Although Jacob Gordin’s 1892 *The Jewish King Lear* is considered one of the greatest of all Yiddish domestic dramas, it is little known in English, though it had its world premiere on New York’s Lower East Side. The Metropolitan Playhouse hopes to change that with a world premiere production of Ruth Gay’s lucid and contemporary 2007 translation, closer to the original text than that played by Yiddish theater star Jacob Adler for 30 years. The magnificent production directed by Ed Chemaly should help restore interest in this variation on Shakespeare’s tragedy. Excellently cast, it suggests 19th century Yiddish theater at the same time as having the actors speaking in English in the 21st century. Joel Leffert in the title role commands the stage at all times in a bigger than life performance.

*The Jewish King Lear* is not a translation of Shakespeare’s play, but an entirely new one using the main characters, themes and plot devices of the Elizabethan original reset in Vilna in 1890. At his Purim festivities, wealthy Lithuanian merchant Reb Dovidl Moyaheles announces that he is dividing his fortune between his three daughters and moving with his wife Khane Leah to Palestine for a life of study and prayer. His two older married daughters Etele and Gitele obsequiously thank him, attempting to outdo each other in superlatives. However, his beloved youngest daughter Taybele rejects his gift, telling him that she doesn’t need all that money, but simply wants to go to St. Petersburg to study and be a doctor along with her beloved tutor Herr Yaffe. Not only is Dovidl insulted by her lack of gratitude, he is infuriated that she goes against tradition for religious Jewish women as well as his wishes and he turns her out. On their way, Herr Yaffe, the German Rabbinical student who he considers no better than a heretic, tells him that he is a “Jewish King Lear” and hopes God will protect him from the same fate as Shakespeare’s hero.

One year later, Dovidl and Khane Leah, now destitute, are back from Palestine living in the home of their stingy son-in-law Avron Harif and his shrewish wife Etele who begrudges them a crust of bread, while second son-in-law Moyshe Hasid spends his time drinking and leading wife Gitele a sorry existence. Several years later, Taybele and Yaffe return fully qualified as doctors, but Dovidl still rejects them for disobeying his orders. Almost blind and unable to take any more of the disdain from his son-in-laws, he and his trusty steward Trytel go out to become beggars on the road, leaving Khane Leah in the hands of Taybele and Yaffe. Like David Garrick’s 18th century version of *King Lear*, the plot takes a surprising turn and goes in unexpected directions.

Aside from being a tight domestic drama, *The Jewish King Lear* has several other differences from Shakespeare’s tragedy. Gordin’s Lear has a wife who is sorely put upon and under her husband’s thumb, as well as the old traditions. Gloucester and his sons are eliminated and Kent and the Fool are combined as Trytel, the steward, who often “rhymes like a real wedding jester.” Taybele, the Cordelia character, gets ahead through education and science rather than marriage to a noble. Gordin’s Lear is not only an advocate for the Jewish traditions of his forefathers he is also very much opposed to scientific advances and education for women, shades of Ibsen who was writing
at the same time as Gordin. Dovidl’s heath speech does not take place outdoors but in his own house, now ruled by his son-in-law who has replaced him.

The play also offers several ways of Jewish life in the 1890’s, satirizing each of them. Older son-in-law Avrom who turns cruel and stingy is a Misnagid, a Jew committed to exactness in religious study and observance. The younger son-in-law Myoshe is a Hasid, following an 19th century movement prizing spontaneity and devotion to worship over meticulous devotion to the law. Dovidl’s blind reliance on the old traditions and inability to change with the times almost destroys him and his wife. It is only his daughter Taybele and her fiancée Yaffe who create a viable life by advancing themselves through education and modern science. That the play ruled the Yiddish stage for over 40 years suggests how necessary discussion of these various lifestyles must have been in the years between the 1890’s and the 1930’s before Yiddish theater went into a decline during World War II.

While the cast is not made up of Yiddish theater actors except for Amanda (Miryem-Khaye) Seigel who is also responsible for the music direction of the Yiddish songs sung in the party sequences, the cast not only simulates a Yiddish inflection but seems attuned to 19th century theater from an unfamiliar culture. At the center is Leffert’s big performance as the long suffering Reb Dovidl. As his wife, Diane Tyler cleverly underplays her role as well as suggests a lifetime of living under her husband’s thumb without complaint. Veteran actor Jeremy Lawrence is both amusing and heartbreaking as Reb Dovidl’s servant/steward who will follow him anywhere.

As the play’s Cordelia, Olivia Killingsworth as youngest daughter Taybele is never maudlin and keeps her equilibrium through the ups and downs of her life. Kelly D. Cooper as her cold-blooded and heartless brother-in-law remains unctuous until almost the very end. Deanna Henson’s wife Etele rivals Shakespeare’s Goneril in her cruelty. Jack Sochet is a comic character as alcoholic younger son-in-law Moyshe Hasid, while Katie Hahn as his long-suffering wife evolves into a tragic figure. As Herr Yaffe, the German Rabbinical student, later a medical doctor, Tyler Kent remains the moral center of the play. Seigel, Thomas Daniels, Tori Sicklick and Clara Kundin are entertaining as the revelers and entertainers who appear in both the first and fourth act party sequences.

Mario Alonso is credited with the atmospheric set design for the three necessary locales, color coordinated in browns and beiges, as are Sidney Fortner’s period appropriate costumes. Scott Andrew Cally’s lighting design is suitable though it never suggests fireplaces or candlelight for its 1890 settings. Actor Joel Leffert is also responsible for the realistic fight choreography that climaxes the end of the second act. Though the play is long at four acts and five scenes, Ed Chemaly’s vigorous and forceful direction keeps the brisk tempo from wavering an inch. As produced by Metropolitan Playhouse, Jacob Gordin’s The Jewish King Lear takes its rightful place as one of the 19th century’s great social dramas.