

A YIDDISH HAMLET

Adapted from a story by Israel Zangwill

Table of Contents

<u>A YIDDISH HAMLET</u>	1
<u>Adapted from a story by Israel Zangwill</u>	2
<u>I. AN EAST SIDE CAFE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, DAY</u>	3
<u>II. DRESSING ROOM OF GOLDWATER'S YIDDISH THEATER, DAY</u>	8
<u>III. THE EAST SIDE CAFE, NIGHT</u>	15
<u>IV. GOLDWATER'S JEWISH THEATRE, DAY</u>	18
<u>V. THE CAFE, NIGHT</u>	22

A YIDDISH HAMLET

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- III. THE EAST SIDE CAFE, NIGHT
- IV. GOLDWATER'S JEWISH THEATRE, DAY
- V. THE CAFE, NIGHT

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A Play by F. J. Morlock
C 1982

Etext by Dagny

CHARACTERS

M. PINCHAS – A Yiddish poet
OSTROVSKY – A Yiddish playwright
SCHNEEMAN – His toady
TUCH
WITBERG – A violinist
VON MIESES – Another poet, also Horatio
HEATHEN JOURNALIST – Also Polonius
GRUNBITZ
GOLDWATER – An actor manager, also Hamlet
KLOOT – his factotum

CHARACTERS IN THE HAMLET PLAY

THE QUEEN
OPHELIA – Mrs. Goldwater

A YIDDISH HAMLET

I. AN EAST SIDE CAFE AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, DAY.

The customers are almost exclusively Jewish except for the HEATHEN JOURNALIST. Many are dressed in traditional costumes, with black hats, black clothes and long beards. GRUNBITZ, TUCH and the Heathen Journalist are seated at a large table, awaiting the arrival of Pinchas. SCHNEEMAN and OSTROVSKY sit nearby at another table.

SCHNEEMAN

He's coming, this seven-day wonder.

OSTROVSKY (bitterly)

They do nothing but talk about this fool poet from Warsaw. They forget Ostrovsky overnight. Fifty-three plays I've written, fifty-three.

SCHNEEMAN

They'll forget him overnight too. This "Yiddish Hamlet" is sure to flop.

OSTROVSKY

Who knows? The public is fickle.

(PINCHAS enters escorted by WITBERG and VON MIESES, who lead him very deferentially to the table at which the Heathen Journalist, Tuch and Grunbitz are waiting. Pinchas is greeted and congratulated by all and begins to hold forth.)

PINCHAS

It is the greatest play of the generation. (complacently) It will be translated into every tongue.

OSTROVSKY

Will you listen to that conceited ass. Wait till Goldwater gets through rewriting it.

SCHNEEMAN

I can't wait to see Goldwater squeeze his fat carcass into a pair of tights to play "Hamlet".

PINCHAS

I, Melchizedek Pinchas will soon be world famous. See, my initials M. P. make Master Playwright.

OSTROVSKY (to Schneeman)

Also Mud Pusher. Who is this uncombed bunco artist?

SCHNEEMAN

He calls himself the sweet singer of Israel.

TUCH (to Pinchas)

But look here Pinchas. You said the other day your initials made Messianic Poet.

PINCHAS

And don't they? You call yourself a ward boss, a political leader and statesman and you don't know your ABC's. (There is a roar of laughter at this sally.)

TUCH (nettled)

They can't stand for everything.

PINCHAS

No, they can't stand for mad politician. (another burst of laughter) But, as there are many meanings in every letter of the Torah, so there are meanings innumerable in every letter of my name. (ingenuously) If I am a playwright as well as a poet, was not Shakespeare also?

TUCH (sarcastic but not ill natured)

You wouldn't class yourself with that low down barnstormer?

PINCHAS (modestly)

My superiority to Shakespeare I leave to others to discover. I discovered it for myself in writing this very play, but I cannot expect the world to admit it until the play is produced.

WITBERG (innocently)

A YIDDISH HAMLET

How did you come to find it out yourself?

PINCHAS

It happened quite naturally. You see when Goldwater was touring with his Yiddish troupe through London, he had the idea of acquainting the Jewish masses with Hamlet, and he asked me to make the Yiddish translation, as one great poet translating another. Well I started the job and then of course the discovery was inevitable.

TUCH (drily)

Doubtless.

PINCHAS (munching on some food which he brandishes from time to time)

The play which I had not read since my youth appeared unspeakably childish in places. (brandishing) Take for example the ghost. (munches, then slightly annoyed) This bagel is as stale as a sermon. Command me a cream tart, Witberg. (Witberg goes to a waiter) (resuming) What was I saying?

TUCH

The ghost—

PINCHAS

As yes . . . now, how can a ghost impress a modern audience which no longer believes in ghosts?

TUCH

That is true.

PINCHAS (sensing approbation, waves his index finger then presses it on the side of his nose)

I translated Shakespeare, yes. But into modern terms. The ghost vanished. Hamlet's tragedy remained only the incapacity of the thinker for the base activity of action.

