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by Agnieszka Legutko

**Festschrift to David Roskies**

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## **HERTZ GROSBARD'S JEWSPEAK: THE LOST ART OF WORD CONCERTS**

by Agnieszka Legutko

**Abstract:** *Throughout the twentieth century, Hertz Grosbard (1892-1994) performed his “word concerts” around the world, leaving his audiences mesmerized. Despite his once enormous popularity, Grosbard’s life and oeuvre has attracted scarce scholarly attention. This article examines Grosbard’s life and the critical reception of his oeuvre through the lens of David Roskies’s concept of Jewspeak. Grosbard embodies Jewspeak and creates a fusion genre of the “word concert” that is a crossover between literature, theater, and music.*

Throughout the twentieth century, Hertz Grosbard (1892-1994) performed his “word concerts” around the world, leaving his audiences mesmerized. In his performances, Grosbard “create[d] a poetic air that you breathe[d] in for years,”<sup>1</sup> wrote the poet Abraham Sutzkever. According to other reports, Grosbard’s admirers became irreversibly transformed by his performance, continuing to hear his voice in their heads long after the end of the show. As one of his fans recalled:

I’m so used to hearing [Grosbard] read that, when I read myself, it’s always [as if] Grosbard is reading for me. [...] I’d like to know how I would read this thing, if I didn’t know Grosbard and if it were just me and the author. But [Grosbard] intrudes between me and the author and he has colored my reading of Yiddish literature, of literature in general, with his fantastic ability to interpret in his own

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Sutzkever, “Der triumf marsh,” *Di goldene keyt* no. 22 (1955): 142.

particular way.<sup>2</sup>

In his essay, “Call It Jewspeak: On the Evolution of Speech in Modern Yiddish Writing,” David Roskies demonstrates how “the spoken language became a central feature of modern Yiddish literature,”<sup>3</sup> mapping its trajectory in the history of Yiddish belles-lettres. Grosbard, one of the artists who engaged with the Yiddish word, takes this orality literally and indeed transforms the spoken word into a key element of modern Yiddish literature through his “word concerts,” a selection of which was left to posterity in the form of ten vinyl records, *Herts Grosbard: Vort Kontsert* (Word Concert).<sup>4</sup> As Roskies puts it, Grosbard “turn[s] the written-as-spoken classics of modern Yiddish literature into performance art, so as to capture and commemorate the language.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, I argue, Grosbard’s art can be considered an exemplar of “Jewspeak”--“an essential expression of the once-living folk,”<sup>6</sup> while the “word concert” – a unique collage of literary, vocal, and performance arts – can be viewed as a new genre of Yiddish literature.

Despite his once enormous popularity, Grosbard’s life and oeuvre has attracted scarce scholarly attention. Only a handful of sources are available: a selection of articles in the Yiddish press reviewing his performances around the world, posthumously collected in a monograph by Mordkhe Tsanin,<sup>7</sup> two short jubilee publications in 1938 and 1944,<sup>8</sup> and two recent articles in *Forverts*.<sup>9</sup> Roskies’s treatment of Grosbard’s “solo readings” in the aforementioned essay, is the only English-language exploration of his art;<sup>10</sup> a comprehensive study of his work is still missing.

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<sup>2</sup> *National Conference on Yiddish: Herz Grossbard Introduced to Youth Group* (May 17, 1969), Audio Collection of Jewish Public Library of Montreal. Introduction by David Rome, Canadian historian, director of the Montreal Jewish Public Library.

<https://archive.org/details/NationalConferenceOnYiddishHerzGrossbardIntroducedToYouthGroupmay>

<sup>3</sup> David G. Roskies, “Call It Jewspeak: On the Evolution of Speech in Modern Yiddish Writing,” *Poetics Today* 35 (2014): 225.

<sup>4</sup> The online platform [www.grosbardproject.com](http://www.grosbardproject.com), inspired by David Roskies and created by Agnieszka Legutko, features digital versions of Grosbard’s *Word Concerts* accompanied by original texts. Hertz Grosbard, *Herts Grosbard: Vort Kontsert*, 10 vinyl records, Pleasantville, NY: EAV Lexington, nd. (recorded ca. 1950s and 1960s).

