

# Pirates of Penzance adapts well to Yiddish

BY PAT DONNELLY, GAZETTE CULTURE CRITIC JUNE 3, 2009

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Mo Hanan, as the Groyser-General (Major-General) performs the Nightmare song from The Pirates of Penzance at the Segal Centre for Performing Arts.

Photograph by: John Mahoney, The Gazette

Montreal has to be the only city on the planet that's currently offering a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, The Pirates of Penzance, in Yiddish, at the Segal Centre, in addition to a French version of Fiddler on the Roof (Un Violin sur le toit), at Théâtre du Rideau Vert.

Plus, the first ever Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival will be launched here on June 17, with visiting companies from France, Israel, Romania, Poland and New York performing through June 25.

The Pirates of Penzance marks the 50th anniversary of the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre, now run by Bryna Wasserman, who is also artistic director of the entire Segal Centre for Performing Arts. The show is made accessible to all via supertitles in English and French. The Jewish Public Library will also be presenting a special exhibit in honour of the 50th anniversary next month.

Although our local Yiddish Theatre company is an amateur one, relying on actors willing to rehearse evenings (sometimes until the wee hours), the production quality is exceptional.

As an added measure to ensure that this Pirates of Penzance sails smoothly, a ringer has been brought in from New York—the city where this G & S classic premiered in 1879.

Mo Hanan will play the starring role of the Major-General, known here as the Groyser-General. The last time this versatile performer played Montreal it was at Place des Arts, as Captain Hook in Peter Pan, with Cathy Rigby as Peter, in 1990.

Some special connection with pirates? Perhaps, Hanan admits. He once received a Tony nomination for his portrayal of Growltiger, the feline pirate in the original production of Cats.

This will be Hanan's second portrayal of the Groyser-General, having played him in the inaugural production of Al Grand's Yiddish adaptation of Pirates in 2006. Hence the mastery of the idiom.

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Is it really possible to do G & S in Yiddish? "It's not only possible," replied Hanan, "it's hilarious."

But what we'll see is an adaptation, not just a translation, he added. "Although Grand sticks very closely to the plot and keeps all of the musical material, there's a certain kind of Yiddishized quality to it. It's a hybrid of the original G & S plot, which is absurd enough in its own right. And then it has a kind of overlay of Yiddish culture of eastern Europe."

He explained: "In the original, at the end Ruth comes in and redeems the plot in a twinkling by saying (of the pirates), they're all 'noblemen who have gone wrong.' And so, in our version, they're all former yeshiva students."

Adaptation does complicate things, Hanan admitted. "God only knows what army I'm a major-general in."

Another modification lies in the famous Major-General's song, wherein the Groyser-General now laments about how difficult it is to be an observant Jew and have an army career. Patter songs work so well in Yiddish, he said, that Grand has added another one, the nightmare song, stolen from Iolanthe, also sung by the Major-General.

The song-swapping thing is nothing new, Hanan observed, citing the 1980 Broadway revival of *The Pirates of Penzance*, starring Linda Ronstadt, in which Hanan played the First Mate. "They interpolated a patter song from *Ruddigore* for the trio of Frederick and Ruth and *The Pirate King* (Kevin Kline), just because the director wanted those three actors to have another big number."

Hanan's knowledge of Yiddish is next to nil. "I have to do this rapid-fire stuff that I learned phonetically," he said. "Which makes it even more interesting. Now I'm used to it, but in the original New York production, there were times when I couldn't remember a word. And I can't think in Yiddish. It's one thing to be able to find your way back if you know the meaning of what you're doing. But when you can't think in the language in which you've forgotten your lines, it's difficult. Fortunately, the music is so marvellous it just carries you along."

A fan of G & S since childhood, Hanan got a taste of the stage while doing his English degree at Harvard. After a year of theatre studies in London, he landed in San Francisco where he spent "most of" his 20s as a street performer, down by the Sausalito ferry pier. "I sang operatic arias and accompanied myself on concertina," he recalled. His New York adventures included starring in an acclaimed Al Jolson show that he wrote for himself. More recently, he has penned a novel and written essays for the Huffington Post.

Before this gig, Hanan had never heard of Montreal's Yiddish Theatre. Now he's impressed. "The New York production wasn't nearly as lavish as this one. The cast is twice the size. The sets are marvellous, the costumes are terrific. It's way beyond the first one. Which is a nice surprise."

*The Pirates of Penzance*, by Gilbert and Sullivan, adapted by Al Grand, begins previews Sunday, May 31, and opens Thursday, June 4 and continues until June 16 at the Segal Centre for Performing Arts, 5170 Côte Ste. Catherine Rd.

The Montreal International Yiddish Theatre Festival runs from June 17 to 25. For more information, call 514-739-7944 or visit the website [www.yiddishtheatre.org](http://www.yiddishtheatre.org)

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