr. p. 41 (see p. 136 in this volume)



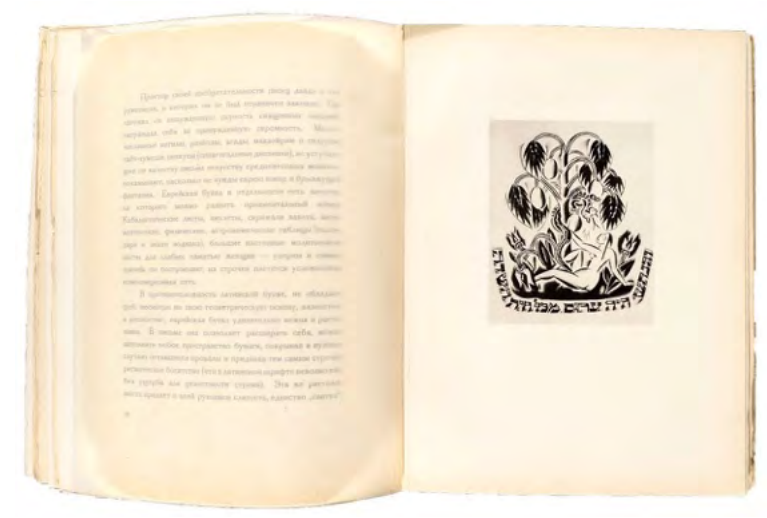
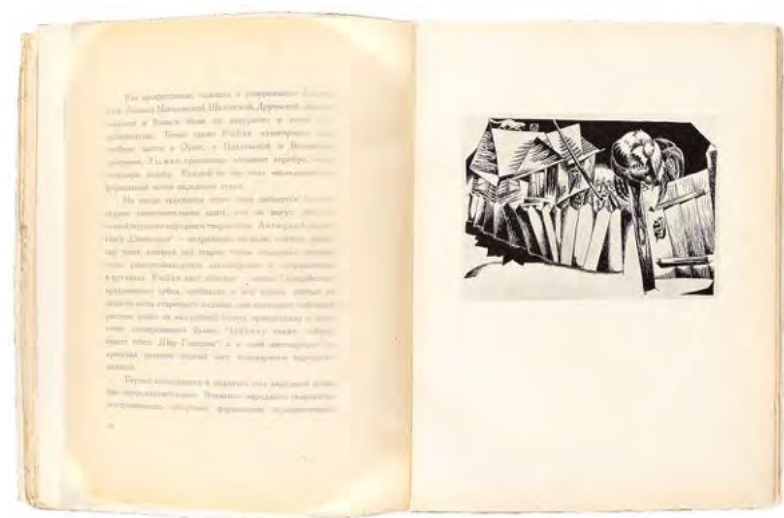
*Interieur* (Interior), 1921–1922  
 Woodcut  
 8 5/8 x 10 1/4" (21.9 x 26 cm)  
 Signed, lower left: Borukh Aronson  
 Note: This motif may have been one of the three woodcuts Aronson exhibited at the landmark exhibition *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* (First Russian Art Exhibition), Galerie Van Diemen, Berlin, in 1922: *Dorf* (no. 260), *Interieur* (no. 261), and *Figuren* (no. 262).