<sup>5</sup> Roskies, “Call It Jewspeak,” 226.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 294.

<sup>7</sup> M. Tsanin, *Herz Grosbard* (Tel Aviv: Publisher “Labor and effort of M. Tsanin, according to the wish of Hertz Grosbard, expressed in his will,” 1995).

<sup>8</sup> *Herts Grosbard: Der mayster fun yidishn vort* (Vilnius: ZaZyd Towarzystwo, 1938); *Tsen Yor Herts Grosbard in Argentine* (Buenos Aires: Baerungs Komitet, 1944).

<sup>9</sup> Sore-Rukhl Schaechter, “A Delightful Way to Listen to Yiddish Literature,” *Forverts*, February 15, 2015. <http://yiddish.forward.com/articles/185375/>; Mikhal Bar-Abraham, “Herts Grosbard: groysler yidisher vort-kinstler,” *Forverts*, April 20, 2007. <https://yiddish2.forward.com/node/140.html>

<sup>10</sup> Grosbard is briefly mentioned in Nahma Sandrow’s *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1977, 1996), 380, and, more recently, in Debra Caplan’s

This article aims to augment current scholarship on Grosbard by examining his life and the critical reception of his oeuvre through the lens of Roskies's concept of Jewspeak. I argue that by focusing on the oral performance of Yiddish literature, Grosbard takes the "written-as-spoken" literature back to the "spoken." In doing so, he imbues the work with a new aesthetic that "makes the work complete (*derzogt bizn sof, farendikt*)." <sup>11</sup> Not only does Grosbard *perform* the Yiddish word, he incarnates it. Using his voice as an instrument in order to bring out the musical rhythm of the word, and enhancing it with his dramatic mimic and "aristocratically studied gesture" <sup>12</sup> in, what Roskies calls, "recitational high art of Grossbard," <sup>13</sup> Grosbard embodies Jewspeak and creates a fusion genre of the "word concert" that is a crossover between literature, theater, and music.

Often described as "the entire theater ensemble in one person," <sup>14</sup> Grosbard puzzled contemporaneous critics who strove to categorize the singularity of his work. Literary critic Dr. Esther Eliashev called it "a new and original art," while Shmuel Charney portrayed it as "a different kind of theater (*an ander teater*) that included poetry, short stories, and not only dramas." <sup>15</sup> Grosbard's theater play is theatrical, yet without conventional theatricality, writes Charney, "he performs without set design, without makeup, without man-made masks, only with the variations of his melody (*nign*), his voice, his glances, facial expressions, and gestures." <sup>16</sup> Another literary critic, Shlomo Mendelson, takes it a step further arguing that Grosbard "occupies a special place in Yiddish theater ... [as] he begets a new genre, a new way – **word art**. This is not recitation, not an addition to something else, but art – for its own sake." <sup>17</sup>

Indeed, in calling his performances "word concerts," Grosbard created a new genre – a transmedial amalgam of literary, vocal, visual, and performance arts, in which the written word is rendered as a quasi musical concert enhanced with a minimalist theatrical performance of facial expressiveness and gesticulation. However, with Grosbard's death, the genre of the word concert, which came to epitomize Jewspeak and

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*Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 196, 231-232. The Yiddish Book Center's [new OCR search tool](#) reveals over sixty results referring to Hertz Grosbard: scattered mentions in Zalmen Zylberweig's *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, and in selected memoirs. See also David Roskies's blog, "[Playlisticle: Yiddish Orality in an Age of Digital Reproduction](#)," *In Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, June 25, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Sh. Mendelson, "Herts Grosbard's maystershaft," January 1947, New York, in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 130-131.

<sup>12</sup> Eliezer Podriatshik, "Der fenomen", *Naye Tsaytung*, Tel-Aviv, April 17, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Roskies, "Call It Jewspeak," 272.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Esther Eliashev, "Di naye kunst fun Herts Grosbard," *Folksblat*, Kovne, 1931, in Tsanin, 57. Sh. Charney echoed this view in the 1950s, see footnotes n. 15 and 16. Actor Avrom Morevsky said that Grosbard "was in the fortunate position to say 'theater is me' (*teater dos bin ikh*)," cited in Abraham Lis, "Eyntsikartiker mayster Herts Grosbard," *Yidishe velt*, Tel-Aviv, February 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Sh. Charney (S. Niger), "An ander teater," *Der Tog*, April 15, 1951.

