

## AN EVENING WITH THEO BIKEL

When I first heard that there was going to be an evening with Theo Bickel, I pictured a group of people in a large living room noshing, drinking and schmoozing with the great singer and actor. I have been a big fan of Bickel's for a long time, despite the fact (or maybe because of the fact) that he is schizophrenic. One day, he is a singer, the next day he is an actor. As a singer, he is known as Theo Bikel. As an actor, he is Theodore Bikel. One of my favorite movies is *The Defiant Ones*, where Bikel plays a southern sheriff. Despite my being a big fan, I felt his slight Austrian-Jewish accent sneaking in on his southern accent. He was more believable as the captain of the Russian submarine in *The Russians Are Coming*, and a German naval officer in *The African Queen*. And most believable as Tevye in *Fiddler*. Anyway, not only is he a fine actor, I loved him because he was a long-time President of Actors Equity.

But I am especially admire him as a singer of Yiddish folk songs. I have his LP records, cassettes, and CDs. And what endeared him to me even more, was that he had recorded a song my first father-in-law would sing at the Passover Seder, which I had heard nowhere else: *Mu Asapru, Eyner Iz Di Got*. I love that song, and view it, and a few others, as a gift from Sam Feig. I am not sure which version is better, Feig's or Bikel's. Both are great, but one I heard for the first time, and in person, on Pesach.

I also have a deep respect for Bikel for his political activism, which was confirmed when I saw him in Boston a few years ago with Leibel Fine. Any friend of Leibel's is a friend of mine. Bickel was a leader of AJ Congress when AJ Congress was AJ Congress. Not what it has become over the past several years. And a leader of Meretz. He came by his love of Israel early. His father named him after Theodore Herzl. Bikel was a fighter for Soviet Jewry, a long time fighter for civil rights and all the right causes here, and around the world.

Back to "An Evening With Theo Bikel." It was not a schmooze; it was a concert at the Berklee Performance Center, part of the Boston Jewish Music Festival, and it featured a great Klezmer group, led by Hankus Netzky, and my own Workmen's Circle Besser Velt chorus and several other Jewish music luminaries. But of course, the star was "Theo." When he came out, he received a standing ovation. It is getting harder for me to stand up, and it turns out that it is hard for Theo to stand as well. He is walking with a cane, and is performing sitting down. He explained that he is almost 90, and his current ambition is to reach 91.

Let it be noted: His voice is as great as ever, as is his guitar playing. His singing was flawless. And his translation of his songs for the "Yiddishly impaired" was also flawless. And what I especially loved was that he commented on something that I thought was original with me. In the song "Reizele" a dialogue between a young couple, the young woman sings that she will "...shtrik ikh a sheyn tfillin zekel." She will knit him a lovely tfillin bag. For years I have noted that the English translation of "tfillin" is "phylactery." Now how ridiculous is that! And Bickel noted it too. Great minds...

When we arrived at the concert, we saw dozens of people whom we knew. Why not? We hang around with lots of Jews who like the same music, both from the Workmen's Circle and the Newton Center Minyan. And there was Ben Pasternack (whose name I could not remember at first.) He is a nephew of Bob Manners, whom we would see at Bob and Jean's annual Christmas party. He is a Klezmer clarinetist, and he and his girl friend play Balkan music, which must be like Jewish music, but different. During intermission, he found all of us seats closer to the stage, and as we were chatting, the couple in front of us turned around. Sonya mentioned that her father taught at MIT, and the man in the row in front of us, had been his student. Small world. Then the man mentioned that they live in Sudbury, and I asked if they knew the Roths. The woman said that their son, David Roth, helped her find her studio in Framingham. Small world.

The concert resumed. My 85 member, Workmen's Circle Besser Velt Chorus was on stage, and did two great Yiddish songs: "Ale Menschn" (from Beethoven's Ninth) and "Vilna," with Rosalie Gerut. We remember Rosalie when she was a young singer of Yiddish folk songs, 25 years ago. She is now a Cantor at a Reform Temple in Concord. Bikel sang a duet (Reizele), appropriately enough, with Rosalie, sang with the band, sang accompanied by a remarkable accordionist, and he closed the concert with a touching song that he wrote, accompanying himself on guitar. Again, the audience was standing and cheering. Even me. What a happy crowd, to have heard Theo.

We are not doing too many evening shows, these days, limiting ourselves to matinees, but this was special. And besides, we were able to get parking at a handicapped spot, nearby.

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