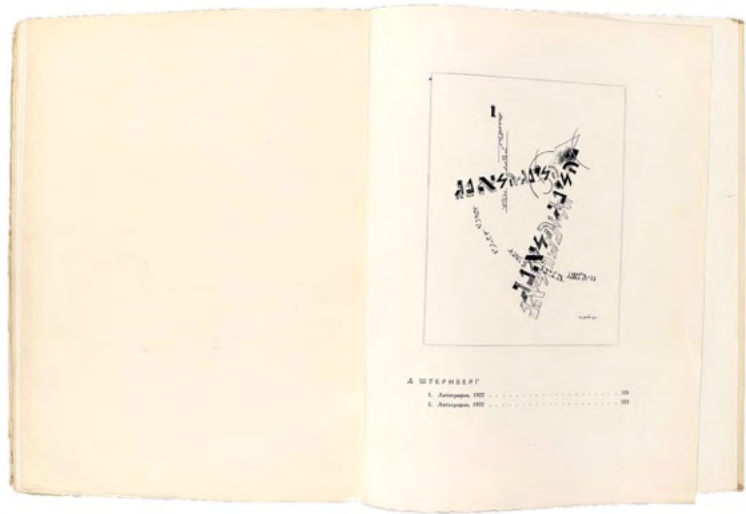


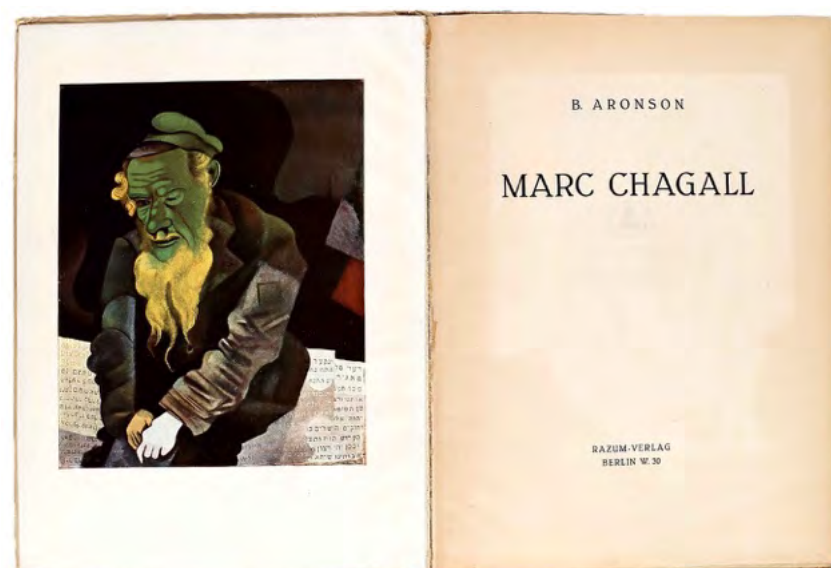
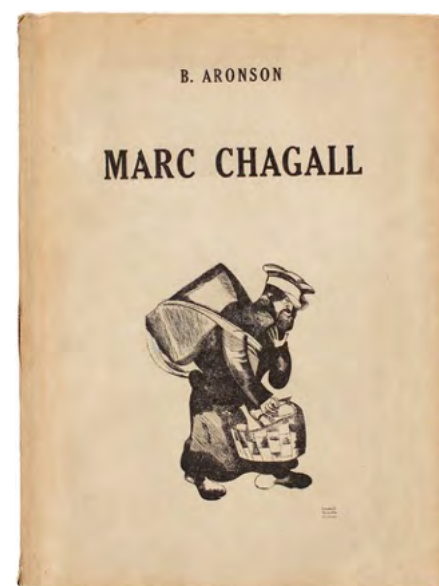
## BOOKS AND JOURNALS



Cover and select spreads from the book (in Russian):  
Boris Aronson, *Sovremennaiia evreiskaia grafika*  
(Modern Jewish Graphics)  
Berlin: Petropolis, 1924  
Lithograph  
12 7/8 x 10 1/4" (32.7 x 26 cm), closed







Cover and select spreads from the book (in German): Boris Aronson, *Marc Chagall*  
 Berlin: Razum- Petropolis-Verlag, 1924 (translated by Reinhold von Walter from the original Russian of 1923)  
 Lithograph and letterpress  
 10 x 7 1/2" (25.4 x 19.1 cm), closed



Untitled (children's book illustration), c. 1924  
 Ink, pencil, and gouache on paper  
 5 x 7" (12.7 x 17.8 cm)  
*Textbook for Yiddish School* 1924, repr. p. 36 (see opposite p. 121, in this volume)



Cover and spread from children's book (in Yiddish): Israel Steinbaum, *Leyenbikher far der Yidisher Shul* (Textbook for Yiddish School)  
 New York: Farlag Ertsyung, 1924  
 Letterpress  
 7 1/10 x 5 1/4 (18 x 13.5 cm), closed



