



News

Home : News : Philadelphia Stage

Artist in Spotlight

Association for Jewish Theatre

Book Reviews

Boston Stage

Call for Proposals

Children & Young people's Theatre

Conferences & Symposiums

David's Front Line

Editor's Notes

Ellen Schiff's Shelf

European

Association for Jewish Culture - EAJC

Festival in Spotlight

Film Reviews

First Curtain

From Page to Stage

Global Arts Initiative

Heritage

Holocaust Theatre

Holocaust Theatre On line Collection (HTC)

Info Center

Interviews

Introduction to Jewish Theatre

Israeli Theatre Worldwide

Jewish Intercultural Performance Group

Kaleidoscope on New York Stage

Magazine Reviews

Merchant of Venice

Michael's Corner

New Publications

Open Space

Open Stage - Intercultural

"Don't ask me what happened. It's best not to know!": A DYBBUK, or Between two worlds

By Henrik Eger

HENRIK EGER, Professor of English and Communication, DCCC, Media, PA, USA. Bilingual playwright, born and raised in Germany, studied in the U.S. Ph.D. in English from the University of Illinois at Chicago (1991). German Translator of Martin Luther King's Nobel Peace Prize mail. Pr director: Multilingual International Shakespeare, London. Instructor of poetry writing workshops at Kerman University, Iran, and drama writing for Indian writers. Philadelphia Judge: Barrymore Theatre Awards. Member: Board of Directors, Theatre Ariel, the Jewish theatre of Philadelphia Philadelphia correspondent. Producer-writer: AAJT—The World's Largest Secular Synagogue and Open University www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBGWFJIZzgg.

PUBLICATIONS: 6 entries in *Literary Exile in the Twentieth Century* (Greenwood Press), including *Else Lasker-Schüler and Stefan Zweig; Write Rewrite: Surrealistic Stories and Sketches, Dramas, and Dialogues* (Goethe Institute, Bombay); conference presentations; articles in various outlets including the *Jewish Forward*, *New York*; *Philadelphia Jewish Voice* and the *Broad Street Review*, Philadelphia. Books include *The Image of "The German" in Selected English Short Stories, 1809-1974; Distortions: A Socio-Literary Study of Some Influences on the Production and Perpetuation of the "the German" in English Literature; Who is Afraid of Noam Chomsky?; Iran Iran: Secret Poetry; Dissertation (UIC 1991): Writer Perception, Writing Projection: The Influence of Personality, Ideology, and Gender on Letters of Recommendation.*

PLAYS include: (1) *Metronome Ticking*, docudrama, performed by the son of a Third Reich War Correspondent and the son of a Jewish Dachau Buchenwald concentration camp survivor who became friends, performed in Germany, Austria, and the U.S. (2) *Mendelssohn Does Not Live Here Anymore*, based on Third Reich sources, showing anti-Semitism at work (3) *The Girl on the Other Side of the Fence*, based on two real people, and Karl Koehler, a German mailman who delivered packages around the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. (4) *Alan Lost in Boston*, historical play, based on Hawthorne's anti-Semitism, Mark Twain's impassioned defense, and the experiences of a Jew who challenges a Puritan minister in 1643.

CONTACT: henrikeger@gmail.com , www.henrikeger.com

A DYBBUK by S. Ansky, translated from Yiddish by Joachim Neugroschel, adapted by Tony Kushner, performed by the EgoPo Classic Theater, Philadelphia

If museums and libraries are legs on which we stand culturally, theatres are lungs through which we breathe.

The United States, one of the world's richest and most powerful countries, is experiencing such bad economic times that many cultural institutions are struggling. Worse, to the chagrin of many members of the theatre world, more and more established and respected theatres are forced to close doors for good, including the very active and innovative **Arizona Jewish Theatre** and the much talked-about **Jewish Theatre of San Francisco**.

JEWISH THEATRE RENNAISSANCE, IN SPITE OF THE ECONOMY

Surprisingly, Jewish theatre in Philadelphia is thriving as never before with many of the main companies producing Jewish drama or plays by Jewish authors, including the **Arden** with **THE WHIPPING MAN**, taking on the touchy subject of a Jewish slave owner during the Civil War; **Theatre A STRANGER IN OUR MIDST**, a collection of 11 new 10-minute Jewish-themed plays; the **Interact Theatre** with **PALESTINE** by Najla Saïd, of Edward Saïd, famous scholar and cultural critic; the Lantern Theater with **NEW JERUSALEM: THE INTERROGATION OF BARUCH DE SPINOZA**; TALMUD TORAH CONGREGATION: AMSTERDAM, JULY 27, 1656; the **Quintessence Theatre** Group with an extremely confrontational presentation of **Shylock** and the non-Jewish community in **THE MERCHANT OF VENICE**; and the **Wilma Theatre** with one of the most exquisite, yet gut-wrenching plays of the season with **OUR CLASS**, set in Poland. Most performances were sold out, indicating a tremendous interest in Jewish Theatre—a Renaissance unprecedented in Philadelphia theatre history.

However, no theatre in Philadelphia went as far as the **EgoPo Classic Theater**. Its artistic director **Lane Savadove**, Head of Acting/Directing at Temple University, who has taught and directed both in the US and abroad, produced a whole season of fully staged Jewish plays, ranging from masterpieces like **THE GOLEM**, via the **DIARY OF ANNE FRANK**, to Peter Weiss' **INVESTIGATION**. The latest masterpiece from this Jewish Renaissance came in the form of a powerful production of **A DYBBUK** by **Tony Kushner**, based on **S. Ansky's THE DYBBUK** and **Joachim Neugroschel's** translation.

