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MOVIE REVIEW

A REMEMBRANCE OF YIDDISH FILMS PAST

By MICHAEL WILMINGTON

"Almonds and Raisins," opening Sunday (for a one-week run) at the Nuart, is a haunting monochrome voyage through a world that is no more, a world that only barely existed even at the time the bits of film that make up this documentary were shot; a world of dreams, sentiment, poverty, persecution, toil and victory. A world, in what we see here, often exaggerated, falsified and romanticized. A world that was later blasted, starved, imprisoned and all but brutalized out of existence in Europe—or assimilated beyond recognition in America.

It is the world of the American Yiddish-language cinema of the late '20s and '30s. This cinema, somewhat like the Yiddish literature that fostered I. J. and Isaac Bashevis Singer, flourished because of its audience: the Jewish immigrants who settled primarily in New York (the Lower East Side, the fringes of Harlem, Riverside) and who emanated primarily from Eastern Europe—from Poland, Germany and Russia. This is the world of the ghetto, whose *reality* Irving Howe writes about in "World of Our Fathers" and whose literary dreams Henry Roth gave us in "Call It Sleep." In "Almonds and Raisins" we see the cinematic contours of that dream.

The film was shot by producer-director Russ Karel and co-producer David Elstein, with apparently minimal resources (for Britain's prestigious Channel 4). It's composed almost entirely of footage from dozens of the more than 300 Yiddish-language films produced during the period—almost all of them unfamiliar, featuring only a few names that have passed into the mainstream: actors Maurice Schwarz, Molly Picon and David Opatoshu; directors Joseph Green and Edgar Ulmer (predictably, the images of Ulmer—legendary *cineaste maudit* of Poverty Row—are the most striking). Others—some of the people above and others like Herschel Bernardi—comment for the camera in huge, black-and-white, dramatically lighted "talking heads"—"witnesses" all, like the interviewees in "Reds."

But their comments are sparse, infrequently shown. What we see mostly are the images from the old films.

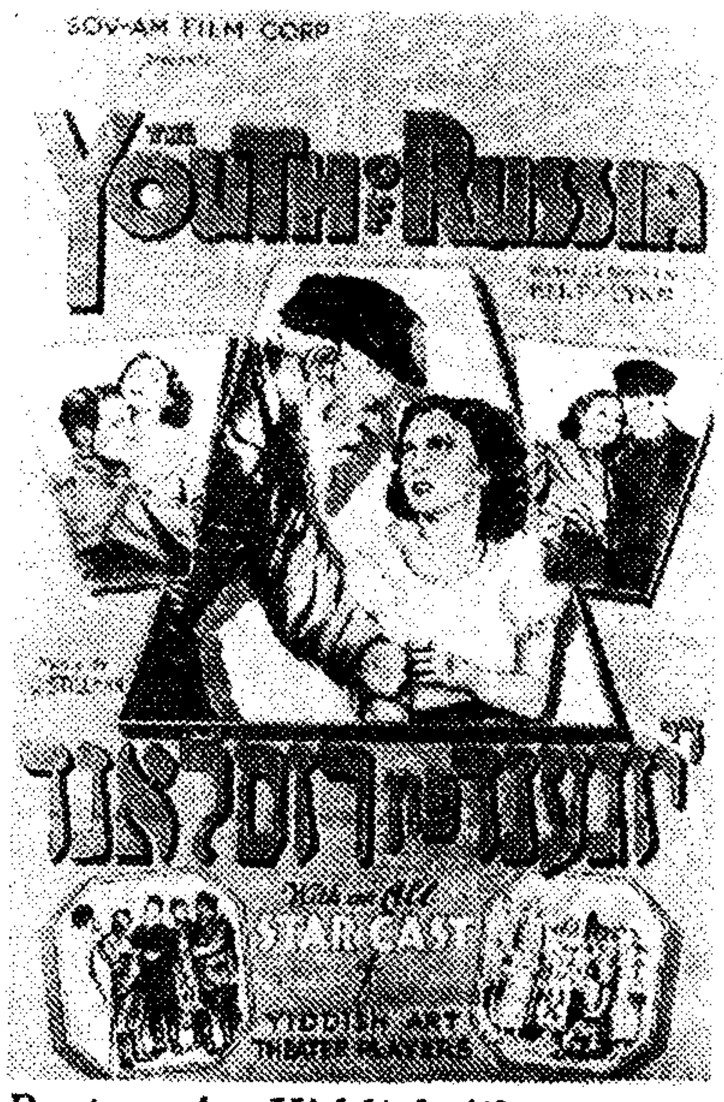
They are primitive, grainy, rare—sometimes heartbreaking. This was a cinema for poor people, for middle-class people—merchants and housewives, peddlers and school kids, doctors and students. It was a cinema that was often naive and ingenuous. It dealt with the simplest dreams and hopes. It was probably not, in any way, a great cinema—yet it was full of great meaning for members of its audience. It was their special solace. After World War II, it quite literally was no more.

"Almonds and Raisins" also makes the point that Hollywood itself was largely a creation of Jewish immigrants—that the Mayers, the Goldwyns, the Warners, the Zukors, the Laemmles were all part of that culture, that "otherness"—and that American sound cinema itself begins with a tale of Jewish assimilation, "The Jazz Singer," with Al Jolson as a cantor's son who winds up singing blackface on Broadway and marrying an Irish girl.

In the Yiddish cinema, however, such things didn't happen. Even the "blacks" spoke Yiddish. And a cantor's son, however tempted (even by cross-country tours or grand opera), always returned—to his synagogue, his community. The message was clear: The old ways are solid, permanent, your anchor in crisis; they will sustain you in times of trial. For an audience that took its entertainment in the old tongue, this message was probably precious, indispensable.

The pathos of "Almonds and Raisins" is this: The world to which all these audiences continued to cling was slated to perish with almost bewildering rapidity in a Holocaust—as the coming Nazi storm tide swept down, destroying the old, destroying the permanent and traditional—finally destroying itself. Now the culture of which these films are a desperate memento exists only in artifacts, books, the minds of the old, fading pictures, movies. Bits of film, "pieces of time," like these.

The narrator of this fragile, lovely little film is, fittingly, that old artificer of memory and time past, Orson Welles.



Poster of a Yiddish film, a part of "Almonds and Raisins."