Australian National University

Theatre and Jewish Identity in the Diaspora

24 September 2026

Kadimah - Jewish Cultural Centre and National Library
7 Selwyn St, Elsternwick, Melbourne

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the death of Jakub Waislitz, a key figure in Yiddish theatre whose artistic and organisational activity played a crucial role in shaping diasporic Jewish theatrical culture in Australia after the Second World War. As an actor, director, educator, and cultural organiser, Waislitz contributed to the creation of theatrical institutions that functioned not only as artistic spaces, but also as centres of memory, identity, and communal cohesion within the Jewish diaspora.

Waislitz's work exemplifies the broader role of theatre in diasporic contexts: as a medium of cultural transmission, a site of negotiation between tradition and new social realities, and a form of symbolic leadership in migrant communities. His work connects European traditions of Yiddish theatre with new diasporic constellations, highlighting theatre's capacity to sustain Jewish identity across displacement, rupture, and generational change.

On the occasion of this anniversary, an international academic seminar is being organised to reflect on theatre and Jewish identity in the diaspora, using Waislitz's legacy as a point of departure for broader, comparative and interdisciplinary discussions.

The seminar participants will explore the complex relationships between theatre and Jewish identity in the diaspora, with particular attention to questions of language (Yiddish, Hebrew, vernaculars), memory, migration, trauma, gender, ideology and transnational cultural exchange. We are especially interested in theatre as a performative site where identities are re-imagined, contested, negotiated, and sustained across generations and geographical boundaries.

The scope of the seminar is intentionally interdisciplinary, welcoming perspectives from theatre studies, cultural studies, Jewish studies, history, anthropology, memory studies, performance studies, media studies and related fields.

The seminar is conceived as a space for discussion and exchange rather than formal presentations alone. Those wishing to offer a short presentation, whether a scholarly paper or a more informal contribution, are invited to submit a brief description by 10 August to kasia.williams@anu.edu.au.

Those who prefer not to present are equally welcome to join the discussion — including community members wishing to share their memories of the Kadimah and its theatre, whose contributions will enrich the seminar in important ways.

The seminar is part of the Centre of Excellence Leadership Emerging from Migration, Ethnicity, Race and Gender in Australia and the EU, led by Dr Katarzyna Williams and supported by the European Union.

Australian National University Centre for European Studies

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