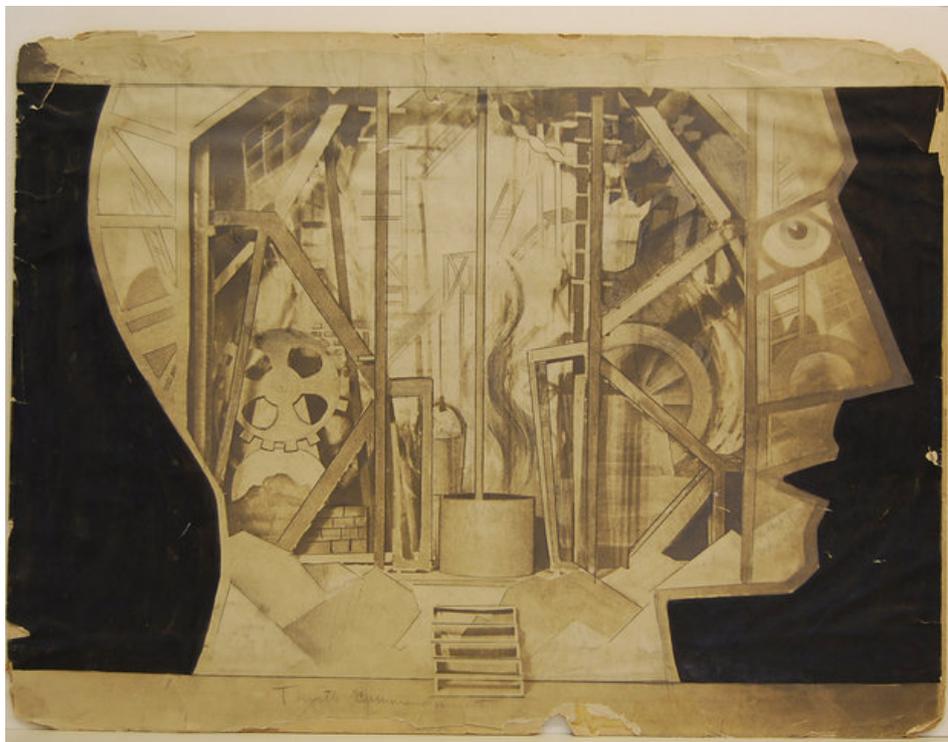


A Yiddish theater artist finally gets his due



A maquette for a set design from "The Tenth Commandment" at the Irving Place Theatre in 1926, depicting hell as all within the human mind. (Courtesy Marc Aronson)



<http://connect.nj.com/user/njoslbischoff/index.html> By **Dan Bischoff** | For The Star-Ledger <http://connect.nj.com/user/njoslbischoff/posts.html>
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The late Boris Aronson was best known for designing the avant-garde Broadway sets of the 1950s and '60s: the mirrored set for "Cabaret" that used the theatre audience as a backdrop; the transparent rectangles in "Company"; and the pastel shtetl surrounding the revolving stage in the 1964 **"Fiddler on the Roof"** <http://www.broadway.com/buzz/177572/lchaim-50-facts-about-fiddler-on-the-roof-on-the-musicals-50th-anniversary/>."

Over those years he won six Tony Awards, the last one for "Pacific Overtures" in 1976.

Aronson was a Modernist when the faith in the modern was at its cultural height, creating increasingly abstract designs that underlined stage themes graphically.

But before those dramatic successes, Aronson worked for years in New York's Yiddish theatre, designing costumes and sets for the thriving Russophile subculture in the city that included at least 1.5 million New Yorkers in the 1920s.

Through Dec. 23, **the Vallois America gallery** <http://the Vallois America gallery> on East 67th St. is hosting "Preparing the Miracle: From the Bronx to Broadway, Boris Aronson and the Yiddish Theatre," showing dozens of Aronson's recently restored watercolor costume designs and set elevations. Most of the paintings have been sitting in flat files in **Aronson** <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway/stars/boris-aronson/>'s glass-and-wood-panel home built into a hillside overlooking the Tappan Zee near Nyack for half a century or more.

"Preparing the Miracle" grew out of an exhibition at Galerie le Minotaure in Paris three years ago, but maintaining the trove of watercolors has been the responsibility of Aronson's son, author and assistant teaching professor at Rutgers University Marc Aronson, who lives in Maplewood.

"My father was interested in emancipating Jewish tradition by bringing its folk style into the Modern movement," says Marc Aronson. "Of course, it helped that they were interested in pre-perspective art, because so many of the folk traditions were about flat color, too. There were a lot of visual artists in Kiev and later Moscow with similar aims — like Marc Chagall."

Boris Aronson was born in 1898, one of ten children of the chief rabbi of Kiev. Yiddish theatre was already thriving in New York, selling nostalgia for the old country in potboiler melodramas, bright musicals, and avant-garde political plays. But in Kiev, Jewish traditions were heavily rural and sentimental. Aronson wanted to bring that tradition into the cities to become the basis for a secularized culture. For a time he worked in the Constructivist studios of Alexandra Ekster and El Lissitzky.

When the Russian Revolution took over, Boris left, first for Berlin and then for New York in 1923, where his personal ambition "was to design one of the huge electric signs for Wrigley's Chewing Gum in Times Square." He never broke into advertising, but he met with quick success bringing flat, bright Constructivist designs to the Yiddish theatre.

There was a certain swagger to European Modernism at the time. Yiddish theatre, recently given a brand new home in what's now the Edison Theatre on the Lower East Side, was divided between mama's-home-is-threatened melodrama and a smaller, avant-garde theater based in DaDa café art and heavily stylized Russian influences. Aronson, of course, worked Modern.

Many of Aronson's designs in "Preparing the Miracle," for plays like "The Tenth Commandment" and "The Golem," are as brilliantly colored as **Leon Bakst** [<http://www.nga.gov.au/Exhibition/balletsrusses/Default.cfm?MnuID=4&GALID=19455&viewID=3>] 's watercolors for the Ballets Russes, though perhaps less cartoonishly realized. But the pieces themselves are often innovative in unexpected ways, the shapes cut from papers rapidly brushed with color and collaged together. They sometimes feature found materials like the pages from the Hebrew bible cut up to make the arms of the "Two Hassidim" of 1926.

Aronson's set designs are economical and witty, visual evocations not just of sets awaiting actors but of the thrust of the play itself. His intense creativity became a hallmark — starting slow, Aronson would pepper directors and writers with mystified questions about what the play was about, often appearing lost until the very last moment. He specialized in summing up a play's action in the set itself, often pushing the limits of set construction at the time. For a play that takes place on a subway car as the main character fitfully falls asleep and dreams, he designed moving flats that transformed the stage into a wealthy American home or a humble Bronx walk-up, all the while keeping the hanging straps visible along the roof at the center.

The show culminates in an ultramarine proscenium view of his revolving shtetl home for *Fiddler*, a breakthrough design that confirmed his move to Broadway and became a tremendous hit, traveling around the country and abroad.

Bakst's watercolors have been seriously collected since the 1950s, but for many years Aronson's work — and the ephemera of Yiddish theatre itself — have been overlooked. The Museum of the City of New York is preparing a major exhibition about the Yiddish theater tradition that opens March 19, 2016, and will include Aronson's work as well as that of actors, musicians, and writers of all sorts.

Preparing the Miracle: From the Bronx to Broadway, Boris Aronson and the Yiddish Theatre

Where: Vallois America, 27 East 67th St., New York City

When: Through Dec. 23. Open 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday

How much: Free. For more information call (212) 517-3820

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