OSTROVSKY

The higher activity, you mean.

TUCH

Thought has no value until it is translated into action.

SCHNEEMAN

Exactly, you've got to work it up.

PINCHAS

Schtuss! Acts are but the soldiers. Thought is the general.

WITBERG (having returned with a cream tart)

It is not much use thinking about playing the violin, Pinchas.

PINCHAS

You performers are all alike. Every tune you play, every word in the mouth of an actor, was put there by someone else. (waving his arms) Yet you think you are indispensable!

WITBERG

Well, someone has to perform it, in order to test your ideas.

PINCHAS

No doubt the leading man who plays my Hamlet will think he is more important than the playwright. Woe be to the mummer that dares tamper with a single syllable.

OSTROVSKY

Your Hamlet! Since when?

PINCHAS

Since I recreated him for the modern world without tinsel and pasteboard; since I conceived him in fire and bore him in agony; since . . . (biting into his cream tart and making a face) even this cream tart is sour!—since I carried him to and fro in my pocket as a young kangaroo in the pouch of its mother.

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

Why didn't Iselmann produce it in London?

PINCHAS

Because of the ghost. (disgusted) I have changed Iselmann's name to Eselmann, the donkey man. I had hardly read him ten lines before he brayed out, "Where is the ghost?" I said, "I have laid him. He cannot walk on the modern stage." Eselmann tore his hair. "But it is for the ghost that I was interested. Yiddish audiences love a ghost." "They love your acting too," I replied. He failed to comprehend the withering irony of that retort. Oh, I

A YIDDISH HAMLET

gave that donkey man a piece of my mind.

GRUNBITZ (jesting)

But he didn't take a piece.

PINCHAS

As if a great poet were to consider the tastes of the mob. Bah! These managers are all men of the earth. Crass materialists. (rising)

Once, in my days of obscurity, I was made to put a bosom into a play, and it swept all my genius off the boards. But I am glad Eselmann gave me my Hamlet back, for before giving it to Goldwater, I made it even more subtle. No vulgar nonsense of fencing and poison at the end . . . a pure mental tragedy, for in life it is the soul alone that counts. My play is the eternal tragedy of the thinker. (turning to Witberg) Another bagel.

(Witberg goes in search of a waiter.)

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

Strikes me, Pin'cuss, you're giving us Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.

PINCHAS

Better than the Prince of Denmark without Hamlet as he is usually played. In my version the Prince of Denmark indeed vanishes, for Hamlet is a Jew and the Prince of Palestine.

(General consternation in the cafe.)

VON MIESES

You have made him a Jew?

PINCHAS

If he is to be the ideal thinker, let him belong to a nation of thinkers. In fact, (confidentially) the play is virtually an autobiography.

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

You still call it Hamlet?

PINCHAS

Why not? True, it is virtually a new work and vastly superior to the original. But Shakespeare borrowed his story from an older play and treated it to suit himself, why therefore should I not treat Shakespeare as it suits me?

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

But wouldn't it be better to modify the title so people don't get confused?

PINCHAS

If I were to call it by another name, some learned fool would pretend it was stolen from Shakespeare; this way it challenges comparison.

TUCH (drily)

And Shakespeare suffers.

PINCHAS (placidly)

Only as a medieval alchemist or astrologer suffers in comparison with a modern chemist or astronomer. The muddle-headedness of Shakespeare . . . which incidentally is the cause of the muddle in Hamlet's character . . . has given way to the clear vision of the modern. How could Shakespeare describe a thinker? The Elizabethans could not think. They were like our politicians.

GRUNBITZ

Why should you expect thought from a politician? (Tuch looks angry) That's like expecting money from an economist. Besides only youth thinks.

PINCHAS

That is well said. He who is ever thinking never grows old. I shall die young like all those whom the gods love. Waiter, give Mr. Grunbitz a cup of chocolate and a cream tart.

GRUNBITZ

Thank you . . . no.

PINCHAS

You cannot refuse. You will pain Witberg who is paying.

A YIDDISH HAMLET

VON MIESES (embarrassed)

I wonder if you could look at these poems.

PINCHAS (graciously)

I'll be glad to give you my opinion, but I warn you I am a severe critic.

OSTROVSKY (to Schneeman)

Ohh! He's a critic too.

SCHNEEMAN (to Ostrovsky)

What a pompous ass.

OSTROVSKY

Do you suppose he has any talent at all?

SCHNEEMAN

He's a Yiddish Bernard Shaw, no doubt. (laughing) Wait till Goldwater gets through with him.

PINCHAS (who has been perusing Mieses' poems joyfully)

But it is full of genius! I might have written it myself. The third stanza is a masterpiece.

VON MIESES

Perhaps I, too, shall write a play one day. My initial 'M' makes master too.

PINCHAS (graciously)

It may be that you are destined to wear my mantle.

(Mieses looks uneasily at Pinchas' ill-fitting and ragged cloak.)

