

**“Attention Must Be Paid”:
*Death of a Salesman’s Counter-Adapted Yiddish Homecoming***

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the Yiddish-language response to *Death of a Salesman* as an essential component of the play’s reception history. I examine how Yiddish adaptations of *Salesman* subtly subverted Miller’s pro-acculturation message through a mechanism that I call counter-adaptation, which I define as an adaptive mode used by a culture on the margins to counteract the agenda of the original while simultaneously performing loyalty to it. Moreover, I document how Miller’s support for a Yiddish production of *Salesman* in New York sheds new light upon the playwright’s contested relationship with his Jewish identity, and reveals that Miller was far more willing to concede the Loman family’s Jewishness in this period than has previously been suggested. In arguing that we cannot accurately interpret postwar American dramatists like Miller without examining the Yiddish record, I am advocating for a multilingual corrective to American theater scholarship at large.

KEYWORDS

Adaptation, Jews, Yiddish, Arthur Miller, Multilingualism, American drama

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Brooklyn, 1951. The curtain rises on a familiar scene: a skeletal outline of a house overshadowed by high-rise apartment buildings. Lights up on a dreary kitchen and two colorless bedrooms. Enter the father, hunched over and carrying two heavy suitcases. He sits down at the kitchen table with a sigh. “*Vili?*” calls his wife from the bedroom. “*Yo, ikh*, [“Yes, I]” he replies.

“*Ikh bin tsurikgekumen*” [“I have returned”], a line that carries dual meaning for this audience (Buloff 1). The iconic salesman with the suitcases is indeed Willy Loman of Arthur Miller’s celebrated *Death of a Salesman*; unlike his Broadway counterpart, however, this salesman is no American Everyman, but rather an idiom-spouting, gesticulating, Yiddish-speaking Jew from Brooklyn.

In the first decade after the Second World War, Broadway’s biggest hit was a play that featured Jewish protagonists (as Miller admitted nearly half a century later) whose ethnic identities were intentionally rendered invisible. *Salesman*’s canonization as an American classic began with Brooks Atkinson’s opening night review hailing it as “one of the finest dramas in the whole range of American theatre” (Centola and Cirulli 27-29), and the play quickly acquired its reputation as *the* quintessential modern American drama after sweeping the Pulitzer Prize, New York Drama Critics’ Circle, and Tony Awards in 1949. It is doubtful that *Death of a Salesman* would have become such a success had Miller not positioned the Loman family as Jews of indeterminate Jewishness. In a postwar landscape in which even the most successful American Jews felt compelled to mask their roots, a play with an explicitly Jewish protagonist would have been jarring for Broadway audiences of the 1940’s and 50’s, which were predominately comprised of first- and second-generation American Jews (Hecht 1-2). Accordingly, as Henry Bial has argued, Miller made the Loman family’s Jewishness manifest in its “palpable absence,” an act of “active vanishing” that allowed Jewish spectators to recognize the protagonists as brethren without alienating non-Jews with an overt display of difference (135). In emphasizing the universality of its quasi-Jewish characters, *Death of a Salesman* modeled for Broadway’s

Jewish theatergoers how they too could integrate into mainstream American culture by making their ethnic identity legible to insiders but invisible to outsiders.

The Jewish content (or lack thereof) of *Death of a Salesman* has long been the subject of critical and scholarly debate. Reviewers began to question whether Willy Loman was meant to be Jewish almost immediately after *Salesman*'s premiere, in spite of Arthur Miller's repeated insistence that there was nothing Jewish about the play at all. Scholars have analyzed the language of the play as "Yiddish-inflected" and compared Willy Loman's character to Jewish literary archetypes of the *luftmensch* (a person who lacks practical sense) or the *schlemiel* (a habitual bungler) (Most 111). Likewise, there is a significant body of scholarship about what one might call *Salesman*'s "Jewish problem." Scholars of American drama, performance studies, and Jewish studies have long been fascinated by the peculiar Jewish mechanics of this play – that is to say, how Miller strategically employed the absence of precise ethnic markers to hint that his characters were *probably* Jewish. Among the influential readings of *Salesman* in this vein are Henry Bial's analysis of the play's structural "double-coding," in which Jewishness is expressed in a way that is only recognizable to other Jews (49-60), Julius Novick's reading of *Salesman* as a Jewish American play (47-51), and Andrea Most's argument that *Salesman* is best understood as a response to the rise of "theatrical liberalism" (108-125). And yet, there remains a significant body of writing on *Salesman*'s Jewish reception that has not been addressed by the extant scholarship. This neglected corpus was not written in English, the language of mainstream American discourse about the play, but rather, in a language with decidedly overt connotations of Jewish identity: Yiddish.

The Yiddish record offers insight into how American Jews responded within their own community to *Salesman*'s meteoric Broadway success. The standard historical narrative of American Jewish life in the 1940's and 50's is one of rapid linguistic, social, and cultural assimilation; accordingly, scholars of postwar Jewish theater have tended to follow the lead of their Jewishly-anxious subjects in focusing primarily on English-language sources.¹ More often than not, scholars of American Jewish drama confine the scope of their research to works authored in English, while Yiddish theater historians consider only those plays written in Yiddish. But neither of these approaches account for how Jewish playwrights, performers, and audience members of the period routinely migrated from one linguistic sphere to the other.

American Jewry – the same population that comprised a disproportionately high percentage of Broadway theatergoers in the 1940s and 50s – was still a thoroughly multilingual community when *Salesman* became an overnight sensation. Yiddish in America may have been on the decline, but it did not vanish overnight, and Yiddish speakers thus continued to comprise a substantial percentage of the American Jewish community in the immediate postwar period. In 1940, well over 1.7 million American Jews claimed Yiddish as their mother tongue (Ellman 171, Fishman 463). Ten years later, there were still six daily Yiddish newspapers and seventeen other periodicals published in New York City alone for a total of more than 401,000 readers (Fishman 440-447). In other words, approximately 20 percent of New York Jews in 1950 subscribed to a Yiddish newspaper. Yiddish also remained a primary locus of communal conversation in the 1950s and was widely used in major American Jewish institutions. For example, Yiddish was a primary language of instruction at Yeshiva University throughout the 1950's; only in 1960 did instructors like Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik switch to English upon noticing that some students

did not understand Yiddish (Grossman). At the same time, as has been well documented, a significant majority of New York City's concert and theatergoers in the 1950's were Jewish (*Encyclopedia Judaica* 219). While certainly not all of these Jewish theatergoers spoke Yiddish (and indeed, many second-generation Jews were encouraged to switch to English by their Yiddish-speaking parents), it is likely that a majority of the Jews attending *Salesman* had significant exposure to Yiddish as a major language of the American Jewish community.