<sup>16</sup> Sh. Charney, "Kvalitet," *Der Tog*, January 3, 1953.

<sup>17</sup> Mendelson, "Herts Grosbard's maystershaft," (emphasis in the original).

which once took Yiddish audiences by storm, was lost. Contemporary Yiddish speakers and enthusiasts can still hear Grosbard's magnum opus: an inimitably elocuted audio anthology of Yiddish literature.<sup>18</sup> However, without the visual component of his performance, we no longer can fully partake in word concerts. At best, we can listen to Grosbard and sift through accounts written by his entranced audience members; still, it is only a fraction of that enthralling experience.

## **I. Grosbard: Biography and Career**

The future "Maestro of the Yiddish Word," Hertz-Naftali Grosbard (also spelled Grossbard) was born on June 21, 1892 in Łódź into a family of great Hasidic lineage. His maternal grandfather, Abraham Gershon Morgenshtern, was a descendant of the founder of Gerer Hasidim, Reb Itshe Meir (Yitskhak Meir Alter). His paternal grandfather, Hershl Grosbard, was an Aleksander Hasid, who one day sold his prospering business in Warsaw and moved together with his wife to Jerusalem to reside in Mea Shearim until the end of their life. Grosbard was raised in a pious household and received both a traditional and secular education. During the times of socialist turmoil, like many of his fellow Yiddish artists, he shed his religiosity and began reading Sholem Aleichem and I.L. Peretz together with revolutionary literature. He picked up flawless German with "a diction that later evoked wonderment,"<sup>19</sup> attended the German Dramatic School in Łódź, and was part of the "Drama and Music" ensemble, together with the future chronicler of Yiddish theater, Zalman Zylbercweig.<sup>20</sup>

When the Vilna Troupe sought to "refresh their ensemble,"<sup>21</sup> Grosbard was ready. His first appearances with the Troupe in Warsaw, in *Der Shtumer* by A. Vayter and *Ganoyvim* by Fishl Bimko, were met with great critical acclaim. According to *Di Arbeiter Tsaytung*, "In the drama *Der Shtumer*, Grosbard created a serious, thoughtful, and deeply-felt Aleksander. ... There was no excessive gesture. ... Each movement of his entire body and face speaks, relates, and reveals; it tells us the secret of his experiences" (July 25, 1919).<sup>22</sup> *Der Moment* applauded Grosbard for his "fine, honest demeanor, respectable stature, his expressive eyes, and his gentle timbre. The earnestness with

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<sup>18</sup> Hertz Grosbard, *Herts Grosbard: Vort kontsert*, 10 vinyl records, available online at [www.grosbardproject.com](http://www.grosbardproject.com). A live recording of a word concert (performed on October 23, 1976) can be accessed here: [https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/archival-recordings/fbr-549\\_4548/hertz-grosbard-performance-hertz-grosbard](https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/archival-recordings/fbr-549_4548/hertz-grosbard-performance-hertz-grosbard)

<sup>19</sup> Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 17. German minority in Łódź constituted 15 percent of the population before 1914. Winson Chu, *The German Minority in Interwar Poland* (Washington D.C: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 117.

<sup>20</sup> *Zalman Zylbercweig: Yoyvl-bukh tsu zayn draysik-yorikn literarishn yubiley* (New York: Yubiley Komitet), 1941, 44.

<sup>21</sup> Michal Weichert, "Di dershaynung," *Unzer vort*, Paris, January 21, 1967.