LEAVING HER BODY AND HER MIND: EGOPO CLASSIC THEATRE EXPANDING BOUNDARIES

The EgoPo production of **THE DYBBUK** hit a raw nerve with a number of people in the audience, some of whom were deeply moved when they heard Chonen [Khonen], the young scholar-turned-into-a-Dybbuk, plead with a direct request, "Say Kaddish for me, I am dying." As soon as the wish was fulfilled and the Kaddish was recited on stage—"Yisgadal ve-yiskadash shmey rabo b'olma eli b'ra chirusey"—a few members of the audience began to cry.

[Junction](#) joined in the Aramaic prayer for the dead—a moment so moving that I, as a non-Jewish theatre critic, had trouble fighting tears.

[Philadelphia Stage](#) [Play Reviews](#) [Production Point](#) [Productions on Tour](#) [Recommended Website](#) [Research & Collections](#)

Savadove, known for his numerous innovative productions, described a similar symbiosis between his theatre and the audience when he recalls recent public Seder which followed the EgoPo production of THE GOLEM: "We were rewarded by an amazing turn-out and a wonderfully open-minded audience. We fulfilled our goal of getting theatre to expand beyond the boundaries of the stage. Most importantly, we created our own community for our audience. It was incredible to watch a room full of strangers become a room full of friends. I enjoyed watching introductions followed by laughter of course, more wine. We ate together, broke Matzo together, and created a special place for a few hours in which we could discuss spirituality and culture. What more could a theater want!?"

The latest production of the EgoPo season, A DYBBUK, featured many unexpected moments throughout, including this quietly spectacular scene at the end of the play. Chonen, the dybbuk, deeply in love with Leah, literally created magic when he took her soul from her lips and into his cupped hand. He saw it shining red and flickering, a small sun, a burning orb—before she let go—allowing him to inhale her soul.

[Revisiting the Past](#) **ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT PLAYS IN CLASSIC JEWISH THEATRE: A SYNOPSIS**

[Solo Performance - Online Catalogue](#) [Spanish](#)

THE DYBBUK, the play that Kushner calls the "cornerstone of 20th-Century Jewish theater" [9], takes place in a 19th century Polish village where a wedding celebration is interrupted by the supernatural presence of the brilliant CHONEN, a young scholar and the intended bridegroom. Chonen

[Spanish / Español : Artículos](#)

to dark spiritual forces and, as a result, dies young after he has been rejected by the bride's father.

[Spanish / Español : Noticias y actividades culturales](#)

He then inhabits the body and the mind of LEAH, the young bride whom he is not allowed to marry because SENDER, her greedy father, breaks his promise in return for the money that comes with a wealthy new suitor. A Rabbinical court, under the leadership of RABBI AZRIEL, punishes the father and also performs an exorcism to free Leah from the dybbuk that has possessed her.

[Story Theatre](#) [Success Story](#)

YESHIVA STUDENTS, VILLAGERS, BEGGARS, AND WOMEN take us into an isolated little shtetl in Eastern Europe where old traditions and rituals are kept alive. Chonen's feverish exploration of the secrets of the Kabbalah. The upcoming wedding centers on the murder of a young bride and bridegroom in the Cossacks in a massacre that sets off waves of anti-Jewish pogroms that would follow over the centuries, ruthlessly eradicating Jewish population.

[The Arab- Israeli Melting Pot](#) [The Bible on Stage](#) [The European Research Center](#)

Leah, possessed by her lover's spirit, belts out his anger against her father and the wealthy bridegroom whom she did not want to marry. Under the wedding canopy, the wedding canopy, in front of the entire wedding party—unaware that Chonen's spirit has taken possession of her to defend her from an unwanted marriage—she hollers at the intended husband with a strange man's voice: "You are not my bridegroom!" Wild-eyed, she then screams the same male voice, "You buried me! But now I've come back to my beloved, and I'll never leave her again!" This moment leads to another frightful outburst when she roars into her father's face: "MURDERER!"

[The New York Scene](#) [The Next Generation](#)

Balancing the melodramatic but also tragic story of Leah and the dybbuk versus the Rabbi and the shtetl, a mysterious MESSENGER serves as a knowing Greek chorus and as a guide for the audience. Although a stranger in their midst, he has the ear of all major characters in the village. The inclusion of the role of the messenger was suggested to Ansky by Konstantin Stanislavsky, the famous Russian theatre director:

[Theatre and Physics](#)

"My play [. . .] is a realistic drama about mystics. Its only nonrealistic element is the Messenger, not Leah's dialogue or visions. I've deliberately imbued the Messenger with mystical features. Actually, he was not in my original version. It was Stanislavsky who advised or rather told me to do so and I thereby automatically broadened my overall conception, adding a higher level beyond the theme of the 'lovely and pleasant'." [1]

[Theatre in Spotlight](#)

LEAH, A JEWISH JULIET

[Upfront Europe](#)

Violence and humor blend in rapid succession, making us laugh one moment and, seconds later, finding our laughter frozen in our throats. For when we realize that the beggars are treating the young bride like a rag doll, thrown around and twirled around so badly that Fradde, her aunt and mother-ersatz, pleads: "Go rescue Leah, she's being danced to death." Within seconds, one hoary woman insists that she has not yet had her turn dancing with the bride, only to hear another wrinkled woman exclaim, "You're so old you've danced with every bride since Eve!"—one of the many moments where the audience at the Prince Music Theatre burst into laughter, even though at other times the audience seemed startled, astounded even in shock.

[What's Next ?](#)

Leah, out of breath from the violent dancing into which she was forced, utters, "My mouth's gone dry, they danced the spit out of me, their need overwhelming, everything flowed out of me, warmth and wetness, I dried, I felt airborne like an old tamarind husk on the wind."

[What's up in Australia ?](#)

In another dramatic scene, her older female companion, maternal friend, and chaperone Fradde (played with great dignity by **Leah Walton**, a former member of the Moscow Art Theatre School, and Barrymore-nominated actor), doing her best to protect her young charge, much like the nurse in ROMEO AND JULIET exclaims, "I'm still shaking from the fright, I tried to wake her, I thought she'd died. [. . .] She shouldn't fast except on her wedding day! It's like disappearing more and more, she's not sitting shiva, she's a bride."