While *Salesman* catapulted to Broadway success alongside an English-language conversation about Jewish representation on the American stage, a parallel *internal* debate was happening simultaneously among American Jews – in Yiddish. Writing for a linguistically-bounded community of fellow Jews, those who chose to comment on the play in Yiddish expressed far more ambiguous attitudes than their English-language colleagues about the play that had made the Lomans a household name. If, as Bial has suggested, postwar American Jewish dramas were deliberately designed to read differently to Jewish and Gentile theatergoers, then it stands to reason that English-language dramatic criticism of the period would also be marked by similar double-coding strategies. By privileging English-language writing over material authored in the primary internal language of American Jewry during this period, the scholarship on *Salesman* has been unwittingly skewed towards the community's externalized response without taking its more private reactions into account.

This article aims to correct this oversight by examining how Jews responded, in their own language, to *Salesman*'s Broadway triumph. *Salesman*'s premiere was quickly followed by several Yiddish versions that sought to unmask the true identities of Miller's ambiguously Jewish characters. The first, authored by Joseph Buloff and Luba Kadison, played in Argentina and New

York City; the second, authored by Jacob Mestel, toured in South Africa (I have chosen to focus on the former as the original Yiddish *Salesman* production and because of Miller's personal involvement in its American premiere). Isolated references to Buloff and Kadison's Yiddish *Salesman* (entitled *Toyt fun a seylsman*) pepper the footnotes of the scholarly record: Henry Bial mentions it in his analysis of the play, as do Mary McCarthy, Leslie Fiedler, Harold Bloom, Christopher Bigsby, Brenda Murphy, Joel Shatzky, Julius Novick, Andrea Most, and many others. When the Mike Nichols revival of *Death of a Salesman* opened in 2012, *The New York Times* marked the occasion with an article that referenced the New York Yiddish production as its lede (Freedman). Yet while the existence of this *Salesman* adaptation is well documented, the content of this Jewish version of an iconic postwar American drama has never been explored.

I read Buloff and Kadison's Yiddish *Salesman* as belonging to a particular subcategory of literary adaptation into marginalized languages that I call "counter-adaptation," a term that I borrow from the natural sciences. While *Toyt fun a seylsman* was marketed as a literal translation, a closer reading of the Yiddish script demonstrates that it was heavily altered with aims that I argue were particular to its position as a minority language adaptation of a majority language work. I call *Toyt fun a seylsman* a "counter-adaptation" because it was adapted with a subtly subversive agenda firmly in mind: to *precisely* counteract the assimilationist message of its predecessor while masquerading as an exact translation. The success of Willy Loman on Broadway had demonstrated that Jews could enter mainstream American culture by erasing markers of their ethnic particularity. But transposed into Yiddish and "returned" to a full-bodied Jewish linguistic and cultural milieu that Miller could only hint at, *Toyt fun a seylsman* symbolically caught Broadway in the act of ethnic erasure.²

In placing Broadway's greatest postwar dramatic success in conversation with its counter-adapted echo on the Yiddish stage, I intend to suggest that we cannot fully understand how Broadway audiences (a majority of whom in this period were Jewish, and thus, de facto members of a multilingual community) responded to a play like *Salesman* without taking the Yiddish record into account. Without these missing Yiddish voices, we cannot adequately evaluate how postwar American Jews responded to their deracinated representation on Broadway, nor can we make sense of the precise cultural dynamics that enabled *Salesman* to succeed with an audience of acculturated Jews whose lives encompassed both the great flowering and the great decline of American Yiddish theater, literature, and culture.

In suggesting that we cannot accurately interpret postwar American drama without examining the Yiddish plays, theater reviews, and journalism of this period, I am also arguing for a broader multilingual corrective to American theater scholarship at large. The history of American drama was not inscribed solely in English, but in a multitude of tongues belonging to the immigrant communities that defined its trajectory. The Yiddish counter-adaptation of *Death of a Salesman* is but a single case study that demonstrates how including multilingual writing can shed new light upon the reception history of American drama. A fresh accounting of American dramatic writing and criticism that placed multilingual texts at the forefront would doubtless reveal other examples of similar phenomena: dramas by immigrant writers and their descendants whose reception occurred not only in English, but also in the culturally-specific landscapes of individual ethnic communities.³ To borrow from Linda Loman's famous Yiddish-inflected refrain, "attention, attention must be paid" (Miller 40-41).

Counter-Adaptation and the Canon

Unlike the rigorous taxonomies of adaptation developed by biologists, literary scholars have only just begun to develop a vocabulary for evaluating adaptations that moves beyond the reductive criterion of “fidelity” to the original (Bortolotti and Hutcheon 444). Drawing upon the rich vocabulary developed by biologists to describe various modes of adaptation, I would like to suggest *counter-adaptation* as a productive conceptual framework for understanding the production of literary adaptations by minority cultures.

The vocabulary developed by biologists to describe different types of adaptation could provide humanists with a richer understanding of literary adaptation as encompassing several distinct forms, each governed by its own particular rules and outcomes. We need a better system for classifying literary and dramatic adaptations because, as is well documented, all texts do not begin on equal footing. A translation from one dominant language/culture to another or from a minority language/culture into that of the majority has, almost by definition, a different set of concerns than a translation from a dominant language into one that has been historically marginalized (Tymoczko). Similarly, adaptations that shift a text’s audience from a minority culture to a dominant culture differ from those that make the opposite move. These differences are only exacerbated when the minority language in question has a perceived legitimacy problem, as has been the case for Yiddish throughout its history. As a canonical American text translated and adapted from dominant English to marginalized Yiddish, *Toyt fun a seylsman* offers an ideal case study through which to examine how adaptation becomes a more specific mechanism in the face of extremely high cultural stakes.

As we will see, *Salesman* was adapted into Yiddish at precisely the same moment in which the very survival of Yiddish theater in America was suddenly thrust into jeopardy. It is

against this backdrop of cultural upheaval that I read *Toyt fun a seylsman* as a “counter-adaptation.”

