

# The OUTLOOK on Theatre

## THE QUARREL

Written by David Brandes and Joseph Telushkin. Based on Chaim Grade's story "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynier." Featuring Dan Amos (Hersh Rasseynier) and Nathan Schmidt (Chaim Kovler). Directed by Morris Ertman. At Pacific Theatre, Vancouver, January 25-February 17, 2007.

Reviewed by Seymour Levitan

The set is simple—on one side an autumnal tree at the edge of a pool, on the other a park bench. A man in a long black coat and homburg stands under the tree swaying and bending his knees as he *davens*. A man in a brown suit stands near the bench apparently addressing an audience, lecturing or reciting poetry, but breaking off to notice the man praying. "That was me years ago," he says, as if the other man is his imagined secret sharer, the other part of himself. And then they recognize each other. The literary man is Chaim Kovler, a Yiddish writer. The man praying is his old friend from the *musaryeshiva* in Bialystock, Hersh Rasseynier. It is the afternoon of Rosh Hashana, 1948. After years of wondering whether the other had survived the war, they have encountered each other by chance in Montreal. And they begin the dialogue that becomes a quarrel that binds them to each other.

In Chaim Grade's story, "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseynier" (available in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, edited by Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg), they are vehement and intractable in their values. Their quarrel is an unapologetic confrontation of ideas, without much personal background provided. But it is humanized by their feelings for each other. Chaim respects and loves Hersh, Hersh

confesses that he spoke to Chaim in his mind as he suffered through the camps.

The play provides back story—family background, war experience, yeshiva memories—partly drawn from Grade's other writings. It softens the vehemence of the story and spells out the personal relationship of the two men.

In the play Hersh, the believer, is the gentle one, the kind, openly emotional, clearly compassionate one, the one not as bright—"You were always smarter than I was, Chaim"). Hersh is always humanly appealing, insightful, honest, direct, generous toward Chaim. Chaim is angry, unsatisfied, cynical. He is the assimilated literary figure, the questioning Yiddish writer who walked out on piety even before the war, walked away from the yeshiva, the rules, the self-righteous isolation.

In the impressive production at Pacific Theatre, Dan Amos as Hersh Rasseynier is wisdom, and Nathan Schmidt as Chaim Kovler is intelligence, each embodied in a characteristic way of moving—Hersh energetic, reaching out; Chaim hesitant and stiff.

The two spend the day reliving old experiences, revealing their losses, their feelings of guilt that they had turned their backs on the people who loved them most. Both are self-reproachful—Hersh because he didn't embrace his difficult, judgmental father on what turned out to be the last night before the liquidation of the ghetto; Chaim because he fled German-occupied Vilna, leaving his wife and children behind. They also spend the day quarrelling, arguing their basic beliefs with startling frankness, shouting at times, never wavering (however forgiving or comforting they may be about personal matters). Plays often hold our attention by daring to present what we might not say openly, by breaking the conventions of courtesy, secrecy or fear of speaking. This is exactly what makes this play exciting.



Dan Amos as Hersh Rasseynier; Nathan Schmidt as Chaim Kovler

The two men argue first of all about God and God's justice. Then about the ethical impact of literature as compared to religion. Then about human nature, the impulse to kill and the motives of people who risk their lives to do good. Then about being chosen—about whether we have been chosen to be saved or to be victimized.

Hersh reveals much, shares much of his vulnerability and loss. And still he makes his demands on behalf of God. None of Hersh's goodness, decency or religious and ethical purpose is lost on Chaim. He never budes from his own convictions, but at a deep level Chaim is still connected to Hersh and the culture they have shared.

Chaim still cares enough to want to blame God for human cruelty. His disbelief isn't based on pure rational argument against the possibility of God's existence or the evidence of God's goodness. It is a reaction to his former belief. And it starts with a passionate need to confront the other half of the Jewish world that originally taught him who he was, that gave him his first view of things—the believing half.

Chaim needs to be heard by Hersh—not simply to state his conviction that there is no God, and not just to rage, but to bring God to a *din toyre*—put God on trial—as he says he would like to do. It is what he does here, but he has the need to do this in an exchange, a quarrel, a *krig*, with Hersh Rasseynier. He needs to do this in dialogue, and they are in dialogue, in the I-Thou way. They are linked

SEYMOUR LEVITAN'S translations of Yiddish poems and stories are included in numerous anthologies. He appeared in our January/February 2007 issue with a review of Michael Wex's *Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods*.

# The OUTLOOK on Theatre



Michael Wipf as Joshua; Dan Amos as Hersh Rasseyrer; Nathan Schmidt as Chaim Koval.

by it. That aspect of their relationship, drawn from within the story, is brought to the surface of the play. Partly this is a dramatic device, a way of humanizing a quarrel of ideas, but at the same time it is the point of the play.

*The Quarrel* is a drama on two levels—a drama of ideas, and a drama of the relationship of these

two men from a common culture and with a shared identity. That they are still bound together is the most important and most controversial idea in the play. ♦

(Note: the film version of *The Quarrel*, with Saul Rubinek as Hersh and R.H. Thomson as Chaim, is available on DVD. – S.L.)

**Chaim Grade** is one of the great modern Yiddish writers. He established his reputation as a poet in Vilna in the 1930s and after the war went on to write fiction as a way of memorializing the lives and society of the Jews of Vilna. "My Quarrel with Hersh Rasseyrer" was his first published story, and draws on Grade's experience in a *musar* yeshiva in Navaredok, where he was a favoured student of the renowned sage the *Khazon Ish*. Though Grade rejected religious belief, he has Hersh say to his Chaim, "Whoever has learned *musar* can have no enjoyment in his life," that is, he can never stop demanding ethical self-examination and absolute honesty of himself. Grade uses this kind of searching analysis of motives in portraying the characters in his stories. They are shown from their own point of view and then from another. Grade is expert at building his story through these surprising reappraisals of his characters. He is also wonderfully informative about the world that the Vilna Jews made for themselves—the social hierarchy, the traditional and the changing cultural values. His writing has urgency, fullness, intelligent complexity.

Some works available in English translation are: *My Mother's Sabbath Days*, a realistic and, despite the title, unsentimental memoir of Grade's early life in Vilna, his escape to the USSR during the war, and his return to his devastated birthplace afterward; *Rabbis and Wives*, a collection of brilliant short novels, including "The Rebbetzin," one of the great works of Yiddish literature; *The Agunah* (The Abandoned Wife), an ever-widening picture of Jewish life at the brink of modernity; and *The Yeshiva*, a two-volume novel focusing on the life of a *musarnik* who discovers at the very start that "it was much easier to observe dozens of laws and customs than to deny oneself one forbidden desire."

—SL

## Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations

### CSJO 2007 Conference

*Secular Jewishness – A Fusion of Social Issues, Civil Liberties and Jewish Culture*

And a fusion of the Secular/Cultural Jewish movement and you at Ursuline College in Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A. during the U.S.

Memorial Day weekend (May 25-28, 2007).

Top-notch workshop topics and presenters, entertainment and participants' talent show in an atmosphere of learning and friendship.

[www.csjo.org](http://www.csjo.org)  
866- 874- 8608  
[conf2007@csjo.org](mailto:conf2007@csjo.org)

## RANKIN & BOND

Legal services including:

- Immigration
- Wills
- Estates
- Criminal
- Injury Claims

Phil Rankin and Ellen Bond

Tel: 604-682-3621  
Fax: 604-682-3919

2nd Floor, 157 Alexander Street  
Vancouver, B.C. V6A 1B8