

# The Dybbuk Century

The Jewish Play That Possessed the World

Debra Caplan and Rachel Merrill Moss, Editors



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POSSESSED THE WORLD

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Edited by  
Debra Caplan and  
Rachel Merrill Moss

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Ann Arbor

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## Notes on Transliteration and Names

As this is an English-language collection that cuts across history, languages, and geographic regions, we have attempted to streamline the transliteration of names with our readership in mind, opting for spelling that is both familiar and easily searchable for continued reading beyond this collection. Our choices for transliteration are in keeping with current and prevailing scholarship at the intersection of Jewish studies, theater and performance studies, cultural studies, and Slavic studies, where *The Dybbuk* continues to live and circulate.

We follow the lead of Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein in not “naturalizing” the spelling of S. An-sky’s name to “Ansky.” The explicit use of the hyphen in An-sky acknowledges Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport’s chosen formatting for his pseudonym, rather than attempting to minimize the “strangeness” of the hyphenation for English-language readership, as Safran and Zipperstein discuss.<sup>1</sup>

In general, we have chosen to transliterate Yiddish words and titles according to the guidelines of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.<sup>2</sup> We follow the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* in determining exceptions to standard YIVO transliteration for proper names that are relatively familiar to English-language readers (for example, Sholem Asch instead of “Ash”).

When discussing towns and regions that significant numbers of Jews called by a particular name, we use that name instead of the Ukrainian, Polish, Lithuanian, or Russian equivalent (e.g., Vilna instead of Vilnius/Wilno/Wilna/Vilnya), *except* in rare cases where the location has a familiar name in English (for example, Warsaw instead of Varshe). The editors wish

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1. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein, eds., *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), xiii.

2. “Yiddish Alef-Beys (Alphabet),” YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://yivo.org/Yiddish-Alphabet>

to acknowledge and support decolonization efforts that move away from using Russian names for countries, cities, and areas of the former-USSR outside of Russia, and note that we continue to use Miropol (as opposed to the Ukrainian-inflected Myropil) as it most closely aligns with the Yiddish spelling.

In the case of the Habima Theater, we have opted to use the spelling adopted by the theater company itself (Habima), rather than the *YIVO Encyclopedia* spelling (Habimah), which includes a silent *h* at the end to allude to the Hebrew spelling. The Habima Theater is still in operation today and has deliberately chosen the transliterated English spelling “Habima” for use on its English-language archival materials and website domain name. We therefore defer to this choice.

## Introduction

### One Hundred Years of *The Dybbuk*

Debra Caplan and Rachel Merrill Moss

A shtetl in eastern Europe, sometime in the early 1900s. A mysterious visitor who may have died three years ago and who may or may not be a dybbuk, a spirit who has possessed the body of a living person. A marital argument, an ice pick, and either a murder or a necessary act of exorcism when the visitor is killed. And it's all in Yiddish. Thus goes the opening scene of Joel and Ethan Coen's 2009 dark comedy *A Serious Man*, a film that goes on to tell the story of Larry Gopnik, a professor of physics living in Minnesota in 1967 who turns to Judaism when his marriage, career, and life fall apart. Why the mysterious Yiddish-language prologue? The Coen brothers have never fully explained their rationale for the dybbuk prologue, saying only that they invented a seemingly folkloric story to set the tone for their film. "Since we didn't know any suitable Yiddish folktales," Ethan Coen stated, "we made one up."<sup>1</sup>

For the Coen brothers, who don't speak Yiddish, the figure of the dybbuk offered a familiar-enough way to mark their story as Jewish and to foreshadow the supernatural dimensions of the film's final scene. *A Serious Man's* opening scene isn't about introducing American film audiences to the concept of dybbuks; instead, the Coen brothers assume that a significant portion of viewers already know what dybbuks are and what geographic (eastern Europe) and cultural (Jewish) world they belong to. The dybbuk (or, as listed in the film's credits, "Dybbuk?") in *A Serious Man* is a signifier of time, place, and culture, a marker of Jewish authenticity, an evocation of the mythic Jewish shtetl past.

*A Serious Man* is but one of countless examples of dybbuks permeating our cultural consciousness about Ashkenazic Jewry over the past century, a

phenomenon that began with an odd play written first in Russian, then in Hebrew, then in Yiddish between 1913 and 1916: *The Dybbuk* by S. An-sky (pen name for Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport). An-sky saw the play as his greatest masterpiece and was desperate to get it produced, in any language, but it was widely considered unstageable—until an ambitious group of young theater rebels decided to produce it in their own experimental style after the playwright's untimely death.

In December 1920, a little over one hundred years ago, the first production of An-sky's *The Dybbuk* opened in Warsaw. In the century that followed, this Yiddish play about spiritual possession beyond the grave exerted a remarkable and indelible impact on modern theater, film, literature, music, and culture. The Vilna Troupe's 1920 Warsaw production was a sensation around the globe and quickly inspired other productions in Yiddish, Polish, English, French, and Hebrew (in an expressionist production directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov and performed by Habima) during the 1920s. The 1930s, '40s, and '50s brought new dybbuk creations inspired by An-sky's play: an Italian opera, a Yiddish film, a concert suite, several television episodes, an English-language opera, dance compositions by Anna Sokolow and Mary Anthony, and a Broadway play by Paddy Chayefsky. In 1974, Leonard Bernstein composed a dybbuk ballet that was choreographed by Jerome Robbins and performed at the New York City Ballet; Bernstein also composed two dybbuk suites the following year. In 1995, Tony Kushner wrote *A Dybbuk*, an adaptation of An-sky's play. There is an Israeli film adaptation and a Polish television show, a Kabuki-inspired *Dybbuk* and a dybbuk puppet show.<sup>2</sup> *The Dybbuk* continues to be one of Yiddish drama's most frequently produced plays. It is arguably the most influential Jewish play, in any language, of the modern period.

*The Dybbuk* is a play deeply steeped in the history, culture, and legends of eastern European Jewry—so much so that during his lifetime, An-sky struggled to get directors and producers to even consider staging the play at all. Directly inspired by An-sky's ethnographic expeditions into the heart of Jewish eastern Europe, *The Dybbuk* is a play full of Jewish specificity: legends and folktales, holidays and ritual observance, religious and mystical sacred texts, and, at its core, a supernatural creature familiar only to those versed in Jewish mythology. It is an intensely Jewish play—an unlikely candidate to join the canon of world drama. And yet, over the course of the past century, *The Dybbuk* became a cultural touchstone with broad significance not only in theater, but also in dance, film, music, and television. How

did such a culturally specific text develop such a vast, cross-cultural scope of influence? What does *The Dybbuk* mean to people across cultures, languages, countries, and time periods?

The essays contained in *The Dybbuk Century* reflect on this landmark play, its productions, and the multitude of work it inspired. We argue that *The Dybbuk* did not retain its initial culturally specific meaning for long. Instead, the play turned into a theatrical conduit for a wide range of conversations about the place of Jews in modern society. This mystical play with Jewishness at its core became a catalyst for a century of transhistorical performative discourse. Constantly expanding and contracting to absorb various languages, cultural contexts, and historical events, *The Dybbuk* has inspired many artistic interpretations throughout its century-long production history and vast web of influence. Unlike a typical canonical piece, which exerts stability over time, An-sky's play operates more like a foil to a canonical work: it is inherently malleable, transforming to embody the needs of each specific place, time, and conversation. In fact, *The Dybbuk* never really had a fixed form at all, even for its creator, S. An-sky, who wrote the "original" version of the play in three languages and tried to get it produced in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts.<sup>3</sup> *The Dybbuk's* very first theatrical productions, by the Vilna Troupe in 1920 and Habima in 1922, continued this legacy by presenting the play as a flexible vehicle for stylistic experimentation. It is this signature fluidity that has given *The Dybbuk* an unusual amount of staying power. From its first production in 1920 to the present, the play has almost always been in performance somewhere, in some language, in some new version.

*The Dybbuk* became a porous theatrical conduit for a wide range of discourses about Jews, belonging, and modernity over the past century. To what extent do Jews, or other minority groups, belong? What does it mean to try to exist straddling worlds, like the eponymous fiddler teetering on the brink in *Fiddler on the Roof*, another iconic Jewish play with similar themes? What does it mean to navigate between identities, to negotiate the complexities of belonging and exclusion in the modern world? With these themes, *The Dybbuk* has continually inspired theater makers to reinterpret the play anew, speaking to ever-more diverse topics and audiences. Productions of *The Dybbuk* have developed innovations in theatrical staging, foregrounded female sexuality and abuse in religious Judaism, articulated the complicated status of memory in post-Holocaust Poland, explored intimacy and homoeroticism in male friendship, and probed the limits of tradition in a changing world, among other approaches.

Much (if not virtually everything) has changed in Jewish life since *The Dybbuk* first premiered in 1920. But this particular play—with its unusual dramatic structure, ethnographic and folkloric detail, and profoundly mystical dimensions—has continued to resonate with artists and audiences around the world.

Thanks to this impressive fluidity, *The Dybbuk* has proved remarkably capable of interesting people across linguistic, religious, national, and cultural borders. Starting with the trilingual circulation of its first years, with influential yet independent productions running in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish simultaneously in the 1920s, this play has always resonated across worlds. Its diverse appeal speaks across the aisle, reaching both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences throughout its history, even in its first Yiddish-language productions. Indeed, one might say that *The Dybbuk* was the first Yiddish play with mainstream crossover appeal outside of the Jewish sphere. For many audience members from the 1920s to the present, watching *The Dybbuk* became their very first encounter with Yiddish culture.

## AN-SKY'S QUEST

An-sky first encountered stories about dybbuks as a professional ethnographer on a series of research expeditions between 1912 and 1914, in which he and his team traveled across the Pale of Settlement—from what is now Moldova to western Belarus—and collected thousands of photographs and songs and hundreds of folktales.<sup>4</sup> In Jewish folklore dating back to at least the sixteenth century, a dybbuk is the dislocated soul of a dead person (typically a sinner) that inhabits and possesses the body of a living person.<sup>5</sup> The ethnographic mission was to collect oral traditions before modernization swept them away, though it ultimately proved prescient as World War I brought a different means of destruction. *The Dybbuk* emerged from these collected fragments of a vanishing world.

Originally titled *Between Two Worlds* (which later became the play's subtitle), *The Dybbuk* tells the story of Leah and Khonen, who, unbeknownst to them, are betrothed by their fathers before birth and who subconsciously fulfill their destiny by falling in love as young adults. But Khonen's father is long dead, and in his absence, Leah's father breaks his vow and instead chooses a wealthy groom for his daughter. Khonen turns to Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) to win Leah back, but the dark power he raises gets out of

control and kills him. On Leah's wedding night, Khonen's soul returns from beyond the grave in the form of a dybbuk and takes over her body. Together, they refuse to marry the groom. Leah's family turns to a wonder-working Hasidic rebbe to exorcise the dybbuk from their daughter, but though the exorcism succeeds, Khonen's soul still lingers between life and death. Leah follows him, dying in order to reunite with her beloved. In death, Leah and Khonen find a way to fulfill their destiny.

*The Dybbuk* is like a Jewish *Romeo and Juliet* steeped in the supernatural. An-sky's play was inspired both by folkloric legends about ghouls and by the all-too-real, ever-present specter of anti-Jewish violence. It is also a commentary on the tension between traditional Judaism and modern Jewish identity. The play's would-be lovers are pinioned between traditional obligations—in this case, marriage arranged by their fathers—and a more modern approach, a union chosen out of love rather than duty. This theme is echoed, of course, in other well-known Jewish plays and narratives from the period and earlier, including works such as Sholem Aleichem's 1894 *Tevye the Dairyman* stories (which were the inspiration for the 1964 *Fiddler on the Roof*) and Sholem Asch's 1908 play *God of Vengeance* (retold in Paula Vogel's 2015 play *Indecent*). But while these other pieces continue to be performed in largely faithful revivals and adaptations, *The Dybbuk* has maintained more porous borders. The spectral presence of the dispossessed spirit opens the play up to haunted—or ghosted—elements, changing significantly with each different performance and context.

Like his characters, An-sky was himself a man between worlds. Born in 1863 as Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport to a poor family in a shtetl in what is now eastern Belarus, An-sky was largely self-educated but became a prolific writer—both in Russian and in Yiddish—and a radical political activist. Conversant with both the Russian and eastern European Jewish elites of his time, An-sky was a committed secularist and a populist, deeply devoted to the plight of the working man. As the revolutionary climate escalated, however, his “mixed loyalties” pulled in opposite directions, bifurcating his identity.<sup>6</sup> Rather than choose sides, An-sky threw himself into his ethnographic research mission while also maintaining a foothold in the urban intelligentsia; in other words, he still operated on the borders between multiple worlds. It seems somehow appropriate, then, that it took his untimely death—and departure from the world of the living—to finally unleash the possibilities that his play held. At the time of An-sky's sudden death in November 1920, *The Dybbuk's* success would have been beyond his wildest expectations.



## FIRST PRODUCTIONS

An-sky spent the last years of his life trying desperately to get the play produced by theater companies in Russian, Hebrew, and Yiddish, to no avail, though he came close a few times. In 1916, Konstantin Stanislavsky had even accepted An-sky's Russian version of *The Dybbuk* for production at the Moscow Art Theater. In 1917, a director was named, roles were cast, and rehearsals were well underway when Stanislavsky abruptly canceled the production, concerned that the play was too dark and off-topic to produce during the Russian Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Hoping to inspire another production, An-sky continued reading the play before audiences of Jewish intellectuals in literary salons across the Russian Empire, but these elite audiences insisted that the play was too literary and folkloric for the stage.<sup>8</sup> At the end of his life, while convalescing at a sanatorium in Otwock, Poland, An-sky met with a group of young theater rebels called the Vilna Troupe, who envisioned a more experimental production style for the play. The Vilna Troupe agreed to produce *The Dybbuk*, but An-sky died of a heart attack just a few weeks later.<sup>9</sup> He never got to see the play produced.

At An-sky's funeral in Warsaw, Mordechai Mazo declared before a crowd of 80,000 mourners that he and his Vilna Troupe would stage the piece as a tribute to their deceased friend and colleague in exactly thirty days, at the close of the traditional Jewish mourning period.<sup>10</sup> And so, on December 9, 1920, *The Dybbuk* began its meteoric rise with the Vilna Troupe's production.

Mystical and mythic, the production was provocative in its ambitious avant-garde staging and in the haunting ambiguity of its performative embrace of Hasidism. The Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* introduced many changes to An-sky's script: cutting dozens of lines and even entire sections, combining the third and fourth acts into a single finale, inserting an expressionist dance of death just prior to Leah's wedding-night possession, and adding a recurrent musical theme based on the biblical Song of Songs.<sup>11</sup> Many of these modifications, especially the dance of death, would become integral parts of most future productions.

Almost overnight, the Vilna Troupe became an international sensation and *The Dybbuk* Jewish theater's most iconic and well-known play. In Warsaw, anecdotes describe how the influx of people coming to the Elysium Theater from all parts of the city (and beyond) was so great that the Polish tram conductor whose route passed by the building took to calling out

“An-sky” or “Dybbuk” in place of the street name.<sup>12</sup> *The Dybbuk* gave rise to a new kind of Yiddish theatergoing public that cut across ethnicity, religion, and class—and extended far outside of Poland. *The Dybbuk* took the world by storm in 1921 as the Vilna Troupe toured across Europe and theatergoers clamored to see the unusual play that was dominating the headlines. What the press called “Dybbuk mania” swept across Europe and, ultimately, the world in the 1920s.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, in another booming Jewish diaspora, the impresario Maurice Schwartz decided to stage his own take on the play in 1921. Undoubtedly, Schwartz was inspired by the effusive and extensive coverage of the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* in the international press.<sup>13</sup> Schwartz, who had founded his Yiddish Art Theatre in New York in 1918, refused to be outdone by his art theater colleagues in Europe. The New York production had a cast of twenty, including Schwartz himself playing the dual roles of Khonen and the Miropoler Rebbe, and Celia Adler as Leah. Schwartz insisted that his *Dybbuk* would correct for the “mistakes” of past directors (i.e., Dovid Herman and the Vilna Troupe), and promised that his production would evoke familiar Jewish tropes rather than attempting to imitate European directors like Max Reinhardt and Stanislavsky.<sup>14</sup> Schwartz’s *Dybbuk* was a moderate commercial and artistic success, running for an impressive eighteen weeks. A guaranteed crowd-pleaser, the production was revived several times during a handful of seasons throughout the 1920s.<sup>15</sup>

In January 1922, the Moscow-based Hebrew-language theater Habima opened its own version of *The Dybbuk*, directed by Russian avant-garde director Evgeny Vakhtangov. *The Dybbuk* was Habima’s breakthrough production, spurring its international reputation as the premier Hebrew theater in the world. Habima’s version was a fully fledged expressionist production with an emphasis on the grotesque. Every gesture, costume, and set piece was larger than life, giving the production a signature theatrical style that made Habima famous. Once again, as with the Vilna Troupe, Habima’s *Dybbuk* became a global sensation and secured the company’s reputation as a leading art theater of the interwar period.

By 1925, despite *The Dybbuk* having already played in Warsaw in Yiddish and Hebrew, a Polish-language version premiered at Warsaw’s Scarlet Mask Theater, thanks to the Polish-Jewish literary celebrity Mark Arnshteyn (in Yiddish) / Andrzej Marek (in Polish). While his version made some changes to the staging in order to attract Polish theatergoers, the production nonetheless maintained the core narrative and Jewish ambi-

ance of the play. Arnshteyn/Marek's production, like the versions that came before it, was a popular success among both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences, despite the Polish theater scene having been saturated by the play already for nearly five years. Ber Karlinski's ebullient review of the Polish production in *Der Moment*, a leading Warsaw Yiddish daily newspaper that he edited, described the seriousness with which the mixed Jewish and non-Jewish audience treated the work: "the Jewish words from the stage are heard intently and seriously. . . . Here and there, an eye gleams with tears. The curtain falls—the whole auditorium applauds warmly. . . . Something has broken through!" Karlinski went so far as to call the 1925 Polish *Dybbuk* "a date to remember in the history of the Polish stage in Warsaw. If you will—even in the history of the Jewish-Polish relations."<sup>16</sup> Despite the half decade that had passed with the play already circulating in Warsaw and among the cultured Jewish diaspora at large, *The Dybbuk* seemed nevertheless to take on new significance as it crossed into a Polish-language context.

### BEYOND WORLDS: THE DYBBUK AS GLOBAL SENSATION

Almost immediately after these first iconic productions, *The Dybbuk* began to enter the repertoire of theaters across the globe, traversing languages, mediums, and cultural contexts. In the century since its first production, An-sky's play has inspired over one hundred (and counting) artistic works, including films, operas, a ballet, musical compositions, literature, stage adaptations, and visual art—including work by Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein, Aaron Copland, Lodovico Rocca, Paddy Chayefsky, Sidney Lumet, Tony Kushner, the Coen brothers, and others—in addition to dozens of significant theatrical productions.

*The Dybbuk* has inspired luminaries across artistic fields, in countries around the world. In 1929, George Gershwin was commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera to write a dybbuk opera; when he was unable to acquire the rights, he abandoned that project and began to work on *Porgy and Bess* (1935) instead. In 1974, Jerome Robbins and Leonard Bernstein collaborated on a dybbuk ballet that premiered at Lincoln Center, with an unusual numerologically infused musical score. In 1997, Tony Kushner, already famous from his two-part epic *Angels in America* (1991–92), turned to An-sky as inspiration for his adaptation *A Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds*. Kushner's script

utilized a new translation by Joachim Neugroschel and modernized language, as well as additional material focusing on the changing world around the late nineteenth-century shtetl itself; for example, one added scene considered the novelty of new advancements in train travel. Featuring live accompaniment by Yiddish musical group the Klezmatics and premiering at the Public Theater in New York, Kushner's *A Dybbuk* offered a nostalgic, if thoroughly American, take on the old country: it was staged in a shtetl that echoed Marc Chagall's dreamlike eastern European world, the colorful cumulonimbus backdrop and dreidel-esque dacha offset by the somberly toned actors on the backlit stage. Michael Stuhlbarg, then a young actor, played Khonen (he would appear two decades later as the lead in the Coen brothers' *A Serious Man*). Over the past century, An-sky's play of love and possession has continuously inspired artists to explore its characters and themes in novel ways.

*The Dybbuk* quickly found itself absorbed into new cultural forms beyond live performance. In 1937, Michał Waszyński made a Yiddish-language film version of *The Dybbuk* featuring an adapted screenplay by the writer and photographer Alter Kacyzne. This was to be the first of many film adaptations of An-sky's play. Waszyński was the most prolific Polish filmmaker of the 1930s, and his *Dybbuk* became a landmark interwar Polish film—and a near-instantaneous classic of Yiddish cinema. Waszyński's *Dybbuk* includes a lengthy prologue exploring the intimate relationship between the two would-be fathers back in their school days, as well as several other significant departures from or additions to An-sky's play.<sup>17</sup> Many scholars, including Joel Rosenberg, Eve Sicular, and Naomi Seidman have analyzed the hidden homoeroticism of Waszyński's film, which is particularly evident in the added prologue.<sup>18</sup> Waszyński's *Dybbuk* was filmed in the turbulent years leading up to World War II, as Jews across Poland experienced anti-Jewish boycotts and the "ghetto benches" that limited Jewish enrollment in universities, echoing the increasingly antisemitic practices of neighboring Germany and Austria. During filming, actors in *The Dybbuk* experienced harassment and physical abuse on their way to the set in Warsaw, as J. Hoberman discusses in his chapter in this collection. Nevertheless, the production persevered, and Waszyński's *Dybbuk* remains a haunting example of *The Dybbuk's* prewar appeal.

While the unimagineable destruction wrought by the Second World War and the Holocaust extinguished the once-vibrant Jewish life in Poland, *The Dybbuk* maintained a cultural stronghold in the country and beyond,

becoming a postwar remnant of the now-lost prewar Jewish world. In the years since World War II, *The Dybbuk* has been further explored through theater, film, and other mediums in a range of both direct and indirect iterations. A notable theatrical production that bridged theatrical and filmic worlds was film director Andrzej Wajda's *Dybbuk* at the Stary Teatr (Old Theater) in Kraków in May 1988, in the months leading up to the Roundtable Talks that led to the end of communism in Poland. In response to his own version of *The Dybbuk*, staged at Warsaw's Nowy Teatr (New Theater) in 2003, renowned Polish theater director Krzysztof Warlikowski gestured to the titular character's place as a Polish historical mnemonic: "The dybbuk gives meaning to existence, it gives restitution to the world. Today it is the personification of the memory that we don't want to let go of, that we want to cultivate within ourselves, the memory that might save us today. It's this that gives meaning to our lives."<sup>19</sup> A decade later, in 2015, Warsaw was graced with another modernized iteration of *The Dybbuk*, this time in honor of Warsaw's Jewish Theater's sixty-fifth season. This production featured an updated script and staging by edgy director Maja Kleczewska.

Today, *The Dybbuk* remains a theatrical landmark, with no decade since 1920 without a *Dybbuk* production happening somewhere in the world. Even amid the pandemic that began in 2020 and shuttered theaters around the world, *The Dybbuk* nevertheless found its way to multiple virtual or hybrid stagings celebrating its centennial, as Diego Rotman discusses in his chapter in this collection. Whether live in person or streamed synchronously worldwide, *The Dybbuk* continues to reach new audiences.

## WHY THIS BOOK NOW

*The Dybbuk Century* marks the centennial of the first productions of this landmark play and the wide-ranging artistry that it inspired. The essays in this collection consider *The Dybbuk*'s remarkable ability to resonate with audiences and artists across linguistic, religious, national, and cultural borders, from its earliest theatrical permutations to its heyday in the interwar period, from Holocaust and post-Holocaust *Dybbuk* projects to contemporary mixed-media, film, and performance art *Dybbuks*.

*The Dybbuk Century* is the first book of its kind for an English-speaking audience. While isolated articles that historicize *The Dybbuk* have been published occasionally alongside *Dybbuk* translations or in journals, and

Hebrew- and Polish-language volumes of essays on *The Dybbuk* do exist, no English-language book until now has presented critical analysis of this play and its immediate impact alongside consideration of its long-term significance. *The Dybbuk Century* fills that gap by historicizing the original productions in Yiddish and Hebrew, while also offering critical reflections on the century of influence they wielded. Our book brings together the vast array of performance subjects inspired by *The Dybbuk* in the writing of an interdisciplinary collection of scholars.

Despite its weighty legacy and large-scale impact on the fields of theater, film, dance, music, and beyond, *The Dybbuk* has received only limited scholarly assessment. Whether this is because of the range of material the play inspired or its shape-shifting production and adaptation history, we are more interested in offering a collection that addresses *The Dybbuk's* multifaceted impact than in diagnosing this scholarly absence.

Other recent books have examined specific aspects of the play. There is substantial recent scholarship on An-sky's life and work, including Gabriella Safran's *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky* (2010) and Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein's *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century* (2006). In 2000, Joachim Neugroschel's edited collection *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader* presented an overview of literary works from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries related to dybbuk lore, alongside a new translation of the Yiddish version of the play. More recently, a 2017 Polish-language collection addressed the Polish context of *The Dybbuk's* past, present, and future (*Dybuk: na pograniczu dwóch światów* [Dybbuk: on the border between two worlds], edited by Mieczysław Abramowicz, Jan Ciechowicz, and Katarzyna Kreglewska). *The Dybbuk Century*, however, represents a new way of thinking about this play: not just studying how it relates to a particular author or literary tradition or country-specific cultural context, but rather analyzing *The Dybbuk's* century-long impact from a global, transcultural, and interdisciplinary perspective.

*The Dybbuk Century* opens with theater historian Ruthie Abeliovich's account of pre-World War I dramatizations of dybbuk legends that appeared onstage decades before An-sky's more famous play. This little-known earlier tradition of dybbuk dramatizations, Abeliovich suggests, provided important models for An-sky's *Dybbuk* and may have had a role in developing his interest in the subject. Abeliovich's pre-An-sky dybbuk theater history is followed by a close reading of the play by Naomi Seidman,

who examines the sexual politics of An-sky's *Dybbuk*, particularly in relation to the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment).

The next chapters focus on *The Dybbuk's* initial production history in the interwar period. Debra Caplan provides a documentary history of the Vilna Troupe's world premiere 1920 production, detailing how the play was understood by its very first actors and critics. Dassia N. Posner's chapter offers a comprehensive examination of Habima's iconic 1922 Hebrew-language production, with dozens of previously unpublished and newly translated documents. Rachel Merrill Moss examines *The Dybbuk's* first production in Polish translation in 1925. Taken together, these three chapters present a detailed account of how An-sky's play was performed and received in its earliest productions.

This is followed by film critic J. Hoberman's account of *The Dybbuk's* cinematic history and musicologist Judah M. Cohen's chapter on *Dybbuk* adaptations in American music and dance. Michael C. Steinlauf considers *The Dybbuk vis-à-vis* the politics of Jews in Poland over the century since its first production, while Agnieszka Legutko examines the play's legacy in contemporary Poland. Legutko suggests that *The Dybbuk* has become a way of reflecting on the complex intertwinement of Polish/Jewish identities and cultures for contemporary non-Jewish Polish theater artists wrestling with the past.

The final chapters in this volume consider *The Dybbuk* from the perspective of contemporary theater makers, performance artists, and curators who have found artistic inspiration in the play. Director and performance studies scholar Avia Moore writes about her 2011 all-female production of *The Dybbuk* in Montreal. Finally, interdisciplinary artist, curator, and theater scholar Diego Rotman offers an account of a 2014 Israeli performance and multimedia festival that invited contemporary artists to create new work inspired by *The Dybbuk*. Rotman analyzes the experiential elements of the resulting nine performances that allowed audiences to take part in an interactive *Dybbuk* expedition, a riff on An-sky's own ethnographic expeditions that inspired *The Dybbuk*.

Each chapter in this collection attests to *The Dybbuk's* unusual fluidity and diverse appeal. The essays that follow stem not only from across the artistic spectrum—from traditional theater and dance to film, music, and television—but also from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including literary scholarship, theater and film history, Jewish studies, musicology, curation, and artistic practice. Our primary goal in curating the essays included

in this volume is to provide a central resource on *The Dybbuk* for the wide range of readers interested in this iconic play, including scholars as well as directors, dramaturgs, actors, and audience members who might encounter *The Dybbuk* in a production or performance context. Perhaps this collection may even encourage a new generation of artists to create their own work inspired by *The Dybbuk*. One thing is certain: *The Dybbuk* is not only a landmark of theater history. It is a timeless classic that has been continuously reinterpreted in each new generation, and it will continue to inspire artists across fields as it enters its second century.

### Notes

1. "A *Serious Man* Production Notes," Focus Features, August 14, 2009, [https://www.focusfeatures.com/article/a\\_serious\\_man\\_production\\_notes](https://www.focusfeatures.com/article/a_serious_man_production_notes)

2. For a comprehensive list of all productions and adaptations of *The Dybbuk* from 1920 to 2012, see Agnieszka Legutko, "Possessed by the Other: Dybbuk Possession and Modern Jewish Identity in Twentieth-Century Jewish Literature and Beyond" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012). For a list of centenary events in honor of *The Dybbuk*, see *An Online Archive of "The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds,"* by S. An-sky, last updated December 9, 2020, <http://dybbukafterlives.com/>

3. On the linguistic history and different versions of the "original" play, see Seth L. Wolitz, "Inscribing An-sky's *Dybbuk* in Russian and Jewish Letters," in *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 164–202.

4. On An-sky's ethnographic expeditions, see Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

5. Yoram Bilu, "The Taming of the Deviants and Beyond: An Analysis of Dybbuk Possession and Exorcism in Judaism," in *Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Matt Goldish (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 42–43.

6. Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 3.

7. See Wolitz, "Inscribing An-sky's *Dybbuk* in Russian and Jewish Letters"; Vladislav Ivanov, "An-sky, Evgeny Vakhtangov, and *The Dybbuk*," trans. Anne Eakin Moss, in Safran and Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, 252–65.

8. Safran, *Wandering Soul*, 215.



9. On An-sky's meeting with the Vilna Troupe, see Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 91.

10. An-sky is buried in Warsaw in what is today the Okopowa Jewish Cemetery, and shares an *ohel* (grave structure) with the Yiddish writers Y. L. Peretz (1852–1915) and Yankev Dinezon (1856–1919).

11. Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 93.

12. See Michael C. Steinlauf, "Fardibekt!": An-sky's Polish Legacy," in Safran and Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, 234–35; and Marian Melman, "Teatr Żydowski w Warszawie w latach międzywojennych," in *Warszawa II Rzeczpospolitej: 1918–1938*, ed. Emilia Borecka, Marian Drozdowski, and Halina Jankowska (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1968), 1:383.

13. Agi [Agnieszka] Legutko, "The Dybbuk Arrives in New York: Maurice Schwartz's Dybbuk Production at the Yiddish Art Theater in 1921," *Mapping Yiddish New York*, October 27, 2014, <https://jewishstudiescolumbia.com/myny/arts/dybbuk-arrives-new-york-maurice-schwartz-dybbuk-production-yiddish-art-theater-1921/>

14. Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 126.

15. Legutko, "The Dybbuk Arrives in New York."

16. B. Karlinius [Ber Karlinski], "Teater notitzen. Der dibek af a poylisher bine," *Der Moment*, June 6, 1925, Esther-Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum (RG8), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

17. For analysis of the differences between the play and the film, see J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1991), 275–85; Zehavit Stern, "Ruhot refaim 'al masakh ha-kolnoa': Lish'eelat ha-zikaron ba-seret *Ha-Dibuk* (1937)," in *Al-na tegarshuni: 'lyunim hadashim be-Ha-Dibuk*, ed. Dorit Yerushalmi and Shimon Levi (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2009), 200–209.

18. See Joel Rosenberg, "The Soul of Catastrophe: On the 1937 Film of An-sky's *Dybbuk*," *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 2 (2011): 1–27; Eve Sicular, "Outing the Archives: From the Celluloid Closet to the Isle of Klezbos," in *Queer Jews*, ed. David Shneer and Caryn Aviv (New York: Routledge, 2002), 199–214; Naomi Seidman, "The Ghost of Queer Loves Past," in the present volume.

19. Krzysztof Warlikowski, "Reimagining the Jewish Legacy in Postcommunist Poland: Dialogues," conversation with Fabienne Arvers and Piotr Gruszczyński, response by Michael C. Steinlauf, *Polish Theatre Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2010): 94–96.

# *The Dybbuk before The Dybbuk*

## A Bastard History

Ruthie Abeliovich

S. An-sky's signature play, *The Dybbuk*, or *Between Two Worlds*, has been widely acknowledged as the theatrical cornerstone of Jewish modernism.<sup>1</sup> Modern Jews, as Gabriella Safran argues, were often perceived as "between two worlds." On the one hand, they were regarded as a traditional society preserving mystical beliefs and a patriarchal way of life; on the other, they were viewed as central players in a growing urban culture.<sup>2</sup> Amalgamating stories and symbols from the Hasidic world with a modernist theater style, *The Dybbuk* made manifest this dialectical pull between tradition and modernity.

Since its premiere in Warsaw by the Vilna Troupe in December 1920, An-sky's drama has been produced more than any other Jewish play—in different languages and venues across the globe—attracting massive crowds of attendees.<sup>3</sup> However, the play was not immediately embraced by Jewish intellectuals or the literary establishment.<sup>4</sup> It was not until *The Dybbuk* was staged that An-sky's contemporaries endorsed it as the first modern Jewish theater masterpiece. Indeed, over time, the engagement of prominent Jewish intellectuals and European avant-garde theater artists with the play rendered An-sky's *Dybbuk* a historiographical corpus that manifested the cultural dynamics introduced by modernity. *The Dybbuk* intertwined Jewish modernist culture with European aesthetic values and the revolutionary agitation of the twentieth century by breaking away from the historically devalued spectacles of Yiddish popular theater, thus transforming Jewish theater into a high-culture institution.<sup>5</sup>

In attempting to historicize An-sky's dramatic creation, scholarship to date has largely focused on the ethnographic background and folkloric

materials adapted and dramatized by An-sky, particularly on the large body of dybbuk folktales gathered from eastern European Jewish communities.<sup>6</sup> This historical narrative has inadvertently marginalized the influence of Yiddish popular theater on the formation of the modern Jewish canon. Research on An-sky's *Dybbuk* to date ignored prior Yiddish theatrical dramatizations of dybbuks—staged as early as the 1880s in Europe and the United States—and implicitly deemed them unrelated to An-sky's classic.<sup>7</sup> In so doing, *Dybbuk* scholarship has eschewed the artistic influence and cultural impact of Yiddish popular theater on modern Jewish culture and unfairly narrowed the artistic (pre)history of An-sky's play.

This chapter departs from the prevalent historical paradigm by offering a new assessment of An-sky's drama and the Vilna Troupe's acclaimed 1920 staging, not as an artistic upheaval or a revolution, but rather as a dramatic creation that partook in a broader, long-standing theatrical tradition of staging dybbuk stories and legends. An-sky's play and its performances, I submit, were created, developed, and nourished through a dynamic dialogue with earlier popular Yiddish theater. In analyzing the dramatic precursors of *The Dybbuk*, which preceded the Vilna Troupe's performance of An-sky's iconic play by a generation, I propose a reconsideration of the theatrical legacy of *The Dybbuk*, extending its historiography to include popular Yiddish theater performances as a significant influence on modernist Jewish culture. This reflection on the centenary of *The Dybbuk's* premiere further contextualizes An-sky's play by taking into consideration not only its well-known ethnographic and folkloristic origins, but also its repudiated *shund* (lit. "trash") theatrical ancestry.

## BEYOND ETHNOGRAPHY

David G. Roskies has defined the "plot of return" as "the archetypal modern Jewish plot," framing An-sky's life path and creative work as a paradigm for the spiritual and physical return of Jews to their neglected culture. *The Dybbuk*, Roskies argues, is the "most perfect distillation of Jewish folklore and mysticism," signifying the modern resuscitation of Jewish culture by a return to traditional practices and beliefs.<sup>8</sup> According to Roskies' "paradigm of return," An-sky's *Dybbuk* should be understood as the reenactment of folklore, the performance of long-established social habits, and the retelling of long-standing mythic lore. Roskies' argument exemplifies the prevailing

historical and cultural explanations for the significance of An-sky's *Dybbuk*. These explanations have focused on the various ways in which An-sky's play dramatizes religious and folkloristic material, analyzing the play as an expression of clashes between tradition, modernization, and secularization.<sup>9</sup> Through these perspectives, An-sky is portrayed as both a pioneer of Jewish ethnography and, concurrently, an exemplar of the processes of modern Jewish transformation, artfully capturing a traditional Ashkenazic way of life in decline.

The prevalent historiographical narrative of *The Dybbuk's* origins suggests that the play was based entirely on Jewish folk material collected by An-sky and his colleagues in a series of ethnographic expeditions conducted over three consecutive summers between 1912 and 1914. Along with musicologists Joel Engel and Zusman Kiselgof, artist Solomon Yudovin, and ethnographer Abraham Rechtman, An-sky traveled on these expeditions throughout the Hasidic communities of Volhynia and Podolia, as well as other Jewish centers of the Pale of Settlement.<sup>10</sup> Equipped with state-of-the-art technology of the time (a camera and a phonograph) they recorded thousands of Yiddish folk songs, folktales, and proverbs; took two thousand photographs; and gathered hundreds of historical documents and samples of Jewish material culture, including attire, religious articles, and even recipes of traditional Jewish food.<sup>11</sup> The trove of folk life they collected became the core of An-sky's dramatic script. As Roskies writes, the "romantic plot, the mystical setting and the historical landscape in An-sky's play were all born en route from one godforsaken *shtetl* to another."<sup>12</sup>

Over the years, there have been many speculative attempts to ascribe various portions of the play to their exact ethnographic sources. For instance, the *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (Encyclopedia of Yiddish Theater) hypothesizes, "An-sky said that the idea of the play *Between Two Worlds* (*The Dybbuk*), which he wrote first in Russian, and then in Yiddish, came to him in the year 1911. The first act of the play was written in Tarnov, the second act in another *shtetl* in Galicia, and the last two acts in Moscow."<sup>13</sup> Vladislav Ivanov argues that the subject of the play, "came from a banal event that An-sky observed in the *shtetl* Yarmolinets in Podolia during 1912–13," in which a father forced his daughter to marry against her will. The daughter's grief, Ivanov adds, "stuck in An-sky's memory."<sup>14</sup>

An-sky's attempt to bring Jewish folklore onto the stage has, heretofore, been assessed mainly in the context of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century endeavors to retrieve selective aspects of Jewish tradition and cul-

ture in order to retain the connection to an endangered world.<sup>15</sup> This historical account renders the Pale of Settlement as a kind of rabbit hole through which An-sky could go back in time and extract vanishing customs, traditions, and folklore. The act of recording, in this account, is a performative capturing of the actual voices of the shtetl, thus documenting and preserving a so-called authentic Jewish culture. Accordingly, *The Dybbuk* has long been interpreted as a theatrical rendering of the primary ethnographic sources gathered by An-sky and his peers.

Among the methods employed by the expedition members for collecting information was an ethnographic survey developed by An-sky and his colleagues for interviewing their Jewish sources. The survey's many questions included inquiries about dybbuks and demons, such as, "What does a *dybbuk* usually say and cry?" or, "For which transgressions does a *dybbuk* enter a person?"<sup>16</sup> This questionnaire, according to Jewish folklore historian Dani Schrire, is problematic when considered as documentation of folklore or traditional practices, as it often prescribed the knowledge they seek to document. In other words, the survey directed responders to search for a specific phenomenon and, therefore, cannot be regarded as a device to accurately capture the lore of the folk "out there."<sup>17</sup>

In fact, the sources from which An-sky derived his knowledge of Jewish dybbuk lore were far more diverse. They transcended ethnographic documentation or even enactments of traditional practices and customs, thus spanning beyond our current understanding of the "paradigm of return." David Biale mentions early fictions featuring in the Jewish popular press and theater to be among the sources that informed *The Dybbuk*. For example, the narrative element of a girl and a boy who fall in love and are prevented from uniting in marriage due to a prior commitment made by their parents was—according to Biale—a popular theme in Yiddish chapbooks.<sup>18</sup> An-sky included a question related to this familiar romantic entanglement in his ethnographic survey, "Do you know of cases or stories from the past in which a match was made between children before they were born?"<sup>19</sup> As Nathaniel Deutsch writes, An-sky then incorporated this element into his play. Drawn to "the simple life of the *narod*, its *naïveté*, poverty, truth, its lack of malice"—in Roskies' words—An-sky encompassed various facets of Jewish culture in his ethnography, including mundane habits and everyday popular narratives.<sup>20</sup>

For modern secular Jews such as An-sky and his expedition colleagues, studying and preserving eastern European Jewish culture and history

included leveraging Yiddish popular culture as a route to forging a national consciousness. This incorporation of popular Jewish culture was a central facet of An-sky's attempt to re-present Judaism. Yoking together traditional practices and legends with popular literary narratives expanded the notion of Jewish culture beyond its religious and communal practices. In this respect, the ideological and physical gesture embedded in the ethnographic expeditions—or in “going to the people”—was not only about re-creating a romantic past by retreating to tradition or imagining the past through a nostalgic lens.<sup>21</sup> Overstepping narrowly religious and folkloristic contexts, the ethnographic expeditions also encompassed Jewish popular culture and, in particular, the mass medium of the time—the theater, as consumed by millions of Jews around the globe. Accordingly, An-sky's *Dybbuk* stood on the shoulders of early Yiddish theatrical representations of dybbuk lore that had long been dramatized and staged across Europe and the United States.

### THE DYBBUK IN POPULAR YIDDISH THEATER

At the end of the nineteenth century, almost three generations before An-sky wrote *The Dybbuk*, two different Yiddish musical theater productions titled *Der dibek* (*The Dybbuk*) were performed across eastern and central Europe as well as the United States. These dramatizations presented different storylines and interpretations of the notion of a dybbuk from An-sky's play.<sup>22</sup> Yet, at the same time, their plots bear profound resemblance to his. Given that they were staged in the same cultural and geographic sphere, these earlier popular plays should be taken into account when discussing the origins of An-sky's *Dybbuk*.

These dybbuk variations were produced by two of the most prolific popular Yiddish playwrights of the period: Moyshe “Professor” Ish-Halevi Hurwitz (1844–1910) and his main competitor, Joseph Lateiner (pseud. Yosef Finkelshteyn, 1853–1935). Lateiner and Hurwitz played a pivotal role in the transnational popular Yiddish theater scene in both Europe and the United States. Hurwitz began producing theater in Iași, Romania. In 1886, he emigrated to New York, where he wrote ferociously over the next thirty years, composing mostly melodramas and music theater plays.<sup>23</sup> Hurwitz's rival, Joseph Lateiner, was an actor and prompter in Romania before emigrating to New York. Widely performed in Europe and the United States from the late 1880s onward, Lateiner's work is also known for its copious

production volume.<sup>24</sup> During the first years of the Yiddish theater, Lateiner and Hurwitz dominated the New York theatrical scene as dramatists and impresarios of various theater troupes.

Lateiner and Hurwitz's monopoly was broken by the end of the first Golden Age of Yiddish theater at the dawn of the 1900s, when the Yiddish theater industry grew substantially in size and output. Yet, in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the repertoire of Yiddish stages across Europe and the United States continued to rely heavily on their dramatic works.<sup>25</sup> Lateiner and Hurwitz created a distinct body of plays that brought folklore to the popular stage, juxtaposing Jewish themes and biblical narratives with non-Jewish elements.<sup>26</sup> As rivals, they both often produced theatrical variations on the same themes, as well as frequently imitating works by other dramatists. Accordingly, both Hurwitz and Lateiner produced plays entitled *The Dybbuk*.

Lateiner's musical comedy *The Dybbuk* tells the story of a young Jewish woman named Amelia, who is in love with Leon, an assimilated Jewish man and Amelia's French teacher. Amelia's grandmother, however, does not wish her granddaughter to marry a 'modern' Jew; instead, she has agreed to marry Amelia off to the local rebbe, Itshe-Meier, who deceives the grandmother by promising to say Kaddish over her grave in exchange for Amelia and her dowry. The local rebbe then plots, with his evil assistants, to capture and chase Leon away, thus preventing any chance of his secretly marrying Amelia. In the meantime, Leon—with the help of his servant Falik, who is a dybbuk (though never explicitly named as such)—makes plans with Amelia to run away and marry. They find refuge from Itshe-Meier in a hole in a brick wall, apparently a broken segment of a dilapidated house. As a dybbuk, Falik can sneak between sites and places: he can traverse physical boundaries, and thus enters and exits the wall freely. While the lovers and the dybbuk are hiding inside the wall, a troupe of Hasidic men and women, led by rebbe Itshe-Meier, enters the stage. The men are wearing long koftans; the women are attired with kerchiefs on their heads. Together they sing and shout, determined to catch the dybbuk. Falik then reappears out of the hovel and spews comic chaos. The turmoil ends when the rebbe and his "army" defeat the dybbuk and arrest him.<sup>27</sup>

Tormented by her lost love and disappointed by her contrived marriage, Amelia becomes severely ill. The turning point of this melodrama takes place when the grandmother dreams of the spirit of her dead daughter—Amelia's mother—resurrecting from beyond the grave and asking after her daughter.

In the dream, Amelia also appears as a ghost, thus foreshadowing what may befall her if she is prevented from marrying the man she loves. Alarmed by this vision, the grandmother aborts her plan and approves Amelia's marriage to Leon. Itshe-Meier is then confronted by the local town official—as well as four of the rebbe's wives—and accused of fraudulence and bigamy. The play ends in the spirit of comedy, with the release of Falik the dybbuk and the happy wedding of Leon and Amelia.

Lateiner's *Dybbuk* premiered on March 27, 1880, at the Mariinsky Theater in Odesa, Ukraine (then located in the Russian Empire). This production was performed by Sigmund Mogulesco's theater company, featuring Mogulesco cross-dressing as Grandmother Eve, Abba Schoengold as Leon, Liza Einhorn as Amelia, and Israel Weinblatt as Falik.<sup>28</sup> Four years later, this play debuted in New York's Oriental Theater with a different cast, including Sam Adler as the grandmother and Lateiner himself as the deceitful rebbe.<sup>29</sup> In 1898, Lateiner's *Dybbuk* was once again staged, this time at the Thalia (Bowery) Theater in New York, with Mogulesco re-creating his acclaimed role as the grandmother.<sup>30</sup>

A review written by Professor Ehrlich in *Di yidische gazeten* provides some clues regarding the theatricality of this show. Ehrlich praises Lateiner's play for its humor and wit, and describes the positive response of the audience, who "did not stop laughing during the entire performance." Ehrlich describes the Jewish characters depicted in this production as parodying what he perceives (as early as 1887) to be the declining, "primitive," impoverished shtetl. For instance, the crooked rebbe in the play is portrayed as a corrupt local magnate who extorts and deceives his fellow Jews. "Those who come *from there*, and are familiar with the rabbinic institution and its servants," Ehrlich points out, "immediately recognized Morris Haimowitz's reliable depiction and natural acting as the synagogue clerk."<sup>31</sup> Ehrlich views the rebbe as a stereotypical representation of an eastern European Jewish character, thus demonstrating the extent to which popular Jewish theater internalized and reproduced widespread negative images of Jews during this period. Fraught with Hasidic idioms, deliberately mispronounced Hebrew words, and a heavily Germanized Yiddish, the language onstage—according to Ehrlich—was also part of the parody.

Notably, though Falik, as Ehrlich writes in his review, clearly fulfills the role of the dybbuk, Lateiner's dramatic manuscript does not explicitly define Falik's character as a dybbuk or spirit. In the absence of an explicitly named spirit of a dead person, one can speculate as to who this entity might







Fig. 2. Sigmund Mogulesco in Joseph Lateiner's *The Dybbuk*, playing the character of Grandmother Eve, on stage with Sabina Lakser.

buk chose to sneak under Sonya Haimowitz's dress and possess her body, as she has an extraordinary stage appearance." Amelia's disease, from this point of view, was symptomatic of her demonic possession, also materialized in her sickness.<sup>32</sup> The dybbuk in this production transformed from a demonic but humanlike presence into a possessing spirit. Throughout the performance, he metamorphosed from an embodied presence into a disembodied voice, disappearing into a brick wall or under Amelia's dress. The journalist Bernard Weinstein elaborates in his memoirs on the highly physical nature of Falik's staged action, with the lovers and the dybbuk disappearing into the brick wall. His vivid depiction of the "army" of Hasidic men and women in search of the dybbuk is especially striking.<sup>33</sup>

A different depiction of a dybbuk is featured in a review of Moyshe Hurwitz's play *The Dybbuk, or the Miracle Worker, a Farce in Five Acts*. The title of Hurwitz's play juxtaposes the dybbuk and the rebbe, who is ultimately revealed to be a fake miracle-maker. In 1880, Hurwitz traveled to Vienna with his ensemble to perform this play at the Ringtheater. Among the actors featured in this production were Israel Grodner—in the role of the grandmother—and Israel Weinblatt, who had played Falik the dybbuk in Lateiner's play, this time cast in the role of the rebbe. A review of his performance, published in the *Neue Freie Presse* (December 12, 1880), describes the play's pastiche and its reception: "There is a young couple in love whom the Rebbe is not willing to recognize because he wants to take home the rich maiden himself. He is one of those miracle Rebbes who miraculously succeed in cheating a portion of their fellow citizens by their actions even in the 19th century. At the end

of the performance, the miracle Rebbe is revealed as a fake and nothing can stop the union of the lovers.<sup>34</sup> Like in An-sky's and Lateiner's plays, Hurwitz's farce—as suggested by this review—included a young couple in love, identified as representing “progress and enlightenment,” in sharp contrast to the Hasidic rebbe. As in Lateiner's play, here, too, the rebbe is unwilling to sanction the marriage of the young couple because he wishes to abduct the wealthy maiden. Once again, too, the performance ends with the downfall of the fake miracle-working rebbe and the union of the lovers. This storyline obviously bears a distinct resemblance to An-sky's play: a young couple that is prevented from consummating their love, a miracle-working Hasidic rebbe, and the presence of a dybbuk causing turmoil in the Jewish community.

The focus on the young rebellious lovers, the mockery of Hasidic belief and ways of life, and the representation of the rebbe's practice as fraudulent all reflect the conflict between maskilim (followers of the Jewish Enlightenment) and Hasidim prevailing at the end of the nineteenth century. This conflict evolved around the increasing non-Jewish European influences on Jewish culture, and its growing secularization.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the *Neue Freie Presse* reviewer criticizes the language spoken onstage, adding: “Apart from the kaftan-dressed figures of the Salzgrües—no human being could understand the jargon that is cultivated by this company.”<sup>36</sup> The review depicts the staged language as a sort of secret code—jargon, in maskilic derogatory terms—shared by a narrow Hasidic community, while delegitimizing the value of the performance as a cultural event.

Four decades later, Eugen Hoefflich would review the Vilna Troupe's production of *The Dybbuk* in the *Neue Freie Presse*, addressing the same “kaftan-dressed figures” and describing An-sky's dramatic plot as “a play of original, pure Judaism,” even though the spectators did not understand the language.<sup>37</sup> Why was the Vilna Troupe's production so widely praised, while Hurwitz's was harshly criticized? What might explain this stark contrast?

Hurwitz's reviewer was by no means alone in his diatribe against the scenes performed in the Jewish theater or its Yiddish parlance. Denigrating Yiddish as “jargon” was standard practice in European newspapers of the time.<sup>38</sup> This changed, however, in the period between 1880 and 1922. During these four decades, Jewish theater gradually established itself as a respectable artistic arena where modern Yiddish culture could be made accessible to lay audiences.<sup>39</sup> Thus, while the image of “kaftan” Jews would prevail for four decades, in the cultural context of 1922, it bore a different meaning for Jewish audiences and critics.

Furthermore, when the Vilna Troupe staged *The Dybbuk* in Vienna in 1922, the production had already gained a reputation as an artistic event in which “the highest goals of theater are achieved even when the spectator now and then does not understand the language.”<sup>40</sup> Hurwitz’s popular Yiddish theater, in contrast, lacked the cultural capital of an “art theater.” This is also reflected in the contrasting reviews published in the 1880s in the *Neue Freie Presse* (of Hurwitz) and *Di yidische gazeten* (of Lateiner). The *Neue Freie Presse* was a prestigious and leading liberal daily newspaper, with an extensive Jewish readership mostly from the educated classes of Vienna. Conversely, *Di yidische gazeten* was a Yiddish-language, Jewish periodical that advertised popular Yiddish theater performances, published reviews regularly, and was a central source of information for Jewish theatergoers in New York. Between these two cultural vectors, Lateiner and Hurwitz created productions concomitantly devalued and denounced by the Jewish elite, though they were clearly admired by their audiences.

The popularity of early Yiddish dybbuk performances is also evident from the existence of commercial sound recordings produced in Lemberg (now Lviv, Ukraine) in 1909, including a Yiddish song titled “Lebendig Lustig ‘Der Dibik’” (Lively and Merry “The Dybbuk”).<sup>41</sup> As noted on the cover of the record, it features the voices of renowned Yiddish performers Norbert Glimmer and Leon Kalisch, accompanied by an orchestra. Glimmer and Kalisch were both performers associated with the Gimpel Theater, a popular Yiddish playhouse in Lemberg.<sup>42</sup> The Gimpel Theater was founded by Jakob Ber Gimpel in late 1889 under the name *Daytshe-yiddish teater* (German-Jewish theater).<sup>43</sup> As Nahma Sandrow explains, the Gimpel Theater staged mostly “one-act plays, farces, song concerts, operettas and plays with a pronounced folk character performed in the Jewish jargon.”<sup>44</sup> At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Gimpel Theater’s repertoire heavily relied on the musical comedies of Hurwitz and Lateiner.

“Lebendig Lustig ‘Der Dibik’” is a remnant from the Gimpel Theater’s production of *The Dybbuk*. While we have no evidence about the specific version of *The Dybbuk* staged at this playhouse, or the context around this song, the apparent thematic and stylistic similarities between it and Lateiner’s and Hurwitz’s versions allow us to consider it as an indication of the comic rhythm and atmosphere prevailing in both early dybbuk plays.

“Lebendig Lustig ‘Der Dibik,’” as heard on the recording, was performed as a folk song—a light duet between two men telling of their visit to the rebbe:

We are coming from the rebbe's  
 He blessed us with long years.  
 I went in to the rebbe  
 The Rebbetzin took me by the hand  
 Only his students and Hasidim know this  
 Our heads are spinning

But the modern Jews [*daytsbn*],<sup>45</sup> no  
 They cannot be his students  
 Their limbs tremble before our brothers  
 They don't know how to have a good time  
 Lively and fun and broad-chested  
 A skip and a jump, a sing and a song  
 Chugging a goblet is a good deed  
 So pour the wine,  
 We'll all have a good time.

A woman came to the rebbe's  
 Oy vey, the rebbe came in  
 Who went in?  
 The rebbe?  
 No, a woman came in  
 For him to help her conceive and have a son  
 Once the rebbe took her payment,  
 She went home with a son conceived  
 Only his students and Hasidim know this  
 Our heads are spinning.

The rebbe gave a blessing  
 For us to have wealth and success  
 Once he signed the prayer note,  
 We knocked on wood,  
 Stayed incredibly poor  
 Only his students and Hasidim know this  
 Our heads are spinning.<sup>46</sup>

The lyrics of this song do not mention a dybbuk even once. They do, however, allude to a woman visiting a rebbe in order for his assistance with her

conceiving a baby. In line with the maskilic influence apparent in the lyrics of this song, the rebbe—an exorcist in An-sky's drama—is portrayed in this song as a dubious character; his supposed “powers” are overshadowed by sexual appetite and greed, embellished by superstitions (“We knocked on wood”) practiced by his ignorant disciples. The rebbe here is a philanthropist, and his alleged mystical powers result in his impregnation of multiple women, thus parodying the concept of spiritual impregnation (*ibur*) as a form of possession.<sup>47</sup> In dybbuk lore, possession refers to a spirit that penetrates and finds refuge inside the body of a living person (usually a woman). Exorcism, performed by a rebbe healer, was considered the only remedy.<sup>48</sup> This song ironically reverses the situation and mocks it, while presenting the rebbe as a false healer.

As in An-sky's play, many of these early dybbuk play variations revolve around the Jewish family and reach their climax in a wedding scene. The cycles of marriage, impregnation, and reproduction in these dramatic works stand for social practices and processes by which domestic groups and national entities come into being. As communal institutions, they mark the boundaries of social legitimacy. The Jewish bride who seeks to marry a Frenchman, the grandmother who worries that no one will say Kaddish over her grave, and the crooked rebbe who impregnates a helpless woman all point to the gradual disintegration of the traditional Jewish world and the transformation of common beliefs. These narrative elements may, thus, be understood as a reflection of changing Jewish norms. Staged in the “low-brow” popular Yiddish theater, often considered as a symptom of the exacerbating decline of Jewish culture—these narrative elements become a meta-theatrical metaphor for the delegitimized popular Yiddish culture to which the theater belonged.

Where, then, does the disembodied voice of the dybbuk reside in these performances? The Gimpel Theater sound recording establishes a link between novel, modern listening forms introduced by sound technology and a technospiritual imagining of the transmigration of the voice from its bodily anchor. This recording presents us with a sort of feedback loop of the body-voice relations manifested by the presence of the dybbuk in both Lateiner's and Hurwitz's plays. Between its staged manifestations and its recorded reproduction, *The Dybbuk* constitutes a cultural creation inextricably linked to mass-media culture. Specifically, the 1909 record of *The Dybbuk*, I submit, evinces the intersection of folklore and popular culture, attesting to the invention of “sounds of capitalism”—in James Loeffler's

words—materialized through the early Yiddish gramophone industry and commercial consumption.<sup>49</sup> The widespread dissemination of stage dybbuks from theater performances to a commercial gramophone recording enabled a transnational movement of sounds and voices, binding together variegated Jewish audiences from different diasporas—Galicia, Odesa, Lemberg, and New York—through a shared theatrical repertoire.

## A “BASTARD HISTORY” OF *THE DYBBUK*

Was An-sky aware of these early popular dybbuk productions when he wrote his play? Did members of the Vilna Troupe or their director, Dovid Herman, ever attend these performances? These questions remain speculative. Lateiner’s and Hurwitz’s productions toured eastern Europe widely and were staged and recorded in Galicia. We could, thus, assume that at least some audience members who attended the Vilna Troupe’s production of *The Dybbuk* were probably familiar with the earlier plays.

However, extant scholarship on An-sky’s *Dybbuk* has either claimed that these dramatizations were unrelated to An-sky’s play or, more often, ignored them altogether. Brigitte Dalinger briefly discusses Hurwitz’s *Dybbuk* as part of her discussion of Hasidic mysticism in the modern Jewish theater (1880–1938). Dalinger, however, does not include Lateiner’s play, and does not link Hurwitz’s dramatic plot, or imagery, to An-sky’s *Dybbuk*.<sup>50</sup> Other mentions of pre-An-sky dybbuk dramas often do not connect them to An-sky’s play at all. Alyssa Quint, for example, discusses the reaction of the renowned Yiddish playwright Nahum Shaikevitch to Lateiner’s performance of *The Dybbuk* at the Mariinsky Theater (1880). Quint, however, does not comment on any links between Lateiner’s play and An-sky’s play.<sup>51</sup> As I have demonstrated, early dybbuk plays had plots that bear major similarities to An-sky’s version. Why, then, were these productions excluded from the historical narrative?

The story of these early popular Yiddish productions sheds light on the prolific Jewish theatrical landscape that was widely considered low, unworthy, and illegitimate. Jewish cultural elites and intellectuals—such as Y. L. Peretz and An-sky himself—endeavored to regulate and determine which artistic models were “appropriate” for Jewish culture. To them, popular Yiddish theater was on par with illegitimate social behavior. It was considered an affront to cultural norms and societal respectability.

During its heyday, Yiddish theater was part and parcel of urban Jewish life. Going to the theater meant going to the people, in the populist sense. Yiddish popular theater, thus, adapted familiar plots and tunes to the social currents of its time. This theater produced a staggering volume of theatrical entertainment that was attended by millions of Jews. Most of this output was delegitimized by Jewish intellectuals, journalists, and scholars as “a flood of trash,” and dismissed as primitive, banal, and worthless.<sup>52</sup> This prejudiced approach has long prevailed among Yiddish writers and critics. More recent scholarship of Yiddish theater, however, has acknowledged the need to study the popular theater that made up the cultural realm of the Jewish masses, recognizing its artistic and social significance.<sup>53</sup> These studies reconsider the term *shund*, employed to describe the performances of early Yiddish popular theater—literally meaning “trash” in Yiddish and denoting popular culture in bad taste.

The struggle against *shund* was fierce on account of the accelerated Jewish modernization process and the aspirations of leading Jewish intellectuals and writers to revolutionize Jewish culture.<sup>54</sup> Despite the war against bad taste, and the slandering judgment of the Jewish cultural elite, the Jewish masses flocked to the Yiddish popular theater.<sup>55</sup> Jewish folk performances, such as *purimshpiln* (Purim plays), *badkhonim* (wedding entertainers), or Broder singers, were considered primitive or low class, much like the popular theater, due to their improvisational and nonliterary qualities.<sup>56</sup> Hayim Nahman Bialik, writing of An-sky's *Dybbuk*, epitomizes this attitude when he addresses An-sky's source material: “I have the impression that, as a collector of folklore, you combed through the garbage dumps. You picked out your little fragments of folklore and pieced together the remnants of all sorts of clothing into patches and took those patches and sewed them together into a sort of crazy quilt. What is folklore? What is the difference between folklore and national art?”<sup>57</sup> Bialik dubs the sources of An-sky's play rubbish, and refers to the folklore dramatized in the play as worthless materials fabricated together.

I contend that Bialik's use of the word *garbage* here is more than a metaphor for the ethnographic source material. It also encompasses the other materials out of which An-sky conceived his play: the marginalized *shund* Yiddish theater. Michael Thompson addresses rubbish as a cultural category, arguing that “when we take stock of our world, we are very selective; we only include those items that are of value—anything that has no value is excluded.” Thompson also emphasizes the flexibility of rubbish as a cultural



product, explaining that some “objects may not be so unequivocal and, by making a personal aesthetic commitment, we may be able to tip them one way or the other.”<sup>58</sup> Rubbish, from this point of view, is a malleable signifier, sinking in value to be discovered at some later date and transferred into durability.

The Yiddish popular theater of Hurwitz and Lateiner demonstrates such a process. Thus, what Sandrow depicts as “formula plays” could also be understood as products of an informed process of translation of familiar plots, appropriation of earlier sources, and adaptation of European music and drama.<sup>59</sup> Lateiner’s *Dybbuk* included elements from Jewish folklore, French idioms, Italian operatic tropes, and Jewish liturgical chants.<sup>60</sup> As Bialik perhaps unintentionally suggested, An-sky’s *Dybbuk* was a patchwork combining various elements, some of them already familiar from earlier *shund* theater.

An-sky’s canonical play thus points not only toward cultural revival and Jewish modernism, but also to the influence of, and bidirectional feedback between, *shund* and *kunst* (art). While the Vilna Troupe’s 1920 performance of An-sky’s play has been largely considered to have revolutionized Jewish theater into a high-culture institution, prior dramatizations of dybbuk lore, staged as early as the 1880s, demonstrate the evolution of modern Jewish theater, not as a result of an artistic upheaval but rather as a process developed and fertilized through a dynamic dialogue with popular theater. Thus, if the Vilna Troupe’s 1920 production of *The Dybbuk* marks the emergence of Jewish theatrical modernism, then the popular Yiddish theater productions of similar dybbuk dramas demonstrate the significance and functionality of a popular culture that was often wrongly dismissed as insignificant in the project of shaping Jewish modernist culture.

Integrating *shund* into the theatrical legacy of *The Dybbuk* generates a fresh take on current historical narratives, proposing a new account that parallels the story of “highbrow” Jewish culture, and weaves it into a conversation with Jewish popular entertainment. Re-examining the history of the popular Yiddish theater allows us to revise what we have long understood as the cornerstone of Jewish theatrical modernism. An-sky did not create *The Dybbuk* out of nowhere; instead, he composed a variation on a Hasidic theme that was long part and parcel of Yiddish popular culture. Shifting this theme from farce into tragedy, from Yiddish to Russian, his version of *The Dybbuk* brought together folklore and theater, ethnographic recording and theatrical reproduction. Along with these shifts, the theatrical phenomenon

of the dybbuk metamorphosed from an embodied demon into a spiritual force—a harbinger of the fault lines of Jewish modernism.

## Notes

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1. On *The Dybbuk* as a cornerstone of Jewish modernism, see Sylvie Anne Goldberg, "Paradigmatic Times: An-sky's Two Worlds," in *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 44–52; Nathaniel Deutsch, "Thrice Born; or, Between Two Worlds: Reflexivity and Performance in An-sky's Jewish Ethnographic Expedition and Beyond," in *Going to the People: Jews and the Ethnographic Impulse*, ed. Jeffrey Veidlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 27–45.

2. Gabriella Safran, "Jews as Siberian Natives: Primitivism and S. An-sky's *Dybbuk*," *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 4 (2006): 635–36.

3. On the Vilna Troupe, see Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018); Shelly Zer-Zion, "'The Vilna Troupe': Prologue to the History of Habima," *Bikoret ve-Parshanut* 41 (2009): 65–92; Shelly Zer-Zion, "The *Dybbuk* Reconsidered: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Symbol between East and West," *Leipziger Beiträge zur Jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur* 3 (2005): 175–97; Michael C. Steinlauf, "'Fardibekt!': An-sky's Polish Legacy," in Safran and Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, 232–51.

4. On the reception of An-sky's play, see Seth L. Wolitz, "Inscribing An-sky's *Dybbuk* in Russian and Jewish Letters," in Safran and Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, 164–202. On the reception of the Vilna Troupe's production of An-sky's *Dybbuk*, see Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 98–110.

5. See Steinlauf, "'Fardibekt!'; J. Mickutė, "The Vilner Trupe, 1916–30: A Transformation of *Shund* Theater—For the Sake of National Politics or High Art?," *Jewish Social Studies* 22, no. 3 (2017): 98–135.

6. On dybbuk tales, see Gedalyah Nigal, *Sipure 'dibuk' be-sifrut Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1994); Yoram Bilu, "Dibbuk and Maggid: Two Cultural Patterns of Altered Consciousness in Judaism," *AJS Review* 21 (1996): 341–66; Matt Goldish, ed., *Spirit Possession in Judaism: Cases and Contexts from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003). For a historical discus-

sion of possession in Jewish religion and early modern European history, see Jeffrey Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists and Early Modern Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

7. See, e.g., Zalmen Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (New York: Farlag Elisheva, 1931), 1:71–79; Brigitte Dalinger, “Begegnungen mit dibbukim: Chassidische Mystik im modernen Wiener Theater zwischen 1880 und 1938,” *Menora* 11 (2000): 229–50.

