

A Yiddish Celebration With Buenos Aires Style

by Roberto Loiederman, Contributing Writer

In the 1950s, a few years after Yiddish culture in Europe had been decimated, there was a bustling metropolis in the Western Hemisphere that still had a thriving Yiddish culture.

This city had a number of schools in which classes were taught in Yiddish; there was an active theatrical scene, a couple of daily newspapers, books, literary magazines, songs and musicals — all in Yiddish. There were Yiddish comedians, as well as cafes where Yiddish-speakers gathered to chat and drink tea with a *bissel* (little) lemon. And there were vacation resorts, a few hours' drive from the city, where Yiddish was regularly heard.

New York? Montreal? Actually, Buenos Aires.

Did you know, for example, that Pesach Burstein and his wife, Lillian Lux, arguably the most prominent couple in Yiddish theater, first toured Argentina in 1938, lived in Buenos Aires in the 1950s and regularly performed there in Yiddish, along with their children?

That vibrant Argentine-Yiddish culture — which existed through much of the 20th century — will be celebrated and remembered on Saturday, Oct. 20, at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (REDCAT). Co-presented by Yiddishkayt Los Angeles, there will be two performances of “Una Noche Idishe: An Argentine Yiddish Experience” at 8:30 and 10:30 p.m., the late-night second show well-suited for Argentines, who — if they were living in South America — would be starting to eat dinner at that time.

Music will be provided by Klezmer Juice, an ensemble featuring the heartbreakingly soulful clarinet stylings of Gustavo Bulgach, an Argentine Jew who's lived in Los Angeles for the last 15 years. (If you saw “The Wedding Crashers” — remember a Jewish wedding early in the movie? — then you saw Klezmer Juice in action.)

Una Noche Idishe will also feature Argentine singer Divina Gloria. Like a Yiddish Judy Garland, Gloria will be the musical nostalgia guide, rendering songs that will undoubtedly touch the hearts of those who have personal memories of Yiddish life in Argentina. There are links between Argentine-Yiddish life and tango, and the show includes a dance performance by Schwee Miguel and his Tango Ganas troupe.

Aaron Paley, president of Community Arts Resources and founder and chair of Yiddishkayt Los Angeles, said he had known about Argentine Yiddish culture for a long time and wanted to highlight it. In addition to dance, song and music, the evening will include old photos and film clips showing the community's history.

“It will be a collage of Yiddish Buenos Aires,” Paley said. “A deeply moving experience. The show will be in English, Spanish and Yiddish. No one will have any trouble understanding it.” Paley said there will also be a raffle: first prize is a trip for two to Buenos Aires.

“In some ways,” Bulgach said, “the show

is a tribute to the singer Divina Gloria. Her father was a well-known chazzan in Buenos Aires, and she herself performed in the Yiddish theater when she was a child.”

Bulgach said that for him, it's been a circuitous journey back to his ethnic musical roots. His grandparents left Russia for Argentina in the 1920s. He was brought up with Jewish music but rarely played it professionally, either in Argentina or the United States. Instead, he made a living as a studio sax and clarinet man and regularly played at the House of Blues, backing up well-known acts like Muddy Waters and Little Richard.

The transformative moment came when he was asked to perform klezmer music at a



Argentine singer Divina Gloria guides fans through Yiddish music nostalgia

friend's wedding. While playing, he suddenly felt connected to his Yiddish roots, his musical heritage. He has dedicated himself to klezmer music ever since.

“It was as if I gave in to my real nature,” Bulgach said. “Klezmer has been my road back to the Judaism I was born with and grew up with in Argentina. I play it every day now, and I play it professionally everywhere, from nursing homes to shuls to festivals.”

Bulgach said that he's deeply aware of the fact that Yiddishkayt has largely disappeared in Argentina, as well as everywhere else.

“I want to help rescue that tradition and culture,” Bulgach said. “This music has given me a sense of mission and purpose. I made a commitment to myself to make this my music and to play it so that others make it *their* music. If it weren't for those of us in my generation who are determined to continue this tradition, it would disappear altogether.”

Bulgach said that since the music comes from his heart, it touches the hearts of those who hear it, who often cry with nostalgia. “One time, when I was doing a show,” Bulgach said, “someone asked me to play something totally different so she could stop crying.”

For more information on “Una Noche Idishe: An Argentine Yiddish Experience,” go to jewishjournal.com. ●