[What's up in Europe ?](#)

[Yiddish Theatre](#)

[Save](#)

Full of suspicion, Leah's father asks, "Did she faint at her mother's grave?"—only to be told by Fradde that "it was another grave, unmarked, and we don't know what happened, [. . .] it's best not to know." Later on, when Leah wakes up, unaware of what is happening to her, she drowsily exclaims: "

[Print](#)

. . .? Oh Fradde. Fradde. I'm so tired, and horribly cold; cradle me. Every limb is heavy . . ."

[Email Page](#)

Soon after, tied down for an exorcism in front of the religious judges at the Rabbinical Court, the beautiful, young **Rachel Kitson** as Leah the bride shakes violently in response to the rabbis' attempt to drive the dybbuk out of her. Her body and the dybbuk inside her are so disturbed by the exorcism that her body convulses violently, uncontrollably.

[Post Comment](#)

That scene horrified me so much that it brought back memories of a young soldier. Inadvertently, I had witnessed his torture at the police headquarters in Tabriz, Iran, shortly before the mullahs took over. His body, exposed to incessant unbearable pain and suffering by police officers, turned him inside out of flesh, entirely without control of his muscles and nerves, leaving him convulsing uncontrollably—an inch away from death. Seeing Leah convulsing

same manner, both frightened and moved me, aware of the damage that human beings can inflict on each other, often in the name of religion

Yet, at the same time, and present throughout the play, the Romeo and Juliet allusion between the young couple comes through most strongly in the final scenes, with Leah and Chonen's voice deep inside her brain:

LEAH: "Your voice is like a violin on a summer's night, playing a melody I remember. Who are you?"

CHONEN'S VOICE: "I've forgotten. I can remember only if you remember me . . ."

LEAH: "I do. I remember. On summer nights I would open the window in my room, and there was always a low bright star that burned brave a made me cry with loneliness. And then someone in my dreams came at night. And he was that horizon light. Was that you?"

CHONEN'S VOICE: "Yes."

This profoundly moving scene led NEW YORK TIMES theatre critic Charles Isherwood to the conclusion that "the passion between Leah and Kho ultimately triumphs over the powers of the Rabbis—even over God's will."

CHONEN, THE HEBRAIC FAUST

"Before the curtain goes up to reveal the utter darkness, we hear something like a soft, mystical chanting in the distance:

Why, oh why,
Did the soul descend
From the highest height
To the deepest end?
The greatest fall
Contains the upward flight." [10]

Thus begins the Kushner-Neugroschel version of Ansky's DER DYBBUK.

Kushner would have loved the opening of A DYBBUK in the recent EgoPo production which shows Chonen reading from ancient Kabbalah tomes candlelight, semi-naked. In near darkness, Chonen then washes himself in a ritual bath and chants:

Why did the soul,
Oh tell me this,
Tumble from Heaven
To the Great Abyss?"

—all against the background of a world in which many senior rabbis were concerned that studying the Kabbalah without guidance and supervision lead to wrong practices and forbidden ways. **Robert DaPonte** as Chonen, looking like a disheveled, pale, young Everyman, transformed himself into an otherworldly Jewish Faust, who, alone and unsupervised, searched for the secrets of life and the beyond. He started with the Talmud, which he "deep and broad and marvelous enough, but with earth above and earth below."

Chonen, the ambitious rebbe, probed the Kabbalah and came to the conclusion, "You can't ever rise up with the Talmud. The Kabbalah . . . is done a way, Chonen, who dabbles in forbidden Kabbalistic secrets, acts almost like Goethe's "Sorcerer's Apprentice." Both Chonen and the apprentice have access to powerful information but did not realize that they did not possess the power to stop the consequences of their actions. Unlike the apprentice, saved by the sorcerer, the young obsessed scholar could not turn off his desires and dies in isolation, his soul turning into a dybbuk. In a way, 'he' appears to have drifted into the great beyond long before he actually dies." [2]

Following the alchemistic frenzy of the Middle Ages, in search of gold and the elixir of life, Chonen, the Hebraic Faust, wanted to forge gold so that it would be accepted by Leah's father. However, feverishly studying the Kabbalah day and night, hardly eating anything, he went where most people would not tread. In the process, full of conviction, he announces his discovery that God made sin, and sin should be valued: "We should not try to banish sin but to make sin holy. Like the goldsmith purifies his metal; like a farmer carefully divides wheat from chaff; we purify sin, in the crucibles of our souls, to purify sin and make sin holy."

Chonen even goes a step further and quietly, full of conviction, announces, "Satan is another side of God. And so Satan must be holy." Standing in for Mayer, the shamas, or caretaker in the Brinnitz synagogue where most of the action takes place, Chonen bends down to him and whispers: "The beautiful Song of Songs. What's it doing in the Bible?"

When the simple Mayer (played convincingly by the versatile **Josh Totoro** who took on numerous roles) begs him not to speak to him about sin, Chonen, obsessed with the eroticism of the Canticles, the Songs of Solomon, pays no attention to the resisting caretaker, almost gleefully announcing that this part of the Bible is "full of desire, it's dangerous to read, but it's there because, precisely because lust and desire are the most persistent sinners, the purifying flame of the Holiest of Holies, even lust and desire have a prayer."

And then Chonen, the Jewish Romeo, obsessed by his desire for Leah and his determination to fully understand the Kabbalah and the holy work of Judaism, launches into a fervid, frantic, feverish recitation of the erotic parts, climaxing with "under her shadow I delighted to sit, And her fruit to my tongue."

