



company plays most skillfully. The performance ends with the figure of Mamaloschen singing a little Yiddish ditty about seven mice. That it is nonsense is not important; what is important is that she sings!

I want to see this play again. I want my children to see it. I want every Jew to see it, and every non-Jew. It is a play to remind every group of what it was like to travel with "a panicky passport in my pocket" and see its culture and way of life slip past. Success and security in America have their pain too—the falling away of tradition that is often the price of assimilation.

Though based in Los Angeles, A Traveling Jewish Theatre fortunately travels. They play San Francisco throughout January, will be in Chicago in February, and in Minnesota for a while during the summer. A spring European festival tour is planned, as is a fall American college tour. Not to be missed.

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EXCURSUS 3

Thomas Land on VANQUISHING RIVER BLINDNESS

The first villagers are cautiously returning to their abandoned homes in the Volta river basin of West Africa, marking the end of the initial phase of a long and expensive international campaign to rid a potentially rich agricultural area of *onchocerciasis*, the scourge known to the local people as river blindness.

The disease has affected more than a million people in a 700,000 square kilometer area spanning parts of Benin, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Togo, and Upper Volta. The fertile river basin had been virtually abandoned to the disease-carrying black fly, but it is now being reclaimed in

a twenty-year, \$120 million program financed by the World Bank, the U.S., and many other countries.

First results—agricultural, medical, and ecological—surpass the planners' expectations. Indeed, the scheme has proven so successful that it may well be copied on a somewhat smaller scale in the Senegal river basin, also in West Africa. And the International Labor Organization in Geneva has now joined the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, and the U.N. Development Program—the specialist sponsors of the scheme—by contributing toward the rehabilitation of the handicapped farmers in the newly cleared areas. More than seventy thousand inhabitants have been completely blinded by the disease, dubbed "river blindness" because the tiny black fly *simulium damnosum* usually lays its eggs in fast-flowing sections of waters.

Human blood is essential for its survival. As the fly bites its victim it deposits a thread-like worm under the skin. Repeated bites cause terrible itching. Developing under the skin, the worms form nodules where they multiply. Their larvae spread through the body. When the parasites reach the eye, they cause lesions which, if untreated, usually destroy the victim's sight.

Many villages in the fertile valleys, abandoned for the unproductive plateaux, have been cleared of the fly and rebuilt to meet the needs of modern agriculture. Upper Volta alone hopes to treble its export revenue from cotton, which is shortly to be grown in the area. Families chosen among the volunteers for resettlement tend to be young because they are the most likely to be receptive to new farming procedures.

The resettlement project has been made possible by entomological studies that concluded the flies are vulnerable to attack, since their breeding grounds can be identified precisely. Ecological considerations have ruled out a massive use of persistent pesticides over such an extensive area. Specialists have chosen Abate, a biodegradable compound lethal to the black fly larvae but harmless to humans and other nontarget organisms.

And the program has already achieved a 75 per cent reduction in the disease carriers. The original action plan was approved by the seven West African countries in 1973; systematic spraying began a year later. Its success rate—carefully monitored ever since by a scientific backup staff of several hundred—has been so great that the four Senegal river basin countries also affected by the disease have asked for a similar program.

A \$1.25 million feasibility study to explore the proposed extension of the scheme is now under way. A research program is meanwhile coordinated in Geneva for the development of new drugs to be deployed in the mass treatment of affected populations. The existing chemotherapy is suitable for only limited clinical use under constant supervision by medical staff.

Some unexpected, hopeful signs are already emerging from the initial phase of the project. In more than three-quarters of the Volta river basin the project has effectively arrested the transmission of the disease. There are no new cases in children under five years of age.

For the moment the key to the economic development of the area remains the control of the disease itself. But for the long term the specialist agencies advising the seven West African partners have prepared an extensive list of recommendations for preventing the outbreak of other potentially disastrous diseases—such as sleeping sickness—in the areas reclaimed for their inhabitants.

Thomas Land is an author and foreign correspondent who writes on global affairs.