

**LA GALERIE
LE MINOTAURE
PRESENTS**
**PREPARING THE
MIRACLE: FROM
THE BRONX
TO BROADWAY,
BORIS ARONSON
AND THE YIDDISH
THEATRE**
AT VALLOIS
AMERICA

NOVEMBER 14TH, 2015
DECEMBER 23RD, 2015

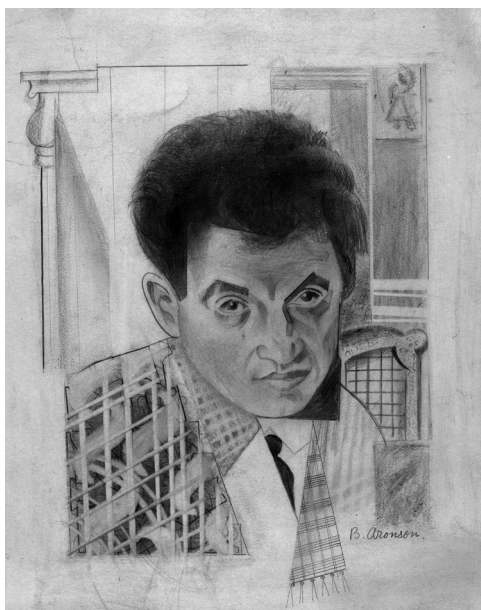
“Success in the theatre is a miracle. But you have to prepare the miracle.”

Boris Aronson, 1976 Tony Award acceptance speech for *Pacific Overtures*. Aronson's 6th and last Tony.

Boris Aronson: Preparing the Miracle

“I never followed the American idea of age. I started at 180th Street and slowly crawled from one rung on the ladder to the next until I got to the Metropolitan Opera. It is not the American way. In America, you are a genius at eighteen and finished at thirty. To me, each experience is a rejuvenation.”

Boris Aronson is widely recognized as one of the most innovative scenic designers in New York theatre history. From the claustrophobic attic of **Diary of Anne Frank** (1955), the pastel shtetl of **Fiddler on the Roof** (1964), the mirror that made the modern audience part of **Cabaret** (1966), to the “transparent cages” of **Company** (1970), he used scenic design to express the dynamic essence of a play. To this day, his influence can be seen all over Broadway. Aronson's own artistic journey began in the Yiddish theatre of the 1920's where he crafted some of his most experimental and avant-garde work. Now for the first time in New York, Galerie Le Minotaure of Paris in association with the Vallois America gallery presents an exhibit fully devoted to Aronson's Yiddish theatre work. The show runs from **November 14th 2015 - December 23rd 2015** and is a herald of the larger **Museum of the City of New York** exhibit that explores Jewish artists from the Yiddish Theatre to Broadway in which Aronson will be featured.



Self portrait,
circa • 1920
Pencil on paper
36 x 28,5 cm



Design for the
circus • 1926
India ink and
pencil on paper
56 x 41 cm

Aronson was born near Kiev as one of ten children of the city's chief rabbi. Like Marc Chagall – about whom he wrote one of the first books – he found a new vitality and vocabulary for Judaism in artistic modernism. Working with Constructivists such as Alexandra Exter and El Lissitzky, he sought to create a theatre world as filled with excitement and change as the day's headlines. Looking at New York from a great distance, he imagined the city as the essence of the new, all skyscrapers, elevators, and zippers. When he arrived here in 1923, “the peak of my ambition was to design one of the huge electric signs for Wrigley's Chewing Gum in Times Square.” While he did not get to work with colored lights, he attempted to show that angular essence to the city in his sets. **Bronx Express** turns a subway into a dream, and a dream into a subway ride. **The Tenth Commandment** reveals that Hell is the human mind – in a set that would be echoed decades later by the late-coming radicals of the 1960s (see page 12).

Aronson's work in New York began in the Yiddish art theatre, but when he shifted to Broadway he had to tone down his experiments and echo the required “realism” of the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950's and early 1960s he experimented with abstraction in the much heralded **J.B.**, and with pop music and pop art in the juke-box-sets of **Do Re Mi**. Then, after the success of **Fiddler**, he found a creative partnership with the producer Harold Prince, and began a new phase of creativity and invention on Broadway.