Untitled (children's book illustrations), c. 1925  
 Each: India ink on cardboard  
 Each: 4 1/2 x 2" (11.4 x 5 cm), approx.  
*Hanukkah Gelt* 1925, repr. pp. 9, 10, 18, 23 (see pp. 124–125 in this volume),



Cover and select spreads from the book (in Yiddish): Sholem Aleichem, *Khanike Gelt: A Kinder Shpil in Dray Stsenes* (Hanukkah Gelt: A children's play in three acts)  
 New York: Matones / The Sholem Aleichem Folks Institute, 1925  
 Letterpress  
 9 x 6" (22.9 x 15.2 cm), closed





recto



verso



recto



verso



Untitled (children's book illustration), c. 1925  
Ink, pencil, and gouache on paper  
11 3/8 x 6" (28.9 x 15.2 cm)  
*A Tale with a Bear* 1925, related to illustration repr. p. 22 (see pp. 128–129 in this volume)

Untitled (children's book illustration), c. 1925  
Ink, pencil, and gouache on paper  
7 x 11 1/8" (17.8 x 28.3 cm)  
*A Tale with a Bear* 1925, repr. p. 27 (see pp. 128–129 in this volume)



Untitled (children's book illustration), c. 1925  
Ink, pencil, and gouache on paper  
5 1/8 x 7 1/2" (13 x 19.1 cm)

Untitled (children's book illustration), c. 1925  
Ink, pencil, and gouache on paper  
6 1/8 x 7" (15.5 x 17.8 cm)





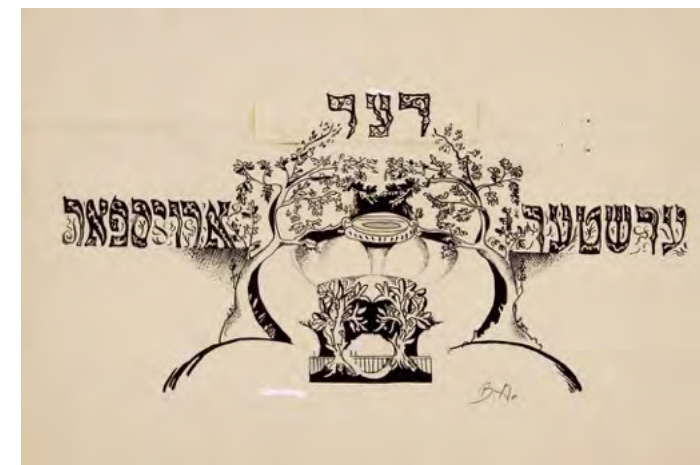
Untitled (illustration for *Sholem Aleichem*), c. 1926  
 Ink and gouache on card  
 9 7/8 x 8 3/4" (25.1 x 22.2 cm)  
*Sholem Aleichem* 1926, repr. p. 155 (see p. 132 in this volume)



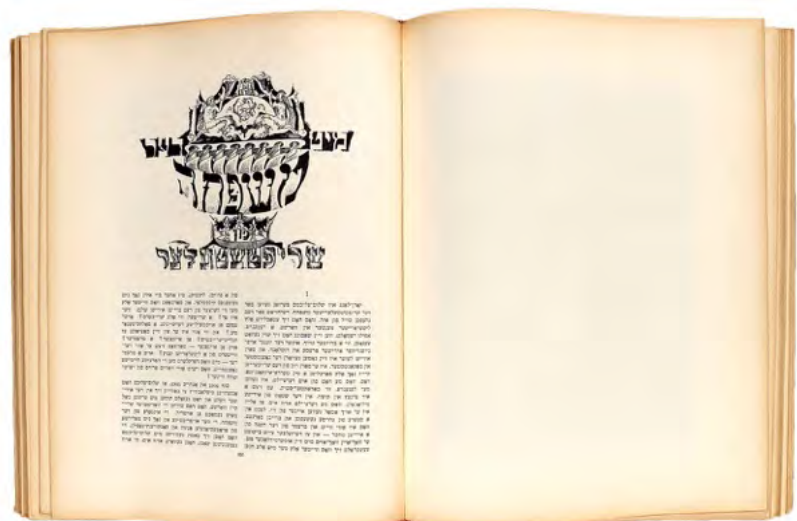
Untitled (illustration for *Sholem Aleichem*), c. 1926  
 Ink and gouache on paper  
 8 1/8 x 8 5/8" (20.6 x 21.9 cm), irreg.  
*Sholem Aleichem* 1926, repr. p. 47 (see p. 132 in this volume)



