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Spotlight on South Florida actor Avi Hoffman



Actor Avi Hoffman performing live on stage. PHOTO BY ANGELO FRABONI

By Linda Chase
Staff Writer

Avi Hoffman is an internationally-known actor and entrepreneur who calls South Florida home. Through his Yiddishkayt Initiative, Avi is the creator of YI Love YiddishFest '22 taking place August 30-September 4 in Boca Raton, Miami Beach, and Coral Springs. Ahead of the six-day event, he chatted with me about his life and career.

"Yiddish is my 'mameloshn' (my mother tongue). As a child of Holocaust survivors, I was instilled with the beauty and depth of Yiddish language and culture and the importance of keeping the legacy alive," Avi said.

"My mother used to sing and play with me and eventually she started writing plays and musicals which I could perform as a child in the Bronx. This led to my professional debut in the Yiddish Theatre in NY in 1968."

"When I made my debut at age 10 in a show called 'Bronx Express 1968' Yiddish Theater had started its decline from the heights of its popularity, but I still had the privilege of working with some of the great stars of the Yiddish Theater in the late '60s. There weren't many children who spoke fluent Yiddish and could act, so I was embraced by all those still performing in Yiddish. Years later, in the '80s, I was able to return to Yiddish theater as an adult, and be a part of its global renaissance."

Avi was asked, "How has your mother

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influenced your life's work?"

"There is no question that my mother has been the greatest influence on my professional career, as we have been working together since my childhood. To this day we have created award-winning productions that have been seen worldwide. Together we founded the Yiddishkayt Initiative (YI Love Jewish) in order to preserve and present the best of Jewish culture, building upon her 25 years at Columbia University."

"There have been several mentors in Avi's life.

"Theodore Bikel was not so much a mentor, as a friend and an iconic performer whom I listened to as a child, growing up on his beautiful albums of Yiddish folk songs," Avi

recalled. "He and other great icons of Jewish culture, many of whom I was lucky enough to meet, gave me the gifts of their talent and inspired me

to pursue a career in this meshuggeneh business."

"One of the most important influences on my life was the great Fyvush Finkel, with whom I worked, and where I met my wife and the mother of my children. The brilliant Bruce Adler was a friend whom I had the opportunity to work with and learn from, but everyone from Leonard Nimoy (who spoke a fluent Yiddish), Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner, Larry Kert, Laurence Luckinbill and the many great talents that I met and worked with, have made me the actor/performer I am today."

"I asked Avi his thoughts on the future of the Yiddish language?"

"Over three hundred

years ago, historians predicted the death of Yiddish. Those historians are dead. Yiddish is thriving. The future of Yiddish is bright!"

"I taught a course at the University of Miami called Yiddish: The Foundation of Modern Culture. I truly believe that those who came from the Yiddish world of the 1880s to the 1960s are primarily responsible for the evolution of our modern world culture. The greatest forces in Theater, Film, Television, Comedy, Music and beyond came out of the world of Yiddish to change the world."

Avi shared the idea behind his renowned one-person shows "Too Jewish?", "Too Jewish, Too" and "Still Jewish After All These Years."

"The original 'Too Jewish?' was written in 1994 when I was unemployed and desperate

before the birth of our first child. A NY producer friend of mine, Eric Krebs, told me to write a play he could present on the off nights in his theater and would pay me a living wage. The rest is history. T.J2 and Still Jewish are outgrowths and complementary programs to the original."

I asked Avi about some of his favorite film roles.

"Playing the title role in the film 'The Imported Bridegroom' taught me so much about the film industry, but I have recently starred in several highly acclaimed Holocaust films which have been recognized in Film Festivals worldwide."

"As a child of Holocaust survivors, I have dedicated much of my work to finding ever more ways to present the stories and lessons of the Holocaust to all generations and all people. We have partnered with many International Holocaust

organizations to present engaging and academic programming to commemorate the Holocaust 3 times a year: Kristallnacht (November), International Holocaust Remembrance Day (January) and Yom HaShoah (April)."

Avi talked about the show "Yiddish Tangos" that will be presented at The Wick Theatre in Boca Raton on Tuesday, August 23.

"Yiddish Tangos was a project that Maestro Aaron Kula invited me to participate in. I fell in love with it and we organized a pre-covid tour that got canceled when the world shut down. We ended up doing a free concert on Facebook Live and 120,000 people watched it. Now we're live again and selling out at the Wick Theatre and I couldn't be more excited."

"This season will be extremely busy as we begin returning to live perfor-

mances. In addition to all the YI Love Jewish programs and Festivals, I will be starring in the Wick Theatre production of Jerry Herman's Milk & Honey in October/November, and I will be part of the world premiere production of Last Night In Wood at Theatre Lab at FAU in January/February. I am working on major projects with the University of Miami and would like to begin production of a film version of Death of a Salesman in Yiddish. So many projects and so little time."

Tell us Avi, "Is there any English spoken in any of your performances including the YiddishFest?"

"At this point, everything is performed in English, with a 'bis' (little) Yiddish and based in Yiddishkayt."

For more information on YI Love YiddishFest and other upcoming events Avi is working on visit yilovejewish.org

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