In a sense, Aronson's journey matched that of the city's 20th century immigrant Jews, who arrived here to live in Yiddish-speaking communities, debating the ideas and ideologies of Europe. By the 1960s, their now more successful children and grandchildren forged their own creative Jewish American identities which honored their “roots” but required neither linguistic separation nor blind assimilation. This exhibit captures that first creative moment for Aronson and for the Yiddish Theatre where modernism was a Jewish language – one he once again spoke in the 1960s and 1970s when the theatre world was finally ready to listen.

“Preparing the Miracle” offers a chronological survey of Aronson's best Yiddish theatre work. While the Yiddish theatre of legend offered nostalgia to large audiences, Aronson flourished in the Yiddish “art” theatre that presented serious plays and created a home to artistic experimentation. Aronson's career began in an art house, the Unser (“our”) theatre in the Bronx.

We feature sets and costumes for **Day and Night**, **The Final Balance**, **The Bronx Express**, and the lively, abstracted, murals of traditional Jewish life Aronson created for the theatre itself (unfortunately lost when the building was torn down), (see pages 6, 7, 10).

In 1926, the leading actor, director, producer Maurice Schwartz created a home for his productions on 12th Street and Second Avenue. Aronson designed a path breaking set for the initial show: **The Tenth Commandment** (see page 12). We round out this introduction to Aronson's Yiddish Theatre period with an expressionist design, **The Tragedy of Nothing**, the sculptural abstraction of his concept for an unrealized Golem, and a Pairing of his first Scholem Aleichem show, **Stempenyu (The Fiddler)** and his later letting for **Fiddler on the Roof**. (see pages 14-15, 16-17)

Aronson's work in the Yiddish Theatre attracted the attention of sophisticated English-speakers who were following avant-garde movements in Europe. In 1927, the Anderson Gallery on 5th Avenue exhibited his designs – and he received commissions to design productions for Radio City Music hall. This created a bridge to Broadway, where he made his theatrical home. He continued to experiment in his paintings (often of the circus), encaustics, and, by the 1960s, designs made with the first color copying machines.

Aronson understood that a set was a collaborative space that would come alive with actors. Every line and color he imagined was half of an equation that could only be solved in real time, when rehearsals began. As Stephen Sondheim recalled, Aronson would stay late at rehearsals a key part of the team making the magic of theatre. Yet he also needed space to invent, imagine, and explore entirely on his own, which he did in his paintings. In turn, the new shapes, forms, and especially textures he found in art created new possibilities for the stage.

In this show we see Aronson's theatrical designs when they were closest to the Cubist, Constructivist, and Expressionist art movements that transformed visual art in the early 20th Century.

*All Aronson quotations here are drawn from his draft notes for a theatrical memoir and Frank Rich with Lisa Aronson, *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson* to be reissued as an ebook by Opus in November, 2015.

"DAY AND NIGHT"

BY S. ANSKY
UNSER THEATRE,
BRONX, NEW YORK



"No one [at The Unser Theatre] knew for sure if they would be paid or not, but they had an adventurous spirit and were concerned with the experimental. I happened to arrive at the right time—they were willing to do unusual things."

S. Ansky's play **The Dybbuk** (1912-14) became a signature piece in the Yiddish theatre. **Day and Night** was his last play, and left incomplete when Ansky died in 1920. Aronson's sets for the play were entirely angular and geometric, starkly black and white. The costume for the devil continues the straight lines and muted colors, with startling splashes of red.

Aronson's second play at the Unser Theatre was David Pinsky's **The Final Balance**. Once again he reduced settings to straight lines and cutouts – emphasizing the two-dimensionality of three-dimensional sets. One set (not seen here) incorporated a rendering of an electric sign – echoing both the paintings of Stuart Davis, and Aronson's own yearning to paint with electricity.



Costume Design
• 1924
Gouache
and pencil
on cardboard
40,8 x 20,8 cm

"THE FINAL BALANCE"

BY DAVID PINSKY
UNSER THEATRE,
BRONX, NEW YORK



Stage design
• 1925
India ink
on cardboard
13,4 x 18,6 cm



Stage design
• 1925
India ink
on cardboard
13,4 x 18,6 cm

1924

"UNSER THEATRE" BRONX, NEW YORK

In addition to the costume and stage designs he crafted for the productions of Unser Theatre Aronson designed murals for the walls of the auditorium. Aronson was probably inspired by Chagall's mural for the GOSET theatre in Moscow. The mural begins with an image of two Hassids, which echoes the cover of the comedy **"The Two Kuni-Lemls"** by the "father of Jewish theatre," Abraham Goldfaden. To the expert, the mural traces the evolution of Jewish theatre, from its simple, almost folkloric forms of the Goldfaden era to the contemporary avant-garde experiment. To the casual theatre-goer, the mural is a playful characterization of traditional Jewish life.

