Between the 1880’s and the start of the First World War, Jewish women accounted for 15 to 20 percent of all prostitutes in Buenos Aires, Cape Town, and Johannesburg—cities were on the cusp of becoming major centers of Jewish theater. My paper considers how the mass trafficking of Eastern European Jewish women across international borders (known in this period as the “white slave trade”) was instrumental in the development of Jewish theater during this period. My focus is not on the pimps, about whom much has been written, but rather on the varied contributions of the trafficked women to the development of Jewish theater in Argentina and South Africa.

My talk will trace how prostitution funded the development of communal institutions like synagogues, benevolent associations, and theaters, and how the women involved in this trade interacted with these institutions as performers onstage and off. Jewish theaters in the southern hemisphere played a dual role in this trade: on the one hand, they produced plays that warned audiences about the ruses traffickers used to lure young women; on the other hand, these theaters were often directly funded by white slavery and were frequently sites of illicit sexual activity. The white slave trade was a tremendously divisive issue, and the mainstream Jewish community developed parallel and mutually exclusive institutions for those involved and those who opposed it. There were separate synagogues, bathhouses, and cemeteries. Only in the theaters did the traffickers, the prostitutes, and their opponents sit side by side.