Adaptation is an everyday occurrence in the natural world, but counter-adaptation is a more unusual biological phenomenon that occurs when an animal (typically under attack) develops a counter-evolutionary trait or behavior in direct response to a trait developed by another animal or species, beginning what amounts to an evolutionary arms race in which each subsequent adaptation is offset by another counter-adaptation (Koene and Schulenburg).⁴ Where biological counter-adaptation involves an animal countering the effects of an adaptation that is evolutionarily advantageous for one animal but poses a threat to another, literary counter-adaptation occurs when the agenda of a dominant text is disrupted by an adaptation from a minority culture. Figure 1 summarizes the analogy that I am making between biological and literary counter-adaptation:

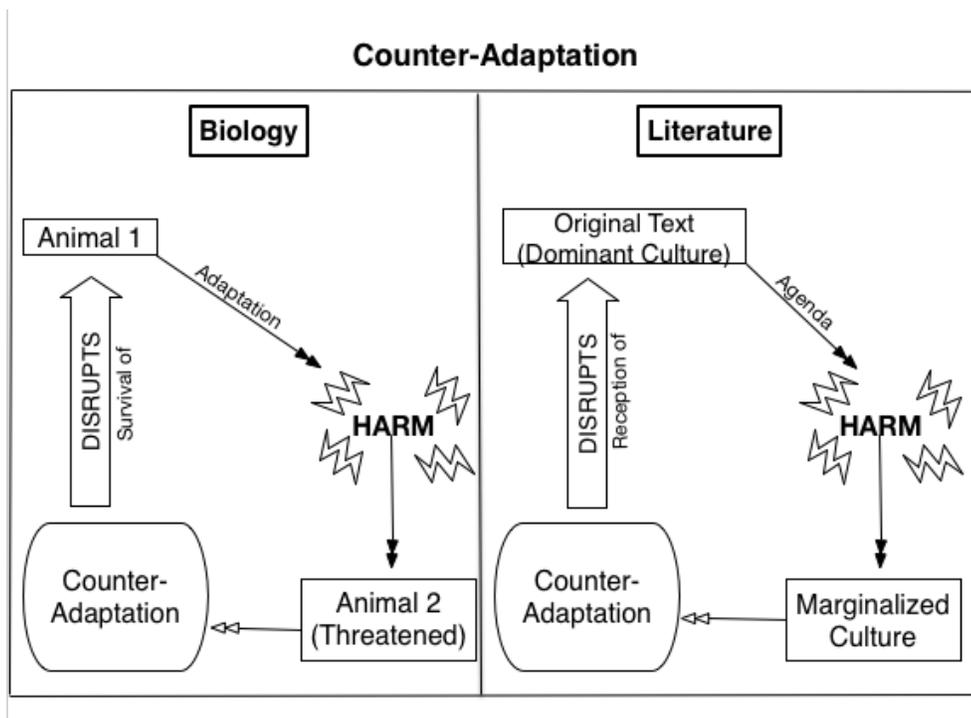


Figure 1: Biological and Literary Processes of Counter-Adaptation

An individual or group, feeling threatened by a dominant text, develops a new cultural product that poses a challenge to the original agenda. Just as an animal will develop a counter-adaptation that seems, on the surface, to be an ordinary adaptation with no particular agenda, literary counter-adaptations likewise masquerade as apolitical. By sabotaging the message of the dominant source text while cloaked in the guise of “loyal” adaptation or even translation, counter-adaptation can be a subtle yet highly effective disrupter of a text’s reception. The “counter” in “counter-adaptation” also highlights another key facet of this mechanism, poignantly expressed in the case of *Toyt fun a seylsman*: the alinear and thoroughly subversive notion that the supposed “adaptation” is actually a return to the original as it *ought to have been written in the first place*.

Anecdotal mentions of Buloff and Kadison’s Yiddish *Salesman* in the scholarly record have tended to cite the production in relation to what it reveals about Miller’s original text (typically, Willy and Linda’s Yiddish-inflected speech). But in framing *Toyt fun a seylsman* a counter-adaptation, I am arguing that the production was less about unmasking the assimilationist politics of Arthur Miller and more about demonstrating the continued relevance of Yiddish theater for postwar America. In a landscape in which the once legendary Yiddish theaters of New York were on the brink of extinction, this production’s suggestion that the most successful postwar Broadway drama *belonged* to the Yiddish theater was a powerful argument for the persistent centrality of the Yiddish stage to American theater at large. If Willy Loman was more at home in Yiddish-speaking Brooklyn than on English-speaking Broadway, then perhaps the postwar Yiddish theater was not, as its critics had charged, an art form on the periphery of Jewish cultural life, but rather, the nucleus of mainstream American theatrical creativity.

Running on Air: Jewish Actors and the Postwar Yiddish Stage

As news of the mass destruction of European Jewry began to circulate in the United States, American Jews were also contending with a domestic crisis that shook even the most established Jewish institutions to their core. At the heart of this structural transformation was the steady decline of Yiddish as the primary vernacular of American Jewry. Yiddish newspaper readership had peaked during World War I, followed by decades of steady decline as upwardly mobile American Jewish families increasingly chose not to speak Yiddish with their children (Diner 241). Jews were by no means the only American immigrants to abandon their native tongue, but this transformation happened much more rapidly among American Jews than among other immigrant populations. Indeed, the linguistic rupture between immigrant parents and their American-born children was more pronounced among Yiddish-speaking Jews than among any other group of the period (Ellman 170-175). Without producing enough native-born American Yiddish speakers to maintain a vibrant cultural sphere, and without a steady influx of new Eastern European immigrants to read Yiddish papers, attend Yiddish theater, and write and buy Yiddish books, Yiddish cultural output declined precipitously in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Nowhere was this trend more pronounced than in the career trajectories of the American Jewish actors who migrated en masse to the English-speaking stage during and after World War II, and in the theatergoing habits of the fans who followed their lead. There was nothing new about American Yiddish actors who dreamed of making it big on the English-language stage. Precarity and decline were familiar narrative tropes in the Yiddish press from the American Yiddish theater's very inception (Warnke). But after World War II, even those who had

advocated most vehemently for the Yiddish theater were increasingly leaving it behind. There was little choice – audiences at Yiddish productions were smaller than ever before, and one by one, the great Yiddish theaters of Second Avenue began to close (Diner 243). There were those who remained professional Yiddish actors after the war, but virtually overnight, they found themselves facing a vanishing institutional framework. Actors who were accustomed to playing before thousands upon gilded proscenium stages were, in the space of a few years, reduced to performing for aging groups in synagogue anterooms and community center auditoriums. In the words of Yiddish theater historian Nahma Sandrow, American Yiddish actors of the 1940's and 50's resembled “cartoon characters who race off a cliff before they realize that they are running on space” (291). Most chose to leap to safer ground on the English-language stage to avoid falling off the cultural cliff, clinging to Yiddish like Looney Tunes' Wile E. Coyote clutching his latest failed product from Acme Corp.