Untitled (illustration for *Sholem Aleichem*), c. 1926  
 Ink and gouache on card  
 8 7/8 x 11 7/8" (22.5 x 30.2 cm), irreg.  
*Sholem Aleichem* 1926, repr. p. 285 (see p. 133 in this volume)



Untitled (unused illustration for *Sholem Aleichem*), c. 1926  
 Ink and gouache with cut paper on paper  
 6 7/8 x 10 3/8" (17.5 x 26.4 cm)



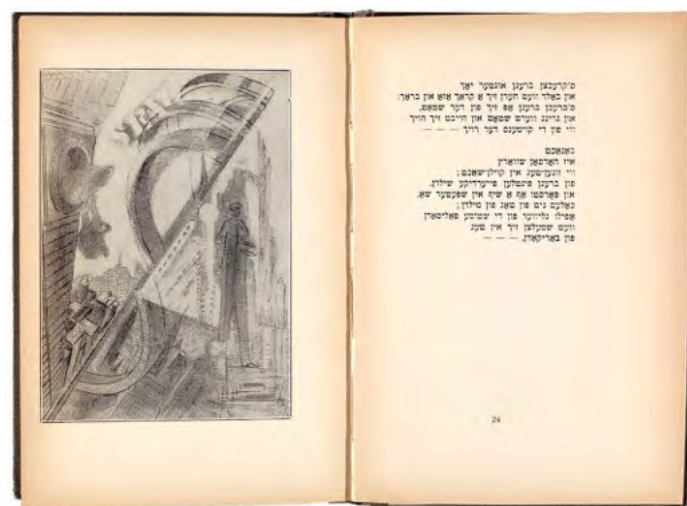
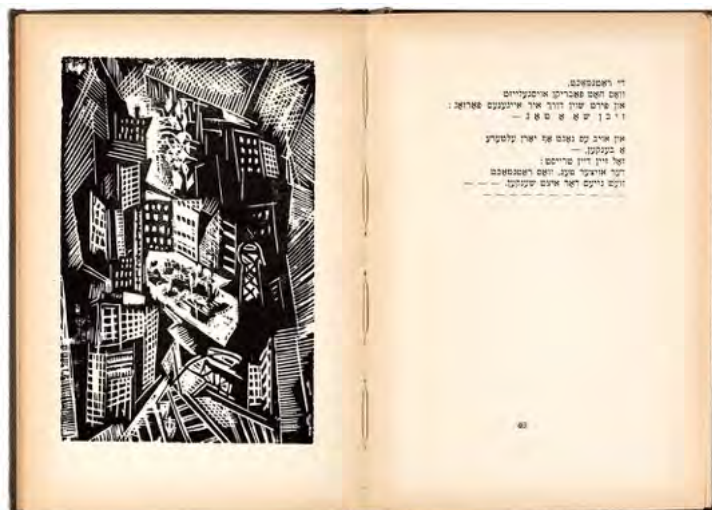
Cover and select spreads from the book (in Yiddish):  
 Yitskhak Dov Berkovitch (Yitskhak Dov Berkowitz), *Dos Sholem-Eleykhem Bukh* (The Sholem Aleichem Book),  
 New York: Sholem Aleichem Book Committee, 1926  
 Letterpress and lithograph  
 11 3/4 x 9" (29.8 x 22.9 cm), closed



