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Film

BY J. HOBERMAN

CLOSE-UP

THE LIVING ORPHAN
Directed by Joseph Seiden
January 15, 19, and 22, Walter Reade

Nestled among the docs and family dramas of this year's Jewish Film Festival, the 1939 Yiddish talkie known as *The Living Orphan* is both a recording of a vanished landscape—Lower East Side streets, Second Avenue marquees, Romanian-style wine cellars—and a particular sensibility, as well as a two-hankie backstage domestic saga. In the opening scene, a pomaded radio singer croons his trademark ballad "Mayn Zundele" ("My Little Boy"). Its fondest wish—"May your pain be mine"—is abundantly fulfilled as his wife leaves their infant to seek her own fortune on the stage. Crudely made, and lovingly restored by the National Center for Jewish Film, *The Living Orphan* is a musical weepie in which the separated showbiz couple spends the next dozen years competing for their child's affections. The parents are impersonated—with maximum temperament—by the Polish Yiddish actors Gustav Berger and Fania Rubina, a real-life couple who happened to be in New York in early 1939. Their adored *zundele* is played by Jerry Rosenberg, a 13-year-old son of the Bronx and subsequent Tin Pan Alley prodigy who, as Jerry Ross, would co-write *The Pajama Game* and *Damn Yankees* before succumbing to lung disease at 29.

The Yiddish term for *The Living Orphan* is *shund* (trash), and it's a generous example, offering something for everyone. Attractions include an orchestral tribute to America's "Eden on Earth," complete with battleship montage; the resident schlemiel is a crypto commie who jokes about Karl Marx and birth control. And then there is the sour, unintentional shund humor. No sooner has the footloose diva finished wowing the Bialystoker Home for the Aged with "Give Me Back My Child" than she is unexpectedly assaulted by her long-estranged mother-in-law. Pleased not to see "the one who made [her] son unhappy," the crone thanks God for making her blind. **J. HOBERMAN**