PINCHAS

And now Mieses, you must give me carfare. I have to go and talk to Goldwater about rehearsals. That pumpkin-head of an actor manager is capable of any crime. Even altering my best lines.

OSTROVSKY (maliciously)

I suppose Goldwater plays Hamlet.

PINCHAS (airily)

We have not discussed it yet.

OSTROVSKY

He'll be all right. So long as Fanny Goldwater doesn't play Ophelia.

PINCHAS

Mrs. Goldwater play Ophelia? She wouldn't dare! Don't dream of such a thing. She belongs in vaudeville.

OSTROVSKY

All right. Don't say I didn't warn you.

PINCHAS (shaken)

You don't think there is really a danger?

OSTROVSKY

He usually gives her the best female role.

PINCHAS (venomously)

I'll drown her before I let her play my Ophelia.

OSTROVSKY (coolly)

Well, it's up to you.

PINCHAS (shaking his fist)

The minx. But I'll manage her. If worse comes to worst. I'll make love to her.

(The cafe erupts in laughter at this threat.)

TUCH

And when is the grand event? When will it open?

PINCHAS

After Passover. (buttoning his coat) I'd better get going before he casts her as Ophelia. (sarcastically) I don't want her to be disappointed.

OSTROVSKY

A YIDDISH HAMLET

Has Goldwater given you a contract?

PINCHAS (with great dignity and disdain)

I am a poet, not a lawyer. Parchments are for merchants; honest men build on the word.

OSTROVSKY

It comes to the same thing. These managers can slip out of any contract. Still I prefer to force them to use their imagination by getting it in writing. When I'm not writing plays, I'm busy writing contracts. It prevents writer's block. (with great deliberation) I will come to your opening night.

PINCHAS

It will be a tribute which the audience will appreciate. Wait till you see my play. You must all come. I will send you all boxes. Then you will learn that thought is greater than action. Thought is the greatest thing in the world!

(Pinchas and Witberg leave. Ostrovsky puffs his cigar, then he rises and goes to a phone.)

OSTROVSKY

Is that you Goldwater? Yes, I'm fine. No, it's not about the money you owe me. Purely artistic. I wanted to tell you that I look forward to seeing you as Hamlet and your missus as Ophelia.

(pause)

Hadn't thought of her as Ophelia? Goldwater you must be losing all your artistic sense.

(pause)

Of course, she'll be perfect. By the way, that wild man who wrote the play is on his way over there to see you. Better dodge him. After all you shouldn't let the author ruin the play—

(facing the audience)

—when you can do it yourself.

(pause)

By the way now you mention the money . . .

(he looks at the receiver which has gone dead)

I should have known it. . . .

(Ostrovsky hangs up, smiles, puffs his cigar and resumes his seat contentedly. He looks at a newspaper.)

BLACKOUT

II. DRESSING ROOM OF GOLDWATER'S YIDDISH THEATER, DAY

Goldwater is applying his makeup; KLOOT, his brash young assistant is sitting on the table. There are sounds of a scuffle outside.

PINCHAS

(forcing his way in)

Not thus. Not thus shall you treat my Hamlet. Every syllable must be engraved upon the actors' hearts, or God forbid the curtain to go up. Not that it matters, with the foolish play you are now butchering; it is ink vomit, not literature.

(Goldwater is ignoring him and angrily changing his trousers. Kloot remains impassive.)

GOLDWATER

Son of a witch! You come and disturb all my house. What do you want?

PINCHAS

I want to talk to you about rehearsals.

GOLDWATER

(placatingly)

I told you I would let you know when rehearsals begin.

PINCHAS

But you forgot to take my address.

GOLDWATER

As if I don't know where to find you!

KLOOT

Pinchas gets drinks from the whole cafe.

PINCHAS

They drink to the health of Hamlet.

GOLDWATER

All right, Kloot get his address. Good evening.

PINCHAS

But when will it be? I must know.

GOLDWATER

(patiently)

We can't fix it to a day. There's plenty of money in this play yet.

PINCHAS

Money . . . bah! But merit?

GOLDWATER

You authors are jealous as the devil.

PINCHAS

Me! Jealous of donkeys? In Central Park you see giraffes and tortoises too. Central Park has more talent than this scribbler of yours.

GOLDWATER

Ostrovsky wrote it and he's very popular.

PINCHAS

Ostrovsky . . . a pygmy talent. He uses all kinds of American slang. His Yiddish is not pure. His locutions odious. Not to mention the fact he can't write.

KLOOT

I'll write you about rehearsals.

PINCHAS

But I must know weeks ahead. I may go lecturing. The great continent calls for me. In Chicago, in Cincinnati . . .

A YIDDISH HAMLET

GOLDWATER

Don't trouble yourself. Make your own plans and go. We know how to put on a play. We can do without you.

PINCHAS

Do without me? A nice mess you will make of it! I must instruct you how to say every line.

GOLDWATER

(astonished)

You, instruct me?