8. David G. Roskies, “S. An-sky and the Paradigm of Return,” in *The Uses of Tradition: Jewish Continuity in the Modern Era*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 243, 246.

9. Roskies; Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk’s Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Naomi Seidman, “The Modernist Erotics of Jewish Tradition: A View from the Gallery,” in *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 156–70.

10. The Pale of Settlement refers to the territories of czarist Russia in which Jews were permitted to dwell permanently. This restriction confined Jews to the western regions of the Russian Empire, including much of today’s Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and Poland. These territorial restrictions on Jews existed between 1835 and 1917, and were abolished after the Bolshevik Revolution of February 1917 by the provisional government.

11. For further reading on An-sky’s ethnographic expedition, see Deutsch, “Thrice Born”; Benyamin Lukin, “An Academy Where Folklore Will Be Studied’: An-sky and the Jewish Museum,” in Safran and Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, 281–306; Liudmila Uritskaya, “Ashkenazi Jewish Collections of the State Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg,” in *Tracing An-sky: Jewish Collections from the State Ethnographic Museum in St. Petersburg; Catalog of the Exhibition in Joods Historisch Museum*, ed. Mariella Beuker and Renée Waale (Zwolle, Netherlands: Waanders Uitgevers, 1992), 24–57.

12. David G. Roskies, introduction to *The Dybbuk and Other Writings by S. An-sky*, ed. David G. Roskies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xxv.

13. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 1:72.

14. Vladislav Ivanov, introduction to “S. An-sky, *Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk): Censored Variant*,” trans. Anne Eakin Moss, in Safran and Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, 361.

15. For further examples of the retrieval of Jewish traditions in modernist contexts, see Wertheimer, *The Uses of Tradition*.

16. An-sky’s questionnaire may be found in Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 306.

17. Dani Schrire, "Ethnographic Questionnaires: After Method, after Questions," in *Approaching Methodology*, 2nd ed., ed. Frog Latvala and Puliina Latvala with Helen F. Leslie (Helsinki: Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, 2013), 201–12.

18. David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 519.

19. Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent*, 195.

20. Roskies, introduction, xxv.

21. On "going to the people," see Veidlinger, *Going to the People*. See also Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, "'We Are Too Late': An-sky and the Paradigm of No Return," in Safran and Zipperstein, *The Worlds of S. An-sky*, 83–102.

22. Four different manuscripts of Lateiner's 'Der Dybbuk' have been preserved. Three Yiddish prompting notebooks (from 1898, 1904, 1907) are kept at the Sholem Perlmutter collection (YIVO Archives, New York); and, a German version entitled "Der Dibeck (Der Dömon): Komische Operette in 5 Acten," Bearbeitet für die deutsche Bühne durch J. Sandberg (manuscript, censored permission 1904), is located in the Jewish Drama Collection at the Saint Petersburg State Theatrical Library. Hurwitz's dramatic text has not been located yet.

23. Solomon Perlmutter and Yankev Mestel, eds., *Yidishe dramaturgn un kompositors* (New York: YKUF, 1952), 66–72; Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 1:591–605.

24. See Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater* (Warsaw, 1934), 2:964–90; Perlmutter and Mestel, *Yidishe dramaturgn un kompositors*, 61–65.

25. See Joel Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002); Judith Thissen, "Reconsidering the Decline of the New York Yiddish Theater in the Early 1900s," *Theater Survey* 44, no. 2 (2003): 173–97.

26. For an overview of Lateiner's and Hurwitz's theatrical creations, see Marvin Leon Seiger, "A History of the Yiddish Theater in New York City to 1892" (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1960), 196–310; B. Gorin, *Di geshikhte fun idishn teater* (New York: Max N. Mayzel, 1923), 2:72–93.

27. Bernard Weinstein provides an elaborate description of this performance in his essay "Di ershte yorn fun yidishn teater in odes un in Nyu York," in *Archiv far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame*, ed. Jacob Shatzki (Vilna: YIVO, 1930), 249–50.

28. The cast of actors included Mogulesco, Abba and Chaya-Sarah Schoengold, Moshe and Esther Zilberman, Wolf Edelman, Moshe Teich, Roza Exelrode, Polina Edelstein, and Sabin Lakser. Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 2:967. Many plays staged during the early years of the Yiddish theater featured Jewish grandmothers. Avrom Goldfaden's plays *The Grandmother and Her Granddaughter* and *The Sorceress* and Shomer's play *Shprintse the [Female] Broker* are but a few

examples. The role of the grandmother was a leading one and, therefore, usually assigned to the most important male stars, such as Mogulesco and Yisroel Grodner. See Weinstein, “Di ershte yorn fun yidishn teater in Odes un in Nyu York,” 248–50.

29. Seiger, “A History of the Yiddish Theater in New York City to 1892,” 153–54.

30. “Der dibek,” poster (1898), Dorot Jewish Division, New York Public Library, b16473452, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47da-db4d-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

31. Professor Ehrlich, “Der dibek,” *Di yidische gazeten*, March 11, 1887, 4 (added emphasis).

32. Ehrlich, “Der Dibuk,” 4. For more on dybbuks as disease, see Eli Somer, “Trance Possession Disorder in Judaism: Sixteenth-Century Dybbuks in the Near East,” *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 5, no. 2 (2004): 131–46.

33. Bernard Weinstein was a journalist and writer for the *Forward*. See Zalmen Reyzen, *Leksikon fun der yidisher literatur, prese, un filologie* (Vilna: B. Kletskin, 1926), 1:957–58.

34. This review is quoted in Fritz Neubauer, comp., *The Guest Performances of Moses Horowitz’s Theater Troupe in Vienna, December 13 to December 16, 1880* (New York: n.p., 2006), 16, Center for Jewish History, <http://digital.cjh.org/webclient/DeliveryManager?pid=1520564>

35. On Haskalah drama, see Jeremy Dauber, “Between Two Worlds: Antitheatricality and the Beginnings of Modern Yiddish Theatre,” in *Inventing the Modern Yiddish Stage: Essays in Drama, Performance, and Show Business*, ed. Joel Berkowitz and Barbara Henry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 27–39; Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, 3rd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 21–39.

36. Quoted in Neubauer, *The Guest Performances of Moses Horowitz’s Theater Troupe*, 16. Salzgies was a neighborhood in nineteenth-century Vienna where many religious Jews lived.

37. Eugen Hoefflich, “Di Wilnaer (anmerkungen gelegntich ihres Wiener Gastspiels),” *Neue Freie Presse*, November 10, 1922, 7. Debra Caplan discusses this review in *Yiddish Empire*, 109.

38. *Jargon* or *zhargon* was a pejorative term that accused Yiddish of being a distorted and poor form of German and an undisciplined mixture of words from various languages. See Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Language* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 27–28.

39. On the canonization of the Jewish theater, see Berkowitz, *Shakespeare on the American Yiddish Stage*; Michael C. Steinlauf, “Fear of Purim: Y. L. Peretz and the Canonization of Yiddish Theater,” *Jewish Social Studies* 1, no. 3 (1995): 44–65; Dauber, “Between Two Worlds.”

40. Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 109n90.

41. The term *lebendig lustig* refers to a joyful genre of songs that typically featured in folkloric Broder singers' performances. Nahma Sandrow defines Broder singers as troubadours or secular entertainers. Their performances usually included folkloric songs, music, and dance, interspersed with short skits and monologues. Broder singers were especially prevalent in Lemberg, Odesa, and Vienna and toured throughout Galicia, Romania, and southern Russia. Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 36. For further elaboration, see Amanda (Miryam-Khaye) Seigel, "Broder Singers: Forerunners of the Yiddish Theatre," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 32 (2020): 109–24.

42. In 1909, Lemberg was a prominent cultural and financial center of Jewish life in Galicia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. See Delphine Bechtel, "Lemberg/Lwow/Lvov/Lviv: Identities of a 'City of Uncertain Boundaries,'" *Diogenes* 53, no. 2 (2006): 62–71.

43. For more on the Gimpel Theater and commercial theater sound recordings, see Michael Aylward, "Gimpel's Theatre, Lwów: The Sounds of a Popular Yiddish Theatre Preserved on Gramophone Records, 1904–1913," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 32 (2020): 125–45; Doris A. Karner, *Lachen unter Tränen: Jüdisches Theater in Ostgalizien und der Bukowina* (Vienna: Edition Steinbauer, 2005).

44. Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 85.

45. *Daytshn* literally means "Germans." In the Yiddish of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the term referred to assimilated Jews who dressed like Germans—that is, as modern Europeans.

46. This song was transcribed and translated by Nick Block.

47. For more on *ibur* in relation to dybbuk possession, see Bilu, "Dibbuk and Maggid"; J. P. Laycock, ed., *Spirit Possession around the World: Possession, Communion, and Demon Expulsion across Cultures* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO Press, 2015), 161.

48. See Yoram Bilu, "The Woman Who Wanted to Be Her Father: A Case Analysis of Dybbuk Possessions in a Hasidic Community," in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 332.

49. James Loeffler, "'The Lust Machine': Recording and Selling the Jewish Nation in the Late Russian Empire," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 32 (2020): 259; and see Aylward, "Gimpel's Theatre, Lwów."

50. Dalinger, "Begegnungen mit dibbukim."

51. Alyssa Quint, *The Rise of the Modern Yiddish Theater* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 110; see also, e.g., Zylbercweig, *Leksikon fun yidishn teater*, 1:71.

52. A. Mukdoyni, "Zikhroynes fun a yidishn teater-kritiker: Yidisher teater in

Poyln fun 1909 biz 1915," in *Arkhib far der geshikhte fun yidishn teater un drame*, ed. Jacob Shatzky (Vilna: YIVO, 1930), 341–42. See also, e.g., Steinlauf, "Fear of Purim"; Michael C. Steinlauf, "Jewish Theatre in Poland," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 16 (2003): 71–92; Avraham Novershtern, *Here Dwells the Jewish People—A Century of American Yiddish Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2015); Harshav, *The Meaning of Language*. Nina Warnke discusses how critics framed the *shund* Yiddish theater as a child; see Warnke, "The Child Who Wouldn't Grow Up: Yiddish Theater and Its Critics," in *Yiddish Theater: New Approaches*, ed. Joel Berkowitz (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), 201–16.

53. For scholarship on *shund* theater, see Ilana Bialik, "Audience Response in the Yiddish 'Shund' Theatre," *Theatre Research International* 13, no. 2 (1988): 97–105; Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 19–27; Natan Gross, "Mordechai Gebirtig: The Folk Song and the Cabaret Song," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 16 (2003): 107–18; François Guesnet, "A Tuml in the Shtetl: Khayim Betsalel Grinberg's Di Khevre-Kedishe Sude," *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* 16 (2003): 93–106; Edna Nahshon, ed., *New York's Yiddish Theater: From the Bowery to Broadway* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016); Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 91–132; Steinlauf, "Jewish Theatre in Poland"; Thissen, "Reconsidering the Decline of the New York Yiddish Theater"; Nina Warnke, "Immigrant Popular Culture as Contested Sphere: Yiddish Music Halls, the Yiddish Press, and the Processes of Americanization, 1900–1910," *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 3 (1996): 321–35; Warnke, "The Child Who Wouldn't Grow Up."

54. Harshav, *The Meaning of Language*, 119–37.

55. The numbers speak for themselves: in the 1890s, on the Lower East Side of New York, there was a community of some 300,000 enthusiastic theatergoers with an insatiable appetite for "light" theatrical entertainment. In 1900 alone, when the Jewish population of New York City reached approximately 580,000 people, the three local Yiddish theaters presented 1,100 performances, selling some two million tickets. See Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870–1914* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 133; Nahshon, *New York's Yiddish Theater*.

56. On the cultural dynamics of Jewish folklore and theater at the end of the nineteenth century, see Zehavit Stern, "From Jester to Gesture: Eastern European Jewish Culture and the Reimagining of Folk Performances" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011); Dina Pladott, "The Yiddish Theatre as a Species of Folk Art: Lateiner's *The Jewish Heart* (1908)," in *Identity and Ethos: A Festschrift for Sol Liptzin on the Occasion of His 85th Birthday*, ed. M. Gekber (New York: Peter Land, 1986), 69–87.

57. Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Dvarim she-be'al peh* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1935), 112–13.

58. Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), 12.

59. Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars*, 104–14.

60. For more on the performative characters of *shund*, see Nahshon, *New York's Yiddish Theater*; I. Bialik, "Audience Response in the Yiddish 'Shund' Theatre"; Pladott, "The Yiddish Theatre as a Species of Folk Art"; Mark Slobin, *Tenement Songs: The Popular Music of the Jewish Immigrants* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).



# *The Ghost of Queer Loves Past*

## An-sky's *Dybbuk* and the Sexual Transformation of Ashkenaz

Naomi Seidman

In dedicating his 1888 novel *Stempenyu* to S. Y. Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem quotes a letter he received from the older writer advising him against trying his hand at the novel form. Playing on the double meaning of the Yiddish word *roman* to signify both novel and love affair, Abramovitsh declared that “if there are romances [*romanen*] in the life of our people, they are entirely different from those of other people. One must understand this and write entirely differently.”<sup>1</sup> Abramovitsh took his own advice to heart. In an ironic passage introducing his autobiographical novel, he described his hesitations about writing his life story, given the inherent unsuitability of Jewish experience to literary expression:

Neither I nor my ancestors ever amazed the world with our deeds. We weren't dukes, or strategists, or warriors. We never made love to charming young women; we never wrestled like billy goats with other men or served as seconds in duels; and we never learned how to waltz with young maidens at balls. . . . In short, all the material that could entice a reader—is lacking among us. Instead we have the cheder and the rebbe, matchmakers and brides and grooms, old people and babies, wives and children.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Abramovitsh's irony in this passage cuts both ways, parodying the clichés of the popular European novel as much as satirizing the lack of glamour in the Ashkenazic way of life. Nevertheless, just beneath the sur-

face of his lament is a more serious reservation about Jewish culture, one he shared with other thinkers of the eastern European Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment), the movement Abramovitsh was affiliated with in the first decades of his literary career. The Haskalah bitterly attacked the “medieval” practice of early, arranged marriages, which corrupted Jewish sexuality and burdened young people with children before they could learn a profession, see the world, or fall in love.<sup>3</sup> With romance so central to the European literary imagination, Jewish writers who aspired to join the European literary arena might well be stymied: their world, as Abramovitsh complained, lacked the very raw material they might use for writing novels.

Sholem Aleichem acknowledged Abramovitsh’s warning, but he wrote his novel anyway. In *Stempenyu*, subtitled “A Yiddish Novel” (or, to translate otherwise, “A Jewish Romance”) Sholem Aleichem looked for the “entirely different” romances of Jewish life in the bohemian counterculture of traveling klezmer musicians, discovering the suppressed eroticism of traditional Ashkenaz at its margins. Later, in the Tevye stories, Sholem Aleichem updated a familiar Haskalah plot, finding romance in the struggles of a modernizing younger generation against their elders.<sup>4</sup> Other nineteenth-century Jewish writers who shared the perception that passionate love was foreign to traditional Jewish culture tried different approaches. The Hebrew novelist Abraham Mapu, for instance, sidestepped it altogether by setting his 1853 *Ahavat Tsiyon* (The Love of Zion) in the time of the prophet Isaiah, when sexually vital Jewish men and women were presumably still to be found.

Abramovitsh himself, after early attempts at Hebrew romantic fiction, had taken the complementary tack of writing Yiddish satire, finding his distinctive voice in ridiculing traditional Jewish failures to live up to European gender ideals and exposing what Dan Miron has called “the callous dehumanization of sex and marriage in [traditional] Jewish life.”<sup>5</sup> His 1878 *The Travels of Benjamin the Third* presents a “Jewish Don Quixote,” as the Polish translation was called, in which Quixote and Sancho Panza are ragged Jewish luftmentschen from a backwoods shtetl in search of the legendary Lost Tribes. The men relate to each other in a caricature of traditional Jewish marriage: one dreams while the other—cross-dressed to avoid being recognized by his wife, who is in hot pursuit—provides the food for both of them.<sup>6</sup> In the Jewish world, Abramovitsh’s parody implies, the knights are all married and the dragons they fear most are their domineering wives; but the fact that these men are married does not make them, in the Europeanized view of the author, “proper” men—not only do husbands fail to

play the appropriate role of provider and head of the house, but their most profound attachments are with other men. It is in novels like *Benjamin the Third*, which satirize traditional Jewish men as ludicrous homosexuals, that the Haskalah critique most clearly shows its homophobic face.

Read in this context, *The Dybbuk*, S. An-sky's acclaimed 1920 play, is a manifesto for the new age, rejecting the Haskalah diagnosis of traditional Ashkenaz as a sexual wasteland awaiting the erotic fomentations of Enlightenment and modernity. The play takes place entirely in a world steeped in religious beliefs and practices; in a certain sense the traditional world is itself the protagonist—the *batlonim*, the synagogue habitués An-sky uses as a sort of Greek chorus, have more lines than the young lovers who are at the presumed center of the story, and the play stages an astonishingly diverse range of folkloric motifs, from Hasidic discourse to betrothal and marital customs to an exorcism ritual in all its technical detail. At the same time, the play tells as grand and passionate a story of frustrated love as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Tristan and Isolde*: the young protagonists, an orphaned yeshiva boy named Khonen and the daughter of a wealthy family named Leah, fall in love and wish to marry, but Leah's father, Sender, objects to the match, since he hopes to find a rich husband for his only daughter. The devastated Khonen dies in an attempt at using kabbalistic magic to win Leah, and she is betrothed to the man her father has chosen. But Khonen's spirit possesses her under the very wedding canopy, and the marriage is called off.<sup>7</sup> The exorcism of Leah's dybbuk—the possessing spirit—brings to light an astonishing circumstance: Sender and Khonen's dead father had long ago, in their yeshiva days, promised their still unborn children to each other. Khonen's possession of Leah, then, is merely an expression of their parents' desires, driven underground by the passage of time and the failures of memory. Khonen's spirit is finally compelled to leave Leah's body, but in the final scene her soul is joined in death with her intended bridegroom.

The play could easily be read as participating in the Haskalah critique of arranged marriages, in which young love represents the triumph of the new against the conservative forces of tradition. But in *The Dybbuk* these themes arise in a context apparently untouched by modernity (except, of course, the modernity of the playwright himself).<sup>8</sup> The familiar Haskalah trope of a youthful initiation into Enlightenment literature is here recast: instead of reading Nikolay Chernyshevsky or Dmitry Pisarev or Hebrew grammars, as other rebellious yeshiva boys did, Khonen consults the medieval kabbalistic handbook *Sefer Razi'el*. And in having Khonen argue with his friend that

even “lust” can be holy, An-sky also implies the converse, that holiness can be erotic, and that this eroticism resides at the very heart of the traditional world:

KHONEN (*approaches his friend, bends down to him, and speaks in a trembling voice*): Which sin is the most powerful of all? Which sin is the hardest to conquer? Is it not the sin of lust for a woman?

HENEKH (*not raising his head*): Yes.

KHONEN: And if this sin is cleansed in the heat of a great flame, does not the greatest uncleanness turn to higher holiness, to the Song of Songs? (*Breathlessly.*) The Song of Songs! “Behold, thou art fair, my love; behold thou art fair . . .”<sup>9</sup>

It is not only An-sky’s characterization of the traditional world as rich in erotic potential that differs from that of his Haskalah predecessors. What distinguishes An-sky’s world is also a new conception of modernity or, rather, of the relationship between modernity and tradition. Where the Haskalah saw itself as providing a program to critique and reform the medieval ways of fellow Jews, An-sky devoted his energies to rescuing—and constructing—a usable past. An-sky was an ethnographer as well as a playwright, the founder of modern Jewish ethnography, in fact, whose expeditions through eastern Europe (1912–14) provided the material from which *The Dybbuk* is drawn.<sup>10</sup> But *The Dybbuk* is not simply the work of a cultural curator eager to fill his theatrical museum with bizarre Jewish folklore, as some early critics charged.<sup>11</sup> An-sky not only collected folklore, he transformed it into modernist—more specifically, expressionist—theater. For An-sky, the folk were a repository of wisdom, the foundation for modern Jewish culture, and it was precisely there, rather than to European models, that a Jewish writer must look. The dybbuk itself is symbolic of his nationalist-modernist enterprise: a figure drawn from the recesses of the premodern occult who also testifies to the modern creed of the inalienability of romantic choice. *The Dybbuk* fuses superstition and romance, erotic love and demonic possession. While Jewish literature records dozens of stories of possession, “no story before An-sky’s,” David G. Roskies writes, “had ever told of a dybbuk who was a lover in disguise.”<sup>12</sup>

That the conflicting and contradictory claims of modernity and tradition are at the heart of the play is made more evident by a recently discovered prologue to *The Dybbuk* that An-sky omitted from his final version.

The prologue introduces the play through a dialogue between a traditional father and his rebellious daughter, who has returned home despondent after a failed marriage that began with her elopement.<sup>13</sup> Hoping to find a bridge between herself and her father, she begs him to tell her whether, in his yeshiva days, he had known something of the love that drove her to leave home: “Father,” the daughter pleads, “you told me that when you were young you studied in yeshiva, with hundreds of young boys. Can it be that none of them happened to fall in love? With a girl, you understand, with a girl.” The father, who first denies the very possibility of such a happenstance, eventually recalls the story of a yeshiva student who became a dybbuk because he was disappointed in love; he hastens to warn his daughter, though, that his story “has nothing to do with what you’re talking about.”<sup>14</sup> The prologue ends with the first line of the play proper, turning the reminiscing father into the narrator and the play itself into an extended and—as we shall see—ultimately ambiguous response to his daughter’s question about the possibility of heterosexual romance in the traditional world. Framed in this way, *Between Two Worlds* (An-sky’s alternative title) promises to tell a story that unites the memories of the generation passing away with the hopes of the one that is taking its place. And the dybbuk, in its conflation of folk belief and sexual passion, is the Janus-faced figure that speaks to both of them.

Within *The Dybbuk*’s fusion of romance and the occult lies an even more unexpected coupling. On the one hand, the play follows the predictable trajectory of one strand of Haskalah romance, in which a young couple struggles to marry against the wishes and mercenary expectations of their elders. Much of *The Dybbuk* is directly drawn from the conventions of this genre: the bourgeois father who ignores the wishes of his daughter, the poor yeshiva boy who boards at his table and falls in love with the rich girl, the father’s holding his daughter as a price for the highest bidder. An-sky’s early career as a foot soldier in the eastern European Haskalah would have acquainted him with myriad examples of this familiar plot, in which parents were cast as the enemy of young love and sexual freedom, and arranged marriages stood for all that was stultifying and repressive in the traditional Jewish social order.

On the other hand, *The Dybbuk* lays this well-worn narrative structure over another, antithetical narrative tradition—that of the ramified set of folk beliefs about fated love, about marriages decreed in heaven, which can be summarized by the term *bashert*. *Bashert* means both “fated” and, as a noun, one’s “future spouse” or, more colloquially, “true love,” as in Leah’s last words

to Khonen: “Ikh bin baheft mit dir oyf eybik, mayn basherter” (I am joined with you forever, my fated one/my true love).<sup>15</sup> We should note that true love, in this traditional system of values, is at the furthest possible remove from free choice. The young couple’s love, it emerges, is an expression of the bonds of destiny and tradition—Leah and Khonen are meant to marry because their fathers had pledged them, before their birth, to each other, a pledge no less binding because one of the men has died and the other has apparently forgotten the entire episode. As folkloric tradition claims is true in the case of every match (although it is usually God himself who acts as matchmaker), Khonen and Leah are destined for each other from their very conception, and the love that arises between them is no more than the inevitable expression of this foreordained decree.

An-sky’s superimposition of a Haskalah narrative of sexual rebellion over a layer of folkloric beliefs in the predestination of love is not in itself surprising—the combination of modernity and tradition is the very insignia of his literary generation of Yiddish post-Haskalah modernists. As the Russian-Jewish critic Abram Efros declared in his essay on An-sky’s folklore-collecting expedition: “Our first imprimatur is our modernism, our leftism, and our youth; our second imprimatur is our orientation to our folk, our traditions, and our antiquity.”<sup>16</sup> While the older generation of Haskalah writers had emulated the European bourgeoisie and disparaged traditional Jewish society, the next generation of Yiddish writers embraced the international avant-garde and their Jewish roots simultaneously. Yiddish modernists like Y. L. Peretz created powerful literature from their “discovery” of the socialist impulse in, for instance, the Hasidic tale. What is remarkable about the juxtaposition of modernism and traditionalism in the case of *The Dybbuk* is that An-sky took the two orientations at their greatest distance from each other and brought them together with maximum impact, combining a call for freedom from arranged marriage with an insistence on the real power of the ultimate arranged marriage—one decreed before the young couple have been born. Thus, the love between the protagonists is motivated and determined by two apparently contradictory notions—the belief that young people have the right to choose their mates, a notion that expressed and fueled Jewish secularization, and a belief in the mysteriously insistent demands of destiny and tradition. In An-sky’s conflation the mutual attraction of the young couple emerges simultaneously from the depth of their erotic passion for each other and from the betrothal pledge sworn by their fathers. In a startling move, An-sky suggests that the two derivations—one

instinctual and preconscious, the other historical and traditional—are, in fact, one and the same.

Even more striking, though, is the play's exploration of the inextricability of tradition and modernity as a sexual dialectic, one based on the symbiosis of homoerotic and heteroerotic love.<sup>17</sup> *The Dybbuk* presents not one, but two pairs of lovers—the two men whose bond has the force of fate, and the young boy and girl who reenact the love of their fathers. The heterosexual love affair/possession is at stage center, but the key to understanding its otherworldly power lies in the homoerotic friendship that refuses to remain relegated to the past or to the background. In *The Dybbuk* homosexual and heterosexual love are mutually dependent and, as a combined system, act as the very engine of the social order rather than operating at its margins. Jewish romance, then, is for An-sky, as for Abramovitsh, “different from those of other people”; it is this difference that explains the unwillingness of the father, in the prologue, to equate the tale he is about to tell his daughter with her conception of heterosexual love.

An-sky, of course, was not the first Jewish writer to contrast the traditional and modern sexual order, nor even to explore the nature of the bonds between traditional men. Just as Khonen and Leah are cousins to the modernizing couple of Haskalah romance, Sender and Nissen, their fathers, have precursors in Abramovitsh's satires as well as in the earlier literature of the *misnagdim*, the opponents of the Hasidic movement. As David Biale writes, *misnagdic* literature took aim at Hasidic men who left their wives and children for weeks on end to visit the tsadik's court (An-sky, significantly, presents the oath between the young men as having taken place at the tsadik's court during the High Holy Days, the occasion of a Hasid's longest absence from home); when men affiliated themselves with the Hasidic movement, the wife “bewailed the husband of her youth, who had left her like a widow, and her sons cried that they had been left as orphans.”<sup>18</sup> The *misnagdim*, Biale continues,

did not believe that the abandonment of wife and children served any holy purpose; to the contrary, they believed that the extreme asceticism was a cover for erotic abandon, just as the mystical doctrine of intercourse with the Shekhina was a mask for licentious behavior in the court of the zaddik. The author of the Anti-Hasidic *Shever Poshim* claims that when the Hasidim gather at Amdur on the fast of the night of Av, they would sleep together in the attic, use filthy language, and sing love songs

all night. This homosexual innuendo was connected to the intense male fellowship of the Hasidic court.<sup>19</sup>

An-sky's description of Sender and Nissen's relationship emphasizes their profound attachment and implies that it blossomed in their wives' absence; nevertheless, it is not "homosexual innuendo," since there is no trace of criticism in the play's presentation of this bond. On the contrary, *The Dybbuk* resists the suggestion that the homoerotic bond that propels the narrative is a deviant one; where *misnagdic* and Haskalah polemics saw Hasidic male fellowship as a threat to the fabric of Jewish family life, An-sky presents the love of Sender and Nissen as natural, true, and even fruitful. Just as he rescues the idea of arranged marriage from the very teeth of the Haskalah critique, so too does he valorize its corollary—the "intense male fellowship" of the yeshiva and Hasidic court—as contributing to Jewish continuity rather than its disruption. In the "trial" between the two friends that precedes the exorcism ritual, Nissen's ghost, speaking through the Rabbi, reminds his old friend of their bond, a friendship that begins in the sexually segregated yeshiva, and that maintains its force and influence through their own near-simultaneous marriages (no wives are mentioned in this phrase) and into the marriage, far in the future, of the children resulting from their own unions:

REB SHIMSHON: Sender ben Henya! The holy dead man Nissen claims that in your youth you were friends in one yeshiva and your souls were joined together in true friendship. You both were married in the same week [*Ir hot beyde in eyn vokh khasene gebat*]. After that, when you met at the rebbe's court for the High Holy Days, you pledged that if your wives should conceive, and one would bear a boy and the other a girl, you two would be joined in marriage.<sup>20</sup>

That last phrase, "vet ir zikh *miskhatn zayn*," is a relatively rare usage, which stands midway between "vet ir khasene hobn" (you would get married) and "vet ir vern mekhutoynim" (you would become in-laws—itself a vastly more profound kinship term in the traditional Ashkenaz than in modern, secular culture). The young men are described as soulmates, but the proliferation of reflexive constructions in this passage, the references to the life cycle, and the use of the physical term for an oath (*tkies-kaf*, or handshake) all work to suggest that the bond between Nissen and Sender is a physically, sexually, and biologically productive one. The concluding phrase, *miskhatn zayn*, strength-



ens the already implicit suggestion that Nissen and Sender pledge their children to each other in order to forge the most intimate, quasi-marital connection two men could attain in their society. And this connection, far from being sterile or deviant, is channeled through the sanctioned routes of Jewish marital and reproductive bonds.

An-sky was able to celebrate the homoeroticism of Ashkenazic marriage by reconfiguring Haskalah narratives that described an older generation, motivated by concerns about money and prestige, forging kinship connections through their adolescent sons and daughters (Abramovitsh's 1868 *The Fathers and the Sons* is a classic of this genre). While Sender's betrothal of Leah to a rich young man participates in the conventions of this narrative, his earlier pledge to Nissen most assuredly does not—Sender and Nissen, far from being the enemies of young love, are its champions and symbols, pledging their children to each other in the first flush of their respective marriages.<sup>21</sup> Thus the oath between Sender and Nissen to marry their children to each other is less an extreme case of the Haskalah's representation of arranged marriage than its polar opposite—the victory of young love over practical consideration. By setting this pledge among such young men and overtly sexualizing their contract, An-sky recasts the generational opposition as a suppressed parallelism, in which the fathers and children are, quite literally, kindred spirits, expressing the same impulses in only apparently dissimilar ways.

In contrast with *The Dybbuk's* valorization of the bond between the two men, the relationship between their son and daughter is described in more psychologically ambiguous terms. Where Sender and Nissen see the way to an emotional and physical union, the heterosexual bond between their two children remains unconsummated (except through the unnatural act of demonic—and transgender—possession), grotesque, sterile. We might usefully compare the passage describing the love between Sender and Nissen, deploying the grammatical and semantic markers of regeneration, with the moving lament of Leah in the play's final scene:

LEAH: Turn to me, my groom, my husband. I will carry you in my heart,  
and in the still of the night you will come to me in my dreams and  
together we will rock our unborn babies to sleep. We will sew little  
shirts for them and sing them sweet songs:

Hushabye my babies,  
Without clothes, without a bed.

Unborn children, never mind.  
Lost forever, lost in time.<sup>22</sup>

Leah's lullaby to the unborn children she is bearing suggests the consequences of suppressing the operations of love, but it also recasts the "natural" processes of heterosexual sex and of human reproduction—pregnancy, birth, and parenting—as uncanny images of death. However, it is the central image of the play, the dybbuk, that is the most striking expression of an ambivalent heterosexuality. The figure of the man-woman, penetrated by and pregnant with her dead male lover and their unborn children and speaking his words through her mouth, is both the fruition and the destruction of the bond between the two men. That is, the possessed Leah represents the ultimate consummation of the two men's pledge, joined as she is with her betrothed for all eternity. At the same time, she is the nightmarish opposite of the biological union and regeneration the two men had hoped for, pregnant only with death. In this play, then, it is the heterosexual couple that is barren, who can come together only through unnatural channels.

The dybbuk is an overdetermined figure—indeed, it is a figure *for* overdetermination and ambivalence—mediating between life and death, male and female, the transcendent and the deformed, victimization and empowerment. It should be no surprise, then, that this figure should open itself up to divergent and even paradoxical interpretations. (An-sky's play, moreover, allows for both the traditional supernatural understanding of the possession and a naturalizing psychosexual one, since directors traditionally have avoided special effects in depicting the possession and instead have Leah speak in a deepened, "masculine" version of her own voice.) How then can we understand *The Dybbuk's* unsettling perspective on heterosexual love? It is clear that Khonen's possession of Leah is meant to represent—if only from the point of view of the lovers—the ultimate romantic gesture, a union of their souls in the absence of any possibility of earthly marriage. At the same time, the dybbuk is a monstrous literalization of Genesis 2:24—"Hence a man . . . clings to his wife so that they become one flesh"—producing an incoherently gendered creature whom the community must violently expel. The dybbuk both transcends physical passion and caricatures it, reproducing the gestures of heterosexuality—penetration and union, pregnancy and birth—in a form that appears, at one and the same time, as the most spiritually exalted expression of love and as its most grossly carnal disfigurement.

Alongside the dybbuk's paradoxical unification of the spiritual and the

fleshy—and not unrelated to it—is its conflation of male and female in a single body. In the dybbuk heterosexual passion, taken to its radical extreme, produces a kind of drag, in which a man wears not women’s clothing but her very body. Heterosexuality, in this extreme form of drag, reveals its own internal contradictions: the fantasy of physical union rests on the illusion of natural, stable gender differences and hierarchies, a structure Judith Butler has called “the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence.”<sup>23</sup> When these gender differences collapse, even through romantic merging, heterosexuality is transformed into its suppressed other. It is in the wedding scene at the heart of the play, at the very moment when Khonen has entered Leah’s body and merged with her, that their passion expresses itself in a series of homosexual gestures. Thus the nuptial blessings come close to sanctifying the union of one bridegroom with another (clothed in his bride’s body); the community is saved from this circumstance by the spectacle of Leah rejecting the man who is about to become her husband by declaring—in a “man-nish” voice—her love for her “intended bride”:

LEAH (*looking wild, she speaks not in her own voice but in a masculine one*): Ah-ah! You have buried me and I have returned to my intended bride and will not leave her!<sup>24</sup>

The collapse of proper gender identities in this wedding scene, as bizarre and idiosyncratic as the circumstances leading to it may appear, nevertheless has roots in Haskalah critiques of Jewish marriage. In its negative-satirical mode (as opposed to its positive-romantic mode), the Haskalah presented traditional Jewish husbands and wives as negative images of their proper (i.e., European) counterparts, satirizing Jewish weddings in which terrified and passive young men were led to their abrasive wives and mothers-in-law like sheep to the slaughter.<sup>25</sup> Following this satirical tradition, *The Dybbuk* stages a Jewish wedding in which the wide-eyed groom whimpers “Ikh hob moyre . . . mer far alts forkht ikh zikh far ir . . . far der besule” (I’m afraid—most of all I’m terrified of her—the girl), and in which his fears turn out to be thoroughly justified.<sup>26</sup>

Nineteenth-century gender satire (Abramovitsh’s cross-dressing character in *Benjamin the Third*, for example) emerged from the gap between the traditional sexual order the Enlighteners rejected and the bourgeois European one they emulated. An-sky’s post-Haskalah drag is more profoundly ambivalent, including in its implicit critique not only the “wrong” couple,

Menashe and Leah, but also the “right” couple, Leah and Khonen—not only traditional marriage, that is, but also the union of true lovers that is the ideal of heteronormative modernity. It is Khonen, after all—more than Menashe—who becomes, in his passionate possession of the woman he loves, truly “feminized” in a way that is both captivating and revolting. And Leah speaks in an inappropriately masculine voice not only as the traditional Jewish woman but also as the avatar of a new era in heterosexual relations. The new heterosexuality, it would seem, cannot guarantee proper Jewish masculinity and femininity any more than the old sexual order could. When the rebbe asks the strange hybrid creature—Khonen/Leah—the woman’s body with the male voice—what or whom it is, he-she-it answers: “Ikh bin fun di, vos hobn gezukht naye vegn” (I am one of those who searched out new ways).<sup>27</sup> In this resonant phrase An-sky makes the fullest use of the conflation in traditional thought between the new and the forbidden, the modern and the dangerous. The dybbuk, then, is a figure drawn from the deepest recesses of Jewish folk belief, but it is also a figure for what is more dangerous and terrifying in the horizons opening before the traditional world: a New Woman, a woman who rejects one bridegroom and incorporates another, speaking with the voice and rebellious authority of the masculine other.

But it would be wrong to read the dybbuk solely as an ambivalent symbol of female empowerment; the possessed woman is a slippery figure, facing the world as romantic rebel and sexual victim both. From this second perspective, Leah is less an embodiment of the fathers who betroth their children to each other earlier, and with more passion than is customary, than of the mothers, invisible, never consulted, whose bodies are the silent tokens of exchange, the symbolic property that enables their husbands to forge their bond.<sup>28</sup> In a grotesque parody of the traditional use of women’s bodies as conduits for male kinship, Leah’s possessed body becomes the site for a meeting of two men, the occasion for their conversation beyond the limits of time and death. As Carol Clover argues is the case for the American possession movies of the 1970s and 1980s, *The Dybbuk* stages a female drama behind which lurks an unacknowledged male homoerotic crisis.<sup>29</sup> The excesses of Leah’s predicament function not only as a “cover” for her father’s suppressed trauma and as an opportunity for its resolution; the voice that issues from her body is a symptom that speaks the Jewish man’s hysterical truth.

An-sky’s dybbuk, then, is both the culmination of the Haskalah program

to heterosexualize Ashkenaz and its subversive shadow, its monster double. If heterosexual romance turns out to be, in An-sky's work, an ambivalent project, it is not because Jews are unsuited for romance, as the Haskalah critique would have it. Romance becomes grotesque in *The Dybbuk* for a reason that ultimately indicts the Enlightenment itself: because eroticism shorn of its traditional connections, ripped from its generational and communal contexts, is a stillborn child. Eroticism, for An-sky's post-Haskalah generation, is the engine that propels Jewish continuity as much as the link between individual lovers. From this perspective the dybbuk is a product neither of the past nor of the present but rather of the violently disrupted connection between them.

*The Dybbuk*, then, hinges not only on the mystical-erotic link between parents and children but even more crucially on the radical break that severs it. If the bond between Sender and Nissen ultimately destroys their children, it is not because their pledge ignores the wishes of their children but because their children are stopped from carrying it through. Sender's failure to remember his friend and their pledge—and his own young self—drives this fated love underground, only to resurface in the terrifying form of possession. Thus the exorcism of the dybbuk cannot proceed before Sender is subjected to a trial that serves as a theater (within the theater) of memory. But Sender's love for his friend has never been exactly forgotten, neither in the children who reenact it nor even by himself. In the scene in which Sender is led to remember his half-forgotten pledge, it emerges that his greedy negotiations with prospective bridegrooms were no more than a defense against the attractions of his daughter's suitor. When Nissen asks, though the mouthpiece of Reb Shimshon, why Sender had never inquired who Khonen's father was and where he was from (normal behavior for a Jewish host, even one without a marriageable daughter), Sender answers:

SENDER: I don't know . . . I don't remember . . . but I swear, I was always drawn to the boy as a son-in-law! That was why I put such difficult conditions on prospective matches that no one could ever meet them. That was how three matches fell through. But the last time the family agreed to everything.

REB SHIMSHON: Nissen ben Rivke says that deep in your heart you recognized his son and were therefore afraid to ask him about his family. You wanted someone who could give your daughter a rich and comfortable life.<sup>30</sup>

For the Haskalah romance, economics underwrites the arranged-marriage system and deafens traditional Jewish parents to the demands of erotic freedom. By contrast, An-sky takes the conventional opposition between money and love and complicates it: Sender's halting response suggests that he drove a hard bargain for his daughter not because—or not only because—he wanted a son-in-law wealthier than Khonen but precisely because he was attempting to shield himself from being drawn to the boy. In this case, at least, financial wheelings and dealings are no more than a pathetic defense against the demands of memory and love—the love of his daughter for the yeshiva boy who eats at their table, Sender's love for the friend of his youth, and his attraction to the young man who is the son of his beloved Nissen. If Sender sabotages his daughter's erotic desires, it is not because he doesn't understand them but rather because he cannot acknowledge that he shares them.

In the court scene between Nissen's spirit and Sender that is a necessary prelude to the exorcism ritual, memory is at center stage. Here, it is not the possessed woman who is on trial (she is not even present for this scene), but Sender, for whom the trial serves simultaneously as an indictment of his failure of memory and as an exposure of what has been forgotten. In the radical logic of An-sky's modernist rewriting of the Haskalah romance, the heterosexual union remains unconsummated (except through demonic possession) because the homoerotic bond has been forgotten—or repressed—and the present is stifled and corrupted by the erasure of a past that continues to shape and haunt it.

*The Dybbuk*, then, joins an archaeology of Jewish eros with an erotics of Jewish communality and continuity, creating modernist theater by thematizing and transcending the disruptions of modernity. For a play that explores the mutual pressures of the past and the present, it is appropriate that Sender and Nissen's bond should have been forgotten and remembered anew in every generation after the play's premiere. The homoeroticism An-sky sunk below the surface of his play emerged most visibly first in the 1937 film version of *The Dybbuk*, directed by Michał Waszyński, which highlights and visualizes the relationship between Sender and Nissen in an added prologue (one that is very nearly the opposite of the heterosexualizing prologue An-sky omitted). Eve Sicular describes the prologue as a "rhapsodic cinematic presentation of same-sex bonding," one of the few in Yiddish film that evidences "little trace of homophobia."<sup>31</sup> While the play describes Khonen singing the Song of Songs to Leah, Waszyński also shows Sender singing

it to Nissen—the lines he sings are those spoken by Shulamite, the poem's female voice—cutting away to reaction shots of Nissen's rapturous face. And Alisa Solomon credits Tony Kushner's 1995 staging of the work for having

levitated [the homoeroticism] to the surface, and provided a feminist perspective for balance. . . . Kushner interpolates a feminist point of view by letting the first act's layabout scholars debate women's exclusion from the synagogue floor as part of their Talmudic banter, and by having the trembling groom arranged for the lovelorn Leah declare how pleased he is to thank God, in daily morning prayers, that he was not born a woman. Thus the sin of Leah's father that provokes the Dybbuk's possession of her . . . extends to include a critique of treating women as chattel.<sup>32</sup>

*The Dybbuk*, then, has had a long and strange afterlife, in which the repressed has returned over and over again. In these belated incarnations the play not only brings to life the homoeroticism of Jewish tradition (as An-sky saw it), it also serves to ground modern Jewish homoeroticism in a rich, if ambivalently remembered, tradition. In placing memory at the center stage and at the heart of our passions, An-sky also suggests that our search for roots—for forgotten fathers—is another form of our search for true love, in all the varieties that love has been imagined.

*The Dybbuk* is a profoundly pessimistic work, and no wonder—the play was written in the shadow of the wartime devastation of Galicia, scene of An-sky's expeditions, and completed amid the political chaos of the postwar years. Nevertheless, it emerges from the hopeful insight that the physical existence of the Jewish people is dependent on the knowledge of who one's daughter's suitor is, on where the guest at one's table has come from—in other words, on the power of narrative as a mode of cultural continuity. Eros, in this vision, transcends individual choice; it is the force that impels fathers to seek a foothold in the unknown terrain of the future and moves their children to discover themselves in the dark mirror of the Jewish past.

## Notes

This essay is reprinted with light edits with permission from *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 228–45.

1. Sholem Aleichem [S. Rabinovitsh], *Ale verk fun Sholem Aleichem*, vol. 11, *Zumer-leben* (New York: Morgn-frayheyt, 1918), 123. The full text of Abramovitsh's letter is included in Y. D. Berkovitsh, ed., *Dos Sholem-Aleykhem-bukh* (New York: YKUF, 1926), 191. Ken Frieden, in his *Classic Yiddish Fiction: Abramovitsh, Sholem Aleichem, and Peretz* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 136–37, discusses the significance of Sholem Aleichem's addition of the words "in the life of our people" where Abramovitsh had written "among our people." Sholem Aleichem, according to Frieden, thus turned Abramovitsh's rejection of the possibility of Yiddish romantic fiction into a mere warning that such literary attempts at dealing with romance in Jewish life must be differently conceptualized.

2. S. Y. Abramovitsh, *Bayamin bahem*, in *Kol kitve Mendele Mokher Sforim* (Tel Aviv: Hotsaat Dvir, 1958), 259. It's worth noting how Abramovitsh juxtaposes, in this catalog, combat between men with courtship of women, an acknowledgment of the European linking of male agnostics and the wooing (or conquering) of women as complementary activities.

3. David Biale summarizes the Haskalah sense that "traditional Jewish adolescence, and particularly premature marriage, created sexual dysfunction." Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 150.

4. Biale suggests that the conventions dictated by the rabbinic elite were, in fact, considerably looser in other segments of Ashkenazic culture. Biale describes various attempts similar to that of Sholem Aleichem in *Stempenyu* to harness traditional folklore to modern sexual ideologies; he examines this impulse in writers like Micha Yosef Berdichevsky and S. Y. An-sky, the subject of this chapter: "*The Dybbuk* takes the traditional Haskalah form of a conflict between romantic love and the traditional *shidduch*, but An-sky creates an alliance between popular Jewish culture and modern values against a repressive establishment." Biale, 169 (quoted), and see 82–84, 169–70.

5. Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 298–99n41. Miron discusses this critique as ubiquitous in Abramovitsh's work. In Abramovitsh's 1869 *Fishke der krumer* (Fishke the Lame), his satire of pecuniary matchmaking practices, a homosexual joke is again used to make the point, when a matchmaker's farcical attempts to cement a marriage result in the matchmaking of two boys.

6. The differences and tensions between non-Jewish modes of masculinity and the alternative modes that characterized Jewish gender orders are brilliantly explored in Daniel Boyarin's *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). See also my own reading of Abramovitsh's constructions of Jewish men as feminized



in relation to non-Jewish men and to Jewish women: Naomi Seidman, “Theorizing Jewish Patriarchy *in extremis*,” in *Judaism since Gender*, ed. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt (London: Routledge, 1997), 40–48.

7. The term *possession* only poorly captures the specificity of the Jewish concept of the dybbuk, which has its roots in the Lurianic doctrine of reincarnation and sin. See Gedalyah Nigal, *Sipurey dibuk be’sifrut Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1994), 11–60.

8. The traditional context of the love story is emphasized by An-sky’s foregrounding of characters who would normally be relegated to the background—the *batlonim* (a contemporary translation might be “slackers”) who spend all their time in the synagogue/study hall—while having the young lovers who are the protagonists exchange barely a word. The effort is to make the community a kind of collective protagonist and the lovers a foil for rendering the conflicts of this collective dramatically visible.

9. S. An-sky, *Der dibuk: dramatishe legende in fir aktn*, in *Di yidishe drame fun 20stn yorhundert* (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1977), 2:40. All translations are my own.

10. For a description of the circumstances under which *The Dybbuk* was written and the complicated fortunes of An-sky’s manuscript in various languages and versions, see Shmuel Werses, “S. Ansky’s ‘Tsvishn Tsvey Velt’ (Der Dybbuk): A Textual History,” in *Studies in Yiddish Literature and Folklore*, ed. Chone Shmeruk (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1986), 99–185.

11. The Yiddish literary critic Shmuel Niger called *The Dybbuk* an “anthology of folklore.” Niger is quoted in Avrom Morevsky’s eyewitness account of one of An-sky’s literary soirees, in which he read drafts of his work to small groups of Jewish writers; see Morevsky, “Di ershte oprufn nokh dem vi Sh. An-sky leyent dem ‘Dibuk’” in *Sh. Ansky: Oysgeklibene shriftn*, ed. Shmuel Rollansky (Buenos Aires: Yoysef Lifshits-Fond fun der Literatur-Gezelshaft baym YIVO, 1964), 269. Morevsky describes an evening with the playwright in Vilna sometime during February or March 1919, when An-sky was close to a final draft of his work. Even An-sky’s Hebrew translator, the poet Hayim Nahman Bialik, who was the playwright’s good friend and an active supporter of his ethnographic research, candidly admitted to An-sky that he considered *The Dybbuk* something less than a masterpiece: “I have the impression that, as a collector of folklore, you combed through all the garbage dumps. You picked out your little fragments of folklore and pieced together the remnants of all sorts of clothing into patches, and took those patches and sewed them together into a sort of crazy quilt.” Bialik, *Dvarim she-be’al peh* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1935), 1:112–13, cited in Shmuel Werses, “The Textual Evolution of Ansky’s *Between Two Worlds* (*The Dybbuk*),” *Hasifrut* 3–4 (1986): 156.

12. David G. Roskies, introduction to *The Dybbuk and Other Writings by S. An-*

sky, ed. David G. Roskies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xxvii. Roskies may be relying here on Nigal's research, which details and categorizes dozens of recorded cases of possession. I would only qualify Roskies' remarks by adding that possession has an undeniable sexual dimension, even if it generally lacks a romantic one. Thus, possessing spirits are overwhelmingly male, while possessed bodies tend to be female. Even the exceptions are telling: Nigal describes a male dybbuk who possesses a man because he is angry that his wife remarried three days after his death and "since then, he no longer desired women!" Nigal, *Sipurey dibuk*, 36.

13. It is possible to read this failed elopement and homecoming as an analogue to An-sky's own return to his Jewish "roots" after a long sojourn among the Russian folk.

14. Quoted in Werses, "The Textual Evolution," 189–90. Werses thanks the Yiddish scholar Avram Novershtern for drawing his attention to this prologue, which was originally published in the Zionist Yiddish journal *Earth and Freedom* (1918).

15. An-sky, *Der dibuk*, 60.

16. Quoted in J. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 1991), 56.

17. The problem of finding an adequate vocabulary for the relationship described in the play is a complex one. Are Sender and Nissen "homosexual"? If we mean by that "did they have sex?" then the question, of course, cannot be answered (though no one would think to question the "heterosexuality" of Leah and Khonen, however little the play tells us of their physical contact). The term *homosocial* is only marginally more accurate, since it fails to convey the degree to which Sender and Nissen desire a bond based on kinship and biology—a bond perhaps more crucial to traditional Ashkenaz than that generated by a sexual act. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses the phrase *homosocial desire* rather than *homosociality* to express her sense that the homosexual and homosocial must be brought into relation with each other: "To draw the 'homosocial' back into the orbit of 'desire,' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum that, for men in our society, is radically disrupted." Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1–2. Luce Irigaray's term of patriarchies in which the illusion of heterosexual romance covers up the strictly masculine nature of marital exchanges, *hom(m)o-sexual*, captures something of the traditional Jewish "exchange of women," but it doesn't account for a sexual order that uses heterosexuality not as an "alibi for the smooth workings of man's relation to himself" but as a conduit—barely mentioned, taken for granted—for the eroticized celebration of this relation. Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 171. Sedgwick makes a point arguing that homophobia is a frequent—destructive—aspect of patriarchy,

but not a *necessary* one, since there have been societies in which male dominance and an openness to at least some varieties of homosexual expression have coexisted. Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 3–4.

18. David of Makov, *Shever Poshim: Zot Torat ha-Kanaot*, 74a, quoted in Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 147.

19. Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 146.

20. An-sky, *Der dibek*, 51.

21. Given the centrality of gender to our own thinking, it's worth stressing here that the Haskalah critique of arranged marriage had viewed not women but young people, "particularly young boys," as the principal victims of the practice. Haskalah autobiography is filled with rage against the premature subjection of adolescent boys to the sexual demands and social constraints of marriage; their wives, who were at least as young, drew less attention, since women rarely contributed to the genre. For a discussion of marriage, adolescence, and gender in Hebrew Haskalah autobiography, see Alan Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 181–84. Because a feminist critique was less crucial to Haskalah reformism, An-sky was able to celebrate the custom of arranged marriage without addressing its erasure of female subjectivity. *The Dybbuk* certainly takes up the issue of gender, but it does so explicitly only when it turns from the fathers to their children, and from the homoerotic to the heteroerotic; it is in this setting that the naturalness of heterosexuality and the gender roles that underwrite it are thrown into anxious question. Ira Koningsberg, in "The Only 'I' in the World: Religion, Psychoanalysis, and *The Dybbuk*," *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (1997): 32–35, has a very different view of the absence of women than my own, psychoanalyzing the "odd parental situations of the lovers' childhoods" and the "missing mothers" as part of both the protagonists' psychopathologies and the larger absence of the feminine in the Jewish religion. Thus, where I view An-sky's playwriting as complicitous in effacing women's roles in traditional Judaism, Koningsberg sees the work as thematizing and working through this absence. I want to thank J. Hoberman for this reference.

22. An-sky, *Der dibek*, 59.

23. "As much as drag works to create a unified picture of 'woman' (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the initiative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency.*" Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 137 (original emphasis).

24. An-sky, *Der dibek*, 37.

25. For a discussion of the Jewish Enlightenment critique of traditional women's economic and social power and its attempts at the embourgeoisement and domesti-

fiction of Jewish women, see Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct*, 333–34. For an analysis of the ways in which resentment of women and arranged marriage could coincide, see Paula E. Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representations of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 60–62. As Hyman writes: “Because of the phenomenon of early marriage for the intellectually precocious male, women (both wives and mothers-in-law) figured in their stories as an obstacle to self-realization and modernization. For young men raised in the traditional Jewish community and yearning to break free, women represented the burden of tradition and the familial obligations it imposed upon young boys before they had the opportunity to realize their dreams of intellectual growth” (61).

26. An-sky, *Der dibek*, 36. The 1937 film version underscores this dimension of the play by having the groom begin to recite the marriage oath in a high, wavering voice, much higher even than Leah’s “normal” voice.

27. An-sky, 44.

28. Claude Levi-Strauss, in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 115, describes the social organization of tribal society as dependent on the “exchange of women”: “The total relationship of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between and man and woman, but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners. . . . This remains true even when the girl’s feelings are taken into consideration, as, moreover, is usually the case. In acquiescing to the proposed union, she precipitates or allows the exchange to take place, she cannot alter its nature.”

29. In this regard, *The Dybbuk* is a precursor to the occult-possession films Carol Clover analyzes, in which the exorcism of the possessed female protagonist—monstrously open, hideously pregnant, physically colonized—enables the emotional catharsis of a male protagonist in the grip of homosexual panic. “On the face of it,” Clover writes, “the occult film is the most ‘female’ of genres, telling as it regularly does tales of women or girls in the grip of the supernatural. But behind the female ‘cover’ is always the story of a man in crisis.” Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 65.

30. An-sky, *Der dibek*, 52–53.

31. Eve Sicular, “A *yngl mit a yngl hot epes a tam*: The Celluloid Closet of Yiddish Film,” *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 16, no. 1 (1994): 44. Sicular states, based on personal communication with J. Hoberman (a reminder of the difficulty of doing homosexual history in a homophobic context), that Waszyński was reputed to be gay. Personal communication with J. Hoberman.

32. Alisa Solomon, *Re-Dressing the Canon: Essays on Theater and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997), 121.

# “Mourning and Entertainment”

## The Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk* according to Its Actors and Critics

Translated, Edited, and Annotated by Debra Caplan

*On December 9, 1920, the Vilna Troupe—a renegade Yiddish theater company upending the norms of Jewish theater across Europe—opened its world premiere production of The Dybbuk in Warsaw. The Vilna Troupe’s groundbreaking Dybbuk (with two nearly identical productions by two distinct branches of the company touring simultaneously) propelled the company to international acclaim and secured its reputation as an avant-garde theater of significance. In the first year of performances alone, the Vilna Troupe performed The Dybbuk more than 390 times to a cumulative audience of over 200,000 theatergoers.<sup>1</sup>*

*The Vilna Troupe’s Dybbuk marked the moment when Yiddish theater began to play a significant role in the modern theater at large. As Vilna Troupe actor Jacob Waislitz would later write, it was through The Dybbuk that Yiddish theater earned its “citizenship rights among the theaters of the world.”<sup>2</sup> As the first theater company to ever stage this play, the Vilna Troupe inspired other Jewish theater companies, including Habima and the Yiddish Art Theatre, to stage influential Dybbuks of their own. The Dybbuk remained a key part of the Vilna Troupe’s repertoire until the very last Vilna Troupe production—a 1936 New York City Dybbuk, directed, like the original, by Dovid Herman.*

*The documents below provide insight into how the Vilna Troupe developed its Dybbuk, as well as how the production was received by audience members and critics. Most of the following documents appear here in English for the first time.*

**M. KIPNIS, "A MEETING WITH THE DYBBUK"**

Haynt, December 14, 1920

*This article was published in the Warsaw daily newspaper Haynt (Today) just five days after The Dybbuk began performances. In this tongue-in-cheek piece, journalist Menachem Kipnis (1878–1942) explores the popularity of The Dybbuk and audiences' thoughts about its meaning during the world premiere production. Kipnis suggests that the character of the dybbuk signified not just the individual possession in the plot, but also a larger conversation about tradition, control, norms, and Jewish life in contemporary eastern Europe.*

Out of nowhere, my doorbell rang. I opened the door, and, to my great shock, a crazy creature slipped in—tall, pale, thin, with terrifying eyes. He was barely able to stand up on his own two feet.

"Who are you? What can I do for you?" I asked.

"You don't recognize me?" he replied with a strange, coarse voice. "Just a few days ago you saw me and expressed such interest, and now you don't even remember me? I am, of course, the dybbuk that the Miropoler Rebbe drove out from the maiden, Leah, daughter of Hannah, at the Elysium Theater."

"The dybbuk? Please, have a seat. Such a guest, all the way from the World to Come,<sup>3</sup> how's it going with—"

"I came to you," he interrupted, "to ask for your help, because you know the Vilna Troupe and you're also a master journalist. What do they want with me? I once had a comfortable place to rest, but they drove me out and created a tragedy with this Miropoler Rebbe and the black candles and shofar blasts and all of this expunging me from the body of the maiden. Why? And to what end?"

"Excuse me, Mr. Dybbuk," I replied. "But we can't simply allow a dybbuk to possess an innocent, kosher Jewish daughter."

"Is that so? You can't allow it?" the dybbuk stared at me with his dead eyes and cried, "Why are you blaming me? Don't you have dybbuks in your institutions and organizations? Nobody wags a finger or lays a hand on *them*, but when it comes to me, they dance around, cause a giant commotion, and call the whole world to come and stare at such an evil marvel."

"Are there other dybbuks besides you?" I wondered.

“Who hasn’t found a dybbuk? Everywhere I go, I encounter them. Just take a look at your Joint Distribution, how many dybbuks and mini-dybbuks do they have?<sup>4</sup> They’ve done far worse things than me, and nobody calls in the Miropoler Rebbe or blows shofars at them. What about *Hayom*, do you think they don’t have any dybbuks?<sup>5</sup> Do you think I’m the only dybbuk in the world? Besides, is everything really as it should be in the Jewish community? You don’t ever catch a whiff of a dybbuk here or there? Among your community leaders and your great men, no dybbuks stand out? You can find dybbuks everywhere . . . why, then, does all of God’s anger fall on me?”

And the dybbuk began to sob and whimper pitifully, tugging at my heart.

“You should at least have had a little more time to leave,” I began to advise, had he only allowed me to. He interrupted again, bitter tears flowing down his cheeks, “I tried, but nobody would help me. I found myself cast out into your world, a world worse than Sodom, out in the terrible cold. The first night after they drove me out of the maiden, I slept in prison because I walked out of the theater in the middle of the night and had nowhere else to go. For days, I searched everywhere for a resting place, and so it went, on and on without an end. There was nothing. How do you live like that? By us in the World to Come, you can keep yourself together thanks to Kotik’s Candy Shop on Nalweki. Where can you find something like that here? Nowhere. And the Lunch Bar is also closed. I wandered around until I found the literary organization on Tłomackie Street.<sup>6</sup> Well, don’t you think a tiny dybbuk is maybe hiding out there? For a cup of tea with honey at the buffet, they had the nerve to take twelve marks from me. It was horrifying.

“What do they all have against me and only me? But I will not be silenced, I will not denounce myself and allow them to drive all the dybbuks out of Warsaw. Without protection, there is no prestige. A dybbuk is a dybbuk. The institutional dybbuks should all be driven away, the dybbuks among the elites, who think only of the communal good. Drive out the privileged dybbuks first—and then I will leave the maiden Leah, daughter of Hannah, in the Elysium Theater of my own accord.

“They can drive me out all night and I will return to her every day. *I will not leave the maiden*, no and no! And if they try to force me, I will possess you all. If you try to stop me, if you don’t accept me, I will possess you all.”

“Mr. Dybbuk, Mr. Dybbuk!” I tried to calm him down, frightened out of my wits, but he glared at me with his cold eyes, and let out a cry in a thick, insane voice—the voice of an animal.

And what can I tell you? It felt like something quivered within me, some-

thing foreign, something strange. I said *kinehora* [no evil eye], but it didn't help. I beg you . . . run to the Miropoler Rebbe and ask for help. I've been possessed by a dybbuk.<sup>7</sup>

**Y. A-KI, "STRONGER THAN DEATH:  
THE PRODUCTION OF AN-SKY'S *THE DYBBUK*  
BY THE VILNA TROUPE"**

Excerpts, December 1920

*These excerpts are from an early review of the Vilna Troupe's world premiere Dybbuk production. In this review, the pseudonymous author describes the mood and directorial style in detail and discusses how director Dovid Herman adapted the play to fit his artistic goals. Interestingly, unlike most other critics of the period, this author views *The Dybbuk* as a fundamentally realistic play onto which Herman superimposed a nonrealistic style.*

Last night, a miracle happened: our old, well-known S. An-sky, with his wide eyes and tender voice, appeared before us and winked good naturedly, as if to say: "Don't be sad, I'm not dead."

Yes, *The Dybbuk* was the artistic salve that created such a miracle. The magic of art brought An-sky back to life and reacquainted us with him for hours.

The play has dozens of symbolic secrets—secrets about characters who wink at us, reveal themselves, and say more with their silence than with their speech. "A dramatic legend," the author called it. But what's within is more legendary than dramatic, more spiritual than mundane. The trouble is that An-sky wrote the play in a sharply realistic format. If the director had directed it as such, it would have had too many clichéd characters, which would have destroyed the mystical spirit that weaves throughout the whole play. Mr. Dovid Herman demonstrated his artistic mastery when he directed *The Dybbuk* mysteriously, casting aside the superfluous realism of the author and placing secretive winks throughout the play, hinting at more.

First, the director inserted a new symbolic prologue into the play. As soon as the first curtain opened, we saw a second *tallis* [prayer shawl] curtain before us. The two wandering souls of Leah and Khonen, drawn toward



each other, entered, accompanied by the Messenger. This immediately put us into a symbolic-mystical mood and exposed us to the proper perspective on the play. The entire first act was directed in this same tone. The singing, the dialogue between the *batlonim*, the mystical dance, the Messenger, all of the visual elements, the music, the rhythm—everything was thoroughly covered with a veil of mysteriousness, everything was freed of its false realistic covering.<sup>8</sup> That's why Herman took out the scene with the Jewish woman and her children who fall on the holy ark and instead added the symbolic character of Sarah, daughter of Toyvim, who comes to synagogue to beg for mercy for a young, kosher soul. This scene is related to everything else in the play. We feel the danger that the “kosher soul” is in when the Messenger stands up and grants her mercy.

In general, the director clearly intended the Messenger to be an important symbolic figure. In the final act, he even speaks during the trial in place of the dead soul—a detail that does not appear in the author's original version at all.

However, in the second and especially the third act, this symbolic frame broke down entirely and the play suddenly switched to a realistic style—a bit too real. It seems that the final three acts (the director turned the last two acts into one) were too difficult to stage non-realistically.

The actors performed with great veneration. Mr. Stein's portrayal of the mystical yeshiva boy soared, and he played the role with fine subtlety. Ms. Valter's acting was also outstanding, particularly during the dance of death (which was also added to An-sky's play by the director).

Director Dovid Herman's work on this play represents a true upheaval in Jewish theater art. If you take into account the transition that the Vilna Troupe had to make, going from *The Village Lad* to *The Dybbuk*, you can conceptualize how difficult his job was.<sup>9</sup>

The performance of An-sky's *Dybbuk* has tremendous value for the Yiddish theater. Dovid Herman deserves our warm and heartfelt congratulations.<sup>10</sup>

### **AVROM MOREVSKY, “SPECTACLE IN HONOR OF THE END OF THE MOURNING PERIOD”**

*This essay appeared in a commemorative Vilna Troupe Dybbuk souvenir program from the company's world premiere production in Warsaw. This booklet contains several lengthy essays in addition to the customary cast*

list, playwright biography, and list of scenes. The souvenir program was produced in early 1921, just as the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk* was starting to attract international acclaim.

In this essay, the actor Avrom Morevsky, who played the *Miropoler Rebbe* in the Vilna Troupe's production, reflects on the meaning of the play as he understands it. Morevsky calls on theatergoers to "piously remember the holy spirit of Shloyme Zalmen, son of Aharon ha-Cohen An-sky," and concludes by invoking the opening lines of the Mourner's Kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer for the dead, thus suggesting that the entire production could be understood as a memorial prayer in the playwright's honor.

Morevsky asks readers to join the Vilna Troupe in a blessing for An-sky and for the future of the Yiddish stage as they watch *The Dybbuk*. The prayer suggested by Morevsky is a modified version of the Rabbi's Kaddish (Kaddish D'Rabbanan), the prayer traditionally recited after a public reading of the Talmud or other rabbinical writings. In this translation, lines from the original prayer appear in quotation marks, interspersed with Morevsky's additions. Morevsky employs a familiar linguistic device that draws an implicit connection between Yiddish theater and classical Jewish modes of textual exegesis. The echoing of each Aramaic line (in quotes) with a Yiddish "equivalent" invokes *taytsh*, a method of studying Jewish religious texts in which students would first read aloud a line of the Talmud, then repeat an interpretive translation of that same line in Yiddish vernacular. Here Morevsky's *taytsh* translation is not simply between high Hebrew and vernacular Yiddish but also between ancient liturgy and modern Yiddish theater. The implication is that Yiddish theater is the contemporary equivalent of ancient liturgy and that *The Dybbuk* could serve the same function as the Kaddish: memorializing the departed by magnifying the divine presence.

I.

Two worlds, two worlds—

Sky and dawn,

Spirit and body,

Truth and fantasy,

Form and content—

The contradictions battle against each other, and this shapes the  
process that we call

"life."

