



**THEODORE BIKEI: IN THE SHOES OF SHOLOM ALEICHEM** was screened by Kino Ken at the 2015 Pittsburgh Jewish Film Festival. Below is his review of that film.

United States 2014 color 75 minutes live action concert / performance  
documentary Live Star Entertainment Producers: Caitlin Colford, Eric Drath,  
Marsha Lebbby, and John Lollos

13 of a possible 20 points

\*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\*

Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

Points:

- Direction: John Lollos
  - 1 Editing: Alison Shurman
  - 1 Photography: James Fideler
  - 0 Lighting: Jack Foster
  - 2 Written by: Theodore Bikel\*, Marsha Lebbby\*, and John Lollos\*
  - 2 Music: Hankus Netky\*
  - 1 Art Direction: Andy Myers Production Designer: David Gallo
  - Set Design: Nadya Gurevich
  - Set Dressing: Brian Chandler
  - Costume Design: Mary Wuliger\*
  - Makeup: Brian Buterbaugh\* and Michelle Kearns\*
  - 2 Interviewees (Cast): Theodore Bikel\*, Fyvush Finkel, Gilbert Gottfried,  
Bel Kaufman\*, Dr. Ruth Westheimer, Joseph Dorman, David Krakauer\*,  
Michael Wex\*, Sheldon Harnick\*
  - 2 Sound: Tony Leonardo and Michael Reilly
  - 0 Creativity
  - 2 Insightfulness
- 13 total points

Functioning simultaneously as both documentation of a dynamic live stage performance by singer / actor Theodore Bikel and as biographical overview of literary lion Sholom Aleichem, **THEODORE BIKEL: IN THE SHOES OF SHOLOM ALEICHEM** is alternately poignant and ridiculous. Crammed with cunning Yiddish one-liners, it keeps guffaws coming from audiences tickled silly. Yet songs and monologues delivered by star and chief narrator Bikel do not shy away from such shtetl topics as poverty, pogroms, and gullibility.

As a child growing up in Vienna during the 1930s, Theodore Bikel witnessed firsthand the anti-Semitism of Kristallnacht and brownshirts. His family fled Austria in the wake of government-sanctioned looting of Jewish shops, relocating to British-ruled Palestine. Thereby escaping the Final Solution. After World War II ended, young Bikel moved to England, enrolling in the Royal Academy of Drama and there honing thespian skills. Emerging as a multilingual triple threat, he engaged in live theater, film acting, and various kinds of music performances. Later, this polymath turned his attention to writing, producing **FOLKSONGS AND FOOTNOTES**, an autobiography titled **THEO**, and a play called **SHOLOM ALEICHEM: LAUGHTER THROUGH TEARS**. The latter is bedrock for this film.

So what common elements unite Bikel and Aleichem? Both were born in Eastern Europe, both eventually visited the United States, both became enchanted with the English language, both employed humor to make unpalatable social criticism entertaining. Bikel fled from Nazis. Aleichem emigrated to escape Communists. Each amassed an enormous, devoted following and used the theater as a means to communicate with it.

Revealingly, Mr. Bikel informs viewers his family's home library included many volumes of Aleichem's writings. These were cherished, partly because they provided a bridge to an impoverished past of restricted movement and unquestioned tradition. The notion of conveying wisdom from earlier eras into modern times using what sound and read like authentic folk tales is shared by both Bikel and Aleichem. They perceive themselves as cultural transmitters, rather than innovators. Their task is to preserve, as well as amuse. This each accomplishes splendidly.

Various commentators further illuminate the relationship between Aleichem and Bikel. Bel Kaufman, author of *UP THE DOWN STAIRCASE* and an Aleichem granddaughter, shares familial stories which throw additional light on the roots of her grandfather's tragicomic tone and oppressed everyman characters. Musician David Krakauer identifies connections between klezmer music's melancholy wittiness and Aleichem's penchant for counterbalancing comedy and tragic elements. Michael Wex and Sheldon Harnick remark how Aleichem used traditional Yiddish self-deprecation to enlist audience sympathy for Tevye and humble underdogs. Like Aleichem and Bikel, they know the great strength of popular identification with David. Who roots for Goliath? He doesn't need or merit a cheering section.

Indeed, the minority Jewish diaspora has comprised a travelling dark horse perpetually seeking recognition for even the most basic human rights and privileges. That quest lies at the heart of several Yiddish songs dramatically enacted by Bikel, giving their syllables the thrust and potency of unleashed Shakespeare.

Who was his inspiration, this Sholom Aleichem fellow? Born in Pereyaslav, Ukraine in 1859, Shalom Rabinovitz grew up in a family of middle-class timber sellers. The clan moved to Voronkov when Shalom was a boy. This community would become the fictional "Kasrilevke," prototype of all subsequent invented literary shtetls. Inhabitants of his childhood town little realized they would become superstars of Yiddish literature, albeit under aliases and with modified character traits.

