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From the Gorbals to the Lower East Side: the cosmopolitanism of the Glasgow Jewish Institute Players

Paul Maloney and Adrienne Scullion

In December 1945 a non-professional, community theatre group in Glasgow gave the first British performances of *Morning Star*, a play by the New York playwright Sylvia Regan. Following the fortunes of a Jewish family in New York's Lower East Side from 1910 to 1931, *Morning Star* was first produced on Broadway in 1940, where it was considered a flop, having run for only ten weeks. In contrast, the Glasgow performances were popular and critically well received. As news of their success reached her in New York, Regan wrote to David Lewis, the secretary of the Glaswegian group, to send her congratulations:

Miss Margaret Sherman of the Dramatist's [sic] Play Service has forwarded to me your recent letter to her, together with the photographs of your Institute's production of *Morning Star*, and a newspaper review of the play. I can't tell you how delighted I was to have them. I gather it was a beautiful production, and I'm very gratified.¹

Introducing herself and her career to date – she had recently been working for Twentieth Century Fox Films and was now writing a musical comedy – Regan pointed out that the music for her current project had been composed by her husband, Abraham Ellstein, the composer of the two songs featured in *Morning Star*, 'whose name may be known by some in your club, for it is a well-known name in Jewish music. This is his first venture in the English field, but he has appeared in Glasgow many times in the past as composer, and conductor for Molly Picon, at your Empire Theatre.' From the austerity of post-war Scotland, Regan's easy references to the Empire, Glasgow's major variety theatre, her songwriter husband Abe Ellstein, and, above all, to Molly Picon, the great star of the American Jewish stage, who had played the leading role of Becky Felderman in the play's Broadway premiere, must have made for an instant rapport, shrinking the distance between Scotland and New York.

This essay is all about that distance and how the new, socially progressive plays of mid-century New York helped shape a modern Scottish theatre and a modern Scottish cultural identity. Superficially, the paper highlights the growing impression that, from a Scottish Jewish perspective, acutely conscious in the late 1940s of its place in the wider Jewish diaspora, the transatlantic divide that separated Glasgow and New York had never felt so negotiable. More significantly, it sees that

negotiation worked out through cultural production and, specifically, in the production choices of a theatre company, the Glasgow Jewish Institute Players (GJIP), led by and consisting of first and second generation immigrants.

Why does this matter? The transatlantic focus of the Players' work is significant because it marks the culmination of these theatre makers' use of a diverse repertoire as a means of exploring the different facets and possibilities of their immigrant identity. The committed cosmopolitanism of the group's choice of plays, which explored Jewish identity, history and heritage, while also confronting the realities – political and social – of what it meant to be Jewish in modern Britain and Scotland, is significant because it offers a new model of community theatre as culturally nuanced and repertoire-driven. Arguably part of a general cultural discourse around a preferred, and even mythologised broadly-left national identity, Scottish theatre in the mid-twentieth century has been characterised as populist, working class and politically driven, epitomised by the socialism of Glasgow Unity Theatre, of which the GJIP became a part. Here, we want to argue that a focus on the immigrant-led GJIP offers an alternative model of a theatre that focused on social and cultural identity, rather than class, and was eclectic, culturally cosmopolitan and repertoire-driven. In short, in highlighting the American and international repertoire of GJIP, we propose a new lens for modern Scottish theatre, unsettling some of the dominant – though, of course, still essential – narratives of class described, developed and championed by John Hill, Douglas Allen and others.²

This essay will, therefore, focus on the GJIP's contacts with American Jewish writers and the particular attraction and utility of their plays for Glasgow theatre makers and audiences in the 1940s and 1950s. Building on its examination of the diasporic links between Glasgow and New York, we will go on to use the example of *Morning Star* to explore briefly how the performance histories of plays could mirror wider development, both within Jewish immigrant communities and in their stage representations, in ways that serve to highlight the connections between New York, Glasgow and London. In the context of western societies' contemporary fear and mistrust of immigrants, this story of a previous experience of mass migration offers an important lesson of cultural integration and influence. The members of GJIP were young people who used culture – specifically theatre – to share an understanding of cultural diversity for the wider community. These first- and second-generation immigrants to Scotland found creative and radical ways to make visible their own lived experienced and the experience of oppressed and marginalised communities here, elsewhere in Europe and beyond. This essay reasserts this internationalism as a key trope in the formation of a modern Scottish theatre.

The Correspondence of Greenbaum and Regan

The Glasgow Jewish Institute Players, the company that produced *Morning Star*, was a remarkable community theatre group active from around 1936 to 1962. Highly innovative, the Players not only established an ambitious new model for non-professional theatre in Scotland but, as we propose, also helped redefine the identities and self-image of Jewish immigrant communities seeking to rationalise their place in British society during the inter- and post-war periods.

The group's founder and leader was Avrom Greenbaum (1903-1963), an inspirational director and playwright who, whilst always an amateur himself, played a vital role in the formation of a modern, professional theatre industry in Scotland. Greenbaum's background was typical of Glasgow's 14,000-strong Jewish immigrant community. Born in Isbitzer in Poland, he was one of five children of parents who came to Scotland when he was small. The family was intensely musical and, despite leaving school at fourteen to work in his father's tailoring business, Greenbaum continued his keen interest in theatre, literature and the arts, teaching himself to read in several languages. The GJIP was formed to take *The Bread of Affliction*, his own play about a family caught up in anti-Jewish pogroms in the Ukraine, to the popular and prestigious Scottish Community Drama Association competition, where it came second.³ Immediately picked up by other theatre groups, it was widely performed and published in the contemporary anthology, *The Best One-Act Plays of 1937*.⁴

Following their initial exchange of letters, Greenbaum began a warm correspondence with Sylvia Regan that lasted for many years, spanning a period in which GJIP increasingly focused on producing plays by the new generation of American Jewish writers, many in British or Scottish premieres. Although only one side of the correspondence survives – Regan's letters to Avrom Greenbaum are in the Scottish Theatre Archive in Glasgow University Library⁵ – they are packed with opinions and gossip on plays and the current state of theatre, giving a vivid impression of the pair's conversations. They are a modest but revealing primary source for understanding mid-century theatre in both the UK and USA.