PINCHAS

(realizing that Goldwater is not to be trifled with on this point)

I, I don't mean you personally. I mean the company. I will show them the accent, the gesture. I'm a great stage manager as well as a great poet. The 'M' in my name makes manager. There shall be no more prompter.

GOLDWATER

Indeed. And how are you going to get on without a prompter?

PINCHAS

Very simple. A month's rehearsal.

GOLDWATER

(drily)

We usually get by with a week's rehearsal.

KLOOT

(ironically)

It is very good of you to give us a month of your valuable time.

GOLDWATER

(irate)

A month! I could put on six melodramas in a month.

PINCHAS

(shocked)

But Hamlet is not a melodrama.

GOLDWATER

(imperturbably)

Quite so. That's why it's so easy. There is not half the scenery. It's the scenery that takes time rehearsing, not the dialogue.

PINCHAS

(enraged)

You would profane my divine work by gabbling through it with your pack of geese parroting the prompter!

KLOOT

You just come down a peg or two. You do the writing, we do the rest.

PINCHAS

(imperiously)

Silence, impudent face! You are not talking to Ostrovsky. I am a poet and I demand my rights.

(Kloot and Goldwater are astounded by his impudence.)

GOLDWATER

(recovering)

What rights? I paid you twenty dollars and that was too much.

PINCHAS

Twenty dollars? For the masterpiece of the 20th century?

KLOOT

In the twenty-first century you shall have twenty-five dollars.

PINCHAS

(superbly)

Make mock as you please. I shall be living in the fifty-first century even. Poets never die although, alas, they

A YIDDISH HAMLET

have to live. Twenty dollars too much indeed! It is not a dollar a century for the run of the play.

GOLDWATER

(pacing a bit, then grimly)

Very well. Give those twenty dollars back. We return your play.

PINCHAS

(confused)

No, no, Goldwater . . . I must not disappoint my printer. I have promised him twenty dollars to print my Hebrew "Selections from Nietzsche."

GOLDWATER

(implacably)

You take your manuscript and give me my money.

PINCHAS

(desperately)

Exchange would be a robbing. I will not rob you. Keep your bargain. See. Here's the printer's letter.

(Pinchas rummages excitedly in his pockets and drags forth letters and manuscripts from his overcoat. Goldwater waives a repudiating hand.)

PINCHAS

Be not a fool, man. Goldwater, I and you are the only two people in New York who serve the poetic drama. I, by writing, you by producing.

(Goldwater still shakes his head, but less vigorously. The flattery is appeasing him.)

KLOOT

Your manuscript will be returned to you by the next garbage truck.

PINCHAS

(disregarding Kloot)

I have faith in you, Goldwater. I am willing you shall have only a fortnight's rehearsals.

(trying harder)

I have always said the only genius of the Yiddish stage is Goldwater. Klosterman—bah! He's not a bad producer, but act? My grandmother's hen has a better stage presence. And there is Davidoff—a voice like a frog and a walk like a spider. And these charlatans I only heard of when I came to New York. But you, Goldwater—your fame has blown across the Atlantic. I journeyed from Poland expressly to collaborate with you.

GOLDWATER

(mollified)

Then why do you spoil it all?

PINCHAS

It is my anxiety that Europe shall not be disappointed in you. Let us talk of the cast.

GOLDWATER

It's too early yet.

PINCHAS

The early bird catches the worm.

KLOOT

But all our worms are caught. We keep them penned up on the premises.

PINCHAS

(aghast)

I know. I know.

GOLDWATER

But we don't give all our talent to one play.

PINCHAS

(breathing a breath of hope)

No, of course not.

A YIDDISH HAMLET

GOLDWATER

We have to use all our people by turns. We divide our forces. With myself as Hamlet, you will have a cast that should satisfy any author, even the bard himself.

PINCHAS

(with wonderful hypocrisy)

Do I not know it? Were you but to say your lines, leaving all the others to be read by the prompter, the audience would be spellbound.

GOLDWATER

That being so, you have no right to expect to have my wife in the same cast.

PINCHAS

No, indeed. Two such geniuses in the same cast would be beyond all expectation, like the sun and the moon shining together.

(Pinchas is really getting carried away)

Besides Ophelia is such a small part. Really she deserves the part of Hamlet to really show her talent.

GOLDWATER

Heaven forbid my wife should appear in breeches. She would never so lower herself.

PINCHAS

(complacently)

That is what makes it impossible for her to appear in the play.

GOLDWATER

But you lucky man, the impossible has happened. Fanny has decided to sacrifice herself. Two Goldwaters in the cast. Think of it.

PINCHAS

Who am I that I should ask her to sacrifice herself?

KLOOT

Fanny won't sacrifice Ophelia.

PINCHAS

(aside, between his teeth)

She'll execute her.

GOLDWATER

(fortunately not hearing)

You hear? My wife will not sacrifice Ophelia, by leaving her to a minor player. She thinks only of the play.

PINCHAS

(disconcerted, but still trying to be polite)

It is very noble of her. But she worked so hard lately. She must need a rest, a vacation. It is such a trying part.