It was against this backdrop of the declining American Yiddish stage that a husband-and-wife team of former Yiddish actors attended the Broadway production of *Death of a Salesman*. Joseph Buloff and Luba Kadison had once been among the most sought after Yiddish actors of their generation. But like many of their colleagues, the couple had left the Yiddish stage in the mid-1930s for Broadway and Hollywood stardom. Sitting in the plush seats of the Morosco Theater, they had come a long way: Buloff had just originated the role of Ali Hakim in *Oklahoma!* on Broadway, while Kadison had temporarily retired from the stage to start a family and support her husband's burgeoning stage and screen career. While many of their former Yiddish theater colleagues were struggling to make ends meet, Buloff and Kadison had the opportunity to build a new life for themselves as mainstream American performers.

But against the accepted logic of Jewish actors of their generation, the couple made the improbable decision to return to the Yiddish stage. Ironically, in spite of Miller's efforts to bury the Loman family's Jewish identity, the all-too-*present* absence of Jewish markers gave Buloff and Kadison an idea: *Death of a Salesman* would be the unlikely vehicle for their Yiddish homecoming.

Buloff and Kadison could not simply stage a Yiddish production of *Salesman* in New York. When the Broadway production closed after almost 750 performances, and New York producers began to approach Miller for permission to stage the biggest hit of the decade, the playwright turned them all down and instituted a strict ban on any professional production within 100 miles of Broadway (Murphy 78-9). For decades, Miller was notorious for his reluctance to relinquish control over the play; twenty-five years later, when Miller finally authorized a production of *Salesman* by the Philadelphia Drama Guild, he insisted upon so many specific demands that the director quit the week before the opening, at which point the playwright simply took over the direction himself (Murphy 78-80). When asked why he was so determined to prohibit professional performances of *Salesman* near New York, Miller told journalists that it was a matter of quality control: since he felt that there was no local theater (except for the original company) qualified to do *Salesman* justice, and since any production in the New York area would be viewed as a revival, a blanket ban was the only option (Murphy 79). The ban did not, however, apply to foreign productions, and New York producers watched from the sidelines as companies in dozens of countries (including Great Britain, Denmark, Sweden, Switzerland, Argentina, Italy, France, Austria, Greece, Germany, and Israel in 1950 alone) made record-breaking profits with *Salesman* (Murphy 70).

Instead, Buloff and Kadison packed their bags and headed for Buenos Aires, home to a thriving postwar Yiddish theater scene. The decline in Yiddish theatergoing was not evenly distributed throughout the Jewish world. After World War II, cities like Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Montreal, and Melbourne that had previously played a minor role in hosting touring performers became themselves major centers of Yiddish theatrical activity. In Buenos Aires, the war had scarcely altered the relationship of the city's Jews to their Yiddish theater (Mirelman 171-4). In fact, the 1950's marked the zenith of Yiddish cultural creativity in the City of Good Airs, fueled by an open immigration policy, which brought a large influx of Jews to Argentina immediately before, during, and after the Second World War, and by a local Jewish community that prioritized the retention of its vernacular. The Yiddish theaters of Buenos Aires were thus expanding just as Jewish theaters elsewhere were closing one after another. With its burgeoning Yiddish theater scene, Argentina offered the perfect backdrop for Buloff and Kadison to stage their linguistic homecoming. There was another, more practical reason that Argentina was an ideal location for a Yiddish production of *Salesman*: no one had yet brought the play there, in any language. Though their production would be in Yiddish, not Spanish, Buloff and Kadison could count on attracting a large and diverse audience to *Salesman*'s Argentinean premiere.

But if Buloff and Kadison were to be the first to bring *Salesman* to Argentina, they would have to hurry. The play had opened on Broadway in February 1949. Buloff and Kadison slated their production for mid-June, just four months later. With such a tight turnaround, the couple made a calculated decision not to contact Miller or his agents for permission to produce their Yiddish version. They would wait until after the reviews came in.

Though they lacked official permission to stage the play, Kadison and Buloff decided to make their Yiddish *Salesman* a precise visual imitation of the Broadway production. They hired a team of carpenters and electricians to create an exact reproduction of Jo Mielziner's iconic set and lighting designs, despite a budget that was a fraction of the original. Costumes would likewise follow the couple's detailed notes on Julia Sze's designs. During rehearsals, Buloff would work individually with each actor to mirror Elia Kazan's blocking and tempo, scene by scene. On the surface, the couple designed their *Salesman* to look virtually identical to the Broadway version, with one notable exception: the language. Placed within the framework of a production that carefully imitated every other element of the Broadway original, the Yiddish speech and Jewish mannerisms of "Vili" Loman and his family would be especially jarring. How would this iconic American play be different if Willy Loman spoke, looked, and acted like a Jew? Without other production elements to distract their attention, spectators would have no choice but to confront that question.

"Speak with Intelligent Language!" Counter-Adapting *Salesman* into Yiddish

At this point, I would like to turn to a close reading of the *Toyt fun a seylsman* script, through the lens of its counter-adaptive mechanisms, in order to illuminate how Buloff and Kadison strategically sabotaged Miller's implied pro-acculturation message.⁵

In order to qualify as a counter-adaptation, as defined above, an adaptation must demonstrate a singularity of purpose. The *only* elements of the original text that are altered are those that relate directly to its political stakes. Anything else is left wholly untouched, resulting in an adaptation that hews remarkably close to its original. Moreover, alterations to the original

text are introduced sporadically in order to give readers or spectators the impression that virtually nothing has been changed. By altering its source text only sparingly, counter-adaptation enables the adapted version of a text to be *perceived* as “loyal” to the original. Thus masquerading as a faithful rendering, the counter-adaptation becomes subtly subversive, challenging its audience’s perspective on the original text without them even realizing it.