1925



Design for a mural
in the Unser Theatre
(our theatre
company) • 1925
Gouache, pencil
and gold painting
on cardboard
19,5 x 55,5 cm

Design for a mural
in the Unser Theatre
(our theatre
company) • 1925
Gouache, pencil
and gold painting
on cardboard
19,2 x 56 cm



Picture of the wall
in the Unser
Theatre (our theatre
company) • 1925
Vintage gelatin-silver



Picture of the wall
in the Unser Theatre
(our theatre
company) • 1925
Vintage gelatin-silver

Codirector:
Boris Aronson

"THE BRONX EXPRESS"

BY OSSIP DYMOV
SCHILDKRAUT THEATRE,
BRONX, NEW YORK



"The Bronx Express" was a play by Ossip Dymov, who was also the assistant director of the production. The plot of the play centers on the dreams of the main character, who falls asleep while traveling on the New York subway. In these dreams, memories of the character's youth in Eastern Europe strangely mix with the realities of American life. For the staging of this phantasmagoria, Aronson built the inside of a subway car, which transformed during the play into the palace of a rich American or the humble apartment of the main character.

"My idea was that when somebody falls asleep there is always a chance to awaken temporarily, and what happens is that when one awakens, one finds oneself in the same locale where one started to dream.... In each set, I left the hanging straps [of the subway] so that in the middle of a dream the hero might wake up and grab one – like an aside.

Stage design
for *Final Balance*
♦ 1925
Gouache on
cardboard
18 x 25,5 cm

1925

With Maurice Schwartz and Joseph Buloff,
Directed by Schwartz, ballet directed by Michel Fokine

"THE TENTH COMMANDMENT" BY A. GOLDFADEN YIDDISH ART THEATRE (SECOND AVENUE THEATRE), NEW YORK, NOV. 17

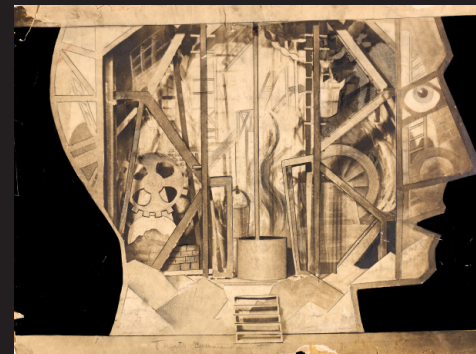
Maurice Schwartz was, Aronson recalled, "extremely ambitious." An entire theatre – which still stands and now shows movies -- was built for his productions. The opening show, **The Tenth Commandment**, was by Abraham Goldfaden, who had created the first contemporary Yiddish theatre exactly 50 years earlier in Rumania. Schwartz was making a statement with the production: not only did he direct the show with its 70 actors in his new theatre, "he played eight parts, one of them female. There were twenty-five scene changes and 360 costumes." On November 17, opening night, the show began at 9 and was still going at 2 in the morning.

The play centered on temptation, adultery (thus the allusion in the title to the prohibition against coveting they neighbor's wife), and redemption. Aronson envisioned Heaven as box seats at the Metropolitan Opera, Hell as a kind of jungle gym inside the human brain. The myriad costumes included a dress for Schwartz, seen here embracing his co-star Joseph Buloff. Costumes for the male chorus, seen in this sketch, found the exact crossing point of abstraction and realism. Schwartz approved of Aronson's avant-garde sets, though he found the edges a bit sharp. "Could you," he asked his young designer, "grow some moss on them to soften them a bit?" That was Aronson's "first exposure to the need to tame the constructivism in my work."

The lively chaos on stage (carpenters criss-crossed with actors during the final rehearsals) did not bring financial success, but Aronson's sets drew the attention of the critic John Mason Brown. Writing in *Theatre Monthly*, he announced that "the settings and costumes are the bravest experiments in scenic design that the present season has disclosed... By employing not one, but many constructivist settings, which range from heaven to hell, he conditions the style of the entire production, and brings a welcome vigor and originality to our theatre."