GOLDWATER

My wife never spares herself.

PINCHAS

(losing his head)

But she might spare Ophelia.

GOLDWATER

(gruffly)

What do you mean? My wife will honor you by playing Ophelia.

(with a wave of his hand)

That is ended.

PINCHAS

(wildly)

No, it is not ended. Your wife is a comedienne, not a tragedienne.

GOLDWATER

(puzzled)

You yourself just called her a genius.

A YIDDISH HAMLET

PINCHAS

For comedy. For comedy, I will allow. But Hamlet is not a comedy. Your wife prances, skips and jumps. Rather would I give Ophelia to a kangaroo or jackrabbit!

GOLDWATER

(indignant)

Swine! Compare my wife to a kangaroo or jackrabbit! Take your filthy manuscript and begone . . .

KLOOT

(to himself)

Well, Fanny would provide an element of comic relief! Hey, that's an idea.

PINCHAS

To gratify your wife, you would make her ridiculous and deprive the world of your Hamlet!

GOLDWATER

I can get plenty of Hamlets. Any scribbler can translate Shakespeare.

PINCHAS

(sublimely)

Surely. You can get hundreds. But who can surpass Shakespeare? Who can make him intelligible to the modern soul?

(Goldwater hesitates, thinking perhaps there is something to it. A voice from offstage calls, "Mr. Goldwater, your cue." Goldwater rushes out, glad to escape.)

PINCHAS

(pleading)

You will talk to him, Kloot? You will save Ophelia?

KLOOT

(easily)

Rely on me, if I have to play her myself.

PINCHAS

(worriedly)

But that will be even worse.

KLOOT

How do you know? You've never seen me act. I'm a great female impersonator.

PINCHAS

(soothing, wheedling)

You will not spoil my play. You will get me a maidenly Ophelia. I and you are the only two men in New York who understand how to cast a play.

KLOOT

You leave it to me. I have a wife of my own.

PINCHAS

(alarmed)

What! Don't you dare.

KLOOT

Don't be alarmed. I'll coach her. She's just the age for the part. Mrs. Goldwater could be her mother.

PINCHAS

But can she make an audience cry?

KLOOT

You bet. A regular onion of an Ophelia.

PINCHAS

But I must see her rehearse, then I decide.

KLOOT

Of course.

PINCHAS

A YIDDISH HAMLET

And you will seek me in the cafe when rehearsals begin?

KLOOT

That goes without saying. How can we rehearse without you? You shouldn't have worried the boss. We'll call you even if it's the middle of the night.

(Pinchas jumps at Klot and kisses him on both cheeks.)

PINCHAS

Protector of Poets!

(releasing him)

And you will see that they do not mutilate my play? You will not suffer a single hair of my poesy to be harmed?

KLOOT

Not a hair shall be cut.

PINCHAS

Ahhh, I and you are the only two men in New York who know how to treat poetry.

(hugging Klot again)

KLOOT

You bet.

(escaping from Pinchas)

Well goodbye.

PINCHAS

(still not convinced)

And you will see it is not adulterated with American slang? In Zion they don't say 'sure' and 'lend me a nickel.'

KLOOT

Didn't I promise? Don't you trust me?

PINCHAS

All the same you might lend me a nickel for carfare.

KLOOT

I'd be honored.

PINCHAS

Goodbye my protector.

(he goes out)

KLOOT

That was a nickel well spent.

(The door opens again, Pinchas' ungainly head reappearing.)

PINCHAS

You promise me all this?

KLOOT

(trying to appear hurt)

Didn't I do it already?

PINCHAS

Save a poet from distraction and swear to me.

KLOOT

Will you go if I swear?

PINCHAS

Yup.

KLOOT

And you won't come back again till rehearsals begin?

PINCHAS

A YIDDISH HAMLET

Nup.

KLOOT

Then I swear on my father and mother's life.

PINCHAS

(grinning, satisfied at last)

Thank you! I'm going.

(he leaves, closing the door behind him)

KLOOT

(locks and bolts the door)

I wonder how he'd feel if he knew I'm an orphan? Sure was a good thing we didn't tell him we plan to add music.

(Kloot goes out whistling)

BLACKOUT

III. THE EAST SIDE CAFE, NIGHT

It is the evening of Opening Night. Most of the persons present in the first scene are in the cafe, but there is no center of attention. Enter Pinchas tumultuously. Striding up and down, brandishing his cane in one hand and a poster in the other, Pinchas is nearly frothing at the mouth.

OSTROVSKY

(reading the poster)

“Itzek Goldberg proudly presents the Yiddish Hamlet, by the world renowned poet Melchitzedek Pinchas, with music by Ignatz Levitsky, the world famous composer. Starring Itzek Goldberg and the world acclaimed Fanny Goldberg.”

(maliciously)

What seems to be the matter?