Toyt fun a seylsman was designed to seem like a direct translation of Arthur Miller’s play into Yiddish. Approximately 90% of the text of the Yiddish version was translated in precise, exacting loyalty to the original. Buloff and Kadison’s production further augmented this false perception that the project was a simple translation by providing the audience with a virtual replica of the sets, costumes, lighting, and stage direction associated with the Broadway production. But Buloff and Kadison’s script also included strategically placed deviations that (1) reanimated the Lomans’ Jewish specificity and (2) attributed Willy’s tragic end to his inability to acknowledge his true (i.e. Jewish) identity. The overall effect was of a family that was actively trying to mask its Jewish identity but frequently failing in the endeavor. Where Miller’s Lomans avoided the question of ethnic origins entirely, Buloff and Kadison’s characters simultaneously acknowledged and denied their Jewishness. This setup – in which the Yiddish-speaking Lomans openly wrestled with their Jewish identities within a stage world that symbolically evoked Broadway – was a provocative unmasking of the politics of the postwar American entertainment industry vis-à-vis its Jewish participants.

Buloff and Kadison made four types of strategic interventions in counter-adapting *Salesman*: (1) altering some of the character’s names; (2) selectively rendering seemingly innocuous lines in idiomatic Yiddish; (3) converting the Loman boys’ athletic prowess into

another one of Willy's delusions; and (4) reimagining Linda Loman as a feisty Jewish mother. Couched within a script and production that billed itself as a literal translation, these modifications made explicit that which had been implicit in Arthur Miller's play: that Willy Loman and his family were of Jewish origin, and that Willy's debilitating anxiety over how others perceived him, his subsequent madness, and his ultimate suicide could all be traced to a single and wholly avoidable cause.

Let us examine each of these counter-adaptive strategies in detail. First, in their most overt modification to the original text, Buloff and Kadison altered the names of the Loman boys – not to more Jewish monikers, as one might have expected, but rather to more typical American names. The couple converted Miller's unusual and symbolically evocative names (“Biff” the jock, “Happy” the kid who nobody takes seriously) into names so commonplace that they signify nothing. In *Toyt fun a seylsman*, Biff and Happy become Bill and Harry Loman – a mirroring of the familiar trope of a Jew Americanizing his name to conceal his origins. While this modification was not especially subtle, it had a counter-adaptive effect by indirectly drawing the audience's attention to the name-changing conventions prevalent in American theater and film of the period, including among the cast and crew of Broadway's *Salesman*: actor Lee J. Cobb, who played the original Willy Loman, had changed his name to a neutral moniker from the more ethnically specific Leo Jacob. In the Yiddish version, the identity masking mechanisms required for Broadway success are rendered visible. Where Biff and Happy are memorable and emblematic; Bill and Harry are two Jewish guys just trying to blend into the crowd.

Buloff and Kadison's other modifications similarly performed loyalty to the original text while subtly undermining its message. In a second textual intervention, the team accentuated the

existing Jewishly-inflected speech patterns of Miller's play with additional Yiddish idioms. Most of the lines that were altered were chosen for their seeming innocuousness, thus rendering lines that rarely had evoked comment on Broadway newly significant as markers of the Loman family's buried cultural heritage. Previously straightforward lines become infused with more detail, color, and emotion. For instance, Willy's curse "that goddamn Studebaker" (Miller 52) becomes a richly expressive exclamation in Yiddish: "*In drerd arayn, di automobil est mikh af a lebediker!*" (That automobile, may it go to hell, is eating me alive!) (Buloff 62). Or Willy's question to Linda "How can he find himself on a farm? Is that a life? A farmhand?" (Miller 9), which becomes more vivid and specific in Yiddish: "*Ver hot im geheysn geyt [sic] arbetn af a farm? Vos iz dos far a kariere reynikn ferdishhe mist?*" ("Who ever gave him the idea to go work on a farm? What kind of a career is cleaning horse shit?") (Buloff 4). Even Willy's most innocuous remarks to his wife ("Why do you get American when I like Swiss?") provide new insights into his character in the Yiddish version: "*Vos epes plutsim holender kez? Ver darf holender kez? Kh'hob lib Amerikanisher tshiz.*" ("What, Dutch cheese all of the sudden? Who needs Dutch cheese? I prefer American cheese.") (Buloff 5). In Yiddish, Willy's offhand comment to Linda demonstrates the depths of his need to belong, to fit in as authentically American. He chides his wife not for buying the wrong kind of cheese, but for purchasing foreign *kez* (spoken in Yiddish) instead of a more thoroughly American *cheese* (spoken in English). Implied in these line modifications and linguistic switches is that Willy Loman's character can only be expressed in its full dimensions when his Jewish identity is made explicit.

The addition of these Yiddish idioms is tempered by evidence that the characters are concerned about behaving too Jewishly, a element from Miller's play that becomes suddenly

absurd in Yiddish translation. In *Salesman*, Willy chides his son for using slang: “‘Gee’ is a boy’s word. A man walking in for fifteen thousand dollars does not say ‘Gee!’” (Miller 47). In the Yiddish version, Willy instead rebukes his son for using the same idiomatic speech patterns that he himself uses on a regular basis (departures from Miller’s script are indicated in **bold**).

VILI: Vifl vestu bay im betn?

BIL: Zol ikh azoy visn fun tsores.

VILI: (*In veytik*) Dos toyg nisht. Vos iz dos far a shprakh – zol ikh azoy visn fun tsores – azoy redt a yingl. **Red mit an intelighenter shprakh.** A mentsh vos vil 15 toyznt dolar a yor, **darf visn vi tsu redn.**

WILLY: How much will you ask him for?

BILL: I should know so little about sorrow.⁶

WILLY: (*Pained*) That’s not appropriate. What kind of language is that – “I should know so little about sorrow” – that’s how a boy speaks. **Speak with intelligent language.** A man who wants fifteen thousand dollars a year **ought to know how to talk** (Buloff 55).