Transformed by his studies of the Kabbalah and his yearning for the young woman, Chonen, in full view of the audience, takes a ritual bath in which religious ablutions intermingle, fuse, harmonize—but also battle with a deeply seated, naked eroticism—at odds with the spiritual nature of the customary bath in Judaism by which impurity can be nullified through ritual immersion in water.

A short while later we see the same mikvah, this time with Leah, who undresses behind white bed sheets, going through the same transformation as the man to whom she was once promised in marriage by her father, Sender. Both Leah and Chonen glisten with a radiant yearning that has many a theatregoer think of them as the Jewish Romeo and Juliet. These pivotal bath scenes reveal more than they hide: "Chonen and Leah are supposedly purifying themselves as is required by their religion. In truth, however, they are bathing themselves in the sensuality of unformed and unutterable longings." [7]

THE MYSTERIOUS GO-BETWEEN, THE MISER, THE RABBI, AND THE ENTIRE SHTETL

Unlike Beckett's *GODOT*, where Godot never arrives, let alone sending an envoy, Kushner's physical, yet otherworldly messenger connects to a set of unnamed Godots. The popular **Ed Swidey** did not constrain himself to an entirely enigmatic nature; he carried himself like a one-man Greek chorus, both eloquent and dignified. Even as he took on different roles, Swidey's physical presence remained strong as he towered over everyone else in the shtetl.

In one striking scene in the last act, Swidey morphs from an Apollonian giant of a man, omniscient and ever present, into a dislimbed, mangled apparition, frozen in time. He acts as a go-between, connecting physical and spiritual worlds, guiding the audience from the quiet shtetl and its surroundings to the realm of the intangible, mystic, and even shocking.

The original author of *THE DYBBUK*, S. Ansky, presented the character of a Jewish miser in the role of Sender (a challenging role, played with great feeling by **Brian McCann** who avoided cultural stereotyping and caricature-like acting). Leah's father presented a wide range of characteristics: a village Shylock who lost his wife, most of his money, and finally, his daughter. He represents the archetypal image of a money-making Jew who makes deals even with the murderous Cossacks, nearly indenturing the whole shtetl and, in the end, almost owning God. The four yeshiva students, a Greek chorus, simultaneously satirize the antagonist and warn everybody about the ruthless miser:

Sender's got money, a crown for his head,
Rents homes to the living and graves to the dead,
Sells vodka to Cossacks, lends gold to the czar,
Knows just who his friends and his enemies are:
His friends are his debtors, all shabby and slim,
And his enemies: those who lend money to him! [. . .]
If the Holy One borrows, who isn't in debt?
We all are, and someday Reb Sender will own
All Brinnitz, the earth, and the Almighty's Throne!

Savadove created an environment in which only ten actors played numerous roles, including yeshiva students, beggars, poor women, wedding rabbis—changing clothing, acting styles, demeanors, voices, and philosophies, faster than the fluctuating, often tempestuous weather in Poland. The handsome and talented **Julian Cloud**; **Peter Andrew Danzig**, the new acting scholar at Villanova University, broody one moment and charming the next; the "wonderful" **Harrison Lampert**; and the affable and subtly gregarious **Josh Totora**).

One of the most sought-after stage and screen actors to represent archetypal Jews like Rabbi Azriel, **David Blatt**, a multi-talented actor who has played a wide range of roles, brought great dignity to his performance as the chief rabbi.

PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL WORLDS CLASHING

Ten actors played numerous roles, both male and female, both old and young, both poor and rich, both serious and ludicrous, demanding a constant change of outfits—a daunting task for any costume designer, but especially for a small theatre with a grand vision, unwilling to compromise quality. **Katherine Fritz**, Artistic Associate with the Philadelphia Artists' Collective, rose to the occasion with her magic needle and her capacity to use just the right props to transform the actors, enhancing their ever shifting personas.

The set of this production centered on a synagogue, symbolized by a large, most elegant Aron Kodesh or Ark, a wooden cabinet that houses the Torah, designed by the incredibly talented **Mathus Fiuza** from Brazil. It matched the intricacies of the many gravestones that served as both the back and front of the spiritual centerpiece to this play about Jewish souls living on. The cornered front of the stage was filled with an exquisitely built diorama of a shtetl.

The diorama included a windmill, a poorhouse, the miser's mansion, the rabbi's home, and many other structures, including a miniature graveyard.

The stage was transformed frequently from a yeshiva to a town square, from a rabbinical court to a cemetery with an open grave that sheltered a bride and groom in the form of two dolls, covered by earth—lovers that were buried and dug up and reburied several times during the evening. The young couple, murdered by the Cossacks, served as one of the primary symbols of the play.

THE DYBBUK takes us to different levels of existence on this earth and beyond, delving into historical realities and feverish imaginations, ancient traditions, and the foreshadowing of Holocaustian events. **Matt Sharp**, EgoPo's resident Lighting and Sound Designer, and talented technical director of three Philadelphia dance companies, effectively designed both lighting and sound, two critical elements for a *DYBBUK* production. For example, the Rabbinical court in a burning light, while protecting Chonen with a somber, almost sinister dim light during the famous mikvah scene. He revealed Leah's innocence with golden beams while she undressed behind large white bed sheets, revealing her body as a silhouette. In each case, Sharp's use of light and sound enhanced the eroticism of this spiritual play—located in both physical and mental-emotional worlds.

Glenn A. Odom, Ph.D., professor of English at Rowan University, specializing in international theatre, and dramaturg for a variety of theatres in the United States, served as dramaturg for both EgoPo's *GOLEM* and *A DYBBUK*. His knowledge and advice helped non-Jewish actors to understand the intricacies of the cultural aspects of this important Yiddish work. He provided a helpful handbook and glossary ("Between What Two Worlds?: A Primer") [12] that included a chart of ancient numerology, an important part of the play and a contributing force to Chonen's confusion. The dedication and professionalism of the entire cast was such that each individual responded nightly to the notes from the director and the dramaturg—willing

as many changes as necessary, all in an effort to take a general audience through this complex and amazing play.