PINCHAS

The matter! The matter! World famous composer, indeed. Whoever heard of Ignatz Levitsky? And who wants his music? The tragedy of a thinker needs no caterwauling of violins. Does Goldwater imagine I have written a melodrama? At most I will permit an overture.

OSTROVSKY

Whoever heard of Melchitzedek Pinchas? World famous author. That's rich.

PINCHAS

(not hearing him)

The dogs. The liars.

WITBERG

(trying to placate him)

Perhaps a little well placed music would not hurt.

PINCHAS

They won't even let me attend rehearsals. Who can tell how they have mangled it? Such ghouls.

TUCH

After all, Goldberg knows his business.

VON MIESES

You shouldn't have tried to replace Fanny. Goldberg is very proud of his wife's talent.

PINCHAS

He has reason. She has so little, every bit is precious.

OSTROVSKY

(rubbing it in)

Where are our tickets? You promised us all box seats.

PINCHAS

They didn't send me any. Liars. Murderers. Slayers of poets. They fear I fire Ophelia.

OSTROVSKY

(relishing his rival's predicament, especially as he has suffered the same fate himself)
Surely you are going to attend?

PINCHAS

(dejected)

The box office is sold out.

OSTROVSKY

Well, that's a good sign.

PINCHAS

I don't believe them. It's a conspiracy to keep me out. But they won't succeed.

TUCH

What will you do?

A YIDDISH HAMLET

PINCHAS

(raving)

I'll do something if I have to fire the theatre.

OSTROVSKY

Why don't you call Goldwater on the phone?

PINCHAS

That's an excellent idea. Will I give him a piece of my mind. Witberg, a dime.

(Taking a dime from Witberg, he strides to the phone, followed by the whole cafe, eager to hear some precious witticisms.)

OSTROVSKY

Be sure to disguise your voice.

(Pinchas dials and waits.)

TUCH

This will go down in history.

MIESES It may not be a good idea.

PINCHAS

(in a high pitched voice)

This is George Bernard Shaw, you Goldwater? May I speak to Goldwater, tell him the critic Bernard Shaw wants to congratulate him.

(to the crowd)

Goldwater's too dumb to know that Shaw doesn't speak Yiddish.

(in a high pitched voice)

Hello, Mr. Goldwater, is that you? It is.

(changing back to his natural voice)

Pigs! Pigs! Pigs! You and Kloot. I have cast my pearls before swine. May a sudden death smite you. May the curtain fall on you, you gibbering epileptic baboon. What do you mean you can't hear? Speak plainer? I will speak plainer, swineherd! Never again shall a work of mine defile itself in your dirty dollar factory. I spit on you. Phutt .

..

(spitting into the receiver)

Your father was a Meshummad and your mother . . . Don't hang up, I'm not finished. . . . And your mother, an Irish fish wife.

(turning from the phone)

He hung up. Coward. I had a lot more to say. That was worth ten cents.

(He hangs up the phone and walks to a table with great satisfaction.)

OSTROVSKY

I'll say this for him. He's got shtick. The happiest day in my life would be to say half of what he just said to Goldwater.

(Enter Heathen Journalist.)

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

Congratulations Pin'cuss. Your play's a great success.

PINCHAS

Ehh?

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

I had to leave early; got a deadline to meet. Nearly eleven and only two acts finished. You'll have to brisk 'em up a bit.

PINCHAS

If I get my hands on Goldwater, I'll brisk him up. Never fear.

A YIDDISH HAMLET

(uneasily)

How was the play?

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

Well, it's not quite what I expected from listening to you, or reading Shakespeare. All that cabaret music and those funny lines.

PINCHAS

Cabaret music! Funny lines! There wasn't a funny line in the whole play.

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

There is now. Mrs. Goldwater is stealing the show, she's a howling success.

PINCHAS

(ready to weep)

Howling success. I'll kill them. All of them.

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

Well, got to go. Congrats.

(The Heathen Journalist starts for the door, but suddenly Pinchas gives chase.)

PINCHAS

Still got your theatre ticket?

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

What for?

PINCHAS

Give it to me. With that I can get in.

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

Sure, take it.

(He gives the ticket to Pinchas who rushes out, yelling, "Now, Goldwater".)

OSTROVSKY

(to the Journalist)

You may just have become an accessory to murder.

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

Hey, would that make a headline. 'Poet slays leading man.' I better go and see.

(he rushes out after Pinchas)

OSTROVSKY

What about your deadline?

HEATHEN JOURNALIST

It can wait.

(They all stare after Pinchas and the Journalist.)

BLACKOUT

IV. GOLDWATER'S JEWISH THEATRE, DAY

We are at a slightly different perspective. We can see the stage in the background, looking from the wings. Hamlet is with his Mother.

QUEEN

“I made you some nice food. You should eat something. You never eat, that's why you have these morbid ideas.”

HAMLET

“I must meet this spectre on the ramparts.”

QUEEN

“You should look out for the ghost. I don't want you getting hurt. Besides it's very damp tonight. If you must go, you should wear your galoshes.”