Young Shalom probably first was attracted to folk tales recounted by male and female elders. Their everyday wisdom and invariable acceptance of life's setbacks appealed greatly. Coupled with lessons from Torah and historical legends transmitted orally, these ready-made stories needed only preservation in written form to find enthusiastic readership. Contemporary Leo Tolstoy showed the way with his miniature fables for peasant readers. What Leo began for Gentiles, Shalom would continue with Semitic readers. Since more of them comprehended and enjoyed Yiddish than Hebrew or Russian, the language of currency in shtetls became Shalom's first choice. His gamble paid off

handsomely, garnering him lifelong loyalty among readers and speakers of Yiddish.

In 1883, Shalom Rabinovitz published a Yiddish novella, *TSVEY SHTEYNER* (*TWO GRAVESTONES*). Despite its dire, gloomy title, the book sold well, establishing a foothold for modern Yiddish literature. It helped that a Romeo and Juliet storyline anchored the tale. A Yiddish novel followed the next year. By 1888, Yiddish literature had advanced to a point where Shalom could publish a grandiose volume titled *DI YIDISHE FOLKS-BIBLIOTEK* (*THE JEWISH PEOPLE'S LIBRARY*). Devoting himself to satires and collections of Yiddish anecdotes and legends, he spent the next several years compiling a second volume of the "Library." In 1895, the author penned a tale about a peasant named Tevye. That trampled proletarian would become his most famous character, eventually morphing into the star of Broadway's mega-smash *FIDDLER ON THE ROOF*. Tevye was just a simple dairyman with a nagging wife and three headstrong daughters — nothing special. Except a unique capacity for even-handed analysis of every dilemma, which led always either to adoption of initial preference or utter inconclusiveness. Guessing which outcome would triumph kept readers on tenterhooks while Tevye peppered them with possible consequences progressively more disappointing or calamitous. Always he would conclude with a retreat from absurdity or clinching affirmation.

Two short novels and a successful play kicked off the new century. Shalom married his beloved Olga, then left an increasingly anti-Semitic Russia. Trying first Switzerland, then Great Britain, he searched for a more welcoming residence. Finally the wanderer opted to move on west, crossing the Atlantic and temporarily settling in New York City. There he assumed the airs of a cultivated European, rankled locals, and wrote two plays which crashed in performance on American stages. Zionist propaganda and defending cultural tradition were obsessions for him at this stage. Neither activity won friends for Shalom among New York City liberal Jews. A year later, the discouraged Old World intellectual returned to Europe. There his politics were as accepted as his literature.

World War I sent him scurrying back across the Atlantic, in ill health and tortured mind. Tuberculosis and a world bent on self-destruction combined to

shorten the author's life. His 1916 New York City funeral was witnessed by tens of thousands dressed in mourning, a spectacle Tevye would have found intolerable.

This writer is indebted to <http://www.bikel.com/bio> for the above information about Mr. Theodore Bikel, now 92 years old and still going strong. Details about the life and career of Shalom Rabinovitz, a.k.a. Sholem Aleichem, derive from [www.yivoencyclopedia.org](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org). Many thanks to Mr. Dan Miron for compiling this information about Mr. Aleichem and making it available to the public.

Notable triumphs of the film are Mary Wuliger's costumes for Mr. Bikel's character, Hankus Netky's melancholy, energetic music, and a superb set of narrated monologues developed by a troika comprised of Theodore Bikel, Marsha Leiby, and John Lollo. Riddled with compact wit and rich in expressiveness, their writing keeps interest unflagging throughout the film's seventy-five minute running time.

Not so engaging is slack editing with pointless lingering on set details. An overly diluted lighting scheme confuses pale bareness of scanty furnishings with vexing gauzy obscurity, suggestive more of misplaced artiness than poverty or the passage of time. Unfocused shots of archival photographs prove to be disappointingly blurred. Since place and personal identities are not supplied, the souvenirs of past decades drift onscreen and off in a kind of interfering haze, rendering cryptic what ought to be either declared or avoided altogether.

Tony Leonardo and Michael Reilly serve up sound expertise capturing every tone across a huge sonic spectrum. Split second changes in dynamics are kept intact. Their work here beautifully reinforces vigorously precise musical backgrounds created by a klezmer chamber orchestra.

Mr. Bikel's singing, guitar playing, and interpretations are emotionally wrenching, the product of multiple executions over many years under live performance pressures.

Kino Ken would like to encourage the National Center for Jewish Film to expedite transfer of this film to dvd.

Film content is suitable and exceptionally illuminating for teens and adults. It is too piercingly impassioned at times for preteen viewers.

