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## YIDDISH HUMOR IN OPERA

### Ofer Ben-Amots: *GAN EYDN FAR A NAR*

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Ofer Ben-Amots's *Gan eydn far a nar* (*Fool's Paradise*), subtitled *Opera Buffa in Five Scenes*, is based on a charming story for children by Isaac Bashevis Singer. Although Singer naturally wrote the story in Yiddish, he published it only in an English translation together with six other children's stories in a volume titled *Zlateh the Goat and Other Stories* (1966)—all of which were translated by Singer in collaboration with Elizabeth Shub.

Ben-Amots, however, from the outset, envisioned this work as a Yiddish opera. But he had first to devise, together with William [Haim] Attias, an English libretto as an interim working draft based on the published story. It would serve as a guide for the eventual Yiddish libretto in terms of how he wanted it to read, what he took from the story in his own interpretation, and what he wanted to emphasize operatically. Then the final Yiddish libretto was translated from that English draft ("back to Yiddish" in a sense) by Morris [Moshe] Moskowitz, at the time a professor emeritus and former head of Hebraic studies at Rutgers University.

The essence of the opera revolves around an affirmation of life, despite its hardships, its monotony, its disappointments, the need to work for sustenance, and the passing of time that can still live in memories. In his foreword to *Zlateh the Goat*, Singer reflected on the meaning, significance and repercussions of all seven stories:

Children are as puzzled by passing time as grownups.  
What happens to a day once it is gone? Where are  
our yesterdays with their joys and sorrows? . . .  
To the storyteller yesterday is still here as are  
the years and decades gone by.

In stories time does not vanish . . . What  
happened long ago is still present.

It is in this spirit that I wrote these tales.  
In real life, many of the people that I describe  
no longer exist. But to me they remain alive and  
I hope they will amuse the reader with their  
wisdom, their strange beliefs, and sometimes  
with their foolishness.

Singer went on to dedicate the book of all seven stories to "the many children who had no chance to grow up because of stupid wars and cruel persecutions . . ."

# GAN EYDN FAR A NAR

## Dramatis Personae

ATZEL.....	TENOR
THE NURSE/NANNY .....	MEZZO-SOPRANO
AKSA, Atzel's bride-to-be .....	SOPRANO
KADISH, Atzel's father.....	LOW BARITONE
DR. YOETZ.....	HIGH BARITONE
MIKHA, the servant.....	LOW BASS

Chorus of angels (SATB)

Quartet of Angels (SSAT)

Dancers / Servants / Angels, etc. — silent

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TIME: Timeless, but before the Second World War

PLACE: Somewhere in eastern Europe

In Scene 1, the Prologue, Atzel is a child of about eight years old who at bedtime implores his nurse to tell him a story he has heard a thousand times before: the story of paradise. She proceeds to describe it as a place where no one has to work, read books, study, wash, or even be bothered with praying. “Once we are there . . . we don’t have to thank the Lord or get on His good side,” she assures him. “In paradise no one has to make any effort. It’s all done for you.” And of course, in paradise, “we are always clean; there is nothing there to get you dirty.” She tells him the food is wonderful there and the heavenly wine is what God has reserved for the just, the righteous—“for us . . .” With nothing required to do, one sleeps very late.

But, the nurse reminds Atzel, one must die in order to get into paradise.

In Scene 2, Atzel, now an adult of eighteen or twenty years old, is working in the carpet store of his father, Kadish, a fairly wealthy merchant. His marriage to the good-natured, beautiful Aksa is imminent. But instead of the joyous enthusiasm he should be feeling in anticipation, he is overcome by boredom and routine, and he resents the hard work that is expected of him. In a soliloquy he complains to himself about all the monotony, discipline and thankless work of daily life, longing instead for the delightful, carefree life in paradise—*olam haba* (the “world to come”).

Of course he knows that to get to paradise, he must die first. “Therefore I will die,” he sings, adding “I am dying . . . I am dead” as he stretches out on his bed and lies there quietly.

Imagining that he is dead, he tells Aksa that he is in fact so and is on his way to paradise. “Let me proceed to my heavenly destination in peace,” he implores her as she bursts into tears. And he demands of her and his parents that a proper funeral and burial be organized so that he can get to his heavenly destination. The scene concludes with Kadish’s lament: “Where did I go wrong? . . . Why was I blest with a son like that? . . . He is going to drive me to an early grave.”

In Scene 3, Atzel’s parents consult the “renowned” Dr. Yoetz, who assures them that he can cure their son within eight days—on condition that they follow his instructions to the letter, no matter how strange they may seem; and they

consent. After Dr. Yoetz proclaims Atzel “dead,” and after Atzel dances for joy that he is dead and will have a funeral, a ridiculously elaborate funeral is conducted according to the doctor’s instructions.