Sylvia Regan herself (1908-2003) was born in New York and trained and worked as an actress on Broadway and in public relations for Orson Welles' Mercury Theatre, before turning to writing. A jobbing screenwriter and playwright, she knew all the leading American dramatists of the 1940s and 1950s – she was, for example, a childhood friend of Clifford Odets – and her letters offered

Greenbaum – and, now, the modern historian – a window onto the New York theatre world of the time.

While Greenbaum was an amateur theatre maker throughout his life, Regan's letters show the relationship as very much one of equals, born of a shared passion for theatre: Greenbaum offered detailed criticism of Regan's plays and shared his ideas for choices of repertoire, while Regan combined discussion of her writing and career with the latest New York theatre gossip. Although her letters cover a range of topical preoccupations – from the stifling impact of the American system of play production on new writing to concerns over the Hollywood Ten and the effect of the blacklist⁶ – Regan's high regard for Greenbaum's critical abilities is very evident. She writes of 'how much pleasure it gives me to be able to discuss the play [*Morning Star*] with someone who at this point knows it better than I do'⁷, and suggests that he might consider making a professional career in theatre:

I enjoyed your last letter so much. Digging as you do to the very roots for interpretation of a play gives you something so much over the average play director that I'm tempted to use some persuasion that you go into the theatre professionally. I'm sure you've thought about this a great deal, and come to your own conclusions about sacrificing security for a 'fling' in this direction. However, from what David [Lewis] has told me about you, and from your two letters to me, I am so impressed by your obvious talents, that I cannot help putting my 'oar' in. You certainly 'belong' to the theatre.⁸

Regan repeated the suggestion in 1949 when discussing plans for a forthcoming London production of *Morning Star* at the Embassy Theatre, with a view to a possible West End transfer:

Now, Avrom, when first this was broached to me it occurred to me that you would be the only one in Great Britain to stage the play for them. Who knows this play better than you?... You say you could not get away, but certainly three or four weeks is not such a very long time, is it? Could not arrangements be made to make this possible? Since I must answer [Oscar] Lewenstein's letter anyway, I shall make this suggestion. Mainly my reasons are selfish of course. I should feel so very optimistic about the outcome if you were to stage the play. However, don't you think this would be good for you too? I do. Hell, we've never met, but I have by this time formed very definite opinions of your talents, intelligence etc., etc. –. A long time ago I wrote you a long letter about spreading your wings, and one of the things

you ought to do, if it can be worked out at all, is come down to London and stage a play there. I just hope that it is not too late for you to do this production.⁹

Greenbaum evidently declined or prevaricated, choosing to remain in Glasgow with his family and their tailoring business. One of the reasons for his reluctance may have lain in the nature of the GJIP as a close-knit community and family group: indeed, for Greenbaum this was literally the case. The group's leading actress, Ida Schuster, was the sister of his [Greenbaum's] wife, Ray. Schuster's brother Leon was production manager for GJIP and, later, Glasgow Unity Theatre. Greenbaum's sister, Hilda, married Sam (later known as Samm) Hankin, one of the Players' leading character actors, whose brother, Harry Hankin, was another of the group's lead performers. In addition, Greenbaum's brother, Ben, was the pianist and music director for several productions and his niece, Edna Green, also played leading roles. Within the crucible of GJIP, these close ties reflect the shared cultural perspectives of an immigrant community, reaching out to new networks from a close core of common, shared values. Whilst some, not least Ida Schuster¹⁰, went on to have significant careers in professional theatre, for Greenbaum the Players was a model of collaborative community theatre making and a model of family and community engagement and participation, to which his pedagogic gifts and temperament were particularly suited and to which a professional career may have been anathema.

The Glasgow Jewish Institute Players

Greenbaum's group of amateur theatre makers took its name from the Glasgow Jewish Institute, a large building next to the synagogue in South Portland Street on the south side of Glasgow that was, in the 1930s, the social hub of the city's Jewish community. Formed in 1936, by 1940, and in the context of stringencies arising from World War II, GJIP had become one of the five left-leaning Glasgow groups that combined to form Glasgow Unity Theatre. It was a measure of Greenbaum's rising reputation that he was one of the new company's three producers.¹¹

The GJIP was important for Scottish theatre on several counts. Firstly, it set a new benchmark for Scottish community theatre, through high production standards that were the result of Greenbaum's distinctive working methods that included: extended rehearsal periods and detailed character-based work with his actors, which produced strong performances from performers with little previous acting experience; the integral use of music in his productions; and, close working collaborations with fine artists such as Joseph Ancill, Bet Low and Tom Macdonald, which led to a series of visually striking productions. The second distinctive aspect was the group's ambitious

repertoire, which reflected and explored different facets of immigrant identity, from plays exploring Jewish culture and history, such as Noah Elstein's *Israel in the Kitchen* and S Ansky's mystical Jewish classic *The Dybbuk*, to anti-fascist propaganda intended to counter the threat of Mosley's blackshirts, including pieces like Michael Goldberg's new masque *Hymn without Praise* (subtitled 'A Modern Masque with Music in Six Phases') and Ben Hecht's *Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto*¹², to European and modern classics, including challenging full-length dramas like Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna* and Garcia Lorca's *Blood Wedding*.

This repertoire explored different facets of Scottish Jewish identity, some looking backwards to Eastern European origins, some examining what it meant to be Jewish immigrants in modern British and Scottish society, and some presenting the works of American Jewish writers such as Clifford Odets, Irwin Shaw, Arthur Laurents, Arthur Miller and Sylvia Regan herself, that continued the diasporic journey across the Atlantic. It is the meanings and influences of this key aspect of the post-war development of the Players' repertoire that concerns this essay. Often presented in Scottish, British or even European premieres, this is a repertoire that brings together many of the themes that marked out Scottish Jewish identity: specific Jewish cultural references (both linguistic and thematic), narratives of anti-fascism, the shared experience of immigration, an emphasis on social justice and a progressive ideology, together with the performing legacy of Yiddish theatre.¹³

Writing on American Jewish theatre, and arguing for its inclusion in the Jewish literary tradition, Ellen Schiff makes the case for the authenticity of Jewish writing in non-exclusively Jewish languages, suggesting that to question its contribution 'undervalues the very symbiosis that animates Diaspora creativity', and sees these works as 'reflections of every dimension of Jewish identity and Jewish life in pluralistic societies'. She adds: 'What more appropriate medium can there be to express the dominant theme of modern Jewish creativity – the imperatives and challenges of dual identity – than the idiom of those countries where Jews live?'¹⁴ By examining the appeal of these American Jewish plays for Scottish Jewish theatre makers, we can suggest that a key part of the attraction lay in the shared cultural and religious identities and the experience of immigration that the communities depicted shared. By understanding a bit more about this repertoire in Scotland we can, perhaps, also say something new about the formation of an international perspective in Scottish theatre and something more about the formation of indigenous and diasporic identities in the post-war period.