Over and over, Buloff and Kadison’s characters make distinctions between heavily idiomatic Yiddish (signifying immaturity and failure) and so-called “proper” Yiddish – that is to say, lines that are exact translations of Miller’s English dialogue – which conveys sophistication and achievement. The irony, of course, is that *all* of the characters are speaking the same language. Willy Loman’s predicament, the Yiddish version suggests, cannot be explained by poor decisions or character flaws. Rather, Willy’s problem is simply that he is a Jew in a world that no longer speaks his language.

In a third counter-adaptive strategy, Willy’s linguistic fears are mirrored by his Yiddish-speaking sons’ new anxieties about their too Jewish bodies. Miller’s protagonist praises God that his sons are “built like Adonises” (Miller 23). Instead, Jewish Vili Loman assures his sons that though they may not be as smart as Bernard, they will still succeed because of their “strong,

healthy personalities” (Buloff 23). Miller’s Willy reminds his sons that physical appearance is more important than intelligence, but his Yiddish-speaking counterpart offers his boys a different prescription for success: “You’ve got to have a real personality” (Buloff 23). For these overtly Jewish Lomans, it is *personality* – not athletic prowess – that is the key to success and social mobility.

Similarly, when muscular Happy tries boxing with Bernard in Miller’s play, Bernard runs away in fear. But when Yiddish-speaking Harry suggests boxing, Bernard happily agrees, beginning to box before realizing that perhaps he should remove his glasses (Buloff 22). Unlike athletic all-American Happy, Yiddish-speaking Harry poses no real physical threat. In the Yiddish version, anemic Bernard is the physical equal of the supposedly athletic Loman boys. Willy’s dream of football glory for his son thus takes on new meaning in a dramatic universe in which Bill’s promising sports career is just one more of his father’s delusions.

With sons that are no longer muscular, the *physical* dimension of the final confrontation between the boys and their father is eliminated (in Miller’s play, Biff almost attacks Willy but is blocked by Happy; in the Yiddish version, these stage directions are notably absent). Instead, the intensity of the *verbal* confrontation between the two generations of Loman men is heightened. Where Miller’s Biff confronts his father with the threat of physical violence and the lines “I am not a leader of men, Willy, and neither are you. You were never anything but a hard-working drummer who landed in the ashcan like all the rest of them” (Miller 97), the conversation between Yiddish-speaking Bill and his father takes on a harsher tone:

BIL: Du bist gornisht! Bloyz a shver farhoreveter tir klaper, **an oyspoyker fun fremde skhoyres, vos hot zikh endlekh derkaklt tsum mist kastn.**

VILI: **Ikh bin Vili Loman!**

BIL: **Vos iz vert a dolar a sho, Mr. Vili. [...]**
 VILI: **Ikh bin Vili Loman!**
 BIL: **Gornisht! Gornisht!**

BILL: You are nothing! Just a hard-working door knocker, **a herald of strange merchandise, who in the end was shit out into the garbage can.**

VILI: **I am Willy Loman!**
 BILL: **Who is worth a dollar an hour, Mr. Willy [...]**
 VILI: **I am Willy Loman!**
 BILL: **A nothing! A nothing!** (Buloff 112)

The Loman boys' bodies are not the only ones affected by the change from English to Yiddish.

Willy's appearance is also altered. On Broadway, Willy Loman worried that his weight made him appear unprofessional: "I'm fat. I'm very – foolish to look at, Linda" (Miller 26). His Yiddish-speaking counterpart (played by the slender Buloff) may not be overweight, but he has his own concerns about looking too ethnic. "I lack something," Vili worries, "I don't look like other people" (Buloff 27). By altering the Loman men's bodies along with their language, Buloff and Kadison make explicit that which Miller could only hint at: that the root cause of Willy Loman's problems is anxiety over his Jewish origins.

Finally, the couple made significant modifications to the character of Linda, a role that Kadison would play in every performance. Gentle, self-effacing, and unequivocally supportive of her husband in the original, in Yiddish Linda becomes an uncompromising woman who directly challenges Willy's unwillingness to face reality. In *Toyt fun a seylsman*, Linda Loman is reimagined as a Jewish mother reminiscent of the maternal tropes of the Yiddish stage. She is less of an advocate for Willy and more protective of her own interests. When Willy refuses to ask for a transfer to the New York office to cut down on his time on the road, Miller's Linda gently disagrees: "You're too accommodating, dear" (Miller 8). Her Yiddish-speaking counterpart, on

the other hand, presses the issue: “*Vos hostu moyre?*” (“What, are you afraid?”) she challenges her husband (Buloff 3). Similarly, when Willy complains that he has been paying their mortgage for twenty-five years, the original Linda simply agrees: “Biff was nine years old when we bought it” (Miller 53). But Kadison’s Linda is nobody’s doormat and she answers *her* husband, in classic Jewish style, with a question. “*Vos zhe vilstu?*” (“Well, what did you expect?”) she chides (Buloff 62). In English, Linda Loman was passive and yielding, cowed by the pressure of her husband’s delusional dreams; in Yiddish, she becomes a fully-fledged character who is not afraid to express her opinions. Like Willy’s colorful Yiddish idioms, Linda’s transformation into a strong character gently suggests to audiences that each alteration was simply a way to reveal a more authentic subtext that had been present all along.

Billed as a loyal translation and framed by set, costume, and lighting designs that imitated the original production down to the most minute detail, *Toyt fun a seylsman* opened to critical acclaim in Argentina. In the Yiddish press, reviewers praised the production’s universality and the revealed Jewishness of Miller’s Lomans in the same breath. Rivke Katsnelson’s review in *Di naye tsayt* praised the play’s global appeal while also calling *Salesman* “a Jewish play” because “the depression that envelops its protagonists is especially characteristic of Jews living in the great metropolises of the world” (Katsnelson).

