

## Chapter One

### In Which I Relate My Humble Beginnings

Some might point to me in the street and call me a *Schmendrik* for putting pen to paper and writing down the story of my adventures when, truth be told, they are not all mine to share; but I ask you, why deny the world such a tale? They laughed before and, as God is my witness, they will laugh again, but I should mind such a thing? I'll tell you something, when they stop laughing – then I'll cry.

If this were one of my plays, the curtain would come up and two women might be gossiping in order to set the scene for the audience, or a traveling peddler might be telling a farmer a tale that would neatly supply the moral of the play. Here, as any fool with two eyes can see, I have no gossiping woman or traveling peddler, so I need to set the scene and supply my own moral. My darling wife tells me I should leave out the moral and let you take from it what you may. The more I think on it the more I realize, as my darling wife would be glad to tell you, that she is right. So, from her lips to God's ear. I will do my best to tell my story simply and let you make of it what you will. But do a hard-working man a favor and be a *mensch*.

"Boris," my mother often told me back in Odessa, "Don't be such a fool! You want the neighbors should all laugh at you?" Well, let me tell you, back then the neighbors were too busy running from the Cossacks to laugh, so my mother's advice I didn't take so much to heart. We ran too, just like all the others in our village, right here to America. Sometimes it seemed as if a great wind had lifted the entire village up and dropped us onto a tiny block on Hester Street. Unfortunately that great wind left the cows, the goats and the little bit of land we farmed, so my father cut shirt collars while my mother spent her days going blind sewing buttonholes. I was ten when my brother talked his boss into giving me a job at the cigarette factory. But I ask you,

what kind of work was that for a theatrical genius? Of course, at the time no one knew I was such a theatrical genius. I myself had a suspicion, as I had for many a year, but for some reason the butcher and the landlord always preferred a coin to a song. So after thinking on it for quite some time, I thought to myself, 'Boris, why not try to get a coin for your song and then give that to the butcher and the landlord?'

There was a boy in our neighborhood, Yonkel Kalichnovitch, who sang at our synagogue each Saturday. Such a high, beautiful voice this Yonkel had. It made my father weep. When I learned Yonkel was earning in one day of singing what it took me six days of cigarette making to earn, let me tell you, I wept too. Such damp, bitter tears I could hardly keep the cigarettes dry. Luckily, nature and time took their course and soon poor Yonkel no longer had such a high, beautiful voice. When that time came I was ready to step in.

If my experience with history had taught me anything, it taught me that my days for singing in the synagogue would be numbered. My mother raised no fools. I knew from the way the younger boys in the neighborhood glared at me on Saturdays that they were waiting for Yonkel's fate to befall me. It's a look I've come to know very well in my twenty years in the theatre.

I thought to myself, 'Boris, if you can make this much singing on the Sabbath, imagine what you could make on the days when you're actually allowed to be working!' I knew that uptown there were theaters and halls where people performed in English, but nowhere was there a place where people like my mother and father could hear the stories and songs they heard back in Odessa in their own language. As I told you, my mother raised no fools, and I knew an opportunity when I saw one.

There was a tavern on the corner of Essex Street where the owner was well known for his penny-pinching ways. It was said in the neighborhood that he could squeeze so much from a nickel that the Miss Liberty stamped on it would shed tears.

“Mister,” I said to him. “I see back here you got a platform. How about I bring you in something for the customers? A little entertainment?”

It certainly wasn't easy, but I managed to talk him into letting me put on a play. For my first production, even I'll admit I was a little grand. I chose a Yiddish operetta about a young prince who disguises himself so that he can marry a beautiful girl from the shtetl. You might wonder who would believe such a thing. Are there princes falling off trees to marry poor girls? Well, let me tell you something, if you have to sew pants or pluck chickens all day long, you'll certainly hope that a prince will come and take you away from it all, believe you me.

As word got out that there would be a performance in Yiddish, there was such excitement in the neighborhood as you've never seen. At the same time, there were a number of people who got quite angry about the news of our production. You see, there were some in the neighborhood who had forgotten where they came from. They had left the past and wanted no reminders of it, and they certainly did not want those reminders in the *mamaloshen*.

They did their best to strong-arm the tavern owner into cancelling the performance. But if he cancelled, he would have been forced to return the price of the tickets he had already sold. And as I've told you once, he was planning on taking every last nickel with him to the Promised Land. However, the good people who had left their Yiddish behind the gates at Castle Garden were not finished with us yet. The day of our performance the actress playing the beautiful shtetl girl came down with a mysterious illness. Such a sudden and mysterious illness, I've never seen

in any medical dictionary. So there we were, tickets sold, the cast rehearsed, a line of people waiting to get in, but no leading lady.

Luckily, Yonkel's fate had not yet befallen me and I still had quite a few high notes left to sing. So with a little bit of sewing help from my mother and a bit of padding provided by my father, I myself took the part of the beautiful, young shtetl girl. The show went on, we made a bit of money and I received three proposals of marriage that day. Some boys become a man before they reach their bar mitzvah, but I am probably the only boy who became a young woman before his.

Well, once again, my beautiful wife is standing behind my shoulder, telling me that I exaggerate a bit too much. But let me tell you one thing, and it's certainly not an exaggeration, on that day I began my life in the theater and since then I've never looked back.

So that's how I came to be working in the theatre when all of this happened. I sometimes wonder to myself, 'Boris, how did you become so involved in something you spent your entire life avoiding?' I wanted to give people something to help them forget their workday, yet somehow I got drawn in with the workers in a way I would not have thought possible. I suppose I never forgot how I had seen my parents struggle to keep food on the table and the wolf from the door, and so I always knew that for all of us there would be bills to pay and mouths to feed. But let me ask you something; if you have to pay the piper, shouldn't you at least get a dance?