When the battle ends, when one world has annihilated the other and  
 rules in eternal victory  
 over the contradictions—then there is eternal peace, but no  
 life . . .

Life is the threshold between two worlds  
 Life is the fusion of contradictions  
 Life is the point where both worlds have intersected one another and  
 neither will yield a sliver of  
 its existence to the other . . .

Theater is life.  
 Thoroughly life,  
 Just life!

2.

Form is the expression of content,  
 Forms change, and that which is moldy or putrid falls away . . .  
 Content remains. Invisible and suppressed, it explodes and destroys the  
 old forms.

If the forms remain and reach the level of eternal content, they become  
 immortalized along  
 with it—

Form itself becomes content.  
 Theater is the content of form.  
 Its forms have changed with every societal shift—  
 But its essence remains and will not change . . .  
 Theater was and is the expression of generations of spiritual  
 and physical yearnings—  
 It is the most complex and richest form of living content:  
 Theater is the form that content aspires to.

3.

Our era is a time of reevaluation . . .  
 Thousand-year-old foundations are collapsing, and we lay the corner-  
 stones for new  
 temples.  
 In our moment, we are awash in storms and tempests, the rotting forms  
 damaging and ruining the  
 value of eternal content . . .

We stand on the threshold between two worlds, as the falling columns  
crumble and crack.

Our bodies grow weary and our souls tremble with a deep longing for  
that which is

disappearing while pining for that which is yet to come—

We are a generation split in two, a tormented generation, a bewildered  
generation.

And blessings mingle together with curses on our lips.

Lamentations are bundled together in our hearts with cries of cheerful  
greeting.

We wander and we never find where the beginning is, or the end.

We see new horizons. Those whose eyes are not hidden by the old  
world can see the new forms

of eternal content, which are currently absent.

4.

Theater was once a place of prayer and ecstasy, of exaltation, of  
spirituality.

Our spiritually rich elders used to go to the theater to praise God—  
during the holiest days of the  
year . . .

But theater became a site of vulgar recreation, of overindulgent  
physicality, of spiritually bereft  
amusement that played to the lowliest desires—

This is what has become of the theater under its current sovereigns—  
the gluttons, the  
exploiters . . .

But their world is disintegrating!

A new world is on the way, it is coming, it is almost here—

A world of builders and creators,

A world where entertainment is a form of spiritual service to the  
divine—because work requires  
rest.

Rest cannot come after work, for work plunders rest.

Theater harks back to those forms which allocated content to its proper  
place.

5.

Let us hold our breath,  
 A page of history turns before our eyes,  
 An-sky's *Between Two Worlds*<sup>11</sup> marks the end of the mourning  
 period—  
 This production of bereavement in Yiddish theater is a pivotal moment  
 in the history of modern  
 Yiddish culture.  
 Is it truly, or is that only a fantasy?  
 We cannot answer.  
 We who are present, we the participants—we all,  
 Every one of us individually—are too insignificant, too fallible, too  
 confused from our day-to-  
 day lives  
 And we do not know what world we are part of . . .  
 But let us quietly bow our heads before the bearers of eternal content  
 and between the worlds of  
 crumbling forms . . .  
 Let us piously remember the spirit of Shloyme Zalmen, son of Aharon  
 ha-Cohen An-sky—  
 In life, he was part of the great struggle for justice and truth,  
 In eternal rest, his name is on the pages of history—  
*Yisgadal*—may his name be celebrated!

6.

Mourning and entertainment??  
 “To all those who engage in the study of Torah”  
 All who are engaged in metaphysical pursuits, in spirituality of every  
 kind,—  
 “In this holy place or in any other place”  
 Offer in mourning their heartfelt blessing;  
 “Grace, kindness, compassion, and long life”  
 The Yiddish theater brings new life to An-sky's work . . .  
 Trembling before the task, bent beneath the yoke of moldy archaic  
 forms, Jewish actors move  
 toward a new era in their ancient Temple of beautiful art.  
 All around us is the theater's clamor—“only life, through and through”

In our hearts is An-sky's unforgettable image,  
 "May there be grace, kindness, and compassion."<sup>12</sup>

**JOSEPH RUMSHINSKY, "THE VILNA  
 TROUPE'S DYBBUK"**

from *The Sounds of My Life*, 1944

*Joseph Rumshinsky (1881–1956) was one of the most influential composers in American Yiddish theater and a fixture of the Second Avenue scene. He wrote and composed for dozens of popular musical shows. In 1921, Rumshinsky traveled to Warsaw and attended a performance of the Vilna Troupe's Dybbuk. In this essay, he reflects on what he remembers about the production and the surprising impact it had on him and his friend, the American Yiddish theater manager Isidore Edelstein.*

For the first time in my life, I went to the Yiddish theater and knew none of the actors. I didn't even know their names. Even though it's been a quarter century since I saw that performance of *The Dybbuk*, something reminded me of it yesterday and it crept into my thoughts. Every scene, every movement, every sound from the (at the time) unknown actors still rings in my ears, and I can still imagine the entire show clearly.

I never read the program before the performance, like most theatergoers do. When the show begins, usually part of the audience spends all their attention studying the program. I don't read my programs until I get home. Then I can go over the whole performance in my mind and experience it again, almost like a second show. I stuck to my usual habit this time, although I didn't know any of the actors.

The Elysium Theater, where *The Dybbuk* played, was long and narrow with bare benches; it gave off the impression of a Russian barracks. I sat on one of the hard benches. It grew pitch black. I saw an old *tallis*, soaked in tears. In the thick darkness, I saw a tall Hasidic young man, with a religious book and a candle. He looked far into the distance, toward nothingness. When the second curtain rose on the synagogue, I heard wrenching voices singing a mysterious wordless melody; a song that moaned with religious ecstasy and drew us nearer to the generations that came before. They sang slowly, very slowly, and rocked back and forth with nervous intensity.

This lasted for a considerably long time, until someone uttered the first word. It was almost like an overture, but without an orchestra. And I must add that no orchestra or composer in the world could have brought such a mystical Hasidic atmosphere the way these Jews did with their movements and broken sounds. I'm not talking about acting because I don't consider them actors, they were more than mere actors. I did not feel like I was sitting in a theater. I was experiencing something that I had never seen nor heard before.

I trembled throughout the performance. My mind shed all of its day-to-day concerns. I forgot about everything and everyone. And remarkably, I didn't think about Yiddish theater or authentic Jewish characters, not even for a moment. This was something mystical of the highest kind, a super-human mysticism. The sounds I heard were not holy nor fantastical nor realistic—they were ruptured, both said and unsaid at the same time. Nothing was too clear or too obvious. Even the wedding celebration was full of brokenness.

I'll never forget the dance, the Dance of Death. It was far from ballet . . . just one person—it wasn't even clear if it was a man or a woman—sweeping, writhing, spinning in a mad, irregular rhythm. When the dancer disappeared, I found myself clinging to Isidore Edelstein, who was sitting next to me.<sup>13</sup> That's how strongly I was trembling—a nervous, full-bodied, spiritual trembling—throughout the entire performance. Nothing could distract me or bring my thoughts elsewhere, not even for a second. I was physically and spiritually in an uncertain world, just like the dybbuk.

When the performance ended—and it annoyed me that it had ended so quickly—I started wondering what impression the play had made on Isidore Edelstein, an American-born theater manager.<sup>14</sup> Though a credentialed lawyer, he was a fan of Lateiner's plays—*Khinke Pinke*, *The Jewish Spark*, etc.—and American musical theater shows.<sup>15</sup>

I was shocked when I saw that Edelstein was even more unsettled than me after watching the matinee. He could hardly speak. When I said that I was going to grab some food and come back for the evening performance to see it again, he replied that he was thinking of doing the same.

After the first performance, I met with the whole Vilna Troupe. I had already known that the actor who played Khonen, the Hasidic Romeo, was Alexander Stein and that he was a former Russian actor. The actor who played Leah, the Hasidic Juliette, was Miriam Orleska, and although she

was very young, she had recently completed Polish drama school. The actor who played the nervous Tsadik so brilliantly was Kovalsky (he is sadly no longer among the living). And the Messenger, the leitmotif of the play, who is onstage even when he is not because his spirit is always there, setting the tone for the play, the conductor of the symphonic performance—was played by Noah Nachbush, who is a lively young man in real life. Leyb Kadison was the person responsible for the design side of the production and also played the role of the in-law spectacularly.

I asked who had danced the Dance of Death. They revealed that her name was Paula Valter and she was dashing out to eat with her husband, Kovalsky. A graceful, elegantly dressed woman with a beautiful, natural smile. I asked her, "How did you seem so colossal onstage? You were like a whole ballet company all by yourself!"

Meeting the company made the show even more interesting, and I enjoyed the second performance that evening even more than the first. I no longer wondered why I had heard so many people talk about the brilliant production of *The Dybbuk* ever since I left America.<sup>16</sup>

**LETTER FROM JOSEPH BULOFF  
TO DR. MIKHL WEICHERT**

Vienna, 1923

*Joseph Buloff (1899–1985) joined the Vilna Troupe as a teenager and was an actor in the company for decades. Buloff kept up an extensive correspondence with other Jewish theater artists across the globe as he traveled. He documented his correspondence in letter books (in Yiddish, and sometimes English) that preserved copies of every letter that he wrote and sent, meticulously organized by date. These letters are preserved in the Joseph Buloff collections at the Harvard Judaica Division and the New York Public Library.*

*In the following letter, Buloff describes how the Vilna Troupe's production of *The Dybbuk* was received in 1923 Vienna, including a memorable backstage visit by Max Reinhardt (1873–1943). At the time, Reinhardt was the preeminent Austrian theater and film director, known for his theatrical innovations.*



To Dr. Weichert,

Arrived in Vienna, and right there at the station the past returns—the German type of bureaucracy. But in a mild form. They stop us with a complaint—why are there 20 of us, not 21 as [Mordechai] Mazo reported? Although we are a Jewish company, we are theater people for whom there is great respect, so finally we are admitted as 21 persons.

Good for me, we present *Green Fields* and have a hit. “A beautiful fable of a play. Won’t you perform *Yankele* after *The Dybbuk*?<sup>17</sup> They say you are all rabbis and Talmudic scholars.<sup>18</sup> Isn’t that true?”

Ironically, in Poland and Lithuania, it was said that we were former professors and doctors. In Vienna, we are reputed to be rabbis and Talmudic scholars.

Of leading personalities, Richard Beer-Hofman[n], the noted playwright, was the first to interest himself in our theater.<sup>19</sup> He saw *The Dybbuk* twice and brought Max Reinhardt the second time. Although our income was not augmented by this visit, we were enthusiastic—“Reinhardt! Big news—Reinhardt!”

He sat through the entire performance and then came backstage. An imposing man—Franz Josef sideburns, an elegant cane in hand. We were speechless with awe. But his sympathy and friendliness encouraged us. He did not know what to say, and we of course could not speak, so we just stood there looking at each other. Finally, he said with a smile, “Das ist nicht ein schauspiel. Das ist ein Gottespiel.” [This is no mere play. This is a religious rite.]

That ends my report of Reinhardt’s visit.

We came to Vienna fleeing Warsaw like from a fire, because of the bad acoustics of Kaminska’s theater. Now, we are in a worse house. But here the trouble is not as great, because they don’t understand our language here anyway. So it is better that they can’t hear us, and it doesn’t bother them.

The news we get from the Warsaw and Lemberg papers of our success is that we are becoming millionaires. That pleases us. As it is said, “Let our enemies burst before they know what we carry in our pockets.” Still, from such joy you could die of hunger.

If we do see a handful of people standing at the theater, they are

not at the box office window but at the office door. The audiences we get here are mostly Polish and Ukrainian Jews on the way to Palestine. Women with kerchiefs on their heads, youths with collarless shirts, all begging for free tickets. They ask if we can play something lively.

Only *The Dybbuk* is a success. To describe the local Jews, I can only say: tell them that Father Abraham led the Jews into Egypt or tell them that the Vilna Jews formed a theater company and they will tell you, "Good, but one thing is missing: stage settings." And that would cost two million.

We do not hold Vienna, but Vienna holds us. We know no alternative.

We sit and wait. We repeat the *Dorfsyung* (*The Village Lad*), eat a cheap lunch and read the foreign Jewish papers. They tell us of the disguised second Kuni Leml that is coining gold in London.<sup>20</sup> Actually, they probably are envious of us, the first, real Kuni Leml (*Azro's second Vilna Troupe* is in London, reportedly doing well, but probably envious of the original Vilna Troupe in Vienna.)<sup>21</sup>

Let us turn to more cheerful matters. The old Bourg theater of Vienna exists on its tradition. Remnants of the Franz Josef era still come to see its heavy stylized performances, and its forced tear-jerking acting. I went three times: it is like visiting a museum. I admired Sonenthal's portrait, listened to old Viennese legends.<sup>22</sup>

I can tell you that we feel so very small compared to the fancy great palaces of Vienna. And there are so many palaces in Vienna.

These days we are appearing in a big concert hall. There was never a Jewish word uttered there. It means we get more respect from the hundred percent Austrians than from our half-German Jews. German players come to our playhouse and admire our work. Vienna's Caruso, Leo Slezak, came to our *Dybbuk*.<sup>23</sup> Arthur Schnitzler also came to see the Vilna Troupe.<sup>24</sup>

B.<sup>25</sup>

## LUBA KADISON, INTERVIEWED BY LOUISE CLEVELAND

1980

*Luba Kadison (1906–2006) was the daughter of Leyb and Khane Kadison, two of the founders of the Vilna Troupe. Her father was a leader of the company as well as a frequent director and set designer. Luba grew up performing in Vilna Troupe productions, including the world premiere 1920 production of The Dybbuk. In this excerpt, Luba explains how meeting Dovid Herman while performing in The Dybbuk led her to pursue professional acting school training. Her involvement in The Dybbuk also inspired her teachers—including the Polish actress and director Stanisława Wysocka (1877–1941), who was not Jewish—to attend performances. Luba grew up to become a famous Yiddish actress in her own right, alongside her husband, fellow Vilna Troupe performer Joseph Buloff.*

I was performing in *The Dybbuk*. I used to play one of the little girls. There are two girls that run into the wedding, and I played one of them. And we needed . . .—my father directed all the plays, the Russian translations, the Yiddish plays. But for *The Dybbuk*—we needed somebody who knew more about Hasidic mystic life. And there was Herman, Dovid Herman, in Warsaw, and he, together with my father really, directed the play. And he started to pay attention to me. One day—and he spoke Polish, the Polish Jews loved to speak Polish somehow. So he said, “you know something,” he says, “you have talent and you should really develop it.” So I says, “Well, what can I do? I come out on the stage and I say *a vaysinker, a shvartsinker* . . . and I feel on the stage as I would feel in my mother’s kitchen, I feel so free.” So he says, “No, but there’s more to it. You should join a dramatic school.” I says, “Yes, I would love to, but my Polish is not good enough.” “Never mind,” he says, “Your pronunciation is fine, learn two poems in Polish, and I’ll tell you where to go and do it.” And I listened to him.

Now I went to—it was one of the best schools in Warsaw, managed by the greatest two actresses, Stanisława Wysocka and Irena Solska. . . . Wysocka was a classic actress, she played Greek tragedy and was a fantastic actress. So I came there and the secretary met me and she says, “Now, did you prepare something?” So I say, “Yes, I prepared a poem, and I can recite it for you. But look,” I say—and this is what they call *chutzpah*, and *chutz-*

pah, I think, even our president uses that word. . . . So I said, "I came to you because we don't have a Yiddish dramatic school. And I want to grow in my profession. So I will read for you this poem in Polish, but I'm playing Yiddish theater. My background is Yiddish theater, which I love." I mean, I was a kid of fifteen, fourteen, something like that.

Well, they accepted me, to make it short. I read it, and it was okay, and I started to take lessons, and we had a real beautiful training, you know, it was dancing, and it was movement, and it was classics, and it was Sophocles—imagine that, they gave me *Electra* to study. That was the second year, not the first. And we had Stanisława Wysocka, who knew already, because all of Warsaw had heard of the Vilna Troupe, and they had heard that there is being played a fantastic performance of *The Dybbuk*, which is a mystical kind of a thing they had never seen in their lives. So one day she mentioned something, and I again had the chutzpah and I said—and my heart was just going, hammering—I said to her, "Mrs. Wysocka, if you'd like to come to see *The Dybbuk*, it will be a great honor to all the actors, to my father and all the rest of the actors, and I'll get you tickets, and I'll sit near you and explain it to you." And she said: "I'd be delighted."

Now we came to the theater, I was sitting near her, explaining it. I was appearing in the second act at the wedding. The first act in *The Dybbuk* starts very mysterious, with beautiful chanting, it was a beautiful performance. And she was absolutely—it was something so new to them, I mean, especially for the Polish theater. Not only for the Polish theater—I think it was new for the American theater. It was something new, it was a new kind of tone brought into the theater. And after the performance she came backstage and thanked the actors. And I felt like walking on wings, flying, I felt so proud, that I had brought Wysocka to the theater to see *The Dybbuk*.<sup>26</sup>

## JOSEPH BULOFF, INTERVIEWED BY JACK GARFEIN

1980

*After a long and successful Yiddish theater career, Joseph Buloff became well known as a Broadway actor in New York City, where he originated the role of Ali Hakim in the original cast of Oklahoma! (1943). In 1979, Buloff starred in a Broadway production of Arthur Miller's The Price, directed by veteran stage and film director Jack Garfein (1930–2019).*

*In this interview, Buloff describes his Yiddish theater career to Garfein, including his work on the original Vilna Troupe Dybbuk production.*

GARFEIN: When you were working on the play, was there an awareness that you were doing something new and important?

BULOFF: Yes. . . . First of all, it's a great play. Secondly, you know, the dramatic background was the death of An-sky, the promise to him. Keeping the promise, rehearsing day and night, because we usually rehearsed a play no less than six weeks. This was one of the innovations. . . . During their [the Vilna Troupe's] existence, there were about 112 plays played. In 98 of them, 98 of them I played. A smaller part, a larger part, one exit, one entrance. In *The Dybbuk* I played nine parts. I started from the beggar, then went on to the Grand Rabbi.

GARFEIN: I've seen nine different productions of *The Dybbuk* in my lifetime. How did they differ from the Vilna Troupe production? What part of the vision did they get?

BULOFF: Can't. Can't have it.<sup>27</sup> First of all, the man, the director [Dovid Herman], you know, was a Hasid. Comes from that background. So his whole vision was from that angle. It's out of this world. It's a world beyond us, you see. Now, it is not a visual thing. It is within the man, within the man, you know what I mean. . . . Nowhere did I see the production, you know, and felt, when I was on the stage, as I felt it there. It was he, the great director.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. Jacob Waislitz, "Der gang in der velt," in *Yidisher teater in Eyrope tsvishn beyde velt milkhomes*: Polyn, ed. Itzik Manger, Yonas Turkow, and Moyshe Perenson (New York: Congress for Jewish Culture, 1968), 41.

2. Waislitz, 40.

3. *Olam ha-ba* (the "World to Come") in Judaism refers to the afterlife, in contrast to *olam ha-zeh* ("this world"). See Leonard Greenspoon, ed., *Olam ha-zeh v'olam ha-ba: This World and the World to Come in Jewish Belief and Practice* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2017).

4. The American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC, colloquially known as "the Joint") was a massive international organization devoted to helping Jews in distress around the world. The JDC had a major outpost (the JDC Overseas Unit) in Warsaw. See Michael Beizer, "American Joint Distribution Committee," trans. I. Mi-

chael Aronson, *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, July 25, 2017, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/American\\_Jewish\\_Joint\\_Distribution\\_Committee](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/American_Jewish_Joint_Distribution_Committee)

5. The Hebrew-language newspaper *Doar Hayom* was published in Jerusalem and circulated widely throughout the Jewish world in the 1920s.

6. The Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw was located at 13 Tłomackie Street. See Nathan Cohen, "Association of Jewish Writers and Journalists in Warsaw," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, July 26, 2017, [https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Association\\_of\\_Jewish\\_Writers\\_and\\_Journalists\\_in\\_Warsaw](https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Association_of_Jewish_Writers_and_Journalists_in_Warsaw)

7. M. Kipnis, "A bagegenish mitn dibek," *Haynt*, December 14, 1920.

8. In Yiddish, *batlonim* refers to loafers or idlers.

9. *Der dorfsyung (The Village Lad)* by Leon Kobrin was one of the Vilna Troupe's first hit productions in 1916, and a major feature in its repertoire. *The Village Lad* was famously performed in a hyperrealistic style.

10. Y. A-Ki, "Shtarker farn toyt: Tsu der oyffirung fun An-skis 'Dibek,'" December 1920, Esther-Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum (RG 8), folder 24, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

11. *The Dybbuk's* original title was *Tsvishn tsvey veltn (Between Two Worlds)*. Ansky later made the original title the play's subtitle.

12. Vilna Troupe, program for *The Dybbuk*, 1921, Programs Collection 1, Europe Programs folder, Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Harvard Judaica Division.

13. Isidore Edelstein was a Yiddish theater manager in New York City and the son of Joseph Edelstein, also an important Yiddish theater manager. See Zachary Baker, "The Menashe Skulnik Story in the *Forward*," Digital Yiddish Theatre Project, June 8, 2021, <https://web.uwm.edu/yiddish-stage/the-menashe-skulnik-story-in-the-forward>

14. Rumshinsky was born in Vilna. He moved to London when he was twenty-two, and to New York shortly after.

15. Joseph Lateiner (1853–1935) was an early Yiddish theater playwright. See Nahma Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater*, 3rd ed. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 106–7.

16. Joseph Rumshinsky, *Klangen fun mayn lebn* (New York: A. Y. Biderman, 1944), 637–40.

17. Molly Picon and Jacob Kalich's musical play *Yankele* was a major global hit in 1923. To a self-styled "high art" actor like Joseph Buloff, *Yankele* represented the popular Yiddish stage, in contrast to his more literary theatrical pursuits.

18. Vilna was an important center for Jewish scholarship and Talmudic learning. See Mordechai Zalkin, "Vilnius," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, November 2, 2010, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/vilnius>

19. Richard Beer-Hofmann (1866–1945) was a renowned Austrian playwright and poet of Jewish descent, who also worked as a theater director alongside Max Reinhardt. See Esther N. Elstun, *Richard Beer-Hofmann: His Life and Work* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

20. Kuni Leml is the title character in Avrom Goldfaden's operetta *Di tsvey Kuni-Leml* (*The Two Kuni-Lemls*, 1880). In the play, a con artist schemes to win the hand of his beloved by pretending to be the man she was arranged by her parents to marry. A Kuni-Leml in Yiddish is a charlatan.

21. Multiple Vilna Troupes performed around the globe simultaneously, each claiming that they were the real Vilna Troupe and that the others were frauds. See Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 3–4.

22. Adolph Sonnenthal (1834–1909) was an Austrian actor of Jewish descent.

23. Leo Slezak (1873–1946) was a renowned Austrian opera singer.

24. Arthur Schnitzler (1862–1931) was an Austrian author and playwright of Jewish descent who wrote against antisemitism. In 1933, Schnitzler's books and plays were among those banned and burned by the Nazis.

25. Joseph Buloff to Mikhl Weichert, 1923, Joseph Buloff Papers, letter 2, folder B23L, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library, transcribed from Buloff's English translation.

26. Luba Kadison, interview by Louise Cleveland, 1980, cassette tape, JCSCRC 236 (4), Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Judaica Division, Harvard University Library.

27. Here, Buloff is suggesting that no other *Dybbuk* production ever matched the quality of the original Vilna Troupe version.

28. Joseph Buloff, interview by Jack Garfein, June 30, 1980, cassette tape, JCSCRC 236 (10), Joseph Buloff Jewish Theater Archive, Judaica Division, Harvard University Library.

# Across Worlds

## Documents on the Creation and Reception of Habima's *The Dybbuk*

Translated, Edited, and Annotated by  
Dassia N. Posner

*In 1922, the Moscow-based, Hebrew-language theater Habima first staged its production of The Dybbuk, the production that made the most significant contribution to this play's century-long fame. The documents below, most of which appear here in English for the first time,<sup>1</sup> provide a multifaceted account of this paradigm-shifting production through the eyes of its collaborators and audiences, from its humble origins in the wee hours of war-torn Moscow nights, to its extensive tours of Europe and the United States, to its early reception in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, to its worldwide fame, in New York critic Brooks Atkinson's words, as "one of the great theatre works of the century." Habima made Tel Aviv its permanent home in 1931 and was formally named Israel's national theater in 1958. The Dybbuk remained in Habima's repertoire, performed by some of its original actors, for over forty years.*

### HABIMA BEGINS

*Habima, a Hebrew word that means both "the stage" and the synagogue rostrum from which the Torah is read, was founded in Moscow in 1917 during Russia's tumultuous revolution and civil war years. Its founders were Nahum Zemach, a Hebrew teacher, Hanna Rovina, an early childhood teacher, and Menachem Gnessin, who had run an amateur theater*



*troupe. The aims of the youthful, motley, initially inexperienced collective built on “Zionist aspirations” that included dreams of moving to Eretz Israel and instigating “a Jewish cultural renaissance” by performing entirely in Hebrew (in part to distinguish the company from the prevalent Yiddish theaters of the day), staging a biblical repertoire, and fostering a deep artistic commitment and high artistic values among its participants.<sup>2</sup> Zemach’s model for these values was the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT)—so much so that he approached MAT co-artistic director Konstantin Stanislavsky in 1917 with a request for training and patronage.*

From Hanna Rovina, “In the Beginning: As Told by Hannah [Hanna] Rovina to G. Hanoch”

The young actors who came to the studio were typical Russian Communists, for whom Jewish nationalism was entirely alien and Hebrew completely unknown. The first thing Tsemakh [Zemach] had to do was explain to them the idea of Habima and make them believe in it. He had the opposite problem with a second group of young people whom he accepted into the studio despite their lack of acting experience. He took them in because of their Jewish national views and knowledge of Hebrew. And he was successful in bonding these two groups into a unified whole.<sup>3</sup>

From Nahum Zemach, “My Teacher, Stanislavsky”

We sat in [Stanislavsky’s] apartment, in the dining room, and I, trying to be as brief as possible, candidly laid out for him the story of the centuries-long wanderings and trials of the Jewish people. . . .

I added that Hebrew is the people’s soul: it is specifically in this language that the people have always expressed—and now express—their yearning and most fervent aspirations. Finally, I emphasized that Jewish theater in Hebrew is already making its voice heard, already whispering in secret—and that the soul of the Jewish people is adorned in it. . . .

I appeared before Stanislavsky without any formalized ideas; even to me it wasn’t all clear. But the feelings that gripped me made my words overflow like a waterfall—and I described what I thought the substance and form of the Jewish theater should be.

As he listened to my words, Stanislavsky showed consistent respect for Jewish culture and its many millennia, and for the idea of creating an original Jewish theater in Hebrew. Near the end he sighed deeply, which made his cheeks go a bit red, and uttered: “Yes, these ideas are close to me.” Then, with polite curiosity, he asked whether he should interpret my words as a

request to show preference to Habima's studio: that unfortunately his work schedule and that of his closest associates (here he gave several names) was extremely full. I replied: "The only thing I ask is that you help us learn, especially during our current birth pains. . . . I ask you to become a lantern lighting our path, a source of inspiration for our work. Because we lag behind, we need a starting push. . . . Stanislavsky stood to his full height and said, "I understand the suffering of your ancient people. I understand the wisdom of the ancients. . . . I imagine that in this rich language . . . you will be able to . . . achieve harmony between the theater and the spirit and scope of the era."<sup>4</sup>

## THE DYBBUK

### Creative Process

*Stanislavsky's student, the Armenian-Russian actor-director Evgeny Vakhtangov, agreed to work with Habima, which also became known as the "Biblical Studio" of the Moscow Art Theatre. Habima first announced its intention to stage The Dybbuk in 1918, at which point renowned Hebrew-language poet Hayim Nahman Bialik translated An-sky's play from the original Russian into Hebrew at Zemach's request. It was three years before the production opened, however, in part due to the poverty, famine, and other disruptions of the Russian Civil War, and in part due to Vakhtangov's deteriorating health: he died of stomach cancer less than three months after The Dybbuk's 1922 premiere. The prolonged rehearsal period was marked by passionate, often all-night creative exploration, with one or two acts at a time being shown to audiences. Vakhtangov's close collaboration with designer Nathan Altman, composer Joel Engel, and the Habima actors was essential, as Vakhtangov did not speak Hebrew and was unfamiliar with Jewish customs and culture. For Vakhtangov, The Dybbuk functioned as commedia dell'arte pantomimes set to music had for contemporaneous Russian directors like Alexander Tairov and Vsevolod Meyerhold, in that sound, music, and rhythm were essential to the overall effect—and that the action had to be clear to audiences who did not understand the language. This clarity was a significant contributing factor to the production's later international acclaim, as was Vakhtangov's breakthrough to a new theatrical style, paired with revolutionary fervor, both of which converged in the act 2 beggars' dance.*

### From Raikin Ben-Ari, *Habima*

So far as the music was concerned, the Habima had a stroke of good fortune in that Yuli [Joel] Dmitrievich Engel was in Moscow at the time. This was the same Engel who for years had traveled about with An-sky to collect Jewish folklore. . . . He would come to the studio almost every day. When he entered the foyer, with a score sheet under his arm, we knew at once that he had something ready for us. . . .

He rejoiced wholeheartedly that An-sky's folklore collection was at last being brought to the public. He was himself a well of Jewish tunes, songs, and melodies, sad and joyful. . . . He breathed a musical soul into *The Dybbuk*, into the wonderful chants of the Beggars, the Hassidim, and the wedding dances.

The music was a great help to the production and Vachtangov [Vakhtangov] fell in love with all the songs. He wanted to use every note that Engel wrote; that is why *The Dybbuk* was so rich in music. Not only did he use Engel's music but he gave a musical phrasing to the prose declamation to harmonize with Engel's compositions. . . .

It was for good reason that [Engel's] melodies for *The Dybbuk* spread so rapidly to every Jewish home in Russia and later to every corner of Europe and America.<sup>5</sup>

### From Nathan Altman, "My Work on *The Dybbuk*"

Nearly half a century has passed since [I designed *The Dybbuk*], and I have forgotten many of the details of my work on this production, but there is one thing I remember vividly.

Habima was a theater-studio, one of many at that time in Moscow and Petrograd. . . . But for many, Habima was not like other studios. The Moscow Art Theatre was its patron, and it planned to perform its productions in a language that then was spoken by none and known by few.

Vakhtangov knew neither Hebrew, nor rural life, nor Jewish practices, legends, and superstitions—that is, everything on which *The Dybbuk* is based. He therefore needed to follow the guidance of studio participants in his work. . . .

I created the scenic designs and character sketches in Petrograd, where I lived then, while Vakhtangov worked with studio participants in Moscow. . . . The people I drew in these designs were tragically broken and gnarled, like trees growing from dry and barren soil. They contained the colors of tragedy. Their movements and gestures were exaggerated. I aimed for extreme

expressiveness of form. The forms themselves needed to act on the spectator, since the words the actors spoke were incomprehensible to most audiences. The movements and gestures were meant to engender a dance.

Vakhtangov had already finished the first act when I brought the designs. They were significantly different from what Vakhtangov had done. I don't know what he felt when he first saw the designs, but I do know that he threw out everything he had done and began to work, using my designs as a starting point.

Work on the production continued in a state of unbelievable excitement, almost ecstasy. Finally, the day came when the performance was presented. . . .

I don't remember everyone who was at the premiere. I remember Lunacharsky. Chaliapin sat beside me.<sup>6</sup> The production made a stunning impression. And so it was always and everywhere this show was presented.<sup>7</sup>

From Raikin Ben-Ari, *Habima*

The first act was completed and the second was almost done. But we lacked money for the stage decorations, costumes, make-up, and musicians. . . . Vachtangov [Vakhtangov] proposed the solution. We would have an evening party and invite the few wealthy people who remained in Moscow. . . . We would also invite the lights of the musical world, and actors from the other theatres in the city. The party was arranged. Vachtangov brought his close friend, the famous actor, Mikhail Chekhov. . . .

The evening progressed. Late in the evening we served tea and cookies—if they could be graced with so elegant a name. The little cookies were tasteless, but they were served with so much style and ceremony that they managed to achieve a certain importance. When the refreshments were consumed we waited anxiously for someone to introduce the real point of the evening. . . . A sort of awkward quiet descended on the room. We had made the effort for nothing. Useless the steaming samovars, useless the tea. And all the precious sugar we had used up. . . .

And then we saw Vachtangov, in a white apron, a white towel over his arm, like a deferential waiter, serving tea around the room. Chekhov, similarly arrayed, was engaged in the same strange occupation. Vachtangov bowed low before each guest, held out his hat, and with the utmost gravity made his meaning clear. Chekhov did the same. The ruble notes began to pour. . . . One guest tried to outdo the other in liberality. This was no small matter. To be served by Vachtangov and Chekhov! But Vachtangov, clutching two hats full of money, was far from through. . . .

He mounted a chair and auctioned off shares in Chekhov, who stood close by him with such a mock-pathetic look on his face that we roared with laughter. The bidding began, our enthusiastic guests paying out their money until the dawn began to show through the windows.

Mikhail Chekhov was “sold” for a very handsome sum, and the Habima was able to buy the material it needed the following day.<sup>8</sup>

From Alexander Karev, “At Rehearsals for *The Dybbuk*”

In the final minutes of one late night, [Vakhtangov] created the famous second act of *The Dybbuk*. Here Vakhtangov’s sharp profile flashed fleetingly among the dancing beggars. . . . There he showed the bride—Rovina—her part in the dance. And there, from a small [audience] box, one could hear Evgeny Bogrationovich [Vakhtangov’s] formidable cry to an actor, “You aren’t feeling the melody of An-sky’s language. . . .” And again, the frenetic dance of the beggars, who advance on the distraught bride in her long white dress. She stands among them, protecting herself with long white hands, in horror, understanding nothing, only sensing the hatred of these unfortunates, these outcasts from life.

These dances were choreographed by Bolshoi Theatre maître de ballet L. A. Lashchilin. One sensed in them his knowledge of folklore, even though they were ordinary folk dances. “I don’t need Jewish dances; what I need is a beggars’ dance at the wedding of a wealthy merchant.” Evgeny Bogrationovich [Vakhtangov] showed each performer’s dance to them: “Your legs are lame, it’s uncomfortable to dance. Yet you dance, you dance. You are blind, you see nothing, you don’t know how to dance, you shouldn’t dance. And yet you dance, dance. I need a dance—protest, a dance—rally cry.” In this beggars’ dance, Vakhtangov revealed the play’s social meaning. . . .

“Hands are the eyes of the body,” he declared . . . and began a discussion about hands. . . . “You are a hungry beggar. What kind of hands does she have? How avidly she grabs, with crooked, rheumatic fingers, whatever falls into her hands. She has long since forgotten how to hold things gently, she grabs and holds onto everything convulsively.

“You are a wealthy merchant giving his daughter’s hand in marriage. How much satisfaction there is in your chest, in your stomach, in the open palms of your serene hands that say ‘there is much we have, there is much we have seized.’ So thrust out your chest and stomach a little, and place your open, pudgy, satisfied hands in front of your body. This is the form of your merchant. . . . Just as each character has its own form, all authors in my production should have their own style.”<sup>9</sup>

### From Mikhail Chekhov, *Life and Encounters*

Once [Vakhtangov] asked me to come to a closed rehearsal of *The Dybbuk* at Habima. We were the only ones in the audience. During the rehearsal, I expressed my delight to him several times, saying that I understood what was happening, even without knowing the language. He was unmoved by my praise and silently awaited the end of rehearsal. When the final curtain fell, he called the actors, as they were, in makeup and costume, into the auditorium and asked me, did I understand *everything* that happened onstage? I said that there were only a few places I couldn't understand, since I didn't know ancient Hebrew.<sup>10</sup> He asked me to tell him which scenes I couldn't understand. I listed them, and Vakhtangov, addressing the actors, said:

“What Chekhov didn't understand in the production was not because of the language, but because you played badly. Good acting should be understood by everyone, regardless of the language. We will rehearse all the scenes Chekhov identified again.”

He rehearsed until the wee hours and achieved stunning results. I was amazed by how much acting itself can do if actors stop depending on the *semantic* content of an author's text and seek expressive means from *their own* actor souls.<sup>11</sup>

### From Evgeny Vakhtangov, “Introductory Remarks for an Invited Dress Rehearsal of *The Dybbuk*”

An-sky's play was written in Russian. It was also translated into colloquial Yiddish. At Habima's suggestion, it was translated by the great Jewish poet Bialik into ancient Hebrew. It is written in a naturalistic style; the play is quotidian. This raised some difficulties in terms of its staging. We needed to stage it either naturalistically or realistically. Neither was acceptable, for the times in which we live require forms that resonate with modern times, and neither style, it seemed to us, would be alive right now. I wanted to present a theatrical production . . . while preserving the essence of everyday situations.

So I tried a form that I might call theatrical realism. At the foundation of stage play there must be genuine organic attention of actors toward one another and the lived-through experience [*perezhivanie*] of the Art Theater approach, that is, what I studied with Konstantin Sergeevich [Stanislavsky]. But I sought the means for expressing this attention and lived-through experience in today's life, in the here and now.<sup>12</sup>

### From Serafima Birman, “A Man of Inextinguishable Passion”

A small box at the Jewish theater Habima. In the box’s two front seats sit Vakhtangov and the artist Altman. An invited dress rehearsal of *The Dybbuk*, act 2, is in progress. The dance of the beggars and the bride. A tall girlish figure—a lily flower. Two long, black braids swish about.

An audience ovation. Nay, the word “ovation” is too specifically theatrical—better to say that the audience is enraptured. Their eyes are directed at the man in the box—at Vakhtangov. It is his fantasy, his energy, his labor that created this marvelous theatrical work. . . .

“He didn’t have enough days—so he turned night into day,” the actors of the Jewish theater said of him.

Vakhtangov stands in response to the audience’s hails. His cheeks are thin, sunken, but his beautiful green eyes have a festive glow. This is a special day in his life. . . . It is the birthday of the Master—Evgeny Vakhtangov.<sup>13</sup>

### MOSCOW PREMIERE

*The Dybbuk premiered at Habima’s small theater on Nizhniaia Kislovka in Moscow on January 31, 1922. The opening night cast list provides valuable information not only on who played which roles, but also on the substantial changes Vakhtangov and Habima made to An-sky’s play: some characters were eliminated, while others, notably the beggars’ chorus, were expanded and reimagined by the actors who played them. Vakhtangov also condensed An-sky’s four acts into three.<sup>14</sup> As the reader will note from audience descriptions of each act, the production emphasized gesture, rhythm, sound, heightened contrast, ensemble play, and jarring emotional impact.*

*The Dybbuk*

BY S. An-sky

HEBREW TRANSLATION BY Hayim Nahman Bialik

DIRECTED BY Evgeny Vakhtangov

SCENE AND COSTUME DESIGNS BY Nathan Altman

MUSIC BY Joel Engel

DANCES BY Lev Lashchilin

MAKEUP BY M. G. Faleev and Yuri Zavadsky

WIGS BY M. G. Faleev

CAST<sup>15</sup>

## BATLONIM

FIRST: David Vardi

SECOND: Nahum Zemach, Benno Schneider

THIRD: Moshe Halevi

WANDERER [MESSENGER]: Alexander Prudkin, Yehoshua Bertonov, Ari Kutai

MEIR, SYNAGOGUE SEXTON: Baruch Chemerinsky, Menachem Biniamini

## YESHIVA STUDENTS

KHONEN: Miriam Elias, Raphael Zvi, Zvi Friedland, Arie Varshaver

ENOKH: Benjamin Zemach

ASHER: Eli Viniar

WEeping WOMAN: Liubov Pudalova, Nechama Viniar, Chayele Grober

SENDER, A MERCHANT OF BRINNITS: Menachem Gnesin, Alexander Prudkin

LEAH, HIS DAUGHTER—Hanna Rovina, Shoshana Avivit

FRIDA, LEAH'S NANNY: Tmima Yudelevich

GITEL, LEAH'S FRIEND: Chava Yoelit

## BEGGARS:

ELKA, DIMWIT: Liubov Pudalova

DVOSIA, ARMLESS: Nechama Viniar

BABCHE, FROG: Chana Hendler

YACHNA, ILLEGITIMATE: Sh. Zemach [?]

RIVKE, GYPSY: Elisheva Factorowitch

MENCHUA, CONSUMPTIVE: Anna Paduit

DREISEL, HALFWIT: Chayele Grober, E. Bongart [?]

ZUNDEL, HUNCHBACK: Eli Viniar

RAPHAEL, BLIND CANTONIST SOLDIER: Aharon Meskin

BERCHIK, LAME: Sholmo Brook

DALFAN ("DOWN-AND-OUT"): Raikin Ben-Ari

SHOLEM, DEAF OLD MAN: Zvi Ben-Chaim

BATIA, LEAH'S FRIEND: Liubov Pudalower

MENASHE, LEAH'S FIANCÉ: Raphael Zvi, Shimon Finkel

NACHMAN, HIS FATHER: David Itkin

MENDL, HIS TEACHER: Benno Schneider

## FEMALE RELATIVES OF SENDER:

FIRST: Ina Govinskaya

SECOND: Tamar Robins



THIRD: E. Bongart, Chava Adelman  
 MALE RELATIVE OF SENDER: Zvi Friedland  
 REB AZRIEL, TSADIK OF MIROPOL: Nahum Zemach, David Vardi,  
 Baruch Chemerinsky  
 MIKHAEL, HIS ATTENDANT: David Vardi, Zvi Friedland  
 REB SHAMSHON, RABBI OF MIROPOL: Moshe Halevi  
 FIRST HOLY JUDGE OF MIROPOL: Benno Schneider  
 SECOND HOLY JUDGE OF MIROPOL: Sholmo Brook  
 HASIDIM: Zvi Friedland, Baruch Chemerinsky, Raikin Ben-Ari, Benno  
 Schneider, Benjamin Zemach, Aharon Meskin, Raphael Zvi,  
 Sholmo Brook, G. Ben-Chaim, Chava Yoalit<sup>16</sup>

### The Production (through Audience Eyes)

#### Act I

The end of act I . . . leaves an unforgettable impression. . . . On the left at a table in the corner, drinking, are three beggar-nomads and the synagogue sexton: the rich merchant Sender is treating them on the occasion of his daughter's engagement—their postures and gestures merge into a single image. A little way off, closer to downstage center, sitting on a knapsack, is the Stranger [Wanderer], motionless, as if made of wood, all angles, gray, blending with his surroundings—a messenger from the distant beyond. The corpse of the young man who was the victim of his love lies covered in a black cloth. The company at the table gradually become less restrained, as if their movements are unleashed; they all sing, clapping fiercely, waving their arms in the air, and then begin a round dance [*khorovod*] around Sender. The merriment grows ecstatically—one feels it in the timbre of their voices, in the cadence of their gestures—and simultaneously there is a growing feeling of eeriness: just as motionless, just as still, unnoticed by the dancers, the Stranger sits, and just the same, a few steps away (any second those haltingly dancing legs will stumble) lies the dead youth. This scene contains something . . . from the Greek mysteries. One doesn't need to understand the actors: the meanings of the words fall away like chaff, revealing the bare frame of theatrical action.

—From *Ne-Teatral* [G. P. Struve?],  
 “*The Dybbuk at Habima*”  
*Renaissance*, July 1, 1926, Paris<sup>17</sup>



Fig. 3. Finale of act 1. Habima's *The Dybbuk*. Directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov. Premiere: January 31, 1922. Photo courtesy of Andrei Malaev-Babel.

## Act 2

The ensemble reaches the pinnacle of its unity in act 2—in the betrothal scene,<sup>18</sup> the scene with the beggars. . . . There is something majestic and sublime in the roles of the hunchback, the deaf man, the old cantonist soldier, the armless person, and the fool. But again, I emphasize: most important are the congruence, the coordination, the unity that are achieved only through the collective effort of all. . . . Incidentally, there aren't that many performers in this scene, but the impression is, once again, as if a grotesque, variegated, monumental, multilayered, multitemporal mass action is unfolding before us. Even at the moment when several beggars, about to dance around the young, beautiful bride, touch her snow-white silk dress and her silk slippers—even then, the scene's primary beauty lies in its collectivity. When the beggars argue, then scuffle, culminating in a fight with one another and with the bride's and groom's parents, when ever-amplifying waves of laughter are heard, it emphasizes the social inequity: the envy of the marginalized,

persecuted cripples that exist in abundance in classist societies, the protest against the luxury of the wealthy, acquire in this production an exaggerated, even menacing expression—yet there is a sort of charming appeal to this threat. Or take, for example, the scene in which the dybbuk possesses the bride—the tension and menace steadily build, as if the forces of nature are colliding. . . . The beggars—the whole strange horde, dressed in worn-out rags, emaciated from constant malnutrition—those who watched enviously just a moment before as the wealthy and their guests stuffed their bellies with food fit for kings, while throwing them pennies; one of them bursts into a vengeful shriek—“Ha, ha!”—and they repeat this cry twice . . . and so a tremor grips the hearts of the audience: either this is a howl of envy by the oppressed in life, or it is the perverse joy and jubilation of revenge.

—From Aaron Glanz-Leyeles,  
 “An Exemplary Performance (*The Dybbuk*)”  
 February 1927, New York<sup>19</sup>

### Act 3

And then act 3 begins—and again, wonder of wonders . . . the audience can’t take their eyes off the actors for a second. . . . The ensemble’s tension at the moment when the dybbuk is exorcised, the triumphant dance, accompanied by a rousing song, after the “flight” of the unclean—these scenes are filled with vast importance: Khonen’s song, which reaches the bride’s ear (and thus the ears of those sitting in the audience) as if from far away, the Song of Songs of a man who has been expelled and excommunicated, becomes a miracle in which the quintessence of everything is concentrated. . . . In the third act, a mystical, religious experience is also evoked—entrancing in its depth and sublime sorrow: this feeling remains until the final curtain, and it reaches its climax at the moment of the bride’s death. And the death of the bride and groom is infused with such beauty! In these moments, the audience is stunned—the audience begins to believe in the immortality of the theater.

—From Aaron Glanz-Leyeles,  
 “An Exemplary Performance (*The Dybbuk*)”  
 February 1927, New York<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 4. Act 2 beggars' dance. Habima's *The Dybbuk*. Directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov. Premiere: January 31, 1922. Photo courtesy of Laurence Senelick Collection.



Fig. 5. Finale of act 3. Habima's *The Dybbuk*. Directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov. Premiere: January 31, 1922. Photo courtesy of Andrei Malaev-Babel.

## MOSCOW RECEPTION

*All of theatrical Moscow attended The Dybbuk. While the Jewish Section of the Communist Party repeatedly attacked Habima's themes and, especially, the theater's use of Hebrew as "reactionary,"<sup>21</sup> memoirs and early reviews by authors ranging from MAT actress-playwright Nadezhda Bromlei to avant-garde director Sergei Radlov focus instead on Vakhtangov's innovative production choices, frequently noting the thrilling, eerie beggars' dance; Altman's use of color, shape, and contrast in the designs; the unassuming virtuosity of Hanna Rovina in the role of Leah; and the musical delivery of the Hebrew.*

### From Nadezhda Bromlei, "A Seeker's Path"

*The Dybbuk is an experiment in tragedy; its theme is love and death. What drives this production is the Song of Songs. When I read that *The Dybbuk's* theme is "passé," I simply didn't understand. The theme of art, the very pur-*

pose of artistry, is affirmation, joy, the glory of humankind, of life. Anything that is “passé,” any “decay” and “decomposition,” can only be counteractive to a work of art; otherwise it is a disease, a danger, a menace. The Song of Songs is a monumental hymn to love. The play’s alien language, the distinctive timbre of the speech, the distorted contours of the [stage] objects, the beggars’ dance, the death, the horror, and that all-conquering cry of love, the elation, the life—will remain in my memory forever.<sup>22</sup>

From Samuel Margolin, “*The Dybbuk*. A Theater of Ecstasy,”  
*The Screen* (February 7–13, 1922)

No, Habima’s *The Dybbuk* is not a romantic tragedy, not a variation on *Romeo and Juliet* in the eccentric setting of mystically minded Jews, not a novella about love as strong as death, not a return to the myth of Tristan and Isolde. This is a tragedy of our time, laden with the blood of war and revolution. . . .

Very many think this show is a kind of theatrical hysteria. But this production of *The Dybbuk* . . . lives, infects, and burns with something else—with ecstasy. . . .

Here . . . not a single face is tranquil, with the possible exception of Sender, Leah’s old aunt, and three respectable women in festive dresses, Leah’s relatives. But even so . . . not always. Nervous thrill, tumult, agitation, elevated spirits: this is the world of Habima. And when the yeshiva students dance with Sender in the synagogue, in their unnerving, tumultuous dance—without noticing the corpse of Khonen, who died right there, instantly, of a broken heart, covered by the Messenger with a mourning cloth<sup>23</sup>—their dance becomes a dance of dervishes. . . .

All of Vakhtangov’s creative work is like this: fantasy in reality, reality in the fantastical.

People like chimeras, chimeras like people. . . . No one can say where we have met people like those in *The Dybbuk*; perhaps we never have met them, yet they are persuasive, and we know them all like kin, though at times they be unnerving.<sup>24</sup>

From Sergei Radlov, “Theater Letters. *The Dybbuk*,”  
*Red Gazette* (June 15, 1923)

The beggars’ dance was staged with such fantasy-infused virtuosity that it makes one see Vakhtangov as a kind of choreographer. I will remember the doll-white figure of the bride among the terrifying beggars for a long time.

The actors play just as they should in a fully realized production by a

great master. The absolute, total ensemble eliminates any desire in us to sort out who is better or who is worse, to bet on who will be the first to finish. In the realm of movement, the work is simply extremely clear (the expressiveness of the hands is superb), always sharp and precise, but in the language, there is an entirely new, very bold technique for gradually transitioning from speech to ecstatic humming during moments of heightened emotional tension. . . .

Nathan Altman's truly brilliant work is impressive for the cunning modesty with which it inspires everything without imposing itself anywhere. In the first act, the bright illumination of individual tables is most ingenious; in the second, the scenic design is built on very simple, uniform color planes, the costumes on strictly allocated colors: black and white for tragic characters, gray for the grotesque, terrifying beggars, multicolored costumes for everyday, petty-bourgeois characters.

When the bride, overcome by despair, leans, in her white dress, against a narrow black curtain—this simplest of effects makes an extraordinary impression. Then, in act 3, she is in a black dress against the background of a completely white wall and a massive white table, raked toward the audience. . . .

The play is performed in ancient Hebrew, as dead as Latin. This means that almost no one in Moscow or Petrograd understands a word of it. Yet it is apprehended, nonetheless. This is very curious, and it confirms an undeniable truth: that theater is an autonomous art, distinct and independent from literature, and that the actor is able to affect the audience without words, with the emotional tone of the voice and the movements of the body.<sup>25</sup>

## INTERNATIONAL RECEPTION

*Although Habima was named a state theater in 1920, fierce debates raged about whether it should receive a state subsidy and, more broadly, about whether it had the right to exist at all in a communist country in which theater was to help create a new proletarian society. The charge against Habima was led by Evseksia, the Jewish Section of the Communist Party, which argued fiercely that Yiddish, not Hebrew, was the language of the Jewish working class, and that Zionism was “counterrevolutionary” and destructive to the building of socialism because it produced competing national and geographic loyalties.<sup>26</sup> Ironically, three decades later, Stalin*

used variations on this latter charge to repress all Yiddish-language culture in the Soviet Union, Yiddish theater included. Habima lost its state theater status in 1924,<sup>27</sup> but, partly shielded by powerful supporters, including Stanislavsky, it remained active in Moscow until 1926, when it embarked on an international tour that became a permanent emigration. Although a few actors returned to Russia after the company split during the tour, Habima did not perform again in Moscow until 1990, when it became the first Israeli theater to tour the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup>

The European leg of Habima's tour began in Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland; in Warsaw, Habima had its first opportunity to play for Jewish-majority audiences. Habima continued to Austria, France, and Germany before crossing the ocean. After nearly a year touring the United States, Habima returned to Europe in 1927, with performances to follow in Germany, the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Yugoslavia. In 1929–30, Habima returned to familiar venues while also expanding its travels to include Italy, Switzerland, France, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, and England.

## Riga and Warsaw

*Habima's tours featured a range of productions but always began and ended with The Dybbuk. In its first encounters with Latvian, Lithuanian, and Polish audiences, The Dybbuk was lauded for striking visual and aural elements, ensemble acting, theatrical expressionism, and profound impact on a wide range of spectators. By 1926, An-sky's play was already well known from performances in Yiddish by the Vilna Troupe (beginning in 1920), as well as from the first Polish staging in 1925. Unsurprisingly, then, many early reviews compare Habima's Dybbuk to these other productions, as well as to Russian theaters that were also well known from 1920s tours.*

From Ja. Kārklīņš, *Breaking News*, Riga (January 29, 1926)

The tour of the Moscow Habima Theater began yesterday at the Nacionālā Opera. . . . After watching S. An-sky's dramatic legend, *The Dybbuk*, which has been performed over 300 times, I affirm that this theater is built on serious theatrical foundations and has become an invaluable achievement of Jewish national culture.<sup>29</sup>



From A. Donets-Zakharzhevsky, "Habima's First Production," *Intermissions Today*, Riga (January 29, 1926)

A sea of heads. The orchestra, boxes, balconies—every seat in the vast theater is occupied. The best Jewish theater has awakened the interest of all social strata. Many representatives of foreign countries, as well as of Latvian society and the musical world. . . .

\* \* \*

There is a sharp divide between audience and stage. On one side: ladies' evening gowns, dinner jackets, European modernity. On the other: the spirit of the past, a breath of mysticism, an uncanny sense of doom. A ponderous, arduous language, incomprehensible to most, yet, despite this incomprehensibility, a newly minted expressive diction. The exclamations, words that seem like interjections, the flow of oriental speech, are all subordinated to a unified musical key.

\* \* \*

. . . Engel's music bears the poignancy of eastern monotones. Eerie. Filled with tragicality and yearning. Synagogue music. And only in the scene of the wedding dance does it spill over into the major key of a kind of Bacchic Shabbos.

\* \* \*

The beggars were remarkably impressive. Each character is a painstaking grotesque, each movement of any individual among them is subordinated to the line of the collective background. There is nothing accidental in this multitude and its movements. Each face is a mask, a misshapen mannequin come to life—but in this mask, in this mannequin, lies great truth.<sup>30</sup>

From Eugeniusz Świerczewski, "The Jewish Theater 'Habima' in Warsaw," *Warsaw Echo* (1926)

Yesterday at the Nowości Theater, performances in Hebrew by the Moscow Habima troupe began.<sup>31</sup> Yesterday's performance was an extremely significant event—a triumph of form, . . . of theatrical expression: out of the over a thousand spectators who gathered in the theater (99 percent Jewish audiences and 1 percent Polish theater critics and actors), very few understood Hebrew, and yet the show made an indelible impression, and, despite its

run time (it lasted until one in the morning), it kept the entire audience in suspense until the very end.<sup>32</sup>

From Antoni Słonimski, "The Habima Theater,"  
*Literary News*, Warsaw (March 14, 1926)

The musicality of every phrase is supported by the rhythm of the gestures and the deeply soul-penetrating cadences of the colors and stage architecture—and so here we observe a rare instance of total ensemble and the harmonious unity of all the theater's elements. . . .

The show's movement style balances between Goya, Chagall, Rousseau, and the stage designs of Picasso. . . . In particular, the dance of the poor, which leaves an unusually strong impression, and the wedding ritual are among the most beautiful moments I have ever experienced in the theater.<sup>33</sup>

From Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, "The Hebrew Theater 'Habima,'" *Morning Courier*, Warsaw (March 1, 1926)

Just as Jews have played, I believe, a significant role in the development of Russian theater, so, in turn, the influence of Russian theater cannot help but be felt on this young Hebrew collective. It contains echoes of both Stanislavsky's theater and the *Blue Bird*,<sup>34</sup> which is well known to us from its Warsaw tours. . . .

It was especially interesting to watch *The Dybbuk*, a play we saw on the Polish stage not long ago. The production had some striking differences, especially in the first act. Here this stark play from Jewish life became even starker; to an even greater degree, individual life was pushed into the shadows. In the Polish interpretation, one scene was especially memorable: Leah's encounter with the young kabbalist in the synagogue—two pairs of lovers' eyes, peering at each other in hopeless despair. Here this scene vanished entirely; apparently even such a hint of eroticism would be at odds with what is acceptable here. . . . Yet the heart is stirred by the strange figure of the Wanderer [Messenger], and the scene in which the rebbe exorcises the *Dybbuk*, and the Jewish lamentation in the first act. And, of course, the beggars' dance: for the sake of this alone, this Hebrew *Dybbuk* is worth watching.<sup>35</sup>

From Jakób Appenzlak, "The Jewish Stage. The Hebrew Theater 'Habima.' An-sky's *The Dybbuk*," *Our Review*, Warsaw (March 3, 1926)  
[In Habima's] *The Dybbuk* . . . the director . . . connects the actors not only with one another, but also with the stage light.

Scrupulously using every opportunity to amplify the effect, he does not permit onstage light to scatter its rays to no advantage. In the first act, for example, the public doesn't see a single candle. A book or bookstand obscures the candle's glow from the audience, directing it, like a spotlight, onto an actor's masklike face. This manner of using light is one of Habima's most fortunate discoveries.

With bated breath, the audience watches as the performance unfolds, marveling at the strength of the directing and the virtuosity of each and every detail—and so absorbed are they in the staging, so taken with the wild pace of the Hasidim's dance . . . so stunned by the play of hands (for the first time in my life did I see hand movement used to this extent) that they forget about the drama, they no longer pay attention to the content of the play.<sup>36</sup>

From "Three Interpretations of *The Dybbuk*," *Our Review*,  
Warsaw (March 7, 1926)

*Stanisław Miłaszewski* [*literary manager of the Warsaw City Theaters*]:  
I've seen *The Dybbuk* four times: twice in the Vilna Troupe's theater, once in Polish at the Comedy Theater,<sup>37</sup> and, finally, on Monday at [Habima's] first [tour] performance. It may sound paradoxical, but for me the least comprehensible *Dybbuk* was the one in Polish. Despite the ensemble's strong acting, in its stage concept, the Polish production lost its mystery origins, instead foregrounding the love drama, to which the mystery was only an accompaniment. Closer to me, purely from a human perspective, and easier to understand were the productions by the Vilna Troupe and Habima.<sup>38</sup>

*Avrom Morevsky* [*the actor who played Reb Azriel in the Vilna Troupe's Dybbuk*]:

I was enthralled . . . with the first and second acts, first and foremost because Vakhtangov the director understood An-sky the ethnographer more deeply than Jewish directors have. Vakhtangov even understood An-sky the socialist more deeply, something he successfully emphasized in the second act more strongly than in the performances of *The Dybbuk* that began to be shown thirty days after An-sky's death.<sup>39</sup> . . .

It seems to me that this production by Habima is the greatest victory over the old traditions of Stanislavsky's Art Theatre. I recently saw Stanislavsky's productions in Berlin, but the results of Habima's work transcend all the achievements and experiments of Russian theaters.<sup>40</sup>

## Paris, Vienna, Berlin, New York, London

As *Habima* continued on to western Europe and the United States, the theater received accolades from a wide range of luminaries—Albert Einstein, Max Reinhardt, Felix Salten, André Antoine, and Edward Gordon Craig—as well as from renowned Russian émigrés, including operatic bass Feodor Chaliapin, who attended the Moscow premiere just before emigrating to France, and Count Sergei Volkonsky, who taught voice classes to *Habima* students in the theater’s earliest years. Myriad reviews show that audiences were drawn to the novelty of the Hebrew, the production’s expressionism, virtuosic individual and ensemble performances, and *Habima*’s revolutionary window into a new acting style.

### From Feodor Chaliapin, Paris (1925)

For a restless artist like myself, theaters provide little spiritual satisfaction—everything is fine, it seems, but somehow something is missing . . . rarely, rarely, are you satisfied. . . .

And so one day I went to the theater—to a little theater on Nizhniaia Kislovka, called “*Habima*”—and for the first time I heard ancient Hebrew, a language completely unknown to me, and I saw actors unfamiliar to me perform a play, *The Dybbuk*, in that language . . . and inexplicably my troubled soul grew light. . . . And for my whole life I have remembered that on that evening I received true artistic fulfillment. Long live “*Habima*”! From my very soul I wish success to this magnificent theater.<sup>41</sup>

### From *New Vienna Daily*, Vienna (May 30, 1926)

Carltheater. On its first day in Vienna, Moscow’s *Habima*, the fame of which far preceded the start of the Vienna tour, showed *The Dybbuk*, a magnificent dramatic legend crafted by An-sky. Who is this renowned *Habima*? . . . Under no circumstances can it be compared with Yiddish troupes, even with the best and most flawless, because it is fundamentally different. Especially, at the very least, because [its actors] speak not in jargon,<sup>42</sup> but in pure Hebrew, the language of patriarchs and prophets, the holy language of Moses and the Psalms. The vocal richness of its sound carried to us the soundscape of ancient Jordan. In all its grandeur and power, it reached our ears, which at first could not comprehend the alien chants but very soon grew accustomed to the euphonic chorus of voices. Never before now has Hebrew been spoken on the Vienna stage.<sup>43</sup>

From Felix Salten, "Habima's Tours," *New Free Press*, Vienna  
(May 30, 1926)

In the second act, beggars dance during the wedding celebration. . . . The whirling of the young bride, clad in white, among the dancing cripples breathes an infectious madness into the audience. During the moments when the robed men sing, and their singing turns into madness and their dance into frenzy, one senses a readiness for death and an unbridled thirst for life. . . .

The style of Habima is expressionistic—an expressionism that is close to reality and full of charm. It is not based on fiction, it offers generalizations: in the makeup of each character, in each melodically flowing word, in the plasticity of each movement. The true modesty of the scenery and the deliberately simple lighting, in which massive shadows, at times cast by actors as they perform, also contribute to the production. All this unrealistically elevated reality is enveloped in music, the rhythm of which accelerates and inspires the course of the action.<sup>44</sup>

From Count Sergei Volkonsky, "The Habima Theater's Tours.  
*The Dybbuk*," *Latest News*, Paris (June 30, 1926)

The vocal orchestration is like nothing I have ever heard before. The subtlety with which a word, under emotion's influence, transforms into a lament, and a lament into song; the precision with which a lone voice that interrupts the choral lament "hits the right note" (the interjection of the Messenger, who has long remained silent, in the first scene), all this baffles the most attentive observation.<sup>45</sup>

From Brooks Atkinson, "The Play: *The Dybbuk* in Hebrew,"  
*New York Times* (December 14, 1926)

After the usual delays and postponements and the formality of Ellis Island probation, the Habima Players of Moscow . . . acted *The Dybbuk* . . . last evening. Almost exactly a year ago the Neighborhood Playhouse made this exotic play by Ansky a treasury of organized acting in an adaptation for the English stage. Next Thursday, incidentally, the Neighborhood players will put on *The Dybbuk* again. . . .

In spite of an eager audience, to many of whom Hebrew was not an unfamiliar tongue, the spoken words obviously did not matter particularly last evening. For the attention was naturally focussed upon a highly stylized

type of acting developed to a state of plastic perfection. We have all caught hints of it in other performances directed by the innumerable Moscovians now rummaging around this country. . . . But no other performance in this city has been so bold in its stylization, so daring in its treatment of details and so skillful in evoking the latent moods of a production.

. . . First of all, the make-up is extraordinary. Faces are painted with curious designs, in high colors, not unlike grotesque masks; mouths are pulled out of shape by daubs of grease-paint; eyes are rendered almost uncannily by circles and arches; noses are pulled to a sharp point. The black gowns of the chassidim are crudely smeared with white at the edges. All the benches and chairs used in the synagogue and at the wedding breakfast are off centre. . . . The actors move about the stage with grotesque motions, with absurd attitudes; the lines of the human figure are broken up by stooping or leaning heavily to one side. And the voices of the beggars, the professional prayer men and the choruses in general are individually unnatural, stressed and strained. . . . When all these separate parts are pulled together in a symmetrical performance the effect is astonishing. . . .

Comparisons with the Neighborhood performance are inevitable after the spectacle of last evening. And comparisons show that the Neighborhood performance is a very good one indeed, and the legitimate offspring of the Habima. For when the Neighborhood players came to mount the piece, already famous in Hebrew and Yiddish, they employed as director David Vardi, once a member of the Habima troupe. They could not have done better; the stylized treatment is surely the authentic expression of this mystic drama.<sup>46</sup>

From Bernhard Diebold, "Habima," *Jewish Theater*, Berlin (1928)

Leah, the bride . . . enters as if from a silver coffin, in a white silk dress, with a dead waxen face . . . as if all her heartache's facial expressions are hidden away inside . . . as if she has been numbed by this life—yet a terrible possession can be read in her eyes and lips. She stands, lies down, she dances, she writhes in convulsions, just as if she is battling a demon, as if attempting madly to escape the bounds of a greater power. In the blink of an eye—just a blink!—after the monotone lamentations, suddenly a light, high moan, a cry of surprise, a sigh, bursts from her breast, as if finally the dybbuk has just withdrawn his claws from the soft spiritual flesh of her heart. Nay, you will never forget this, not ever.<sup>47</sup>

From “Phoenix Theatre,” *Times*, London (December 30, 1930)

To an English audience unfamiliar with Jewish tradition and ritual, *The Dybbuk* must always present difficulties. These difficulties remain, but are not, as might be expected, made more acute when the play is given a Hebrew interpretation by the Habima Players. These players remind us that acting is the universal language. . . . It is acting quite distinct from that which we are accustomed to see on the English stage. These actors have not, like so many of our own, been bred in a naturalistic school; they have been taught to express rather than to suggest emotions. They are not afraid to aim at sublimity: in short, they are romantic actors, and for a play like *The Dybbuk* romantic acting is required. . . . Such a story, poised on the knife edge between the sublime and the ridiculous, can only be handled impressively by actors who are not afraid to give direct expression to emotion.<sup>48</sup>

### Tel Aviv and Jerusalem

*Disagreements about Habima’s leadership structure during the US tour contributed to a split in the company in 1927. Several members, among whom were founder Nahum Zemach, his brother Benjamin, and future Habima memoirist Raikin Ben-Ari, remained in the United States, hoping to found a new Hebrew-language theater, while others, Hanna Rovina included, returned to Europe. After a second split, the reshaped company traveled to British Mandatory Palestine in 1928, where it was hailed as the foundation of a new Israeli theater. Following another European tour that included almost a year in Germany, Habima returned to the Middle East, performing in Haifa, Jerusalem, and Cairo before making Tel Aviv its permanent home.*

From Itzhak Norman, “About *The Dybbuk* (Play Notes),”  
*The Word*, Tel Aviv (May 3, 1928)

It’s understandable why some have put *The Dybbuk* on public trial in Eretz Israel. This production returns to the stage a life of exile [*galut*],<sup>49</sup> the “Pale of Settlement,” age-old sorrows—of our recent past, from which we have not yet freed ourselves. From an ideological point of view, *The Dybbuk* is problematic. . . . But anyone who truly wants to understand Habima should view the production from a different perspective. Most important in Habima is

the drive to create a theater. . . . Yes, for the most part, Habima follows the traditions of Stanislavsky . . . and in this sense it brings nothing new, but, nevertheless, it creates works of artistic value (no less so than painters and writers), and with its own hands it embroiders the *tallit* [prayer shawl] of the theater of our time. . . .