The Players' Repertoire of American Jewish Plays

The appeal of these American plays to GJIP is epitomised by two of their most successful productions: Clifford Odets's *Awake and Sing!* is set in the Bronx in the 1930s; and, Sylvia Regan's *Morning Star* follows a Lower East Side family from 1910 to 1931, through domestic tragedy and wartime loss. The two productions were amongst the Glasgow company's most successful: *Awake and Sing!* was first produced in December 1940, firstly by the Players themselves, and then, the next month, as part of the launch of Glasgow Unity Theatre, while *Morning Star* became the Players' signature piece. Both plays portray Jewish immigrants in a new and multicultural city. While both seek to show the reality of that immigrant life, and feature formidable Jewish matriarchs, Odets's is a bleaker, more unrelenting vision, in which poverty and economic necessity results in characters who are broken and defeated. For all her 'Yiddishe mama' appeal, *Awake and Sing!*'s Bessie Berger is as hard as nails, so ground down and desensitised by poverty that she will do anything to preserve the family's economic interests. Accused of trying to appropriate her son's inheritance, she is unrepentant: she has worked all her life and never had anything for herself, dreaming is all very well but, as she puts it, 'here without a dollar you don't look the world in the eye. Talk from now to next year – this is life in America.' (Act 3)¹⁵ In contrast, *Morning Star*'s matriarch, Becky Felderman, is a warmer, far more sympathetic figure. Despite her share of tragedy – her husband dies young, she loses a daughter in the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and a son in World War I – she retains her idealism about America and what it can offer. While other, embittered characters sometimes make wry comparisons with their former life in Europe, Becky retains her unflagging gratitude for the opportunities it has afforded: giving the toast at her son Hymie's bar mitzvah, she insists they honour not a person but a place, America, 'because we know only good can come to us here!' (Act 1, scene 2)¹⁶

For their contemporary Scottish audiences both plays were recognisably about real life, with characters and situations that chimed with their own lived experiences: according to one Scottish reviewer the GJIP production of *Morning Star*, now being performed under the Glasgow Unity Theatre banner, was a 'play of Jewish family life that might as easily have had its setting in Glasgow's Gorbals – or Glasgow's Dennistoun, for that matter – as in New York's Bronx'.¹⁷ These plays spoke powerfully to Glasgow audiences – and to nascent Scottish playwrights developing their own dramaturgies and representations. In depicting life with all its hard knocks, family disputes, tragedies and setbacks, they were rehearsing and reliving the processes of immigration to the New World in ways that were useful and important for Glasgow's Jewish audiences, and deeply resonant for a wider working-class audience confronting inequalities of all kinds.

But for the Jewish community, in particular, the points of contact were more than thematic, they were also personal, familiar, and immediate. For all that Broadway itself was still exotic, America and New York were not remote or abstract destinations for Glasgow's theatre makers and audiences. Many in Glasgow's Jewish community of new first and second generation immigrants also had family members in America and these family networks were further consolidated through theatre networks: for instance, on the very day that Sylvia Regan received her first letter from Avrom Greenbaum she was phoned by his brother David, a musician living in New York, to arrange a meeting. And, whilst the written correspondence between Regan and Greenbaum flourished, their families too became friends and, over the years, these social ties were strengthened as various members of the Players and their families and friends visiting America called in on or stayed with the Regan-Ellsteins in New York. Underpinning and consolidating these personal connections, the Players' choice of these plays was far from random or coincidental but the result of a determined policy to seek out and secure permission to perform new works by American writers that they knew to be writing about parallel social and cultural experiences. In addition to soliciting Regan's insider perspectives and advice, members also subscribed to an American contemporary theatre magazine, *Theatre Arts*, to keep abreast of the latest theatre developments and were evidently prepared to lobby and negotiate with American agents to secure the rights to stage the new plays they thought would work for them: one of the Players, Samm Hankin, reportedly obtained permission for the group to produce the Scottish premiere of Irwin Shaw's *The Gentle People* when he was visiting New York by going on a local radio station to talk up the success of the Players' productions of *Awake and Sing* and *Morning Star*.¹⁸

These new American plays mirrored the new Scottish drama's thematic concern with the working-class, urban experience: in terms of a socialist or left world view these American plays have much in common with the new Scottish drama being developed under the aegis of Glasgow Unity Theatre, including Ena Lamont Stewart's *Starched Aprons* (1945) and *Men Should Weep* (1947) and Robert McLeish's *The Gorbals Story* (1946), as well as lesser-known plays such as James Barke's *The Night of the Big Blitz* (1944) and *When the Boys Come Home* (1945) and John Kincaid's *Song of Tomorrow* (1943). But, differently, they also deal directly with the question of integration, of what to expect in making your way in American society, in ways that had a particular immediacy for Scottish Jewish audiences. Part of this involved issues of identity, and the representation of a new Jewish American identity. In this the plays' Jewish identity – written by Jewish writers, describing the experience of Jewish characters, using identifiably Jewish linguistic and performative markers and acknowledging and addressing a Jewish audience – becomes more important, more provocative than their place in

broadly-left, working-class identities and representations. For example, one of the key conflicts in *Morning Star* involves the divisive character of Sadie, Becky's daughter, who, following early disappointment and an unhappy marriage, becomes a ruthless, jealous and vindictive businesswoman. In their final scene, Becky orders her daughter never to come to the house again. Greenbaum clearly questioned this uncompromising depiction because one of Regan's surviving letters explained that, for her, the character's purpose was precisely to confront negative images of Jews head on:

my choice of developing Sadie's story – this was not accidental but *deliberate*. [The characters] Esther, Hymie, even Fanny [Becky's other children] are extensions of Mama herself. They are 'good' people. Now, we know what people say of Jews. Need we be reminded that today, more than ever before, anti-Semitic feeling is intense. What do 'they' say about the Jew? That we are hard, grasping, etc. *All* of us receive this label from those who cannot understand that people are people regardless of color, creed, race – I wanted to show a Jewish girl who happened to have some of the qualities all Jews are supposed to have, but this happened to her because of *personal* frustrations, money, power, to compensate her for lack of other things. The first blow, her younger sister gets her man, the rest follows – She gets Harry too late, when she does [get] him he is a disappointment, and she recognises, as well, that he never really belongs to her. This would turn even a stronger woman sour, and it could even happen to a gentile. By justifying Sadie to some extent, perhaps people would realise that this is not necessarily the way Jews behave, but the way human beings behave. Mama, on the other hand, suffers more than Sadie, loses more (Esther, Hymie) but her basic character is stronger, she is never soured, and *this* could even happen to a Jew. No, we are only so bad as the gentile under the same set of circumstances, and the burden of proof that we are 'different' or worse, is on *them*. I guess all I wanted to 'say' in the play is to paint these portraits.¹⁹

These plays' view of life in working class America was far from rose-tinted. Part of their diasporic interest lies in pointing out the dangers of American society, which certainly offered opportunities for initiative and advancement through hard work – the 'American dream' – but also encompassed the danger of being exploited by unscrupulous employers, like Sadie, or other predatory elements. So, Irwin Shaw's *The Gentle People*, that GJIP produced in 1948, is set on the New York waterfront and concerns two working men, easy-going characters who are threatened by a gangster who tries to extort their life savings from them. Goff, the gangster, is a bully, a textbook fascist who believes that might is right: 'The superior people make the inferior people work for them. That is the law of

nature.' (Act 3, scene 3) But he has learnt this from his life experience 'on the brake-rods and bread-lines, in the pool-rooms and beer joints of the big cities of the United States of America' (Act 2, scene 4), a reminder that this society, no less than the old world, contains within it the seeds of fascism.

The Influence of Yiddish Theatre

While these new American plays had something of an educational function for Scottish Jewish audiences – inspiring them with the idealism that attached to American society, whilst also offering a cautionary warning against abuse by predatory forces – they also appealed to the cultural affinities and shared values of the Jewish diaspora, reinforcing the social and cultural networks beyond the national and economic. Although the Glaswegian company never performed in Yiddish, the parallel popular performance heritage of the Yiddish theatre and Scottish music hall suggests a resonant cultural crossover between the Players and Sylvia Regan's theatre world. As Regan's first letter mentioned, her husband Abe Ellstein had accompanied Molly Picon when she appeared at the Glasgow Empire, and *Morning Star* itself is suffused with references to vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley, for example Becky's daughter Fanny sings in a saloon and marries a struggling songwriter, Irving Tashman. Music in Regan's play has a symbolic role: Irving is emblematic of Becky's faith in the exuberance and optimism, indeed the basic goodness, of American culture, and, for all his brashness, she instantly approves of him. His catchy songs, which are central to *Morning Star*'s sense of period, were written by Ellstein who was one of the leading composers of 'Second Avenue', the shorthand term for New York's thriving Yiddish theatre district, and who composed everything from songs, musicals and operettas to cantorial choral music and opera. While Ellstein and Robert Sour's numbers for the play – 'Under a Painted Smile' and 'We'll Bring the Rue de la Paix! (Back to Old Broadway)' – were pitch-perfect evocations of the popular songs of the period, it was typical of the Jewish Institute Players that their production of *Morning Star* featured its own locally-authored song: 'Lennox Avenue' was composed by multi-talented cast member Harry Hankin, who played the role of Irving Tashman and whose own vaudevillian credentials included appearing in Scottish variety theatre with the hugely popular Glasgow comedian Tommy Morgan.²⁰ As explored in lots of scholarship about Scottish theatre, the externalised, direct-address performance style of music hall is fully embedded in Scottish dramaturgies and performing traditions, and finds an easy parallel with the popular aspects of Yiddish theatre's stylistic legacy.²¹

Indeed, in addition to this new repertoire, the reputation and influence of New York's Yiddish theatre was formally acknowledged by the Jewish Institute Players in 1952 when Greenbaum

produced Hy Kraft's play *Café Crown; or, A Comedy of the Yiddish Theatre*, a bitter sweet elegy to the fading world of Second Avenue. Based on the real-life Café Royale, the famous rendezvous of the Yiddish theatre industry in New York ('to the East Side what Sardi's and the Algonquin are to Broadway', as Kraft describes it²²), the play concerns the excitement around a great actor-manager, David Cole, who is returning to the stage after five years for his swansong production, *The Modern King Lear*.²³ The play abounds with sharply comic lines – such as the Yiddish playwright Aaron Toplitz's effusive tribute to Cole: 'Shakespeare for me is the greatest dramatist in the world, and with your improvements, even more so' (Act 3).²⁴ But the comedy is suffused with the pathos of the knowledge that this is a world that is changing and that the Yiddish theatre belongs to the past. In a poignant final scene, Cole acknowledges that the young actor who would previously have succeeded him in the leading roles must now follow a different future and leave his Yiddish company to take up a film contract. Cole, who has hitherto steadfastly refused to acknowledge a wider contemporary American drama, says:

I may be getting old, but not foolish. How can I deny that Broadway exists, and that fine actors play there? How can I close my eyes to Hollywood and say there is no art and no greatness? This [Yiddish theatre] is my theatre, my language, my audience. What right have I to demand your life and your sacrifice.

He follows with a final exhortation to his young colleague en route to California and, by extension, towards a new identity for the diaspora itself: 'Goodbye Freed', he says, 'you haven't much time, neither have I. Be an honor to your people, be a great American actor.' (Act 3.)