<sup>22</sup> Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 18.

which he approaches his role of Yoel-Dovid in *Dos Vilner Balebesl* evokes hope that he will be a valuable contributor to the modern Yiddish stage” (June 27, 1919).<sup>23</sup>

Despite his early success, Grosbard decided to join the next iteration of the Vilna Troupe, the *Yidish Kinstler Teater* (Yiddish Artists Theater) in Berlin. He then performed on the German stage, as part of the Berlin-based Renaissance Theater, the Volksbuehne Theater, and the Piscator-Buehne, as well as the Municipal Theater in Frankfurt am Main. At the same time, he began to give what he would later call “word concerts” [*vort kontsertn*] in Yiddish. The first documented “recitation evening” took place on May 16, 1925, at the Writers’ Union venue in Warsaw. Grosbard appeared together with his first wife, Frieda Blumental,<sup>24</sup> and the “renowned [and] talented performers read the works of Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Moshe Nadir, M. Kulbak and others. The evening was a great success and the artists strongly captivated the audience with their original reading that interprets and revives the works”<sup>25</sup>

Soon afterwards Grosbard began a solo career.<sup>26</sup> He became so successful that in 1927 Dovid Bergelson famously labeled him “the Modern *Davner*” of Yiddish literature, his performances akin to prayer in their devotion and enthusiasm.<sup>27</sup> In 1928, he was invited to perform at the twentieth anniversary of the Czernowitz Language Conference, alongside such distinguished delegates from Poland as Noyekh Prilutski, Zalman Reisen, Dr. Zemakh Shabad, and Dr. Zemakh Rubin. The conference anniversary was also celebrated by the publication of a limited edition of Eliezer Shteynberg’s fables, *Durkh di briln*,<sup>28</sup> illustrated by Artur Kolnik’s woodcuts. Grosbard, who was one of the most ardent promoters of Shteynberg’s oeuvre, inspired Kolnik to create “*retsitatsye geshtaltn*” or “recitation figures”; these images present twelve expressionist woodcuts that attempt to capture Grosbard’s unique ability to inhabit and become part of the work he recited.<sup>29</sup>

The following years launched Grosbard to the height of his fame as he toured extensively “on the triumph-train around the Yiddish empire ... on which the sun never sets.”<sup>30</sup> In the years 1926-1934 and 1936-1939, Grosbard performed mostly in Europe (Poland, Lithuania, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Finland, Denmark, Belgium, and France), with a brief stop in Johannesburg in 1927. In Lithuania, alone, he performed 150 word

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Unlike Grosbard, Frieda Blumental has her own entry in Zylbercweig’s *Leksikon fun Yidishn teater*, according to which she did solo tournées with “word concerts” in 1934 around Europe (Mexico: The Hebrew Actors Union, 1967), vol.5, p. 5225-6.

<sup>25</sup> “Tsu di retsitatsye ovntn fun F. Blumental un H. Grosbard,” *Literarische bleter*, May 22, 1925.

<sup>26</sup> Grosbard’s earliest documented solo performance was in Paris in 1926 (Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 79).

<sup>27</sup> Dovid Bergelson, “Der moderner davner,” February 1927, in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 13.

<sup>28</sup> Later reissued as Eliezer Shteynberg, *Mesholim*, with 14 woodcuts by Artur Kolnik, (Tshernovits: Komitet af aroystsugabn Eliezer Shteynberg shriftn), 1932.

<sup>29</sup> Artur Kolnik, *Herts Grosbards retsitatsye geshtaltn: 12 holtsshnitn* (Paris: Farlag “Kinstler gemeynshaft,” 1933), also reproduced in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, n.p.

<sup>30</sup> Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 24.

concerts between 1928 and 1939. These performances were routinely held in 1,000-seat auditoriums; “statistically speaking,” as one critic explained, “every Jew in Lithuania attended a Grosbard’s concert.”<sup>31</sup> Along with his European tours, Grosbard also made his way to South America. The audiences in Argentina, where he lived for two years (August 1934-June 1936), were so infatuated with Grosbard that he was invited back in August of 1939, thus escaping the fate of European Jewry. He remained there for five years, performing in Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Bolivia. He subsequently lived in New York, before moving to Canada in 1951, where he obtained Canadian citizenship in 1957. He continued touring in Europe, North and South America, and South Africa.