Maquette for journal cover (in Yiddish): *Der Hammer* (The Hammer), c. 1926.  
Collage and ink on card  
20 x 14 7/8" (50.7 x 37.7 cm)



Journal cover (in Yiddish): *Der Hammer* (The Hammer), no. 2 (April 1926)  
Lithograph  
10 3/4 x 8 1/8" (27.3 x 20.6 cm)



Cover and select spreads from the book (in Yiddish): Betsalel Fridman (Bezalel Friedman), *Baloykhtene Vegn* (Enlightened Roads)  
New York: Yunyon Skver / Proletarian Writers' Organization Union Square, 1929  
Letterpress  
7 3/4 x 5 1/2" (19.7 x 14 cm), closed

## POSTERS



Film poster: *The Red Russia: The Waking Giant*, c. 1924

Lithograph

27 15/16 x 22 15/16" (71 x 58.3 cm)

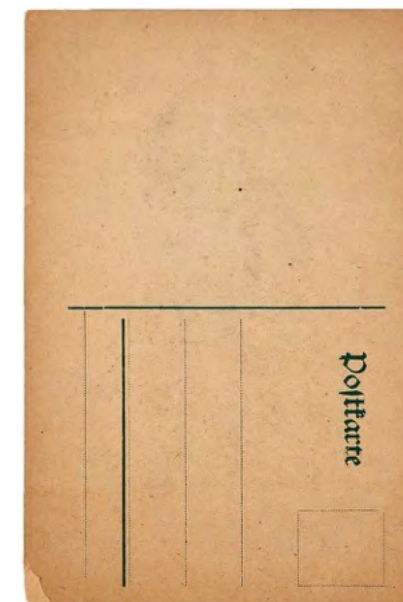
Note: This documentary film showing "six vivid reels of an industrial everyday life in Soviet Russia" was released in 1924. The American-led effort to industrialize the Siberian Kuzbass region coincided with New Economic Policy (NEP), in place from 1921 to 1927.



# THEATER



recto



verso

Postcard: Boris Aronson's costume for the dancer Baruch Agadati  
 (pseudonym of Boris Kaushansky, 1895–1976), c. 1923  
 Lithograph  
 5 7/8 x 4" (15 x 10 cm)



*Der letster sakhaki* (The Final Balance) by David Pinski (1872–1959). A four-act tragicomedy. Unser Theater, The Bronx, 1925

(Left) Stage design  
India ink on cardboard  
5 1/4 x 7 1/4" (13.3 x 18.4 cm)  
*Hanukkah Gelt* 1925, repr. p. 3 (see p. 124 in this volume)

(Right) Stage design  
India ink on cardboard  
5 1/4 x 7 1/4" (13.3 x 18.4 cm)  
*Hanukkah Gelt* 1925, repr. p. 22 (see p. 125 in this volume)



*Dos Zenteh Gebot, oder Lo Tachmod* (The Tenth Commandment, or Thou Shalt Not Covet), adaptation of an 1882 play by Avrom (Abraham) Goldfadden (1840–1908). Review. Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre (Second Avenue location), 1926

(Left) Stage design, Act 1, Scene 2: exterior of "The Little House in the Woods"  
 Gouache on paper  
 15 3/4 x 28" (40 x 71.1 cm)  
 Aronson Theater 1927, repr. p. 5 (see p. 59 in this volume)



(Right) Stage design, Act 1, Scene 2: interior "The Little House in the Woods"  
 Gouache on paper  
 20 3/4 x 25 3/4" (52.7 x 65.4 cm)  
 Aronson Theater 1927, repr. p. 5 (see p. 59 in this volume)



*Dos Zenteh Gebot, oder Lo Tachmod* (The Tenth Commandment, or Thou Shalt Not Covet), adaptation of an 1882 play by Avrom (Abraham) Goldfadden (1840–1908). Review. Maurice Schwartz's Yiddish Art Theatre (Second Avenue location), 1926

(Left) Costume design: "A Hypocrite"  
Gouache on paper  
21 1/4 x 14" (54 x 35.6 cm)