(Hamlet/Goldwater exits to where Kloot is standing in the wings, observing.)

QUEEN

“That kid never listened to his mother. Never.”

(Loud applause, whistles, etc.)

GOLDWATER

They're loving it Kloot. They're swallowing it like ice cream soda.

(The Hamlet play continues in mime. We cannot hear what they are saying but the audience in Goldwater's theatre can, and they titter, roar, and laugh. Ophelia enters, a buxom, comical woman and pirouettes to applause. She carries a Palm Branch and shakes it to every point in the compass. Thunderous applause.)

GOLDWATER

This Pinchas is a genius after all.

KLOOT

We got our money's worth.

GOLDWATER

Next I'm going to commission Pinchas to adapt MacBeth. Don't you think Fanny would make a fantastic Lady MacBeth?

KLOOT

I see her more as Desdemona.

GOLDWATER

A genius. That's what you are. A genius.

KLOOT

(modestly)

I know it.

(Pinchas is seen stealthily approaching along the wall.)

KLOOT

That's your cue.

(Goldwater returns to greet the ghost, a figure in a white sheet that cakewalks across the stage. Pinchas tries to bound onto the stage shouting “Villains” but Kloot has seen him and collars him in an iron grip.)

KLOOT

(unruffled)

You don't take your call yet.

PINCHAS

(in a fury)

A YIDDISH HAMLET

Let me go. I must speak to the people. They think me, Melchitzedek Pinchas, guilty of this drek. My star will set. I'll be laughed at from the Hudson to the Jordan.

(struggling)

KLOOT

(impudently)

Hush, hush, you're interrupting the poesy.

PINCHAS

Who has drawn and quartered my play? Speak.

KLOOT

I've only arranged it for the stage.

PINCHAS

(flabbergasted)

You!

KLOOT

(with great assurance)

You said you and I are the only two men who understand how to treat poesy.

PINCHAS

You understand drek not poesy. You conspire to keep me out of the theatre. . . . I will summons you.

KLOOT

(imperturbably)

We had to keep all the authors out. Suppose Shakespeare had complained of you?

PINCHAS

(modestly)

Shakespeare would have been only too grateful.

KLOOT

Hush, the boss is on.

POLONIUS "He's coming. Now give it to him good."

QUEEN

"Will I ever?"

HAMLET

"Mother, mother, mother."

QUEEN

"Leave it to me."

POLONIUS "I'll hide behind the curtain."

HAMLET

"Something wrong, Mom?"

QUEEN

"Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended."

HAMLET

"Mother, you have my father much offended."

QUEEN

"Don't get fresh with your mother."

HAMLET

"Will you ever stop nagging?"

QUEEN

"Nagging. Now let me tell you . . ."

HAMLET

"I'm in no mood for fooling. You're going to listen."

QUEEN

"Let me go."

A YIDDISH HAMLET

HAMLET

“Sit down. You shall not budge.”

QUEEN

“Is this the way to treat your mother? I should die I have a son like this. Murder. Help. Help.”

(Polonius stirs behind the curtain.)

HAMLET

“How, now, a rat?”

(Hamlet pulls his sword and runs Polonius through.)

POLONIUS

“Oi Vay!”

PINCHAS

(thunderstruck)

OI VAY!

(Pinchas makes a wild lunge, and is barely restrained by Kloot.)

KLOOT

Who's mutilating the poesy now? You'll spoil the scene.

PINCHAS

Liar, murderer. Word butcher. You promised me your wife as Ophelia.

KLOOT

Sure. The first wife I get, you shall have.

(Pinchas gnashes his teeth.)

KLOOT

I think you owe me a carfare.

PINCHAS

(icily)

Why is there singing in Hamlet?

KLOOT

Because it's Passover. You're a greenhorn. In New York it's a tradition to have musical plays on Passover. We only took your play as a Passover play.

PINCHAS

But Hamlet is not a musical play.

KLOOT

Yes it is. What about Ophelia's songs? That was what decided us. It only needed a little touching up by an experienced theatre person such as myself.

PINCHAS

But Hamlet is a tragedy!

KLOOT

Sure! They all die at the end. Our audiences are very compassionate. They'd be miserable if they didn't all die. Wait till they're dead, then you shall take your bow.

PINCHAS

Take my bow for your play!

KLOOT

There's quite a lot of your lines left, if you listen carefully. Only you're a poet and you don't understand stage technique. The idea was yours and was worth every cent we paid for it. Really, you're a genius.

(A storm of applause from the audience. The ghost cakewalks on stage and is confronted by Hamlet in mime.)

QUEEN

A YIDDISH HAMLET

“I will not speak with her.”

HORATIO

“Ophelia has gone meshugenah.”

QUEEN

“Let her in.”

OPHELIA

(tripping in)

I'm meshugenah,

Da, da, da,

I'm meshugenah,

Da, da, da,

Daddy's dead,

I'm out of my head. . . .

(Ophelia's song is accompanied by incongruous music. The play continues in mime. Pinchas continues to struggle with Kloot.)