The scenery of the play and its rhythm (especially in the second act) is a mirror of our time. These are not glimmers of Moscow flames, nor are they a fig leaf with which Habima attempts to cover itself. The asymmetries and disharmonies in the first and second acts—between the *batlonim* and the Wanderer, between Leah and her friends, between the beggars and Sender—reinforce this impression. A Jew shouts, converses, dances, sings, and weeps all at the same time—and in this swift and modern action lies all the horror of our era. This dynamic . . . brings us closer to the revolutionary spirit of our prophets. . . .

The acting in *The Dybbuk* truly makes an impression. . . . Each action is strung together on a powerful rhythmic core that connects all the events to one another . . .

Rovina is a brilliant actress, gifted with a transparent, lyrical dramatic talent. In her interpretation, Leah is a song sung in a clear voice. . . . With Rovina, one senses her training less than with other actors. You would think she had never set foot in a theater. Her soft lyricism and modesty (in the synagogue, act 1) captivate the audience instantly. Her deep voice, straight from the heart, her light movements, rhythmical steps, airy dance, the hand she places to her mouth and forehead, her sparkling eyes—are mesmerizing. . . .

Only those who are filled with faith, intelligence, and a thirst for beauty can bear the theater on their shoulders. This production, like *The Golem*, is the birth certificate of the Israeli theater.<sup>50</sup>

From Quidnunc, “In a Few Lines,” *Palestine Bulletin*,  
Jerusalem (December 10, 1931)

In the hands of Habimah [Habima], [*The Dybbuk*] ceased to be the poor thing which Ansky had written, it became a tremendous tragedy. With the Dibbuk [*The Dybbuk*], Habima conquered the world.

I was among the very few in the Zion Hall last night who was seeing Habima in the Dibbuk for the first time. Most of the persons to whom I spoke declared that this was their third, fourth or fifth time of seeing.

There were more than 1500 persons present and there was nearly a riot at the beginning when those in the gods<sup>51</sup> insisted that the people who were



standing in the gangways and blocking their view should sit down. . . . The prelude could not be heard for noise and when the curtain rose there was for a few seconds a continuance of the hubbub. But the Dibbuk conquered. Within half a minute of the rise of the curtain, there was absolute silence. . . .

The first act was a masterpiece in itself. I remember being bored to death by this very act when the play was produced in London, with Jean Forbes-Robertson as the possessed girl. Last night my eyes were glued to the stage from the moment the curtain rose until the moment it fell—and after. Like a well-drilled army, all the members of the cast acted together in this scene. . . . The sing-song of conversation, the chanting of scraps of music, the meeting of the lovers, the hysterical sister, the greedy sexton, the mumbling of psalms and the arrival of the rich man Sender—a mosaic as perfect as a mosaic can be. . . .

It would be sheer nonsense to pick out this actor or that actress for peculiar mention. Where all are, in their own spheres and as a whole, as perfect as they are in the Dibbuk, criticism may be left behind and one bouquet be presented to all.<sup>52</sup>

## LATER YEARS

*Habima performed The Dybbuk over a thousand times in eighteen countries. In the 1940s, it opened its own school, and in 1946, it built the theater building that is still the company's home. According to the theater's production history, just before Israel declared independence in May 1948, "Habima set out on tour of the United States, believing that the company would inspire American Jews to help Israel in her struggle for independence."<sup>53</sup>*

From Brooks Atkinson, "Palestine's Habimah Players Revive *The Dybbuk* Here as Homeland Faces Crisis," *New York Times* (May 3, 1948)

On the day when their homeland was reported being invaded the Habimah [Habima] players from Palestine appeared in New York with a masterpiece. It is their oldest work, S. Ansky's "The Dybbuk," with which they opened a brief season of repertory at the Broadway on Saturday night. Since they have come from embattled Palestine, where they also perform military duties for home defense, the Habimah represent something more than art at the moment. . . .

These extra-art aspects of the Habimah make them especially welcome now. But . . . they have no visible bearing on the Habimah performance of “The Dybbuk,” which is as timeless as the universe. As a stage composition it is one of the great theatre works of the century. By comparison, the realistic theatre looks poverty-stricken and naturalistic acting seems hackneyed and sterile. . . .

Twenty-two years is a long time to remember a theatrical production. But no one who saw the dance of the beggars in 1926 has ever forgotten it—the tall blind man whirling uncertainly to the music, the cripple leaning on his stump of a cane, the ragged women with their baleful tenderness toward the bride. . . .

“The Dybbuk” is to the Habimah what “The Sea Gull” is to the Moscow Art Theatre—the first success and the signature. The Habimah actors have played it more than a thousand times.<sup>54</sup>

~

*In 1958, Habima was officially named Israel's national theater, with an image of Hanna Rovina as Leah serving as its “unofficial logo.”<sup>55</sup> Rovina, the “first lady of the Hebrew theatre,” continued to play Leah in The Dybbuk until the mid-1960s.<sup>56</sup> Habima's mainstage theater in Tel Aviv still bears her name today.*

## Notes

1. Aside from documents reproduced from English-language sources, all translations are my own from Russian sources and Russian translations of Latvian, Polish, German, French, and Hebrew sources. Because Habima actor names appear over three alphabets and seven languages in these documents, settling on English spellings of proper names has posed particular challenges. I use the most common English spellings in the text and a simplified version of the Library of Congress Russian transliteration system for references in the notes. In documents reproduced from English originals, I have retained all original transliteration, spelling, and punctuation conventions.

This project would not have been possible without the scholarship of Vladislav Ivanov, the world's foremost expert on Habima's *The Dybbuk*. His books *Russkie sezony teatra Gabima* (Moscow: Artist. Rezhisser. Teatr, 1999), *Evgenii Vakhtangov: Dokumenty i svidetel'stva*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Indrik, 2011), and *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike* (Moscow: Teatralis, 2016) formed the basis for my documentary study. Sincere thanks, also, to Andrei Malaev-Babel and Laurence Senelick,

who shared photos from their personal archives; to Kevin Bartig, who verified my translation of musical terms; and to Ruthie Abeliovich, who generously shared her research on this production's glorious soundscape. Her detailed analysis of the latter can be found in her book *Possessed Voices: Aural Remains from Modernist Hebrew Theater* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019) and on the related website, which features a radio performance of *The Dybbuk*, recorded in 1965 with several of the original actors: "Possessed Voices," *Ruthie Abeliovich* (website), accessed December 15, 2022, <https://www.ruthieabeliovich.com/possessed-voices>

2. Gad Kaynar, "National Theatre as Colonized Theatre: The Paradox of Habima," *Theatre Journal* 50, no. 1 (1998): 4 ("aspirations"); Vladislav Ivanov, "Habimah," *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, August 10, 2010, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/> ("renaissance"). Habima had a strong influence on the revival of Hebrew as a spoken, rather than written or liturgical, language. Ivanov, *Russkie sezony teatra Gabima*, 46.

3. Hannah Rovina, "In the Beginning: As Told by Hannah Rovina to G. Hanoth," *Theatre Art Journal of the Habima Circle in Palestine*, August 1939, 7 (original in English). The segment that appears here is from Ivanov, "Habimah."

4. Naum Tsemach, "Moi uchitel'—Stanislavskii," trans. from Hebrew into Russian by I. B. Mints, in *Vershiny evreiskogo teatra v rossii*, ed. Galina Poltavskaiia (Moscow: Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, 2015), 34–36. Published Hebrew version appears in Itzhak Norman, ed., *Be-reshit Habima: Naḥum Tsemah Meyased Habima Ba-Hazon Uve-Ma 'as'* (Jerusalem: ha-Sifriyah ha-tsiyonit, 1966), 157–58.

5. Raikin Ben-Ari, *Habima*, trans. A. H. Gross and I. Soref; foreword by Harold Clurman (New York: T. Yoseloff, 1957), 58–60 (original in English).

6. Anatoly Lunacharsky (1875–1933): playwright, the first Soviet commissar of enlightenment (1917–29), and an influential advocate for pluralism in the early Soviet arts. Feodor Chaliapin (1873–1938): Russia's greatest operatic bass and the actor on whom Stanislavsky is said to have based his system. Chaliapin emigrated to France in early 1922, not long after he saw *The Dybbuk*.

7. Natan Al'tman, "Moia rabota nad 'Gadibukom,'" in *Evgenii Vakhtangov: Sbornik*, ed. L. D. Vendrovskaiia and G. P. Kaptereva (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1984), 390.

8. Ben-Ari, *Habima*, 52–54 (original in English).

9. Aleksandr Karev, "Na repetitsiakh 'Gadibuka,'" in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov: Dokumenty*, 2:532–33.

10. Bialik translated *The Dybbuk* from An-sky's original Russian into modern Hebrew. Habima adopted "Sephardic inflection," however, as an attempt "to be closer to the 'original' modulation of biblical Hebrew" and to move intentionally away from the more familiar Ashkenazi pronunciation, a possible explanation for why most reviewers and even Vakhtangov mistakenly thought Habima was performing in ancient Hebrew. See Abeliovich, *Possessed Voices*, 144.

11. Mikhail Chekhov, "Zhizn' i vstrechi," in Vendrovskaiia and Kaptereva, *Evgenii Vakhtangov*, 394 (original emphasis).

12. Evgenii Vakhtangov, "Vstupitel'noe slovo k general'noi repetitsii 'Gadibuka,'" in Vendrovskaiia and Kaptereva, *Evgenii Vakhtangov*, 389. These remarks by Vakhtangov are from a spring 1921 showing of the first two acts of *The Dybbuk*.

13. Serafima Birman, "Chelovek neugasimoi strasti," in Vendrovskaiia and Kaptereva, *Evgenii Vakhtangov*, 396–97. Vakhtangov's birthday was February 13 (February 1, Old Style). Born in 1883, he died of stomach cancer on May 29, 1922.

14. For more on An-sky's Russian original, long thought to be lost but discovered in the Saint Petersburg State Theater Library in 2001, see Vladislav Ivanov's introduction to "S. An-sky, *Between Two Worlds*, (*The Dybbuk*): Censored Variant," trans. Anne Eakin Moss, in *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 361–73. Ivanov's essay is followed by a full English translation of an early Russian draft. The prologue and epilogue of this early four-act version were cut and several characters changed by the time An-sky gave the play to Bialik to translate into Hebrew. Ivanov, introduction, 371.

15. Many parts were double cast, for Moscow performances and in subsequent tours. The first actor listed is typically the primary actor to play that role.

16. The 1922 cast list is from Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 272.

17. Ne-Teatral [G. P. Struve?], "Gadibuk' v 'Gabime,'" *Vozrozhdeniie* (Paris), July 1, 1926, 4, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 353.

18. The act 2 wedding scene.

19. Aaron Glanz-Leyeles, "Obraztsovaia postanovka ('Gadibuk')," New York, February 1927, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 389–90, from the Russian typescript in the David Nahum Zemach collection, Israel Goor Theatre Archives and Museum, Hebrew University, Jerusalem. A published Hebrew version appears in Norman, *Be-reshit Habima*, 356–58.

20. Glanz-Leyeles, "Obraztsovaia postanovka," in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 390–91.

21. Kaynar, "National Theatre as Colonized Theatre," 8.

22. Nadezhda Bromlei, "Put' iskatel'ia," in *Vakhtangov: Materialy i stat'i*, ed. L. D. Vendrovskaiia (Moscow: Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo, 1959), 325.

23. Production photos reveal that this was a *tallit*, a traditional Jewish prayer shawl, though the reviews I consulted do not identify it as such, instead referring to it simply as a cloth.

24. Samuel Margolin, "Gadibuk. Teatr ekstasa," *Ekran*, February 7–13, 1922, 5–6, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 286–87.

25. Sergei Radlov, "Pis'ma o teatre. 'Gadibuk,'" *Krasnaia gazeta*, evening edition, June 15, 1923, 3, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 300–301.

26. For a full account of Evseksia's attacks on Habima, see Ivanov, *Russkie sezony*, 42–82.
27. Ivanov, 49.
28. Irina Prokhorova, 1990: *Russians Remember a Turning Point* (London: Quercus, 2013): n.p.
29. Ja. Kārklīņš, *Jaunākās Ziņas* (Riga), January 29, 1926, 3, trans. from Latvian into Russian by T. M. Bartele, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 325.
30. A. Donets-Zakharzhevskii, "Pervyi spektakl' 'Gabimy,'" *Antrakty segodnia* (Riga), January 29, 1926, 7, trans. from Latvian into Russian by T. M. Bartele, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 324.
31. According to Nahma Sandrow, "The Nowósci [sic], a fancy new theater building which Warsaw acquired in 1926, housed primarily Yiddish theater, and is an example of the degree of economic stability and the glamour that the Warsaw Yiddish theater attained. . . . One of the biggest theaters in Warsaw, it seated some two thousand. . . . It was handy to the heart of the Jewish neighborhood . . . as well as to the areas where the Jewish intelligentsia gathered." Sandrow, *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 306–7.
32. Eugeniusz Świerczewski, "Evreiskii teatr 'Gabima' v Varshave," *Echo Warszawskie*, no. 50 (1926), trans. from Polish into Russian by N. O. Iakubova, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 331. The unusually long run time was due to technical difficulties during the first tour performance.
33. Antoni Słonimski, "Teatr 'Gabima,'" *Wiadomości literackie* (Warsaw), March 14, 1926, 3, trans. from Polish into Russian by N. O. Iakubova, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 339.
34. The author refers here to *Der blaue Vogel*, a cabaret founded in Berlin by Russian émigrés.
35. Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, "Ivritskii teatr 'Gabima,'" *Kurier Poranny* (Warsaw), March 1, 1926, trans. from Polish into Russian by N. O. Iakubova, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 330–31. [Note from volume editors: Boy-Żeleński (1874–1941) was a prominent Polish theater critic who regularly reviewed Jewish theater productions and was a major proponent of collaboration between Polish and Jewish theaters.]
36. Jakub Appenzlak, "Evreiskaia Stsena. Ivritskii Teatr 'Gabima.' 'Gadibuk' Anskogo," *Nasz Przegląd* (Warsaw), March 3, 1926, 4, trans. from Polish into Russian by N. O. Iakubova, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 333–34.
37. In 1925, Warsaw's Comedy Theater was renamed the Szkarłatna Maska Theater. Miłaszewski uses the theater's former name. Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 434n101.
38. "Tri interpretatsii 'Gadibuka.' Interviu s zaveduiushchim literaturnoi chast'iu

gorodskikh teatrov S. Miklashevskim. Mneniia D. Germana i A. Morevskogo,” *Nasz Przegląd* (Warsaw), March 7, 1926, 7, trans. from Polish into Russian by N. O. Iakubova, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral’noi kritike*, 337.

39. A reference to the world premiere of *The Dybbuk*, performed by the Vilna Troupe after the thirty-day mourning period following An-sky’s death had ended.

40. “Tri interpretatsii ‘Gadibuka,’” in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral’noi kritike*, 338–39.

41. Letter from Feodor Chaliapin [Fedor Shaliapin], Paris, 1925, written before Habima’s first foreign tour, Israel Goor Theatre Archives and Museum, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, reproduced from Poltavskaia, *Vershiny evreiskogo teatra v rossii*, 66.

42. That is, Yiddish. As Debra Caplan writes, “Until the late nineteenth century, Yiddish was considered inappropriate for art, literature, scholarship, or anything more serious than everyday banter. . . . To Jewish intellectuals, Yiddish was an impure, bastardized form of German, a zhargon (jargon) and not a language. . . . The name Yiddish (meaning ‘Jewish’) became popular only later [in the late nineteenth century] with the emergence of a younger generation of writers who wanted more legitimacy for their literature.” Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 21.

43. V. A., *Neues Wiener Tageblatt* (Vienna), May 30, 1926, trans. from German into Russian by I. V. Kholmogorova, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral’noi kritike*, 341.

44. Felix Salten, “Gastrolī ‘Gabimī,’” *Neue Freie Presse* (Vienna), May 30, 1926, 19, trans. from German into Russian by AAT, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral’noi kritike*, 343. Felix Salten was an Austrian-Jewish writer, author of *Bambi: A Life in the Woods* (1923).

45. Sergei Volkonskii, “Gastrolī teatra ‘Gabima.’ ‘Gadibuk,’” *Posledniye novosti* (Paris), June 30, 1926, 2, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral’noi kritike*, 346.

46. J. Brooks Atkinson, “The Play: *The Dybbuk* in Hebrew,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1926, 24 (original in English).

47. Bernhard Diebold, “Habima,” *Evreiskii teatr* (Berlin), 1928, 5–11, trans. from German into Russian by V. F. Koliazin, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral’noi kritike*, 403–4.

48. “Phoenix Theatre,” *Times* (London), December 30, 1930, 8, Times Digital Archive (original in English).

49. *Galut*: Hebrew and Yiddish for the Jewish exile, which extended from the destruction of the Second Temple to the founding of the modern state of Israel. Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral’noi kritike*, 442n145.

50. Itzhak Norman, “O ‘Gadibuke’ (Obryvochnye zamechaniia),” *Davar* (Tel

Aviv), May 3, 1928, 2–3, trans. from Hebrew into Russian by B. A. Entin, in Ivanov, *Evgenii Vakhtangov v teatral'noi kritike*, 409–10.

51. Gods: theater slang for the inexpensive upper gallery seats.

52. Quidnunc [David Goitein], “In a Few Lines,” *Palestine Bulletin* (Jerusalem), December 10, 1931, 3 (original in English).

53. Hani Seligsohn, “The Tale of Habima” (2022), 5, Archive of the Habima Theater, accessed December 15, 2022, <http://archive.habima.co.il/media/1448/the-tale-of-habima-2022.pdf>

54. Brooks Atkinson, “At the Theatre: Palestine’s Habimah Players Revive *The Dybbuk* Here as Homeland Faces Crisis,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1948, 26 (original in English).

55. Seligsohn, “The Tale of Habima,” 6 (“logo”); David B. Green, “This Day in Jewish History, 1980: A Woman Who Thought What Moscow Needed Is Hebrew Theater Dies,” *Haaretz*, February 2, 2016.

56. Bernard Reich and David H. Goldberg, *Historical Dictionary of Israel* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 422 (“first lady”); “Hanna Rovina Dead at 90,” *JTA Daily News Bulletin*, February 4, 1980, 4.

## *Between Worlds*

### Mark Arnshteyn/Andrzej Marek's Polish *Dybbuk*

Rachel Merrill Moss

By the mid-1920s, theater audiences in newly sovereign Poland had already been saturated by the Vilna Troupe's highly successful Yiddish production of *The Dybbuk*. Nonetheless, the 1925 world premiere of the first Polish-language version of the play still attracted the attention of the public. This was due in large part to its content, but also due to Mark Arnshteyn's openness about his Polish adaptation of this Jewish play being an undoubtedly "political act" furthering Polish-Jewish understanding.<sup>1</sup> The Polish *Dybbuk* was intended to serve as a cultural corollary to the more politically focused Polish-Jewish clubs and organizations of the time. As Michael C. Steinlauf has written, "in the highly charged national atmosphere of interwar Poland . . . to produce Jewish plays on the Polish stage was much more than an artistic event; it was to stride unavoidably into the political arena."<sup>2</sup> And for the translator and director at the heart of the project, the move was also personal: a man who embraced his Jewishness and his Polishness equally, as displayed by his use of two names—Mark Arnshteyn or Andrzej Marek, depending on the context—Arnshteyn had already established himself as someone existing in two worlds, in Yiddish and in Polish. In essence, Arnshteyn represents the cultural microcosm of the interwar period; working on both sides of the Jewish and non-Jewish Polish aisle, he represents the possibility of a cultural model within which Jewish and Polish material could flow fluidly.

Even with his transparently political motivations, Arnshteyn got so far as to have a written contract for a world premiere production in Warsaw with



Leon Schiller—perhaps the most famous director in interwar Poland—though the production was soon postponed and then dissolved completely before rehearsals began.<sup>3</sup> In an interview chronicling the production history of his *Dybbuk* in the acclaimed, Warsaw-based Yiddish periodical *Literarische bleter* (Literary Pages), Arnshteyn discussed his initially promising partnership with Schiller, who was artistic director at the time for the Bogusławski Polish Theater (Teatr Polski im. Bogusławskiego) in Warsaw. According to Arnshteyn, Schiller signed a production contract because he was “in love with *The Dybbuk*,” before shortly “cooling” and eventually canceling it.<sup>4</sup>

But Arnshteyn remained undeterred in his efforts to stage his Polish translation of *The Dybbuk*, and he eventually found a willing partner in Kazimierz Wróczyński, artistic director of the Łódź Municipal Theater (Teatr Miejski w Łodzi), where Arnshteyn’s Polish *Dybbuk* would premiere on April 18, 1925. In the same *Literarische bleter* interview, Arnshteyn discussed how impressed he was with the dedication of the resident acting company to the Jewish material and its foreignness, though during the process he had to help them shy away from the Polish acting tendency to offer stereotypical portrayals of Jews onstage, a practice so engrained that it even had its own term in Polish: *żydłaczenie*, or to use a pejorative Jewish intonation or accent.<sup>5</sup>

Despite that acting tendency of the time, the newly adapted version of *The Dybbuk* offered the Polish actors ample characterization to explore, much as its Yiddish-language predecessor had done. While the bulk of the play’s narrative remained stable in Arnshteyn’s “free” translation, it was shortened from four acts down to three, with the last two acts (both set in Miropol and involving the convening of the rabbinical court and the case brought against Sender by the deceased Nissen) combined.<sup>6</sup> Arnshteyn also radically altered the character of the Messenger, which had been one of the more critically discussed characters from the Vilna Troupe production.<sup>7</sup> Arnshteyn augmented this role by cutting the character of Reb Shimshon, who is originally tasked with stating that he had been visited by the spirit of Khonen’s long-deceased father, thereby unveiling the ultimate cause of the dybbuk’s possession. In Arnshteyn’s version, the Messenger revealed this mystical information. This brought the Messenger’s mystical presence into much sharper relief, underscoring notions likely already obvious to Jewish audiences, but that perhaps needed to be plucked out for non-Jewish ones. This element in the Messenger’s character exists more in the margins in the Yiddish version, though even in the original, that character’s allusion to the

mythical figure of the Wandering Jew and the wandering Jewish prophet Elijah is already evident. With Arnshteyn's edits, the Messenger was pointedly represented as a character in possession of otherworldly knowledge.

Arnshteyn attested that his ultimate motivation behind staging *The Dybbuk* in Polish was his desire to help, in whatever way possible, improve Polish-Jewish relations. Pointedly, he stated, "each should do all that is possible in order to improve Jewish-Polish relations. . . . Maybe an artist would have more success? . . . Of all firsts, *The Dybbuk* on the Polish stage ought to be the first step."<sup>8</sup> And if anyone was going to attempt to stage *The Dybbuk* in Polish, Arnshteyn was primed for the task. Long having occupied both of the cultural worlds of interwar Warsaw, he "managed steadfastly to pursue a literary and theatrical career devoted in equal measure to creation in both Polish and Yiddish."<sup>9</sup>

Arnshteyn truly believed in the possibility for Polish-Jewish cultural partnership to be forged through theatrical collaboration. In particular, he hoped—despite the complex context of Polish-Jewish relations of the interwar period—"to build a bridge between Polish and Jewish societies' on the basis of dramatic art."<sup>10</sup> His push to stage his Polish translation of *The Dybbuk* must be considered within that intention. And, as the Łódź and Warsaw productions and their reception reveal, the complexities of such a goal were understood by audiences and critics, who exhibited a nuanced range of reactions to it.

Jewish critics of the period were skeptical about the long-term, or even immediate, political impact of Arnshteyn's work, especially about his idea of promoting deeper understanding between the two groups by translating Yiddish work to Polish (non-Jewish) audiences. This attitude is evident in the press coverage of the productions: Jewish critics, it would seem, were skeptical to the point of occasional sarcasm with regard to Arnshteyn's oeuvre,<sup>11</sup> whereas Polish critics, who were less familiar with the Jewish literature being adapted on their stages, seemed somewhat more moved by the artistry and foreignness of the performed Jewishness.

To add to the cultural tensions in interwar Warsaw at the time, there was also a level of bitterness among Jewish cultural creators, given the stark contrast in the staging resources between Polish and Yiddish theaters.<sup>12</sup> Jewish material was being performed in Polish theaters with higher production values than anything the impoverished Yiddish theaters could manage at the time.

Nevertheless, *The Dybbuk* received ample critical coverage from both

the Jewish and the Polish non-Jewish press. The perceived “strangeness” (to Polish spectators) encapsulated by the Jewish tale mired in Jewish mysticism and set in a nineteenth-century shtetl<sup>13</sup> managed to enthrall non-Jewish audiences, as well as many Jews who had likely seen the production already in Yiddish.<sup>14</sup> Arnshteyn’s Polish translation both utilized and diminished the original production’s layers of Jewishness—for example, in cutting the additional rebbe character and amplifying the Messenger’s mystical status—making the narrative more accessible to non-Jewish audiences. This attempted legibility became a point of repetition in the Polish press, in that *The Dybbuk* was seen as positioning the Jewish Other in Poland as somehow less foreign by making them more knowable, even in their difference. In his review of the Polish *Dybbuk*, famed theater critic Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński articulated this simultaneous sense of the impenetrable wall between Poles and Jews and the potentiality of new awareness that *The Dybbuk* encapsulated: “When the curtain falls after the third act, we feel that we have returned from a trip to a distant, strange country. And this feeling of strangeness is intensified by the awareness that this distant world exists just next to us, only a few streets away.”<sup>15</sup> Despite its potential problematics, could this reading of *The Dybbuk* as a quasi-ethnographic experience, in which the theatrical world was mapped onto real-life Jewish experience in Poland, create space for the cultural meeting ground Arnshteyn sought?

Coverage following *The Dybbuk*’s Łódź premiere suggested that possibility. The review that ran in the Jewish, Polish-language periodical *Nasz Przegląd* (Our Review) on April 24, 1925, included a brief interview with the president of the Municipal Council of Łódź, who stated how the production changed his opinion of his “gray” Jewish neighbors seen at a distance on the city streets. Reflecting his new, post-*Dybbuk* perception, he stated, “how much colorful life, how much enthusiasm does this gray religious crowd conceal?”<sup>16</sup> This conflation of reality and theater—comparing the living Jewish community with the performed one—is key to understanding the weight with which this *Dybbuk* production was imbued within the broader cultural context of this moment.

This air of authenticity—or, perhaps more pointedly, the sense of the play offering some specialized insight into the inner workings of the Jewish community and thereby being educational to outsiders—was present even within the earlier Yiddish productions of *The Dybbuk*. As Debra Caplan has noted, even from the play’s first production, back in December 1920, “for non-Jews . . . the experience was unlike anything else that they had ever seen

or heard before, an invitation into the inner sanctum of the Jewish religious practice in a secular public space."<sup>17</sup> It was the same with the Polish production, if not more so, thanks to the translation of the work making it more "accessible" to non-Jewish, Polish audiences.

Reactions to the Polish *Dybbuk* and its impact were divided. On one side, Ber Karlinski, the longtime editor of the Yiddish newspaper *Der moment*, went so far as to suggest that the understanding formed through the production marked an important moment of Jewish-Polish cultural "breakthrough."<sup>18</sup> On the other side, some Jewish critics saw the Polish *Dybbuk* production as a sign of the artistic impotence of the professional Yiddish theater. For example, Nakhmen Mayzel's review in *Literarische bleter* spent equal time highly praising the Polish production and damning what he saw as the sorry state of the inadequate and lowly Yiddish theater in comparison.<sup>19</sup> His review suggests that the Polish theater, even taking highly Jewish material, *still* triumphs over the Jewish theater in its production value, from acting to set design. Mayzel closed his review by stating that at least we might hope the Polish *Dybbuk* will serve as an impetus to boost the quality of future Yiddish productions.

The play proved to be the most popular offering of the Łódź Municipal Theater's 1924–25 season. It ran for a total of thirty-eight performances, selling nearly nineteen thousand tickets and dwarfing the statistics for other productions of the season.<sup>20</sup> *The Dybbuk* accounted for almost 13 percent of all the theater's viewers in 1924–25.<sup>21</sup> Given these figures, it is easy to believe that the Polish *Dybbuk* was indeed a "record-breaking success."<sup>22</sup> Directly following the Łódź production, Arnshteyn's Polish *Dybbuk* quickly found its way to a Warsaw production, despite previous difficulties. In the recently opened Scarlet Mask (*Szkarłatna Maska*) Theater at 3 Jasna Street, the Polish *Dybbuk* premiered on May 29, 1925, less than six weeks after its premiere in Łódź.<sup>23</sup> While neither the Łódź nor the Warsaw staging of the Polish *Dybbuk* matched the run length or audience size of the Vilna Troupe production, they nonetheless inspired critical, thoughtful debate that engaged both sides of the cultural divide.<sup>24</sup>

Karlinski wrote a lengthy review of the Warsaw production in early June 1925, insisting that Arnshteyn's Polish *Dybbuk* was the first significant performance of Yiddish theatrical material transferred to the Polish cultural sphere, powerfully articulating the production's importance.<sup>25</sup> His article begins, "however wild and naive it may be: it is, nevertheless, a date to remember in the history of the Polish stage in Warsaw. If you will—even in

the history of the Jewish-Polish relations." Karlinski describes Arnshteyn's translation as "excellent" and even clarifies "that this play is not only good but perfectly tailored to the Polish stage," having trimmed what he considers "the excessive folkloric baggage" of the original.<sup>26</sup> For Karlinski, the production offered a platform for presenting Jewish characters on the Polish stage who were devoid of the pitfalls of the "stage Jew" type that was all too prevalent in Polish theater of the period: "[On] a Polish stage, and the impression here [of the Jewish world is] truly excellent. . . . The Jews of *The Dybbuk* on the Polish stage do not shock anyone, do not insult, do not elicit mockery or ridicule through their characteristic shapelessness, which is usually compounded into cheap caricature. They develop on the stage into interesting, even sympathetic human figures [of] standing, who possess their own internalized, rich spiritual lives."<sup>27</sup> Karlinski's discussion provides valuable insight into the ongoing prevalence of unflattering Jewish character types on the Polish stage, while underscoring the importance of the Polish *Dybbuk* for eschewing such stock characterizations.

In closing, Karlinski again highlights the significance of the performance. He paints an evocative image of the utopian, cross-cultural moment being offered to the audience: "In the attractive, comfortable hall of the 'Scarlet Mask' sit Jews and non-Jews . . . the best of the Warsaw intelligentsia. . . . The words, the *Jewish* words from the stage, are listened to intently and seriously. The performance forces you to go along with it. . . . Here and there, an eye in which a tear gleams. The curtain falls—the whole auditorium applauds warmly and sincerely. You leave a happy person! Something has been broken through!"<sup>28</sup> While Karlinski's vision of the change that might be brought about by the Polish *Dybbuk* was ultimately unfulfilled, it reveals a desire for cross-cultural understanding and the belief that theater was uniquely capable of bringing that to fruition.

Even within the Jewish community, however, there were fractured viewpoints about whether such cross-cultural strivings were desirable, let alone actually possible. A 1926 article penned by Hillel Zeitlin, longtime journalist for both *Haynt* (Today) and *Der moment*, contextualized all three *Dybbuk* iterations from a six-year span in the interwar period: the Yiddish world premiere in 1920, the Polish premiere in 1925, and the touring Hebrew-language Habima production from the Yiddish Art Theater in Moscow, which came through Warsaw in 1926. In his three-part essay, Zeitlin was dismissive of the kind of Jewishness that the non-Jewish, Polish public was being offered by the Polish *Dybbuk*, let alone what the general public was

taking away from the production. Rather scathingly, he described his experience of the production, evidently having watched both the performance and its audience:

[The Polish *Dybbuk* production] is a beautiful thing, but not my thing. Not a Jewish thing. The “Tsadik” in the Polish *Dybbuk* was indeed a holy man, indeed a hero, but—you know—not at all a Jewish holy man and not at all a Jewish hero. . . . I observed the Christian spectators of *The Dybbuk* and sensed that they in essence are also very strange. . . . For them, [the Polish *Dybbuk*] is an exotic thing. They’ve thought to themselves: we understand nothing of this piece performed here. . . . No doubt, this is how a Jew lives.<sup>29</sup>

Zeitlin’s skepticism is palpable and indeed echoes the Polish, non-Jewish press coverage, which exemplifies the kind of reduction he describes. Some reviewers seemed to take for granted that the “Jewishness” presented onstage was something of an ethnographic insight into the “exotic” world one street away.

Another prominent critical approach involved examining the work through Polish cultural corollaries. Some critics, Boy-Żeleński included, saw *The Dybbuk* now cast into the world of Polish Romanticism, bringing the two cultural worlds into a kind of alignment.<sup>30</sup> Boy-Żeleński’s review touched on a number of underlying commentaries at play in the Warsaw premiere, including its task in translating the Jewish religio-cultural material for a non-Jewish audience and its parallelism to Adam Mickiewicz’s nineteenth-century ghost-filled Polish romantic epic *Dziady* (Forefathers’ Eve). Boy-Żeleński specifically parallels the narrative of unrequited love with the story of Gustaw (Konrad) from *Dziady*—the tragic spirit whose beloved rejects him for another in one part of the play’s ritualistic contemplation of spirits of the dead—though he also acknowledges that this plotline runs through much of romantic literature.

Romantic parallels aside, Boy-Żeleński saw—or at the very least wrote about—the play as an analogy for the distance between Jews and Poles. Nevertheless, in service to culturally translating *The Dybbuk*’s mystical Jewish framing, he incorporated Polish and Catholic interpretations of a number of elements within the plot. For example, he aligned the character of the Messenger with Conscience, perhaps as a means of closing the ethnoreligious gap between the two peoples. Speaking directly to the Polish audience,

Boy-Żeleński closed his review: “You have heard so much about this *Dybbuk* that it is good some theater has finally introduced us to this interesting spectacle.”<sup>31</sup> While this points to a somewhat reductive purpose for the Polish staging of the play, it nonetheless places high value on Arnshteyn’s work and the Polish *Dybbuk* itself as being a desired—and highly anticipated—transfer from Jewish to Polish cultural spheres.

Other Polish critics also responded to Arnshteyn’s *Dybbuk*. Writing for the *Robotnik* (Worker), the newspaper of the Polish Socialist Party, Karol Irzykowski was a prominent and frequently outspoken cultural critic and writer.<sup>32</sup> Irzykowski’s coverage of the Warsaw Polish *Dybbuk* production ran across two issues of *Robotnik*, offering both an in-depth synopsis of An-sky’s narrative and a broad contextualization of the production. Irzykowski argued that An-sky took inspiration from folklore but used it as a message to modernize. That sort of gesture, Irzykowski argued, “will be the true futurism.”<sup>33</sup> As such, Irzykowski inadvertently recognized the various literary pathways that had inspired An-sky to shape his narrative in this way, drawing not just from his ethnographic work, but also from popular *Has-kalah* (Jewish Enlightenment) literature, which was highly dismissive of the traditionalism that dictated the core issue in *The Dybbuk*: marriage.

*Echo Warszawskie* (Warsaw Echo) joined in the chorus of Polish press reviews in both praising the work and aligning it in some way with the existing Polish canon. Unlike Irzykowski and Boy-Żeleński, however, Bolesław Fruhling (writing under the pen name Jacek Fr.) compared *The Dybbuk* with previously performed work on Jewish themes written by non-Jewish, Polish authors. He compared it with *Małka Szwarcenkopf* (1897), which had been the first popular theatrical success on the Polish stage to feature only non-stereotypical Jewish characters.<sup>34</sup> Its author, Gabriela Zapolska, had written the play as way to depict her Jewish neighbors in a realistic fashion, something that had never yet been done, during a time in which some Polish theaters were beginning to cater to Jewish audiences.

The review that ran in *Słowo* (Word), while largely neutral, emphasized that *The Dybbuk* had Polish cultural parallels, much as Boy-Żeleński had. The review stated, “for Jews, it is like our *Dziady* and *Wesele* taken together.”<sup>35</sup> Again referencing Mickiewicz’s *Dziady*, this review also included perhaps the most famous turn-of-the-century Polish avant-garde play, Stanisław Wyspiański’s play *Wesele* (The Wedding, 1901), which features a Jewish country girl as a love interest; the review gestured both to the saturation

of these cultural commodities in interwar Poland, and to the way in which Arnshteyn's *Dybbuk* was being read as in conversation with them.<sup>36</sup>

All three plays—*Wesele*, *Dziady*, and *The Dybbuk*—are set in the late nineteenth century, include narrative plot points about ill-suited romantic partnerships, and feature folk or mystical elements such as ghosts and spirits. All three also deal with questions of nationalism, nationhood, and the longevity or precarity of peoplehood, though they approach these themes in very different ways. All three plays are also set in premodern locales that are experiencing the transition from traditionalism to modernism in sometimes violent ways. While their overlap can be attributed in part to the historical circumstances of the geographic area they stemmed from, the narrative parallels between these plays remain significant.

Whether through discursive embrace or negation of Polish canonical crossover, the ascribed intersection of Polish and Jewish culture that *The Dybbuk* seemed to invoke is revealing—not only in terms of the level at which the press at the time was engaged with the cultural legacies being narrativized in the early years of the Second Polish Republic, but also in the ways that Jewish material was being considered. There is a noticeable tension between the notion of the influence of Jewish material *on* the Polish canon and that of the inclusion of Jewish material *within* the Polish canon. On the one hand, the reviewers' emphasis on the dramatic parallels between *The Dybbuk* and these Polish canonical plays points to an attempt at recategorizing or recalibrating previous conceptions of Jewish theater by placing it on a level with European (i.e., Polish) work. Critical responses to *The Dybbuk* that compared it to *Wesele* and *Dziady*, therefore, either inadvertently or intentionally positioned Jewish theater (through *The Dybbuk*) as a representative work of Jewish culture and nation, on par with European theatrical work of the time.

At the same time, this comparative alignment of *The Dybbuk* with Polish canonical works suggests a willful positioning of Jewish work within the Polish canon, albeit perhaps as something aspirational rather than authentic. Jewish critics at the time were certainly keen to frame Jewish material as occupying the same cultural position as Polish work, which benefited greatly from both a longer history and state funding—two things Yiddish theater in Poland simply did not have. Polish critics, on the other hand, would have had little incentive to include the Jewish work within their own fold, were it not deemed artistically compelling and worthy of such consideration. In



this sense, then, by making comparisons between *The Dybbuk* and canonical Polish work, Polish critics were alluding to the possibility of Jewish material being somehow in conversation with—if not included in—the Polish canon.

Arnshteyn's Polish-language *Dybbuk* serves as a valuable testament to its cultural moment and context. This very first Yiddish-to-Polish translation of S. An-sky's play is, like the subtitle of its source material, itself a document from between two worlds. A Polish-Jewish, Jewish-Polish, Polish and Jewish thing from across cultural divides, this Polish *Dybbuk* captured the crux of an important conversation in Poland about the place of Jewishness in Polish culture, society, and history. It is a time capsule of experimentation in cultural transmission, created by a man who, as his own two names would attest, split his identity across the two sides of the interwar Polish cultural divide. Indeed, Arnshteyn's translation of *The Dybbuk* was more than a mere attempt to expand and capitalize on audiences. While it garnered successful productions in both Łódź and Warsaw in 1925, his Polish *Dybbuk* evidenced the ability of both Jewish and Polish material to bridge the divide separating the two cultures, at least by offering cultural—and, more problematically, seemingly ethnographic—access to the “distant lands” separated by only a few city blocks. Furthermore, though Arnshteyn could not have known it then, his *Dybbuk* was a crucial early installment in what has become an unending line of performances reckoning with Polish-Jewish history and cultural overlap in Poland, as Michael C. Steinlauf and Agnieszka Legutko's chapters in this collection explore. The theatrical and cultural lineage that has brought *The Dybbuk*—in Yiddish and Polish, and in many forms—to the stage over the past century in Poland spans through wartime, the communist period, and into the present day, in nuanced dialogue with changing political, cultural, and national narratives.

## Notes

1. Michael C. Steinlauf, “Mark Arnshteyn and the Polish-Jewish Theater,” in *The Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars*, ed. Yisrael Gutman et al. (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), 404. Steinlauf mentions the ongoing negotiations between the Polish government and the Galician Zionist leaders at that time.

2. Steinlauf, 404.

3. By the end of the interwar period, Schiller did direct a significant Polish-Jewish collaboration: the world premiere of Aaron Zeitlin's Yiddish translation of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in 1938–39. Mark Arnshteyn, interview, *Literarishe bleter*, April 30, 1925, 2 (in Yiddish). All Yiddish and Polish translations are by the author unless otherwise noted.

4. Arnshteyn, 2.

5. Arnshteyn, 2. Stereotypical portrayals of Jews are mentioned in Jakób Apenszlak, "Scena polska," *Nasz Przegląd*, May 30, 1925, 3; May 31, 1925, 5. They are also discussed by Debra Caplan in *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 61: "[Leyb] Kadison's entreaties asking the actors to avoid pathos, superfluous gestures, and excessive face making reflects an underlying anxiety about Jews being perceived as improperly theatrical. Antisemitic rhetoric of the period often portrayed Jews as excessive in speech, gestures, and affect—and thus dangerous in their ability to lead the righteous astray. Similarly, European popular culture associated Jews with melodrama."

6. The script itself and the press coverage for Arnshteyn's Polish *Dybbuk* list it as having been a "free" translation or adaptation, though the most significant change is the collapse of acts 3 and 4 together. I have not, as yet, found an explanation for why "free" was used to denote the adaptation, especially when it hewed so closely to Ansky's original. Additionally, as Debra Caplan notes in her chapter in this collection, the Vilna Troupe's production of *The Dybbuk* in Yiddish also trimmed the original script's four acts down to three.

7. Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 101: "Ironically, the additions that [Arn] Aynhorn cited as especially egregious would later become two of the most iconic elements in future productions of *The Dybbuk*: the dance of death and the expressionist Messenger."

8. Arnshteyn, interview, 2.

9. Steinlauf, "Mark Arnshteyn," 400.

10. Steinlauf, 401.

11. Steinlauf, 406.

12. Steinlauf, 406.

13. See commentary in Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's review: "Teatr 'Szkarłatna Maszka.' *Dybuk*, legenda dramatyczna w trzech aktach Sz. Anskiego. Wolny przekład, reżyseria i inscenizacja Andrzeja Marka. Dekoracje Józefa Wodyńskiego (29 May 1925)." In Boy-Żeleński, *Flirt z Melpomeną, Wieczór szósty* (Warsaw: Księgarnia F. Hośicka, 1926), 52–58.

14. See "Prasa polska o premierze 'Dybuka' na scenie polskiej," *Nasz Przegląd*, June 1, 1925, 4, which suggests that the majority of theatergoers for the Warsaw Polish *Dybbuk* production were Jewish.

15. Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, *Pisma* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo PIW, 1964), 22:323.
16. Leski, “Dybuk’ na scenie polskiej w Łodzi,” *Nasz Przegląd*, April 24, 1925, 4. Although Jakób Appenzlak’s most commonly used pseudonym was Pierrot, Eleonora Udalska attributes this Leski article to Appenzlak (Udalska, “Dybuk na scenach polskich,” in *Teatr Żydowski w Polsce: Materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej*, ed. Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Małgorzata Leyko [Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1998], 169).
17. Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 90.
18. B. Karlinius [Ber Karlinski], “Teater notitzen. Der dibek af a poylisher bine,” *Der moment*, June 6, 1925, Esther-Rokhl Kaminska Theater Museum (RG8), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.
19. Mayzel was one of the founders of *Literarische bleter* in 1924 and served as editor from 1925 to 1939. He was an outspoken critic of *shund* (trash) in Yiddish literature. See Mayzel [N. M.], “Der ‘Dibek’ in poylish: tsvishn undz gered,” *Literarische bleter*, June 19, 1925, 5.
20. Łódź Municipal Theater [Teatr Miejski w Łodzi], keepsake season program, 1922–27, Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi.
21. The one production in the 1924–25 season that remotely approached the popularity of *The Dybbuk* was *Galganek* (*Scampolo*) by Italian playwright Dario Niccodemi, which performed twenty-seven times for 14,066 audience members. Strangely, in the keepsake program commemorating the Municipal Theater’s 1922–27 seasons, *Galganek* is credited as having been the record-breaking play in terms of viewership that season, when the theater’s accounting records very clearly state otherwise.
22. “Widowiska, koncerty i zabawy. Teatr miejski,” *Głos Polski*, May 20, 1925, 5.
23. The Scarlet Mask Theater opened on March 8, 1925, though it shuttered quickly half a year later, on September 30. Its site, 3 Jasna Street, may have formerly been the “Comedy Theater.” Eva Helevke, “Teatr Szkarłatna Maska,” *Encyklopedia Teatru*, 2017, <https://encyklopediateatru.pl/teatry-i-zespoły/2198/teatr-szkarlat-na-maski>. The Łódź production would continue to run—though in repertory, not in a sit-down production—until June 20, 1925, overlapping with the Warsaw production for nearly a month.
24. Eleonora Udalska, “Dybuk na scenach polskich,” in *Teatr Żydowski w Polsce: Materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej*, ed. Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Małgorzata Leyko (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1998), 172. And indeed, neither production run of the Polish *Dybbuk* escapes critical comparison to the Vilna Troupe production in coverage: almost all reviews make a point of comparing the Yiddish and Polish versions, though some more favorably than others. For example, Jakób Appenzlak, writing for *Nasz Przegląd*, states that the Polish version of *The Dybbuk* should not be compared to

the Vilna Troupe's since the latter was the original, whereas Jacek Fr. [Bolesław Fruhling], writing for *Echo Warszawskie*, writes that the Polish *Dybbuk* cast need not be ashamed of comparison to the Vilna Troupe. Appenzlak, "Scena polska," May 31, 1925, 5; Fr., "Dybuk' Legenda dramatyczna w 3-ch aktach S. An-skiego. Wolny przekład i inscenizacja Andrzeja Marka. Premjera w Teatrze Szkarłatna Maska," *Echo Warszawskie*, May 30, 1925, 4.

25. Karlinski knew the Yiddish *Dybbuk* intimately, and had actually written a lengthy program note for the Vilna Troupe's world premiere of *The Dybbuk*.

26. Karlinius, "Teater notitzen." In the article, Karlinski uses Arnshteyn's Polish name, Andrzej Marek.

27. Karlinius.

28. Karlinius (original emphasis).

29. Hillel Zeitlin, "Dray 'Dibukim," part 2, *Der moment*, April 2, 1926, 5 (original emphasis).

30. Boy-Żeleński, *Flirt z Melpomeną*, 55.

31. Boy-Żeleński, 58.

32. Irzykowski and Boy-Żeleński were often at odds with each other.

33. Karol Irzykowski, "Sprawozdanie teatralne," part 2, *Robotnik*, June 9, 1925, 2.

34. Jacek Fr. [Bolesław Fruhling], "Dybuk' Legenda dramatyczna w 3-ch aktach S. An-skiego. Wolny przekład i inscenizacja Andrzeja Marka. Premjera w Teatrze Szkarłatna Maska," *Echo Warszawskie*, May 30, 1925, 4. Michael C. Steinlauf notes the significance of *Malka Szwarcenkopf*: "The play—set entirely in Jewish society (. . . appeared for the first time on the Polish stage 'with an intention other than mockery)'" Steinlauf, "Jews and Polish Theater in Nineteenth Century Warsaw," *Polish Review* 32, no. 4 (1987): 457. The internal quotation is from N.N., "Echa warszawskie," *Przegląd Tygodniowy* (Warsaw), July 17, 1897.

35. Cat., *Słowo*, July 9, 1925, 1.

36. These references are arguably just as relevant today—both *Dziady* and *Wesele* receive frequent revivals in contemporary Poland; both plays were running concurrently as recently as the 2018–19 theatrical season in Warsaw. In an event at the time the review ran, Jakób Appenzlak vehemently denied that An-sky was at all influenced by Polish literature. Rosenówna, G. "REPERTUAR. O inscenizacji 'Dybuka,' z prelekcji p. red. Appenzlaka," *Nasz Przegląd*, June 29, 1925, summarizing a lecture given on June 10.

# *The Dybbuk*

## The Movie(s)

J. Hoberman

S. An-sky's *Dybbuk* had scarcely materialized on the stage when it began, intermittently but inexorably, to haunt the movies, first in Poland before World War II, and then, as televised after the war, in the United States.

Each *Dybbuk* film has a meaning all its own, but just as An-sky's play would exemplify Yiddish theater, so the 1937 film version came to epitomize Yiddish cinema and even a lost Jewish-Polish civilization. The movie, directed by Michał Waszyński, was not only the most atmospheric and "artistic" of Yiddish talkies but arguably the greatest international success of the pre-World War II Polish film industry.

From the opening image of a candlelit synagogue, through the scenes in a rabbinical court and the nightmarish dances that accompany the unconsummated wedding, to the climactic exorcism scene, Waszyński's 1937 *Dybbuk* (*Der dibek*) is a film bathed in music and steeped in religious ritual—as well as superstition and supernaturalism—a spectacle that is also a complex and ambiguous love story.

Given its prestigious source, this most ambitious of Yiddish talking pictures involved much of literary and theatrical Warsaw. The initial impetus came from Ludwig Prywes, who claimed that his uncle Naftali Prywes was the financier for the original 1920 Vilna Troupe production of the play.<sup>1</sup> Prywes persuaded two distinguished men of letters, the playwright Mark Arnshteyn (Andrzej Marek), who had translated *The Dybbuk* into Polish back in 1925, and the author-photographer Alter Kacyzne, An-sky's literary executor, to write the screenplay. Meir Balaban, the founding father of Polish Jewish historiography, served as a consultant.

According to legend, the film's producer, Zygfryd Mayflauer, attempted

to secure the services of the German-American director Ernst Lubitsch, then the best-known Jewish filmmaker in Hollywood, and, failing to do so, recruited the “Polish Lubitsch,” as Waszyński was known.<sup>2</sup> The prolific stage composer Henekh Kon supplied the score. (“In my whole life I never approached a work with such devotion,” he wrote in the widely circulated Yiddish journal *Literarische bleter*.)<sup>3</sup> Kon’s then wife, the dancer Judith Berg, choreographed the film’s half-dozen dance sequences. Berg, like Kon, was a Yiddish modernist who grew up in a Hasidic environment and took Hasidic folk forms as the basis for a new Jewish art.

The performers spanned several theatrical generations. Playing the Miropoler Rebbe, the distinguished actor Avrom Morevsky re-created the role he had originated in the 1920 Vilna Troup production. Isaac Samberg, another veteran of the Vilna Troupe, and a specialist in proletarian and gangster parts (as well an organizer for the Yiddish Actors Union), was cast as the mysterious Messenger. Leon Liebgold and Lili Liliana, a young couple associated with the satirical troupe *Yidishe Bande*, played the ill-fated lovers, Khonen and Leah. (Indeed, Liliana had just performed Leah in a stage *Dybbuk* production in Riga, with Liebgold, Molly Picon’s love object in the 1936 Yiddish talkie *Yidl mitn fidl* [Yiddle with His Fiddle], playing the Messenger.) The veteran actor Moyshe Lipman, a stalwart of the Warsaw Yiddish Art Theater, who played a similar character in the silent film *ur-Dybbuk*, *Tkies-kaf* (The Vow, 1924), was cast as Leah’s father, Sender. Polish actress Ida Kamińska’s cousin Dina Halpern, herself cast in a secondary role, recalled that actors were “handpicked” from Warsaw’s various Yiddish ensembles and that most had prior experience in theatrical *Dybbuks*: “Many of us were veterans of many different stage productions, [and] every person connected with the film production felt privileged, even the extras. . . . It was much more than a choice assignment.”<sup>4</sup>

Expanding on the Vilna Troupe production, characterized by Debra Caplan as “something of an edgy, experimental musical,” Waszyński’s *Dybbuk* was an astute popularization.<sup>5</sup> Running two hours, the film drastically streamlines the original dialogue and, by adding an extensive new prologue, reveals a crucial plot element in the first half hour. Taking a cue from the 1924 Polish-Jewish film *Tkies-kaf*, which itself drew on elements of *The Dybbuk*, Kacyzne and Arnshteyn’s script supplies an extensive prologue in which the yeshiva students Nissen (Gershon Lemberger) and Sender (Moyshe Lipman) pledge their unborn children in marriage.

Since the material was already so familiar to audiences, the filmmakers

felt free to rework it as a series of set pieces, almost as though the movie were a serious operetta. Some of these, including the use of “Shir Hashirim” (the Song of Songs) and the interpolation of the *toytntants* (Dance of Death), had been introduced by the Vilna Troupe. Emphasizing *The Dybbuk* as a love story, the film amplified “Shir Hashirim” with several renditions: sung by Nissen in the prologue, the piece is later reprised by his son, Khonen, both performances accompanied by orchestration and vocal choruses, and even briefly hummed by Leah.

The filmmakers created a major part for the popular character actor Max Bozyk as Sender’s servant, who—in keeping with the movie’s emphasis on class relations—adds the perspective of the *proste yid* (unscholarly Jew) to the supernatural happenings. Bozyk is also given a cheerful song, celebrating his work as a drayman. Liliana, an actress with broad experience in *kleynkunst* (cabaret) as well as professional theater similarly gets a chance to demonstrate her surprisingly strong singing voice, with a mournful love ballad that belies her character’s innocence. In addition, Gershon Sirota, the most celebrated cantor in Poland, if not all of Europe at the time, is heard at length chanting a portion of Psalm 115, part of the Hoshanot (special Sukkot prayers).<sup>6</sup>

Berg’s choreography elaborates on and augments the various dances that were features of the Vilna and Habima productions of the play. These include an all-male *freylekhs* (circle dance), a *patshtants* (clapping dance) performed by the wealthy women at Leah’s wedding, and three more choreographed and expressionistic numbers, the “Dance of the Poor,” the “Dance of the Beggars,” and, most memorably, the “Dance of Death,” led by Berg herself and partially inspired, she has said, on her grandmother’s recollection of a *toytntants*.<sup>7</sup>

Finally and perhaps most crucially, the 1937 *Dybbuk* film had the benefit of a popular, versatile showman in its brash, self-mythologizing thirty-three-year-old director Michał Waszyński (1904–65). Considering the Yiddish artists and scholars who contributed to the making of *The Dybbuk*, Waszyński’s biographer Samuel Blumenfeld noted that “in this fraternity, [Waszyński] occupied a special place. Assimilated Jew and homosexual dandy, a commercial filmmaker a priori foreign to the concerns of the Jewish intelligentsia, he was the family idiot.”<sup>8</sup> Citing the ironic title of Jean-Paul Sartre’s massive biography of Gustave Flaubert, Blumenfeld is suggesting that the depth of feeling and knowledge of the material that Waszyński would bring to his *Dybbuk* was unanticipated by his colleagues and would

for years be underacknowledged by commentators on the film, as indeed was the case.

Waszyński broke into movies as an actor in the 1922 film *Zazdrość* (Jealousy), directed by Wiktor Biegański, perhaps the leading Polish director of the silent period, and subsequently served as Biegański's assistant director. Waszyński is credited with making the first sound-on-disc Polish talkie, *Kult ciała* (Cult of the Body), filmed in Vienna in 1930. Over the next decade, he would direct some forty films, virtually all of them moneymakers. (No fewer than eight of these, including *The Dybbuk*, opened in New York between 1934 and 1938.)

Fast and versatile, Waszyński worked in almost every genre—making melodramas, musicals, romantic fantasies, farces, military films, a Polish-Czech coproduction of the Soviet satire *The Twelve Chairs*, even an adventure film shot in Morocco. He was regarded by more intellectually inclined critics as a hack. “What is the use of cinematographic art if it finds itself in the hands of such mediocrity?” the art historian Stefania Zahorska asked, adding that “Waszyński is the shame of Polish cinema.”<sup>9</sup>

The Polish film industry was heavily populated by secular and assimilated Jews, but Waszyński vigorously deemphasized his background, apparently having turned down an offer to direct the hit Yiddish musical *Yidl mitn fidl*.<sup>10</sup> Leon Liebgold recalled that Waszyński directed *The Dybbuk* with a group of “ten or twelve people around him”—including Arnshteyn on hand as translator and so-called *mashgiah* (the person who supervises the kashrut status of a kosher restaurant)—and was assumed to speak no Yiddish, a misconception that Waszyński, uneasy in his Polonization, evidently promoted.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, Yiddish was Waszyński's mother tongue, and his upbringing made him uniquely suited to direct *The Dybbuk*. The son of a blacksmith and the youngest child in a large Hasidic family, he was born Moyshe Waks in the western Ukrainian city of Kovel, less than a decade before An-sky's ethnographic expedition to that region. Not only was Waszyński, as he would rename himself in 1922, native to Volhynia, the very place where An-sky set his play, but his paternal grandparents were also followers of the eighteenth-century messianic apostate Jacob Frank, himself an adherent of the self-proclaimed messiah Sabbatai Zevi.<sup>12</sup> Waszyński received a thorough Jewish education, though, by Blumenfeld's account, he was expelled from his *bet midrash* at fourteen.<sup>13</sup>

Then part of the Russian Empire, Kovel was a railroad hub with a



mixed citizenry of Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews (who constituted over half the population). The town was occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Army in 1915, retaken by the Russians the following year, and, after 1917, contested by Bolsheviks, Ukrainian nationalists, and Poles, who defeated the Red Army in 1920.<sup>14</sup>

By the time Kovel officially became part of Poland, in March 1921, Waszyński was long gone, having relocated to Kyiv, where he studied drama with the Polish tragedienne Stanisława Wysocka, who spent World War I in Kyiv before returning to Warsaw in 1921 to head the new State Dramatic School at the Music Conservatory.

Waszyński's 1937 *Dybbuk* was not the first movie to venture into dybbuk territory. This distinction likely goes to the 1924 silent film *Tkies-kaf*, which starred Ester-Rokhl Kamińska (self-proclaimed mother of Yiddish theater) and her daughter Ida and was directed by Ida's husband, Zygmunt Turkow, who called the movie "a naive *emese mayse* [folktale] with a Jewish moral."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, screenwriter Henryk Bojm's scenario appropriated a bit of the film's premise, as well as its title—the term for the handshake that seals a marriage contract—from a 1907 play by Peretz Hirschbein, itself a ghostly anticipation of *The Dybbuk*.<sup>16</sup>

Opening in the late nineteenth century, *Tkies-kaf* strikes an appropriately supernatural note, with the prophet Elijah (played by Turkow), wide-eyed and hirsute, on the road toward Vilna. There he visits a rabbinical court and witnesses two students, Khaim Kronenberg (Adam Domb, a former Vilna Troupe member) and Borekh Mandel (Moyshe Lipman) making a sacred pledge to unite their unborn children in marriage, the same pledge that Khonen and Leah's fathers make in *The Dybbuk*. Complications ensue before Elijah, abetted by a few prophetic dreams, finally succeeds in bringing together the predestined couple.<sup>17</sup>

*Tkies-kaf* had its premiere in May 1924 at the Rococo, an elegant Warsaw cinema on the fashionable boulevard Nowy Świat. Andrzej Włast, one of the most respected critics of the period, wrote in the Polish monthly *Ekran i Scena* (Screen and Stage) that it was "a film that I can unhesitatingly call the best movie that has been made so far in this country."<sup>18</sup> Infinitely more caustic was the review *Tkies-kaf* received in *Literarische bleter*, which rated the movie as *shund* (trash)—a "mishmash of real matters and total impossibilities, *The Dybbuk* [the play] and the messenger Elijah the Prophet."<sup>19</sup>

The following year, Avrom Morevsky (who had played the role of Reb Azriel in the Vilna Troupe's *Dybbuk*) tried to persuade his friend Wiktor

Biegański to make a *Dybbuk* film, but, according to the Polish film scholar Daria Mazur, the project “stalled at the stage of trial shootings.”<sup>20</sup> At least one other European actor also dreamed of filming An-sky’s poetic drama. In an April 1929 letter to the French writer Yvonne Allendy, playwright and theater director Antonin Artaud announced plans for a film based on An-sky’s *Dybbuk*, “synchronizing the scenes of possession by spirits and exorcism with appropriate shouts and voices.” The film, Artaud noted, would be “to the credit of the Jews.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1930, Habima cofounder Nahum Zemach moved to Hollywood, hoping to make a *Dybbuk* film. Nor was he alone: In 1935, the Yiddish humorist and puppeteer Yosl Cutler died in an automobile accident en route to California, where he had planned to raise money for a movie version of his parody, *The Dybbuk in the Form of a Crisis*, a left-wing satire in which Leah (a.k.a. Prosperity, portrayed as the star actress Mae West) is pledged to marry J. P. Morgan when she is possessed by Khonen, the Dybbuk of Depression, with various secular “rebbe”s—including the Ku Klux Klan, *Forward* editor Abraham Cahan, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt—performing an unsuccessful exorcism.<sup>22</sup>

And, just as Waszyński’s *Dybbuk* was announced, the Leo-Film studio began a sound remake of its hit silent film *Tkies-kaf*, directed by Henryk Szaro and including a number of supporting players from the original cast. The remake scarcely altered the earlier tale of a marriage pact made (and broken) by two yeshiva students on behalf of their unborn children—although the Jewish custom of the week of mourning that follows a death in the family is given pride of place. Turkow once again played the prophet Elijah, who intercedes to ensure the fulfillment of the vow. Three members of *The Dybbuk*’s film cast—Moyshe Lipman, Dina Halpern, and Max Bozyk—appeared in the movie. Lipman had also been in the original, silent version of *Tkies-kaf*.

Labored and a bit perfunctory, the 1937 iteration of *Tkies-kaf* feels nostalgic, both for traditional folkways and for its own earlier, more innocent, and incomparably fresher version. However, the movie’s relationship to *The Dybbuk*, both on stage and screen, was significant. Just as *Tkies-kaf* drew on *The Dybbuk*, so too did Waszyński’s *Dybbuk* film draw on the silent version of *Tkies-kaf*.

Produced at a time of escalating antisemitism in Europe and elsewhere, Waszyński’s *Dybbuk* can be seen as an act of Jewish solidarity. Indeed, the making of the film roughly coincided with preparations for the Nazi propa-

ganda exhibition *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew), which opened in Munich in November 1937 and was shown, the following year, in Vienna and Berlin.<sup>23</sup>

In Poland, nationalist politicians and church leaders blamed the Jewish minority for the country's ills. A debate on kosher slaughtering preoccupied the Polish parliament for two years; at the same time, Poland petitioned the League of Nations for a mandate to relocate its Jewish population to Madagascar.

*The Dybbuk* was filmed during the late spring of 1937 at Warsaw's Feniks studio, using some of the Polish film industry's leading designers and technicians (several of whom were refugees from Nazi Germany). According to actress Dina Halpern, the studio was located in one of Warsaw's "most aristocratic" and "most anti-Semitic" neighborhoods: "The old Jews and the young Jewish boys who came to appear in the film as extras had to run the gauntlet of those hoodlums who waited for them on the street corners around the film studio. They were beaten with canes and knives, and practically every day during the peak of the filming, the production was held up as we bound their wounds."<sup>24</sup> In addition to five weeks in the studio, there were two weeks of location work in the picturesque, medieval town of Kazimierz Dolny, where, in the late 1920s, the Vilna Troupe had staged a summer production of An-sky's play.

Opening in Warsaw on September 29, 1937, at the Sfinks, a major cinema where *Tkies-kaf* had premiered thirteen years earlier, *The Dybbuk* enjoyed a run of nearly three months and, unlike other Yiddish talkies, attracted gentile as well as Jewish audiences, most likely on the basis of the play's celebrity.<sup>25</sup> Reviews were mixed. While the trade magazine *Film* hailed *The Dybbuk* as "a triumph of national cinematography" that "outclasses much European cinema," Waszyński's critical nemesis, Stefania Zahorska, writing in *Wiadomości literackie* (Literary News), found it "inflated" and "without a single good scene," the "sediment of pathetic kitsch."<sup>26</sup>

In New York, Waszyński's *Dybbuk* opened at the Continental Theatre, a Broadway venue, on January 27, 1938. It played there for seven weeks, receiving more press coverage than any previous Yiddish (or Polish) film, and was well reviewed by *Time* and *Newsweek*. While most American critics were enthusiastic or at least respectful, it is not altogether surprising that a film so boldly Jewish in its imagery would also provoke outright hostility. *The Dybbuk* was not yet the middlebrow cinematic classic it would become; nor were Polish Jews yet the subject of sentimental remembrance.

The *New York Times* critic Frank Nugent, who had a few months ear-

lier written a contemptuous review of Edgar G. Ulmer's pastoral *Grinefelder* (Green Fields), called *The Dybbuk* "almost oppressively tedious" and "hamstrung (excuse the sacrilege) by a frequently infantile groping after the mystic": "Told as bluntly as it has been, [the film] strikes of stupidity, silly superstition, outmoded religion. And, aside from its thematic weaknesses, it is overlong, static in presentation, rather awkwardly contrived [and] as incredible in its way as a documentary film of life among the pygmies or a trip to the Middle Ages."<sup>27</sup> Coming some four months after Adolf Hitler had publicly vowed to protect the "community of European-culture nations" from the conspiracy of "Jewish world Bolshevism," Nugent's rhetoric has an unmistakably sinister undercurrent.<sup>28</sup> Waszyński's *Dybbuk* had a similar impact on the Nazi minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels, who would screen it in February 1942, noting in his diary that although the film was "intended to be a Jewish propaganda picture," its effect was precisely the opposite: "One can only be surprised to note how little the Jews know about themselves and how little they realize what is repulsive to a non-Jewish person and what is not."<sup>29</sup>

An-sky's *Dybbuk* is modern both in its ethnographic attitude toward religious belief and in its corresponding interest in sexual repression. In shtetl folklore it is almost invariably young women who are possessed by evil spirits, and, no less than his contemporary Sigmund Freud, An-sky gives this hysteria a sexual content.