At the absurd funeral ceremony, which begins with a “Farewell Waltz,” dancers carry a casket into which Atzel is placed—wrapped in a *talit* (prayer shawl) according to custom, with a white rose placed on his chest by Aksa. After the ceremony the casket is carried from the room, from which Aksa is the last to leave.

### **ENTRACTE: Song of the Angels**

During the Song of the Angels, the dancers—costumed as angels—walk quietly in and out of Atzel’s room, serving him his meals and preparing him for bed. Several days pass this way, with the “angels” repeating their function over and over, demonstrating to Atzel the monotony of his “life after death.”

In Scene 4, a fabricated representation of paradise has been created in Atzel’s room. Mikha, his family’s head servant, is costumed as the angel in charge of him. At first Atzel is delighted by the fulfillment of his requests for fine food and wine, and by the other angels attending to him and bearing cakes and fruits.

But he soon becomes bored, unhappy and suffocated by the monotonous and joyless routine, including the same food being served every day.

In his exchange with Mikha, Atzel becomes ever more frustrated and disillusioned with paradise—or what he’d assumed paradise would be like. What time is it? There’s no time in paradise, no day or night. What shall he do with himself? One does nothing here, and one cannot visit with others. When will his family come? Not for a long time, since they still have many years to live. What about Aksa? She has more than fifty years to live before coming. She is in mourning now, but sooner or later she will forget him. Must I be alone all that time? Yes. At this, Atzel wants out.

“I’d rather kill myself. I’d rather be dead,” Atzel declares. “But you are already dead,” comes Mikha’s response. And then, Atzel’s ultimate realization: “Better to be alive again!”—at which moment Dr. Yoetz enters, puts his hands on Atzel’s shoulders and pronounces, “Atzel, my boy, there’s been a mistake. You are not dead. You must leave paradise at once.”

In Scene 5, the Epilogue, Atzel is welcomed back to life, to Aksa and to his family. “I didn’t know how good it was to be alive,” Atzel confesses exuberantly. And to Aksa: “Do you still love me? If so, it’s time we were married.” He summons the wedding band musicians to come and start playing, as Aksa replies that she has never forgotten him and never could.

A joyful marriage celebration begins, and as the curtain comes down, the band is heard playing a traditional wedding dance, the *freylekh*.

The opera is permeated by engaging lyricism—sometimes chromatic, other times intervallic—which is punctuated by dramatic expression at moments of dynamic tension. Recitative or quasi-recitative passages often form duets with individual instruments, instrumental combinations, or inventive instrumental gestures. For example, the duet between Kadish and bass clarinet. Moreover, various instruments are given what amounts to expressive solo roles. In one evocative passage, the vibraphone, creatively used, provides a suggestion of angelic presence in the scene in paradise. But even when the accompaniment involves the full ensemble, it is never allowed to obscure the voice or the words.

Overall, there is an ethereal, haunting aura. Yet it can be juxtaposed against an intuitive sense of the comedic—and on more than a superficial level of humor. This comingling of moods gives the opera its pervading charm, with nothing coming across as contrived. There are imaginative interpolations of certain eastern European Jewish wedding band echoes when appropriate, but never overstated or trite, as these clichés tend to be when quoted or incorporated into

many contemporary compositions. And their seamless interfusion with influences of Berg and Webern betrays a rare artistic gift for originality.

The arch of the opera reflects Singer's genius for storytelling and sardonic wit. In some ways it succeeds in conveying the messages of the tale and its symbolic humor more vividly than does the printed page. Singer maintained that the story was for children. But is it, really? And even if so, the opera cannot be classified as a "children's opera" per se. In fact, children might easily be traumatized by the funeral scene. In any event, the story is typical of Singer on another level, in that it might be interpreted by some as posing an unanswered question left for us to resolve. In this instance it was for Ben-Amots to wrestle with its underlying symbolism—with one of Singer's favorite themes: a demon of sorts inside us. Here that demon is one of immaturity, ultimately silenced and laid to rest as Atzel realizes the nature and rewards of life.

*Gan eydn far a nar* received its world premiere in Vienna in 1994 by Opernhaus Zürich, as part of the Wien Modern music festival. After three performances, to critical acclaim, it received twelve more in Zurich. All those performances, however, beginning with the premiere, required a translation to German—in which it was sung under the title *Ein Narrenparadies*. As of this writing, the opera has yet to be produced and performed in its original Yiddish—as intended. Nonetheless, it was the catalyst for Ben-Amots's winning the 1994 Vienna International Competition for Composers.