



PHOTO BY NATIONAL CENTER FOR JEWISH FILM

Tevye faces life with humor.

Yiddish tales come to life

By Daniel M. Kimmel

One of the side effects of the invention of the movies is that we are now able to create a record of the great actors of an era. You might read about the great performers of the past, but film allowed some of those performances to be preserved for generations to come.

Movie Maven

Maurice Schwartz (1890-1960) was perhaps the greatest actor who ever appeared on the Yiddish stage. His nuanced and varied roles led him to be called the "Yiddish Olivier." He appeared in only a handful of films, and his work in English is minor. It is in his Yiddish performances that you get a glimpse of what must have thrilled live audiences.

When the National Center for Jewish Film (NCJF) at Brandeis began, they first became known for their restorations of old Yiddish movies. "Tevye" was a revelation to American viewers who knew the Sholem Alechem stories about the philosophical dairyman primarily from "Fiddler on the Roof." Here the focus is on the story of

Chava, the daughter who marries a Russian peasant. There are some amusing moments, but it is essentially a tragedy, although not without some hope at the end.

Schwartz (who also wrote and directed) plays Tevye as a pious, decent man who reveres his Jewish heritage even if he's not particularly learned in it. In the most heartbreaking scene, Tevye returns at the end of the Sabbath, having been unable to prevent Chava's marriage to Fedya (played by Leon Leibgold, a heartthrob of the Yiddish stage). Tevye rues having missed the traditional third meal of the day as well as the

"Schwartz plays Tevye's more ironic moments with a sigh, as if it hurts too much to laugh."

evening prayers, but proceeds with the Havdalah ritual. Then, having given God His due, he mourns Chava as if she were dead. He declares an hour to cry and then he will treat her as if she had never been born. One would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved. Schwartz plays Tevye's more ironic moments with a sigh, as if it hurts too much to laugh but he alone appreciates the sad humor of his predicament.

To fully appreciate

Schwartz's range, take a look at the extras on the DVD, which included extended excerpts from the silent "Yizkor" (1924) and the early talkie "Uncle Moses" (1932), both available from the NCJF as well. It's hard to believe that we're seeing the same actor, such is his transformation in each role.

Schwartz was only 49 when he made "Tevye" and he would never have a starring role in the movies again. It was recognized as an American classic — those Russian scenes were all shot on Long Island in New York — when in 1991 it was selected for the Library of Congress's National Film Registry, for which only 25 movies are selected each year. We are fortunate to have it.

"Tevye" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.

Daniel M. Kimmel, a Boston-based film critic and author, reviews Jewish films for the Advocate. He lectures widely on a variety of film-related topics and can be reached at daniel.kimmel@rcn.com.