Waszyński's *Dybbuk* follows the play in linking love and death: "I feel as if I were being dragged to the gallows," whimpers Leah's hapless groom as he joins her under the wedding canopy. Indeed, an unusually grim *badkhn* (wedding jester) cues what many regard as the movie's signature scene—a grotesque danse macabre in which a death-masked figure, shrouded in a traditional Jewish prayer shawl, embraces the entranced bride, who, hallucinating Khonen, snuggles in the specter's embrace.

In *The Story of Yiddish Literature*, written in the late 1930s at the behest of the American branch of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, the psychiatrist A. A. Roback suggested that the play's wellsprings are oedipal. An-sky, he confidently maintained, "identified himself with Khonen. . . . Leah, on the other hand, represented his mother to whom he was so devoted as to adopt a pseudonym incorporating her name, Anna." Roback further noted that An-sky named other sympathetic characters after Anna, including Leah's mother, who dies in childbirth.<sup>30</sup>

Parker Tyler, an openly gay critic who often used psychoanalytic terms

and continued to champion Waszyński's *Dybbuk* for thirty-five years after he first saw it, characterized the movie as "a religious parable of the 'crime' of illicit sexual passion." Writing in his last book, the 1972 *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies*, he argued that the story tended "to resist any effort to interpret sex as homosexuality in any phenomenal or realistic sense," except in the "merging between heterosexual individuals which transcendently induces them to exchange their sexual forms. The male demonstrably takes the female in *The Dybbuk*, despite the taboo laid on her as the betrothed of another man. . . . He is at last expelled, but not without having achieved complete immersion in his beloved, an absolute transvestism so that he may be said indeed to have worn her body for a while, like a gown, a ritual garment."<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, Tyler passed over the backstory told in the prologue, added to the play by Waszyński, which results in the couple's illicit desire. In the most substantial psychoanalytic reading of the movie, Ira Konigsberg points out that although "the prologue is about birth and children, no women appear as major figures in the entire film except for Leah. The prologue represents the students Nissen and Sender as two young lovers, sharing their secrets and emotions, huddled together with knowing expressions and sly nods, planning the future of their children. . . . The entire film, which seems to be about generations, about parents and children, is strangely devoid of mothers and women in general."<sup>32</sup>

Konigsberg introduces the overt homoeroticism that has been the basis for much recent analysis of the movie—not just because of the prologue but also because of Waszyński's more-or-less open homosexuality. Eve Sicular was the first to note the movie's "rhapsodic cinematic presentation of same sex bonding," while in an essay on sexual transformation in *The Dybbuk*, Naomi Seidman credits Waszyński with a significant reinterpretation: "The homoeroticism An-sky sunk below the surface of his play emerged most visibly first in the 1937 film." When Sender sings the Song of Songs to Nissen, Seidman points out, "the lines he sings are those spoken by the Shulamite, the poem's female voice—cutting away to reaction shots of Nissen's rapturous face."<sup>33</sup>

Writing that homosexuality was, in fact, "fashionable" among artists and writers in pre-World War II Warsaw and part of Waszyński's carefully cultivated public persona as a man of refinement, the art historian Sebastian Jagielski maintains that Waszyński's "films and biography can be read as the prehistory of Polish queer cinema."<sup>34</sup>

If that is the case, *The Dybbuk* may be considered Waszyński's coming-out film—not as a gay man but as a Jew. After he made this Yiddish film, he started making a second one called *Kol Nidre* (All Vows), from a script by Alter Kacyzne.<sup>35</sup> This plan was delayed by the outbreak of World War II. The trauma of the Holocaust, during which the Jewish inhabitants of Waszyński's birthplace of Kovel were massacred en masse in June 1942, caused him to deny his origins forever after.

After World War II, *The Dybbuk* was itself something of a dybbuk. Habima did not stage its expressionist version in New York until May 1948. Opening during the Israeli war of independence, the play was reviewed as the embodiment of the Zionist miracle—"something more than art," Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *New York Times*.<sup>36</sup> (This remarkable review of a non-English-language play underscores the cultural significance that Atkinson attached to *The Dybbuk*, which, as he notes, he had first seen performed, in Yiddish, in 1926.)

The following year, *The Dybbuk* was presented on television in an adaptation by the Odesa-born TV dramatist Joseph Liss, as part of the CBS series *Westinghouse Studio One*, featuring the Yiddish actor David Opatoshu as Sender. Unfortunately, no recording of this production exists; however, in 1960, WNET's *Play of the Week* introduced (or reintroduced) Liss' version of *The Dybbuk* to a million television viewers. This production has since become available on DVD.

Directed by Sidney Lumet, the son of a Yiddish actor and a onetime child actor on the Yiddish stage, the *Play of the Week's Dybbuk* is at once more immediate and closer to An-sky's original than the 1937 motion picture was. Liss' main changes are the addition of a narration supplied by the Rabbi Azrael (played by Ludwig Donath), as the Miropoler Rebbe is called here, and the splitting of An-sky's lengthy fourth act in half. Where the film added backstory and widened the world of the play, Lumet uses the confines of the small screen to instead intensify the unfolding drama.

Lumet's televised *Dybbuk* opens in medias res in a small, Hasidic synagogue and, after introducing Khonen (Michael Tolan) and Sender (Theodore Bikel), remains there for the first two acts. Only after Khonen's death does the action move outside, for a scene in which, as preparation for her wedding, an unhappy Leah (Carol Lawrence) must cavort with a horde of capering beggars—while delivering the first of two heartbreaking soliloquies. As the third act ends, Khonen rises like a zombie from his grave to dance with Leah. With music by the polymath critic John Gruen and cho-

reography by Anna Sokolow, Lumet's televised *Dybbuk* is a study in stylized movement—the Hasidim rhythmically praying in synagogue, the exuberant Sender announcing his daughter's betrothal with a gavotte of triumph.<sup>37</sup>

Unusually for a *Play of the Week* presentation, *The Dybbuk* opened with a personal statement by its director. For Lumet, the play was something between a family drama and a boyhood memory—it was the first Yiddish show he had ever seen onstage as well as the first where he first saw his father, Baruch Lumet, a onetime member of the Vilna Troupe, perform. At one point in the third act, Leah speaks of feeling “surrounded by the souls of people who died before their time,” and Lumet's production has an inescapable commemorative quality. The director makes repeated use of a high-angle camera; seen from a heavenly perspective, the actors twist and turn under the burden of a mysterious destiny. In their flame-like postures it is as though they themselves are *yahrtzeit* (memorial) candles consumed before our eyes.<sup>38</sup>

Once Habima became Israel's national theater, An-sky's play would never again be as important to its repertoire or, apparently, to Israeli audiences. A Hebrew-language film version was not made until 1968, directed by Yugoslav-born Holocaust survivor Ilan Eldad for German television (perhaps as a nod toward cultural reparation), where it was presumably shown with subtitles. (This time David Opatoshu played Reb Azriel). In 1979, a Yiddish version of the play was staged by the Ester Rachel and Ida Kamińska Jewish Theater (at the time the State Jewish Theater) and also recorded as a telefilm. Directed by Stefan Szlachtycz, the telefilm, which arrived in New York during the summer of 1982, is at once static and sensational, exhibiting a foggy expressionism and voluptuous sense of decay more redolent of Hammer horror films than Hasidic folklore.<sup>39</sup>

Nearly twenty years later, *The Dybbuk of the Holy Apple Field* (1997), a Swiss-German-Israeli production directed and cowritten by Yossi Somer, transposed the plot of *The Dybbuk* to present-day Jerusalem, although protests by local Hasidim necessitated relocating the production to outside the city's Haredi neighborhood. Not making the An-sky connection, *Variety* called it “a schmaltzy love story of two doomed young people whose love reaches beyond the grave,” adding that “Israeli critics have given the film a wide berth, but it was a resounding hit with audiences at its Haifa festival premiere.”<sup>40</sup>

The distinguished filmmaker Agnieszka Holland directed a faithful, viscerally claustrophobic version of An-sky's play for Polish television in

1999. Comparing well with Sidney Lumet's interpretation, Holland's telefilm begins and ends in darkness, using a muted palette of black, brown, and white throughout. Much, including the entire first act, is shot in close-up, with some scenes illuminated by candlelight. As Leah, Dominika Ostałowska conveys moments of possession that recall the manic intensity of Lucyna Winnicka in the 1961 Polish classic *Matka Joanna od Aniołów* (Mother Joan of the Angels). (A year later, Ostałowska would play a Jewish woman hiding from the Germans in Jan Jakub Kolski's *Daleko od okna* [Keep Away from the Window].) Polish critics were impressed with the production's naturalism: one stated that "Holland built an unusual world on realistic foundations" based on her "awareness that the supernatural can only reliably manifest itself in natural surroundings." Another praised her for eschewing sentimentality and "ethnographic reconstruction." A third critic reported that her film was not about "reconciliation," religious ritual, or memory, "but about reality."<sup>41</sup>

Several recent movies have incorporated aspects of *The Dybbuk*. *The Possession* (2012) is based on a "true story" (or internet *bobe-meyse*: tall tale, lit. "grandmother's tale") about a ceremonial wine cabinet that contains a dybbuk. Produced by horror film specialist Sam Raimi, directed by Ole Bornedal, and featuring the Hasidic rap star Matisyahu as a tsadik, *The Possession* is competent if only intermittently atmospheric. The 2015 Polish-Israeli production *Demon*, cowritten and directed by Marcin Wrona, is far richer. Python (played by Israeli actor Itay Tiran), an outsider whose origins are unclear, comes to Poland to marry a local woman. The wedding is held in a picturesque, if rundown, manor acquired by the bride's father, a high-power contractor and obvious beneficiary of Poland's postcommunist economy. Upon arrival, Python is spooked by the sight of what he imagines are human remains, glimpsed in an excavation on his prospective in-laws' property. The discovery, which no one else sees, triggers a nightmare. In the midst of the prolonged and riotous wedding, Python is possessed by the spirit of a local Jewish girl who was killed during the war, perhaps on her own wedding day.<sup>42</sup>

The 2017 Polish documentary *Książę i dybuk* (The Prince and the Dybbuk), a biography of Michał Waszyński written and directed by Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosolowski, may also be considered a film version of *The Dybbuk*. Arguing that Waszyński's *Dybbuk* is the key to understanding his life, the movie integrates sounds and images from that film and *Tkies-kaf* into its interviews, while also inventing helpful newsreels and constructing



an imaginary journal from Waszyński's scattered notebooks that is presented as having been written in Yiddish, thus, so it seems, revealing the possessed filmmaker's true feelings.

If *Książę i dybuk* strives to make the power of the past tangible, the same is true of Waszyński's 1937 movie. The living mingle with and—in what Joel Rosenberg calls a “demonic ‘wedding’”—even marry the dead.<sup>43</sup> Khonen intuitively knows the melody of his father's version of the Song of Songs, even though his father died the day he was born. And not only does Leah visit the cemetery to invite her dead mother to her wedding, but her entire village itself is also a sort of cemetery: the “holy grave” in the marketplace memorializes a bride and groom murdered under the wedding canopy by Bohdan Khmelnytsky's Cossacks some two hundred years earlier. Horror is less supernatural than historical. Published a year before *The Dybbuk* was first performed, Sigmund Freud's essay “The Uncanny” anticipates the play's ambivalent engagement with the Jewish past by positing the uncanny as the return of something that “ought to have remained hidden.” Or, as the dybbuk Khonen says in the movie, “You buried me, but I have returned.”<sup>44</sup>

An-sky's play is the ur-text for the tendency in Jewish art and literature that has been called “haunted modernism.”<sup>45</sup> Even before the Holocaust, the displacement and violent destruction of an ancient collective past prompted many writers, artists, and performers to view the vanished or vanishing traditional communities that they came from as quintessentially ghostly, reimagining these rural towns and urban ghettos as fantastic landscapes or haunted graveyards. The painters Marc Chagall and Nathan Altman are illustrative of this trend, at least in their early work. Y. L. Peretz's play “A Night in the Old Marketplace” (1907) and H. Leivick's dramatic poem *The Golem* (1921) rival *The Dybbuk* in their ghostliness. Other literary examples include Franz Kafka and Bruno Schulz, as well as Isaac Bashevis Singer, who maintained in his 1978 Nobel laureate speech, “The deader the language the more alive is the ghost,” adding that, “ghosts love Yiddish and as far as I know, they all speak it.”<sup>46</sup>

Cinema, as Parker Tyler once observed, is the technology that reanimates the dead.<sup>47</sup> Yiddish movies are thus doubly uncanny—and not only for Jews. Tyler saw that part of the significance of Waszyński's *Dybbuk* was its status as a relic: “No negative print of *The Dybbuk*, I am told by its 16mm distributors, is believed to exist anymore; no 35mm positive, apparently, has currency in this hemisphere.” (For Tyler, *The Dybbuk* was in effect its own ghost.)<sup>48</sup>

Whatever its intentions, and however *The Dybbuk* was received in 1937,

it's impossible for us to watch it now without reading its themes as harbingers of exile and oblivion. Joel Rosenberg has correctly pointed out that insofar as the movie has a historical referent, the filmmakers were likely referring to the mass violence directed against Jews during World War I, something that some of the filmmakers, including Waszyński, may have observed firsthand.<sup>49</sup> But it is the devastation wrought by the subsequent world war that informs the film today.

The movie is haunted by predestination. The respective fates of the filmmakers and the actors represent the triumph of the arbitrary. Many vanished in the Holocaust, among them Meir Balaban, Alter Kacyzne, Mark Arnshteyn, Ludwig Prywes, Isaac Samberg, Gershon Sirota, and the actors Simkhe Fostel, Zishe Kats, Abraham Kurts, Samuel Landau, the art director Jacob Rotmil, and the owners of the Feniks company, Felicia and Leon Fenigstein. Some of those who survived World War II, including Leon Liebgold, Lili Liliana, and Max Bozyk, did so only because they happened to be on tour in the United States or Argentina when the Nazis invaded Poland. Others made their way east, notably Judith Berg and Avrom Morevsky (who returned to Poland in 1956 to direct *The Dybbuk* at the Ester Rachel Kamińska State Jewish Theater, where he once again played Reb Azriel).

Waszyński is a special case. By the time his remaining relatives were massacred in Kovel, he had escaped into the Soviet Union and, identifying himself as a Warsaw-born Catholic, joined General Władysław Anders' Free Polish Army, directing frontline movies as this Soviet- and British-sponsored force of Polish nationals made its way through Iran to Palestine, Egypt, and Italy. Many Jewish soldiers, among them future prime minister Menachem Begin, elected to stay in Palestine. Waszyński instead continued on to Italy, where he reestablished a film career, married an eighty-year-old countess, and passed himself off as a member of the Polish nobility.<sup>50</sup>

Despite this successful masquerade, Waszyński is said, by his chauffeur (and likely lover) Giorgio Dickmann, to have remained obsessed with his *Dybbuk*, which not only embodied the vanished world into which he was born but also represented a path not taken.<sup>51</sup> Meanwhile, another *Kol Nidre* was made, although not in Poland and not by Waszyński. When casting his production, the American purveyor of cheap melodramas Joseph Seiden exploited the presence of Liliana and Liebgold, stranded, to their good fortune, in New York when Poland was invaded by the Nazis and Soviets in September 1939. Saved from death, the star-crossed lovers of *The Dybbuk* reappear in America, the last of their kind.

Although named for the most sacred of Jewish prayers, *Kol Nidre* is *shund* (trashy entertainment) in its purest form. A young, somewhat Americanized woman (Liliana, speaking better Yiddish than the actors who play her parents) is pressured by her traditional parents to be more Jewish and submit to their wishes. The girl's overbearing father takes every opportunity to insist that she marry her former schoolmate Rabbi Goldstein (Liebgold), even as the mother shamelessly plays on her daughter's guilt.

Just as *Kol Nidre* gives us Lili Liliana as the young modern woman she actually was in 1939, so too does Waszyński's *Dybbuk* bring back, if only for the duration of the film, the dead ancestors and their vanished civilization. The film tells us as much. "I have forgotten who I am," Khonen's spirit whispers, adding as if in anticipation, "Only in your thoughts can I remember myself."

## Notes

1. "The Dybbuk, Famed Play, to Have Premiere in Seattle," *Jewish Transcript*, June 11, 1938, 1, 8.

2. See Samuel Blumenfeld, *L'homme qui voulait être prince: Les vies imaginaires de Michal Waszynski* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 2006), 64; Roman Szczepanek, "Michał Waszyński: wyreżyserowany arystokrata," Onet Film, September 29, 2020, <https://kultura.onet.pl/film/wywiady-i-artykuly/michal-waszynski-wyrezyserowany-arystokrata/b5ygs4s>

3. Henekh Kon, "In Film-Atelye," *Literarishe bleter*, July 23, 1937, 485.

4. Dina Halpern, unpublished interview with Patricia Erens, 1974, National Center for Jewish Film archives.

5. Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 88.

6. An international recording star, Sirota was featured on the first Jewish *plastinkes* (records), produced in Vienna, Berlin, and Saint Petersburg before the First World War.

7. Michael Alpert, "Freylekhs on Film: The Portrayal of Jewish Traditional Dance in Yiddish Cinema," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Newsletter* 8, no. 3–4 (1986): 7.

8. Blumenfeld, *L'homme qui voulait être prince*, 68.

9. Quoted in Blumenfeld, 51.

10. Daria Mazur, *Waszyński's "The Dybbuk"* (Poznań: Adam Mickiewicz University, 2009), 26–27.

11. Leon Liebgold, interview by the author, New York, March 1989. In a subse-

quent interview, Liebgold told a reporter that Waszyński “didn’t let it be known that he knew Yiddish. With the anti-Semitism of those days, anything that had to do with Yiddishkeit had to be covered up.” Richard F. Shepard, “‘The Dybbuk’ Rises from the Ruins,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1989, II 19.

12. Blumenfeld, *L’homme qui voulait être prince*, 34–35. Blumenfeld’s source for this detail is the production designer John Moore, who worked with Waszyński on several films in the early 1960s, including *El Cid* (1961) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). The connection is striking in that Khonen articulates an apostasy associated with Frank and other radical Sabbatians when he suggests the holiness of sin and seeks to win Leah by “treading on the vesture of shame.” See Gershom G. Sholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 315. Blumenfeld speculates that Frank, a figure torn between Judaism and Christianity, who posed as an aristocrat by adding a particle to his name, was a model for the future Prince Waszyński. Whether that is true or not, Waszyński’s familiarity with Frank attests to his ineradicable Jewish identity. According to Blumenfeld, “D’une certaine façon, Waszyński ne quittera jamais Kovel, pas plus qu’il ne tournera vraiment le dos à son héritage familial” (In a way, Waszyński would never leave Kovel, nor really turn his back on his family heritage). Blumenfeld, *L’homme qui voulait être prince*, 36.

13. Blumenfeld, *The Prince and the Dybbuk*, 27–39. Additional information comes from Waszyński’s Israeli relatives interviewed in the 2017 documentary film *Książę i dybuk* (*The Prince and the Dybbuk*), written and directed by Elwira Niewiera and Piotr Rosolowski. Another filmmaker of note was born in Kovel in 1905, a year after Waszyński: Abraham Zapruder, the Dallas dress manufacturer who, in making a home movie, inadvertently documented the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

14. Isaac Babel describes Kovel in the September 11, 1920, entry of his diary: “The town retains traces of European-Jewish culture. They won’t take Soviet money, a glass of coffee without sugar costs 50 rubles. A rotten meal at the [train] station 600 rubles. . . . Go to visit [Captain Vadim] Yakovlev [a Cossack cavalry commander who was originally a White, became a Red, and finally joined the Poles], quiet little houses, meadows, Jewish back streets, a quiet life, wholesome, Jewish girls, youths, old men by the synagogues, perhaps *shaytls*. Soviet power does not seem to have troubled the surface, those parts of town over the bridge. . . . I spend the whole day looking for food. . . . Saturday, all the shops closed.” Babel, *1920 Diary*, ed. Carol J. Avins, trans. H. T. Willets (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 96.

15. Zygmunt Turkow, *Di ibergerisene tkufe: fragmentn fun mayn lebn* (Buenos Aires: Central Farband, 1961), 96.

16. There is speculation that Bojm had originally wanted to adapt *The Dybbuk* but was unable to secure the rights. Natan Gross, *The Jewish Film in Poland* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1990), 28.

17. Only fragments of *Tkies-kaf* remain; at twelve reels, it was the longest Polish movie of its time.

18. Quoted in Władysław Banaszkiewicz and Witold Witczak, *Historia Filmu Polskiego i Filmowe* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne, 1989), 1:200.

19. *Literarische bleter*, May 15, 1924, 6. Peretz Markish, who then edited the journal and likely wrote the review, is pointing out that the prophet Elijah serves the same dramatic function as the Messenger. It should be noted that Markish was contemptuous of movies in general.

20. Mazur, *Waszyński's "The Dybbuk,"* 25.

21. Antonin Artaud, *Collected Works* (London: John Calder, 1972), 3:129.

22. An incomplete version was salvaged from Cutler's papers, published in *Der hamer* in June 1936, and translated into English by Michael Shapiro as "The Dybbuk in the Form of a Crisis," *In Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, March 2017, <https://ingeveb.org/texts-and-translations/the-dybbuk-in-the-form-of-a-crisis>

23. Billed as an exhibition of "degenerate art," *The Eternal Jew* featured large photographs of Leon Trotsky and Charles Chaplin, among other artifacts, and emphasized supposed attempts by Jews to bolshevize Germany. "The exhibition attracted 412,300 visitors, over 5,000 per day. . . . Police reports stated there was a direct correlation [to a] rise in anti-Semitic feelings, and in some cases violence against the Jewish community in each city the exhibition was held." "Der ewige Jude," Holocaust Education & Archive Research Team, accessed December 15, 2022, <http://www.HolocaustResearchProject.org>

24. Halpern, unpublished interview.

25. It would seem that *The Dybbuk* had a sneak preview in Lublin. The Polish researcher Piotr Nazaruk has located an issue of the *Lubliner tagblatt* from September 19, 1937, with a full-page advertisement on page 6 announcing the film's premiere in Lublin the following day (viewable online at <https://polona.pl/item/lubliner-togblat-r-20-nr-217-19-wrzesnia-1937,OTewODMxMw/3/>). According to Nazaruk, "everything surrounding Lublin screenings was well-prepared—the press started building up the tension around September 14, they had access to film photos, etc." He speculates that, as a city with a large Hasidic population, Lublin may have been picked to test their response to the film. Email communication with the author, July 14, 2019. *Historia Filmu Polskiego* gives the opening date as simply September 1937; see Barbara Armatys, Leszek Armatys, and Wiesław Stradomski, *Historia Filmu Polskiego* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1988), 2:308–9.

26. Armatys, Armatys, and Stradomski, *Historia Filmu Polskiego*, 2:308–9.

27. Frank Nugent, "The Continental Brings in a Film of 'The Dybbuk,'" *New York Times*, January 28, 1938.

28. Quoted in, e.g., Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933–1945*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 94.

29. Joseph Goebbels, “Dr. Goebbels at the Cinema: 1) Extracts from the Diaries,” *Sight and Sound*, August 1950, 235. Assuming the date is correct, Goebbels saw *The Dybbuk* multiple times. According to Blumenfeld, he had already arranged for director Veit Harlan to screen it in preparation for his antisemitic period film *Jud Süß* (1940). Blumenfeld, *L’homme qui voulait être prince*, 96.

30. A. A. Roback, *The Story of Yiddish Literature* (New York: Yiddish Scientific Institute, 1940), 188–89. The same year that Roback’s book was published, the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO) had moved much of its staff and holdings from its main center in Vilna to its New York outpost, where it would become known as the Institute for Jewish Research.

31. Parker Tyler, *Screening the Sexes: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 220–21.

32. Ira Konigsberg, “The Only ‘I’ in the World: Religion, Psychoanalysis, and *The Dybbuk*,” *Cinema Journal* 36, no. 4 (1997): 33.

33. Eve Sicular, “A *yingl mit a yingl hot epes a tam*: The Celluloid Closet of Yiddish Film,” *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 16, no. 1 (1994): 44; Seidman, “The Ghost of Queer Loves Past,” in the present volume. As I am somewhat cryptically cited in both essays, I’ll explain that, in 1990, while researching my history of Yiddish cinema, I was told by Joanna Ney—the daughter of the Polish actress Nora Ney—who had as a young girl known Waszyński in Italy, that the filmmaker appeared to her stereotypically gay. Unsure whether this constituted documentation, I used a coded description (“flamboyant”) to characterize him. Since then Samuel Blumenfeld and others have written of Waszyński’s more-or-less open homosexuality.

34. Sebastian Jagielski, “Queer Fantasies: The Camp Prince, the Diva, and Polish Cinema in the Interwar Period,” *Studies in European Cinema* 14, no. 2 (2017): 120. Waszyński’s sexual orientation is a major theme in both Blumenthal’s biography and, especially, the film *Książe i dybuk*.

35. Blumenthal, *The Prince and the Dybbuk*, 98.

36. Brooks Atkinson, “At the Theatre: Palestine’s Habimah Players Revive *The Dybbuk* Here as Homeland Faces Crisis,” *New York Times*, May 3, 1948, 26.

37. Lumet’s *Dybbuk* brought its own contemporary subtext. The emphasis that his version placed on the trial of the last scene recalled his recent movie triumph, the jury-room drama *12 Angry Men* (1957). Similarly, the presence of twenty-six-year-old Carol Lawrence (who had created and was still playing the role of Maria in the original Broadway production of *West Side Story*) positioned An-sky’s play as a kind of supernatural, ethnic *Romeo and Juliet*. “I think I’m the only member of the cast who doesn’t understand Yiddish,” Lawrence told the *New York Times* in a feature that ran three weeks in advance of the premiere telecast on October 3, 1960 (John P. Shanley, “The Dancer and ‘The Dybbuk,’” *New York Times*, September 11, 1960).

Although the actress was exaggerating, the production was filled with European-born Yiddish speakers including Bikel, Donath (who had played Al Jolson's Old World father in the 1946 film *The Jolson Story* and the Rabbi Azrael in *The Dybbuk's* 1954 English-language production), Michael Shillo (the Israeli actor who appeared as Rabbi Samson), and Eli Mintz (playing the father of Leah's groom; he is the younger brother of Yiddish stage star Ludwig Satz).

38. The *Play of the Week* production coincided with Paddy Chayefsky's seriocomic play *The Tenth Man*, originally titled *The Dybbuk from Woodhaven*, which opened on Broadway in late 1959 and ran 622 performances through the spring of 1961. Freely transposed to a shabby storefront synagogue in suburban Mineola, New York, set between the lost Old World and the godless new one, *The Tenth Man* coarsened but scarcely effaced *The Dybbuk's* original conflicts. The cast was an essay on the development of Jewish theater in America, with Habima's cofounder David Vardi in a supporting role alongside such stalwarts of Catskill character comedy as Jack Gilford and Lou Jacobi. Risa Schwartz, the daughter of Maurice Schwartz, played the dybbuk-possessed heroine with Schwartz's rival, the great Yiddish actor Jacob Ben-Ami, cast as her guilt-ridden *zeyde* (grandfather). There is no Khonen, although the eponymous hero—needed to complete the minyan for the exorcism—is a Freudian, ex-communist, suicide-prone, divorced atheist who talks to the Leah figure in psychoanalytic jargon as the ritual proceeds and ultimately falls in love with her.

39. Gabriella Safran has noted that Jerzy Kawalerowicz's 1982 film *Austeria*, based on Jerzy Strykowski's 1966 novella of pre-World War I Jewish Galicia, contains a number of visual references to Waszyński's *Dybbuk*. Safran, "Dancing with Death and Salvaging Jewish Culture in *Austeria* and *The Dybbuk*," *Slavic Review* 59, no. 4 (2000): 765–66.

40. Deborah Young, "Haifa: *The Dybbuk of the Holy Apple Field*," *Variety*, December 8, 1997.

41. The cited reviews are from, respectively, Jarosław Komorowski, *Teatr*, March 1, 2000; Jacek Wierzbicki, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 6, 2000; and Elżbieta Czerwińska, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, November 28, 1999. All three reviews reappear at and are quoted from the entry for "Dybuk," *Teatr Telewizji* production, premiered November 22, 1999, *Encyklopedia teatru polskiego*, accessed December 15, 2022, <http://encyklopediateatru.pl/przedstawienie/11166/dybuk>

42. More a Polish than a Jewish story, *Demon* is one of three recent fiction films that might be said to literalize the return of Poland's repressed with plots that pivot on unearthing evidence of Polish Jews murdered on Polish soil during World War II. In Władysław Pasikowski's *Aftermath* (2012), a Polish émigré to America returns home to his village to find the natives attempting to suppress the fact that it was they, rather than the Nazis, who massacred their Jewish neighbors. More artful and restrained, Paweł Pawlikowski's Oscar-winning *Ida* (2013), set in 1962, concerns a

young orphan raised by Catholic nuns. As she prepares to take her vows, she discovers that she was born of Jewish parents who perished in the Holocaust. A key scene involves the excavation of a mass grave outside a once-Jewish village.

43. Joel Rosenberg, “The Soul of Catastrophe: On the 1937 Film of S. An-sky’s *The Dybbuk*,” *Jewish Social Studies* 17, no. 2 (2011): 22.

44. Freud’s attribution of “the primitive fear of the dead” to “the old belief that the deceased becomes the enemy of his survivor and wants to carry him off” has particular relevance to *The Dybbuk*, which not only has a dead man that takes possession of his fated love but a lawsuit in which the plaintiff is an unquiet soul and the defendant a live man. Sigmund Freud, *Studies in Parapsychology* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 27, 48.

45. The term was used in conversation by the Yiddish scholar Jeffrey Shandler.

46. Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Banquet Speech,” December 10, 1978, Nobel Foundation, accessed December 15, 2022, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1978/singer/speech/>

47. Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), xxv.

48. Parker Tyler, *Classics of the Foreign Film* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), 120.

49. Rosenberg, “The Soul of Catastrophe,” 9. An-sky’s play can certainly be seen as a response to the carnage of World War I; Waszyński’s movie, which has points of contact with the war-traumatized German supernatural cinema of the 1920s, may be even more closely related.

50. Blumenfeld considers *Dzieci* (The Children, 1943), a movie that documents Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, as a sort of personal diary, including as it does a Polish exile’s final farewell to his family in Kovel. “The director of *Dybbuk* has thus written a summary of his Jewish past since he was about to invent a new ancestry for himself. Prince Waszyński, in order to be born, had to get rid of Michal Waks once and for all.” Blumenfeld, *L’homme qui voulait être prince*, 112. Waszyński directed two films in Italy, *Lo Sconosciuto di San Marino* (Unknown Man of San Marino, 1946) and *La Grande Strada* (The Great Road, 1948), in collaboration with Vittorio Cottafavi. He was Orson Welles’ assistant director on *Othello* (1949–52) and served as art director on several American productions, including *Quo Vadis* (1951) and *Roman Holiday* (1953). In 1960 Waszyński left Italy for Spain, where he worked as executive producer on Samuel Bronston’s epics *El Cid* (1961) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). His 1965 *Variety* obituary lists him as “Prince Michael Waszynski,” (*Variety*, February 25, 1965).

51. Blumenthal, *L’homme qui voulait être prince*, 22. Dickmann is interviewed in the film *Książe i dybuk*.



# *Between Two Art Forms*

## *The Dybbuk* in Music and Dance

Judah M. Cohen

“The [Dybbuk] ballet is based on our experience in Jewishness,” the composer [Leonard Bernstein] said, looking at [choreographer Jerome] Robbins, who muttered, “It isn’t.” Unfazed, Bernstein tried a mix of flattery and self-abasement. “Jerry doesn’t quite agree,” he said, “but mostly he just doesn’t like to be caught saying anything that *nudgy*.”

—JOSEPH RODDY, “PAS DE DEUX FOR THE TWO OLD PROS,”  
*PEOPLE MAGAZINE*, 1974

*The Dybbuk* crystallized a moment of connection between turn-of-the-century Russian folkloristics and the twentieth-century taxonomy of artistic specialization. The play’s creator, S. An-sky, viewed his work as part of a broader effort to revitalize Jewish culture and to include Judaism in an expressive national catalog of ethnic identity—grounded in a meticulously planned ethnographic expedition to the Russian Pale of Settlement. *The Dybbuk*, consequently, was more than just a play: from its first Warsaw staging by the Vilna Troupe in 1920, the play became a medium for modern artists to explore Jewish expressivity on its own terms, using ideas actively circulating in their own disciplines to argue for the contemporary relevance of Jewish theater to general audiences and critics. Debra Caplan has described the oversized role that the nonverbal arts held in the play’s success: bold expressive methods came to characterize early performances of *The Dybbuk*, from highly stylized movements and choreography to modernist sets, an exotic, singsong verbal delivery, and incidental music and songs that evoked both tradition and angular modernism. Together, they provided as much

if not more meaning to the story than the script itself, especially in the frequent cases where mainstream audiences (Jewish and otherwise) could not understand Yiddish.<sup>1</sup>

The complement of creative arts arising around *The Dybbuk* emerged in tandem with ethnography at the turn of the twentieth century, with both working together to establish the symbols of Jewish national identity. Gabriella Safran notes that An-sky initially drew on the work of Jewish folktale collectors such as Y. L. Peretz as well as the ideas of contemporary Russian folklorists to construct a philosophical basis for his fieldwork, believing “that folk art would inspire modern Jewish artists to produce works that could speak to Jews and Christians alike, art that itself would defend and renew the Jewish culture.”<sup>2</sup> Forays into what folklorists viewed as the naive miasma of rural activity that represented “folk life” thus began with field collection, and then transitioned into a process by which trained specialists (i.e., artists) could analyze the collected materials along specific disciplinary lines (including theater, visual art, music, and dance). From these analyses they developed a set of aesthetic qualities indicating “authentic” peoplehood, which, in turn, could become a blueprint for producing new, ethnically affirming creative works. The first stagings of *The Dybbuk* showed this process in action, with different components of each production drawing directly from An-sky’s ethnographic expeditions, including artistic extrapolations emphasizing the difference and exoticism of shtetl culture. These interpretations, in turn, became inseparable from the play itself—and, by extension, became symbols of the spirit of Ashkenazi Jewish folk life.

What began as a play, then, developed a substantial artistic oeuvre almost immediately, and remained a touchstone of Jewish-themed creativity for composers and choreographers over the next century. Among the many kinds of collaboration *The Dybbuk* inspired, I focus here on *Dybbuk*-themed music and dance works, which can be seen as their own artistic subgenre around the play. After presenting an overview of these composer-choreographer collaborations, I focus in on the decades-long negotiations between Leonard Bernstein and Jerome Robbins, who produced the 1974 ballet *The Dybbuk Variations* and several related works, as a case study of how music and dance built on An-sky’s ethnographic path, intersecting symbolic narratives that connected *The Dybbuk* to new and substantial layers of contemporary meaning well beyond the play itself.

## ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE ART OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

As with folklorists who studied other national groups, An-sky approached life in the Pale of Settlement as a source of artistic inspiration, and he took some artists along with him on his ethnographic expeditions for assistance. Modeling his plans on other Russian ethnographic efforts, he sought to identify methods, technologies, and specialists for capturing nonverbal expressive forms, which he could subject to “further processing, comprehension, and assessment” upon his return.<sup>3</sup> The musical aspects of An-sky’s ethnographic expeditions have received perhaps the most attention in scholarly circles, with writers from Albert Weisser in the 1950s to Izaly Zemtsovsky, James Loeffler, and Jascha Nemtsov more recently exploring An-sky’s extensive cooperation with musicologist-composers Joel (also Julius or Iulii) Engel and Zusman Kiselgof: work that produced a treasure trove of field recordings and inspired numerous compositions from the Society for Jewish Folk Music.<sup>4</sup> While there is no known record of theater and dance scholars collaborating on An-sky’s expeditions, both areas received their own questions in An-sky’s extensive survey: dance was mentioned in the context of weddings and other celebrations, and theater was mentioned in the context of yeshiva rituals, including dramatic retellings of the Purim story (*purimshpiln*).<sup>5</sup> Artists professionally trained at such institutions as the Saint Petersburg Conservatory of Music, the Saint Petersburg Academy of Arts, the Imperial Ballet School (and Ballets Russes), and the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts drew on this material to inspire “Jewish” art.

*The Dybbuk* served as a crucial link in the translational chain: a fictional artistic work that claimed a basis in documentary evidence. From its first dramatic production by the Vilna Troupe in 1920, and especially with the iconic Habima production directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov in 1922, the play became a creative catalyst for a growing circle of artists who developed complementary systems of sounds, images, and gestures from the material. After their work with a *Dybbuk* production, moreover, artists might spin their creations off into stand-alone projects that burnished their professional and artistic bona fides, claiming connection to a newly extant “Jewish” canon or tradition. In the only recordings of the Vilna Troupe’s original production of the play, for example, which Caplan describes as an “edgy, experimental musical,” the Messenger character delivers his lines using a series of melodic formulas that draw on “Jewish” prayer modes codified in the 1880s.<sup>6</sup> Joel

Engel, An-sky's fieldwork companion, also composed the incidental music for Vakhtangov's 1922 staging of the play, music that some have credited with establishing Habimá's "house style" alongside Nathan Altman's cubist set and costume designs and Vakhtangov's own animalistic movement vocabulary.<sup>7</sup> One reviewer, in an assessment of the show's exotic choreography and direction, interpreted Engel's music as "resound[ing] like old synagogue biblical psalms. It has a dolefulness and passion, both expectation and a breakthrough into elements of the eternal and the infinite."<sup>8</sup> Four years later, in 1926, Engel adapted his work into a "suite" of pieces with its own opus number (op. 35), publishing arrangements of the suite for both solo piano and extended chamber ensemble (string quartet, clarinet, bass, and percussion) under his special-interest Jewish imprint Juwal.<sup>9</sup> Engel's *Dybbuk* music thus developed its own life in musical circles. Concert performances of the suite evoked the play, reminding listeners of key scenes (such as the beggars' dance), while also showing Engel's music to be viable on its own terms, compatible with Engel's project to establish a Jewish musical "school." Engel's intertwined personal, ethnographic, and artistic connections to An-sky and *The Dybbuk*, moreover, appeared to reinforce the distinctiveness of his work in both mediums.

The deep integration of music and dance into productions of *The Dybbuk* remained a significant element as the play rapidly rose to the status of a modernist folk legend, reinforcing a kind of ethnographically grounded avant-garde that complemented the work's proliferating productions. In providing opportunities for musicians and dancers to import contemporary modes of expression, moreover, the play gave them license to maintain a complicated artistic insider-outsider topography that balanced Jewish identity with creative legitimacy.

## ADAPTING THE DYBBUK TO MUSIC AND DANCE

*The Dybbuk* thus became one of a small group of widely known postbiblical Jewish narratives, including the Golem of Prague and later the diary of Anne Frank, that artists specializing in nonverbal expressive forms could adapt coherently into stand-alone works. Its emphasis on the conflict unfolding between two worlds presented ripe opportunities for symbolic musical and gestural contrast, leading to a host of operas, ballets, modern dance works, and musical suites.

In these collaborations, each art form followed its own conventions. From a musical perspective, the earliest productions of *The Dybbuk* showcased new songs by prominent Jewish composers, including Joseph Cherniavsky for Maurice Schwartz's 1921 Yiddish Art Theatre production in New York and Engel for Vakhtangov's production.<sup>10</sup> Subsequent composers (nearly all male through 1990) based their work on key moments in the drama, whether via operas or via programmatic music with evocative titles. In 1925, German composer Wilhelm Grosz was reported to be working on an operatic adaptation of Arno Nadel's 1921 translation of An-sky's play; Grosz's music (op. 28, published 1928) ultimately became the incidental music for another work of Nadel's, the play *Die Pest* (The Plague), staged in October 1928 in Mannheim.<sup>11</sup> Alban Berg, composer of the now-classic 1924 opera *Wozzeck*, was reported to be at work on a *Dybbuk* adaptation in 1926 before he had to abandon it, unable to obtain the rights.<sup>12</sup> (Operatic adaptations require the securing of rights, but often the holder of those rights will grant them to only one composer at a time.)<sup>13</sup> Arthur Hammerstein (Oscar Hammerstein II's uncle) considered adapting *The Dybbuk* to an operetta version with music by composer Rudolf Friml, in part so he could prevent his Leah, actress/singer Mary Ellis, from being lured away; and he tried again (unsuccessfully) in 1931 with Sigmund Romberg.<sup>14</sup> George Gershwin considered creating an opera version in 1929 before dropping the idea, unable, as Berg, to obtain the rights to the work.<sup>15</sup> Composer Ernest Bloch was rumored to have received a commission to create an opera from New York's Metropolitan Opera in 1933.<sup>16</sup> And although David and Alex Tamkin completed their opera in 1933, Lodovico Rocca and Renato Simoni's Italian adaptation (written 1928–34) gained fame in Italy in 1934, becoming the international version of record through extensive touring (including in the United States) the following year.<sup>17</sup> Postwar operatic versions included those of Karl Heinz Füssl (composed 1945–70), Joel Mandelbaum (composed 1956–72), Shulamit Ran (premiered 1997), and Ofer Ben-Amots (premiered 2007).<sup>18</sup> Nearly all these works experimented with sound and movement, with special focus on contrasts between the worlds of the living and the dead. Most also existed in at least two forms themselves, on the one hand as a collaboration with artists in other disciplines, and on the other hand as a stand-alone musical suite that could be performed in concert.

Modern dancers could prepare works for multiple media as well, though the embodied nature of their creations emphasized live performance. Musical accompaniment established the mood, allowed choreographers to set the

counts for their dancers, and (when dancers commissioned new compositions) offered rich opportunities for creative development through artistic dialogue. *The Dybbuk* consequently had a wide variety of choreographic adaptors: Simon Semenov was tasked with creating a ballet for a group called Jewish Ballet Creations in 1944, with music by Elya Jacobson and scenery and costumes by artist Arthur Szyk; and a pantheon of twentieth-century American Jewish choreographers, prominently including Anna Sokolow, Sophie Maslow, and Pearl Lang, followed.<sup>19</sup> The few video recordings produced of these works had extremely limited circulation. Instead, these dancers and others found in *The Dybbuk* a physically striking, expressive language for live audiences out of the legend's well-established extravert power.

In many cases, artists who addressed *The Dybbuk* did so over the course of years and even decades, often producing interconnected creative works over that extended time. To give a few examples: dancer Pearl Lang (1921–2009) created works around *The Dybbuk* over half a century, from the 1952 *Legend* (one of Lang's first solo choreographed pieces, with music by Morton Feldman) to the 1961 *Shirah* (which set a parable from act 3 of the play to a movement of Alan Hovhaness' 1951 *Talin* viola concerto) to her 1975 full-evening work *The Possessed* (with original music by composers Joel Spiegelman and Meyer Kupferman), choreography for a 1980 staging of the play (with music by Leon Odenz), and finally a video version of *The Possessed* in 2001.<sup>20</sup> David and Alex Tamkin, as mentioned, completed their opera version in 1933, yet despite a significant amount of exposure, including a November 1933 presentation for New York City's Rodeph Sholom League, it did not receive its concert premiere until 1948, at the hands of singer Jan Peerce in Eugene, Oregon. A recording connected to this premiere gave the work its first mass media exposure in the context of a *Voice of America* broadcast in Israel shortly afterward, and the opera had its first full staging, by the New York City Opera, in October/November 1951.<sup>21</sup> Sophie Maslow, who choreographed the New York premiere of the Tamkins' opera, had her own extended relationship with the play: supervising the choreography for a televised version of *The Dybbuk* in 1960 (dir. Sidney Lumet), creating the loosely based work *Neither Rest nor Harbor* with music by Israeli composer Robert Starer in 1964, and directing a one-scene condensed version of the play at New York's Madison Square Garden Hanukkah festival in 1968.<sup>22</sup> Composer Starer, continuing this chain, did more than just work with Maslow: he also wrote the music to a 1960 *Dybbuk*-based dancework

choreographed by Herbert Ross and Nora Kaye for their company Ballet of Two Worlds. The variety of forms these creative efforts took—whether a one-off performance, an interartistic collaboration, an adaptation of existing material, or a formal “work” intended for posterity—highlights the complexity of *The Dybbuk*’s narrative entanglements, especially as seen through the lens of an artist’s extended career.<sup>23</sup>

In this context, Bernstein and Robbins’ decades-long conversations and wide-ranging work around *The Dybbuk* present a meaningful case study. The two artists, who first collaborated in the breakthrough 1944 ballet work *Fancy Free*, reportedly began thinking about setting *The Dybbuk* that same year, and went public with their plans by October 1946.<sup>24</sup> Bernstein’s thoughts on music and dance at the time hint at the advantages they saw in such a partnership. Writing in *Dance Magazine*, he identified a common spirit between the two art forms that, he felt, contrasted with the more concrete, meaning-bearing arts of literature, theater, painting, and sculpture. Music and dance were more “fun,” Bernstein claimed, since “there is no room for meaning in this extrinsic sense; there is nothing left but the sheer animal enjoyment.”<sup>25</sup> As the two artists approached the *Dybbuk* narrative in their chosen media, however, they often found their visions in conflict precisely due to their differing strategies for achieving such enjoyment. What remains of their conversation thereby offers insight into both the creative process around *The Dybbuk* and the relative topographies of each mode of expression.

Aside from Alan Pearlmuter’s extensive exploration of Hebrew numerology (*gematria*) in Bernstein’s compositional process—a topic that Bernstein emphasized in his own descriptions of the work, perhaps to heighten public interest—*The Dybbuk Variations* has had remarkably little scholarly coverage.<sup>26</sup> I explore the work here from a different angle, hoping to understand its complex genesis and development by drawing on ideas from the active field of adaptation studies, with a special interest in the “specific impulses and ideologies, personal and historical, at play.”<sup>27</sup> Julie Sanders and others have noted how artists (and scholars) tend to imbue meaning into their adaptations of existing works through the conscious juxtaposition of other meaningful narratives, whether conspicuous or implied. Sanders describes this concept as hypertextuality; here, however, I employ the narrower term *narrative intersection* to emphasize a more focused and mutually reinforcing narrative analysis.<sup>28</sup> This approach offers particular benefits for addressing nonverbal arts, where additional

narratives reinforce a work's complex balance of meaning and abstraction for an audience. The historically visceral presentation of *The Dybbuk*, as I will show, allows artists—as translators of a sort—to use these other narratives as symbolic languages, thereby adding new, contemporary, and often relevant layers to a familiar work.<sup>29</sup>

### THE DYBBUK VARIATIONS: EARLY DISCUSSIONS

Between 1946 and 1972, when the composition began in earnest, Robbins and Bernstein exchanged ideas for adapting *The Dybbuk* in fits and starts. In discussions between 1946 and 1954, the two artists explored the work as a way to build artistic partnerships between Palestine/Israel and the United States, with different sites and institutions in both locations considered for the premiere. Nothing came from these talks, though Israel would remain a significant if subtle presence in *The Dybbuk Variations* over the following decades.

In 1958, the year after their long-incubated collaboration *West Side Story* premiered on Broadway, Robbins renewed the proposal. He sent another letter to Bernstein, this time dangling the interest of another prominent artist:

Dybbuk Dybbuk Dybbuk. I'm sending over an unseen but continually haunting prodger who will creep into your sleep and into your spare moments and will say the words Dybbuk Dybbuk Dybbuk. With this ghost's effort I know that suddenly something will be on paper that will get us all started. I've heard from [artist Ben] Shahn [1898–1969] who is wonderfully enthusiastic and excited about the idea of working with you, so please keep haunted and jot down a few of those scribbles that turn out to be the basis, theme and dramatic motifs for the whole ballet.<sup>30</sup>

Two years later, in 1960, Bernstein and Robbins came close to a deal to produce a music/dance work that would appear as a CBS television special.<sup>31</sup> This effort would also fail, mainly because Bernstein, occupied with a series of faith-based works including his *Kaddish* symphony (1963), *Chichester Psalms* (1965), and *MASS* (1971), could not find the time to write the score until 1973. Remarkably, then, an idea born of the pair's first partnership would ultimately become their final collaboration.<sup>32</sup>



## NARRATIVE INTERSECTION I: ISRAEL

For Bernstein and Robbins, discussions surrounding *The Dybbuk* coincided with the creation and first decades of the State of Israel, which swept both artists up in rapturous narratives of Jewish self-determination. Bernstein had been courted by Jewish groups to become a cultural ambassador of sorts for the emerging nation, and he took on the role eagerly. In June 1947 he made his first visit to Palestine, where he attended a performance of *The Dybbuk* by Habima, probably in Tel Aviv; and shortly thereafter he announced his intention to create a ballet of the work that he would bring back to Israel on his next trip.<sup>33</sup> By October, however, plans had shifted: under the aegis of a musical exchange program, Habima director Zvi Friedland would come to New York to stage the work for the Ballet Theatre (later the American Ballet Theatre) the following spring, with Bernstein's score, Robbins' choreography, and Marc Chagall's sets, and with ballerina Nora Kaye in the role of Leah.<sup>34</sup> But that plan faded as well. Although Bernstein kept *The Dybbuk* on his compositional agenda through at least early 1948, it eventually took a back seat to other projects, including a 1949 symphony based on W. H. Auden's 1948 Pulitzer Prize-winning poem *The Age of Anxiety*.<sup>35</sup> Both Bernstein and Robbins would retain a robust connection to Israel in other ways, with Bernstein serving as the first conductor of the Israel Philharmonic from 1948, and Robbins working with the Inbal Dance Theater in 1952–53 in association with the America-Israel Cultural Foundation. Yet this latter connection also created tensions: when Robbins again proposed a *Dybbuk* ballet to American Ballet Theatre directors George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein in 1954, Balanchine responded that Robbins should work on it with Inbal, highlighting a continued battle over *The Dybbuk's* status as a subject for general ballet and leading Robbins to respond caustically about two other "ethnic" works: "His suggestion . . . is about as valid as my suggestion that he do [Balanchine's ballet] Apollo for the Greek Folk Dancers that were over here, or the Western Symphony [another Balanchine ballet] for a group of cowboys."<sup>36</sup>

When Bernstein and Robbins came back to *The Dybbuk* in 1972, Bernstein continued to connect the project with Israeli nationalism, initially planning the premiere for 1973, "in time for the state's 25th anniversary celebrations."<sup>37</sup> Although that plan fell through as well, *The Dybbuk Variations* would finally premiere in 1974 in New York. Israel's consul general to New

York, David Rivlin, attended the premiere and afterward publicly presented the two artists with “[fiftieth] anniversary albums of ‘The Dybbuk,’ by Israel’s Habima,” affirming the work’s continued significance as a cultural bridge between the two nations.<sup>38</sup>

Bernstein continued to explore connections between *The Dybbuk* and Israel for decades afterward. One piece in particular, called “Celebrations” or “18” (the latter due to its numerological connection to *chai*, the Hebrew term for life), originally dramatized the gaiety of Leah’s wedding day as a contrast to Khonen’s death in the previous scene. Robbins began choreographing “Celebrations” in February 1974, but apparently he and Bernstein scrapped the piece soon afterward. Instead, Bernstein repurposed it over a decade later as the “Diaspora Dances” movement of his 1986 *Jubilee Games*, which would become the 1988 *Concerto for Orchestra*, a work honoring the Israel Philharmonic’s jubilee (fiftieth) year. The presence of Israel in narrative negotiations over *The Dybbuk*’s form and meaning, then, ultimately bore fruit, even as its role in crafting the actual *Dybbuk* dance work remained largely implied and symbolic.<sup>39</sup>

## NARRATIVE INTERSECTION II: NOH DRAMA

For Robbins, meanwhile, the process of translating *The Dybbuk* into a dance form required finding a gestural language that could balance abstraction and narrative. Robbins initially approached this challenge by jotting down a series of atmospheric qualities—“religious, mystic, joyous, superstitious, boundaries between magical + realistic”—that could help in “freeing the dance of its narrative + pantomimic burdens.”<sup>40</sup> From these ideas, he established the main conflict in physical terms: a “trial” represented by a series of symbolic scenes distilled from the play, and overseen by a set of clashing forces positioned along the proscenium, including “death,” “the Torah + synagogue,” and “Heaven and the highest of worlds.”<sup>41</sup> Leah consequently became the center of a mythological struggle between love and death (embodied by Khonen) and religion and community (represented by the rebbe performing the exorcism). Khonen’s character, meanwhile, gained definition by his turn to the dark arts to claim Leah for himself: Robbins envisioned the solo leading to Khonen’s death as a series of physical (up/down) and spiritual (Torah/Kabbalah) opposites:

Chanon: an intense dance of ripping from the Torah the magic to win Leah to him. He becomes engulfed in the pages (scrolls) of the Torah, like Laäcoon—he forces thru the fervor of his prayers—his obsessive insistence—he burns + burns—+ at last catches fire + (in silence) he burns out—+ as his body drops thru the stage (he stomps on floor + makes a Kabbalistic sign on it) his soul flies up + out—a double movement. Falls off earth . . . trap stage in front of him. . . . The sign opens the [downstage] trap. Then as clothes suddenly shoot up to heaven, he is dropped into the pit.<sup>42</sup>

Although these moves situated *The Dybbuk* within a classical dance framework, Robbins also drew on other dance traditions for further inspiration. During the previous decade, Robbins' directorship of the American Theatre Laboratory (1961–68, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts) had led to an engagement with a variety of abstract theatrical approaches, prominently including Japanese Noh drama and Kabuki dance; the premiere of his Noh-inspired work *Watermill* in February 1972 presented his latest attempts to bring the form to ballet.<sup>43</sup> These experiences likely led Robbins to try a similar Noh-inspired approach that emphasized *The Dybbuk's* cosmic nature. In an exploratory four-page treatment titled "NOH (DYBBUK)" dated February 17, 1972, which he may have shared with Bernstein, Robbins began with a "pure spirit": a composite "'he'-'she'" character that he elsewhere called "Leah-Chanon," who begins the work by relating "the time 'she' was two, trying to seek + be with each other . . . the time of love—the time of meeting . . . the time of finding each others soul . . . the recognition of finding a home," before "relat[ing] the things that took them apart . . . the difference of status . . . her fathers ambitions . . . the ethics of the shte[t]le . . . the earthly worlds promises." He viewed this solution as a way to emphasize tensions between the living and the dead, and saw the "demon" Khonen living in Leah as a symbol of the broader cosmic injustice: the broken promise between their fathers. When Khonen's dead father, Nissen, is summoned during the trial/exorcism, he "tells (dances) his + Senders love. [Masks—changed—etc.] . . . if dancers in Masks portray old men—can they then discard them, become young + dance their love . . . friendship—marriage—separation + progenerations."<sup>44</sup>

Within days, Robbins and Bernstein had arranged the key moments of the work both backward and forward, while moving the dance between the fathers to the start of the work with the line "2 men meet + love + pledge."

Robbins affirmed: “By now it is a Noh—an abstract interrogation” that superseded a more narrative-based theatrical work, even as he was “upset at moving away from the original feelings” of the play.<sup>45</sup> While he made no additional mention of the form, this episodic approach ultimately restructured the 1974 work as a map of spiritual rupture and reconciliation.

Choreographer Zvika Serper, who staged his own unrelated *Dybbuk/Noh* fusion in 2002, identified what he saw as several “common beliefs, meanings, and structures” between the two forms.<sup>46</sup> Noh (and related Kabuki) characters, according to Serper, can have a much more fluid presentation of gender, shifting registers based on specific sounds and movements; and just like *The Dybbuk*, Noh plays highlight interactions between the living and the supernatural worlds (especially demons).<sup>47</sup> Robbins drew similar inspiration from Noh in the 1970s, and through it came to conceive the two lovers as a composite male-female, tragically torn apart through the previous generation’s broken promises.

### NARRATIVE INTERSECTION III: DAVID AND JONATHAN

A few days after producing the Noh treatment, Robbins asked Bernstein to jettison a narrative approach and “just write a score for dancing based on thematic suggestions from the world of the DYBBUK.”<sup>48</sup> Perhaps motivated by Bernstein, who regularly looked to literature for his compositional themes, Robbins followed up with a series of biblical and liturgical texts that could correspond with each episode: “The Creation / Ezekiel” for the opening, “Song of Songs [bracketed with] David + Jonathan” for the scene of the fathers, “Sabbath [liturgy]” perhaps for Khonen, and “Celebrations” presumably for the wedding music, perhaps linked to “Psalms.”<sup>49</sup> Three days later, “David + Jonathan” (or “D+J”) become shorthand for an introductory scene where the two fathers, Sender and Nissen, pledge their children to each other. The original outline of the scene partly survived in the 1974 work: “2 men dance,” then “2 couples pas de deux” (presumably the two men with their wives), and finally “2 trios” dance (likely dramatizing the addition of children).<sup>50</sup>

On one level, this interpretation of the fathers’ arrangement had a precedent in Michał Waszyński’s 1937 film version of *The Dybbuk*, which Bernstein and Robbins both knew well.<sup>51</sup> As described by literature scholar

Naomi Seidman, the film begins with a prologue that characterizes the close homosocial relationship between the two fathers through a musical setting from the Song of Songs—music that later justifies the fatedness of Khonen and Leah's relationship further along in the film.<sup>52</sup> To Seidman, this relationship broadens the erotic continuum of traditional Jewish life in the Pale:

Ansky distributes intersubjectively and performatively what Freud attributes to the psychosexual composition of an individual—the dybbuk is herself/himself a figure for such doubling. The demonic possession of the bride is a function of the sublime erotic love between Leah and Chonen, but it also reflects a disruption between Leah's father and her lover, and between both fathers. Rather than read the relationship between the fathers as thinly veiled "homoeroticism," with the associations of the term with "sexual orientation" and resistance to the heterosexual order, I would now direct attention to the normativity of this same-sex bond, as part of the fabric of traditional Jewish marriage in which same-sex relationships are coproductive. The young men who promise their unborn children to one another are not "queer" (except in anachronistic translation) but rather a normative type—prospective *makhatonim* [in-laws], participants in a kinship relationship critical to traditional Ashkenaz.<sup>53</sup>

Bernstein and Robbins expand that context further by interpolating the biblical David and Jonathan story into the fathers' agreement. As Sharon Friedman notes in her gender-focused exploration of the David and Jonathan story across various media, "the context and purpose of the narration transforms each account, depending upon time and place, historical circumstances, and purpose of the narrator."<sup>54</sup> In this case, the convergence of these two narratives adds quiet credence to a queer reading of Bernstein and Robbins' *The Dybbuk* in a time of gay liberation: both in the post-Stonewall era and in Bernstein's own life.

Bernstein's interest in the *Dybbuk* narrative appears to have intersected with his interest in the story of King David. In a letter to his wife, Felicia, on January 7, 1954—around the same time as another unsuccessful attempt by Robbins to revive the project—Bernstein expressed his progress in mapping out a three-act opera based on King David.<sup>55</sup> Although this narrative clearly connected Bernstein's open Jewish identity with his more recent advocacy for Israel, the David story also held an episode that received increasing attention in the second half of the century: a pledge from David to King

Saul's son Jonathan that "whatsoever your soul desires, I will do it" (1 Samuel 20:4).<sup>56</sup> Bernstein's own life contained a number of parallels: he had long acted on his attraction to men, but he also enjoyed a happy marriage and a public family life. The David narrative offered a flexibility that allowed him to explore both sides: in the fall of 1954, for example, Bernstein agreed to conduct Darius Milhaud's rather more heteronormative opera *King David* at Milan's La Scala opera house.<sup>57</sup>

From at least the 1950s onward, the story of Jonathan and David increasingly became a metaphor for gay identity. Bernstein, who knew writer James Baldwin, may have encountered this metaphor in the author's 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room* (which employed an Italian variant of the name Jonathan alongside the more conventional David).<sup>58</sup> In late 1970, one of the first gay synagogues in Brooklyn Heights named itself the House of David and Jonathan during its brief existence.<sup>59</sup> The following year, when Bernstein's public and torrid relationship with musicology student Tom Cothran began to erode his marriage, the topic of Jonathan and David likely took on a more specific homosexual recoding; and the relationship continued as Bernstein and Robbins searched for meaningful metaphors with which to populate *The Dybbuk*.

The visibility of the Jonathan and David subtext would change as versions of Bernstein and Robbins' *Dybbuk* proliferated. Robbins pushed toward abstraction: writing in his project journal on January 25, 1974, he reiterated his dissatisfaction with Bernstein's romanticizing efforts: "Our ideas of love expressed are so different. He milks [it] + I resist it strictly—or obviously."<sup>60</sup> But Robbins likely referred to Bernstein's suggested metaphorical texts as much as he did Bernstein's music. The scores that Bernstein provided to Robbins around that time included four bass/baritone duets. In the first section of the ballet, the two voices sing the blessing for separating "the sacred from the profane, light from darkness, Israel from the other nations" from the Jewish Havdalah (separation) service marking the end of the Sabbath at Saturday dusk. The "Fathers"/David and Jonathan section begins with the two voices singing the second half of 1 Samuel 20:4 ("Anything your soul desires I shall give to you"). A third duet, during Leah's solo, includes a reference to Song of Songs 4:1 ("Hinach yafa rayati" [Behold, you are fair, my love]), and Khonen's death scene included the two voices intoning a segment of the traditional prayer for the dead (the Kaddish).<sup>61</sup> Robbins continued to oppose the vocal sections over the following months, writing in his journal on the day before the premiere: "Lennie can't change

the voices + cut them, he says, but [I believe that] they should be out.”<sup>62</sup> Yet only one duet ultimately succumbed: while Bernstein’s original piano score for “David and Jonathan” included the male duet singing 1 Samuel 20:4, a later two-piano score in a polished hand, likely created for dance rehearsals, eliminated the voices altogether, hiding that relationship. A May 15, 1974, program proof for the dancework’s premiere, moreover, described the two fathers as having only a “loving friendship.”<sup>63</sup>

As Robbins transformed the piece further, from *The Dybbuk Variations* in December 1974, into the 1980 *Suite of Dances*, he eroded the textual bases for the narrative—not to mention the narrative itself—eliminating the vocal parts while emphasizing the abstract dance as the work’s focus. Bernstein, in contrast, came to *emphasize* the vocal settings in his presentation of the narrative, highlighting David and Jonathan even as the official title of the section (as included in the 1974 LP recording) transformed into “The Fathers” or “The Pledge.”<sup>64</sup>

In 1975, Bernstein premiered two suites based on his *Dybbuk* music that (at least theoretically) retold the narrative in different ways: once in a purely instrumental version emphasizing Leah’s story (*Suite, no. 2*) and once in a more tumultuous retelling that expanded on all the sung texts (*Suite, no. 1*).<sup>65</sup> In his concert note for the American premiere of *Suite, no. 1* (by the New York Philharmonic, April 3, 1975), Bernstein explained the role of the David and Jonathan narrative explicitly:

In Ansky’s sense, “this world” is limited to the tiny but teeming area of the Russian-Polish ghetto; the True World is the world of the angels, the ten spheres, the sources of Being. In that world, a pledge made in loving faith must be honored, or the ten spheres will tremble, and the universe may cease to be. Such a pledge was made (before the curtain went up) in Ansky’s play; and the fact that it was not honored is discovered only in the last act, when contact with the True World has been magically made. It is then that we understand the meaning of the whole preceding drama.

It is otherwise in the ballet that Jerome Robbins and I have devised. Our scenario begins with the pledge, and such action as there is initiated thereby. . . . And out of this communal reaching for the True World emerges the Pledge, again introduced by the two singers who recall the Biblical love-pledge of David and Jonathan. This episode is danced by the two young males who make a similar bond: “Thy seed shall be my seed.”<sup>66</sup>

Bernstein then resolved the episode back into the heteronormative: “They both take wives, and out of each couple emerges a child, a son and a daughter, Channon and Leah, the predestined lovers.” When he adds that “all is now prepared for the inevitable tragedy,” he appears to speak on more than one plane.<sup>67</sup>

Sung text—in a duet between bass and baritone—drives the narrative in *Suite, no. 1*. Even as Bernstein titles the scene between the fathers “The Betrothal,” the published score (which is identical to the score used to premiere the suite) also restores the 1 Samuel 20:4 vocal duet that had been cut from the ballet, while keeping the notation “D + J” on each page.<sup>68</sup> Bernstein’s use of Hebrew in this case effectively encodes what would be a jarring English interpolation: a seemingly mundane text masking a far more passionate sentiment than two prospective fathers might typically offer each other. The bass/baritone duet returns several times throughout the suite, moreover: not only including the Havdalah blessings of separation at the beginning and end, but also interpolating a new duet (“Leah Gematria”) during Khonen’s turn to Kabbalism, which numerically transforms the Hebrew name “Leah” into the phrase “There is no God”;<sup>69</sup> singing the Kaddish to mark the moment that Khonen dies; and provocatively adding a sung quote from Deuteronomy 27:22, forbidding incestuous relations between brother and sister, during the exorcism scene.<sup>70</sup> It is possible to hear *Suite, no. 1* as a retelling of the story from Nissen and Sender’s perspective, with their ill-fated efforts to turn their relationship into an extended vision of family.

Thus, while Bernstein claimed that the suites went a step further than the ballet to create “an abstract of an abstract,” his addition (or restoration) of sung text throughout offers another reading that reflects a broader spectrum of relationships putting the plot into motion—while possibly commenting on the relationships in his own life.<sup>71</sup> Those too, notably, would end tragically: Bernstein returned to his wife, Felicia, in 1977, shortly before she was diagnosed with late-stage lung cancer; she died the following year. And Cothran died in 1980 of what would later be called AIDS.

As the end of his life approached, Bernstein continued to connect *The Dybbuk* with more boldly queer versions of the David and Jonathan narrative. Biographer Humphrey Burton describes his attempt to reconfigure his *Dybbuk* music into part of a two-act drama shortly after returning from a dispiriting trip to Israel, where he saw Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir rhetorically ramp up tensions between Jews and Arabs during a visit to Yad Vashem.<sup>72</sup> The first act would comprise his David/Jonathan/Saul “triangle



opera,” including a “full-blown love scene” between the two young men that also appeared to equate pangender love with political and intellectual maturity, to the point of resolving conflict between nations. And at one point, notes Bernstein scholar Katherine Baber, Bernstein conceived of Jonathan as a “Hosenrolle [a cross-gender ‘pants role’]: [a] beautiful black-haired mezzo[-soprano]—or countertenor,” complicating gender dynamics further.<sup>73</sup> *The Dybbuk* music, moreover, would take place in the second half of the evening, in the newly transfigured context of a post-Holocaust world—with David and Jonathan returning as the “Two Ghetto Fathers.”<sup>74</sup>

### CONCLUSION: ABSTRACT POSSESSIONS AND NARRATIVE INTERSECTION

Bernstein and Robbins’ *Dybbuk*-based works are both a significant collaboration and an overlooked curiosity: a set of pieces that have been rarely performed, though they were briefly revived on both coasts as part of the Bernstein centennial celebration events in 2017–19. Viewed as a long-term collaboration, however, they present a rich example of how the abstractions of music and dance, crafted over decades, can add new layers to *The Dybbuk*’s story. Born out of ethnographic research, *The Dybbuk* quickly became an attractor of “crossover” Jewish creativity, fulfilling modern strivings for folk status that allowed Jews to seek entry into a marketplace of new artistic expression. The works that resulted channeled the story through the concerns of the day, Jewish and otherwise, and offered public explorations of fantastical dual worlds that spanned disciplines, nations, and sexualities. Extended projects such as that of Bernstein and Robbins reflect the inherent connections between modern artists and mythical points of origin. But even more so, they highlight the value of the nonverbal arts as a fertile medium for extended and varied dialogues between Jewish identity and modernity.

