

A loss to us all

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"Founded Canada's only Yiddish theatre," reads the headline. Imagine what an accomplishment that was. There were no royal commissions in the 1950s calling for more drama in the language of eastern European Jews. But Dora Wasserman had a dream - one that will survive her death at age 84.

That dream had to do with keeping alive the tradition she left behind in Soviet Russia, where she grew up and worked professionally as an actress. There were enough Montrealers who spoke Yiddish in those days to support her in this quest.

Yet her dream was also about forging links with other communities. Plays by the turn-of-the-20th-century storyteller Sholom Aleichem resonate with the joy and heartbreak of insular family life - a theme well known to Quebecers. This is why Michel Tremblay's proletarian epic *Les Belles Soeurs* blossomed so naturally in its Yiddish translation, and why a francophone actress, Emily Phaneuf, could enjoy success in leading roles.

Amazingly, the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre has survived the disappearance of most of its mother-tongue subscribers. This is in part because simultaneous translations have appeared above the proscenium at the Saidye Bronfman Centre since 1995.

The real source of the vitality of the company, however, is the professionalism Wasserman insisted on and the dedication of her daughter Bryna, who took over the company in 1996 when Wasserman suffered a stroke.

That misfortune compromised Wasserman's ability to speak. Yet this woman of theatre remained active, inspiring her troops in rehearsal and attending as many performances as she could. She will be greatly missed.

Obituary of Dora Wasserman