If before the war Grosbard’s success was measured largely by his popularity in Lithuania, after the war his name continued to attract large audiences in Israel. His first Israeli tour in 1955 was an enormous success. He performed the opening word concert on Habimah’s main stage, where he reunited with Habimah actors he had worked with in Europe, a very emotional moment for all who were present.<sup>32</sup> The 1955 tour marked the beginning of a nearly annual visit to Israel where, over the next decade and a half, he would give hundreds of performances, especially in kibbutzim. He eventually immigrated to Israel and became an Israeli citizen in 1971. He gave his last word concert in 1992, at the celebration of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in Holon, Israel, where he lived. Two weeks before his death at the age of 102, he was making plans for the Yiddish Writers’ Union of Israel to organize one more concert.<sup>33</sup>

## II. Grosbard: The Forum of the Word Concert

Accounts of Grosbard’s word concerts abound in the Yiddish press. As the papers reported, Grosbard appeared on stage alone, without makeup or set decorations. He would sit at a small table with a little lamp, and with a book in his hand. In this pose, Grosbard managed to spellbind audiences worldwide with the power of his voice. It is helpful here to recount the words of some of his more famous audience members in order to understand Grosbard’s ability to captivate masses. The Yiddish novelist Dovid Bergelson, for example, noted in 1927 that not only was Grosbard applauded “as a rare elocutionist (*retsitator*) both in Jewish and non-Jewish press,” but he also possessed a rare skill of “deeply exploring the soul of the text and finding its true tone.”<sup>34</sup> He goes on to portray Grosbard as “the modern cantor of modern Yiddish literature,” encouraging his readers to “Go, listen to Grosbard, and he will reveal new depths of Yiddish literature before you. ... Go, hear, how Grosbard *prays* (*davens*) Yiddish literature.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 21. See also M. Tsanin, “An eynmolike dershaynung,” *Letste naves*, Tel-Aviv, April 6, 1955.

<sup>33</sup> Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Bergelson, “Der moderner davner.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

popular Yiddish writer Yoshue Perle compares the experience of listening to Grosbard to “the Sabbath joy during the week.”<sup>36</sup> Yiddish poet and chronicler Melech Ravitch ranks Grosbard as “without doubt and exaggeration one of the best, perhaps the very best Yiddish reciter (*retsitor*). ... He renders [poetry] so clearly to the listeners’ ears that even their eyes can see it.”<sup>37</sup> The public health advocate Dr. Tsemakh Shabad recalls that in Grosbard’s rendition, “The Yiddish word sounded like the most beautiful music,”<sup>38</sup> while writer Moshe Gros-Tsimerman compares Grosbard’s performance to “a solo symphony.”<sup>39</sup> The Yiddish linguist Noyekh Prilutski calls Grosbard a unique “reciter-magician (*retsitor-kishefmakher*) ... who is blessed with the talent to conjure words and ensnare their soul, like a Hindu fakir who charms the snakes and makes them submissive.”<sup>40</sup> The above reviews repeatedly attest to Grosbard’s extraordinary ability to bring out an almost metaphysical fusion of religion, magic, music, and literature, so prevalent in the genre of the word concert.

While Grosbard’s style and affect were central to reports, very few commentators engaged with Grosbard’s repertoire. We may reason that Grosbard had a bounded repertoire, as the same names of Yiddish writers are mentioned repeatedly in descriptions of his performances. Among his “core” writers were Sholem Aleichem, I.L. Peretz, Moshe Nadir, Eliezer Shteynberg, Itzik Manger, Moyshe Kulbak, Moyshe Leyb Halpern, and A. Lutsky; recordings of works by all of these writers can be found on Grosbard’s vinyl records. To be sure, in the early stages of his career, Grosbard did experiment with his repertoire, adding such authors as Yehoash and Pintshevsky,<sup>41</sup> Sholem Asch, Chaim Grade, and Israel Ashendorf,<sup>42</sup> and introducing a thematic diversity with works on “national conflicts, social unrest, and war” as well as moral, philosophical, and artistic texts.<sup>43</sup> Later, however, he stopped diversifying his repertoire. One critic timidly commented that Grosbard did not seek to “deepen and beautify the tastes of the Yiddish public”<sup>44</sup> with his choice of the material.

Indeed, the rare negative critique of Grosbard stemmed from this limited repertoire. In 1937, Melech Ravitch begins a review of Grosbard by pointing out his “holy” status as Bergelson’s “*Davner* of Yiddish literature”; then, sighing with relief, Ravitch writes: “I paid my debt [by mentioning that], now I can say whatever I want.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Yoshue Perle, “Oyneg shabes indervokhn,” *Der Moment*, January 14, 1938.