#### Notes

I am grateful to Katherine Baber for her close reading and valuable comments on this essay.

1. Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 87–134. The source that appears in the chapter epigraph, which was dated June 3, 1974, was found in

the Jerome Robbins personal papers, box 37, folder 11, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Subsequent citations to Robbins' personal papers also refer to this collection.

2. Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 189, 193–94. See also Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), which deals mainly with central Europe; and Itzik Gottesman, *Defining the Yiddish Nation: The Jewish Folklorists of Poland* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003).

3. Roland Cvetlovski, "Introduction: On the Making of Ethnographic Knowledge in Russia," in *Empire of Others: Creating Ethnographic Knowledge in Imperial Russia and the USSR*, ed. Roland Cvetkovski and Alexis Hofmeister (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014), 14.

4. Albert Weisser, *The Modern Renaissance of Jewish Music* (New York: Bloch, 1954); Izaly Zemtsovsky, "The Musical Strands of An-sky's Texts and Contexts," in *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 203–31; James Loeffler, *The Most Musical Nation: Jews and Culture in the Late Russian Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Jascha Nemtsov, *Die neue Jüdische Schule in der Musik* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2004).

5. Nathaniel Deutsch, *The Jewish Dark Continent: Life and Death in the Russian Pale of Settlement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 80–81, 180–81 (on theater), 215–29 (on dance). Music is also mentioned extensively at several points throughout his vast fieldwork-focused questionnaire *The Jewish Ethnographic Program* (103–313). On the *purimspiel* as a form, see Ahuva Belkin, "Ritual Space as Theatrical Space in Jewish Folk Theatre," in *Jewish Theatre: A Global View*, ed. Edna Nahshon (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 15–24.

6. Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 87–88; see also Judah M. Cohen, "Modes of Tradition? Negotiating Jewishness and Modernity in the Synagogue Music of Isadore Freed and Frederick Piket," *Jewish Culture and History* 5, no. 2 (2002): 27–32. For a more extensive discussion of aurality in *The Dybbuk*, based on an analysis of a 1965 audio recording of the play, see Ruthie Abeliovich, *Possessed Voices: Aural Remains from Modernist Hebrew Theater* (Albany: State University of New York, 2019), 49–84.

7. See, e.g., Laurence Senelick, "Jews in Fashion at the Moscow Art Theater," in *Jews and Theater in an Intercultural Context*, ed. Edna Nahshon (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 240; Vladislav Ivanov, "Habima and 'Biblical Theater,'" in *Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theater*, ed. Susan Tumarkin Goodman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 27–39.

8. Review of "The Dybbuk," *Écran* 20 (1922): 6, cited in *The Soviet Theater: A*

*Documentary History*, ed. Laurence Senelick and Sergei Ostrovsky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 139.

9. Joel Engel, *Suite aus der Musik zu der dramatischen Legende von An-ski*, "Hadibuk" (Tel Aviv: Juwal, 1926).

10. Untitled notice, *Musical America*, September 24, 1921, 21. Cherniavsky wrote the songs "The Ragged Philosophers" and "The Chant of the Sage," which received their own publications in association with the play.

11. "Opera Composers Are Busy," *Musical America*, November 25, 1925, 14 (Grosz worked with librettist Rudolf Stephan Hoffmann); "Neue Opern," *Die Musik* 18, no. 3 (December 1, 1925), 238; "Neue Opern," *Die Musik* 21, no. 2 (November 1, 1928), 154. (Later, in 1939, Grosz migrated to the United States, where he changed his name to Hugh Williams and had a long career as a songwriter.) Images from this production show that it is clearly based on *The Dybbuk*; see Arno Nadel Collection, AR4314, box 1, folder 4, Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

12. "Activities of Some of the Members of the Honorary Board," *Pro-Musica Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1926): 45. See also Soma Morgenstern, *Alban Berg und seine Idole: Erinnerungen und Briefe* (Lüneberg, Germany: Zu Klampen, 1995), 130–33.

13. See Luisa Passerini, *Love and the Idea of Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 251–52. Passerini notes that the rights holder at the time was Izaak Grünebaum (Yitzhak Greunbaum), and that Lodovico Rocca secured the rights first.

14. "Many Productions of 'The Dybbuk,'" *Billboard*, April 3, 1926, 24; "Abandons 'The Dybbuk' as Opera," *New York Times*, March 25, 1926, 20; Gloria Lasky, Copy-right report on *The Dybbuk*, Jerome Robbins personal papers, box 37, folder 12.

15. Howard Pollack, *Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 461–64.

16. "Activities of Musicians Here and Afield," *New York Times*, January 15, 1933, X6.

17. See Jesse Rosenberg, "Race, Religion and Jewish Identity in the Operas of Fascist Italy," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 10, no. 1 (2017): 117–21; Passerini, *Love and the Idea of Europe*, 250–61; "American Premiere of Dybbuk Planned," *Musical America*, October 10, 1935, 6. Notably, as Passerini notes, Rocca's opera appears to have been the first adaptation of *The Dybbuk* to include a prologue highlighting the fathers' pledge of their children to each other in marriage, preceding the 1937 film.

18. "Dybbuk Opera," *Stage and Television Today*, October 22, 1970, 20 (on Füssli). Mandelbaum's four-hour-long opera had a significant performance at the Merkin Hall of the Aaron Copland School of Music in New York on October 26, 2017; see "The Aaron Copland School of Music to Present *The Dybbuk*," *Broadway World Opera*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwopera/article/The-Aaron-Copland-School-of-Music-to-Present-THE-DYBBUK-20171019>; Gregory Briggler, "The Dybbuk: A Review of Opera in Concert," *Briggler in Tune*

(blog), October 28, 2017, <https://brigglerintune.com/2017/10/28/the-dybbuk-a-review-of-opera-in-concert/>). Other music-theatrical settings include Michael White and George Bluestone's opera in Seattle, November 17, 1962; and Joel Pierson and Joseph Donnelly's musical *Between Two Worlds* in Bloomington, Indiana, circa 2019. On the former, see Margo Wald, "Northwest Roundup," *Back Stage*, October 26, 1962, 12.

19. Giora Manor, "Extending the Traditional Wedding Dance: Inbal Theatre's *Yemenite Wedding* and the 'Dance of the Beggars' in Habimah National Theatre's *Dybbuk*," in *Seeing Israel and Jewish Dance*, ed. Judith Brin Ingber (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 221n5; "Drama Notes," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 27, 1944, E7; John Martin, "The Dance: Notes from the Field," *New York Times*, August 20, 1944, X4.

20. An essay that I am coauthoring with Nina Spiegel, "*The Dybbuk* and the Arts of Reinvention: Music, Dance, and Narrative in American Jewish Culture," discusses this topic further.

21. Marjory M. Fisher, "Golden Gate Opera Ballet School Wins Success in First Production," *Musical America*, July 1933, 18; "Music Notes," *New York Times*, November 2, 1933, 19; Louis I. Newman, "Telling It in Gath," *Modern View* (Saint Louis, MO), December 16, 1934, 17; "ANNotations," *Register-Guard* (Eugene, OR), October 5, 1948, 13; "City Center to End Decade of Mishaps for Opera," *Brooklyn Eagle*, August 26, 1951, 28.

22. The latter piece was restaged the following year at the 92nd Street Y in New York.

23. For a list, created by the author, of music and dance works based on *The Dybbuk*, see "Adaptations and Remediated Works," MODIYA Project, New York University, accessed January 9, 2020, <http://hdl.handle.net/1964/929>. On a completely different level, *The Dybbuk* also appeared to influence the musical career of rabbi and folk singer Shlomo Carlebach. Hired briefly as a consultant for David Ross' 1954 staging of the play at the 4th Street Theatre in New York, he connected with the Greenwich Village folk scene and especially musician-singer Anita Sheer, who taught Carlebach to play the guitar. See Judah M. Cohen, "A Holy Brother's Liberal Legacy: Shlomo Carlebach, Reform Judaism, and Hasidic Pluralism," *American Jewish History* 100, no. 4 (2016): 496.

24. John S. Wilson, "Robbins Turns to the Serious," *PM* (New York), October 24, 1946, 18.

25. Leonard Bernstein, "Music and the Dance," *Dance Magazine*, June 1946.

26. Alan Pearlmutter, "Leonard Bernstein's 'Dybbuk': An Analysis including Historical, Religious, and Literary Perspectives of Hasidic Life and Lore" (DMA diss., Peabody Institute of Music, Johns Hopkins University, 1985).

27. Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge,

2016), 23; see also Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

28. Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 24. Thus dancer Andrée Howard could adapt a 1925 novel for dance by drawing on an earlier publication with anthropological descriptions of Dahomey dance; see Susan Jones, "From Text to Dance: Andrée Howard's *The Sailor's Return*," *Dance Research* 26, no. 1 (2008): 1–17.

29. A note on orthography: Bernstein and Robbins used the spelling "Chanon" or "Channon" for the character more conventionally spelled "Khonen." Bernstein and Robbins likely based this choice on Henry G. Alsberg and Winifred Katzin's 1926 translation (which Robbins consulted and annotated, and which remains in his personal papers, box 38, folder 13). Here, for the sake of consistency across the essays of this volume, "Khonen" will be used unless directly quoting Bernstein or Robbins.

30. Jerome Robbins, letter to Leonard Bernstein, October 13, 1958, Leonard Bernstein Collection, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/musbernstein.100061418/>

31. "The Dybbuk' as Ballet by Bernstein and Robbins, plus Menotti CBS Opera," *Variety*, March 30, 1960, 1; April 13, 1960, 25.

32. Deborah Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theater, His Dance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 418–22.

33. Arthur D. Holzman, "Palestine Inspires New Ballet by Young American Composer," *Boston Globe*, June 2, 1947, 10; see also Erica Argypoulos, "Conducting Culture: Leonard Bernstein, the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Negotiation of Jewish American Identity, 1947–1967" (PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2015), 99. The Israel Museum includes a photo of actor Hanna Rovina performing Leah in Tel Aviv in 1947; see Paul Goldman, "The Actress Hanna Rovina," photograph, 1947, Museums in Israel: National Portal, ICMS\_EIM\_MHZ380.2012.3, [https://museums.gov.il/en/items/Pages/ItemCard.aspx?IdItem=ICMS\\_EIM\\_MHZ380.2012.3](https://museums.gov.il/en/items/Pages/ItemCard.aspx?IdItem=ICMS_EIM_MHZ380.2012.3)). Bernstein also arranged the Israeli folk songs "Rina" and "Simchu Na" in 1947, and wrote several works for other commemorations.

34. Claudia Cassidy, "On the Aisle: Ballet Russe Rehearses 'Billy Sunday' as Ballet Theater Plans 'Dybbuk' and Trip to Bogota," *Chicago Tribune*, October 30, 1947, 29; "Habimah Director to Stage for Ballet Theatre," *Variety*, October 22, 1947, 56. Kaye had been in Bernstein and Robbins' previous ballet collaboration, *Facsimile* (1946). The musical exchange program Bernstein mentioned was likely associated with the Esco Foundation, which was involved in a number of Jewish music projects at the time, including the founding of the National Jewish Music Council. See Marianne Sanua, "The Esco Fund Committee: The Story of an American Jewish Foundation," in *America and Zion: Essays and Papers in Memory of Moshe Davis*, ed. Eli Lederhendler and Jonathan Sarna (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002), 117–60, esp. 142–50.

35. Paul Moor, "Leonard Bernstein: Ceiling Unlimited," *Harper's Magazine*, February 1, 1948, 142.
36. Jerome Robbins to Lincoln Kirstein, November 11, 1954, in *Jerome Robbins, by Himself: Selections from His Letters, Journals, Drawings, Photographs, and an Unfinished Memoir*, ed. Amanda Vaill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019), 170–71. *Apollo* (1928) had music by Igor Stravinsky; *Western Symphony* (1954) used a set of American folk songs arranged by Hershey Kay.
37. "Leonard Bernstein Plans 'Dybbuk' Score for 1973," *Jewish Exponent*, June 16, 1972, 2.
38. "Broadway," *Variety*, June 19, 1974, 61.
39. Another unused section of Bernstein's score became a part of his flute concerto *Halil*, which premiered in Tel Aviv in 1981. This concerto commemorates the memory of Israeli flutist Yadin Tanenbaum, who was killed in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. See Jack Gottlieb, *Working with Bernstein: A Memoir* (New York: Amadeus Press, 2010), 104.
40. Jerome Robbins, *Dybbuk* notebook, December 12, 1971, Jerome Robbins personal papers, box 38, folder 1. Subsequent citations to Robbins' *Dybbuk* notebook are to this same folder.
41. Robbins, *Dybbuk* notebook, February 1, 1972.
42. Robbins, *Dybbuk* notebook, February 9, 1972 (original emphasis). The reference to Laocoon, a Trojan priest, remains unclear.
43. Mari Yoshihara notes that Bernstein also had some interest in Noh and Kabuki theater, inspired by his 1961 tour of Japan with the New York Philharmonic and his Japanese protégé Seiji Ozawa; at this point, however, there appears to be no specific connection with Robbins' interest in Noh for *The Dybbuk*. See Yoshihara, *Dearest Lenny: Letters from Japan and the Making of the World Maestro* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 28.
44. Jerome Robbins, *Dybbuk* notes, February 17, 1972 (original emphasis), Jerome Robbins personal papers, box 38, folder 3; and see Robbins, *Dybbuk* notebook, February 14, 1972.
45. Robbins, *Dybbuk* notebook, February 17, 1972.
46. Zvika Serper, "Between Two Worlds: 'The Dybbuk' and the Japanese Noh and Kabuki Ghost Plays," *Comparative Drama* 35, no. 3/4 (2001–2): 373. The performance also exists in a 2002 video recording entitled "The Dybbuk: Between Two Worlds." Serper does not appear to have been aware of Robbins' attempts to present *The Dybbuk* as Noh, likely because Robbins never made his ideas public.
47. Serper, 365.
48. Robbins, *Dybbuk* notebook, February 22, 1972.
49. Robbins, *Dybbuk* notebook, February 23, 1972.
50. The two trios would be transformed into three couples at the premiere, with the third couple representing Khonen and Leah.

51. See letter exchange between Jerome Robbins and Martin Bookspan, March 1966, Jerome Robbins personal papers, box 37, folder 2.

52. See the discussion in Naomi Seidman's chapter "The Ghost of Queer Loves Past" in this volume, reprinted from *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 240–41. See also Diana Matut on Henekh Kon's setting and its foreshadowing later in the film ("Henekh Kon: Beyond the Dybbuk," Presentation for the Jewish Music Forum/YIVO, October 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZleJvBsiqTM>).

53. Naomi Seidman, "Reading 'Queer' Ashkenaz: This Time from East to West," *TDR: The Drama Review* 55, no. 3 (2011): 55.

54. Sharon Friedman, "Between Desire and Authenticity: The 'Dybbuk' in Modernist and Postmodern Theatrical Adaptations from S. Ansky to Tony Kushner," in *Dramatic Revisions of Myths, Fairy Tales, and Legends: Essays on Recent Plays*, ed. Verna A. Foster (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 126.

55. Leonard Bernstein, letter to Felicia Bernstein, January 7, 1954, in *The Leonard Bernstein Letters*, ed. Nigel Simeone (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 316.

56. Mechon Mamre translation.

57. Darius Milhaud, letters to Leonard Bernstein, August 17, 1954, and September 23, 1954, in Simeone, *The Leonard Bernstein Letters*, 319, 322. Bernstein canceled in November, however, to work on *Candide*, which would receive its premiere in 1956. See Erin K. Maher, "Darius Milhaud in the United States, 1940–71: Transatlantic Constructions of a Musical Identity" (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016), 177.

58. James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Dell, 1956). Baldwin used an Italian analogue for Jonathan. See, e.g., Raymond-Jean Frontain, "James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* and the Biblical Myth of David," *CEA Critic* 57, no. 2 (1995): 41–58.

59. Jean R. Herschaft, "America's First Gay Synagogue Short Lived," *Jewish Post and Opinion* (Indianapolis, IN), August 27, 1971, 6.

60. Robbins, *Dybbuk* journal, January 25, 1974. This was not the first time that Bernstein's collaborators critiqued his romanticism: a similar conflict arose with Lilian Hellman over *Candide*.

61. Robbins, *Dybbuk* journal, February 22, 1972. Bernstein was intimately familiar with the Kaddish text, which he made the subject of his third symphony (*Kaddish*, 1963). The symphony, however, approached the Kaddish text in its broadest form, as a generic praise text, whereas in the *Dybbuk* he specifically used a version of the prayer for the dead also mentioned in An-sky's play. In addition to sung texts, Bernstein also interpolated the Hasidic-inspired song "V'Taheir Libeinu" (Purify Our Hearts [so we can worship You in truth]) into the exorcism section as its own

unmarked reference. See Harry Coopersmith, ed., *More of the Songs We Sing* (New York: United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, 1971), 7.

62. Robbins, *Dybbuk* journal, May 14, 1974.

63. This proof is collected in Jerome Robbins personal papers, box 38, folder 12.

64. Leonard Bernstein, *Dybbuk: Complete Ballet*, Columbia M33082, 1974, LP.

65. Interestingly, the published score for *Dybbuk Suite, no. 2* includes one sung note at the start of section 4 (“Dream”), likely inadvertently retained from the original score. Bernstein, *Dybbuk Suite, no. 2* (1974; rpt., New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 2018), 66.

66. Leonard Bernstein, program note to *Suite, no. 1* from *Dybbuk*, New York Philharmonic, program, April 3–11, 1975, 19.

67. Bernstein, 19.

68. See, for example, Leonard Bernstein, performance score for *Dybbuk Suite, no. 1*, New York Philharmonic, Shelby White & Leon Levy Digital Archives, item 8007, <https://archives.nyphil.org/index.php/artifact/7b500106-152f-4bc1-b0e3-744b18d5c412-0.1/fullview#page/1/mode/2up> (accessed June 1, 2020).

69. Bernstein here separated the Hebrew letters of Leah’s name, spelled *lamed, aleph, hey*. *Lamed* and *aleph* together translate as *lo* or “no,” and *hey* on its own represents the divine name. For more on these texts, see Gottlieb, *Working with Bernstein*, 244–46.

70. Leonard Bernstein, *Dybbuk Suite, no. 1* (1974; New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 2018).

71. Bernstein, program note to *Suite, no. 1* from *Dybbuk*, 19.

72. Humphrey Burton, *Leonard Bernstein* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 502.

73. Leonard Bernstein Collection, box 1060, folder 4, Library of Congress; Katharine Baber, notes. I am grateful to Baber for sharing her notes on this source.

74. Burton, *Leonard Bernstein*, 502.



# Tracks of the Dybbuk

Michael C. Steinlauf

“Tell me who you are,” the maiden Leah implores the spirit of her dead lover, Khonen. He has just been exorcised from her body and can now only return to her soul. “I have forgotten,” replies the dybbuk. “It is only through your thoughts that I can remember who I am.”<sup>1</sup> Leah will die to be with him and thereby, presumably in the spirit world, will help him remember. The dybbuk, however, once set loose on our world, will also maintain its presence here, both on the stage and off. It will wander our world restlessly, indefatigably, and therefore embody Joanna Tokarska-Bakir’s appellation: “Something lost that seeks its name.”<sup>2</sup>

And seeks its language too—for *The Dybbuk* was born amid a polyphony of languages. We now know that S. An-sky, aiming his play at a Russian audience, first wrote *The Dybbuk* in Russian, and only later translated it into Yiddish. Then, wandering through war and revolution, An-sky lost his copy of this Yiddish text. But the Hebrew poet Hayim Nahman Bialik had made a Hebrew version of *The Dybbuk* that he gave to An-sky, who then translated it back into Yiddish. This was the version of the play that the Vilna Troupe opened on December 9, 1920 at Warsaw’s Elysium Theater, from whose stage An-sky’s dybbuk first wandered into our world—already a creature of absence, speaking through other mouths, in voices not its own. Walter Benjamin’s notion of pure language, language “which no longer means or expresses anything but is,” is relevant here. For Benjamin such a language is that of primal creation, the tongue in which God spoke the world into existence.<sup>3</sup> Or is it a vile caricature of the language of creation, recalling Bruno Schulz’s overripe, rotting travesties?<sup>4</sup> Or is it both? We have before us not only a creature that has lost its name, but also one that has lost, or never had, its own language. Yiddish, then, the oft-derided, so-called jargon, a helter-

skelter mash-up of the “serious” languages of the world, is the perfect vehicle for a dybbuk’s speech.

Finally, there’s *The Dybbuk*’s creator, Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport, who took the name An-sky, meaning “no-name” or “any-name.” An-sky’s biographer Gabriella Safran cites the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin to gloss An-sky’s decision: “The revolutionary . . . does not have his own interests, affairs, feelings, habits, not even a name.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, An-sky himself, as Safran shows, was a wandering soul and a shape-shifter, like his dybbuk creation: from heretic and maskil (follower of Haskalah) to writer and socialist, to Jewish socialist and Jewish ethnographer—always a revolutionary, however, and always homeless. He was Jewish and Russian but neither fully. His dybbuk, whether on the stage or off, was, like its creator, a multivalent creature, a being capable of containing vast and varied stores of changing meaning and, at the same time, no meaning at all.

\* \* \*

Originally intended as an act of homage to its author, who had just died, the Vilna Troupe’s production of *The Dybbuk* was not expected to create much of a stir.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the play went on to become the single most celebrated work in the history of Yiddish theater, produced over subsequent decades in nearly a dozen languages, and made the subject of several movies, an opera, and a ballet. In the prewar Polish Jewish world, the so-called *dibukiada* (dybbuk mania) was a sensation that spoke to powerful cultural, political, and psychosocial needs.<sup>7</sup> Rooted in the most elemental Jewish sense of place, the cemeteries, synagogues, courtyards, and marketplaces of the Polish lands, and in the premodern lifeways of the Jews who populated them, the play was a solemn ritual, a pageant, a *misterium* (mystery play) that—in an era of antisemitic agitation calling for the expulsion of Jews from Poland—proclaimed “We are here!” With its carefully constructed Hasidic milieu and its channeling of the premodern folklore of demonic possession, the play, observers noted, was a kind of religious experience. As a journalist for a Jewish Warsaw daily put it, more than once during the performance of *The Dybbuk* he had shuddered with *hadres koydesh*. This expression, never used in a secular context, suggests awesome, holy beauty.<sup>8</sup> It bears remembering that the journalist’s use of this phrase was inspired by the work of a socialist revolutionary.

In addition, here was a plot instantly recognizable to its contemporary Jewish audience: the poor young truth-seeker and his beloved, the threat

of her arranged marriage to an unappetizing yeshiva student, and a climax marked by the lovers' escape or, in other versions, by their destruction. There is, however, a crucial difference in *The Dybbuk*. In the conventional plot in early Yiddish theater and popular Yiddish novels, the young lovers represent a critique of the old Jewish world; they are linked to progress and light, to a quest for new paths out of the so-called superstition and darkness of Jewish tradition.<sup>9</sup> But in *The Dybbuk*, in an atmosphere thick with the telling and retelling of legends and lore, Khonen and Leah represent a complete thematic reversal: they stand squarely on the side of superstition and darkness. This stance, however, leads them to break with normative tradition: a traditional dybbuk, after all, was hardly an attractive lover. An-sky the revolutionary has the final word. And more. An-sky's dybbuk quickly descended from the stage and into the street. "Without any exaggeration," declared a Jewish journalist in 1921, "dybbuk now belongs among the most popular words in the Warsaw Jewish lexicon." And, making use of a newly popular term in contemporary discourse, he asked: "Is it a psychosis?"<sup>10</sup> Brought to the center of public attention on the stage of the Elysium Theater and then endlessly reproduced in the pages of the mass Yiddish press, to an audience encountering all the dislocations of twentieth-century urban life, the notion of possession began to reassume its primary associations. A dybbuk, after all, is an agent of dissolution that clings to the living; the Hebrew root *d-b-k* means to cleave, to adhere. A dybbuk confounds the border between life and death and attacks the boundaries of the self. This was the dybbuk that descended from the Elysium stage and into the streets of Jewish Warsaw a century ago. There it assumed a multivalent life, often as an agent of parody. Warsaw, writers noted, was itself *fardibekt* (shot through with dybbuks), with mouths speaking for one another, voices usurping each other. One columnist contrasted the number of telephones, newspapers, meetings, and committees with the little that ever got done, and concluded: "Not without cause has *The Dybbuk*, in which one mouth speaks for another . . . had such success here."<sup>11</sup> The popular humorist Der Tunkeler (Yosef Tunkel) in his column *Der krumer shpigl* (The crooked mirror) further expanded the dybbuk's reach:

A dybbuk! a dybbuk! a dybbuk! a dybbuk!  
 With dybbuks we now must contend . . .  
 Dybbuks, dybbuks of every kind,  
 In our Jewish garden like mushrooms they grow,  
 Creeping up to the very first row.

Succeeding stanzas identify a red dybbuk in Russia that craves freedom, happiness, and Jewish blood; a dybbuk that writes for an antisemitic Polish newspaper in the body of a notorious Jewish convert; a dybbuk called futurism; a dybbuk that contaminates bread; and one that steals from American Jewish charities.<sup>12</sup>

It was inevitable that *The Dybbuk* would be pulled into politics. But while Jewish artists and activists saw *The Dybbuk* as a model for creating a modern national culture, Polish attitudes toward Jews and Jewish culture during the interwar period were nearly universally negative. First of all, there was the growing nationalist movement, with the National Democrats, known as Endecja or Endeks, at its head. Endeks regarded the Jews as outright enemies, and the Versailles Treaty, which guaranteed Jews national rights, as treason. Associated Endek youth groups specialized in beating Jews. Beyond this, for most Poles the Jewish world was endlessly remote: Jews were said to exist behind a “Chinese wall”; the Jewish quarter was referred to as a “dark continent.”<sup>13</sup> Even much of the liberal Polish intelligentsia was largely blind to the phenomenon of modern Jewish culture. To suggest that the stereotypical Jew, wearing *peyes* and *kapote* (sidelocks and long coat) and babbling jargon, could develop a modern culture would seem absurd.

Just one month after *The Dybbuk*'s premiere, the activist Zalmen Reyzen, writing from Vilna, where the Polish-Jewish conflict was particularly acute, launched the play into the political arena. Deciding against a conventional review, Reyzen chose to discuss “the great social significance that *The Dybbuk* will have for the Jewish people in Poland.” *The Dybbuk*, he points out, was reaching Poles as well as Jews. Perhaps they would stop seeing Jews as “dealers, smugglers, and speculators” and gaze instead into “the folk soul, with its striving to create and reveal itself in the higher world of art.”<sup>14</sup> Conventional politics, of little value for a diaspora minority such as the Jews, would not bring the Jews to their goal. It would require work of the spirit, and *The Dybbuk* was the most powerful expression yet of that spirit in its modern form. For *The Dybbuk* had finally and definitively broken out of the decades-old discourse that condemned popular Yiddish theater as *shund* (trash). Here was a work of art, Jewish writers exulted, on a par with the greatest accomplishments of Polish and European theater.

To what extent did Poles respond to the play? The creators of Polish dramatic theater in the interwar period were the inheritors of an exalted artistic and national tradition. In the nineteenth century, when the czars attempted to stifle Polish culture, theater had been the last public domain where the Polish language could continue to be celebrated. Theater, like the

church, became a crucial link in the perpetuation of Polish national identity, the subject of intense public preoccupation. In independent Poland, theaters became shrines in which the “national mystery plays” of the Polish Romantic tradition, from Adam Mickiewicz to Stanisław Wyspiański, could at last be staged in spectacular modernist productions.

At a time when Polish attitudes to Jewish culture ranged from indifference to hostility, the creators of Polish dramatic theater, for the most part “progressive” artists with left-wing sympathies, proved notable exceptions. Moreover, as directors such as Juliusz Osterwa, Stefan Jaracz, and others pointed out, the audience for their Polish-language theater was substantially and often primarily Jewish.<sup>15</sup> Beginning with the Vilna Troupe’s *Dybbuk*, Polish theater artists regularly attended, supported, and occasionally collaborated in the work of their Yiddish counterparts. But this recognition remained marginal in relation to Polish society as a whole and rather ephemeral. In the words of the great Israeli scholar Chone Shmeruk, describing the parallel situation of literature: “[With] naive amazement . . . successive generations of Polish writers ‘discovered’ Yiddish literature, happily unaware that its existence had already been uncovered, and more than once.”<sup>16</sup>

Nor were all Jews so taken with the Polish accolades. Responding to Reyzen, Mendl Elkin protested against the transformation of *The Dybbuk* into “a political demonstration.” “They,” declares Elkin, “the great art sages of the nations of the world, agreed to come see the amazing wonder and—oh joy—they like *The Dybbuk*, ‘they’ speak about it to one another. . . . You mean Jews think too? They also aspire to art? . . . We never knew this. . . . Great! We can associate with them.”<sup>17</sup>

In May 1925, the Polish-Jewish dramatist Mark Arnshteyn (Andrzej Marek) brought *The Dybbuk* to the Polish stage for the first time. Arnshteyn encountered many obstacles on the way to his production, among them, the refusal of Polish theaters to stage so “Jewish” a play, and the tendency of his Polish actors to *zydłaczyć*, that is, to use the traditional intonations and gestures of the stage Jew of Polish farce: displaying “the crooked nose, and impossibly long *peyes*, . . . grabbing at one’s beard, . . . drawling vowels,” holding one’s belly, grimacing endlessly, and interminably using the interjection “aj waj!” (*oy vey*).<sup>18</sup> The play succeeded because Arnshteyn enabled the actors to find their own path, bringing Polish Romanticism into a world so alien to them. Jewish critics praised the production, often with a touch of envy; Arn Aynhorn, in the Yiddish daily *Haynt*, pointed to “that large measure of old artistic culture to whose level our young poor [theater] has not as yet

been able to attain.”<sup>19</sup> Polish critics readily identified the play as a *misterium*. The medieval genre, deeply rooted in Christian representation, originally performed in churches and marketplaces, had been revived in the twentieth century by directors from Wyspiański to Leon Schiller seeking to configure a national vision on the Polish stage. Some Jewish observers praised the production for bolstering Polish-Jewish understanding; others questioned the need to prove anything to Poles.

Political controversy, indeed, especially on the Jewish side, threatened to overwhelm artistic judgments. “Flirting with the goyim” is how Herts Grosbard, a Vilna Troupe actor, described the production.<sup>20</sup> Even before the play opened, Arnshteyn and his collaborators announced that the production was a “political act” intended to further Polish-Jewish understanding. This approach was amplified in the pages of the Polish-language Jewish press. Jakób Appenzlak, the editor of the Warsaw Polish-language Jewish daily *Nasz Przegląd*, greeted the Polish *Dybbuk* as follows: “*The Dybbuk* on the Polish stage. A Jewish masterpiece in a Polish theater in the capital city! For the first time in many, many years, a Jewish poet has been permitted to speak, and an honest artistic effort has been made to enter into the spirit of a work more foreign to Poles than the theater of faraway China. Does this not mean that a significant turning point has occurred in the attitude of the Polish intelligentsia to things Jewish . . . ?”<sup>21</sup> To which Aynhorn of *Haynt*, even as he praised the production on artistic grounds, replied: “Let’s not make a political event out of it, and let’s not think that *The Dybbuk* on the Polish stage signifies a break in the Chinese wall that divides the two peoples who have lived side by side for hundreds and hundreds of years, yet are still so totally strange to each other. Let’s especially not think . . . that *The Dybbuk* on the Polish stage is evidence of our wealth, which strangers must now approach. If only it were so, but it would be very naive to think that it already is.”<sup>22</sup> Instead, he suggests that a much better indicator of Jewish cultural wealth would be support for the accomplishments of the Yiddish theater.

The subtext here concerns the audience for the Polish *Dybbuk*, which, like that of Polish theater as a whole, was substantially Jewish, in this case overwhelmingly so. When Arnshteyn went on to stage other celebrated Yiddish plays in Polish productions, Yiddish cultural activists turned on him, warning that his work would draw Jews away from the “unclean” Yiddish language and theater, strengthen assimilation, and “lead to the collapse . . . of the Yiddish [dramatic] theater.”<sup>23</sup> Arnshteyn ultimately withdrew from stag-

ing Jewish theater in Polish, at least in Warsaw, but he was later recruited as artistic director of the 1937 Yiddish film version of *The Dybbuk*, which, directed by Michał Waszyński, became the most successful Yiddish film ever made.

\* \* \*

While Jews managed to stage theater in ghettos and even camps during World War II, the dybbuk as play or even as trope seemed to have vanished. After the Holocaust, in communist Poland, the play was staged only to small audiences of survivors, by the Ester Rachel and Ida Kamińska Jewish Theater in Warsaw. It remained largely unknown to Polish audiences. But in 1988, with communism in its final throes, Andrzej Wajda, the most celebrated film and theater director in Poland, staged *The Dybbuk* in Kraków as well as with the national theater Habima in Israel. The previous year, Jan Błoński's essay "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto" had triggered an unprecedented public soul-searching about Poles' responsibility for their Jewish neighbors during World War II. Jews, Błoński wrote, had "shared our home, lived on our soil, [their] blood has remained in the walls, seeped into the soil, [and] has also entered into ourselves, into our memory." But "when we lost our home, and when, within that home, the invaders set to murdering Jews, did we show solidarity towards them?"<sup>24</sup> The year after Wajda's production, the bitter international controversy about the convent at Auschwitz, which had been brewing for several years, burst onto the pages of Polish newspapers, side by side with news of the first free Polish elections in over half a century.<sup>25</sup> In this context, lavishly staged productions of *The Dybbuk* by the national theaters of Poland and Israel, directed by Wajda, an artist centrally identified with the Polish national vision, made a powerful statement. Wajda's *Dybbuk* summoned an exotic lost Jewish world that he linked directly to the Holocaust: in one scene, a long line of traditionally dressed Jews moves through the audience and onto a darkened stage. Here was the apotheosis of the black-garbed, death-shrouded Jew, first evoked in Jerzy Kawalerowicz's 1983 film *Austeria* and subsequently recalled throughout the 1980s by a generation for whom retrieving memory was a blow for freedom. The vehicle for this vision was a spectacle easily identifiable as a *misterium*.

Increasingly numerous Polish productions of *The Dybbuk*, both professional and amateur, began to segue into the larger process that has been termed Jewish memory work. In the small town of Sejny in the late 1990s,

Małgorzata Sporek-Czyżewska and Wojciech Szroeder of the Borderland Foundation, an institution dedicated to celebrating the “small fatherlands” of the Polish frontier, worked with local secondary school students to create a compressed adaptation of An-sky’s play that they staged on the bimah of the town’s synagogue, which the foundation had restored. This amateur production heralded the emerging function of the play and of the dybbuk itself as tropes for something other than death. At the heart of this play was a klezmer band recruited from the town’s students that has continued to perform throughout Poland, gradually expanding into an orchestra. In 1999, the award-winning Polish film director Agnieszka Holland produced another sort of *Dybbuk* for Polish television. An artist rooted in concerns more international than national, Holland made use of the small screen to avoid the spectacular for a production that, while still set in a carefully detailed Hasidic world, suggested the parameters, albeit in miniature, of classical tragedy.

Krzysztof Warlikowski’s *Dybbuk*, first staged in Poland in 2003 and subsequently performed throughout the world, represented something profoundly new. To begin with, the production eliminated all traces of feel-good folklore. There were no beards or *peyes* here, no darkened synagogues or rickety study houses. Instead, there was a minimalist set with cheap chairs and tables, spaces lightly sketched, and a few residual Jewish references: men wearing *kipot* (head coverings), a recognizable *khupe* (wedding canopy), steam suggesting a *mikve* (ritual bath), and animated figures of animals recalling old synagogue polychromes. “I didn’t want to submit to any particular tradition,” Warlikowski has said of the play.<sup>26</sup> Yet the link to a specific past is there, right from the start. For the first twenty minutes, the seated cast, dressed in street clothes, narrate Hasidic tales. The scene parallels the opening of An-sky’s *Dybbuk*, with old Jews telling miraculous tales in the darkened synagogue. But in post-Holocaust Poland, these tales, of legendary fish and sightings of Messiah, are exotica; they conjure a world vastly remote from their Polish narrators and from the Polish audience. The tales are rooted, however, in a litany of place names intimately known to Poles: Radzyń, Kutno, Sochaczew, Góra Kalwaria, Brańków, Czernobył, Kock, Proskurow, Łañcut, Ropczyce, Lublin, Międzyrzecze, Sassów, Różyn. The audience is confronted by these fantastic tales as *nasze* (ours), born in Polish towns, raised on Polish soil. Moreover, their very narration is intended as a link to the past, as one of the stories itself teaches. This is the celebrated tale of the Baal Shem Tov, who, when faced with a difficult problem, was said to



have gone to a particular spot in the woods, lit a fire, prayed, and received an answer. Generations later, the place in the woods, the building of the fire, the words of the prayer are all forgotten, but telling about them is said to suffice. So too with the telling of the names of holy Jewish places.

Warlikowski did not confine his transformation of the play to the elimination of its folkloric context. The second half of his *Dybbuk* is a staging of the contemporary Polish Jewish writer Hanna Krall's story of Adam S., a young American possessed by the dybbuk of his half-brother, who perished as a child in the Warsaw Ghetto.<sup>27</sup> While traditional tales of dybbuk possession usually climax with the exorcism of the invading spirit, in both halves of Warlikowski's play the attempt to exorcise the dybbuk fails. In the first part, following An-sky's plot, the tsaddik Reb Azriel drives the dybbuk from Leah's body, but it later returns to claim her soul and the lovers are united in death. In the second part, Samuel, a Buddhist monk, attempts an exorcism of the dybbuk from Adam's body, but at the last moment, overcome with *rakhmunes* (compassion) for his brother's lost soul, Adam invites him back. Unlike in the first half of the play, there is no resolution here, no closure. Adam's dybbuk will remain in his body and in our world, restless and menacing. In the final tableau, Samuel plays his flute and Adam's wife tosses sleepless in bed while Adam runs on a treadmill. A Polish caricature of an American, he is attempting to counteract the heart condition he has probably inherited from his father. Ironically, of course, only his death will finally free the dybbuk from his body.

Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* is filled with disturbing sexuality. Indeed, Naomi Seidman has suggested a strongly repressed sexual subtext in An-sky's *Dybbuk* itself. Sender and Nissen, the young men whose vow precipitates their children's tragic encounter, "pledge their children to each other in order to forge the most intimate, quasi-marital connection two men could attain in their society." In contrast, "the heterosexual bond between their two children remains unconsummated (except through the unnatural act of demonic—and transgender—possession), grotesque, sterile."<sup>28</sup> Issues of sexuality point again to the radical multivalence of the dybbuk trope.

Warlikowski makes the sexuality of his play viscerally explicit. Leah is sexually aggressive, demonstratively touching the passive Khonen's nipple. After Khonen's death, the young women prepare for Leah's wedding in an environment that suggests a bordello. A man walks through the space, gradually removing his clothing and fondling himself as the women, along with a little girl, watch. Leah appears in this scene wearing a man's suit. Reb Azriel,

the tsaddik who attempts to exorcise the dybbuk, is played by a woman. And in both parts of the play, two nearly naked men wrestle each other to exhaustion. In the first half it is Khonen and his yeshiva comrade Henekh as they argue about the transformation of lust into holiness and recite lines from the Song of Songs; in the second half, Adam and Samuel wrestle as the latter attempts to exorcise the dybbuk. These two homoerotic scenes are acted by the same two men.

Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* was first staged soon after the great national debate triggered by Jan T. Gross' book *Neighbors*, published in Polish in 2000, about the murder of Jews by their Polish neighbors in the town of Jedwabne early in World War II. In 2001, the president of Poland, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, standing at the site of the massacre, publicly apologized in the name of all Poles for this atrocity and dedicated a monument to the murdered Jews. "We have become aware of the responsibility for our attitude towards the dark pages in our history," Kwaśniewski declared. "We have understood that bad service is done to the nation by those who are impelling it to renounce that past. Such an attitude leads to moral self-destruction."<sup>29</sup>

Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* was staged in the aftermath of this collective soul-searching, when, as Tokarska-Bakir archly suggests, Poles had begun to feel that "after all we've already apologized for Jedwabne."<sup>30</sup> But Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* moved beyond the issue of Polish guilt, to something deeper, toward that nameless lost thing that seeks its name. What is it? It is, first of all, the Jew. As Warlikowski has described it: "A realization about the life and the annihilation of the Jews in Poland . . . the missing link within Polish identity today . . . the memory that might save us today." Save us how? "By bringing into the light of day what has been repressed ever since the Holocaust and by beginning to embrace it as a constituent part of Polish identity." He continues: "I'd like to open something up for those who live repressed lives here," and thereby segues into something even more deeply buried that seeks its name.<sup>31</sup> "Gay, That Is, Jew," Agnieszka Graff entitled her provocative article about Polish homophobia.<sup>32</sup> In mainstream public discourse in Poland, homophobia edges out antisemitism. What is new here is Warlikowski's yoking them together, thereby tapping into the submerged strata of contemporary Polish consciousness.

\* \* \*

At a time when the word *dybbuk* means almost nothing to the Jews of the world, not to mention to non-Jews, the dybbuk has begun to chart a path

through Poland. New versions of An-sky's play are constantly staged. New Polish books have appeared with *dybuk* (the Polish spelling of the word) in their titles, and the word has entered Polish public discourse. One journalist catalogs the particularly brazen dybbuks in Polish public life, while another attacks the so-called anti-Polonism of Jan Gross by referring to him as a dybbuk.<sup>33</sup> There's a Polish video game called *How to Become a Dybbuk*, and there's Double Dybuk Bourbon vintage 2018. Consider also the gathering known as Festiwal Dybuk in Pyskowice in 2007, dedicated to ethnic and world fusion music of all kinds. It included klezmer music but in no way prioritized it.<sup>34</sup> What does "dybbuk" signify in this context?

And what does it signify for the Israeli director Avishay Hadari, an Israeli of Moroccan descent who had previously staged a play in a bombed-out Israeli bus. Hadari first translated Hayim Nahman Bialik's Hebrew version of *The Dybbuk* directly into Polish for Warlikowski, then used the script for his own production. Hadari's version, subtitled *Misterium* and first staged at midnight in a Kraków synagogue during the 2006 Jewish Culture Festival, is a harrowing visceral spectacle that owes less to An-sky and more to Hadari's reading of centuries-old documentation of demonic possession.

Another ferocious dybbuk is summoned by the Polish "folk bio-metal" band Żywiołak in a popular song. It tells of an attempted rendezvous between young Jaś and his girl, Kasia. But on his way through the night forest, Jaś is devoured by a dybbuk. Jaś vows to return to Kasia.

Choć mi łamie kości, choć mi parzy skórę.  
 Żem do ciebie w gości chadzał—nie żałuje.  
 A ty po mnie nie płacz, głosu serca słuchaj.  
 Duchem do cię przyjdę znów . . . choć w ciele Dybuka.

Though it break my bones, though it burn my skin  
 That I came to see you—I don't regret.  
 Don't cry for me, listen to your heart's voice  
 As a spirit I'll come to you again . . . though in a dybbuk's body.<sup>35</sup>

This dybbuk recalls Avishay Hadari's savage creature, but it has passed entirely out of the Jewish realm and unselfconsciously into Slavic folklore, which underlies this and much other Polish contemporary music.

A remarkable trajectory has begun to emerge. The dybbuk, which once strode the stages and the streets of prewar Jewish Poland, incarnating the

triumphs and fears of the thousand-year Jewish presence in Poland, then appearing throughout the stages of the world, has traversed the Holocaust and has now returned to the Polish lands. It is still lost, it still does not know its name, but gradually it is starting to know the place to which it must adhere.

It is not only the dybbuk that returned from prewar Poland. Irena Grudzińska-Gross describes a two-stage process, beginning in 1989, in the development of Polish political culture and consciousness.<sup>36</sup> In the first period, lasting for nearly twenty years after the fall of communism, she sees the attempt by Polish political and cultural leaders and by Polish society as a whole to emulate the postwar development of western European societies, of neoliberalism and concomitant forms of social and cultural tolerance within the shadow of the fifty million dead of World War II. Grudzińska-Gross calls this period transition. But more recently, Europe as a whole, and eastern Europe in particular, has begun to reject this model. And in Poland above all, where Poles witnessed the murder of three million of their Jewish neighbors, occasionally saved them, and, as we increasingly learn, participated in their murder, neoliberalism doesn't seem to stand much of a chance.<sup>37</sup> "Did we show solidarity towards them?" Jan Błóński's question of thirty years ago is swept away by the returning horror of the repressed.<sup>38</sup> Grudzińska-Gross calls this period, appropriately, trauma. It's where Poland is now and where it will probably remain for the foreseeable future. Poland, it seems, cannot be a "normal" European country.

The electoral victory of the right-wing Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice, PiS) in 2015, a party that proudly inherits the entire legacy of the prewar *Endecja*, formalized the return of a virulent Polish ethnonationalism to a commanding role in Polish society. If the period of transition facilitated the emergence and grudging acceptance of a narrative of the Polish past based in historical fact, a confrontation with what President Kwaśniewski called "the dark pages in our history," the current period of trauma has launched a narrative based in myth. From the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 to that of 1944, the past is read exclusively as a narrative of Polish martyrdom and heroism. The suggestion that during World War II Poles did anything other in relation to their Jewish neighbors than attempt to save them is widely attacked, often seen as part of the ongoing effort by world Jewry 'to besmirch the good name of Poland.'<sup>39</sup> With PiS in power, such notions are taught in schools and churches, conveyed by cultural institutions, and propagated in the government-controlled press. As Grudzińska-Gross puts

it: “Poland is, with one hand, renovating cities and building roads, and with the other, wiping its tears. It is now strong and rich. But its success is tinged with bitterness, if not denied. Who knows where this will lead?”<sup>40</sup>

Will the dybbuk—on the stage, on the street, as trope, as preoccupation, as memory, as name, in all its multivalence, have any place in this world of trauma? In keeping with what we know of its habits, we can suspect that it will have everything and nothing to do with this world. First, in the presentation of “life and not death” in the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, in the Kraków Jewish Culture Festival, and in their many smaller iterations throughout Poland, we discern the tracks of the “good” dybbuk.<sup>41</sup> But there is too the inchoate rage of the victims of mass murder, of those never able to speak, in the transformation of Żywiołak’s lover into a flesh-destroying dybbuk. Finally, there is absence, an absence that can perhaps be approached through the Polish adjective *pożydowski*. The word can be read as “after the Jews” or “post-Jewish,” as in *świat pożydowski*, meaning a world with synagogues, courtyards, marketplaces empty of Jews. It can also be read as “once belonging to Jews” or “ex-Jewish,” as in *mienie pożydowskie*, designating the many varieties of Jewish property—land, factories, warehouses, money, jewelry, furniture, clothing, dishes, linen, toys—taken, “appropriated,” from the “vanished” Jews by their Polish neighbors. Here is how the prescient critic Kazimierz Wyka, writing in 1945, described the moral anguish that awaited Poles:

From under the sword of the German butcher perpetrating a crime unprecedented in history, the little Polish shopkeeper sneaked the keys to his Jewish competitor’s cashbox, and believed that he had acted morally. To the Germans went the guilt and the crime, to us the keys and the cashbox. The storekeeper forgot that the “legal” annihilation of an entire people is part of an undertaking so unparalleled that it was doubtless not staged by history for the purpose of changing the sign on someone’s shop. The methods by which Germans liquidated the Jews rest on the Germans’ conscience. *The reaction to these methods rests nevertheless on our conscience.* The gold filling torn out of the corpse’s mouth will always bleed, even if no one remembers its national origin.<sup>42</sup>

Here too, perhaps most ineradicably, the tracks of the dybbuk define the landscape of Jewish absence. And the dybbuk continues to stumble along its twisting path.<sup>43</sup>



Has that path suddenly brought the dybbuk out of Polish and into global trauma? Amid the progress of COVID-19 as it devastates the planet, we can note the coincidence of two centennials: the most recent previous comparable plague, the influenza epidemic of 1918–20, and the first performance of *The Dybbuk* on December 9, 1920. The multivalent dybbuk perhaps now stumbles beyond coincidence and into synchronicity.<sup>44</sup>

### Notes

1. S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds*, in *The Dybbuk and Other Writings*, ed. David G. Roskies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 48.

2. “O czymś, co zginęło i szuka imienia.” Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste: Eseje i studia* (Sejny, Poland: Pogranicze, 2004), 210–15.

3. Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 1913–1926, by Walter Benjamin, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 261.

4. See Bruno Schulz, “Tailors’ Dummies” and “The Age of Genius,” in his *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2008), 25–40, 129–39.

5. Mikhail Bakunin and Sergei Nechaev, “Catechism of the Revolutionary,” cited in Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk’s Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 57.

6. For more on the reception of the play, see Michael C. Steinlauf, “‘Fardibekt!’: An-sky’s Polish Legacy,” in *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 232–51.

7. On this term, see, e.g., the memoirs of Avrom Morevsky, *Ahin un tsurik (Zikbroynes un rayoynes fun a Yidn an aktyor)* (Warsaw: Yidish Bukh, 1963), 4:26–27.

8. A. Foygl [Yekhezkl-Moyshe Nayman], “Nokhamol vegn Anskis Dibek,” *Haynt*, December 24, 1920. Joseph Buloff reported that in Vienna in 1923, Max Reinhardt exclaimed after a performance: “Das ist nicht ein Schauspiel. Das ist ein Gottespiel” (This is no mere play. This is a religious rite). Quoted in Luba Kadison and Joseph Buloff, *On Stage, Off Stage: Memories of a Lifetime in the Yiddish Theater* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 43.

9. Examples include the Enlightenment novels of Israel Aksenfeld and Isaac Mayer Dick and the plays of Shloyme Ettinger and Avrom Goldfaden.

10. B. Karlinius [Ber Karlinski], “Dos ekho: Tsum 50-ster oyffirung fun ‘Dibek,’” *Der moment*, January 28, 1921.

11. B. Yieshzon [Moyshe Yustman], “Kleyner felyeton: Varshe redt a sakh,” *Der moment*, January 5, 1921.

12. Der Tunkeler [Yosef Tunkel] and Bontshe, *Der krumer shpigl*, *Der moment*, February 18, 1921 (original emphasis). The columnist referred to was Jerzy Ohrenstein (Ohr).

13. See, e.g., Wanda Melcer’s series of travelogue-style articles: “Czarny ład—Warszawa,” *Wiadomości literackie*, no. 14, 22, 40 (1934); no. 4, 15, 36 (1935). Melcer was of Jewish origin.

14. Zalmen Reyzen, “Der dibek’ un di yidish-poylisher farshtendikung,” *Unzer tog*, January 7, 1921. My thanks to Sam Kassow for directing me to this article.

15. I discuss this in chapter 6 of my dissertation; see Michael C. Steinlauf, “Polish-Jewish Theater: The Case of Mark Arnshteyn; A Study of the Interplay among Yiddish, Polish and Polish-Language Jewish Culture in the Modern Period” (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1988).

16. Chone Shmeruk, *The Esterke Story in Yiddish and Polish Literature: A Case Study in the Mutual Relations of Two Cultural Traditions* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1985), 9.

17. Mendl Elkin, “Der dibek’ af der bine,” *Lebn* (Vilna), no. 9–10 (1921).

18. “Ze scen ogródkowych,” *Izraelita*, June 10, 1898. Thirty years after the article quoted here was written, in a review of the Polish staging of another Yiddish play, Jakób Appenzlak complained that “the entire company considered it appropriate to deform diction, to drawl, to speak in a singsong—which is by now the mannerism of all dramatizations of Jewish works on the Polish stage.” Appenzlak, “Scena polska,” *Nasz Przegląd*, November 21, 1929.

19. Eynert [Arn Aynhorn], “Teater-notitsn: ‘Der ‘Dibek’ af der poylisher stsene,” *Haynt*, June 5, 1925.

20. “Arum der oyffirung fun ‘Dibek’ in poylish,” *Literarische bleter*, May 15, 1925.

21. Jakób Appenzlak, “Scena polska,” *Nasz Przegląd*, May 30, 1925.

22. Eynert, “Teater-notitsn.”

23. Yonas Turkov [Jonas Turkow], “Yidish teater on yidish,” *Literarische bleter*, August 16, 1929.

24. Jan Błoński, “Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto,” *Tygodnik Powszechny*, January 11, 1987; quoted from the English translation: Jan Błoński, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” in *My Brother’s Keeper? Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Routledge, 1990), 44–45.

25. Carmelite nuns had moved into a building abutting the grounds of the former camp, erected a twenty-five-foot cross that could be seen within the camp grounds, and announced they were praying for all the victims of Auschwitz—including the Jews, who, Poles were only just discovering, had constituted the vast majority of victims. Jews throughout the world were horrified, and the situation was only resolved

years later, in 1993, after Pope John Paul II, himself a Pole, ordered the nuns to vacate the convent.

26. Krzysztof Warlikowski, “Reimagining the Jewish Legacy in Postcommunist Poland: Dialogues,” conversation with Fabienne Arvers and Piotr Gruszczyński, response by Michael C. Steinlauf, *Polish Theatre Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2010): 89.

27. Hanna Krall, “Dybuk,” in *Dowody na Istnienie*, by Hanna Krall (Poznań: Wydawnictwo a5, 1995), 5–17; abridged English version in *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Poland: An Anthology*, ed. Antony Polonsky and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 312–16.

28. Naomi Seidman, “The Ghost of Queer Loves Past,” in this volume, reprinted from *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, ed. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 228–45.

29. Aleksander Kwaśniewski, “President Kwaśniewski’s Speech at the Jedwabne Ceremony,” July 10, 2001, Radziłów, accessed December 15, 2022, <http://www.radzilow.com/jedwabne-ceremony.htm>. For a translation of Gross’ book, see Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

30. Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste: Eseje i studia*, 213.

31. Warlikowski, “Reimagining the Jewish Legacy,” 86–88.

32. Agnieszka Graff, “Gej, czyli Żyd,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, June 24–25, 2006. Graff cites a banner seen at a right-wing rally: “GEJ (=) MACA (z) DZIECI” which, without the parentheses, reads “Gay gropes children” and, with the parentheses, added as if an afterthought, reads “Gay equals matzah from children,” thereby segueing, in dream logic, into the blood libel, the provocation for centuries of anti-Jewish violence.

33. Rafał Ziemkiewicz, “Dybuk niebezinteresowny,” *Interia Wydarzenia*, June 28, 2006, <https://fakty.interia.pl/opinie/ziemkiewicz/news-dybuk-niebezinteresowny,nId,810682>

34. “Dybuk—festiwal na kultur rozstajach,” Last.fm, event listing for August 25–26, 2007, <https://www.last.fm/festival/207707>; “Imprezy: Dybuk Festival,” *Dark Planet* (blog), July 1, 2007, <https://www.darkplanet.pl/Dybuk-Festival-3447.html>

35. For one of many performances, see: Żywiolak-Dybuk, YouTube video, 3:48, posted by kockogłaviChoban, October 14, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3zxWYAjxrls>

36. Irena Grudzińska-Gross, “Polishness in Practice,” in *Poland and Polin: New Interpretations in Polish-Jewish Studies*, ed. Irena Grudzińska-Gross and Iwa Nawrocki (Frankfurt: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016), 37–46.

37. On the fate of Jews who attempted to hide in the Polish countryside, see Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, eds., *Dalej jest noc: Losy Żydów w wybranych powiatach okupowanej Polski*, 2 vols. (Warsaw: Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów,



2018). See also, in English: Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day . . .: Jews Seeking Refuge in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2016); Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). On the basis of this and comparable evidence, the Polish historian Elżbieta Janicka argues for replacing the word *witness* with *participating observer*; see Janicka, “Pamięć przyswojona: Koncepcja polskiego doświadczenia zagłady Żydów jako traumy zbiorowej w świetle rewizji kategorii świadka,” *Studia Literaria et Historica*, no. 3–4 (2014–15): 148–227.

38. Błoński, “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” 45.

39. The most notorious attempt to institutionalize such attitudes was the so-called Holocaust Law of 2018, which mandated jail for anyone who accused Poles or Poland of complicity in the Holocaust.

40. Grudzińska-Gross, “Polishness in Practice,” 46.

41. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Opowiadamy o życiu,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 25, 2014 (“life”). The “good” dybbuk is the creature that Piotr Cywiński hopes can bring Poles and Jews together; see Cywiński, “Na bezludziu dybbuk nie zamieszka,” *Więź*, no. 4 (2005): 24–31.

42. Kazimierz Wyka, “The Excluded Economy,” in *The Unplanned Society: Poland during and after Communism*, ed. Janine Wedel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 41 (original emphasis). Written in 1945, Wyka’s essay was first published in 1959. The reference to the gold filling recalls the postwar plundering of Jewish corpses, the ultimate Jewish property. See Jan T. Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

43. For a recent performative attempt to reach another (the same?) dybbuk, see: “Misterium of the Dark Brother,” YouTube video, 1:02:56, posted by pograniczesejny, February 4, 2019, <https://youtu.be/axLDIv74bIA>

44. C. G. Jung, *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

# *The Dybbuk Century in Poland*

## Dybbuks and the Contemporary Discourse on the Polish/Jewish Past

Agnieszka Legutko

On March 15, 2014, the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw premiered an unusual event: *The Dybbuk Invasion*, episode 15 in a series called *A Fire in a Brothel*, staged at the POLIN's invitation by a hip political and literary Warsaw cabaret, the Artistic Brothel. The headlining artists, Michał Walczak and Maciej Łubieński, creatively “reconstructed a masterpiece of B-class Polish sci-fi cinema from 1938 that survived in fragments” and resurfaced in Warsaw’s Krasiński Garden under mysterious circumstances.<sup>1</sup>

The show summoned dybbuks—referred to as “the ghosts of the past”—to possess contemporary political figures, such as the mayor of Warsaw, the city’s chief of police, and the president of Russia, and wreak havoc amid horror scenes that made the audience’s blood run cold.<sup>2</sup> Hailed as “the most significant cultural phenomenon in Warsaw,” the “insane brothel troupe” follows the nonconformist tradition of the prewar Warsaw cabaret *Qui Pro Quo*.<sup>3</sup> A tremendously successful Polish/Jewish artistic collaboration, featuring such eminent poets as Julian Tuwim and Marian Hemar, *Qui Pro Quo* combined variety shows with irreverent political satire, focusing on the Warsaw metropolis and challenging nationalist notions of Polishness.<sup>4</sup> Like their famed predecessors, the members of Artistic Brothel “spare nobody, taunting the audience and at the same time engaging it in superb entertainment” with their scathing commentary on contemporary social and political events in the city, all while drawing on the past in order to examine the complexities of Polish history and identity.<sup>5</sup>

Performing in the (at the time) still-empty building of the POLIN Museum (the main exhibit opened seven months later, in October 2014), in the area of the former Warsaw Ghetto, the Artistic Brothel grappled with the “still unprocessed Jewish history of Warsaw” and addressed “the subjects that we avoid, that we pass over in silence, or that we forgot.” The cue, “Come and face your dybbuks in the museum!” appraises a cultural phenomenon prevalent in contemporary Poland.<sup>6</sup> There are Jewish dybbuks of the past, and Poles need to face them, be it in the POLIN Museum, as in this case, or at the theater. Even though the Artistic Brothel did not fully deliver on its promise and in the end the show retreated from a serious exploration of these difficult topics, the ensemble’s use of the figure of the dybbuk is emblematic of a recent proliferation of theater productions employing dybbuks as a vehicle to confront the darkest periods in twentieth-century Polish history.<sup>7</sup>

This chapter surveys the Polish production history of S. An-sky’s Yiddish drama *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds* over the century since its 1920 premiere, situating it in the context of the discourse on the Polish/Jewish past.<sup>8</sup> I then examine three *Dybbuk* productions that revisit Polish/Jewish history and reappraise contemporary Polish identity, with its deeply ingrained—albeit often denied or repressed—Jewish components: Andrzej Wajda’s in 1988, Krzysztof Warlikowski’s in 2003, and Maja Kleczewska’s in 2015. My analysis is framed by the following questions: Why are contemporary non-Jewish artists in Poland so drawn to *The Dybbuk*? How does dybbuk lore become a mode of reflection on the intricate entwinement of Polish/Jewish identities and cultures? What are the historical and political implications of the “dybbuk invasion” for contemporary Poland?

## BACKGROUND

The past three decades in postcommunist Poland have been defined by the making and remaking of identities that were severely affected by the communist erasure of ethnic affiliations and by the contesting of the historical narrative of the previous regime. This “transitional condition,” as Dominick LaCapra elucidates, “requires a continual rethinking of what counts as history . . . [and] dialogical encounters with voices and forces that challenge its present constitution.”<sup>9</sup> This is particularly pertinent to the history of the Holocaust and its aftermath. Intentionally misconstrued by the commu-

nist regime, “the Holocaust had been fused with the Polish national trauma without being processed as the experience of the Other,” a framing in which Polish Holocaust martyrology overshadowed Jewish Holocaust martyrology, especially in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1980s, the burgeoning anticommunist underground movement began expressing interest in the Jewish past as part of “political contestation and a form of oppositional discourse,” exploring the “inconvenient”—for the communist government—subjects erased from the official state narrative.<sup>11</sup> The issue of Polish accountability for the Holocaust was raised for the first time in earnest in January 1987, with Jan Błoński’s article “The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto,” published in Poland’s independent Catholic weekly magazine *Tygodnik Powszechny*.<sup>12</sup>

Błoński called for “a moral revolution regarding the Polish-Jewish past . . . [and] an honest confrontation with the question of co-responsibility” for Jewish deaths. In the article, the well-known literary historian analyzed two 1943 poems by Nobel Prize-winning Polish writer Czesław Miłosz that expressed guilt about the fate of the Jews, linked passivity with complicity, and demanded expiation. The past that we carry within us, Błoński argued, is tainted by “Jewish blood . . . which remained on the walls, soaked into the soil, whether we want it or not, and into our memory, into ourselves. We must cleanse ourselves by seeing ourselves truly. Without that, the house, the soil, and ourselves will be defiled.”<sup>13</sup>

Błoński’s groundbreaking work characterizes a contemporary Polish identity that is ridden by “the fear that one might be counted among the helpers of death.” His analysis points out a desire to be “beyond accusations, to be pure [i.e., have a clear conscience], and to be also—only victims” and serves as the first genuine reckoning with the difficult past. Błoński’s main charge, that silent witnessing and passivity amount to being “co-guilty” and that turning a blind eye on the Jewish genocide made the non-Jewish Poles “co-responsible” for the Holocaust, was revolutionary, and went against the official narrative of the regime that was still in power.<sup>14</sup> While Błoński’s appeal for a sincere reckoning with the guilt about Polish/Jewish relationships—before, during, and after the Holocaust—“stirred passions” in Poland, as a *New York Times* headline expressed, it also marked the historic beginning of transitional processes that continue to this day.<sup>15</sup>

In the postcommunist period, a culminating point in the discourse on the Polish/Jewish past came with the heated debates surrounding the publication of Jan T. Gross’ *Neighbors* (2000). Gross’ examination of the infamous

1941 massacre in the town of Jedwabne with Poles as perpetrators shattered the deeply ingrained self-perception of the Polish victimhood during the Second World War, solidified through decades of communist historical distortion.

The debate on the Polish/Jewish past, intensified by Gross' book, continues today, evoking a wide spectrum of reactions: denial, defensiveness, and resentment, to sincere, although still rare, reflection and soul-searching.<sup>16</sup> Postwar generations of Poles—like LaCapra's descendants of perpetrators and victims—"experience a psychic burden regarding events for which they are not responsible but for which they may nonetheless feel in some sense answerable."<sup>17</sup> While the complexities of Polish/Jewish relations during the Holocaust and anti-Jewish postwar violence have long been the subject of interrogation by both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars, especially after communism fell in 1989, the artistic world has joined the conversation more prominently only in the twenty-first century.<sup>18</sup>

## DYBBUKIZED POLISH IDENTITY

Theater was the first medium in postcommunist Poland to embrace "the Jew within" each Pole while engaging with Holocaust memory. In their overview of the postwar evolution of "Polish memory of the Holocaust and the Polish cognizance of the Jewish fate," theater historians Krystyna Duniec and Joanna Krakowska argue that Poles need Jews for their self-redefinition because "the new dybbukized [*zdybukowana*] Polish identity" is possessed by the "guilt, [and] the traces, the burden, and the presence" of Jewish history and "has the Jew irreversibly and eternally inscribed in it." The authors assert that just like the mysterious Jewish title character of Paweł Huelle's debut novel, *Weiser Dawidek* (1987), whose sudden disappearance haunts his schoolmates for years, the Jews are "an integral part of Polish memory and identity, and [their] disappearance is a burden the Poles have to grapple with their whole life."<sup>19</sup> This tormenting aspect of the Jewish absence can help us better understand the use of the dybbuk trope in the historical processes of identity redefinition in Poland.

In recent years, the term *dybbuk* has become so ingrained in Polish historical, social, and artistic discourse that theater scholars often discuss the *dybbukization* of contemporary Polish identity without even defining the concept of dybbuks.<sup>20</sup> Others talk about a "dybbuk invasion"—clearly bor-

rowing the term from the Artistic Brothel cabaret—in Polish theater and beyond, which “exposes the sources of collective fears and enables a closer examination of various transformations and deformations that have affected our common—European, and our individual—Polish memory (or post-memory).”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the dybbuk has become a catalyst for contemporary discourse on Polish memory.

Undoubtedly, the figure of the dybbuk, traditionally understood as an external agent forcefully invading a living body and temporarily taking over the identity of its victim, provides a useful vehicle for the artistic exploration of the Polish/Jewish past. The dybbuk offers a culturally sanctioned way of expressing guilt, and frustration over conflicted feelings.<sup>22</sup> The “dybbuk invasion” in Polish theater can be read as artistic engagement with Polish answerability about the Holocaust and Polish postwar violence toward the Jewish survivors that is only now openly discussed in depth. Torn between a shameful past and a guilt-ridden present, between Jewish physical absence and cultural presence in Poland, the Poles need dybbuks to facilitate the processes of rethinking the Polish/Jewish past and redefining contemporary identities. This embrace symbolizes a collective desire to acknowledge repressed Polish guilt through the Jewish dybbuk, a metaphorical mediator between the two worlds, and points to the reparative processes of communal renewal through art.