QUEEN

(to Hamlet)

“That Ophelia's a pain. I always told you you'd have trouble with shiksés.”

(The play continues in mime, to roars of approval.)

HAMLET

(with a skull)

“Oy Vay. Poor Yorick, I knew him well, Horatio. A real joker. An unemployed comedian. . . .

(Finally Pinchas escapes from Kloot and runs on stage brandishing his cane.)

PINCHAS

Cutter of lines.

(whacking Hamlet with his cane)

Perverter of poesy.

(whacking Hamlet again)

(The audience loves it; cheers as Hamlet runs off.)

PINCHAS

Good people. I am the world famous poet, Melchitzedek Pinchas. This is not my play. This is not Shakespeare.

This is drek! Drek!

(Kloot and other members of the cast drag off Pinchas.)

BLACKOUT

A YIDDISH HAMLET

V. THE CAFE, NIGHT

It is later that night. Pinchas is sitting by himself in the deserted cafe. The bartender is polishing his glasses. Pinchas is sitting at a table.

(Enter the Heathen Reporter.)

REPORTER

Congratulations on your great success.

PINCHAS

(turning away)

Do not mock me!

REPORTER

But your Hamlet is a great hit. It's a sensation.

PINCHAS

It's a disgrace; a travesty! Poetry lies bleeding.

REPORTER

Well, you European intellectuals certainly take an odd view of things. I never laughed so hard in my life.

PINCHAS

You were not supposed to laugh. The play is a tragedy!

REPORTER

Maybe so, but I'd like to have a nickel for every ticket dollar that play will make.

PINCHAS

Bah! You're crazy. I'm going to stop them, no matter what. In the morning I will see Mendelsohn, the lawyer, and withdraw the right to produce my play.

(Enter Kloot.)

PINCHAS

You!

(rises and raises his cane)

Man of the Earth! Swindler! Enemy of Poetry!

KLOOT

Now you just hold on, there Pinchas—I've been looking for you all over the place.

PINCHAS

What do you want?

KLOOT

I came to give you your share of the box office.

PINCHAS

I don't want it.

KLOOT

The play's a hit. It will run for years. It's the greatest thing since sliced bread. You're a hero Pinchas! You're famous.

PINCHAS

I'm a laughingstock. And because of you.

KLOOT

Now, that's what I want to talk to you about. You've got to do that thing again.

PINCHAS

What thing? What are you talking about?

KLOOT

You've got to run on stage and fight with everybody. Just like you did tonight. That was the showstopper.

A YIDDISH HAMLET

PINCHAS

Are you mad?

KLOOT

Crazy like a fox, my boy. People almost pissed their pants.

PINCHAS

I will do no such thing!

KLOOT

That's O.K. we can have an actor playing you do it.

PINCHAS

I will not allow it! This whole travesty will stop tomorrow. I am going to Mendelsohn and he will put an end to this murder of art.

KLOOT

Say now Pinchas, don't kill the goose that laid the golden egg.

PINCHAS

It will stop, I say.

KLOOT

Look here, Pinchas, here's \$163.25—

PINCHAS

(turning)

I don't take bribes!

KLOOT

Bribes! Hain't no bribe. It's the author's share of the box office.

PINCHAS

For one night?

KLOOT

That's right. And, this play of yours, with a little help from yours truly, is likely to run a thousand and one nights as the saying goes.

PINCHAS

(musing)

A hundred and sixty-three dollars!

KLOOT

And twenty-five cents.

PINCHAS

It's more than I made in the last year.

KLOOT

And there's more where that come from. You are already being hailed as the comic genius from Warsaw.

PINCHAS

(unbelieving but flattered)

I am?

KLOOT

Damned right. What I want, what Goldwater wants, is another tragedy from you. He's ready to pay \$200.00 in advance.

PINCHAS

Two hundred dollars!

(controlling himself)

No—I will not do it! I will not debase my art for any amount of money.

KLOOT

But . . .

REPORTER

But Mr. Pinchas, you're throwing away the opportunity of a lifetime. Not only will you get rich, but your fame, as the comic genius from Warsaw, will be jeopardized.

A YIDDISH HAMLET

(Pinchas scowls. Putting his hands behind his back, he walks around in a circle considering—he waves his right hand muttering “On the one hand” then his left—“on the other hand” in considerable uncertainty. Finally, nodding to himself, he decides.)

PINCHAS

All right. But on one condition.

KLOOT

What's that?

PINCHAS

I will give you my Yiddish Caesar. I will let you butcher it to your heart's content. I will let you produce my Hamlet.

KLOOT

I'll treat it with the greatest respect. But what's your condition?

PINCHAS

My condition is that you don't try to stop me when I run on stage and beat Goldwater to death!

KLOOT

(thinking hard)

Well, you've got a deal.

(winking at the audience)

PINCHAS

Action is greater than thought.

KLOOT

(aside)

What do I care what happens to Goldwater?

CURTAIN