<sup>37</sup> Melech Ravitch, “Herts Grosbards kunst,” *Folks-Tsaytung*, Warsaw, Sept 21, 1928.

<sup>38</sup> Dr. Ts. Shabad, “Grosbards kontsert,” *Vilner tog*, March 13, 1932.

<sup>39</sup> M. Gros-Tsimerman, “Herts Grosbard,” *Di goldene keyt*, in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 141.

<sup>40</sup> Noyekh Prilutski, “Er iz eyner,” *Der Moment*, March 16, 19? in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 25.

<sup>41</sup> M.B., “An eyntsiker in zayn min,” *Nayer folksblat*, 1928.

<sup>42</sup> Kh. Yelin, “Ershter uftrit fun Herts Grosbard,” *Folksblat*, Kovne, n.d., ca. 1930s, in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Sh. B., “A yoyvl-kontsert,” *Vilner Tog*, January 31, 1939.

<sup>45</sup> Melech Ravitch, “Herts Grosbard” (1937) in *Mayn Leksikon: Yidishe shrayber, kinstler un kultur-tuer in poyln tsvishn di tsvey groyse velt milkhomes* (Montreal: Komitet in Montreal, 1947), vol. 2, 211.

Ravitch remarks that it takes Grosbard a long time to find his authors but once he does, he commits to them, his “betroted” (*zivugim*), for eternity. Although he admits that Grosbard’s recitation has “genre, style, and personality that cannot be matched to every author,”<sup>46</sup> he mockingly comments that only elect individuals can obtain the honor. Grosbard can be paired solely with predestined authors “who forty days before their first literary creation hear an angel’s voice from heaven saying, ‘You will receive the elevation (*tikn*) from Grosbard.’”<sup>47</sup> Ravitch sarcastically observes that “when Grosbard attaches himself to an author, he crawls into him. At times, he even expels the author entirely, as he seems to be constantly saying to the author, ‘Go, move away, ... you don’t understand your own work.’”<sup>48</sup> Finally, Ravitch offers an interesting observation: “Grosbard is very angry. Above all, he is angry at the writers, ... who – he thinks – have grievances against him for not reciting their works. ... Grosbard deems that even authors who are part of his repertoire resent him. ... Perhaps they do. They probably think that Grosbard puffs their works like a tavern keeper at a fair. ... This is how it is with predestined matches – they are fruitful but there is no peace at home.”<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the source of Ravitch’s anger is his own thinly veiled resentment for not being included in Grosbard’s repertoire; nonetheless, it sheds somewhat different light on Grosbard.

Of course, Ravitch’s review is in the minority. While Grosbard’s choice in writers was not dynamic, his admirers certainly deemed the vocal performer to be unique--in the words of one critic, “the only one of his kind who has no equal on the Yiddish stage.”<sup>50</sup> Yankev Botoshansky agreed, asserting “with full certainty: there is no other Jewish artist who recites the way Grosbard does,”<sup>51</sup> whereas Perle refers to Grosbard as “the one and only in the domain of what he alone calls a word concert.”<sup>52</sup> Attempts to situate him in the context of the history of the art of solo recitation, which according to theater historian Michal Weichert has “only a smidgen of tradition among the Jews,”<sup>53</sup> were proven unsuccessful. References to Purim shpilers, Broder singers, Velvl Zbarzher or Avrom Goldfaden, who sometimes read his poems on stage<sup>54</sup> – none of whom, however, performed exactly in the way Grosbard did – were unsatisfactory. Comparisons between Grosbard and other artists, who would occasionally recite – mostly poetry – on stage, such as Dovid Herman, Hannah Rovinah, or such active theater actors as Joseph Buloff, Noah Nachbush, and Maurice Schwartz who would also record their readings, as Grosbard did, were insufficient. Although Grosbard was by no means the only performer

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> M.B., “An eyntsiker in zayn min.”

<sup>51</sup> Yankev Botoshansky, “A balade vegn Grosbardn,” *Di Prese*, June 17, 1935.

<sup>52</sup> Perle, “Oyneg shabes indervokhn.”

<sup>53</sup> Weichert, “Di dershaynung.”