## PROLOGUE: THE DYBBUK CENTURY IN POLAND

The Polish dybbuk mania of recent decades has a long history. It began with the obsession over S. An-sky’s masterpiece, *The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds*, a play that captivated audiences in Warsaw in 1920. The trilingual genesis of *The Dybbuk*—first written in Russian, then self-translated into Yiddish by An-sky, and later translated into Hebrew by poet Hayim Nahman Bialik—signals that the play was intended for transnational audiences from the start.

An-sky’s *Dybbuk* foregrounded its creator’s belief that folklore-inspired modern Jewish art “could speak to Jews and Christians alike” and “defend and renew Jewish culture.”<sup>23</sup> Literary historian Zalmen Reyzen similarly hoped that *The Dybbuk* would be a turning point in Polish/Jewish interactions, understanding that “only on the path of culture-building and cultural creativity . . . will we attain victory in our war for national and human liberation.”<sup>24</sup>

Polish critics, too, shared this view and considered *The Dybbuk* an event of “artistic, social, and political significance,” one that revealed an “exceptionally captivating kabbalistic-mystical and occult mood and quality, . . . [and] the soul of the nation as reflected in the play. Despite the fact that this nation has lived next to us for centuries, its soul *is less known to us* than the Japanese art and soul.”<sup>25</sup> While other Jewish thinkers were skeptical about the transformative power of *The Dybbuk* in terms of politics, and Polish critics exoticized and fetishized An-sky’s drama, Polish audiences, including the intelligentsia and theater community, were mesmerized by the play.<sup>26</sup>

The Vilna Troupe’s 1920 production, directed by Dovid Herman, made “a very strong impression” on Juliusz Osterwa, head of the National Theater in Warsaw at the time, who considered the production “a masterpiece of directorial art.”<sup>27</sup> Eminent theater director Leon Schiller praised Herman’s production for its closeness to An-sky’s original script, and lauded Habima’s 1922 Hebrew version, directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov, for its ingenious style. When asked whether he considered staging a Jewish play himself, Schiller replied that he often did but encountered difficulties, since “in Poland, Jewish art and literature are passed over in silence [*farshvign*], while in other countries Yiddish is in fashion. I think that also among us the interest in Jewish art begins to emerge—it has to come.”<sup>28</sup>

Collaboration between Polish and Jewish theaters in the interwar period was virtually non-existent. Yiddish theater performances were unlisted in Polish newspapers because of the language and prevailing stereotypes about their low artistic level, despite the fact that many prominent Yiddish actors, such as Miriam Orleska and Zygmunt Turkow, graduated from Polish theater schools.<sup>29</sup> Acculturated Jews attended Polish theaters, and there seemed to be little interest in bridging the two worlds.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Schiller’s words were in a way prophetic: interest in Jewish art in Poland did emerge, but under drastically changed circumstances: a post-Holocaust Poland haunted by Jewish absence.

Dybbuks were everywhere in the first two decades following the Yiddish world premiere of An-sky’s drama. In addition to hundreds of *Dybbuk* performances staged by the various iterations of the Vilna Troupe, Habima’s 1926 and 1937 tours in Poland with Vakhtangov’s *Dybbuk* reinforced the grip An-sky’s masterpiece had on Polish audiences.<sup>31</sup> Critics raved about the 1925 sold-out world premiere of the Polish-language production in Łódź, translated and directed by Mark Arnshteyn (Andrzej Marek), calling it an “extraordinary stage production veiled in mists of Romanticism and mys-

tical otherworldliness.”<sup>32</sup> The first film adaptation, *Der dibek* (1937) by the successful Polish Jewish director Michał Waszyński, was popular with both Polish and Jewish audiences, and even in the darkest times of the Holocaust, on August 21, 1941, the Nowy Azazel Theater in the Warsaw Ghetto presented *The Dybbuk* in Yiddish.<sup>33</sup>

The situation changed dramatically after the Holocaust. The Jewish Theater in Łódź—the “cradle of the reborn Jewish culture” in postwar Poland—produced *The Dybbuk* in Yiddish, directed by Moyshe Lipman, twice, in 1946 and 1947.<sup>34</sup> Lipman’s productions, though staged in dire conditions, “evoked feelings of gratitude and awe, even among the most fastidious critics.”<sup>35</sup> However, the communist regime, in line with Moscow’s agenda, soon tightened its grip on Jewish artistic creativity, forcing socialist realism and “progressive” Soviet plays on theater directors.

Under the two-decades-long artistic guidance of the Yiddish theater star Ida Kamińska (1948–68), the Ester Rachel Kamińska State Jewish Theater (after 2005 Ester Rachel Kamińska Jewish Theater, and after 2012 Ester Rachel and Ida Kamińska Jewish Theater) in Warsaw staged *The Dybbuk* only once, in 1957, during the so-called Thaw, a period of temporary liberalization following Joseph Stalin’s death. The legendary Yiddish actor Avrom Morevsky, who had just returned from the Soviet Union, directed *The Dybbuk*, re-creating his unforgettable role of Reb Azriel from the prewar Vilna Troupe’s production (and also Waszyński’s film). This postwar production of *The Dybbuk* introduced audiences to the haunting aspects of their past. One critic commented on the “unsettling and terrifying voices in the dark” that reminded theatergoers about the world that had been irreversibly lost during the Holocaust and yet remained with the audiences long after they had left the theater.<sup>36</sup>

The 1970 *Dybbuk* production directed by Chewel Buzgan, who became the artistic director of the Ester Rachel Kamińska State Jewish Theater after Kamińska’s emigration in 1968, was a response to a transforming political situation. Buzgan, a former Vilna Troupe actor, sought new artistic forms that were suitable for the changing times, actors, and audiences. He departed from prewar renditions of the play by centering on the internal psychological conflicts of its characters. Critics compared Buzgan’s *Dybbuk* to the Polish Romantic tradition of Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki, and the modernism of Stanisław Wyspiański, and lauded it for its poetics, freshness, sublimation, and mystery, all of which evoked in the audience a sense of tragedy and respect for Jewish art.<sup>37</sup>



Performed shortly after the forced exodus of twenty thousand Jews from Poland following the antisemitic March 1968 campaign, Buzgan's *Dybbuk* was a bold political statement in 1970. As Buzgan said in his director's note, the intention was to "erect an angry monument to lost forms of Jewish traditions, myths, and miracles; a monument to all that now belongs to the past." Referring to An-sky—who "talks with pain and torment about social injustice. The subject of his drama is the spiritual tragedy of unhappy beings"—Buzgan implicitly alluded to the injustices of the recent Jewish expulsions.<sup>38</sup>

The political aspect of *The Dybbuk* came to the fore most clearly in the postwar era. Nearly every production staged after 1945 in Poland marked a particular historical moment or anniversary. The 1973 production of *The Dybbuk*, directed by Szymon Szurmiej, who took over leadership of the theater after Buzgan's death in 1971, was staged thirty years after the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The Ester Rachel Kamińska State Jewish Theater revisited *The Dybbuk* in 1990, the year marking the fortieth anniversary of the theater's existence and the seventieth anniversary of S. An-sky's death and the *Dybbuk's* world premiere, and again in 2013, this time in celebration of sixty-five years of Szymon Szurmiej's artistic work, and his ninetieth birthday.<sup>39</sup> In short, *The Dybbuk* became a weapon in the Polish/Jewish sociopolitical arsenal.

## POLISH DYBBUKS

### Act 1: Andrzej Wajda, the Stary Theater in Kraków, 1988

The political significance of An-sky's drama became crucial in the (non-Jewish) Polish postwar engagement with *The Dybbuk*, beginning with Andrzej Wajda's groundbreaking production, which initiated a "dybbuk mania" among Polish theater directors. The eminent Polish film and theater director started working on *The Dybbuk* in June 1987, a few months after Błoński's article kicked off the heated debate about Polish co-responsibility for the Jewish genocide.<sup>40</sup> Wajda's *Dybbuk*, an artistic response to Miłosz's tenet (featured prominently in Błoński's piece) about art's "duty to cleanse" the homeland that is "burdened, bloodied, and defiled," had a political dimension, too.<sup>41</sup> Wajda's production was "an artist's voice, which wants to participate in the ongoing national debate on the Jewish themes, and which can straighten up what is twisted and what

is hypocritical,” and critics considered it an important contribution to the historical discourse of the moment.<sup>42</sup>

Wajda’s *Dybbuk* premiered in Kraków on March 12, 1988, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Jewish exodus of March 1968—the final blow to Jewish life in post-Holocaust Poland—and to honor the upcoming forty-fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (April 19, 1943).<sup>43</sup> Critics immediately labeled Wajda’s production “an event of social and artistic significance,” while playwright Maciej Karpiniński viewed it as “an elegy, . . . a monument erected to the perished tradition . . . [and] a symbol of Jewish philosophical and religious traditions returning to us from the grave, as a legacy of the murdered nation that once lived among us, on the same land.”<sup>44</sup> In the eyes of theater historian Eleonora Udalska, the leitmotif of the performance was to “retrieve from oblivion the classical, multilayered masterpiece of the murdered nation” and to restore it in Polish culture.<sup>45</sup>

The elegiac character of Wajda’s staging was evident from the start. The set design of a synagogue facing a Jewish cemetery, modeled on the historic Remah Cemetery in Kraków, was an implicit reference to the Holocaust and an artistic tribute to the memory of the 95 percent of the local Jewish community who perished during the Shoah. The curtain of black tulle separating the stage from the auditorium, through which the audience watched the entire performance, was interpreted as a symbol of mourning. With dimmed lights and “muffled expression of group scenes (especially the joyful dances),” Wajda transformed An-sky’s *Dybbuk* into a eulogy for the lost Jewish culture and the perished Jewish neighbors—a symbolic first step in the process of sincere reckoning with the Polish/Jewish past.<sup>46</sup>

While the Holocaust was not explicitly addressed in the performance, Wajda’s work notebooks reveal that he had initially intended to stage the entire play inside a cattle car taking Jews from one of the ghettos in 1941–42.<sup>47</sup> The director eventually decided against it, since it would have been “too real and would have to end in gas chambers,” and shortly before the premiere he noted, “It has to be done subtly! Not [in a] coerced [way]. Otherwise, it will become a propaganda of who knows what.”<sup>48</sup>

The play opened with a silent scene in which black birds, symbolizing the souls of the dead, ascend to heaven from the cemetery, a subtle emphasis on the absence of the Jewish dead who at the same time occupy a prominent place in the memory of the living. “The Kraków performance gave *The Dybbuk* a dimension of [Mickiewicz’s drama] *Forefathers’ Eve*. It embodied the idea of remembrance, which can become a vibrant source of national cul-

ture.”<sup>49</sup> By explicit references to the classics of the Polish Romanticism, *The Dybbuk* became a universal exploration of life and death, fate, and individual and collective suffering. The production refrained from the ethnographic depiction of Jewish culture, using only symbolic props (the Torah scroll, a candle, the Star of David), focusing instead on “the universalization of symbols . . . [and] treating the [Jewish] tradition as an element of humanity’s cultural heritage, [thus becoming] a philosophical statement, constituting an inherent component of national self-awareness.”<sup>50</sup> In the eyes of less sympathetic critics, Wajda “Polonized” *The Dybbuk* by inserting it into the Polish Romantic tradition and by domesticating the Jewish cultural otherness through Ernest Bryll’s rhymed translation of the play, commissioned for the production, which was harshly criticized as too easy and banal, “kitschy and church-fair like.”<sup>51</sup>

*The Dybbuk* theater program, serving as a kind of director’s manifesto, featured several texts by Polish Jewish writer Adolf Rudnicki, and by Polish poets Zbigniew Herbert and Bryll. These texts addressed the disappearance of the Jews, who had been an intrinsic part of Polish history, culture, and identity; recognized the common cultural heritage of Poles and Jews; and made explicit accusations about the Polish failure to save the Jews during the war, thus bringing the question of Polish accountability for the Holocaust to the fore.<sup>52</sup>

An excerpt from Rudnicki’s *Teatr zawsze grany* (Theater Always Performed, 1987), which served as inspiration for Wajda’s *Dybbuk*, opened the program.<sup>53</sup> Rudnicki recalls the artistic magnitude of *The Dybbuk*, “the creme of Jewish dramaturgy,” which is “staged all over the world whenever Jews seek authenticity.” He compares it to Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* (Forefathers’ Eve, c. 1822), the classic of Polish Romantic literature dealing with national identity, calling “*The Dybbuk* and *Dziady*—two national portraits.” Emphasizing the importance of the cemetery, which becomes a living character in *The Dybbuk*, Rudnicki asserts that in both dramas, “the dead live next to the living. The latter call for help from the former whenever misfortune comes near, when a community or an individual is in danger. . . . In this symbiosis of the living and the dead, the Jews resemble the Poles.”<sup>54</sup>

The sociocultural and historical proximity between the two nations is also addressed in Zbigniew Herbert’s poem “Mr. Cogito Seeks Advice,” which implies that contemporary Poles are at loss without the Jews, like the poetic persona, who is disoriented without Hasidic wisdom. “I look for you, Rebbe / . . .—my heart aches, Rebbe / —I’m in trouble / Perhaps Reb

Nachman / would give me advice / but how can I find him / among so many ashes."<sup>55</sup> This excerpt, with its emphasis on the significance of Jewish cultural heritage for Polish identity—and on the overwhelming sense of loss—reinforces the elegiac character of the production.

With his trailblazing production of *The Dybbuk*, Wajda became the first postwar Polish director to address the legacy of Polish/Jewish cultural entwinement. The breathtaking scenography, alluding to the common artistic heritage—set designer Krystyna Zachwatowicz drew inspiration from nineteenth-century paintings by Polish and Jewish artists—demonstrated, to borrow Bryll's words, that "there is no complete picture of the culture that emerged on this land [Poland] without Yiddish culture."<sup>56</sup>

As Polish literary critic Bronisław Mamoń noted, Wajda's major contribution lay in the "tribute of memory and reverence that Polish artists—the writer, director, scenographer, composer, choreographer, and actors—bring to Polish Jews on the twentieth anniversary of the March events, as a testimony about one history and one common cultural heritage."<sup>57</sup> This Polish/Jewish entwinement was first expressed by poet Adam Mickiewicz, who, as "a Pole and a fellow countryman of my brothers, the Israelites," in 1844 remarked about "the relationship between the nations, seemingly so foreign to each other, and yet so closely bound together by a mysterious fate."<sup>58</sup> While both sides still debate the extent of this entwinement, Wajda's turn to *The Dybbuk* was a symbolic testament to Mickiewicz's premise that Poles and Jews are "closely bound together."

Finally, what really made Wajda's *Dybbuk* transformative was the Polish and Jewish collaboration on the production. Hanan Snir of Habima, Israel's national theater, served as director's assistant on the production, and then, in another unprecedented move, Wajda staged *The Dybbuk* at Habima on May 15, 1988.<sup>59</sup> This cooperation set a model for Polish and Jewish artistic interactions, soon emulated by others, forming another significant component of Poland's exploration of its Holocaust legacy. Indeed, as Wajda put it in 2011, "The subject of the Holocaust remains for us, Polish artists, like an open wound."<sup>60</sup>

Wajda's production ended with a powerful scene in which Leah follows the dybbuk's fading voice and disappears among the tombstones of the cemetery. With this poignant commentary on the Jewish disappearance from the Polish landscape, Wajda's *Dybbuk* marks a transitional moment in Polish/Jewish discourse and ranks among the most remarkable Polish renditions of An-sky's play.<sup>61</sup>

## Act 2: Krzysztof Warlikowski, the Rozmaitości Theater in Warsaw, 2003

A postmodernist collage, Krzysztof Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* juxtaposed An-sky's play (here used in Avishay Hadari's translation from the Hebrew) with the Holocaust by incorporating into the production Polish Jewish writer Hanna Krall's "Dybbuk" (1995).<sup>62</sup> The short story follows an American Jew and a child of Holocaust survivors, Adam S., who is possessed by his stepbrother, who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto. Warlikowski transposes An-sky's sensibility, combined with the Holocaust narrative, into the twenty-first century for an audience estranged from Jewishness to address the fundamental questions of identity, memory, historical responsibility, and cultural heritage. Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* emerged in response to the public debate evoked by Gross' *Neighbors*, which "brutally confronted the Poles with history, which after the war . . . was pushed aside, passed over in silence," becoming another artist's voice in the national debate on the Poles as perpetrators in the Holocaust.<sup>63</sup>

Crediting Wajda with bringing *The Dybbuk* into the Polish repertoire, Warlikowski explained his decision to use Krall's story, pointing out that when "approaching Jewish culture, we must come face to face with our own dybbuk. It's always there." Warlikowski's interest in the Holocaust, which Krall suggests is one of the four pillars of his theater, came from the "realization that the life and the annihilation of the Jews in Poland . . . is the missing link within Polish identity today." Warlikowski is among the first Polish artists to admit that "Polish history is enriched by the history of the Jews. Through the Jewish graves in Poland, they continue to exist here, and our land is populated with dybbuks."<sup>64</sup>

Warlikowski openly talks about the intended therapeutic role of his *Dybbuk*, which was meant to provide a forum for Poles who are eager to acknowledge their guilt about the Holocaust but don't know how.<sup>65</sup> He views his production as "our wrestling with the ghosts of the past. . . . We wanted to transgress a certain barrier: to talk about the Holocaust in a way that can get through to the audience."<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, in Warlikowski's understanding, the dybbuk has become "a continuation of life. . . . The dybbuk allots meaning to our existence, it brings back justice to the world. Nowadays, the dybbuk is also the embodiment of memory, which we don't want to get rid of, which we want to cultivate within us; the memory that saves us today."<sup>67</sup> His statement reveals that the dybbuk has become a metaphorical carrier

of memory and an indispensable component of contemporary identity in a post-Holocaust Poland without Jews. Polish critics saw Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* as a "Polish memory of the Jews," while a *New York Times* critic viewed the play as "an allegory for the Polish connection to Judaism in the last century."<sup>68</sup>

Krall, on the other hand, perceives Warlikowski's work as the long-overdue Kaddish (prayer for the dead) for the Jews who perished in Poland. Asserting that Jews were not mourned during or after the Holocaust, Krall admits, "Now, I have a feeling that Krzysztof Warlikowski weeps for those unmourned ghosts."<sup>69</sup> Indeed, even the dates of Warlikowski's premieres had a symbolic meaning.<sup>70</sup> The world premiere of his *Dybbuk*, in Wrocław, took place on October 6, 2003, which was Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, while the Warsaw premiere (November 2, 2003) coincided with the Catholic All Souls' Day, a day traditionally spent visiting the graves of relatives. Both holidays are dedicated to repentance, introspection, and pondering of the past.

Although, like Wajda, Warlikowski refrained from incorporating explicit Holocaust imagery into his production, "the shadow of the Holocaust loom[ed] over everything that unfold[ed] in the performance."<sup>71</sup> A close collaboration with Holocaust survivor Krall transformed Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* into a meaningful dialogue on memory and the Shoah, as well as their role in redefining contemporary Polish identity. The play opened with actors dressed in modern clothing sitting on the proscenium and exchanging tales, based not on An-sky's play but on Krall's stories, which document the narratives of Holocaust survivors in fictionalized prose. The set design, featuring an enormous glass cage instead of a typical synagogue setting, transformed into a bathhouse, bordello, rebbe's study, Polish wedding hall, or an operating room, producing a sense of familiarity for Polish audiences. By including women among the storytellers, and especially by casting women in the key roles—Austrian actress Renate Jett played the Messenger, and Israeli actress Orna Porat played Reb Ezriel (Reb Azriel)—Warlikowski not only introduced gender egalitarianism into his production, but also rendered the dybbuk as a vehicle for transnational discourse on the Jewish past across genders.

Warlikowski's *Dybbuk* was met with mixed critical reception, ranging "from euphoria to irritation, [although] more often irritation."<sup>72</sup> Some considered it a "magnificent failure," a "beautiful but empty" work, or a production "sinking into sluggish self-absorption, appropriating a mishmash of

Jewish material for an exploration that, in the end, is really about Poles.”<sup>73</sup> Warlikowski’s staging of Krall’s “Dybbuk” as a series of monologues was in particular very harshly reviewed for its tautological, amateurish rendition, but it did bring to the stage a poignant moment of Polish/Jewish dialogue.<sup>74</sup> During an exorcism, featured in Krall’s original story yet slightly modified in Warlikowski’s play, Adam S. asks his dybbuk to stay, “You want to leave me? Don’t go! Stay! You are my brother.” Adam S.’s plea can be read as the symbolic, long-overdue Polish desire to embrace the Jewish past.

Critics debated whether Warlikowski’s *Dybbuk* achieved its intended goals. Cultural anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir argued that the performance’s “moral is only anxiety and emptiness” and therefore that the production had failed to change anything in Polish/Jewish relations.<sup>75</sup> Others, like Maria Janion, argued that it couldn’t. Janion asserted that after the Holocaust, catharsis is no longer possible.<sup>76</sup> Regardless, the performance was an important step in revisiting the Polish/Jewish past and exploring the repressed Polish guilt.

### Act 3: Maja Kleczewska, the Ester Rachel and Ida Kamińska Jewish Theater, 2015

The cutting-edge performance of Maja Kleczewska’s 2015 *Dybbuk* took Polish and Jewish collaboration to another level. Golda Tencer, director of the Ester Rachel and Ida Kamińska Jewish Theater in Warsaw, invited the renowned Polish director Kleczewska to direct *The Dybbuk* to celebrate the sixty-fifth anniversary of the theater’s existence. Kleczewska in turn invited Tencer—who herself played Leah in the 1973 production at the Ester Rachel Kamińska State Jewish Theater—onto the stage in one of the most poignant moments of the performance.

When Leah goes to the cemetery to invite her deceased mother to her wedding, she encounters two Leahs from the past. First, her Yiddish-speaking mother appears, played by Joanna Przybyłowska, who had previously played Leah in 2004 at the Jewish Theater. Then, Golda Tencer appears as a kind of *deus ex machina* from a side door. With the wedding dress Tencer wore in the 1973 production of *The Dybbuk* attached to the front of her black dress, she gives a powerful monologue in Yiddish (simultaneously translated into Polish via headphones).

Bringing An-sky’s original text into the performance, Tencer mono-



Fig. 6. Maja Kleczewska's *Dybbuk*, the two Leahs (Gołda Tencer, *front*; Magdalena Koleśnik, *in back*). Warsaw, 2015. Photo courtesy of Magda Hueckel.



logues about interrupted lives. Then she embraces the Leah from the present (Magdalena Koleśnik). Reliving her own theatrical past, Tencer recites other passages from her earlier role while Koleśnik clings to her from behind. This powerful scene epitomizes the Polish/Jewish past embracing the present, and the present embracing the past. Tencer-Leah's wedding blessing for Koleśnik-Leah turns into a symbolic Jewish blessing for contemporary Polish *Dybbuk* productions. This moment of Yiddish and Polish artistic (re)union, and recognition of common cultural legacy, was pivotal in Polish/Jewish discourse. Some critics fretted that Tencer was used as a theater prop, yet at the same time acknowledged that the scene was "a beautiful tribute to the past, a beautiful gesture of building a covenant between the old and new years."<sup>77</sup>

Kleczewska's production opens with the Messenger (Jerzy Walczak) quoting a passage from Polish theater director Tadeusz Kantor's final production, *I Shall Never Return* (1988), perhaps itself inspired by An-sky's *Dybbuk*.<sup>78</sup> The passage, which in Kantor's play announces conjuring up specters from his past performances and his life, invites the audience to encounter the dead in Kleczewska's *Dybbuk*: "I will see them again, after so many years. . . . They all died." The motto of the production, "And I still see their faces, . . . they are not there / I think and dream, see them in theater spaces [lit. in the soul of the theater]"—a quotation from Polish modernist playwright Stanisław Wyspiański—alludes to the location of the Jewish Theater in the former Warsaw Ghetto, which witnessed the annihilation of nearly all 350,000 Jewish residents of the city.<sup>79</sup> With these direct references to Polish theater giants (Kantor and Wyspiański) and the locality of Jewish memory, Kleczewska reinforced the foundations of this renewed cultural covenant, setting *The Dybbuk* (like Wajda did before her) within the Polish theatrical tradition, while simultaneously pointing out the overwhelming Jewish absence.

Kleczewska's *Dybbuk* centered on the collective discourse on the Polish/Jewish past, and aimed to recover individual memories of the murdered nation by incorporating Holocaust testimonies into the play—or, more precisely, "everyday memory," as dramatist Łukasz Chotkowski explains, and "not the anniversary-commemoration memory that is always accompanied by conflicts and quarrels about guilt and innocence, [which] we have recently witnessed."<sup>80</sup> Situated in the context of the tumultuous commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, which erupted into international bickering about the politics of memory, Kleczewska's

*Dybbuk* emphasized the significance of summoning “the witnesses’ memory [that] is still alive” against “all the attempts to forget.”<sup>81</sup> The performance featured explicit Holocaust references, women survivors’ testimonies from the ghettos and death camps, and a Kaddish for those who died at Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Majdanek.<sup>82</sup> Kleczewska’s *Dybbuk* thus “entered the dialogue with the past in a very dynamic and communicative way in order to show contemporary reflections, worries, and desires.”<sup>83</sup>

This production was the first Polish *Dybbuk* to engage in Polish/Jewish discourse through numerous individual Polish and Polish Jewish interactions, as a conversation between Tencer (who is Jewish) and the production creators (who are not Jewish) illustrates. Kleczewska explained her understanding of *The Dybbuk* as “a text about life prematurely interrupted, which needs to be completed, and which demands fulfillment,” echoing An-sky’s Leah, who ponders in act 2, “what happened to the life [a person] hasn’t lived?” Chotkowski emphasized that we cannot forget that Warsaw is full of “interrupted lives,” while Tencer added that “we are the heirs of the six million souls who perished and we need to tell their story, because as long as we talk, they live on in our memory.”<sup>84</sup> This is quite a remarkable moment of Polish/Jewish dialogue—through art—about an impossible history that cannot be fully reconciled.

For Kleczewska, the most poignant scene in *The Dybbuk* is the trial between the dead and the living, which she interprets as “a scene of unappeased memory, which brutally demands satisfaction.”<sup>85</sup> The forgotten memory about Jews demands—through the mouth of the dybbuk—recognition from a Polish nation “suffering from amnesia” about the Yiddish-speaking population of Poland, which merely a few decades ago lived on the neighboring streets.<sup>86</sup>

Kleczewska’s *Dybbuk*, which premiered two days before the seventy-second anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, “interpreted the broken vow between the fathers [of Leah and Khonen] as the story of the broken ‘covenant’ between Poles . . . and Jews, the effect of which was the Holocaust.”<sup>87</sup> Although this wasn’t expressed directly in the performance, the creators elucidated in interviews that “the Jewish subjects still evoke hysteria in Poland. We are not dealing with guilt—not guilt. We are dealing with the broken covenant between two nations.”<sup>88</sup>

Finally, Kleczewska raises a fundamental question. “In the context of the Holocaust, we’re talking about millions of interrupted lives. We need to ask ourselves the question: how do we live with them today?”<sup>89</sup> Theater

critic Michał Centkowski reads Kleczewska's *Dybbuk* not as an accusation but rather as "an expression of astonishment over the easiness with which traces of the most tragic events disappear; easiness with which this incomprehensible abyss is filled with everyday banality." Kleczewska's *Dybbuk* "is a theater ritual of restoring memory, and a warning against forgetting," a Polish call for embracing the Jewish past, marking a new stage in the Polish/Jewish discourse.<sup>90</sup>

## EPILOGUE

Some Polish scholars, like social historian Zuzanna Dziuban, are skeptical about the "transformative power" of *The Dybbuk* and its effect on Polish/Jewish discourse. In her analysis of the "spectral turn" in the Polish post-Holocaust imaginary, Dziuban discusses Polish dybbuks, asserting that Wajda's *Dybbuk* "did not bring about a change—instead, it left intact and perpetuated the established discourses and power structures between the Poles and the Jews, the living and the dead. His dybbuk was, then, effectively unable to haunt," as was, in Dziuban's view, Warlikowski's *Dybbuk*.<sup>91</sup>

Putting aside Dziuban's ontological confusion about the dybbuk's ability to haunt in the first place—the dybbuk is internally oriented, and enters and possesses living bodies; it does not haunt them externally like a ghost—the author brings up an important point that these productions (made by Poles for Polish audiences) "retained full control" over the discourse, which excluded the Jewish perspective, and left it unchanged.<sup>92</sup> Dziuban's charge to change the "power structures" between the living Poles and the dead Jews sets out an impossible task. Nothing can bring back those who perished during the Holocaust. However, what can be transformed are the narrative and memory politics, and, as my analysis demonstrates, the three *Dybbuk* productions did have a profound impact on discourse about the Polish/Jewish past.

These three productions established a dialogue with *living* Jews: Wajda through his collaboration with Hanan Snir and the staging of the Polish *Dybbuk* at Habima; Warlikowski through his cooperation with Hanna Krall and through his casting of Israeli actress Orna Porat as Reb Ezriel; and Kleczewska through her close work with Golda Tencer. These Polish and Jewish artistic collaborations, emerging from *The Dybbuk*, not only recognized "one cultural heritage" and the incompleteness of Polish culture

without Jewish culture, but also educated both artists and audiences about Jewish history and culture through exposure to An-sky's magnum opus.

The three Polish *Dybbuks* have been a significant part of the ongoing transitional processes of contesting the established historical narrative. They have been instrumental, too, in the collective reappraising of Polish/Jewish culture and Polish identity, with its deeply ingrained Jewish component. The productions emerged in response to national debates on Polish answerability for the Holocaust, the premieres were scheduled around historic dates, and each performance was a consequential reflection on the Polish/Jewish past and present.

Wajda's trendsetting *Dybbuk* brought the vanished Jewish world back from oblivion, inserted An-sky's drama into the Polish theater repertoire, and symbolically mourned the irreversible Jewish loss. Warlikowski's production took it a step further, viewing *The Dybbuk* as a forum for acknowledging the repressed Polish guilt about the Holocaust. Through her interpretation, Kleczewska demanded the restoration of memory of the disappeared Jewish nation among Poles suffering from historical amnesia, and atonement for the "broken covenant" between the two nations.

These performances confirmed that Polish identity is not complete without its Jewish aspects, and each raised fundamental questions about responsibility for the memory of the perished Jewish world. The three *Dybbuks* answered Błoński's call for an honest confrontation with the question of Polish co-responsibility for the Holocaust, first, by mourning the loss (Wajda), then by talking about the repressed guilt (Warlikowski), and finally by acknowledging broken covenants and lost memory (Kleczewska). Although it will take a long time before the artists' voices reach the entire population, the "moral revolution" has begun. Through art, the reparative processes of communal historical renewal are underway. Polish dybbuks are unable to haunt, but they have successfully possessed Polish artists and audiences, one soul at a time.

## Notes

1. Michał Walczak, dir., *Inwazja Dybuków*, episode 15 of *Pożar w Burdelu*, 2014; the quotation is from "Pożar w Burdelu," Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich (website), event listing for March 15–30, 2014, <https://polin.pl/pl/wydarzenie/pozar-w-burdelu>

2. "Pożar w Burdelu," Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich (website).
3. Wiktor Uhlig, "Kabaretharsis Warszafki: O Burdelu Artystycznym i jego 'Pożarze,'" *Kultura Liberalna*, April 8, 2014, <https://kulturaliberalna.pl/2014/04/08/>; Izabela Szymańska and Dorota Wyżyńska, "Wdech 2013 rozdane! Cielecka, Pożar w Burdelu i Tęcza," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, February 1, 2014.
4. See Beth Holmgren, "Acting Out: *Qui Pro Quo* in the Context of Interwar Warsaw," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 27, no. 2 (2013): 205–23. A note on terminology: the commonly used phrase "Polish-Jewish" relations, identity, and so forth with a hyphen is not entirely accurate, since Jews in Poland were Polish citizens. A more precise rendition would be "Polish non-Jewish–(Polish) Jewish relations," but this sounds awkward and is therefore impractical. "Christian-Jewish" relations is also factually incorrect, since not all non-Jewish Poles were Christian. The spectrum of cultural affiliation was broad, and "Polish-Jewish" or "Polish Jewish" (with or without a hyphen) should really refer to Polish Jews embracing their dual identity. See Stanisław Krajewski's excellent exploration of this issue, *Poland and the Jews: Reflections of A Polish Polish Jew* (Kraków: Austeria, 2005). In an attempt to acknowledge this ambivalence, I use "Polish/Jewish" (with a slash) to refer to non-Jewish Poles and Polish Jews and their complex identities and histories, and "Polish Jewish" (without a hyphen) to refer to Polish Jews.
5. "Pożar w Burdelu," Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich (website).
6. "Totalny burdel w Muzeum!," [dziennikteatralny.pl](http://dziennikteatralny.pl), March 13, 2014, <http://www.dziennikteatralny.pl/artykuly/totalny-burdel-w-muzeum.html>
7. Uhlig, "Kabaretharsis Warszafki."
8. For a full production history of *The Dybbuk* between 1920 and 2020, see *An Online Archive of "The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds,"* by S. An-sky, last updated December 9, 2020, <http://dybbukafterlives.com/>
9. Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2.
10. Krystyna Duniec and Joanna Krakowska, "Nie opłakali ich?," *Didaskalia* 105 (2011): 5.
11. Duniec and Krakowska, 5.
12. Jan Błoński, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, January 11, 1987; for an English translation, see Jan Błoński, "The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto," in *My Brother's Keeper? Recent Polish Debates on the Holocaust*, ed. Antony Polonsky (London: Routledge, 1990), 34–52.
13. Błoński; for the poems in question, see Czesław Miłosz, "Campio di Fiori" and "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto," in *Ocalenie* (Warsaw: S. W. Czytelnik, 1945), 100, 134.
14. Błoński, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto."
15. Michael T. Kaufman, "Debate over Holocaust Stirs Passions in Poland," *New York Times*, March 8, 1987.

16. Polish help to the Jews is prevalent in the debate. See Duniec and Krakowska, “Nie opłakali ich?,” for a discussion of works that explore the issue. Of particular note is the Polish outrage that exploded, especially online, in response to the Academy Award–winning film *Ida* (2013, dir. Paweł Pawlikowski), which touched on the complex subject of Poles killing Jews during the war (including the Jews they had originally hidden).

17. LaCapra, *History in Transit*, 6.

18. Several films created under communism did implicitly allude to the Jewish Holocaust experience, e.g., *Ostatni Etap* (1947, dir. Wanda Jakubowska), *Ulica Graniczna* (1948, dir. Aleksander Ford), and *Pokolenie* (1955, dir. Andrzej Wajda). See Duniec and Krakowska, “Nie opłakali ich?” Among the key scholarly texts on the topic are: Michael C. Steinlauf, *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997); Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (New York: Random House, 2007); Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Jan Grabowski, *Na posterunku: Udział polskiej policji granatowej i kryminalnej w zagładzie Żydów* (Wołowiec, Poland: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2020); Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, *Night without End: The Fate of Jews in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022); Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Pogrom Cries: Essays on Polish-Jewish History, 1939–1946* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2017); Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Legends of Blood: Anthropologia przesądu* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo W. A. B., 2008); Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015).

19. Duniec and Krakowska, “Nie opłakali ich?,” 6–7. Paweł Huelle’s novel *Weiser Dawidek* (Kraków: Znak, 1987) was published in English as *Who Was David Weiser?*, trans. Michael Kandel (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), and adapted for film under the title *Weiser* (2001, dir. Wojciech Marczewski).

20. Duniec and Krakowska, “Nie opłakali ich?,” 7.

21. “55. Rzeszowskie Spotkania Teatralne—03. Festiwal Nowego Teatru,” Teatr im. Wandy Siemaszkowej (website), event listing for November 18–26, 2016, <https://teatr-rzeszow.pl/article/festiwal-nowego-teatru-2016>. See also Joanna Puzyna-Chojka, “Inwazja Dybuków (na scenie teatralnej i nie tylko),” in *Dybuk: Na pograniczu dwóch światów*, ed. Mieczysław Abramowicz, Jan Ciechowicz, and Katarzyna Kręglewska (Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, 2017), 282–95.

22. For the anthropological approach to spirit possession, see I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 1989).

23. Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 189.

24. Zalmen Reyzen, "Der dibek' un di yidish-poylishe farshendikung," *Unzer tog*, January 7, 1921, cited in Michael C. Steinlauf, "Fardibekt!": An-sky's Polish Legacy," in *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 242.

25. "Egzotyczna sztuka w Bagateli," *Ilustrowany Kuryer Codzienny*, April 14, 1923, 7 (original emphasis).

26. Steinlauf, "Fardibekt!," 241–45; Eleonora Udalska, "Dybuk na scenach polskich," in *Teatr Żydowski w Polsce: Materiały z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej*, ed. Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Małgorzata Leyko (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1998), 170.

27. Juliusz Osterwa, "Pisarze, artyści, i uczeni polscy w kwestii żydowskiej," *Nasz Przegląd*, January 31, 1925.

28. Sh. L. Sznayderman, "Bam bavustn rezhiser Leon Schiller," *Literarische bleter*, January 7, 1927, 20–21. Eventually, in 1938, Schiller did direct a Yiddish play: a translation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Schiller's mention of *farshvign* gestures to the way that many Polish intellectuals frequented Yiddish theater but rarely discussed their impressions in a public forum. See Steinlauf, "Fardibekt!"; Debra Caplan, *Yiddish Empire: The Vilna Troupe, Jewish Theater, and the Art of Itinerancy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 104.

29. Edward Krasiński, "Związki i współpraca artystów teatru polskiego i żydowskiego w latach międzywojennych," in Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Leyko, *Teatr Żydowski w Polsce*, 302.

30. See Michael C. Steinlauf, "Polish-Jewish Theater: The Case of Mark Arnshteyn; A Study of the Interplay among Yiddish, Polish, and Polish-Language Jewish Culture in the Modern Period" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1988); Michael C. Steinlauf, "Dyskusja," in Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Leyko, *Teatr żydowski w Polsce*, 448.

31. Caplan, *Yiddish Empire*, 87–134.

32. B. Dudziński, review of *Dybuk*, *Kurier Łódzki*, April 21, 1925, cited in Udalska, "Dybuk na scenach polskich," 169.

33. Mosze Fass, "Theatrical Activities in the Polish Ghettos during the Years 1939–1942," *Jewish Social Studies* 38, no. 1 (1976): 70.

34. Leszek Olejnik, "Z dziejów teatru żydowskiego w Łodzi po II wojnie światowej," in *Łódzkie sceny żydowskie: studia i materiały*, ed. Małgorzata Leyko (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2000), 143.

35. Małgorzata Leyko, "Ida Kamińska i Łódzki Teatr Żydowski," in Leyko, *Łódzkie sceny żydowskie*, 160.

36. August Grodzicki, "Okciem i uchem recenzenta: Dybuk," *Życie Warszawy*, February 19, 1957.
37. Szczepan Gąsowski, *Państwowy Teatr Żydowski im. Estery Racheli Kamińskiej: Przeszłość i terażniejszość* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1995), 256.
38. Chewel Buzgan, "Słowo od inscenizatora i reżysera," Państwowy Teatr Żydowski im. Estery Racheli Kamińskiej, program for *Dybuk*, 1970, n.p.
39. "Spektakl *Dybuk* na początek 'Warszawy Singera,'" *dzieje.pl*, August 23, 2013, updated July 19, 2016, <https://dzieje.pl/kultura-i-sztuka/spektakl-dybuk-na-poczatek-warszawy-singera>
40. Andrzej Wajda, "Dybuk: zeszyt roboczy," no. 141/1 (June 18, 1987), Baza obiektów: zeszyty robocze, Archiwum Andrzeja Wajdy, <https://wajdaarchiwum.pl/baza-obiektow/zeszyty-robocze>
41. Błoński, "Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto."
42. Bronisław Mamoń, "Dybuk," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, March 27, 1988.
43. Mamoń; Jacek Sieradzki, "Pomiędzy szacunkiem i pychą," *Polityka*, June 11, 1988.
44. Mamoń, "Dybuk"; Maciej Karpiński, *Teatr Andrzeja Wajdy* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1991), 159–60.
45. Udalska, "Dybuk na scenach polskich," 176.
46. Udalska, 176.
47. Wajda, "Dybuk: zeszyt roboczy," no. 141/21 (June 16, 1987).
48. Wajda, no. 143/3 (August 8, 1987), no. 142/26 (February 9, 1988).
49. Udalska, "Dybuk na scenach polskich," 176.
50. Karpiński, *Teatr Andrzeja Wajdy*, 161; and see Udalska, "Dybuk na scenach polskich," 177.
51. Puzyna-Chojka, "Inwazja Dybuków," 284; Krzysztof Miklaszewski, "Dusza z ciała wyleciała," *Dziennik Polski*, April 8, 1988.
52. Drukarnia Wydawnicza im. W.Ł. Antczyca, Kraków, program for *Dybuk*, March 12, 1988, n.p.
53. Jan Ciechowicz, "Dybuk w inscenizacji Andrzeja Wajdy w Starym Teatrze w Krakowie (w spolszczeniu Ernesta Brylla)," in Abramowicz, Ciechowicz, and Kręglewska, *Dybuk: Na pograniczu*, 213.
54. Adolf Rudnicki, *Teatr zawsze grany* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1987), 75; Drukarnia Wydawnicza im. W.Ł. Antczyca, Kraków, program for *Dybuk*, excerpt 1.
55. Zbigniew Herbert, "Pan Cogito Szuka Rady," Drukarnia Wydawnicza im. W.Ł. Antczyca, Kraków, program for *Dybuk*, n.p.
56. Ernest Bryll, "Ernest Bryll," Drukarnia Wydawnicza im. W.Ł. Antczyca, Kraków, program for *Dybuk*, n.p.; and see Karpiński, *Teatr Andrzeja Wajdy*, 158; Mamoń, "Dybuk." The scenography was inspired by works by Maurycy Gottlieb, Abraham Józef Messer, Michał Elwiro Andriolli, and Franciszek Kostrzewski.



57. Mamoń, "Dybuk"; and see Karpiński, *Teatr Andrzeja Wajdy*, 158.
58. Adam Mickiewicz, *Dzieła: Literatura słowiańska*, ed. Tadeusz Pini (Lviv: Nakł. Księgarni H. Alternberga, 1920), 2:474.
59. Renata Jabłońska, "Dybuk w Tel Awiwie," in *Teatralny świat Andrzeja Wajdy*, ed. Anna Kuligowska-Korzeniewska and Krzysztof Pacek (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 141–47.
60. "Andrzej Wajda odbierze nagrodę Prima Leviego," culture.pl, October 2, 2011, <https://culture.pl/pl/wydarzenie/andrzej-wajda-odbierze-nagrode-prima-leviego>
61. Udalska, "Dybuk na scenach polskich," 177.
62. Hanna Krall, "Dybuk," in *Dowody na Istnienie*, by Hanna Krall (Poznań: Wydawnictwo a5, 1995), 5–17; in English as "The Dybbuk," in *The Woman from Hamburg and Other True Stories*, by Hanna Krall, trans. Madeline G. Levine (New York: Other Press, 2005), 137–54.
63. Krzysztof Warlikowski, "Reimagining the Jewish Legacy in Postcommunist Poland: Dialogues," conversation with Fabienne Arvers and Piotr Gruszczyński, response by Michael C. Steinlauf, *Polish Theater Perspectives* 1, no. 1 (2010): 93, and see 88.
64. Warlikowski, 90, 94, 100.
65. Justyna Drobnik-Rogers, "Krzysztof Warlikowski: Theater as Collective (Auto) Therapy," *TheaterForum: International Theater Journal* 35 (2009): 10–16.
66. Tadeusz Sobolewski, "Krzysztof Warlikowski, Hanna Krall: Nie będzie katharsis," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 8, 2003.
67. Piotr Gruszczyński, "Krzysztof Warlikowski: Dybuk, czyli 'Dziady,'" *Tygodnik Powszechny*, September 21, 2003.
68. Roman Pawłowski and Rafał Węgrzyniak, "Polsko-żydowskie 'Dziady,'" *Gazeta Wyborcza*, December 6, 2003; Neil Genzlinger, "Two Tales of Dybbuks as an Allegory for Poland and Judaism," *New York Times*, October 15, 2004.
69. Sobolewski, "Krzysztof Warlikowski, Hanna Krall."
70. Zuzanna Dziuban, *The Spectral Turn: Jewish Ghosts in the Polish Post-Holocaust Imaginaire* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2019), 156n20.
71. Warlikowski, "Reimagining the Jewish Legacy in Postcommunist Poland," 93.
72. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "O czymś, co zginęło i szuka imienia," *Tygodnik Powszechny*, November 9, 2003.
73. Jacek Melchior, "Wspaniała porażka," *Wprost*, November 16, 2003; Jacek Sieradzki, "Dybuk wyszedł z Warlikowskiego," *Przekrój*, October 19, 2003; Alisa Solomon, "The Dybbuk/White Chocolate," *Village Voice*, October 20, 2004, C81.
74. Jacek Sieradzki, "Dybuki cielesne i nagie," *Dialog*, December 1, 2003.
75. Tokarska-Bakir, "O czymś, co zginęło i szuka imienia."
76. Maria Janion, "Świadkowie, niewyraźność i tragedia," *Rozmaitości Theater*, Warsaw, program for *Dybuk*, 2003, n.p.

77. Wojciech Owczarski, "Noc żywych Dybuków," in Abramowicz, Ciechowicz, and Kręglewska, *Dybuk: Na pograniczu dwóch światów*, 242.

78. Marta Bryś, "Polski teatr żydowski," *Didaskalia*, no. 127–28 (2015): 121. For more on *The Dybbuk's* influence on Kantor's theater, see Agnieszka Legutko, "Possessed by the Traumatic Past: Postmemory and S. An-sky's *Dybbuk* in Kantor's *Dead Class*," in *Theatermachine: Tadeusz Kantor in Context*, ed. Magda Romanska and Kathleen Cioffi (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2020) 103–16; Katarzyna Osińska, "Nigdy tu już nie powrócę: Tadeusz Kantor czyta *Dybuka*," in Abramowicz, Ciechowicz, and Kręglewska, *Dybuk: Na pograniczu dwóch światów*, 197–212, esp. 210.

79. Ester Rachel and Ida Kamińska Jewish Theater, Warsaw, program for *Dybuk*, 2015, n.p.

80. Jacek Cieślak, "Romeo i Julia z Getta," *Rzeczpospolita*, April 17, 2015.

81. Cieślak.

82. Bryś, "Polski teatr żydowski," 122.

83. Jacek Cieślak, "Sytuacja Teatru Żydowskiego nie jest kolorowa, może znaleźć się na bruku," *Rzeczpospolita*, June 29, 2016.

84. Wiesław Kowalski, "Jesteśmy spadkobiercami tych dusz," *Teatr dla was*, February 3, 2015.

85. Cieślak, "Romeo i Julia z Getta."

86. Dawid Karpiuk, "Niepamięć," *Newsweek Polska*, May 7, 2015.

87. Bryś, "Polski teatr żydowski," 121–22.

88. Karpiuk, "Niepamięć."

89. Karpiuk.

90. Michał Centkowski, "Zerwane przymierze," *Teatr*, no. 6, July 2, 2015.

91. Dziuban, *The Spectral Turn*, 155.

92. Dziuban, 165.

# *Unpacking a Production of The Dybbuk*

## An Artist's Reflection

Avia Moore

In 2011, I directed a production of *The Dybbuk* in Montreal. Although it was a small-scale production, the show drew attention from beyond the city; in particular, the wider cultural community that gathers around Yiddish language, cultural practices, and arts was interested in the choice we made to feature an all-female cast. What follows is a personal reflection on that production, in which I consider the lenses through which I approached the interpretive choices we made. What is the process of thinking through a play like *The Dybbuk* as an artist? What do you uncover, and what are you left with? Which parts of the creative journey result in material decisions, and which parts are immaterial hauntings? I want to emphasize that this is a retrospective. Looking back at our *Dybbuk* production across a decade is both challenging and rewarding: the reasons behind some decisions elude me, while I see other choices in new ways, through my current research and positionality.

In 2019 I retrieved several large boxes from Maya Jarvis, our costume designer, containing the costumes from our production of *The Dybbuk*. As I opened these boxes, I was reminded of my time as an intern at the Yiddish Book Center in 2006, when we unpacked and sorted boxes of Yiddish books shipped from Mexico and Argentina. Sometimes we would come across traces of the lives of the people who had owned these books—a leaf pressed inside a novel, a postcard left as a bookmark, a *tallis* (prayer shawl) bag, a set of *tefillin* (phylacteries). I was drawn in by these objects; they were resonant with untold experiences. The warehouse was bursting with stories simply waiting to be imagined into performance. Unpacking our long-stored costumes, I felt a similar sense of discovery as objects that I expected to

find emerged alongside traces of the familiar but forgotten. I wrote the first draft of this reflection at that time, and my own memories were aided by the memory held within these objects, shaken out and hung around my room.

Our production of *The Dybbuk* was an ensemble effort that came together through brainstorming, discussion, studio exploration, and hard work from the creative team: producer Daniel Brodie, without whom this production definitely wouldn't have happened; theatrical designer Maya Jarvis, who also built our set and spent long hours with me sewing our costumes; the talented performers Jacqueline Fay, Sandi Hilton, Bronna Levy, Caitie Parsons, and Jacqueline van de Geer; and stage manager Manon Manavit. Fay also doubled as musical director, composing original music and writing new arrangements of traditional songs for the production. This ensemble dove into the Yiddish world of the play with me, a world that was completely unfamiliar to more than half of them.

I saw our production as an exploration of cultural space. In approaching this canonical text, we were forging new space—for Leah, as I will discuss later, but for ourselves as well. In my past scholarship, I wondered aloud why the contemporary explosion of innovative explorations in Yiddish music had not been (with a few notable exceptions) paralleled in the theater: “there emerges an image of an absent set of practices, a rather desperate need for a theatre that deals with Yiddish themes in a contemporary way, recognizing the fragmented nature of contemporary cultural identities.”<sup>1</sup> I wanted to dig into and explore *The Dybbuk* in the same way that I saw my colleagues dig into and explore traditional Jewish melodies, honoring the source material while also letting it tell new stories in relation to the present moment.<sup>2</sup>

In writing *The Dybbuk*, An-sky drew inspiration from the stories he collected on his ethnographic expeditions. Many early Jewish ethnographers sought to collect Jewish arts practices such as folk songs because they understood that these practices served “as a, if not the, cultural storehouse—not only of concepts, imagery, tropes, and emotions, but also of language, rhythm, rhyme, sounds, and music.”<sup>3</sup> It is a storehouse that reveals the rich pluralism of Jewishness. And yet, the collection of Jewish folklore was driven by two ostensibly incompatible purposes. On the one hand, as Annette Werberger argues, collecting Jewish folklore was part of “the European attempt to produce tradition and traditionality” as an exercise in nation-making. Across Europe, folklore was being put to use to “build” cultural identity. Jewish ethnography during the time of the An-sky expeditions was tied to a drive to establish a Jewish cultural identity that was *outside* the religious framework,

a “project of modernity, which is intimately linked to such factors as nationhood, progress, and science.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Jewish ethnography also revealed the *diversity* of that Jewish religious framework. In their introduction to *Writing Jewish Culture: Paradoxes in Ethnography*, Andreas Kilcher and Gabriella Safran point out that while liturgy inscribes the exceptionalism of the Jewish people, Jewish folklore takes a non-exceptionalist approach.<sup>5</sup> In his influential work *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi claims that the collective memory “derived from the folklore and mythology” is “of limited relevance” because Jewish culture was molded by elites rather than peasants.<sup>6</sup> However Nathaniel Deutsch describes Jewish customs as the spinal cord of Judaism, showing how integral *minhagim* (customs) were to Jewish life and religious practice. Importantly, while *minhagim* showed religious dedication, they “also revealed important parallels with the folk cultures of surrounding peoples.”<sup>7</sup> As the cultural storehouse of folklore reveals, Jewish practices have tended to be messily entangled with the practices, languages, and lives of the non-Jewish communities and histories around them. The messiness of this memory space does not fit well into attempts to modernize or enforce ethnocentric solidarity through unity, and so practices that do not conform to the dominant ideology are often pushed to the sidelines. The cultural heritage elevated in the exercise of empire and nation building was intentionally reductive, a manipulated selection from a landscape of diverse and overlapping cultural practices, designed to perform a unique claim to national identity. Simultaneously, in the name of refinement or enlightenment, local customs were often set aside. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett comments that “the attempt to reform Jewish life by repudiating customary practices” created “a large domain of cultural trash,” the value of which we have today reclaimed as “folklore.”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps it is this messiness that makes Jewish folklore so appealing to artists. It is a treasure trove of material that reveals myriad ways of being and doing Jewish, an archive waiting to be unboxed. Ethnography has the potential to resist hegemonic memory by doing what performance studies scholar and ethnographer Dwight Conquergood describes as “reconfiguring texts and performances in horizontal, metonymic tension.”<sup>9</sup> “This promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing” acknowledges the plurality of “sociocultural formations, memories and identities [that] coexist” in every society, and opens up a site for a rich individual engagement with memory and identity.<sup>10</sup> This code-switching between ways of knowing became key to the way I approached our engagement with the

language, as I discuss later in this chapter. In working with *The Dybbuk*, I hoped to draw out some of the messiness of cultural practice that I imagined went into its creation. This appealed to my preference for devised theater processes, where the script or text is often decentered and different ways of knowing are central to generating performance. Although I was working with a script for this production, I also wanted to explore multiple ways of knowing for our ensemble and audience.

## CHOOSING THE PLAY

Our production of *The Dybbuk* grew out of a conversation over a Peysakh (Passover) seder at the home of Anna Gonshor, a teacher of Yiddish literature and mentor to countless students at McGill University. Deeply rooted in values of cultural and social activism, her family seders were unlike anything I had ever experienced growing up in British Columbia. I remember that the tables were arranged with what was clearly a “kids’ table” at one end. The “kids” in this case, however, ranged in age from about twenty-five to forty. In 2010, at one of these seders, I met Daniel Brodie, who was doing a master’s degree in Jewish studies at McGill. Daniel was from England and had a background and a future in theatrical producing; I had just returned from doing my master’s in theater in England. By the end of the evening we were half joking about putting together a production. These “we should work on a project together” conversations happen in an offhand way all the time. This was one of those rare situations where we turned a conversation into a play.

I was very conscious that our process, and thus our performance, was shaped by our larger context and, perhaps even more importantly, that the audience would bring their own lives to their readings of our performance, including any preconceptions and emotional attachments they might have for the play and the language. One reason that Daniel and I chose *The Dybbuk* was purely practical. Because Daniel and I were both newcomers to Montreal, without name recognition, we decided that we needed to choose a piece that would have some draw of its own. We felt that *The Dybbuk* had the name recognition to bring an audience to the theater, whether or not they knew who the team was. I wrote in our program notes: “*The Dybbuk* is a well-loved piece of theatre and literature and, over the past 100 years, many other directors have imposed their vision on the play. From expressionism to



Fig. 7. All-female cast of *The Dybbuk* (Jacqueline van de Geer, Bronna Levy, Sandi Hilton, Jacqueline Fay, and Caitie Parsons), directed by Avia Moore. La Sala Rossa, Montreal, May 22–25, 2011. Photo courtesy of the author.

ballet, from Vakhtangov to Kushner, *The Dybbuk* has emerged unscathed.”<sup>11</sup> I can’t resist noting the irony of choosing, for material reasons, a play that deals with the immaterial.

### CASTING: RAISING WOMEN’S VOICES

My decision to produce *The Dybbuk* with an all-female-identifying cast was the choice that caught the most attention. I believe that this interest in my casting choice reflected a growing willingness, or perhaps urgency, to discuss gender imbalances elsewhere in the Yiddish cultural scene. The decision to feature a cast of five women started simply out of limitation: we chose the strongest performers of those who auditioned, and they all happened to be women. As is so often the case, what started as a limitation became a creative catalyst. While I didn’t walk into the casting process with the intention of putting together an all-female ensemble, I decided that approaching the text through a gendered lens might be especially revealing. Although Leah is one of the central characters in the play and the story revolves around her, *The Dybbuk* depicts a man’s world, inhabited

by men and written by men.<sup>12</sup> Of the thirty-plus characters individually listed in the script, only ten are women.<sup>13</sup> Of those ten women, only four have names, and only two—Leah and her grandmother Frade—have any sort of character substance. The other women are identified in the script only by a characteristic, such as “A Lame Old Woman.”<sup>14</sup> With only a line or two each, they are broad-stroke characters that help paint the setting of the play but never rise above anonymity and stereotype. I found further motivation in Agnieszka Legutko’s article “Feminist Dybbuks,” in which she notes that most literary and historical accounts of dybbuk possession are narrated by men and that feminist authors are pushing back against these gendered narratives by “putting women’s perspective in the center.”<sup>15</sup> With an all-female cast we were flipping the familiar script and asking ourselves what might change with a non-male narrator.

We had already chosen to pare down the number of characters, cutting and combining and double-casting so that we could stage *The Dybbuk* with a cast of five. We kept the scripted characters gendered as written; our all-female cast played the male characters as men. In early rehearsals, we allowed the roles to shift; the performers explored a wide range of different characters before we settled on who would play whom. With the reduced character list and the time to play, we discovered possible relationships between characters that we could then choose to build on. For example, Caitie Parsons and Jacqueline Fay, who played Leah and Khonen, respectively, both played the Messenger in different scenes. We found that although the three characters remained distinct, this casting resulted in layering that was revealing. When the Messenger offers wisdom to Leah and Khonen, for instance, we felt as though that wisdom was now coming from within themselves or from their deep connection with each other. The Messenger also plays a narrative function that, with the actors embodying both roles, transferred physically to Leah and Khonen. The physical doubling empowered Leah and Khonen to narrate their own story.

I understood the underlying theme of our production to be self-determination. I saw this theme in my own approach to the project as well as in the text. Leah struggles to claim space in a male-dominated world in which she has little to no control over her own life and is denied agency. Khonen, too, chafes against the spoken and unspoken rules that restrict him. He pursues the forbidden mystical paths of the Kabbalah, an alternative route toward his desires, even as he is warned that he is on a dangerous course. The choices that Leah makes—to invite Khonen to her wedding,



to struggle against expelling him during the exorcism, and then to join him (in death)—are actions through which Leah takes control of her body and her heart. As Legutko points out, Leah's possession can be read as a form of hysteria, which, in turn, has been theorized as a method for women to assert control in a world in which they have none.<sup>16</sup> In assuming the character of a possessing spirit, a woman might act out against or find temporary escape from her restrictive surroundings. The ensemble, and especially Parsons, Fay, and I, discussed at length whether we thought that Leah was actually possessed by the soul of Khonen or whether she was consciously *performing* possession to gain power in a world in which she has always been powerless. Ultimately, we decided to leave it ambiguous in the production. "He only seeks other paths who has lost the straight one," Reb Azriel rebukes the dybbuk—or is he rebuking Leah? "Er iz tsu eng" (the straight path is too narrow), the dybbuk—or is it Leah?—responds. When I imagined the exorcism scenes of the play, I imagined Leah in an interrogation room or a psychiatric hospital cell. So in the production, we clamped a tin light to the rebbe's staff and positioned the rebbe as an interrogator, above Leah, so that the light shone directly down on her as it might in a scene from film noir.

Creating performance space for women, and populating the male-dominated world of the play with female performers, became a critical part of our reimagining of individual and community mythologies in *The Dybbuk*. During rehearsals we tried to pay attention to how it felt for women to inhabit roles that were reserved for men in the world of the play. While we were rehearsing the exorcism scene, I scribbled the note "gentleness is beautiful" in response to the way that Jacqueline van de Geer was portraying the rebbe. We discussed how the rebbe was no longer a hero for performing the exorcism and, instead, felt internally conflicted over the emotional violence of the scene. In an interview with the *Forward*, I observed that "we see . . . the gentler sides of the characters. The Rabbi who performs the exorcism is often played as a very old and tired man, but one who has a lot of power. With a woman playing that role we see more sympathy and empathy emerge."<sup>17</sup> In An-sky's play, Leah is routinely silenced by the men around her. Even the dybbuk himself paradoxically creates space for Leah's voice only by stealing her voice in order to speak through her. In contrast, by stepping onto the stage as an all-female ensemble, we were raising our voices as women. It was always my intention to include song in the performance, and this decision was heightened by the casting choice. There was a productive dissonance between the beauty of our voices and arrangements and

the knowledge that, as women, we would not actually have been allowed to sing in mixed company in the world of our performance. The restrictions on women's voices in the religious world, both figuratively and literally, made raising our voices within the ultrareligious world of the play into a political statement. In our all-female *Dybbuk*, the male characters could not exclude the voices of women without silencing themselves.

As we thought about what it meant to inhabit this play as women, we considered the roles ascribed to women in Jewish liturgy, custom, and history. We agreed that there was power in pushing back against those roles, but also in reclaiming some of them. We decided that we should bring loaves of braided challah for the audience, welcoming them into the theater as we might welcome a guest into our home and referencing the *mitsve* (good deed) of *khale-nemen* (taking challah).<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline Fay and I were roommates at the time and had been regularly baking challah for Shabes throughout that year. We made almost sixty mini loaves to offer to our audiences, each with a six-stranded braid. We arranged the space so that most audience members were seated around small tables, cabaret style.<sup>19</sup> This cabaret setup also referenced the history of the hall itself. We chose La Sala Rossa as a theater for practical reasons (location and price) but also for its history as a social and political hall for the left-wing Jewish community of Montreal from the 1930s to 1950s, a time when the space played host to many shared Jewish meals. Maya Jarvis and I made tablecloths for the audience tables that matched the costumes and placed the little challah loaves on them. In baking and sharing bread with our audiences, we made the performance space our home. Opening one's home to guests is a vulnerable act. While many tables happily ate the bread offered to them, I remember feeling a sadness when a table barely touched their bread. Did this rejection of our offer mean that they didn't like it? That they weren't hungry? That they were too shy to eat together?

## YIDDISH: BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

I remember Bryna Wasserman, the former artistic director of the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre in Montreal, remarking that they used to teach Yiddish speakers how to act, but now they have to teach actors how to speak Yiddish.<sup>20</sup> Approaching *The Dybbuk*, I knew that we would need to do the production primarily in English. My own Yiddish-language skills were not

at a place where I felt comfortable directing a production completely in Yiddish. I also knew that we would struggle to teach that amount of Yiddish to our performers within the time frame that we had. Finally, while we hoped to reach Jewish audiences in Montreal, we expected that few members of our audience would have a vernacular understanding of Yiddish. For those who were familiar with the language but not fluent, it was likely to carry more subjective meaning than literal meaning—a relationship with language that Jeffrey Shandler has described as *postvernacular*.<sup>21</sup> We were more interested in exploring the interplay between vernaculars, and between modes of signification, than we were in directly translating to our audience.

Shandler coined the term *postvernacular* to describe the increasing use of Yiddish in nonvernacular contexts. Our production is an example of a nonvernacular context: Yiddish was not the primary, or even the secondary, language for most of our performers; nor was it for most of our audience members. The use of Yiddish in such a context is always a choice. Referring to an expansion in the metalevel of the language, the *postvernacular* heralds a “privileging of the secondary level of signification of Yiddish over its primary level.”<sup>22</sup> This means that the fact that something is said in Yiddish is often as important, if not more important, than the words that are said; the action and the context for the action is as significant as the content. Shandler argues that it is in performance “that *postvernacular* Yiddish is manifest most extensively and provocatively.”<sup>23</sup> Language as a site of cultural memory is a relatively new conversation in Jewish culture, and it is a subject that raises hackles. Jan Schwartz, for example, writes that “the *postvernacular* use of Yiddish, and in some cases promotion of its culture, has resulted in a watered-down, pale version of the original,” in the same breath as admitting that “it nevertheless has [ensured] that the Yiddish cultural heritage continues to be circulated, reviewed, and accessed.”<sup>24</sup> For Schwartz, *postvernacular* Yiddish can only nostalgically recall another era, only memorialize the vernacular. “In translation Jewish culture is not lost but found,” Shandler counters, pointing out that nonvernacular languages (such as ancient Hebrew and Judeo-Aramaic), code-switching, and translation have always played a vital part in Jewish life.<sup>25</sup> *Postvernacularity* opens up a space for reconceptualizing memory in generative ways: “*postvernacularity* can be understood as a response to the demand for a new ordering of language, culture and peoplehood.” Shandler argues that the idea of Yiddish as dying actually expresses “the sense of a breach in Jewish cultural or social continuity at its most elemental level.”<sup>26</sup> The circular argument over whether

Yiddish is dead or alive fails to acknowledge contemporary experiences of Yiddish—which can look very different from prewar Yiddish culture—as a form of continuity.

Postvernacularity is a pivotal concept in my work and was the primary lens through which I approached *The Dybbuk*. In fact, in creating the space for a subjective, relative, and contingent relationship with Yiddish, postvernacularity reflects, I believe, the contemporary relationships of the Yiddish community (as a whole) to the language and culture. Any dialogue between the Yiddish canon and contemporary performance must recognize that multiple levels of translation and retranslation are constantly at play. For example, Joachim Neugroschel points out that even the Yiddish text that we commonly think of as the original “is actually a second-degree translation,” as the original (which may have been in Russian) was lost and the play had to be retranslated into Yiddish from a Hebrew translation.<sup>27</sup> Subtitles and supertitles, although a valuable tool, provide only a blanket solution, and can be a means of skirting a deeper engagement with issues of text and translation.<sup>28</sup> I wanted to dive into these issues, engaging with the Yiddish in *The Dybbuk* through the trio of postvernacularity, code-switching, and translation.

For our *Dybbuk* production, I decided that we would use an English translation but would carefully replace select portions of the English text with the Yiddish. I read several translations and adaptations, including a two-person adaptation by Bruce Myers (1979) and the Tony Kushner/Neugroschel adaptation (1997).<sup>29</sup> Finally, instead of taking up a contemporary translation, I chose to use the 1926 English translation by Henry Alsberg and Winifred Katzin because I was drawn to the poetic and somewhat formal construction of the language. As we analyzed the text, I referred frequently to these other translations, as well as to the Yiddish text. Although the variants were usually very close in the way they translated the Yiddish, nuanced differences often prompted us to consider our own interpretation. Where the English texts varied, I would turn to the Yiddish text. Where I did not understand the Yiddish text, I used the various English translations to help me find my way through.

