

Saving Yiddish Films

National Center for Jewish Film's work on exhibit at festivals.

IT IS TEMPTING TO POINT TO THE REMNANTS of Yiddish cinema — only 60 films still exist in part or whole out of approximately 100 Yiddish-language films ever made — and put the blame on Hitler and Stalin. Most of the time, it's a safe indictment to offer, but the fact is that film is a fragile medium. Of the thousands of silent feature films made in the United States, only 10 percent are still extant. For once, the Jews are better off, and a lot of the credit belongs to the National Center for Jewish Film. In the 34 years of its existence, the NCJF has been responsible for the restoration of 35 Yiddish films.

"We began preserving these films one at a time," says Sharon P. Rivo, the executive director of the Brandeis University-based Center since its inception in 1975. "We acquired Joe Seiden's collection [of the films he produced and directed] from his son and that's how we started."

The most visible fruits of the Center's labor may be seen on the Jewish film festival circuit where many of these films, long thought to be lost, are now frequently screened. The newest manifestation of this phenomenon is the Yiddish Film Festival, which will make its debut in Manhattan in April. Appropriately, one of the presentations, "Between Two Worlds," is a compilation of great moments from Yiddish film presented by Rivo, and the three features in the program are all films that were restored through the efforts of the Center: "East and West," "Our Children" and "The Cantor's Son."

The last film is the most recently completed NCJF project, "our 35th film," Rivo says with understandable pride. "We're working on 36th right now."

The lucky double-chai film is Ludwig Satz's "His Wife's Lover," which is frequently described as the "first Jewish musical comedy talking picture." Rivo is hoping to have a restored print ready for the Jerusalem Film Festival this summer, and she is already focusing her attentions on No. 37, "Bar Mitzvah," a star vehicle for Boris Thomashefsky.

"These are the only moving images of him on film," she notes.

Saving these films is not a cheap process. "It costs between \$60,000 and \$80,000 to restore one title," Rivo says. So it's back to fundraising for her when she isn't displaying the Center's valuable handiwork to appreciative audiences hungry for a bissel Yiddish.



Moishe Oysher in full flight in "The Cantor's Son."

The first annual Yiddish Film Festival will take place April 28-30 at the JCC in Manhattan (334 Amsterdam Ave. at 76th Street).

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