

## TWO TRADITIONS, ONE STRUGGLE

The Skirball Cultural Center and Mayme A. Clayton Library are presenting the rare double bill of Molly Picon and Cab Calloway as part of the Black and Yiddish Film Festival. The four-day festival, which features screenings of eight classic films, offers a look at a pair of film traditions with an uneasy relationship to the mainstream movie industry.

"Some of the actors in both genres had appeared in Hollywood films, but almost always as ethnic stereotypes," April Dobson, Skirball's program coordinator, told the Forward in an e-mail. "It was in the black and Yiddish films that they found leading roles with real depth, and the opportunity to portray their own communities with honesty, dignity and even humor."

### CALIFORNIA

Some of these films were produced through Hollywood, while others were made in spite of it. By the time he directed "Yankl Der Schmid" ("The Singing Blacksmith"), legendary noir director Edgar G. Ulmer already had worked for major studios; he left them for ethnic films and small "Poverty Row" studios, trading big budgets for the right to be left alone. By contrast, Hollywood director King Vidor was a proven box-office draw in 1929, when he convinced MGM to let him make "Hallelujah!" with an all-black cast, in part by offering to give up his salary. Vidor, a white Christian Scientist from Galveston, Texas, had wanted for years to make a sympathetic film about African American life. The film became an early "talkie" crossover hit.

Avery Clayton, executive director of Mayme A. Clayton Library, sees the film festival as a chance to revisit the long, intimate and sometimes troubled relationship between blacks and Jews in America. "Right now, the problem is that there's no dialogue," Clayton told the Forward. "A lack of communication leads to fear."

Clayton's mother, for whom the library is named, is a retired university librarian who spent 40 years independently collecting photographs, books, documents and films, storing them first in her house, then in her garage and now in storage facilities scattered around Los Angeles. Her library is the largest collection of African-Americana on the West Coast. The explanation she



**CLASSIC FLICK:** 'Yidl Mitn Fidl' ('Yiddle With His Fiddle') (1936), which stars Molly Picon, is among eight films presented in Skirball's Black and Yiddish Film Festival.

offered for her collecting could serve as an emblem for the film festival: "To know where you're going, you have to know where you've been."

— ANTHONY WEISS

Skirball Cultural Center, 2701 N. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles; Jan. 26-29; \$8, \$6 for members; for schedules and additional information, call the listed number or visit the Web site. (310-440-4500 or [www.skirball.org](http://www.skirball.org))

Forward 1/13/06