

The Old-Fashioned Purim Spiel

By MORDECAI WAXMAN

The Jewish theatre had its roots in the Purim-spiel, that bit of tomfoolery that children and grownups will indulge in on March 24. The origins of the Purim-spiel are interestingly related in the following article by Mordecai Waxman, a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

—THE EDITOR

The walls of the ghetto three and four centuries ago were high and within them all was cramped and mean. Yet, periodically the troubled lives of its inhabitants were purged by a great cathartic of laughter and jollity. Simchas Torah and Hannukah and Purim annually brought with them joy and gladness and relief from care.

Of the three festivals, Purim was particularly dedicated to mirth. The role which the Fool's Carnival played in the medieval Christian world, was filled in the universe of the medieval Jew by the fourteenth of Adar. For on Purim the Jew was free—free from inhibitions, free from the general severity of Jewish life, free to shout, to dance, to tipple and to masquerade. More than that, these actions were almost specifically enjoined upon him. "On Purim," the Rabbis said, "one should drink so much that he will not be able to recognize the error in saying: 'Blessed be Haman and cursed be Mordecai.'" It was good doctrine, which was often cheerfully obeyed.

It was above all, however, in public celebration that the spirit of the day was expressed. Since, as the popular saying had it, "Purim is no more a holiday than kadachas is an ailment," there were no religious restrictions attaching to the day.

The crowd would gather in the narrow streets of the ghetto to select the Purim-king, some clever and sharp-tongued individual who could serve as master of the revels. In the tradition of the Christian carnival king, the King of Fools, he and his followers spared no one in their pranks and in their jests. The rabbis and the community leaders, the prayers and the Talmud all served equally as fodder for their wit. In the throng that followed at their heels there were many in masquerade—men attired as women and women as men. The costume was lent all the more savor by the fact that it was ordinarily forbidden by law, and by the probability that it irked the staid graybeards who stood on the sidelines looking down their noses in disapproval.

The climax of the festival was yet to come, however. It was heralded by the joyous burning of Haman in effigy and marked finally by the presentation of a drama glorifying the day.

Early Jewish Drama

In point of interest and significance this, the Purim-spiel, was one of the most vital features of Purim, for it was the undoubted progenitor of the Jewish drama. Moreover, it is the guilty and shame-faced grandsire of the host of holiday plays which periodically people Sunday school stages with "Spirits of Purim" and "Spirits of Pesach."

It is strange indeed that the Jews, who as a people manifested a rare literary talent for a period of several thousand years, developed a dramatic form only at the conclusion of the seventeenth century. It is true that there are some who claim to see in the Song of Songs and the Book of Job evidences of dramatic forms, yet that is by no means certain, nor even probable. Unquestionably the post-Biblical period manifests no traces of that art until the end of the seventeenth century.

The reason may well be found

in the fact that while the Jews early became acquainted with the drama in its later Greek and Roman forms, they frequently found it in association with immorality, idolatry and irreverence. The aversion to the theater that resulted was expressed throughout Talmudic and later Rabbinic literature. In fact, there is a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud offering thanks to the Lord that "thou hast placed my portion among those who sit in the House of Learning . . . and didst not cast my lot among those who frequent theatres and circuses. . . . I wait and they wait. I to inherit paradise; they the pit of destruction."

Sixteen centuries of European life, however, effected some change in the Jewish attitude toward the theater and finally led to a Jewish dramatic literature.

Jewish Jestors

As is the case with all folk literature, the immediate origins of the Purim-spiel are satisfyingly mysterious. They may perhaps ultimately be traced to the Spielmann—those actor-minstrels who wandered through Germany in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, affording amusement for a price.

Since Jews were equally partial to amusement, there soon came into being a group of Jewish professional entertainers who were known by the rather uncomplimentary name of "Narren" (fools). At a later date, due either to their increased strength or to the improvement in the level of the entertainment they afforded, they came to be known as "Badhanim" (men who amuse). Their media throughout their long history, which extends into the last century, were songs and impersonations, parodies and jests; their language was Judaco-German.

It was some centuries before the oral entertainment of the Badhanim was supplemented by set plays which were printed and circulated far and wide and acted over and over again. But, by the end of the seventeenth century plays built around Biblical themes, and particularly about that of the Megillah, had begun to appear in profusion. One of the most famous of them was the Ahasuerus-spiel which was acted in Frankfurt in 1708. It was a notable burlesque of the Purim story, done in a parody vein and rounded out with questionable and censurable jests. It immediately invoked the wrath of the elders of the Frankfurt community who banned it and condemned it to be burned.

Despite official disapproval, or perhaps because of it, the play continued to enjoy a wide popularity among Jewish communities and it was re-enacted time and again. Moreover, it sold a considerable number of printed copies. Indeed, we have a copy of one of the advertisements exhorting people to purchase the book. "A beautiful new Ahasuerus-spiel composed with all possible art, never in all its lifetime will another be made so nicely with beautiful lamentations in rhyme. We hope that whoever will buy it will not regret his expenditure; because God has commanded us to be merry on Purim, therefore we made this Ahasuerus-play nice and beautiful. Therefore, also you householders and boys come quickly and buy from me this

play; you will not regret the cost. If you read it, you will find that you have value for your money."

"Pickleherring"

The success of the Ahasuerus-spiel was the cue for a host of other plays to be written upon the same theme. Meanwhile, however, some enterprising spirits were discovering the dramatic possibilities of other sections of the Bible. In 1711 "David and Goliath" enjoyed its first presentation in the city of Frankfurt. It was immediately popular, but, a nomalously enough, that was responsible for its very short run. So great were the crowds that the police, acting for the public safety, closed it at the end of a few days. Like most of the Purim plays it too aspired to the comic and therefore introduced a "gagman" into the script. He and his jests attained a vast popularity, but alas, his reign was short-lived. Two years later a character named Pickleherring was introduced to the Jewish public in a play called "The Sale of Joseph" and he immediately arrogated to himself the position of the leading comic character in the cycle of Purim plays.

So far as literary quality went the Purim plays were distinctly uneven and the acting very probably was quite poor. Since the theatrical season was limited to a few days in the year, there was little room for a group of professional actors. However, there must have been several semi-professional groups, for we know that some plays were presented by the same casts in several different cities. Moreover, we know that it was often customary to make a collection at the end of the performance. Indeed, one drama added to the miracles connected with Purim by restoring Haman of the play to life so that he might lead in the plea for donations. The amateur theater was probably represented during this period by the students of the yeshivah, who were the first to present such classics as "The Sale of Joseph" and "Akta Esther."

The Purim-spiel is now a thing of the past. In common with a great many Purim customs it went out of fashion during the last century, though occasional modest efforts are still encountered locally. But it left its mark upon Jewish life through its heirs, the Yiddish and Hebrew drama. The mark was not a great one for, as a form of art, the Purim-spiel was crude and primitive. In retrospect and evaluation the remark of Israel Abrahams about the Jewish drama is probably still valid. "Whatever the mission of Israel may be, it is obvious that the production of dramatic masterpieces was no portion of it."