

Maurice Podbrey really does love Yiddish

Janice Arnold
Staff Reporter

Maurice Podbrey chuckles as he recalls how whenever he gave talks to Jewish groups in Montreal he would overhear mutterings in the audience – often in Yiddish – about whether he was Jewish.

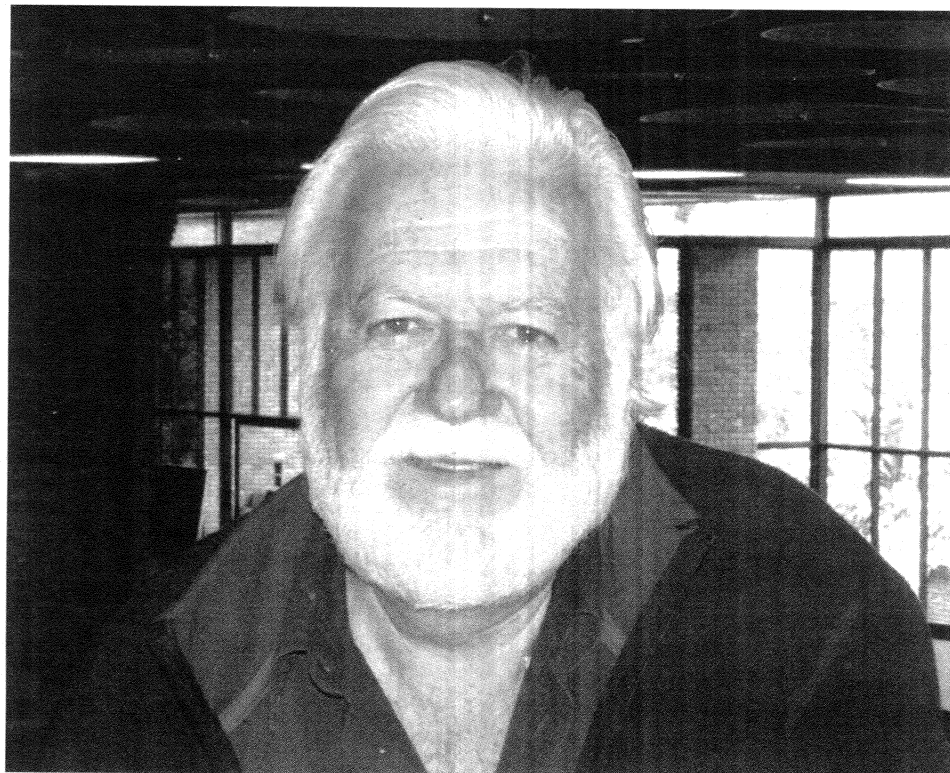
A well-timed (and eloquently delivered) interjection in the mamaloshen always set the record straight.

It was no act by this South African-born, British-trained stage actor, best known in Canada as the co-founder and artistic director from 1969-1997 of the Centaur Theatre.

Podbrey will read and discuss the classic Yiddish story *Bontshe Shvayg* (*Bontshe the Silent*) by I.L. Peretz at the Segal Centre for Performing Arts' Studio Jan. 22 at 8 p.m. It's billed as "An Evening with Maurice Podbrey... In Yiddish!" reflecting how astonishing that remains to many.

Podbrey's Jewish/Yiddish bona fides are in order, he assures. He was born in Durban, South Africa, in 1934 to Lithuanian immigrants who spoke Yiddish at home.

"In fact, my mother never spoke English well. It was always poor, even



Maurice Podbrey

though she tried with tenacity right up to the end," Podbrey remembered in an interview.

The elder Podbrey arrived in South Africa in 1928, and his wife and Maurice's older brother and sister came in 1933.

"My father had been a schoolteacher in Europe, a learned and sophisticated man who had higher aspirations, but he had to work as a bookkeeper and resented being employed by other, less educated, Jewish immigrants," he said.

Podbrey's more grounded mother successfully ran a number of small shops in Durban, a city on the east coast that had a Jewish population then of about 10,000.

His parents never encouraged the children to keep up their mother tongue, but Podbrey maintained a proficiency in Yiddish, a skill that has been useful in his world travels.

They were also quite secular but did send young Maurice to synagogue and saw that he had a bar mitzvah. "We were dropped at the synagogue, but usually skipped out to play cricket around the back. The services went on forever."

Still, the Order of Canada member says, "I really enjoyed this background – it was never problem, I never resented it, but I moved on."

Podbrey is rehearsing "assiduously" for his Yiddish stage debut, coached by Edit Kuper, a stalwart of the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre, and someone else in South Africa.

The audience will likely hear a fine Litvak Yiddish tinged with Podbrey's South African lilt and polished with the craft Podbrey learned in London's West End.

"It's a bit of a challenge getting the pronunciation and rhythm right. I tended to speak Yiddish in phrases, not full sentences, and this is a sustained effort

over 10 or 15 pages." He will be reading from a transliteration, having long forgotten his bar mitzvah aleph-bet.

There will be English supertitles projected above the stage.

Bontshe Shvayg is a personal favourite of Podbrey's. His father taught it to him as "a moral lesson."

Bontshe is a poor Jew who never complains about his lot. When he dies and goes to heaven, he is asked by the heavenly tribunal what he would like as a reward. Bontshe asks only for a warm roll and butter every morning.

The story, with its ambiguous ending, is open to various interpretations, with many seeing the character as a metaphor for the passivity and hopelessness of shtetl Jews.

"It has influenced me over the years and, in fact, I ended my autobiography [*Half Man Half Beast*] with that story," said Podbrey who divides his time about equally between Cape Town and Montreal.

"Peretz [1852-1915] was quite a radical, politically and culturally. There's a reason the angels hang their heads in shame and the prosecutor laughs."

Podbrey understands it as an indictment of timidity. "Meekness is not a virtue. People should live well in this world and find their due reward here... There is no afterlife, this is no rehearsal. We have to get the best out of the here and now."

The Yiddish evening is a sidebar to Podbrey's main project at the Segal: the production of the North American premiere of *Waiting for the Barbarians* on the main stage from Jan. 27 to Feb. 17.

Based on an early novel by Nobel Prize-winning South African writer J.M. Coetzee, this is an adaptation by Alexandre Marine, who directs.

The play had its world premiere in Cape Town in August. It is co-produced with South Africa's Mopo Cultural Trust, which Podbrey founded to foster young talent. The original cast, black and white performers, is coming to Montreal.

Podbrey describes Coetzee's book about political intrigue as "combining a deep-rootedness in African history with an almost Dostoyevskian obsession with self-understanding."

Podbrey has been active in the rebuilding of his native land over the past 15 years, through not only the arts, but also educational and sports projects (he runs a soccer club in one of the townships).

He says things are not as bad as the impression we have here.

"It's a new country, with a hell of an inheritance... We will rise from the ashes," Podbrey said, adding enthusiastically, "We now have the best cricket team in the world."

For tickets to the evening, call the box office at 514-739-7944 or visit www.segalcentre.org.

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