As a result of his collaboration with the director, the cast, and the production team, we saw a first-class DYBBUK. However, even though Odom the regional and historic shifts in the language and encouraged the authentic use of old European accents for the prayers, the producing artistic who had followed that historically correct approach in the GOLEM, decided to let the rabbis and yeshiva students recite the Hebrew prayers with American accents for this production. I considered that move a terrible Stilbruch, a breaking of styles. However, as the artistic director pointed number of people in the audience complained after the GOLEM performance and told him point blank, "This is not how we sound when we pray congregation." As a result, he made the decision to have the yeshiva students and rabbis from the 19th century talk like modern American synagoers. "No more complaints this time," he said. We both smiled—even though, deep down, the purist in me cringed.

"TSVISHN TSVEY VELTN": S. ANSKY, TORN BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

In Germany, ethnographers like the Grimm Brothers (Jacob, 1785-1863, and Wilhelm, 1786-1869) traveled around the country and collected o as part of the evolving Romanticism, a movement with an emphasis on a new national literature, based on traditional folk stories and culture. I driven by a similar spirit of Jewish cultural resurrection, **Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport** (1863-1920), commonly known as **S. Ansky** (An-sky), tra Eastern Europe in search of Hasidic folktales. Ansky, a Russian Jewish author, playwright, and researcher, started out writing in Russian, but sv Yiddish in 1904.

Impacted by Romanticism and the revolutionary new Zeitgeist, Ansky shaped the image of the dybbuk into a very dramatic creature, a human transforms himself into a homeless spirit. For example, on her wedding day, the heroine, like Grimm's Aschenputtel (Cinderella), also visits her grave to communicate with the dead, experiencing a tremendous transformation: the young woman who had been wronged by her father, sudc appears strangely empowered. Possessed by Chonen's dybbuk, she now talks and acts like him, frightening everyone in the wedding party.

However, unlike the Grimm Brothers, Ansky was torn between different callings, often opposing values: "From this early age he found himself t two worlds—between secularism and religion; between Russian and Yiddish; between being an early socialist in Tsarist Russia." Sherman also c

some of Ansky's police records, showing that Ansky was "having a few run-ins with the law as a political organizer and activist, an 'agitator,' a i to play for the rest of his life." [14]

Reflecting upon this tumultuous struggle between worlds, Ansky's DYBBUK, according to Ben Brantley, chief theater critic of THE NEW YORK TII "would seem to belong more to the realm of sociology than theater. It is filled with elaborate dialectics about the Torah, apocryphal tales of rab and painstaking analyses of numerology from the cabala." [3]

The very ambiguity of both Ansky's life and THE DYBBUK has spawned literally hundreds of interpretations, often based on the drama's subtitle Tsvay Veltn": "a deathless love trapped between two worlds [. . .] between a sense of the demonic and the angelic," according to Henry Schve Lerner [11]. Taking an even broader perspective, Brantley points out, "The gulf portrayed here isn't just the one between the living and the dea also the division that separates the sexes, the generations and the carnal and the spiritual." [3]

In a ground-breaking study, we learn of the dichotomy of Ansky's failed relationships with women and his passionate relationship with Chaim Z a Jewish socialist, writer, and literary critic—two years younger than Ansky—to whom he wrote in 1888, "Chaim, Chaim, how could I not love y could I not want to meld with you into a single soul? For a long time you were everything for me. You replaced my family, God, life, a woman, i you are and will remain for [me] the closest person on earth. How could I not love you?" [13]—Ansky at his most vulnerable, found himself terr between two clashing worlds, not only in his professional, but even in his private life, never fitting ruling ideologies and societal norms.

Safran, one of the foremost researchers on Ansky, presented important aspects of his torn identities, unafraid of revealing even uncomfortable for example, his compassion for the many Russian soldiers he encountered through his work and the Galician Jews they assaulted mercilessly, c lifelong devotion to the cause of Russian peasants, ignoring their blatant anti-Semitism—all uncovered by the diaries he wrote during World Wa

Jewish Theatre, A Comparatively New Phenomenon: A Short History of the Dybbuk Play

Jewish theatre is a comparatively new phenomenon. Although the culture of Eastern European Jews included music, song, and dance, and foun into often satirical Purim plays that traditionally were performed with masks in the courtyards of synagogues—some published as early as the 1 century—most did not survive.

However, it was not until Ansky's arrival of the melodramatic play DER DYBBUK (composed between 1912 and 1919), that Jewish theatre as vu into its own and contributed to a worldwide interest in the old Yiddish folktale, once his seminal work was translated into several languages and around the world.

"With the Russian Revolution of 1917, Ansky was forced to flee the Bolsheviks, and disguised as a priest, he made his way to Warsaw. His heal deteriorating, and he was in despair, knowing that much of the ethnographic materials that he had gathered had been captured by the Revoluti Sherman adds that Ansky "had to leave behind much of his written work, including the early drafts of THE DYBBUK. Luckily, a Hebrew version c which had been translated by the writer Hayim Bialik and was subsequently translated and published in Russian, survived. Ansky used both of t versions to rewrite his play." [14]

Loved by many Jews in Eastern Europe for having rediscovered and revived old Hasidic folklore, Ansky lost his battle with diabetes and angina c November 8, **1920**, aged 57. He had never seen his play performed. However, in his honor, the day after the 30-day period of mourning, the V Troupe, the main Yiddish Theatre in Vilnius, Lithuania, premiered THE DYBBUK at the Elyseum Theatre in Warsaw on **December 9**. Their DYBBI the Vilna Troupe's greatest success.

1921: Maurice Schwartz produces THE DYBBUK in New York City's Yiddish Art Theatre.