Costume
design • 1926
Gouache and
pencil on paper
52 x 33,5 cm



Stage design of the
scene on "The Tenth
Commandment"
Irving Place Theatre,
New York • 1926
Gouache, pencil and
photo on cardboard
39 x 49,5 cm



Photo of show scene
(for M. Schwartz)
• 1926
Gouache and
pencil on paper
71 x 49 cm

Costume design
"Two Hassids"
• 1926
Gouache and collage
and cardboard
61 x 46 cm



Produced by the Art Circle
Directed by Boris Aronson

"THE TRAGEDY OF NOTHING"

BY MOYSHE NADIR
IRVING PLACE
THEATRE
NEW YORK



Costume design
• 1927
Gouache and collage
on cardboard
49,5 x 36 cm

B. Aronson

Directed by
Maurice Schwartz

"THE GOLEM"

BY H. LEIVICK
UNRALIZED PROJECT
YIDDISH ART THEATRE,
NEW YORK



Stage design
• 1929
Gouache and
pencil on paper
29 x 52 cm

1926

BORIS ARONSON AND THE YIDDISH THEATRE

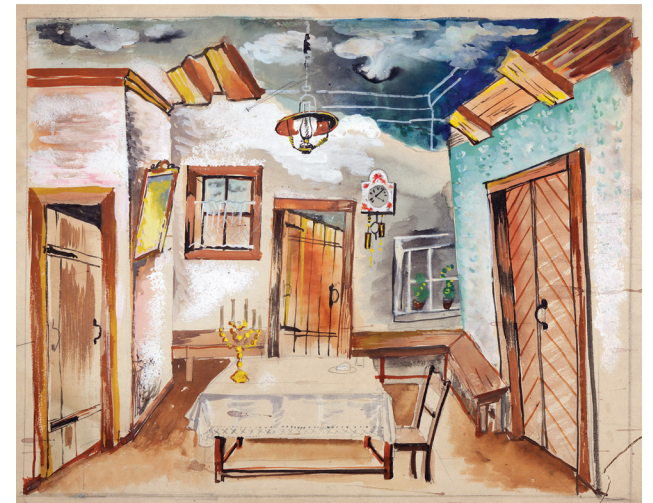
With Maurice Schwartz
and Celia Adler
Directed by Maurice Schwartz

"FIDDLER ON THE ROOF" BY SOLOM ALEICHEM YIDDISH ART THEATRE (SECOND AVENUE THEATRE), NEW YORK

1926

Aronson thought that Maurice Schwartz's "adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's **Stempenyu**, the Fiddler, was the kind of play that he did very well.... Never before or after did he achieve anything that had such a oneness about it." Aronson aimed at a similar unity when he returned to the same stories to design **Fiddler on the Roof**. He made the circle of the family within Tevye's revolving house, and the circle of the community in Anatevka (which played out on a second, larger, revolving stage), the visual metaphor of the show. The encompassing and yet expansive home in **Stempenyu** is a forecast for what he would later create on the Broadway stage.

Fiddler on the Roof ends when the circle breaks, the family is in a line, ready to ride a train (parallel lines) away to America. Yet for Aronson, New York, the city of colored lights and geometry, was a "romantic fantasy." In his art for the Yiddish Theatre he married circles and lines, the past and the future. And he found his visual voice.



Stage design
• 1929
Gouache and pencil
on cardboard
33,5 x 42,5 cm

Stage design for
"Fiddler on the Roof"
• 1964
Family archives
31,11 x 59 cm



Boris Aronson was “the most original guy I ever met [in an] increasingly homogenized culture.” Elia Kazan

“Every play was a new adventure for Boris. He had no ready solutions. He floundered for months, and needed guidance from the director and author to know where he was. But once he knew! He’d come up with the strongest angles. Most other set designers want the work done for them.”

Arthur Miller

“The term ‘theatre designer’ never described him. He was a philosopher and a generalist. He was cosmopolitan. Though assimilated and highly sophisticated about what it meant to live in America, he never left Russia in a sense. He was rooted here and not rooted here—a series of contradictions. He loved to upset people by not conforming.”

Robert Mitchell, set designer

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Opening exhibition Saturday November 14th at 3pm

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