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., Perle, “Oyneg shabes indervokhn.”

of the spoken word, he certainly distinguished himself as a singular artist who dedicated his entire life to solo word concerts – a new genre of Yiddish literature he had created.

Some inspiration for Grosbard's art can be found in other European cultures, exemplified by such performers as Russian actors Ivan Gorbunov (1831-1895) and Vasily Kachalov (1875-1948); Austrian actor Alexander Moissi (1880-1935); or Polish-Jewish actress Kazimiera Rychterówna (1895-1963). Alongside his acting career at the prestigious Alexandrine Theater in St. Petersburg, which he joined in 1855, Gorbunov began "performing improvised scenes from his earlier life living in Moscow, which became extremely popular. ... The crowds delighted in the keenness of his observations and the accuracy of his imitations."<sup>55</sup> Gorbunov solo performances refer to a form of Russian story telling, *skaz*, which Mikhail Bakhtin defines as "a technique or mode of narration that imitates the oral speech of an individualized narrator."<sup>56</sup> Kachalov, who was part of the Moscow Art Theater, did readings of literature. "When he read, one had a feeling that the simple words acquired a new spirit, a new splendor; they began to sparkle."<sup>57</sup> Alexander Moissi performed on many European stages, including Vienna, Prague, Berlin, and Salzburg, and excelled in troubled characters he performed with great retrospection. Many Yiddish critics recalled his recitations of Schiller and Heine, his "achieved perfection in the word sound," and his ability to "create music from the word."<sup>58</sup> His voice, "with its strongly melodic, almost operatic range, was legendary."<sup>59</sup> Rychterówna, like Grosbard, abandoned her successful theater career and took up solo recitation performances, appearing among others in Lvov and Berlin. She gained enormous popularity as an "excellent elocutionist"<sup>60</sup> who during her three-hour shows recited poetry and monologues from Polish dramas. While a fuller comparison of Rychterówna and Grosbard is beyond the scope of the current study, the brief comparison points to the broad European trends of verbal recitations which Grosbard translated into and modified for the Yiddish audience. His approximation and adaptation of such trends was unique in the history of Yiddish performance.

### III. Grosbard's Jewspeak: A New Genre of Yiddish Literature

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<sup>55</sup> Danielle Jones, ed., *Skaz: Masters of Russian Storytelling: A Dual Language Anthology* (Thornhill, Ontario, Canada: Translit Publishing, 2014), 54.

<sup>56</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 8.

<sup>57</sup> Mendelson, "Herts Grosbards maystershaft."

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Balme, "Moissi, Alexander," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Theatre and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198601746.001.0001/acref-9780198601746-e-2674>. Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> "Kazimiera Rychterówna" in *Słownik Biograficzny Teatru Polskiego 1765-1965* (Warszawa: PWN, 1973). <http://www.e-teatr.pl/pl/osoby/17704.html>.

Indeed, Grosbard stands out as a performer not just in the Yiddish context but in the European context writ large. He perfected his art of elocution, yet he did not recite from memory; in fact, he *read* on stage, thus fusing the written word with the oral performance of the theater. “He alone is a theater, ... an original, idiosyncratic theater, without makeup, without costumes, without gestures, and without all the accessories we are used to seeing in the theater. He is careful, even stingy with movements and mimics. Everything is concentrated on expressing the plasticity of the word.”<sup>61</sup> By focusing on an oral rendering of the written text and the orality of the written word, and enhancing it with a sophisticatedly minimalistic theatrical performance, I argue that Grosbard created his own form of “Jewspeak” – the word concert.

Grosbard’s ultimate focus on the “spoken language that becomes a central feature,”<sup>62</sup> and his virtuosity, shown in his ability to “present the Yiddish voice and intone literally every letter”<sup>63</sup> in his performances, thus resulted in the creation of a new genre of Yiddish literature. This is a genre in which the written is made oral, in which the Yiddish audience is ushered into a literary world of vocal acrobatics, and mesmerized by the theatrical dramaturgy of the performer. The poet Aaron Zeitlin extolling Grosbard’s rendition of his own poems wrote, “I can’t imagine a more adequate artistic interpretation, or more precisely, co-creation (*mitshafung*).”<sup>64</sup> It appears then that the word concert is not only a coalescence of arts. It also merges the author of the text with the artist of the word – Grosbard, and even “the listener becomes a co-creator.”<sup>65</sup>

