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FRIDAY, JUNE 1, 2012
Review: 'A Dybbuk'



Rachel Kitson and Robert DaPonte in Ego Po Classic Theater's production of "A Dybbuk." Photo by Ian Paul Guzzone.

for the plot is a bit plodding — and Savadove's unsteady timing in the early scenes doesn't help, but when the play begins to swing quickly into different mood shifts and then into mysticism, the production gains steadily in intensity. Overall, *A Dybbuk* is a highly stylized form of entertainment with its super-faithful Yeshiva boys, its observant women and its storybook Jewish sensibility.

Essentially, it's a bizarre love story. A seemingly wayward Yeshiva student (Robert DaPonte) is overtaken by his longing for the daughter of a rich and learned man (Brian McCann). But the student dies, and his soul overtakes her when she is a bride.

The second act is *The Exorcist* kosher-style, in the home of a rabbi (David Blatt, in a thoughtful performance) who must rid the bride of her dybbuk. This half is pure Kushner — lyrical and fierce, emotional and with an intense mysticism; in odd but clear ways, *A Dybbuk* mirrors his triumphant two-play *Angels in America*, whose first part unfolds a few blocks away at the Wilma Theater.

The bride in *A Dybbuk* is played by Rachel Kitson, who at one point shakes and shimmies and does everything but turn her head 360 degrees, but she convinced me that she would if she could. She speaks in character and also as DaPonte's dybbuk, who gives those lines in tandem — an eerie and rich effect.

The most impressive stars of the show are costume designer Katherine Fritz, who dresses 10 cast members in the roles of about 40, and the emphatic actor Ed Swidey, who plays a messenger, and through most of the plot we're not sure for whom. In a play about souls, Swidey's character ends up as the soul of the play, and in his forceful performance of a man we can't figure out, Swidey himself is the soul of the cast.

Contact staff writer Howard Shapiro at 215-854-5727, hshapiro@phillynews.com, or #phillstage on Twitter.

By Howard Shapiro
 INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The frightening Jewish folkloric notion of a malevolent "dybbuk" draws that name from the Hebrew word for *attachment* — which is exactly what a dybbuk does. It's the lost soul of a dead person that for various reasons is relegated to wander, and can attach itself to a living person.

The classic story of *The Dybbuk* was written in Russian in 1917 by S. Ansky, and has had its own transformations. *A Dybbuk*, a 1995 stage version by celebrated American playwright Tony Kushner, has never been produced professionally here until now.

It's being done by Ego Po Classic Theater in a way that salutes the story — the production bows to the melodrama inherent in this tale (or any tale) of a dybbuk but also offers a sincere reflection on its place in Jewish culture.

No one flinches when one woman blurts in a gentle warning that the Torah is powerful because it is "made of black and of fire" or when a learned rabbi tells the dybbuk: "I will with my outstretched arm hurl anathema toward you." This is Ukraine, in a time of pogroms that killed Jews and destroyed villages, when people clung to folktales with one hand, and to their demanding religious practice with the other.

Ego Po's artistic director, Lane Savadove, directs *A Dybbuk*, the final show in the company's season of Jewish-themed theater, on Matheus Fiuza's set of several locations, draped on two sides by a handsome curtain of fabrics made to look like large prayer shawls. Kushner's setup

ABOUT PHILLY STAGE

Howard Shapiro reviews and writes about theater for The Inquirer, and has been on staff since 1970. He's had many posts at the newspaper, including cultural arts editor and editor of the Weekend section. He's twice been the editor of the Travel section, for which he writes frequently. He began writing theater criticism a decade ago, and has been a Nieman Fellow at Harvard, an Internews fellow in Greece, and a fellow at the National Endowment for the Arts' Journalism Institute in Theater and Musical Theater, where Robert Brustein was among his mentors. He teaches arts criticism and travel writing at Temple University, and is Broadway critic for the NPR-affiliated stations of the Classical Network.



Toby Zinman's night job since 2006 is theater critic for the Inquirer. She also is a contributing writer for Variety and American Theatre magazine. Her day job: Prize-winning prof at UArts, author of four books about four playwrights (Rabe, McNally, Miller, Albee), and doer of scholarly deeds (winner of five NEH grants, Fulbright lecturer at Tel Aviv University, visiting professor in China). Her 'weekend' job as a travel writer provides adventure: dogsledding in the Yukon, ziplining in Belize, walking coast-to-coast across England, and cowboying in the Australian Outback.

Wendy Rosenfield has

been writing freelance features and theater reviews for The Inquirer since 2006. She was theater critic for the Philadelphia Weekly from 1995 to 2001, after which she enjoyed a five-year baby-raising sabbatical. She also writes the ArtsJournal blog Drama Queen. She was 2009 and 2010 Guest Critic for the Kennedy Center American College Theater Festival's Region II National Critics Institute, a 2008 NEA Fellow in Theater and Musical Theater, and a participant in the Bennington Writer's Workshop. A graduate of Bennington College, she is inching toward a Master's degree in Liberal Arts at the University of Pennsylvania. She also is a fiction writer, was proofreader to a swami, publications editor for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and a Brownie Girl Scout troop leader.

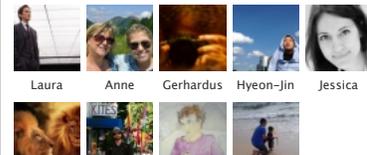


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A Dybbuk: Presented by Ego Po Classic Theater at Prince Music Theater, 1412 Chestnut St., through June 17. Tickets: \$20-\$50. Information: 1-800-595-4849 or www.eqopo.org.

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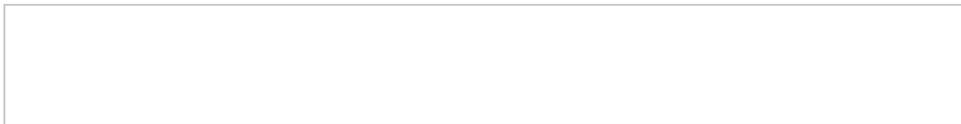
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