Spanish-language reviewers and theatergoers, on the other hand, seemed to take it for granted that the Yiddish production was a loyal translation of Arthur Miller’s celebrated play. In fact, Argentinean journalists were so thoroughly convinced of the Yiddish version’s loyalty to the original that many neglected to even mention that the production was in Yiddish. A review

published in *Noticias Gráficas* was typical of *Toyt fun a seylsman*'s reception in the Argentinean press:

Joseph Buloff returned his name to the marquee at the Soleil Theater with the opening of *Death of a Salesman*, a drama by Arthur Miller, one of the greatest successes on Broadway during the last few years, and the recent Pulitzer winner. Miller's drama is an exhaustive analysis of the downward spiral of the 'salesman' in the United States, examining its individual significance and social repercussions. [...] Buloff's cast performs a laudable piece of work under the guidance of their director and lead actor, *unveiling the drama's essence to the audience*, which results in a comprehensive and effective production ("Con 'La Muerte'").⁷

If Yiddish was mentioned at all, it was as a footnote. "It so happens," amended the reviewer, "that a Jewish actor named Joseph Buloff is performing this play in Yiddish" ("Con 'La Muerte'"). Reviewers were far more interested in the content of Miller's play than in considering the Yiddish adaptation's relationship to the original. In interviews, Buloff followed the lead of the Argentinean press in rarely mentioning Yiddish, focusing instead on *Salesman*'s significance for American theater at large (E.A.). Advertisements in the Spanish-language press and even the playbill likewise de-emphasized Yiddish by calling the production *La Muerte de un Vendedor* instead of using its Yiddish title (Likht). A Spanish-speaking spectator might easily have walked into the theater unaware that they were about to see a Yiddish play until the opening scene began. These strategies, in which the adaptors intentionally masqueraded as translators, were in keeping with their counter-adaptive aim: to almost imperceptibly counteract the original text by performing loyalty while strategically subverting it.

Willy Loman's Brooklyn Homecoming

After *Toyt fun a seylsman* closed in Buenos Aires, Buloff mailed Miller envelope after envelope filled with Spanish and Yiddish reviews, without even bothering to include translations.

The production had been so successful, Buloff boasted, that a prominent Buenos Aires company had decided to perform a Spanish-language version of *Salesman* under his direction. Buloff advised Miller to grant them permission immediately. It was pure chutzpah – Buloff had never corresponded with Miller, nor had he ever had permission to stage *Salesman* in the first place. His letters were full of confidence but rife with typos, even misspelling the famous playwright’s last name. “As I told Mr. Muller [sic] in my letter,” Buloff wrote to Miller’s agents in July 1949, “I am sure that if you had seen the Yiddish version and my interpretation of the part of the salesman, you would not hesitate in granting me the permission and the rights for the play” (Buloff, Letter to Ruth Gordon).

And yet, in spite of Buloff’s audacious behavior, Miller was not angry. On the contrary, he replied with a polite note asking the Yiddish actor to sign and return a backdated contract that he must have “somehow overlooked,” along with a friendly reminder to send MCA the missing royalties (Lyons). A few months later, a second contract arrived at Buloff’s Buenos Aires hotel. It was every postwar theater producer’s dream: permission to stage *Salesman* anywhere in the United States, including New York City, so long as the production was in Yiddish. Miller’s sole stipulation was a gently-worded request that the Yiddish version keep to “the spirit of the original play,” leaving Buloff free to adapt the play’s dialogue, characters, and plot at will (MCA Management). Later, Buloff obtained a third contract from Arthur Miller permitting unlimited performances in South America, South Africa, and Israel (MCA Artists).

Miller’s acceptance of the Yiddish *Salesman* stood in stark opposition to his ban on professional productions in the New York metropolitan area. After the Broadway production closed in 1951, these Yiddish-speaking actors were the only professional performers who were

legally allowed to perform *Salesman* anywhere near Broadway for the next twenty-five years. Miller's motivations for this decision are unclear from his correspondence with Buloff. Perhaps Miller was personally invested in seeing a Yiddish production of *Salesman* or perhaps he simply did not believe that a Yiddish version would pose a threat. But by making an exception for *Salesman* in Yiddish, Miller implicitly (and perhaps unwittingly) conveyed a message to Broadway's Jewish theatergoers that augmented the counter-adaptive goals of Buloff and Kadison's production. If a Yiddish-speaking company was the only group authorized to stage *Salesman* wherever they desired, then perhaps there was something exemplary about the quality of their work, and by extension, the quality of the Yiddish stage. Miller's permission for a *Seylsman* production suggested to New York's Yiddish-speaking denizens that, in the eyes of the most celebrated American playwright of the century, the Yiddish stage remained an important venue for high-quality theater.

In interviews with New York journalists, Buloff and Kadison articulated an alternative genealogy of *Salesman* in which the real meaning of the play could be found only in Yiddish, the language, they argued, in which its characters belonged. When *Death of a Salesman* premiered on Broadway, Buloff quipped, 90% of the audience was sure that they were watching the tragedy of somebody else. In the Yiddish version, Jewish spectators realized that they had actually been watching *themselves* all along (Stern 6). Just as the Loman family's dialogue had been transposed in counter-assimilatory fashion from English, "back" to Yiddish, so too did Buloff and Kadison ask Broadway theatergoers, themselves disproportionately Jewish, to venture "back" from Manhattan into the ethnic enclaves of Brooklyn. In this way, the production challenged dominant cultural narratives of assimilation as progress by telling theatergoers that

they needed to return to a landscape of linguistic and ethnic diversity in order to understand this iconic American play.

The Yiddishization of *Salesman* was not exclusively confined to the dialogue. Within the basic framework of Elia Kazan's blocking, Buloff also incorporated Yiddish theatrical norms into each character's gestures, giving spectators the impression that these characters embodied their Jewishness physically as well as linguistically. Still photographs from the New York production show the actors using an expansive gestural vocabulary that resembles the larger-than-life histrionic physicality historically associated with the Yiddish stage. In nearly every photograph, Buloff's Vili Loman gesticulates vigorously. His hands are almost always in motion in the production stills: gesturing towards his body, clutching at his face, pointing at his sons, questioning his wife, beseeching a higher power. In moments when Lee J. Cobb's Willy Loman rested his hands alongside his body or in his pockets, Buloff's hands became a dynamic part of the play, layering the dialogue with a demonstrative gestural vocabulary. In one photograph from the Brooklyn production, we see Buloff's Vili Loman facing the audience instead of his family, gesticulating as he talks instead of looking at them (Figure 2).

[FIGURE 2. Caption “*Toyt fun a seylsman*, Brooklyn, 1951. From left to right: Joseph Buloff as Vili Loman, Luba Kadison as Linda Loman, Yakob Susonoff as Harry, and Lewis Norman as Bill. Credit: Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations]

In another still from a 1958 Tel Aviv production of *Toyt fun a seylsman*, Buloff shakes his fists at the ceiling in a gesture that fellow former Yiddish actor Zero Mostel would later make famous in

Fiddler on the Roof. Buloff's Vili Loman talks with his hands, physically revealing his Jewish identity anew with every gesture (Figure 3).