I wanted the Yiddish in this production to carry meaning and depth, to be more than just a handful of familiar words used by English speakers for recognition or emphasis. I thought about the ruptures in the play and the characters who struggle to express themselves. The original title of the play is *Between Two Worlds* (*The Dybbuk*). This theme of being between worlds

manifests in the play on multiple levels. The dybbuk is caught between two worlds, unable to ascend to the next life. The characters are likewise caught: between the world of the mystical and the world of the rational, between belief and doubt, and, as An-sky himself pointed out, “between the individual and the collective.”<sup>30</sup> In our production, I decided to make the linguistic gap between English and Yiddish parallel these gaps between worlds in the play’s title. We mapped Yiddish onto the less commonly or no longer understood: the mystical, the spiritual, the individual, the otherworldly. Some language decisions were made during the rehearsal process itself as we explored the way the characters expressed themselves.

The dybbuk, we decided, would speak in Yiddish. When the dybbuk spoke within Leah, she too would speak in Yiddish. In addition, both Frade and Reb Azriel (who performs the exorcism) would also speak some Yiddish: Frade, because she understood the ways of that other world through stories and superstitions, and the rebbe because his spirituality was a bridge between the worlds and he had the power to communicate with, and excommunicate, the dybbuk. In the program, I wrote: “In re-introducing parts of the Yiddish text into our English-language production I wanted to heighten the space between worlds. The dybbuk is an unknown and misunderstood energy, a force that causes discomfort and confusion to the outsider. Only Leah and the Rabbi truly understand the dybbuk: Leah because he is her soulmate, the Rabbi because he wields old and powerful magic.”<sup>31</sup> Where the text was in Yiddish, it was, for the most part, only in Yiddish. I made a conscious decision not to translate it line by line or to have supertitles. When there were larger sections of Yiddish, I wove the Yiddish and English together, imagining Leah raising her own voice to join that of the dybbuk within her. Certain phrases were repeated in both languages.

For example, in a scene from the play’s final act, here’s how Leah and the dybbuk resist the rebbe’s attempt to exorcise them. The lines that remain or are repeated in English were chosen as key phrases that the non-Yiddish speakers in the audience would need in order to follow the arc of the scene:

*Miropoler Rebbe, Ikh veys vi shtark un almekhtik ir zayt! Ikh veys, az ir kont bafeln malokhim un srofim, ober mit mir vet ir gornisht makhn. Ikh hob nisht vubin tsu geyn! Far mir zenen fartsamt ale vegn un farshlosn ale shtegn un fun ale zayten loyern af mir beyze rukhes greyte mir ayntsushlingen. There is heaven, and there is earth, un es zenen do on a tsol veltn yet in not*

one of these is there any place for me. *Un itst, az mayn farbiterte, faryogte neshome hot gefunen ir ruekh*—now that my soul has found refuge—you wish to drive me away? *Hot rakhmones, farshvert mir nisht.*

Miropol Rabbi—I know your almighty power. I know that angels and archangels obey your word. But me you cannot command. I have nowhere to go. Every road is barred against me and every gate is locked. On every side, the forces of evil lie in wait to seize me. There is heaven, and there is earth—and all the countless worlds in space, yet in not one of these is there any place for me. And now that my soul has found refuge from the bitterness and terror of pursuit, you wish to drive me away. Have mercy! Do not send me away—don't force me to go!<sup>32</sup>

Of the five performers we cast, only one of them had familiarity with the Yiddish language. The other four, to the extent that each spoke Yiddish text, needed coaching. Most of the Yiddish fell to Caitie Parsons, our Leah, who had no familiarity with Yiddish at all. Anna Gonshor helped us tremendously by recording all the Yiddish lines and coaching Caitie in person. Bronna Levy, our one performer with some Yiddish fluency, helped with ongoing in-rehearsal coaching as well. I glowed with pride when Anna, after seeing the performance, praised Caitie's Yiddish.

In including Yiddish text, and choosing not to translate all of it, I understood that I was manipulating audience access to the world of the play. In my rehearsal book, I wrote “different languages, different audiences.” While audience members like Anna and her family could understand both the English and the Yiddish, there would also be many who could not. I pointed to this in my program notes:

The audience will be similarly split between those that understand the dybbuk and those who do not. The non-Yiddish-speaker and the Yiddish-speaker will each find different clues and cues that quote their various secular, religious, and linguistic worlds. If you do not understand Yiddish, I encourage you to accept the unfamiliarity. Rather than fighting against the language, rather than feeling that you are missing aspects of the play, embrace the strangeness and allow yourself to have a gut reaction to the unknown itself.<sup>33</sup>

I wanted the language to be heightened and full of feeling, but not nostalgic. I felt that we were successful when one audience member told me that watching the performance made her want to learn Yiddish.

### MUSIC AS ACCESS POINT

Music is an integral part of my creative work, although I am not a musician myself. I arrived in the Yiddish cultural world through music—and I am not the only one. Music is a common access point and pathway into Yiddish culture today. When I was growing up, my only connection to Yiddish culture was the klezmer music that my father, who is a musician, played. Experiencing Yiddish music and dance at KlezKanada, a festival of Yiddish culture just outside of Montreal, was a turning point in my relationship to my own Jewish identity and to Yiddish culture. Music can catch at us in unexpected ways, sweeping us into the dance, drawing out laughter and tears.

Music can likewise be an entry point and guide us into or through a play. It can convey feeling and subtext. Because we were choosing not to translate most of the Yiddish, I felt that music might provide another way for the audience to access the language, especially for those who did not speak any Yiddish. Jacqueline Fay, whom I had met at KlezKanada the year before, arranged traditional melodies for the cast to sing and composed new settings for songs in An-sky's text. We drew on and were inspired by *The Upward Flight*, the CD that accompanied Gabriella Safran and Steven Zipperstein's 2006 book *The Worlds of S. An-sky*.<sup>34</sup> In particular, Michael Alpert's rendition of "Mipney Ma" became a musical motif for us, sung in canon by our ensemble with overlapping Yiddish and Hebrew lyrics. Jacqueline also performed in the play, as described earlier, and we discussed how her multiple roles, as Khonen, as a cellist, and as the Messenger might be connected. One of these connected moments that I found particularly powerful came in the scenes in which Leah and the dybbuk are being interrogated and exorcised. Jacqueline improvised on the cello throughout these scenes, the cello sounding whenever Leah spoke as the dybbuk, transmuting her role as Khonen into the music and adding layers to his voice.

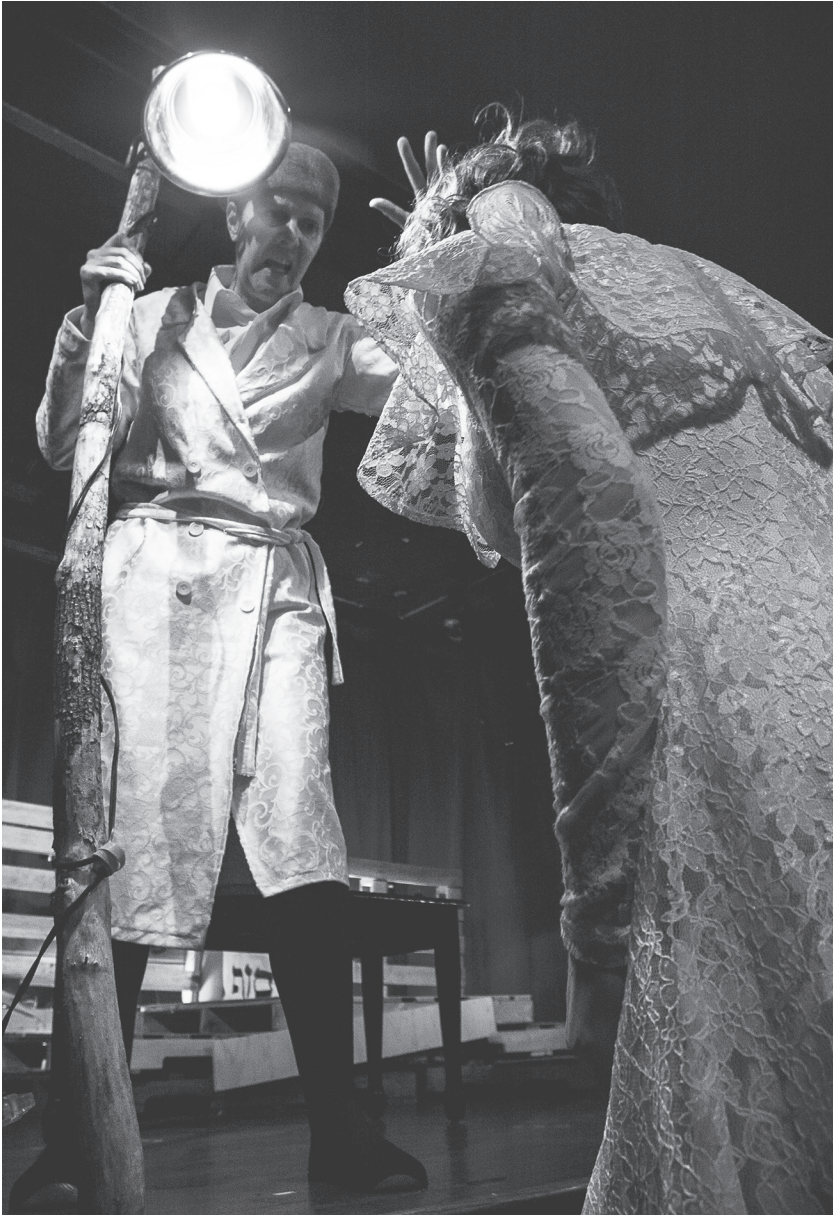


Fig. 8. Exorcism scene in *The Dybbuk* (Jacqueline van de Geer and Caitie Parsons), directed by Avia Moore. La Sala Rossa, Montreal, May 22–25, 2011. Photo courtesy of the author.



## COSTUMING: IDENTITY ON THE OUTSIDE

What parts of ourselves—of our hearts—do we wear on our sleeves? Most of the costumes worn in our *Dybbuk* production were hand painted with Yiddish text. Vertically, along one front side, we painted the character's name. Around the back, in tumbling letters, we painted a phrase that gave insight into each character, a line or concept that defined them in some way; "It's a little Brechtian," I commented to the *Forward*.<sup>35</sup> Leah and Khonen both wore the phrase *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li* (I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine) from the Song of Songs. Sender, Leah's father, whose judgment is clouded by his sense of self-importance, wore a line spoken by the Messenger in one of his parables: "Di gloz fun spigl iz a bisl bazilbert" (The glass of the mirror is glazed in silver).<sup>36</sup>

Painting the robes with text carried forward themes from a long series of studio explorations starting in 2009 in which I played with wearing language. This was at times a metaphor for the ways we can don identity performatively, at other times for the ways that our identity is visible on the outside. Thinking again about Shandler's case for the performativity of postvernacular Yiddish, I wondered what it *looked* like when we wear language at some times and not at others.<sup>37</sup> These themes were still running through my mind and body—aesthetically and resonantly—as we designed the costumes for *The Dybbuk*. As I've described here, we were already working with the Yiddish language as a rich layer of the production; I saw the costumes, like the musical elements, as yet another layer of language, a layer that the actors literally wrapped around themselves. Since most of our ensemble was learning about the context, culture, and language of the play as we rehearsed, wrapping ourselves in layers of language felt like a metaphor for the very process of developing our *Dybbuk* production.

## CHOOSING THE DYBBUK

As I slowly packed our costumes back into their storage box, I thought about how the process of developing a production can be a process of unpacking and packing. We sit with a script or an idea and slowly lift out elements, unwrapping them and examining them, letting the contents of the script cover the floor of the studio until we are wading through text and images. We ask questions about how we relate to each element and whether we



Fig. 9. The Messenger (Jacqueline Fay) in *The Dybbuk*, directed by Avia Moore. La Sala Rossa, Montreal, May 22–25, 2011. Photo courtesy of the author.

want to keep it this time round. We interpret and translate and historicize through a lens that shifts and changes. Eventually we try to pack everything up neatly again into a presentable whole. Invariably it doesn't fit the first time we try, and we have to spread it all out and try again. Just as the cultural storehouse of Jewish cultural practices shows that there are innumerable ways into Jewish identity, there is no one way through this process, no one interpretation, no straight and narrow path. Our production of *The Dybbuk* was just as much about our choices as it was about Leah's. This reflection has been an opportunity for me to unpack some of those artistic choices again, from a time when, like Leah, our ensemble chose to embrace the dybbuk.

### Notes

1. Avia Moore, "Fragmented Memory in Emerging Cultural Practices" (MA thesis, Falmouth University, 2009), 43.
2. In the past decade, I have observed a wave of theatrical and interdisciplinary art that addresses the gap I observed in my MA thesis. However, that is for another paper.
3. Jordan Finkin, "Yiddish Ethnographic Poetics and Moyshe Kulbak's "Vilne,"" in *Writing Jewish Culture: Paradoxes in Ethnography*, ed. Andreas Kilcher and Gabriella Safran (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 101.
4. Annette Werberger, "Ethnoliterary Modernity: Jewish Ethnography and Literature in the Russian Empire and Poland," in Kilcher and Safran, *Writing Jewish Culture*, 140.
5. Andreas Kilcher and Gabriella Safran, introduction to Kilcher and Safran, *Writing Jewish Culture*, 6.
6. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (1982; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), xxxiv.
7. Nathaniel Deutsch, "From Custom Book to Folk Culture: Minhag and the Roots of Jewish Ethnography," in Kilcher and Safran, *Writing Jewish Culture*, 287, and see 274–86.
8. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 160.
9. Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 40.
10. Conquergood, 33; Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 110.
11. Avia Moore, "Director's Notes," Sala Rossa, Montreal, program for *The Dybbuk*, 2011.

12. Agnieszka Legutko points out the gendered nature of authorship—documentary and artistic—with regard to dybbuk possession. See Legutko, “Feminist Dybbuks: Spirit Possession Motif in Post–Second Wave Jewish Women’s Fiction,” *Bridges: A Jewish Feminist Journal* 15, no. 1 (2010): 9–10.

13. The number of characters listed in the script varies by translation. The Yiddish script that we used listed thirty-three characters, plus ensemble characters such as “scholars,” while the Alsberg/Katzin translation lists thirty-one, plus ensemble characters. See S. An-sky, *The Dybbuk*, trans. Henry Alsberg and Winifred Katzin (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926).

14. Tony Kushner, and Joachim Neugroschel, *A Dybbuk and Other Tales of the Supernatural* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1998), 4.

15. Legutko, “Feminist Dybbuks,” 7.

16. Legutko, 9–10.

17. Ezra Gliner, “Q&A: A ‘Dybbuk’ of Her Own,” *Forward*, May 18, 2011, <https://forward.com/schmooze/137888/>

18. Gil Marks, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), s.v. “challah.”

19. There is a note on the first page of my rehearsal book that suggests we make the audience the guests at the wedding of Leah and Khonen. While we didn’t build on this idea, the cabaret seating is also a nod to it.

20. Wasserman was speaking to the 2006 cohort of the Steiner Summer Yiddish Program of the Yiddish Book Center at a presentation in Montreal.

21. Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language & Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

22. Shandler, 4.

23. Shandler, 128.

24. Jan Schwartz, *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture after the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 251.

25. Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 23, 92.

26. Shandler, 193, 183.

27. Joachim Neugroschel, ed., *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), xiv.

28. Moore, “Fragmented Memory in Emerging Cultural Practices,” 48–49.

29. Bruce Myers, “A Dybbuk for Two People” (unpublished manuscript, 1979), photocopy in author’s possession; Kushner and Neugroschel, *A Dybbuk*.

30. S. An-sky, “From a Letter to Khaim Zhitlovsky,” in Neugroschel, *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination*, 2.

31. Moore, “Director’s Notes.”

32. Performer’s script, last modified April 10, 2011, in author’s possession. The English translation is from An-sky, *The Dybbuk*, trans. Alsberg and Katzin, 109–10.

33. Avia Moore, "Director's Notes."

34. Gabriella Safran and Steven Zipperstein, eds., *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

35. Gliner, "Q&A." The German director Bertolt Brecht wanted his audiences to be aware that they were watching a play. To this objective, he often employed metatheatrical signage as part of revealing the mechanics of the production to the audience.

36. Because the performers all played multiple characters, there were many costumes. Maya Jarvis and I briefly discussed hanging them around the stage when they were not in use to create the feel of "more ghosts, more men in the space," as I wrote in my rehearsal notes.

37. Shandler argues that in the semiotic mode of the postvernacular, "every utterance is enveloped in a performative aura" that demonstrates a heightened awareness of language use. Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland*, 26.

# *An-sky's Dybbuk as Destination*

Diego Rotman

If An-sky's *Dybbuk* were a site or a place, if the drama were defragmented into independent scenes, if the spectators were active travelers and the curators the tour guides of different fragments of the performance, An-sky's *Dybbuk* would become a (post)dramatic destination instead of a dramatic legend, as An-sky put it. This was the approach that guided us, the curators of a performance festival, when we planned to revisit An-sky's *Dybbuk* in 2014. That year, Lea Mauas and I (as the Sala-Manca Group) got an invitation from Guy Biran, then director of Hazira Theater in Jerusalem, to curate with him the Voice of the Word Festival (*kola shel hamila*), a festival dedicated to the intersections between poetry, performance, voice, theater, and the visual arts. Biran's invitation reached us at a time when we were involved in a long-term curatorial research project on the connections between contemporary art and ethnography as part of our work as artistic directors of the Mamuta Art and Research Center in Jerusalem. Our intent was for the outcomes of this ongoing project to become an exhibition entitled "The Ethnographic Department of the Museum of the Contemporary." The research project was focused on two folklorists active at the beginning of the twentieth century: S. An-sky (Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport), a Jewish folklorist known for his ethnographic expedition to Volhynia and Podolia in 1912–14 and author of *The Dybbuk*, and Tawfiq Canaan, a Palestinian physician and ethnographer who served as the director of the Jesus Hilfe Leprosarium, today the Hansen House for Art and Technology, where the Mamuta Art and Research Center is based.<sup>1</sup> In tandem with this, I was teaching a first-time course on An-sky's *Dybbuk* in the Department of Theater Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, entitled "*Dybbuk: Between Theater and Ethnography*."

Theater scholar Marvin Carlson once characterized theater as "a simu-

lacrum of the cultural and historical process itself. . . . The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the processes of recycling and recollection.”<sup>2</sup> Our proposal for the festival was to revisit An-sky’s *Dybbuk* as a defragmented cultural text, relocating it in the building where we were based, and turning the festival into a site-specific project with its own ghosts, both of the *Dybbuk* and of the leprosarium. Biran liked the proposal, and the three of us started a unique process of collaborative work, our own expedition into An-sky’s *Dybbuk*.

In this chapter, I mainly consider our curatorial and dramaturgical approach to An-sky’s *Dybbuk* based on the idea of the play as a territory, of the former hospital as a possessed body, of the curators as ethnographers, and of the audience as visitors. I refer to the works of the festival by describing their main ideas, and then focus on one project, that of Adi Kaplan and Shahar Carmel, and its particular approach to the film version of An-sky’s *Dybbuk*. I discuss these topics from the subjective role I played as one of the curators, dramaturgs, and guides of this project.

### VOICE OF THE WORD FESTIVAL: “IN HIS/HER VOICE”

In the text accompanying the festival’s program, we referred to the reasons that inspired us to work on An-sky’s play, citing the transformation of the former leper colony into “an area for challenging one’s spiritual transformation, as a metaphor for the old building’s newly designated mission.” We spoke of our attempt to connect the past with the present, art with ritualism, and healing with performance. We described the dybbuk phenomenon “as a way [to cope] with harsh social situations, voice dissent, for which the afflicted have no words, and reveal dark occurrences from a community’s past.”<sup>3</sup>

The return to the idea of dybbuks and possession in an avant-garde performance festival was not a novelty: both the Vilna Troupe’s 1920 version, directed by Dovid Herman, and Habima’s canonical 1922 version, directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov, were avant-garde performances of *The Dybbuk*. The festival’s curatorial text proposed a few possible reasons for this choice:

Maybe it’s because the Leper Hospital was previously known as “Jesus Hilfe,” and it reminds us of two of Jesus’ qualities—healing and banish-

ing demons; maybe it's because in 1950 a different, political and ideological spirit possessed the building, and it was decided to change the hospital's persona and rename it after Dr. Hansen, who discovered leprosy's origin and seemed, to the building's new owners (Israel's Health Ministry), like the right spirit for the public body they now represented; maybe it's because the Leper Hospital lost its function, became an arts and technology center, and was named Hansen House, as if it is the home of the spirit that replaced Jesus; maybe it's because today, instead of the lepers, artists and students are the ones who live in the building, and sometimes challenge the local cultural hegemony; maybe it's because one hundred years have passed since Sh. An-sky's ethnographic expedition, where he collected a part of the stories that functioned as the play's basis, and a hundred years since the play's first drafts were written in Russian and Yiddish; maybe it's because of all these things, separately or together, that we decided, as a part of the "The Voice of the Word 14" festival, to return to one of the most profound traditions in Jewish culture, to dwell on an external spirit which possesses the body of a flesh and blood human being: the dybbuk.<sup>4</sup>

The Vilna Troupe and Habima's earlier productions notwithstanding, approaching an avant-garde performance festival in Israel through one of the modern classics of the Yiddish canonical theater was an unexpected choice in contemporary Israel. Yiddish is associated in Israel with low and popular culture and not with contemporary Israeli art. The Sala-Manca Group had presented contemporary and avant-garde approaches to Yiddish culture and language in the past, but this was the first time the group devoted a whole performance festival to a figure like An-sky or a canonical performance like *The Dybbuk*.<sup>5</sup> The festival was dealing with *The Dybbuk* not only through Hayim Nahman Bialik's Hebrew translation but also through An-sky's Yiddish version.<sup>6</sup> We were approaching diasporic culture and language not apologetically, not as part of an agenda of cultural revival or as a disappearing culture to be preserved as part of Jewish heritage (as it is approached, for example, by the Yiddishpiel Theater of Tel Aviv), but as a natural component of Israeli culture, without making any reference to the sudden appearance of Yiddish in the Jerusalem avant-garde scene.<sup>7</sup> The intention was to bring suppressed and subconscious fragments of a repressed culture and a language to the stage.<sup>8</sup> During the festival, Hansen House became, on the one hand, a site of healing where traumatic cultural and linguistic exclusion



seemed to become, at least for a while, part of the past. At the same time, the house and the festival also became a cultural nightmare of possession, in which the ghost of Yiddish was possessing central venues for contemporary Israeli art. The metaphor of the dybbuk allowed the artists to deal, as we stated, with topics of ownership, of national and gender identity, of possession, of sound and spirit, and of the spirit of time, and to “convey a feeling that must be similar to the one created during the play’s performances in the 1920s: The feeling that one world of values is disappearing and a new one is taking its place.”<sup>9</sup>

## THE SITE

Approaching the site, the building of a former hospital—and more specifically a hospital that treated Hansen’s disease (leprosy)—as a possessed body added another layer of meaning to our site-specific performance. The Jesus Hilfe (Jesus’ Help) Leprosarium, founded as an isolated refuge for lepers, was established in 1867 by the Moravian German Protestant community in Jerusalem. For twenty years, the hospital was housed in a building located on what is now Agron Street. In 1887, the leprosarium moved to a new building designed by Conrad Schick in the Talbiyeh neighborhood.

Until 1948, most of the patients were Arab Muslims, while the nurses were Christian. Tawfiq Canaan, a Palestinian Christian, was the leprosarium’s chief physician from 1919 until 1948. In charge of all medical and research issues as well as external relations, Dr. Canaan would visit the hospital once a week.

Once the State of Israel was established, Dr. Canaan either left Jerusalem of his own volition or was expelled from the city. The leper population in Jerusalem, which had been Muslim majority, now became Jewish only, which packed a metaphorical punch in terms of the politics of segregation and territory. In 1950, the Jewish National Fund bought the leprosarium and transferred its administration to the Ministry of Health of Israel. Its name was changed to Hansen Government Hospital, to honor the Norwegian physician who identified the leprosy-causing bacterium. Once antibiotic treatment became available and its success rate increased in the second half of the twentieth century, most of the patients were gradually released. The inpatient wing closed in 2000, but the hospital continued to operate as an

outpatient clinic until its final closure in 2009. That year, the Israeli government transferred the building's ownership to the Jerusalem municipality for renovations, in preparation for turning it into a cultural center. When the site reopened at the end of 2013, it again changed its name, to be known simply as Hansen House. Today, Hansen House is an art, design, and technology campus, revealing to visitors one of the most beautiful buildings in the city as well as its mysterious past. The campus houses the master's program of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, the Museum of the Contemporary, exhibition spaces, screening rooms, the offices of the online cultural journal *Erev Rav*, and the Mamuta Art and Research Center.

An-sky's *Dybbuk* and the symbolic structure hosting the festival were both performances of abnormal body situations. The former leprosarium became the body to be possessed, and the artists would speak through that body, as I will discuss in the following pages.

## THE PROCESS

The idea of metaphorically connecting theater with territory in Jewish culture is not new. When the Yiddish avant-garde poet Moyshe Broderzon (1890–1956) established the theater Ararat in Łódź, Poland, in 1927, for example, he chose as the theater's name *Artistisher revolutzionerer teater* (Artistic Revolutionary Theater), a title that indicates the theater's modernist and experimental aesthetics but also, through its abbreviated form—Ararat—refers to the geographic location straddling Armenia and Turkey that symbolizes the mythical rebirth of humanity after the biblical flood.<sup>10</sup> Broderzon's understanding of the theater company as a territorial destination is stressed in Ararat's anthem, which was performed as the opening song in most of the theater's productions: "The world destroyed in a black shimmer / The flood is coming to an end. / Young swimmers stroke through the water / Looking for a beach! / The air remains clouded, / It is far from calm . . . / Without an Ark, toward Mount Ararat / We swim, we swim to the destination."<sup>11</sup> According to the anthem, the group of young revolutionary actors go through Ararat the theater to reach Ararat the territory in order to fulfill their dream of cultural renewal.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, we envisioned our revisiting of An-sky's play ninety years later not only as a rereading of a text, but also as an approach to a temporal and ephemeral destination.

The project started with a symposium and a series of talks and lectures on possession in Jewish culture in general and in An-sky's *Dybbuk* in particular. The project was planned for artists interested in making a proposal for the festival, but was also open to the general public. In that sense, it could be argued that the festival started before its formal beginning as a study seminar, as a place for meetings in which the artists were part of the public, and the scholars were the main performers.

Yoram Bilu, Rachel Elior, Ruthie Abeliovich, Yair Lipshitz, and Freddie Rokem presented various multilayered approaches to the topic. Some of their texts were collected later as part of *Possession and Dispossession Performing Jewish Ethnography in Jerusalem*, coedited by Lea Mauas, Michelle MacQueen and myself and published in 2022.<sup>13</sup> The symposium was followed by an open call to artists to take part in the festival.

We commissioned the artists Josef Sprinzak, Victoria Hanna and Noam Enbar, Li Lorian and Adam Yodfat, Shira Borer, Tom Soloveitzik and Alex Drool, Adi Kaplan and Shahar Carmel, and Yaara Bar and Carmel Bar to each develop a project no more than fifteen to twenty minutes long. The short works format was characteristic of the festival, which had, under Biran's direction in previous years, already become a site-specific event. What was new was the connection between the specificity of the site and our topic. The eight selected works were to be staged in different rooms of the former Jerusalem leprosarium—in the basement, the galleries of the first floor, and the attic—allowing the curators to construct a guided tour connecting the sites and the performative acts. On one festival day, an extra room, a reconstructed administrative room of the hospital, was set aside for a reading of the original play in Yiddish by Eliezer Niborski and his twelve-year-old daughter, Ethel; on another day of the festival, it hosted a lecture on the music of Habima's production of *The Dybbuk* by musician and scholar Michael Lukin. The guided tours were conducted by the curators themselves, who did not explain the works but added different texts, references, and comments related to An-sky or to *The Dybbuk*.

The second day of the festival had an entirely different program, this one devoted to an experimental sound event commissioned from musician and conductor Ilan Volkov, with the participation of Volkov, Zohar Shafir, Tomer Damsky, Eran Sachs, and Maya Dunietz. It was an event bordering on ritual, in which the most radical sound and music artists of the Israeli avant-garde possessed the site.

## THE FESTIVAL

The other two nights of the festival lasted about an hour and a half each. The only way to visit the dramatic territories in the specific performance times was to be part of one of the three visiting groups moving in tandem, watching the fragments in a different order; the groups would be reunited only at the end, in the last performative event. Our version of *The Dybbuk* became a victim of its own multiplicity—the dybbuk's inherent multiplicity in his/her double existence in one possessed body, and its performative multiplicity happening in different rooms of the building, accessed in parallel, crossing paths for mere moments, in which a singular-plural coexistence is possible, to use Jean-Luc Nancy's formulation.<sup>14</sup> Each visitor's experience was constructed in relation to the specific audience group they were part of, to the particular order in which they experienced the performance events, and to the narrative heard from their individual guide.

The building was possessed, both physically and metaphorically, by a group of experimental artists as we deconstructed An-sky's narrative. The site, the building, became the possessed body. The walls of the modern leprosarium were the borders drawing the line between lepers and the healthy, demarcating leprosy itself. As suggested by Rod Edmond, Hansen's disease was a "boundary disease par excellence. It can focus and dramatize the risk of trespass, serve as a punishment." Drawing on Julia Kristeva's example of the human corpse, Edmond argues that the leprous body is "a border that has encroached upon everything . . . death infecting."<sup>15</sup> The Jerusalem leprosarium was an area to be avoided by the normal and the healthy, and for decades it was considered "forbidden" and threatening. The surrounding walls, which prevented any neighbor's gaze, generated endless stories, rumors, fear, and curiosity, creating a rich urban mythology.<sup>16</sup> The events we constructed were a kind of antifestival, dispersion instead of concentration, with low numbers of possible visitors per performance (around thirty) that never really generated a "positive vibe" or festival atmosphere. Instead, during the festival, the Hansen House once again became a healing site for the "abnormal" and "ill" body.

A dybbuk, the Jewish version of spirit possession, manifests as an occurrence in which the spirit of a person who died prematurely—a person deemed so sinful that even entrance to hell is denied to him or her—

enters the body of a living person. The prematurely departed is thus left suspended between the two worlds, persecuted and tormented by malicious angels. The spirit enters the body of its victim to find refuge from its tormentors, where it usurps the body's previous identity, from now on controlling that body. The community in which this occurs perceives the dybbuk as a disease, not unlike many other types of spirit possessions defined as culturally dependent illnesses.<sup>17</sup>

In our festival, the artists took the place of the dybbuk. The visitors became witnesses to an act of possession, medical students at a performance of hysteria, tourists to the undiscovered.

Given the structure of the festival and its ritual aspect, I approach its analysis through the lens of performance studies, more specifically through the relationship between theater, performance, and anthropology as developed by theater director and scholar Richard Schechner through his collaboration with the anthropologist Victor Turner.

Structurally, the festival had many characteristics of a rite of passage, including the tripartite ritual scheme of separation, marginalization, and aggregation. From the beginning, visitors were separated into groups, creating a collective experience unique to each group. The visitors were not mutilated or removed from humanity like in Arnold van Gennep's description of rites, but they were separated from the audience, experiencing a new farewell from their own temporal community, only to be reunited at the end.<sup>18</sup> This was a liminal phase—according to Turner, the locus where social drama and fictional structures entangle, grouping individuals into a social unit that forms and affirms the community.<sup>19</sup>

During the Voice of the Word Festival, three ephemeral communities were created to take part in a modern ritual of deconstruction of a canonical work of Jewish theater. The visitors were not passive spectators, but pilgrims, walking through, commenting on, and reacting to a play becoming a destination. Similar to trends among avant-garde theater groups during the 1960s and 1970s, this performance was a return to ritual outside of religion.

The ritualistic approach to this defragmented version of *The Dybbuk* was expressed in its intimacy, the closeness to the performer, the body, and the emotions that the visitors experienced. Moving through underground passages, through the architectural and symbolic structure of healing of the former hospital, and approaching *The Dybbuk* as a ritual pilgrimage, visitors

participated in the creation of the experience. The festival was a nonfestival, or a festival without parties, ending actually in a symbolic after-party of a decadent wedding in which the bride was united with herself.

### FROM AN-SKY'S DRAMATIC LEGEND TO A POSTDRAMATIC EXPERIENCE

There were three guides, three narratives, three groups, and three paths. The three guides steered their groups through the halls of the leprosarium, took care of the timing, and contextualized the event's concept and works. Each guide read fragments aloud from An-sky's writings or from scholarly works. This guiding was an integral part of the performative event—and was, perhaps, an unconscious reference to the role of the Messenger in An-sky's *Dybbuk*.

With audience members walking in groups, arriving at different sites, hearing explanations and anecdotes, and physically moving up or down stairs alongside a symbolic script, the method of performance helped An-sky's classic dramatic legend become a site to be explored, to be accessed through a range of different approaches to dybbuks and possession.

In the festival we attempted to deconstruct dramatic time without establishing a progression: this was a performance that could be visited from different "entrances." The visitors were pilgrims who not only walked, but were also welcome to read, ask questions, move, and enter or reject entering some of the performances. In most of the short performances, there was no plot. Instead, An-sky's plot was deconstructed and reinterpreted, using different approaches. Most performers in the event did not represent the figures of An-sky's drama; instead, they were playing themselves. The text was not central, at least not in the sense of the role it plays in most productions of *The Dybbuk*; it was instead one of the performance's many components. In some pieces, the sound was perhaps more significant, and in others the symbolic aspect or the visual approach was central. The site—the leprosarium—played a significant role in constructing meaning, and the visitors were central players not only in their own personal interpretations, but also in their individual ways of participating.

## THE WORKS

The audience's experience of the festival was not linear. The works were not seen in the order of my description. The festival was a puzzle consisting of fragments of meaning, where walking and touring were a practice of connecting and interpreting. An-sky's plot was reflected back at the audience members as if through a broken mirror. This reconstruction of meaning depended, intellectually or emotionally, on the visitors' background, on the guides' input, and on the aleatory order in which the works were seen. What all the visitors had in common was the communal experience of together visiting a dark Jewish phenomenon on a winter night in the cold Jerusalem leprosarium.

In the following paragraphs I reconstruct the fragments of one of those tours, after which I turn to a deeper discussion of Adi Kaplan and Shahr Carmel's work, which itself would later become the basis of another new performance piece inspired by Michał Waszyński's film *The Dybbuk* (1937).<sup>20</sup>

Following an explanation to the general public of how the festival worked, each guide (Biran, Mauas, and me) took their own group into a performance, each entering the event from a different access point. During the intermezzi, the guides explained how this festival was curated; they cited An-sky, stories of dybbuk possessions, memories, or scholarly works, as well as anecdotes from the creative process. Here is an example of an introductory text that was read to contextualize the work:

Into the body of a living human being, with an individual, distinct soul, enters at a certain point in his life another soul—the soul of a person who died prematurely and was seen as a sinner so terrible, even entering hell was deprived from him, and he remains between two worlds, haunted and tortured by angels of destruction . . . the dybbuk seeks a refuge from its persecutors and enters the living body against its will, seizing it, sticking to it, possessing it and speaking from the mouth of the person possessed as a distinct personality.<sup>21</sup>

The scholarly text thus became a performative text with the power to introduce the visitors into a specific mood. The scholar became a playwright, just as An-sky himself went from ethnographer to dramatist.

## Foreing Root

Following the introduction, the audience was conducted through narrow stairs into the basement of the former leprosarium. In “Foreing Root,” a thin woman wearing black clothes covered by an apron was already performing. Shira Borer, in a “domestic performance” as she defined it, assumed the role of Khonen playing with the sacred Hebrew letters. But instead of practicing Kabbalah in the synagogue, Shira was in the hidden basement, which was disguised as a kitchen in which domestic tools were staged—an iron, an ironing board, and kitchen utensils. In a mix of ritualistic act, kabbalistic work, black magic, witchcraft, and cooking, the fragile-looking Shira was—with the extreme care of a surgeon—picking up hidden letters made of beets from a transparent bowl filled with dark, opaque wine. In the bowl, the letters were mixed, their meaning absent or incomprehensible. The ritual act in which Shira engaged was an act of constructing meaning, and the visitors became witnesses to a private ceremony.

One at a time, Borer took a “bloody” red Hebrew letter, brought it carefully to an ironing board covered in white cloth, and placed it in a seemingly incomprehensible order, but in a predesignated place. Each letter had its own destination. It was clear there was a hidden meaning. Slowly words and then a sentence were being constructed, not only from the layer of text formed by the beet letters themselves: the leaking beet letters stained the white cloth, from which a second sentence now emerged. This second sentence had been written in white using a liquid-repellant material, rejecting the liquid absorbed by the rest of the cloth: these letters were a white negative.

Of Borer’s performance, Eppie Bat-Ilan wrote the following:

She is serious and miniature, her thin fingers trembling for a moment, her thin face serious. The action takes place in silence, inside a cave. . . . We watch the occurrence whose possible meanings rise and slowly connect, like the letters drawn from the red bowl. There is something mesmerizing about the movement. She behaves like a blind man, the figure, present and unseen, though her preoccupation is in color and form; her form of discovery is an exploration, it embodies life in the dark. The letters in her, in an old-fashioned font with fancy Swans of yesteryear, live in 3D, cut and perfect and decorated. They are dripping, juicy, sweet, staining everything in their path, as beets know how to do. It’s not a





Fig. 10. Shira Borer as Khonen. Voice of the Word Festival, Jerusalem, 2014.  
Photo courtesy of Dima Nof.

show for kids, all the scary spots and all the patience to look at something without knowing exactly what. [...] She takes the letters out of the liquid like a womb, one by one, and arranges them on the white ironing board, placing them there in the designated place. At first, each letter is left alone, without context, without a word. Only the unaccompanied sound, and the shape.<sup>22</sup>

The two sentences that appeared on the cloth were taken from An-sky's *Dybbuk*:

על מה ולמה יורדת הנשמה, Why, oh why, / Did the soul descend,

This sentence was created by the hidden scripture, with biblical Hebrew font sculpted on beet. The hidden answer, written with Hebrew cursive letters on white, also appeared:

ירידה לצורך עליה היא. The greatest fall / Contains the upward flight.<sup>23</sup>

There were also two separated sides of a beet heart sewn by Borer. A mysterious story of broken love, magic, and possession and a ritual of women's empowerment opened an underground festival in which Kabbalah was domesticated, Khonen was feminized, and his broken heart reunified.

## The Sparkle

In the basement, the group continued into another room, Mamuta's recording studio, an auditorium where "The Sparkle," an experimental performance by vocal artist Josef Sprinzak, was staged. "The Sparkle" is a live performance for a performer and sound-activated lights on the relationship between *voice* and *light*. The lights were activated by speech that was being recorded and played back in real time. The vocal and visual relationships that were formed among the various lamps, and between them and the performer, became a type of puppet theater or animation theater in which the voice was not only a transmitter of content and meaning but also the provoker of action, like one of John L. Austin's performative speech acts.<sup>24</sup> The dialogue was based on fragments of texts and scenes from An-sky's *The Dybbuk*. In his text about the piece, Sprinzak wrote:

The idea of a voice that “sticks” to a body is realized by attaching a sound to a light source. Like the voice, abstract abstractions of light and darkness are also loaded with polar symbolic meanings in the world of religion and mysticism—good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, conscious and subconscious, the real world and the world of the shadow. These metaphors were also passed on to rational Western culture, such as Plato’s parable. The performance invites the viewer to enter with his senses “to the world of sparkle” which, like the dybbuk, also exists on the border between worlds.<sup>25</sup>

If Shira Borer, as a woman, was appropriating the place of hidden knowledge typically reserved for men in traditional Jewish society, Sprinzak was the alchemist, playing magic with electricity using the old symbolic system connecting knowledge with light, and darkness with the unknown and unexpected.

In the same underground level of the building, Tom Soloveitzik and Alex Drool created an experimental music and sound performance playing with the impossibility of earthly union. Using “The Heart and the Spring” by Reb Nachman (a tale told by the Messenger at the beginning of act 3 in *The Dybbuk*) as textual background to their performance, both musicians struggle through the meeting of their sound and music, in what becomes a connection of voices and sounds.<sup>26</sup> The performance was a symbolic, sonorous approach to the idea of Leah and Khonen’s encounter, a tension in which for a moment the artists’ sounds—the deep voice of Drool seemingly coming from the depths of the earth, and the music by Soloveitzik—meet or reject each other in a sonoric experience, a postmodern version of Vakhtangov’s dance of the beggars in Habima’s canonical production. The performance took place in an extremely small room where visitors could feel the vibrations, giving the performance physicality. The moment in which the mountain and the well met was almost volcanic, causing the visitors to become part of a ritual of sonoric possession that affected them physically and emotionally through its intensity.

### The Reading/Lecture Room

The trip inside the former leprosarium continued to the main floor. Before entering the room, the guide referred to An-sky’s readings of *The*

*Dybbuk* at literary salons, when he attempted unsuccessfully to promote and convince others to produce the play.<sup>27</sup> Inside the room, Yiddish teacher and activist Eliezer Niborski and his daughter Ethel read An-sky's *Dybbuk* in Yiddish. This reading emphasized the father-daughter relationship developed in the play.<sup>28</sup> The reading of the play continued in the room till the end of the event and was an obligatory station for all groups during their tours of a theatrical event that can be framed as immersive theater.<sup>29</sup>

Since most of the audience did not understand Yiddish, the reading had both a sonoric and a symbolic effect of estrangement. For audience members, the visit to the reading room lasted around fifteen minutes. It was unexpected for many audience members and not "performed" in the sense that the other artistic works were performed. It was a "real thing" happening, a cultural and linguistic nonhegemonic practice of the Niborski family (Eliezer Niborski and his daughter are part of a well-known Yiddishist family), shifted from the salon in their house in Jerusalem, where they used to hold readings of Yiddish literature, to the reading room of the festival site to be shared with the visitors.<sup>30</sup> This reading was not only a way of inserting Yiddish and the original play into the festival, but also a way of stressing intergenerational and contemporary Yiddish continuity, in which a father and daughter share a common love for a language and culture. But for most of the audience, the Yiddish reading was a sonoric performance, with hidden meaning reserved for those who possess certain knowledge. The language that was once a medium for daily communication became the symbol of an unknown culture for the majority of festival visitors, who didn't understand Yiddish. Like Kabbalah in the original play, Yiddish in our festival became the knowledge of the chosen.

On another day of the festival, instead of the reading, the same room hosted a lecture on the music from Habima's 1922 version of *The Dybbuk* by musician and scholar Michael Lukin. Scholarship was an inherent component of the work, blurring the borders between lecture and performance.

### Between Two Worlds

On the same floor, in the living room, Adam Yodfat and Li Lorian performed their piece "Between Two Worlds." Yodfat and Lorian's approach to An-sky's work was political. They were inspired by Leah's words in the third

act of *The Dybbuk*: “I have nowhere to go! All paths are closed to me, and all worlds locked before me!” As Yodfat and Lorian described their piece: “A town square, a revolving stage, several paper figures, a single puppeteer and additional voices. The dybbuk a ghost that haunts or quite literally enters another’s body, serves this work as an image for the Jewish people’s quest for a single land-center and the end of exile: a land without people for a people without a land.”<sup>31</sup> The artists connected the play with Zionist history, dealing metaphorically with identity transformation for the sake of survival. The piece was, according to the artists, a response to contemporary political discourse in Israel.

Yodfat and Lorian’s work, which used techniques of collage, pasting visual and vocal images to tell the story of Zionism as a dybbuk from the 1903 Kishinev pogrom until the 2014 Gaza War, foregrounded an old turntable, with its repetitive and circular movements, to create a symbolic stage signifying the circularity of history. Cut-paper figures of Israeli politicians and Habima Theater actors from *The Dybbuk*’s 1922 performance came together to tell the story. The performance included a soundtrack based on a recording of *The Dybbuk* at Habima Theater, political discourse, and Ansky’s text, as well as sound effects and digital manipulations of texts, narratives, and sounds. The performance, according to the artists, was inspired by the beggars’ dance in *The Dybbuk* and presented “a schizophrenic demons’ dance as an actual stage response to the present political atmosphere, in which myriad dybbuks have gripped Israeli society. The work . . . tell[s] the story of Zionism as a dybbuk.”<sup>32</sup>

### Dayn kol iz mir zis (Your Voice Is Sweet for Me)

The tour continued back to the underground room, where two avant-garde Israeli musicians, Victoria Hanna and Noam Enbar, waited for the audience. The artists were seated one in front of the other, with a table in the middle. On one side, Noam was playing the zither and singing in Yiddish and Hebrew, while, on the other, Victoria also sang in both languages. Their performance incorporated sonoric aspects of the two languages, their musicality and emotions, as well as the historical tensions between the languages and between the two lovers, in a romantic and darkly subversive cabaret, in which the performers attempted to learn and understand the Yiddish text through its Hebrew translation, working with the language’s materiality, and

repeating vocals and consonants. Hanna and Enbar deconstructed the content of the dialogue between Khonen and Leah through their vocal work. In this way, Hanna and Enbar's performance reflected their continued distance from the language and the difficulties of bringing *The Dybbuk* back as a background soundtrack to the history of Israeli theater, whether in the margins or in the basement of Jerusalem's former leprosarium.

### *Der dibek* (1937–2015)

If *The Dybbuk* is a territory and the Hansen House a possessed body, the attic is the place of the dream, the subconscious, the nightmare. The attic was the gothic venue where a twenty-minute-long reedited version of the Polish-Yiddish film *Der dibek* (1937) was screened. Adi Kaplan and Shahar Carmel not only reedited the film, but also replaced the original music composed by Henekh Kon and the cantorial singing of Gershon Sirota. The new score, performed live by the Jerusalem Young Symphonic Orchestra and conducted by Michael Klinghoffer, was an adapted version of "Vltva" (The Moldau), the second symphonic poem of *Má vlast* (My Homeland), composed by Czech composer Bedřich Smetana in the 1870s.<sup>33</sup>

Kaplan and Carmel are independent Israeli visual artists who work as painters and illustrators in Tel Aviv. Their work also includes a series of fictitious films, "Einstein at the Hebrew University" (2004), "The Golem" (2006), and "Heim" (2014), all made from found footage, in which the artists revisit different aspects of Israeli historiography and politics. Kaplan and Carmel don't know Yiddish, but they were invited by the Sala-Manca Group to create a film about An-sky's *Dybbuk* from their own references and associations.

Kaplan and Carmel's version of the 1937 film kept most of the original text, which was in Yiddish with Hebrew and English subtitles, but because the artists did not have the means to apply the technique of reversibility (the separation of tracks of sound) to the film, some parts of the sound were forcibly silenced, leaving only the Hebrew and English subtitles. Yiddish, however, remained the living language of the film in most of the dialogue. Kaplan and Carmel's *Dybbuk* was a Yiddish film reedited by non-Yiddish speakers for an audience that comprised mostly non-Yiddish speakers—a postvernacular Yiddish film, in which Yiddish had a symbolic dimension as

well as its linguistic function. As Jeffrey Shandler defines it: “The term *post-vernacular* relates to Yiddish in a manner that both is other than its use as a language of daily life and is responsive to the language having once been a widely used Jewish vernacular. . . . In the postvernacular mode the language’s secondary, symbolic level of meaning is always privileged over its primary level.”<sup>34</sup> Kaplan and Carmel also made important changes to the original film as a result of the length limitations established by the curators for all works in the festival, their own artistic perspective, the historical, political, and social conditions at the time of production, and budget constraints. They took out many of Waszyński’s additions to An-sky’s original play. For example, the first twenty-five minutes of Waszyński’s film, devoted to Nissen and Sender’s friendship and to the oath between them, were completely erased, as were most of Waszyński’s additions of elements from Jewish tradition and folklore that don’t appear in the original play (e.g., cantorial singing in the synagogue, blessings, a funeral procession, Sabbath meals, superstitions, and songs).

The story about the bride and groom’s tombstone in the middle of the shtetl, which has an important symbolic place in both An-sky’s play and the 1937 film, is missing as well. But the most important change in Kaplan and Carmel’s version comes at the end of the exorcism ceremony: Leah does not die. Instead, she reclaims her place in this world, defining her body as her/his last possible refuge. Leah-Dybbuk’s argument from the third act was moved to the last scene of the film (done with no possible way to synchronize image and voice): “I do not fear your oaths! There is no more exalted height than my present refuge!” In Kaplan and Carmel’s film, Leah rejects entering the archive.

The character of Leah in this Israeli revisitation of the canonical film (in which Leah was played by the Polish-born actress Lili Lilitana) could not have been conceived of without reference to Hanna Rovina’s portrayal of Leah in Habima’s version of *The Dybbuk*. The image of Leah performed by Rovina, argues theater scholar Dorit Yerushalmi, “became a national-Zionist myth. . . . She symbolizes the Land and the Nation, and they are equivalent to her.”<sup>35</sup> If Leah/Rovina is the mother of the nation, then in Kaplan and Carmel’s film Leah/Lilitana becomes the mother of exile. “In the absence of any other way to resist the forces of the hegemonic power structure, the dybbuk allowed for the expression of such resistance,” writes Rachel Elior.<sup>36</sup> Leah/Lilitana becomes in this film a *lieu de protest* instead a *lieu de mémoire* (site of memory).

In Kaplan and Carmel's film, Leah/Liliana represents the irresistible myth of the Jewish exile, a posthuman body, issuing from the celluloid to digitally reclaim her body, her love, her language, and her voice. With all the pathos in the sonic background of "The Moldau" and its reference to the melody of "Hativkah," the Israeli national anthem, Leah/Liliana deconstructs Leah/Rovina's Zionist myth. Leah/Liliana refuses to perform her death in exchange for any ideal, for any love, without resigning it: "There is no more exalted height than my present refuge!" repeats Leah with Khonen's voice, and we don't know who possesses whom anymore.

I read this new version of Waszyński's film as a contemporary practice of "intermundane collaboration," following Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut's research on collaborations that "enroll, enlist, and manage deadness, not from the grave itself, but from another dead space: the recording studio."<sup>37</sup> Stanyek and Piekut provide conceptual tools for researching intermundane collaborations in music, its economy, and its ethics. They consider the 1932 recording of Enrico Caruso's "Vesti la giubba" (On with the motley) as the first joint recording ever of a dead performer (who had passed away eleven years before this recording session) with live musicians. They conclude their research with a case study of Natalie Cole and Nat King Cole's 1991 recording of "Unforgettable," completed twenty-six years after Nat King Cole's death. Of her experience of singing with her dead father, Natalie Cole said she felt "as if he was more communicating with me, that he was kind of leading me in all the right things. And we were kind of holding hands."<sup>38</sup> Jonathan Sterne argues that sound recordings have the capacity to "preserve the bodies of the dead so that they could continue to perform a social function after life."<sup>39</sup> Stanyek and Piekut affirm: "Through recording itself, these live persons sign on to future networks where they will play a decidedly different role. They are the becoming dead."<sup>40</sup>

Intermundane collaborations are a popular phenomenon among Israeli musicians. Kobi Oz, Yehuda Poliker, and Ilana Eliya are among those who have incorporated the archival voices of their parents and grandparents into their recordings. Kobi Oz's 2009 album *Mizmorei Nevukhim* (Psalms of the Perplexed, a pun on Maimonides' twelfth-century *Moreh Nevukhim* [Guide for the Perplexed]), consists of remixes with religious texts. Edwin Seroussi has written about this phenomenon and defined it as a kind of cyclical return to the soundscape of the past. It is, affirms Seroussi, "a strategy to subvert both the secular and colonial Zionism that attempted to marginalize the religious-oriented culture of Mizrahi Jews" (as in the case of



Oz), and “a tactic that allows the regeneration of the contemporary Israeli soundscape through the sentiment of nostalgia using a parent’s voice” (as in the case of Poliker). Nostalgia, argues Seroussi, is “an escape from the present time and/or place . . . [as] a reactionary political force.”<sup>41</sup> Unlike Oz or Poliker, who worked with archival material from their own families, Kaplan and Carmel use nonfamilial recorded and filmed bodies for their *Dybbuk* project. The film comes alive again not as an extinct dinosaur or as *lieu de mémoire*, but as an extraordinary act of sonic resistance, a metaphorical and intellectual act of sonic possession.

The use of Smetana’s “Moldau” as the score of Kaplan and Carmel’s *Der dibek* is a clear reference to Israel’s national anthem, sounding like it but also different, reminiscent of it without being it, creating a liminal sonic soundscape that cannot be defined in terms of place or ideology. “The Moldau” is a sonic manipulation capable of stressing the connections and the interferences among different worlds and traditions: European Romanticism and the nationalism inherent in Smetana’s *Má vlast*, the Zionist “Hatikvah,” and the east European Jewish dybbuk.

The journey into the origin of or inspiration for the melody of “Hatikvah” has generated much scholarly literature on the grassroots energies that shaped this song from its initial writing until its legislation as the Israeli national anthem, which only happened in 2004, as discussed in a study by Seroussi.<sup>42</sup> As Seroussi discusses, “Hatikvah” joined together in contrafact Naphtali Herz Imber’s nineteenth-century poem “Tikvatenu” (Our Hope) with a preexisting folk melody, for which the words were replaced with those of the poem. According to Seroussi, Imber’s inspiration seems to have been the news of the founding of the Jewish settlement Petah Tikvah (Gate of Hope) in Palestine. Among other possible inspirations for Imber’s text, Seroussi refers to its intercultural connection with the patriotic song “Mazurek Dąbrowskiego,” which was written in 1797 by Józef Wybicki and was modified and made the national anthem of the Republic of Poland in 1926. It includes the line “Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła” (Poland is not yet lost), similar to the “Our hope is not yet lost” of Imber’s poem.

“Hatikvah” was set to music by Samuel Cohen in 1887, who borrowed it from the Moldavian-Romanian song “Carul cu Boi” (Cart with Oxen). This song was a variant of a melodic pattern circulating among Jews and non-Jews alike. Many scholars and musicologists have looked for the origins of the melody in Spanish, Polish, Czech, Romanian, Ukrainian, and Armenian sources, and even in Jewish liturgy. Other, more accurate, accounts attribute the origins to a folk melody from northeast Italy known as “La

Mantovana.” But the version that attracted Kaplan and Carmel was the one that relates the first melodic phrase of “Hatikvah” to the first main theme of “The Moldau,” which Smetana composed between 1874 and 1879, against the backdrop of the ideals of nationalistic music that characterized the late nineteenth century.

Although there is no direct relation between “The Moldau” and “Hatikvah,” the similar musical patterns can provoke a powerful and confusing effect in the unexpected association created by Kaplan and Carmel, who used Smetana’s piece to connect the canonic Jewish film to the homeland of others, both musically and ideologically. What makes the connection stronger is the fact that “The Moldau” was played as a subversive substitute for “Hatikvah” by the Hebrew section of the Palestine Broadcasting Service during the British Mandate of Palestine (1920–48), when it was forbidden to perform any national anthem other than the British one. This double agency, told by the guides to the audience, makes the music of this film an act of sonic contestation, an act of heresy, a proposal for a hybrid condition and a transnational body.

This film was created without permissions: not from the owner of the rights, not from the Yiddish actors, and not from the director of the original *Dybbuk* film. Carmel and Kaplan approached the film as a copyleft archive that belongs to the folk, although it is, of course, a copyrighted film. They added a new soundscape to a specific and symbolic cultural body. They perhaps broke the law in an illegal act of appropriation, but it was also an act of poetic resignification. They erased many layers in the film and, through their sonic intervention, added new meanings to *The Dybbuk*, and especially to Leah, who doesn’t want to die, neither for love nor for any ideology. In the spirit of An-sky, Carmel and Kaplan presented the film not as a museological piece, but as a brilliant, critical piece of contemporary art.

Kaplan and Carmel’s project was developed later in collaboration with the Sala-Manca Group into an hour-long version in which not only the music but the entire soundtrack was erased and replaced. All the voices were dubbed live in Yiddish by Lea Mauas and me, and all sound effects were performed live by Kaplan, Carmel, and Ashelen Rotman Mauas.<sup>43</sup>

## Tantz! (Dance!)

As in a rite de passage, the last section is the reunification with the community. This is exactly what happened in the last piece of the festival, where the



Fig. 11. Carmel Bar as the bride. Voice of the Word Festival, Jerusalem, 2014.  
Photo courtesy of Dima Nof.

three groups of visitors came back together again. Carmel Bar and Yaara Bar invited the visitors to dance at a wedding where there was no bridegroom; it was a contemporary beggars' dance at a disco party of a nonwedding of a solitary bride. The bride served the wedding cake topped by the figure of a bride alone. The act of communal eating that followed could be interpreted symbolically as the eating of the bride's body, or the consumption of the bride's chance for love, or perhaps as an alternative conception in which the union of bride and bridegroom is no longer an aim in our contemporary society, in which Leah celebrates her independence.

## LAST WORDS

*The Dybbuk* at the Voice of the Word Festival was not only an adaptation of An-sky's text. It was inspired by the canonical play, making use of fragments of it, as well as academic and artistic research done on dybbuks, An-sky's *Dybbuk*, and the concept of possession. The power of the short performances lay in

their interrelationship. As separate performances, the works were in a state of potentiality, to be developed further (and some of them, like Kaplan and Carmel's film project, would be). But it was the event, the whole experience, and the particular approach not only to An-sky's *Dybbuk* but also to how scholarship and art can meet, enrich, and develop each other, that made this event a unique experience and offered a particular approach to the play.

From my point of view as a curator and scholar, the event opened new paths. New scholarship developed out of this project, which I include in the syllabus of my Hebrew University course on *The Dybbuk*. Our curatorial approach to *The Dybbuk* and its performance as territory, and the idea of intermundane collaboration as an approach to creative and scholarly work with archival material, affected not only the way I approach the seminar on *The Dybbuk* and my artistic practice but also the way I teach and conduct research. In 2020, I asked my students to develop a site-specific project on *The Dybbuk* for the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University, including performances, guided tours, and paper presentations. The Mount Scopus campus includes a botanical garden and historical tombs in caves. There is a charged story in the landscape and in the building, a story of disputes and a discourse on possession and dispossession. This plan had to be changed because of COVID-19 and the new limitations on campus activities. Suddenly the internet became the territory, the virtual destination in which the students developed their projects. On digital platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Instagram, students created projects related to COVID-19 as *dybbuk* (in Hebrew, קוביד [COVID] is דיבוק [Dybbuk] in reverse), developed sound performances that embed An-sky's text with the urgent topics of our times (gender issues, politics, Instagram filters, and the banality of ghosted filters), and wrote their own new texts based on the play. In these unexpected times, An-sky's *Dybbuk* extends its territoriality to the virtual world, perhaps the ultimate site where the impossible dream to meet the past and the dead becomes possible.

## Notes

1. Tawfiq Canaan was born in 1882 in Beit Jala to a Christian Arab family. Canaan attended Schneller High School in Jerusalem, where he received a German education. In 1899, he and his family moved to Beirut, where he studied medicine at the Syrian Protestant College. From 1919 until 1948, Canaan served as the medi-

cal director of the Jesus Hilfe Leprosarium, where he conducted groundbreaking research in treating Hansen's disease. At the same time, Canaan was one of the fathers of Palestinian folklore studies and researched the living Palestinian heritage. Since 2012, Hansen House, a center for art, design, and technology, has existed in the compound of the Jesus Hilfe Leprosarium, which during its years of operation was an autonomous paradise for lepers. In its basement, Hansen House hosts the Mamuta Art and Research Center, run by the Sala-Manca Group. Hansen House consists of art galleries and a historical exhibition about the leprosarium on the main floor and, on the second floor, the master's degree programs in urban design, design and technology, and conceptual design of the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, products of Bezalel founder Boris Schatz's partially fulfilled dream.

2. See Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), 2.

3. For this translation of the curatorial text, see "The Voice of the Word 14—Performance and Music Festival, 2014," Mamuta Project (website), last updated 2014, <https://mamuta.org/portfolio/the-voice-of-the-word-14-performance-and-music-festival/>

4. "The Voice of the Word 14."

5. These previous projects included, e.g., *Albatros 2003 oder 2003 Albatros and Elephants in the Nights of Metula*, which were both presented in Yiddish with Hebrew translation at the Metula Poetry Festival (in 2003 and 2005, respectively) and were later presented at the Jerusalem Film Festival as well as other international venues such as Eyebeam (New York), Stadtplatz (Graz, Austria), and the Neighbours festival (Warsaw).

6. The festival offerings included American composer Solomon Epstein's *The Dybbuk: An Opera in Yiddish*, with direction by Rachel Michaeli and libretto adapted from S. An-sky's play.

7. The festival did not approach the Yiddish National Authority or Beit Shalom Aleichem for economic support.

8. On the repressed status of Yiddish in Israel and on the Israeli stage, see Rachel Rojanski, *Yiddish in Israel: A History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020); Diego Rotman, "Language Politics, Memory, and Discourse: Yiddish Theatre in Israel (1948-2003)," *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 6, no. 2: Jewish Theatres (2020), 115–45.

9. "The Voice of the Word 14."

10. See Gilles Rozier, *Moyshe Broderzon: Un écrivain yiddish d'avant-garde* (Saint-Denis, France: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1999).

11. פֿאַרגייט אַ וועלט אין שוואַרצן שימער, / צום מבול נעמט אַן עק – / עס לייגן קלאַפֿטער יונגע שוימער, / און זוכן ווי אַ בערג! / דער חלל איז נאָך אַלץ פֿאַרכמאַרעט, / עס איז נאָך ווייט פֿון רו . . . / אַן תּיבֿה צו דעם באַרג אַראַראַט / מיר שווימען שווימען צו!

Shimon Dzigan, *Dizgan-albom in vort un bild: 35-yor stsenishe tetykayt fun Shimen Dzigan* (Tel Aviv: Strud, 1964), n.p.

12. For further discussion of this topic, see Diego Rotman, "Performing Homeland in Post-Vernacular Times: Dzigan and Shumacher's Yiddish Theater after the Holocaust," in *Spiritual Homelands: The Cultural Experience of Exile, Place and Displacement among Jews and Others*, ed. Asher D. Biemann, Richard I. Cohen, and Sarah E. Wobick-Segev (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 81–98.

13. See Lea Mauas, Michelle MacQueen, and Diego Rotman, eds., *Possession and Dispossession: Performing Jewish Ethnography in Jerusalem* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), originally published as the Hebrew-language *The Ethnographic Department of the Museum of the Contemporary* in 2017.

14. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

15. Rod Edmond, *Leprosy and Empire: A Medical and Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 3.

16. Diego Rotman, "The Fragile Boundaries of Paradise: The Paradise Inn Resort at the Former Jerusalem Leprosarium," in *Borderlines: Essays on Mapping and the Logic of Place*, ed. Edwin Seroussi and Ruthie Abeliovich (Warsaw: Sciendo, 2019), 160–73.

17. Rachel Elior and Yoram Bilu, "Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Spirit Possessions and Demons, Angels and Maggidim" in Mauas, MacQueen, and Rotman, *Possession and Dispossession*, 75.

18. Ruthie Abeliovich, "Reconsidering Arnold Van Gennep's *Les rites de passage* from the Perspective of 'Performance Studies,'" *Journal of Classical Sociology* 18, no. 4 (2019): 285.

19. Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).

20. See Diego Rotman, "Dancing with the Dead: Possession and Nationalism in the Old-New Film *Der Dybbuk*, 1937–2017," in Mauas, MacQueen, and Rotman, *Possession and Dispossession*, 122–58.

21. Introductory text adapted from Elior and Yoram Bilu, "Between Worlds," 75.

22. Eppie Bat-Ilan, "Why Did the Soul Descend?," *Erev-Rav*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.erev-rav.com/archives/34305>

23. Translation from Joachim Neugroschel, ed., *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 4.

24. See John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

25. Josef Sprinzak, "The Sparkle," in "The Voice of the Word 14—Performance and Music Festival, 2014." Printed Program.

26. See Neugroschel, 32–33.

27. Gabriella Safran, *Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 186–224.

28. See Vladislav Ivanov, introduction to "S. An-sky, *Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk): Censored Variant*," trans. Anne Eakin Moss, in *The Worlds of S. An-sky: A*

*Russian Jewish Intellectual at the Turn of the Century*, ed. Gabriella Safran and Steven J. Zipperstein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 361–435.

29. For immersive theater, see, e.g., Gareth White, “On Immersive Theatre,” *Theatre Research International* 37, no. 3 (2012): 221–35.

30. Eliezer Niborski and his partner, Miriam Thrin, are Yiddish teachers and cultural activists. They speak Yiddish at home with their children. Eliezer is also the son of Yitzhok Niborski, one of the most important Yiddish teachers in Paris.

31. The text is taken from the artists’ website and was written after the festival. See “Between Two World (The Dybbuk),” Li Lorian (website), 2014 performance, <https://www.lilorian.com/Between-Two-Worlds-1>

32. “Between Two World (The Dybbuk).”

33. Kaplan and Carmel’s twenty-minute version was screened in November 2015. Two years later, in July 2017, a longer version of this new edition of Waszyński’s film, this time edited by the Sala-Manca Group, was screened and performed on the patio of the same leprosarium as part of the Jerusalem Film Festival. See Zehavit Stern, “Dubbing the Dead: *Der Dybbuk 1937–2017* at the Jerusalem YMCA Hall,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 63, no. 2 (2019): 158–66; Diego Rotman, “Dancing with the Dead: Possession and Nationalism in the Old-new Film *Der Dybbuk, 1937–2017*,” in Mauas, MacQueen, and Rotman, *Possession and Dispossession*, 121–58.

34. See Jeffrey Shandler, *Adventures in Yiddishland: Postvernacular Language & Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 22.

35. Dorit Yerushalmi, “Betsila shel Hanna Rovina,” *Zemanim* 99 (2007): 32.

36. Rachel Elior, *Dybbuks and Jewish Women in Social History, Mysticism and Folklore* (Jerusalem: Urim, 2014), 57.

37. Jason Stanyek and Benjamin Piekut, “Deadness: Technologies of the Inter-mundane,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 1 (2010): 27.

38. Stanyek and Piekut, 32.

39. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 292.

40. Stanyek and Piekut, “Deadness,” 33.

41. Edwin Seroussi, “Nostalgic Soundscapes: The Future of Israel’s Sonic Past,” *Israel Studies* 19, no. 2 (2014): 41, 43, 36.

42. Edwin Seroussi, “Hatikvah: Conceptions, Receptions and Reflections,” *Yuval Online* 9 (2015), <https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/yuval/22482>

43. The new version of the piece was performed at the Jerusalem Film Festival in 2017, at the Israel Festival in 2018, in Timisoara, Romania (a European Capital of Culture) in 2018, and Kaunas, Lithuania (a European Capital of Culture) in 2022. See Stern, “Dubbing the Dead”; Diego Rotman, “Dancing with the Dead.” A new cameral version with the music and live performance of Yarden Erez was performed at the Jerusalem and Tel Aviv Cinematheques in April 2022 and January 2023.

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