1922: The Habimah Theatre, the main Jewish Theatre in Moscow, presents a stylized production of THE DYBBUK in Hebrew, directed by Eugen Vakhtangov, one of Stanislavsky's star students.

1925-1926: The first English production runs at the off-Broadway Neighborhood Playhouse in New York City.

1937: Michal Waszynski adapts Ansky's play into the film THE DYBBUK. One of the finest films in the Yiddish language, it implements the melodramatic stylization of German expressionistic acting, bringing to exaggerated life, among others, the famous scene of Leah's wedding. [11]

1948: Habima, the national theatre of the recently founded Israel, produces THE DYBBUK, a symbol of Yiddish theatre. It remains in their repertoire this day, albeit in different versions.

1995: First performance of A DYBBUK, the Neugroschel-Kushner adaptation, at The Hartford Stage Company, Connecticut.

1997: The revised version of the Neugroschel-Kushner work premieres at The Public Theatre in New York and sees a number of different productions in a wide range of theatres.

2008: The Habima in Tel Aviv produces Shmuel Shoa't's highly innovative puppet version of THE DYBBUK, based on the expressionistic masterwork of the past, reinventing Ansky's famous play: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeMh7SU166g> [16]

2012: The EgoPo Classic Theater of Philadelphia, formerly based in New Orleans, presents a hauntingly beautiful production of the S. Ansky play translated by Joachim Neugroschel, adapted by Tony Kushner, at the Prince Music Theatre.

FROM KUSHNER'S CONFESSION TO JOINT CULTURAL BRIDGE-BUILDING WITH NEUGROSCHEL'S TRANSLATION

Famous American playwright and screenwriter Tony Kushner (born 1956) had been interested in the history of the Yiddish Theatre through picture phonographs for years and recalls a pivotal moment that changes his perception of Yiddish: "Vanessa Redgrave did a benefit for a group called Memorial for the Victims of Stalin's Oppression' in New York [. . .], and one of the people that performed was an eighty-five-year-old actress from original Jewish theatre in Moscow, who was this beanpole of a woman in this fabulous black velvet dress, and white face paint. She did a Yiddish about the Holocaust. It consisted primarily of the names of Jewish towns that don't exist anymore in Russia."

Kushner, unfamiliar with a literate and sophisticated form of Yiddish, confessed, "I'd never heard Yiddish spoken that way. I always think of [. . .] Rosten Yiddish [THE JOYS OF YIDDISH, 1968]. But this was incredibly elegant, and fluid, and melodious. And I thought 'God, this is an astonishing beautiful language.' So I became very fond of hearing it, and decided that I'd be interested in working on a play, and THE DYBBUK seemed like an obvious place to start." [13]

Because Ansky's original play was written at a time when melodrama and tense, affected, emotion-heavy language were en vogue, the play could be revived in our own time with a translation that recreated THE DYBBUK in a style accessible to contemporary audiences. Kushner approached Joachim Neugroschel (1938-2011), a well-known literary translator of French, German, Italian, Russian, and Yiddish into English.

The prodigious Neugroschel had translated more than 200 books of numerous authors, including Sholem Aleichem, Chekhov, Dumas, Hesse, Kafka, Molière, Maupassant, Proust, Schweitzer, Singer, and contemporary writers. His translation of THE DYBBUK by S. Ansky from Yiddish, through its adaptation by playwright Tony Kushner, reached a wide audience.

Neugroschel saw himself as not just a translator but as a bridge builder to other cultures: "My efforts may look like adaptations [. . .] In the traditional Yiddish melodrama, the overwrought language of THE DYBBUK tends to be grandiloquent and melodramatic, reaching a gushing intensity that is perfectly acceptable to, indeed, demanded by its audience, but that would sound almost comically overcharged in English."

Aware of the marked linguistic and cultural shifts from Yiddish to modern American English, Neugroschel describes the process by which he rendered the old-wordish text into the vernacular of our own time: "I have steered the English version toward a blend of normal and slightly elevated speech used a fusion of free verse and blank verse for most of the prose dialogue of the more mystical characters—the Messenger, Leah, and Khonen—in the amorous parts, which in a culture that was very buttoned-up about public utterances of love, sex and even affection, had an intensity that would otherwise be lost in English." [14]

DYBBUK JUMPING: FROM TRANSLATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS TO THE STAGE

In this creative, intercultural chain, Kushner encountered some linguistic and dramatic issues, when he adapted the Neugroschel version: "What soliloquies or speeches of moral instruction in Neugroschel, are transformed into dialogues, debates and interactions in Kushner's adaptation." [15] However, the prodigious Kushner, known for writing and rewriting his texts almost non-stop, almost obsessively, wanted to do justice to the original play for its first performance at The Hartford Stage Company in 1995. According to one observer, "Rehearsals for the play ended at 5:30 Friday, the day of its opening performance, and Mr. Kushner, true to form, was adding to and deleting from the text until the very last minute." The revised version of the Neugroschel-Kushner work premiered at The Public Theatre in New York in 1997 to great acclaim.