The real-life Café Royale and the fictional Café Crown were heightened meeting places for the Yiddish theatre industry certainly, but within the wider Jewish community were also understood to be a transatlantic hub of sorts – a place where visitors from around the world, even from Glasgow, could bump into a friend or a friend of a friend at the next table. An experience of Regan's from 1946 emphasises the extent to which, even in its final days, the Café Royale remained a meeting place for anyone and everyone in the community, and how effortlessly diasporic networks served to link the old and New Worlds:

Night before last I was at the Café Royal [sic] (the 'hangout' for the Yiddish theatrical profession from time immemorial) and was introduced to a young man... who had arrived in America that same morning, with instructions from Lewis to look me up and say hello. He

was sitting with some cousins of his and expressed his wish to look me up. By one of those amazing coincidences which can only happen in real life, he was overheard by a gentleman at the next table, who said, if you look straight ahead of you, there she is. So, he was brought over to my table and told me of having seen the performance [of *Morning Star*] some ten days or so ago, and I got all the news first hand. I was thrilled pink. Tell David Lewis he's a very charming young man, and again how really gratified I am about everything —.²⁵

But, again, these personal networks and connections are reinforced via repertoire and production choices in Scotland – and this Yiddish theatre world is also referenced in another of Sylvia Regan's plays produced by GJIP. *The Fifth Season* is a comedy about the commercial tailoring business which Regan wrote as a vehicle for Menasha Skulnik, the great box office star of the Second Avenue Yiddish theatre. Although Abe Ellstein had written eight Yiddish musicals for him, Skulnik was unknown to mainstream American audiences until he appeared in Regan's play, a farcical comedy about a clothing company trying to secure backing to produce a new collection.²⁶ The play gave Regan her only Broadway hit and was, again, a great success in its GJIP production in 1955. The rag-trade setting was hugely resonant for the Glasgow Jews: not only did tailoring play a central role in Scottish Jewish culture – Greenbaum himself was a master tailor in his family's bespoke tailoring business – but it only added to the shared resonances of Yiddish theatre and Scottish popular theatre and variety. In the Players' production, the Menasha Skulnik role of Max Pincus was played by Samm Hankin. As a boy in Glasgow Hankin had appeared in talent contests as a 'Hebrew comedian', whilst as a young man he worked in professional variety. He brought the full corresponding *chutzpah* of the Scottish Jewish stage to the part, so successfully on his first outing that he came out of acting retirement to reprise the role in 1969: different but equally authentic.²⁷

A New Jewish Theatre

But, the decline of the Yiddish stage – in fact as well as in its fictional representations – was also a metaphor for changes to older patterns of Jewish immigrant life on both sides of the Atlantic. Just as Second Avenue was to disappear so, in Britain, Greenbaum's Jewish world was also changing and dissipating. In Glasgow, the post-war migration of the Jewish community away from the Gorbals – away from the South Portland Street Synagogue – into the suburbs and even away from Scotland to London, to America or to Israel led to the decline and eventual closure of the social and cultural hub that had been the Jewish Institute. Just as the New York plays that had attracted the Players in the 1940s and 1950s told stories of that phase of a Jewish social journey, so these subsequent

disappearances of older patterns of British immigrant communities were echoed in their later productions of plays such as Wolf Mankowitz's *The Bespoke Overcoat* (1954) and Bernard Kops's *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* (1959), premiered in London but quickly produced in Glasgow too.

Depictions of this decline could sometimes prove sensitive, particularly in their shorthand portrayals of Jewish characters, confirming the role of theatre within cultural debates involving the Jewish community. The sensibility that applauded the cohesive, hard-fought-for family values of *Morning Star*, which received a new revival in 1959, balked at Greenbaum's realisation of the characters of Kops's vanishing world of Stepney Green. Several letters to the *Jewish Echo* complained about the GJIP's 1959 production of *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, one suggesting the play's weakness was compounded by 'a poor production completely lacking in subtlety with, at times a ludicrous emphasis on music-hall postures and vaudeville groupings, especially in the second act. Jewish characters are handled crudely and without sensitivity and are shown as the stereotypes accepted and believed in the non-Jewish world.'²⁸ This view – that the production fell back on lazy stereotypes – was reiterated by *The Scotsman*'s critic, T.M. Watson, who felt the problem lay with the play, writing that, 'The author is a Jew, which makes it surprising that he ignores Jewish life for some of his characters and goes to the yiddisher comedian of the music hall stage.'²⁹ There were several possible explanations for the criticism. One was that Greenbaum had misjudged the production, set in the modern Jewish East-End of London, and its use of the broad reflexive, larger-than-life Jewish archetypes which he felt the play called for. A second possibility, perhaps reinforced by the belief that Glasgow Jewish variety performers, such as Ike Freedman, had already gone a long way towards moving such representations on³⁰, was that Greenbaum had consciously sailed close to the wind, assuming that the piece, and his audience, could now take such portrayals in their stride, as part of the community's reclaiming or taking ownership of these depictions. In this reading Greenbaum had not allowed for the response of some sections of the community for whom these were still sensitive issues. In either case, the reason for the vehemence of the reaction was that, for some, the old 'Hebrew' variety stereotype – 'the yiddisher comedian of the music hall stage' as Watson termed it in his review – still carried a raft of negative associations.

And, as we might also say, too soon? The play itself had also provoked strong reactions elsewhere, causing Colin MacInnes to write rebutting a critic's charge that Kops's drama was a 'ghetto' play that was 'blowing on the embers of a fire which went out with the death of Israel Zangwill' by asserting that it did precisely the opposite:

The Hamlet of Stepney Green is a lament for the bewailing past; a respectful dirge for it, with a tear but with no regret; and a hymn of confident affirmation that young David [the Hamlet protagonist] and his Hava will go out into the *English* world, there to live out their lives as *English Jews'*.³¹

In Glasgow, the generally positive press reviews of Greenbaum's production, and the balance of the lively correspondence in the letters pages of the *Jewish Echo*, suggests that, for most, the production was a success: a preview article, that reported the cast breaking off from fraught rehearsals at the Institute to consume saveloy sandwiches and glasses of Russian tea, probably got it right in suggesting that Kops's 'was a powerful play which is bound to offend a lot of people'.³² But the response, and discussion that the play and Greenbaum's production provoked, also demonstrated the role of theatre within such evolving cultural debates, and the continuing vitality of the Jewish Institute Players as a creative force even in the last phase of their existence and reinforces a new narrative about Scottish theatre that connects meaningfully with other non-national cultural debates.

