

# Haimishe Home Viewing

BY ANDREA GRONVALL SPECIAL TO THE WORLD JEWISH DIGEST

If you're not finding the early spring crop of movies at your local cineplex alluring, that could be because this spot on the distribution calendar—after the Oscars but before the May start of the summer action blockbuster season—is when Hollywood studios release the somewhat iffy titles they suspect can't compete in either quality or star power. So now might be a good time to catch up on some lesser-known DVD titles that are more satisfying than what's on the big screen. A number of specialized video distributors offer engaging films about Jewish life in the Diaspora and Israel that are well worth checking out.

## National Center for Jewish Film

Affiliated with Brandeis University, the National Center for Jewish Film is dedicated to restoring, archiving and exhibiting Jewish-themed film and video. Among the jewels in the NCJF collection is its sizable library of Yiddish-language movies, including four features—*Green Fields*, *The Sineiro Blacksmith*, *The Light Ahead* and *American Matchmaker*—by one of Hollywood's most versatile and resourceful directors, Edgar G. Ulmer.



David Opatoshu (left) and Helen Beverly play a pair of disabled star-crossed lovers in the Yiddish film *The Light Ahead*.

Ulmer, who was born in Bohemia in 1904 and grew up in Vienna, got his start in the German theater designing sets for the legendary Max Reinhardt and in silent movies working for F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. Part of the exodus of German-speaking Jewish talent to the United States, Ulmer's career took him back and forth between Hollywood and Europe

before a sojourn in New York. There, despite his unfamiliarity with the language, he collaborated with leading artists of the Yiddish stage to make a series of films widely acclaimed for advancing Yiddish cinema.

The first of these films, *Green Fields* (*Grine Felder*, 1937), is based on Peretz Hirschbein's play about a *yeshive bokher* who leaves his community in search of deeper spiritual fulfillment. Played by Michael Goldstein (later Gorin), he finds what he is looking for not in another *shul* but among some salt-of-the-earth Jewish peasants. A farm in New Jersey doubled for the Pale of Settlement in this slow-moving but affecting celebration of land, work and brotherhood. American actress Helen Beverly is delightful as the barefoot *shayne meidele* who captures the scholar's heart; the movie also gave a young Herschel Bernardi his big break, casting him as Beverly's younger brother. For his first Yiddish film, Ulmer shared directing credit with theatrical great Jacob Ben-Ami, who coached the actors.

But by his next film, *The Singing Blacksmith* (*Yankl der Schmid*, 1938), Ulmer's command of the language was

third Yiddish film, *The Light Ahead* (*Fishke der Krumer*, 1939), based on a story by Mendelev Mokher Seforim and starring David Opatoshu as the soulful cripple who loves a blind *shtetl* beauty, played again by Helen Beverly. The look and tone of the film are both dark and brooding, with Ulmer's set design greatly influenced by German Expressionism—he claimed to have designed sets for the 1919 classic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*—and the narrative redolent of disorder and early sorrow.

Ulmer's last Yiddish film, *American Matchmaker* (*Amerikaner Shadkhn*, 1940), is a bittersweet musical starring Leo Fuchs as a wealthy New York Jewish playboy so unlucky in love he goes into the matchmaking business as a kind of aversion therapy. Lots of humorous references to psychology and other modern trends abound, as the *shadkhn's* (matchmaker) coterie pepper Yiddish with English in a rush to blend Jewish tradition with all things American and new.

Extras on the four Ulmer discs are outstanding; each offers extensive background notes by critic J. Hoberman (who wrote the seminal book "Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film Between Two Worlds.") There are interviews with Opatoshu and Gorin, and an audiotaped interview with Ulmer in his 70's, conducted by filmmaker, critic and fan Peter Bogdanovich.

One of NCJF's contemporary releases is the illuminating documentary *Tijuana Jews* (2005), a memoir by Isaac Aronstein, whose family and neighbors descended from a wave of Jewish émigrés to Mexico in the 1920's. Comprised of both Yiddish-speaking European Ashkenazis and Ladino-speaking Turkish and Syrian Sephardis, they thrived under the egalitarian spirit of post-revolution Mexico and the tourist dollars of American sailors and movie stars who crossed the California border looking for respite from Prohibition. The Tijuana community became so closely knit that whenever a holiday or *simcha* took place, there wasn't any need for invitations



Leo Fuchs, the "Yiddish Fred Astaire" in *American Matchmaker*.

because everyone would show up.

A fictional counterpart to Aronstein's film is Guita Schyfter's *Like a Bride* (*Novia Que Te Veo*, 1994), long unavailable on video but now out on DVD thanks to Desert Mountain Media (whose catalogue includes titles by many top Latino directors like Mexican Jewish filmmaker Arturo Ripstein). This charming romantic comedy follows two Jewish girls (Claudette Maille, Maya Mishalska) coming of age in Mexico City during the tumultuous 60's, as they're caught between family traditions and the pulls of Zionism, bohemian life and Mexican politics. It's a crowd-pleaser.