Brantley, the powerful New York theatre critic, valued the poetic language of the Kushner-Neugroschel version of THE DYBBUK: They "have imbued their adaptation's language with an exquisite sense of poetry. The Torah scrolls, for example, are described as 'dark men engulfed in shadow in velvet shawls, bent over mysteries.'" [2]

In a detailed comparison of the Neugroschel translation with the Kushner adaptation, Sherman lists all the differences. [14] He found that Kushner included "nicks" about women and the railway station scene, with its allusion to the Holocaust. Consequently, in his afterword to the play, Hara

included jokes about women and the railway station scene, with its allusion to the Holocaust. Consequently, in his afterword to the play, Hara asserted that Tony Kushner had taken great liberties in adapting this "classic of Yiddish theater," an observation echoed by Brantley: "The play substantially restructured [. . .] those who haven't read 'A Dybbuk' recently may not realize just how much Mr. Kushner has altered it, since my interpolations enhance the play's inherent imagery and themes already implicit: sexual division, racial self-awareness and (since this is Tony Kushner after all) a glimmer of apocalyptic apprehension." [3]

However, Charles Isherwood, Brantley's colleague at the NEW YORK TIMES, presents a different perspective: "With the exception of some pron references to its 19th century setting and haunting allusions to the Holocaust, Kushner honors the original text by hewing closely to its cadence and weird spirit" [8]—a play that to Brantley, "still reads like a fever dream." [2]

In an interview with Patrick Pacheco of NEWSDAY, Kushner outlines Ansky's existential dilemma which permeates THE DYBBUK: "It's very much between two worlds, not just of the living and dead, but also between the worlds of traditions and modernity, of structure and divine mystery [is a sense of an ancient community on the brink of tremendous change, and the struggle to maintain one's bearings." [9]

"GOING TOO FAR, REACHING TOO DEEPLY, STARTING TOO YOUNG": THE BIRTH OF AN INTELLECTUAL VAMPIRE

According to Jewish folklore and popular belief, a "dybbuk or dybbuk" is seen as "an evil spirit which enters into a living person, cleaves to his or her mental illness, talks through his mouth, and represents a separate and alien personality." The Jewish Virtual Library adds, "The term appears in Talmudic literature nor in the Kabbalah, where this phenomenon is always called 'evil spirit'." [4]

The belief in dybbuks and spirits is particularly noticeable in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries when people with mental problems were rabbis who performed miracles, somewhat similar to their Christian counterparts, who performed religious rituals known as exorcisms.

"Isaac Luria (1534–1572), a mystic, laid the grounds for a Jewish belief in a dybbuk with his doctrine of transmigration of souls (gilgul), which means whereby souls could continue their task of self-perfection." [5] His general notion traveled around Eastern Europe through his disciples and the course of time, stoked the belief that one could get possessed by a dybbuk, an idea which, subsequently, opened a range of different practical views.

Critic Lisa Traiger interprets the dybbuk as a "rabbinical prescriptive for those who study Kabbalah, the mystical texts that delve into life's creation. She postulates that the story of the Dybbuk "warns against going too far, reaching too deeply, starting too young to get to the core of the most secrets of the universe" [17]—all core issues of the play. These elements had such an impact on one critic that he described the dybbuk as "an vampire that had sunk its teeth into S. Ansky's eternally fascinating tale of a ghostly lover in an Eastern European shtetl in the late 19th century."

Sherman even goes a step further and describes THE DYBBUK, the play, as a "Kaddish, a prayer for the dead that asks us to remember the dead."

"I DO NOT ENTIRELY TRUST GOD": DYBBUK AND THE HOLOCAUST

After the Inquisition and the expulsion of the entire Jewish population from Spain, many Jews migrated to Eastern Europe. Over the centuries, it became a center of Jewish life with Yiddish dominating the cultural landscape. Tragically, Poland also became the site of endless exterminations under the Nazi regime.

Reflecting on the past and the present, RABBI AZRIEL, full of despair, prays to the spirit of one of his ancestors, "I only grow weaker, and the world grows wickered. Pogroms spread through Europe. The people talk idly of traveling and scientific marvels and don't pray. Under my robe, my knees knock together in fear sometimes. And sometimes, Grandfather, I do not entirely trust God." Such a moving confession adds to the play's human aspect, showing the stern old rabbi as a mensch who, like Job, suffers, fearing future pogroms.

Kushner alludes to the Holocaust several times by adding to the Ansky-Neugroschel version, for example, in this exchange between Leah and Fela lamenting the mass murder of whole villages and shtetls by the Cossacks: "cut down while still young, and there are so many of them, bodies lying everywhere, souls of the dead in the air"—a clear reference to the horrors of the past and the horrors to come.

We also see the past roll by when one of the Batlonim—a group of men who are paid by the community to engage in prayer and study—reflects on the good old days: "Rabbi Yisroel of Rizhin went about in a gold-curtained carriage pulled by six grey horses." Another young Batlon disagrees, comparing the candlelit past with the exciting, electrifying, new present, declares: "Give me electric light. In a world of electric light, even Jews don't ride the trains."

The irony of that optimistic statement is not lost on the audience, especially with the provocative train image, with half the cast sitting on benches as if they were riding a train. It brings back almost automatic associations—not "gold-curtained carriages," but IBM-guided cattle trains which carried millions of Jews and other minorities to their final destinations in labor and concentration camps in Germany and all over Eastern Europe.

The Batlonim, their original optimism evaporating, then engage in an almost prophetic conversation: "The darkness and misery of the world is incomprehensible to me," followed by the confession of one of the religious young men, echoing the old rabbi, "I cannot pray." The last comment is the most devastating of them all: "The world is in its last age. If the Messiah doesn't come soon, there'll be no Jews left to welcome Him."

One does not have to be Jewish to experience the gravity of that statement, or, in Sherman's words, "A Dybbuk is about the death of an entire community, not just the death of one or two souls." [14]

"WRITE NOTHING FURTHER OF THE EVENTS OF THIS NIGHT"

Near the end of the play, the seriousness of the Rabbinical court gets interrupted by a chanting, a keening, as one judge points out, a voice wit—classical Sprechgesang that members of the EgoPo ensemble presented masterfully, movingly, rising to a prophetic crescendo with Rabbi Azri

Rabbi, only turn the page:
the wonders of the coming age
will dwarf your shtetl magic so—
dybbuks, golems, all you know,
your writings and the words you say,
like oven ashes, swept away.
At some not-very-distant date
the martyred dead accumulate;
books of history will contain
mountain-piles of the slain.