Across this post-war period, Regan's *Morning Star* was the Jewish Institute Players' award-winning signature play and it was presented regularly in several revivals until 1959. In addition, the London production that Regan had agonised over in letters to Greenbaum did also come to pass. Renamed *The Golden Door* (to avoid confusion with Emlyn Williams' similarly titled play *The Morning Star* (1941)) and revised from its original four acts to a three-act version³³, Regan's play received its British professional premiere in September 1949 in Leicester, before enjoying a 16-week run in London at the Embassy Theatre in Swiss Cottage.³⁴ The irony, from Greenbaum's perspective, was that the producers were his own Glasgow Unity Theatre, in this instance the short-lived London-based professional wing that had by now split away from the Glasgow-based amateur organisation.³⁵ The play was directed by his Glasgow Unity co-producer Robert Mitchell and featured a professional cast of London Jewish actors that included Alfie Bass, Leonard Sachs and was led by Lilly Kann, in the role of Becky Felderman, along with the famous Yiddish actor-manager Meier Tzelniker. Acting in his first English-language part, Tzelniker scored a great personal success in the comic role of Aaron Greenspan: the reviewer in *The Stage* found it 'difficult to identify the actor who thrilled us with his Yiddish Shylock' but welcomed to the Anglophone stage 'this great artist'; while *The Scotsman*, under the sub-heading 'Yiddish comedian's success', thought Tzelniker the 'chief joy of the play [...] a superbly diverting comedian, as fluent in gesture as he is voluble in

speech'.³⁶ The production toured to Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow in February 1950, advertised as 'the play that broke all records at London's Embassy Theatre'.³⁷

This professional production's success can be seen as part of a wider pattern of post-war cultural convergence. While Bernard Kops was concerned with problematizing Jewish identity, juxtaposing old and new at a time of generational transition for British Jewish communities, *The Golden Door*'s success offered an example of Jewish identity and representations being accommodated into the mainstream commercial stage via the theatres of the Howard and Wyndham circuit. In much the same way that Menasha Skulnik's success in *The Fifth Season* had allowed him to transcend the language limitations of Second Avenue to discover a new audience on Broadway, in this production of *The Golden Door* Tzelniker, closely associated with the last permanent Yiddish theatre company in London, the Grand Palais in Commercial Road, enjoyed a major 'crossover' success that enabled him to reach a new mainstream British theatre audience and to launch a career in film and television, albeit at the cost of switching to English language performance.³⁸ In both cases – the comedian Skulnik moving from Second Avenue to Broadway, and actor Tzelniker moving from the Grand Palais to be cast in a production influenced by the Scottish popular tradition – the Yiddish theatre technique, with its volubility and comic charisma, was carried over into and reframed for English language contexts. We can, perhaps, argue that these cross overs happened and resonated particularly deeply in those places where music hall and other popular theatre traditions were celebrated as especially significant in culturally and/or nationally described traditions.³⁹

Conclusion

In the mid-twentieth century, groups of working-class Jewish theatre makers on both sides of the Atlantic forged a connection that was based on the shared values and perspectives of being migrants. In Scotland, this was visible in a series of productions by Jewish immigrants living in Glasgow of plays by American Jewish writers living in New York. The special resonance of the plays' themes, narratives and representations were consolidated by the diasporic networks that linked the Jewish communities in the two countries. The links that developed between Glasgow and New York in the immediate post-war period suggest that this transatlantic link was the culmination – and, in many ways, the logical conclusion – of a studiedly cosmopolitan repertoire which had seen the GJIP progress from plays that processed issues of their Eastern European heritage and history, and the anti-Jewish persecution that had brought them to the UK, through to a fresh perspective on the possibilities for a new future in a New World, that is the purpose of their post-war American programme.

In her letters, Sylvia Regan described her theatre-making friends from Glasgow as her ‘mispocha’, a Yiddish word for an extended family that captures something of the particular warmth of these transatlantic relationship: ‘It’s the word you use in your letter and the very word I used to Hilda and Sam [Hankin] when they were here, for indeed that is how I feel about all of you in far-off Glasgow’.⁴⁰ But Greenbaum and the GJIP’s dialogue with American theatre went beyond the correspondence of Greenbaum and Regan, important though that was. The GJIP engaged in a dialogue with American writers through their theatre making, by staging their representations of Jewish identity in their work and by finding parallels with their own experiences in the stories and descriptions of what life is like for immigrants in America.

The GJIP not only engaged with American Jewish plays for their progressive ideas, and the sense of optimism and aspiration they seemed to embody in the post-war period, but also out of a real sense of shared community that came through their links to the American Jewish diaspora – a network of friendships and family ties that shrank the distance between the Old and the New Worlds and gave added resonance to the themes of American Jewish writers – the shared experiences of immigrant life, the practical reality of an urban working-class culture, of what was needed to get on in society, and the ways that shifting cultures were leading to the falling away of the older Yiddish world. Looking back to a repertoire of mainland Europe and forward to these new plays of a new America, developing their own original dramas and producing bold versions of new plays from the London theatre scene, the cultural outlook of Scotland’s Jewish theatre makers in the 1940s and 50s was cosmopolitan, comprising the total sum of their multiple identities: as first or second generation immigrants from eastern Europe; as Scots, the products of their upbringing in urban Glasgow; and, open too to the prospect of a new life in Israel or in America. But it was a particular affinity with work by new American Jewish playwrights, which really blossomed after the war, that resonated most strongly with Glasgow audiences and the city’s nascent theatre makers. The increasing transatlantic influence in the late 1940s was the final, culminating phase of GJIP cosmopolitanism, which had seen their repertoire progress from plays that celebrated their Jewish history and heritage in Europe, through explorations of the present-day role of immigrants in modern British and Scottish society, to the progressive new voices of American Jewish writers, whose depictions of the roles of immigrants offered the prospect of a new life in a country and society which had, after all, been built by immigrants.