[FIGURE 3. Caption: “*Toyt fun a seylsman*, Brooklyn, 1951. Left to right: Joseph Buloff as Vili Loman and Lewis Norman as Bill Loman. Credit: Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations]

To the English-speaking critics, who came out in large numbers to review *Seylsman* for major American newspapers and periodicals, Buloff's Willy was a revelation. “Graceful and affecting,” wrote one, “[Buloff] is as fluid as Willy Loman's imagination, equal to the expression of all sorts of moods, seldom letting his facility take the place of genuine feeling” (Pollock). “Willy speaks and behaves in Jewish idiom much more comfortably and eloquently than in American,” agreed George Ross in *Commentary*, “*Toyt fun a seylsman* is larger and more significant than *Death of a Salesman* by the discovery of Jewish character and Jewish situation in the play” (185). For *Seylsman*'s spectators, most of whom had seen the Broadway production first, Buloff's expressive style was a striking contrast to Lee J. Cobb's more restrained physicality, as though Yiddish-speaking Willy Loman was trying to tell audiences just how constrained he had felt by Broadway's anxieties about ethnic visibility. *Toyt fun a seylsman* was thus a kind of public expose of how assimilatory ambition had limited American Jewish acting, and by extension, the American theater at large.

In the Yiddish press, critics lauded *Seylsman* as a public symbol of Jewish theater's continuing vitality, a production that countered the sense of rapid decline among Yiddish theatergoers.

In a time when we have so many elegiac poets [*mekonenim*] who together bemoan the fate of Yiddish in America; in a time when we are all mourning the decline of Yiddish theater in America in general and especially in New York; in a time when an Israeli minister tells American Jewry to get the ‘mess’ of our ‘jargon’ [i.e. Yiddish] out of their faces and switch over – here we have a Yiddish theater production that shouts and calls: Yiddish lives! Yiddish creativity, Yiddish culture lives! Away with the elegies and the mourning. (Kazdan)

Why stage *Death of a Salesman* in Yiddish at all? As Buloff told the Yiddish press, the answer was simple: “Arthur Miller is just a Jewish guy *who’s afraid of that which is Jewish* [*an idisher bokher mit a tsiter farn idishn*]” (Beylin). In Yiddish, “the action comes out more human and more intimate than in the original,” thus allowing “the entire interior of the play to come out of hiding.” (H.E.) In other words, for Buloff and Kadison counter-adapting *Salesman* was about creating the play that Arthur Miller should have written in the first place.

While Miller neither spoke publicly of his thoughts about the Yiddish production nor commented on Buloff’s incendiary remarks to the press, he continued to provide tacit support by expanding Buloff’s contract to produce *Salesman* in multiple countries and posing backstage with Kadison and Buloff for publicity photographs. Paradoxically, for a playwright who had always insisted on exerting strict control over productions of his work, Buloff and Kadison’s subversive *Toyt fun a seylsman* sparked a lifelong correspondence and friendship between the Yiddish actors and the famous American Jewish writer.

To summarize: a team of Yiddish actors stage an illegal and heavily modified production of a play by a notoriously exacting playwright? They get his full support and a generous contract. They tell reporters that they are revealing the “real” play that the playwright could not write because he is too afraid of who he really is? They get publicity photos and a lifelong friend. I can offer only one explanation for this surprising outcome to a situation that should have ended in

controversy: perhaps Miller was just as eager to see a Yiddish production of his play as *Toyt fun a seylsman's* audiences. Scholars have tended to consider the Arthur Miller of the 1940's and 50's as a playwright deeply uncomfortable with his Jewish roots. But Miller's uncharacteristic support of Buloff and Kadison's Yiddish *Salesman* reveals that he was far more willing to concede the Loman family's Jewishness in this period than the historical record has given him credit for – if not publicly, then at least before an audience of fellow Jews in the Yiddish theater. To English-language readers, theatergoers, and literary critics, Miller refused to admit that the Lomans were Jewish until the printing of the play's 50th anniversary edition, in which he called the family “Jews light-years away from religion or a community that might have fostered Jewish identity” (Miller preface xii). But to Yiddish readers and theatergoers, there was never any doubt: the Lomans had always been Jewish.

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Notes

¹ For example, Novick's monograph on Jewish American drama "does not deal with Yiddish drama, which is another matter entirely" (7), while Bial's *Acting Jewish* limits its scope to performances "created by Jews for consumption by a mass audience" (2), which by default, occurred exclusively in English.

² This is a nod to *Commentary*'s review of *Toyt fun a seytsman*, in which George Ross suggested that "Buloff has caught Miller, as it were, in the act of changing his name, and has turned up the 'original' for us" (184).

³ As Werner Sollors has argued, an "'English-only' approach" is "pervasive" in American studies (4). In turning our attention to non-English-language literary texts, Sollors writes, we acquire "a much-needed reorientation in historical consciousness" (10). While Sollors' call for a multilingual approach focuses on prose and poetry, I am arguing that a similar multilingual corrective is necessary for scholars of American drama who have likewise tended to prioritize English-language texts, leaving a vast body of American dramatic writing largely unexplored.

⁴ Counter-adaptations often occur within a single species – if certain sexual traits arise that are evolutionarily advantageous for males but physically harmful to females, the females might develop counter-adaptive traits that make it more difficult for the species to procreate (Arnqvist and Rowe). For example, the females in certain species of water striders have evolved specialized shields and even altered the shapes of their abdomens in order to make it more difficult for male water striders to copulate with them. The males, in turn, have developed a counter-counter-adaptive behavior of their own: intentionally attracting predators in order to intimidate the females into submission (Han and Jablonski).

⁵ Officially, Buloff billed himself as the adaptor; though Kadison also contributed significantly by making line corrections, typing Buloff's handwritten versions into formatted typescripts, and making specific suggestions about how to adapt the part of Linda Loman, whom she would play.

⁶ The implication of the expression "*zol ikh azoy visn fun tsores*" is "I know nothing about that, and that's how much I wish I knew about suffering" (Fridhandler).

⁷ Spanish reviews quoted in this article translated by Jennifer Martin.