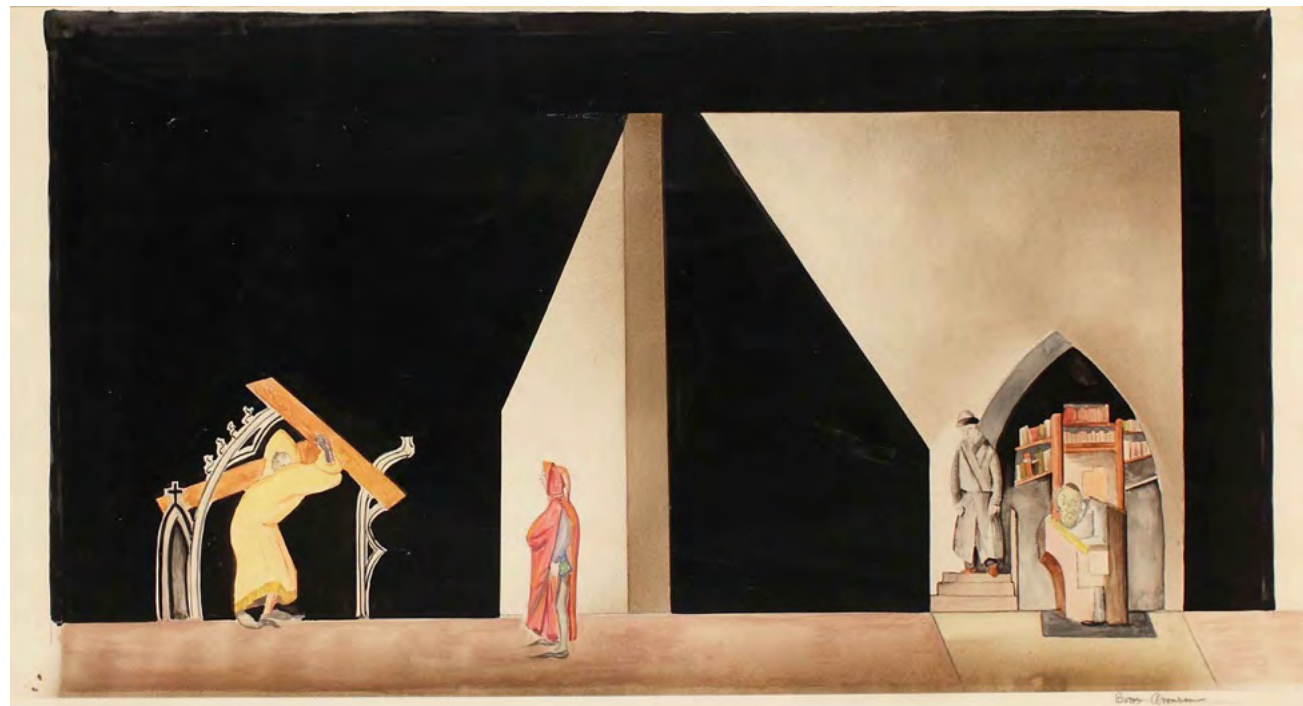
(Right) Costume design for the actor Joseph Buloff (1899–1985)  
Gouache and pencil on paper  
27 x 19" (68.6 x 48.3 cm)

(Opposite) Costume design: "Two Jews (Chorus)"  
Gouache with collage on cardboard  
17 3/4 x 12 3/4" (45.1 x 32.4 cm)



*Tragedie fun gornisht* (The Tragedy of Nothing), based on the play by Moisha Nadir (1885–1945). Produced by the Art Circle, Irving Place Theatre, 1927

Costume designs for "The Ghosts"  
 Gouache with collage on paper  
 17 x 20 1/4" (43.2 x 51.4 cm)  
 Aronson Theater 1927, repr. p. 28 (see p. 82 in this volume)



detail

*Der Golem* (The Golem) by Halpern Leivick (1888–1962). Unrealized, c. 1928

Stage design  
Gouache and pencil on paper  
14 1/8 x 22 3/8" (36 x 56 cm)