A Coda to the Correspondence

Finally, after years of correspondence, Avrom Greenbaum and Sylvia Regan met in person in 1953, when Regan visited Britain and travelled to Glasgow, where she was feted by the members of the Jewish Institute Players.⁴¹

Research towards this essay was supported by a grant from the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow.

¹ Letter from Sylvia Regan to David Lewis, 6 December 1945, Scottish Theatre Archive (STA), Glasgow University Library, STA A.j. Box 7/5.

² See Douglas Allen, 'Culture and the Scottish labour movement', *Journal of the Scottish Labour History Society*, 14 (May 1980), pp. 30–9; and 'Glasgow Workers' Theatre Group and the methodology of theatre studies', *Theatre Quarterly*, 9.36 (1980), pp. 45–54; Bill Findlay, ed., *Scottish People's Theatre: Plays by Glasgow Unity* (Glasgow: Association of Scottish Literary Studies 2008); John Hill, 'Towards a Scottish people's theatre: the rise and fall of Glasgow Unity', *Theatre Quarterly*, 7.27 (1977), pp. 61–70; 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: the search for a "Scottish People's Theatre"', *New Edinburgh Review*, 40 (1978), pp. 27–31; and "Scotland doesnae mean much tae Glesca": some notes on *The Gorbals Story*', in Colin McArthur (ed.), *Scotch Reels: Scotland in Cinema and Television* (London: BFI, 1982), pp. 100–11; Linda Mackenney, *The Activities of Popular Dramatists and Drama Groups in Scotland, 1900-1952* (Lewiston, NY, Queenston, Ont., Lampeter, UK: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000); and, Adrienne Scullion, 'Glasgow Unity Theatre: the necessary contradictions of Scottish political theatre', *Twentieth Century British History* 13.3 (2002), pp. 215–52.

³ The Scottish Community Drama Association coordinated the amateur drama competitions that were such a vital element of Scotland's theatre culture in the mid-twentieth-century. In its mid-century heyday, its cultural project and values were equivalent to those of the British Drama League.

⁴ J.W. Marriott, ed., *The Best One-Act Plays of 1937* (London: G.G. Harrap, 1938).

⁵ The letters from Sylvia Regan to Avrom Greenbaum are part of a wider archive of paper-based materials relating to the Glasgow Jewish Institute Players held as part of the Scottish Theatre Archive (STA) in University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections (STA A.j.-A.p.).

⁶ Letters from Regan to Greenbaum, 29 September 1947 and 16 March 1947 respectively (STA A.j. Box 7/5).

⁷ This comment comes in a letter in which Regan responds to a series of points Greenbaum has raised regarding *Morning Star*'s structure and ideas for possible cuts to reduce its length. Supplying draft dialogue sections incorporating some of his suggestions, Regan's letter includes discussion of characters and defence of her approach to the Fanny/Irving relationship. Letter from Regan to Greenbaum, 14 December 1946 (STA A.j. Box 7/5).

⁸ Letter from Regan to Greenbaum, 11 March [1946?] (STA A.j. Box 7/5).

⁹ Letter from Regan to Greenbaum, 29 July 1949 (STA A.j. Box 7/5).

¹⁰ For a brief introduction to Schuster's career, see Jackie McGlone, 'Forever young and maternally yours', *Glasgow Herald* 12 December 1992,

<http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12590021.Forever_young_and_maternally_yours/>. Schuster also

wrote and presented a video documentary *A Short History of the Glasgow Jewish Institute Players* (Scottish Jewish Archives Centre Audio Visual Library, VID-DVD-0020, 1996).

¹¹ Glasgow Unity Theatre brought together the Clarion Players, the Glasgow Corporation Transport Players, the Glasgow Players (an evolution of the Scottish College Players), Glasgow Workers' Theatre Group and the Glasgow Jewish Institute Players. The three founding directors were Donald McBean, Robert Mitchell and Greenbaum.

¹² *The Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto* was a section, episode 3, of Hecht's *We Will Never Die*, a huge memorial pageant dedicated to the two million Jewish dead of Europe staged at Madison Square Gardens, New York, on 9 March 1943. Directed by Moss Hart, with music by Kurt Weill, the all-star cast of narrators included Paul Muni, Edward G Robinson and Claude Raines. See STA A.k.36.

¹³ The new American plays presented by GJIP were:

1939	Clifford Odets, <i>Till the Day I Die</i> [one act drama]
1940	Clifford Odets, <i>Awake and Sing!</i> *
1942	Fay Elhert, <i>The Undercurrent</i> [one act]
1944	Ben Hecht, <i>Battle of the Warsaw Ghetto</i> [one act]
1945	Sylvia Regan, <i>Morning Star</i> * (billed as 'For the first time in Great Britain')
1946	Clifford Odets, <i>Rocket to the Moon</i> * Arthur Laurents, <i>Home of the Brave</i> (billed as European premiere)
1948	Irwin Shaw, <i>The Gentle People</i> , Norman Krasna, <i>Dear Ruth</i> Tennessee Williams, <i>The Long Goodbye</i> [one act] (billed as 'First performance in Europe') Thornton Wilder, <i>Love and How to Cure It</i> [one act]
1950	Elma Ehrlich Levinger, <i>The Tenth Man</i> [one act drama]
1951	Hy Kraft, <i>Cafe Crown</i>
1953	Arthur Miller, <i>All My Sons</i> (billed as 'For the first time in Scotland')
1954	Armand L. Zimmermann, <i>The Dream</i> [one act]
1955	Clifford Odets, <i>Winter Journey</i> (UK title for <i>The Country Girl</i>) Sylvia Regan, <i>The Fifth Season</i>
1956	Tennessee Williams, <i>The Glass Menagerie</i>
1957	Arthur Miller, <i>Death of a Salesman</i> Caroline Francke, <i>Father of the Bride</i>
1959	Sylvia Regan, <i>Morning Star</i>

*Plays presented through Glasgow Unity Theatre.

¹⁴ Ellen Schiff, 'Introduction', *Awake and Singing! Six Great American Jewish Plays* (Second edition; New York: Applause, 2004), p. 18.