Grosbard’s word concerts inspired the audience to see “the other side of the word,”<sup>66</sup> uncovering new depths of meaning in Yiddish literature. As Sutzkever recalls,

I have read Yankev Glatshayn’s poem, “The Dead Don’t Praise God” many times. But it was only when Grosbard read the poem at Lohamei haGetaot [The Ghetto Fighters’ Kibbutz] during the commemoration of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in front of ten thousand people – that I felt the cut of the slaughtering knife of affliction.<sup>67</sup>

He further asserts that Grosbard reveals “the mysteries (*soydes*) of great literature and inserts them in the listener.”<sup>68</sup> Indeed, even after one evening with Grosbard, posits Shabad, “You view the works of Sholem Aleichem, Peretz, Kulbak or Nadir in a

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<sup>61</sup> M. Kitay, “A moyl, vos shit perl,” *Literarishe bleter*, February 3, 1938.

<sup>62</sup> Roskies, “Call It Jewspeak,” 225.

<sup>63</sup> “Herts Grosbards vort kontsertn,” New York, n.d., in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 123.

<sup>64</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, Letter to Grosbard, Dec. 20, 1966, in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 134.

<sup>65</sup> M. Tsanin, “An eynmolike dershaynung.” *Letste naves*, (ca. 1955) in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 136.

<sup>66</sup> Podriatshik, “Der fenomen.”

<sup>67</sup> Sutzkever, “Der triumf marsh.”

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

completely new way. ... You penetrate their soul, you begin to understand differently the mysticism, pure poetry of nature, or satire of their works.”<sup>69</sup> The power of Grosbard’s performance was so magnificent that some even preferred Grosbard’s reading over that of the author. Comparing Sholem Aleichem reading his own works with Grosbard, Shabad lauds the latter’s rendition as more convincing, saying that “when Grosbard reads Sholem Aleichem, I hear Menakhem Mendel himself, even though I see no makeup and no people on stage.”<sup>70</sup>

Most important, Grosbard’s performances were vested with the ability to make live what was seen as having already died. Grosbard was applauded for his power to “resurrect the works, bring them back from the dead, printed letters, and to make them alive again.”<sup>71</sup> He was viewed as an “Ambassador of Yiddish Literature,”<sup>72</sup> and a personification of “an entire academy of the concept, intensity, and sound of the Yiddish word.”<sup>73</sup> Grosbard’s word concerts were viewed as a kind of a literary mission (*shlikhes*).<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Sutzkever praised Grosbard for awakening “the slumbered love for Yiddish literature, [in Israel, and] with his magical key liberating a vanished world ... [that in fact] did not disappear.”<sup>75</sup> Echoing Sutzkever, critics in Israel expressed hope that Grosbard would attract new generations to Yiddish, who could learn the nuances and subtleties of the “artistic Yiddish word” from his recordings.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

The orality of Jewspeak becomes sublimized through Grosbard’s word concerts: “in his mouth, Yiddish words are individually dramatized, directed, and – Grosbardized.”<sup>77</sup> “The Theater Grosbard,” writes Zeitlin, “penetrates [the texts] with meditation, and interprets them with his voice, his gesture, and his mimic.”<sup>78</sup> In this rare combination of orality and performativity, reinforced by his deeper interpretative exploration of the text, Grosbard brings out the aesthetic and humanistic essence of the Yiddish word. Grosbard’s exquisite rendition of Jewspeak – through the now-lost art of word concerts – was once “the shortest way home, to Yiddish.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Shabad, “Grosbards kontsert.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> “Grosbards vort-kontsert,” *Lodzher veker*, February 28, 1928.

<sup>72</sup> Sh. B., “A yoyvl-kontsert.”

<sup>73</sup> Podriatshik, “Der fenomen.”

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Sutzkever, “Der triumf marsh.”

<sup>76</sup> Podriatshik, “Der fenomen.”

<sup>77</sup> Aaron Zeitlin, “Herts Grosbard,” *Letste naves*, Tel Aviv, January 5, 1973.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> A hand-written letter from “a Jewish girl,” September 17, 1928 in Tsanin, *Grosbard*, 90.