The Rabbi concludes with a strong reference to Jewish suffering: "What must be will be," a philosophy that Dr. Peter Hohn, director of the Suett in Hamburg, presented movingly when addressing his anti-Semitic father on his 80th birthday in front of the whole family: "If all of you had only understood something of the Jewish spirit, its tolerance, its capacity to suffer, and its readiness to help others!" [6]

The Rabbi's lament leaves us to ponder, with Brantley, that "Like all enduring myths born of collective experience, A DYBBUK strikes responsive that scientific and psychological explanations have never been able to still," [3] as Shakespeare knew when he ended his MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S with an address to the audience, almost apologizing for some of the extraordinary fantastical scenarios that the audience had witnessed:

"If we shadows have offended, think but this, and all is mended, that you have but slumbered here while these visions did appear and this weak theme no more yielding but a dream" [15]—except that all the pogroms and the Holocaust were certainly not dreams, not even nightmares, but realities.

Whatever our own worldviews, A DYBBUK allows us to see not only what happened in the past, or in the physical world, but in a deeply-seated world of the mind. A DYBBUK can serve as a catharsis of the many veiled and real joys and horrors in life, in which we could experience and play the roles in A DYBBUK, which the EgoPo artistic director, the cast, and the production team presented in innovative ways, connecting the past to the present. We cried, we laughed, and perhaps left wondering whether we should obey the Rabbi's stern order: "Write nothing further of the event tonight. Take this, wrap it in a shroud, go to the river and drown this Book."

Against the wishes of Rabbi Azriel, some of us may not want to drown all those countless Jewish dreams and nightmares, wrapped in millions of realities. On the contrary, we may want to remember the souls that lived and still live on—or in the words of the Messenger, "We've all had this one, and no one is simply or entirely who he or she appears to be."

Works Cited

- [1] Ansky, S. "From A letter Khaim Zhitlovskyl." *The Dybbuk: A Haunted Reader*. Edited and translated from the Yiddish by Joachim Neugroschel. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000. <http://books.google.com/books?id=msFeBYSIJtoC&printsec=frontcover&dq=dybbuk&hl=en&sa=X&ei=uuXRT5z9B4OI6AGMhqCaAw&ved=0CFEQ6AEwBA#v=onepage&q=dybbuk>
- [2] Brantley, Ben. "The Martyred Dead." *New York Times*, 17 Nov 1997. <http://theater.nytimes.com/mem/theater/treview.html?pagewanted=print&res=990CE2DE153EF933A15751C0A963958260>
- [3] Brantley, Ben. "Talking to the Dead, Yearning for Answers." *New York Times*, 20 Feb 1995. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/20/theater/treview-talking-to-the-dead-yearning-for-answers.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>
- [4] "Dybbuk (Dybbuk)." *Jewish Virtual Library*, 2012. http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0005_0_05197.html
- [5] "Dybbuk." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2012. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/174964/dybbuk/>
- [6] Eger, Henrik. "U.S. and International Responses to *Metronome Ticking*." <http://henrikeger.com/Responses--and--Reviews.php> 9 Nov 2006.
- [7] Fink, Joel G. "A Dybbuk, Or Between Two Worlds (Review)." *Theatre Journal* 48.4 (Dec. 1996), 516-17. http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/theatre_journal/v048/48.4pr_ansky.html
- [8] Isherwood, Charles. "A Dybbuk, Or Between Two Worlds: Joseph Papp Public Theater's Newman Theater, New York." *Variety* 29 Nov. 1997. <http://www.variety.com/review/VE111729199>
- [9] Kushner, Tony. "Caught Between Different Worlds: Kushner Adaptation Probes a Crisis of Faith." Interview with Patrick Pacheco. *Newsday*, 1997, B3.
- [10] Kushner, Tony, and Joachim Neugroschel. *A Dybbuk and Other Tales of the Supernatural*. Adapted by S. Ansky. New York: Theatre Comm Group, 1997.
- [11] Lerner, Neal. "The Dybbuk Tells Tale of Love Trapped Between Two Worlds." Washington University St. Louis, 1995-2000. http://wupa.wustl.edu/record_archive/1996/11-07-96/7606.html
- [12] Odom, Glenn A. "Between What Two Worlds?: A Dybbuk Primer." Philadelphia: EgoPo Classic Theater, 2012.

[13] Safran, Gabriella. Wandering Soul: The Dybbuk's Creator, S. An-sky. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

[14] Sherman, David. A Dybbuk's Journey: A Directorial Process of Tony Kushner's A Dybbuk. Master of Fine Arts Thesis, Edmonton: University 2008. https://circle.ubc.ca/bitstream/handle/2429/1032/ubc_2008_fall_sherman_david.pdf;jsessionid=0A1C258A4F23D9157EDC26437D3F8Cf;sequence=1

[15] Shakespeare, William. A Midsummer Night's Dream. `

[16] Shoat, Shmuel. Director. Dybbuk between two worlds: Based on a play by S. Ansky [puppet show]. Tel Aviv: Habima Theatre, 2008. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeMh7SU166g>

[17] Traiger, Lisa. "The Talmud Tells of Four Sages Who Entered Paradise." All About Jewish Theatre. N.d. http://www.jewish-theatre.com/visitor/article_display.aspx?articleID=1742

[18] Waszynski, Michal. Director. The Dybbuk [original film in Yiddish]. 1937. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_dSAZJ7Z5UQ

Related Links:

- [Read additional reviews by Henrik Eger](#)
- [Other Dybbuk articles on All about jewish theatre](#)

 [Bookmark](#)  [Print](#)  [Send to friend](#)  [Post a comment](#)

There are currently no comments about this article

Copyright © 2002 - 2012 All About Jewish Theatre. All rights reserved.

Concept and Content by NCM Productions | Graphic Design by Sharon Carmi | Programming by Tigersoft, Ltd.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Contact Us](#)