¹⁵ Clifford Odets, *Awake and Sing*, in Odets, *Waiting for Lefty and Other Plays* (New York: Grove Press, [1993?]), p. 95.

¹⁶ Regan, *Morning Star*, in Schiff (ed.), *Awake and Singing!* (2004), p. 277.

¹⁷ Cutting, *Evening Times*, 7 December 1945: Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, Box CUL.AGP0003.

¹⁸ Unidentified press cutting, 'Curtain rises on this play after a two-year struggle': Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, Box CUL.AGP0003.

¹⁹ Letter from Regan to Greenbaum, 28 December 1945: STA A.j. Box 7/5.

²⁰ *Morning Star* programme: STA A.r. Box 11/15.

²¹ For example: Alasdair Cameron, 'How popular is popular? Some thoughts on the definitions of Scottish theatre traditions', *Chapman*, 46 (1986–7), 31-4; Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain, 1968–1990: The Case of 7:84 (Scotland)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Paul Maloney, *Scotland and the Music Hall, 1850-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Randall Stevenson, 'Scottish theatre, 1950-1980', *The History of Scottish Literature, Volume 4: The Twentieth Century* ed. Cairns Craig (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), pp. 349-67.

²² Kraft's description in his notes to the play continues: 'It [Café Crown] is the meeting and eating place for the Yiddish actors and actresses; the last cultural rendezvous of the Jewish American, the country store of New York's ghetto'. Playscript of *Café Crown*: STA A.k. 14, p. 1.

²³ While David Cole was widely assumed to be based on Joseph Adler, Kraft later admitted that Lester Freed, the young American-born Yiddish theatre actor, was based on Paul Muni, the well-known film actor who had begun his career on the Yiddish stage and as a boy had performed in Yiddish theatre in London. Hy Kraft, *On My Way To The Theater* (New York, London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 113.

²⁴ Prompt copy and playscript of *Café Crown*: STA A.k. 13 and STA A.k. 14, p.76.

²⁵ Letter from Regan to Greenbaum, 14 December 1946: STA A.j. Box 7/5.

²⁶ As a young woman, Regan had worked part-time in a New York garment factory:

cutting loose threads off the finished coats and suits [...] I was introduced to the world of *The Fifth Season*. The models, the buyers, the salesmen, the production men, the shoestrings and the big shots. A world full of color, of warmth and vitality. Is Seventh Avenue so different from Schubert Alley? Even the vocabulary is the same. A good garment has a long run and there are always buyers for the right merchandise.

Sylvia Regan, 'Suited to the season and tailor-made for a star', *Theatre Arts* (July 1954), pp. 32-3.

²⁷ Following Greenbaum's death in 1963, the Players were renamed in his honour. Material on the successor group, the Avrom Greenbaum Players (1963-c. late 1980s), is held by the Scottish Jewish Archives Centre in Glasgow.

²⁸ Letter from Charles S. Lewis, *Jewish Echo*, 4 December 1959: cuttings of letters to the *Jewish Echo* regarding *The Hamlet of Stepney Green*, 4, 11, 18, 20, 25 December 1959: Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, Box GUL AGP.

²⁹ Watson, himself a well-known popular dramatist, was mystified by the play's whimsically updated Shakespearean premise, but otherwise found much to admire in the writing's 'beautiful character drawing', which he celebrated as 'the real thing'. T.M. Watson, 'You can rely on the Jews', *The Scotsman*, 3 December 1959: Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, Box GUL AGP.

³⁰ Paul Maloney, 'Wha's like us? Ethnic representation in music hall and popular theatre and the remaking of urban Scottish society', in *From Tartan to Tartanry: Scottish Culture, History and Myth* ed. Ian Brown (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 129-50.

³¹ Colin MacInnes, ‘Hamlet and the Ghetto’, in *England, Half English* (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 81.

³² Cutting, ‘The “Hamlet” of S Portland St’, [Jewish Echo?], 20 October 1959: Scottish Jewish Archives Centre, Box CUL.AGP0003.

³³ Questions around the running time of the original four-act version, and the possibility of a three-act structure were discussed in Regan’s letters of 15 July 1946 and, most significantly, 14 December 1946, where she supplied dialogue sections responding to some of Greenbaum’s suggestions for cuts. Letter from Regan to Greenbaum, 14 December 1946 (STA A.j. Box 7/5).

³⁴ See *The Stage* 15 September 1949; and, *The Scotsman* 23 September 1949 and 20 January 1950.

³⁵ The production was produced by Glasgow Unity Theatre Society Ltd., in association with Envoy Productions. Colin Chambers, *The Story of Unity Theatre* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1989), p. 283.

³⁶ *The Stage*, 15 September 1949; *The Scotsman*, 23 September 1949.

³⁷ In the Scottish performances, the role of Hymie as a young man was played by ‘Warren Misell’, the actor better known as Warren Mitchell.

³⁸ See David Mazower, *Yiddish Theatre in London* (London: Museum of the Jewish East End, 1987).

³⁹ A BBC television production of *The Golden Door* was broadcast on 3 April 1951. *Morning Star* itself received a number of international productions, including performances in Spanish, Hebrew and Yiddish, before sinking into relative obscurity until an acclaimed revival by Chicago’s Steppenwolf Theatre in 1999 led to a critical reappraisal and inspired an opera commissioned by Chicago Lyric Opera. J.P. Wearing, *The London Stage 1940-1949: A Calendar of Productions, Performers, and Personnel* (Second edition; Lanham, et al: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014), p. 485; Advertisement, *Aberdeen Press & Journal*, 15 March 1950; William Hawes, *Live Television Drama, 1946-51* (Jefferson, NC: McFarlane, 2001), p. 172.

⁴⁰ Letter from Regan to Greenbaum, 29 September 1947: STA A.j. Box 7/5.

⁴¹ The Glasgow Jewish Institute Players’ association with *Morning Star* remains strong: in her introduction to the play in her influential anthology of Jewish American plays, *Awake and Singing!*, Ellen Schiff’s mentions the Glasgow production, identified as its European premiere, as representing a significant part of the play’s performance history. Schiff, *Awake and Singing!*, pp. 249-50.

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