



The revolutionary spirit of The Dybbuk

When Habima staged its production of *The Dybbuk* in Moscow 100 years ago, it marked a defining moment in theatre history. **Edna Nahshon** explores the background to this radical production

Habima theatre company's Hebrew-language production of *The Dybbuk* opened on 31 January 1922 at the company's small Moscow venue on Malaya Bronnaya Street. With its fusion of traditional Jewish culture and the aesthetics of the Russian avant-garde, it was deemed a groundbreaking feat of modern Jewish art and a major event for the Russian stage.

The audience included members of the local Jewish intelligentsia and major figures of the Russian stage. Leading Soviet actor and director Yuri Zavadsky remembered the performance: "You felt that you were being immersed in some strange dream; although incomprehensible, it was thrilling and rousing, and it made your heart turn! You felt as though you touched upon the mysteries of earthly existence..."

Habima had come a long way since 1918, when the, mostly amateurish, Hebrew-language company was incorporated as an independent studio

theatre into the venerable Moscow Art Theatre. There it came under the tutelage of Yevgeny Vakhtangov, the most outstanding protégé of theatre practitioner Konstantin Stanislavsky. Before the Russian Revolution, such a move would have been inconceivable for a troupe of Jewish actors.

The *Dybbuk* was composed by writer and ethnographer S Ansky, who never lived to see it produced. It depicts a phantasmagorical Hasidic world steeped in religious piety, mysticism and supernatural beliefs. It's a world where the boundaries that separate the living and dead, male and female, matter and spirit, all dissolve, and the frenzied desires of flesh and spirit fuse.

The play is a tragic love story with the character of the virginal Leah at its centre. Her rich father, Sender, has neglected to keep an oath to his yeshiva buddy and has arranged for his daughter's nuptials to the son of a wealthy family, rather than to Khanan, his friend's son and originally destined groom.

In desperation, Khanan, who is besotted with Leah, throws himself into forbidden kabbalistic practices, eventually collapsing and dying in front of the synagogue's holy ark (chamber housing the Torah scrolls). As Leah is about to marry, Khanan's spirit disrupts the union by invading her as a dybbuk, a disembodied human spirit that takes control of the body of a living person. In a harrowing rabbinic exorcism, the possessed Leah is finally freed of the dybbuk. But as the family rush to get the groom for the wedding, the spirit of Khanan appears to Leah and she chooses to join him in death. The two figures merge, united at last.

Habima's *Dybbuk* must be seen within the context of the coalescence of three separate movements: the rise of Zionism and quest for a national and cultural renaissance, which had the revival of Hebrew at its epicentre; the 1917 revolution, which at first liberated Jews from tsarist oppression and for a brief moment allowed for an intense flurry of Hebrew and Zionist activities in Russia; and finally, a new spirit in the Russian theatre that encouraged artists to create a theatrical language for this new world. A desire for self-expression, including by minorities oppressed by the tsarist regime,

Clockwise from above: Habima's 1922 production of *The Dybbuk* with Zvi Friedland as Khanan; group scene; Zvi Friedland as Khanan and Baruch Chemerinsky as Rabbi Azriel

was also among the moving forces of the new theatrical landscape.

From 1918 to 1924, Russia was riddled with famine and civil war. Yet, theatre reached an amazing vibrancy: millions of people attended performances, and hundreds of theatrical groups sprang up. A theatrical fervour seemed to engulf the entire population. "Never and nowhere had such a phenomenon been witnessed in modern history," writes Marc Slonim in his 1963 book, *Russian Theatre, from the Empire to the Soviets*.

Vakhtangov was one of the most brilliant talents of this new theatrical terrain. His technique merged Stanislavsky's psychological realism with heightened forms of expressiveness in an approach which became known as 'fantastic realism'. It was fully manifest in his work on Ansky's play.

Habima's work on *The Dybbuk* had begun in 1919, but was suspended because of Vakhtangov's ill health. The director made a (temporary) recovery and work began in earnest the following year. Rehearsals were an all-consuming process, where every word, gesture and sound was analysed and polished. The actors were required to delve into the farthest depths of their mental and emotional resources.

One of the unique aspects of Habima's work was its use of Hebrew as the language of production. Hebrew was not the actors' native tongue, and it had no established stage pronunciation. The director, working with the Russian script, did not understand the language. But the use of Hebrew had tremendous artistic ramifications. In particular it drew on chanting inspired by synagogue prayer. The actress Chayelet Gruber, who played the role of a mother praying for the life of her pregnant daughter, was having difficulties with one particular scene. Vakhtangov suggested she sing the meaning of the words without actually saying the words. She recalled, "A



memory of a chant I heard as a girl in the synagogue on the Day of Atonement came to me ... I started chanting the tune ... I felt what it meant to beg for someone's life. Now the words did not hinder me. They strengthened the appeal."

Critic Sergei Radlov noted that the use of Hebrew was proof that theatre has its own unique language and uses the spoken word differently from literature – a novel idea at the time. Some even suggested that if the play had been staged in a language more widely understood, its realism would diminish its theatrical magic.

Two other figures had considerable impact on the production: the composer Joel Engel [see p25], whose score was influenced by the melodies he had collected

accompanying Ansky on his ethnographic expeditions; and the artist Nathan Altman, whose striking sets, costumes and unique make-up, shaped its distinctive look.

Altman represented the shtetl through the lens of the Russian avant-garde and included stylised Hebrew letters in his design. He used a palette of white, black and grey, with an occasional striking, colourful detail. The make-up was extraordinary: faces were painted in curious Cubist designs that resembled grotesque masks, with noses white on one side and black on the other, mouths pulled out of shape and eyes rendered eerie by circles and arches. This hyper-stylised expressionism was reflected in the actors' movement as they stooped or heavily leaned to one side. The unsettling atmosphere was reinforced by the hyper-angular, off-centre and disproportional stage sets.

The production's most memorable scene was the dance of a group of beggars with the bride at the wedding feast. This was based on the custom that gave beggars the right to dance with the bride before the wedding ceremony. Vakhtangov arranged it as

a fierce protest dance. The beggars were portrayed as being filled with anger over their miserable existence, which left them as victims of the greed of the rich and consumed with a desire for vengeance.

Each of the 12 beggars was given an exaggerated physical deformity. Each also assumed animal characteristics that endowed their fury with a wild quality. Their objective was to upset the rich man's wedding and support Khanan, the spiritual rebel, in his quest to unite with Leah. The wedding scene concluded with the beggars' cry of "Ah-ha!" Through their frenzy, they

had succeeded in preparing the bride for possession and avenged themselves on the rich.

The resounding success of *The Dybbuk* stood in stark contrast to the virtual criminalisation of Hebrew that was initiated by the Jewish section of the Communist Party (Yevseksya). It heralded Yiddish as the language of the masses and castigated Hebrew as the language of the darkest reactionary forces. By 1926, Habima had performed *The Dybbuk* 300 times, mostly in Moscow, but they knew it was time to get out. The company embarked on a successful European tour and then headed for the United States, finally settling in Tel Aviv in 1931 and building a theatre there in 1945. Habima was officially recognised as the national theatre of Israel in 1958.

The 1922 production was kept in Habima's repertory in its original form until 1965. Hana Rovina, who portrayed Leah in the Moscow premiere, played the young maiden into her sixties.

Eventually, this mythologised production appeared fossilised, shifting from a theatrical ideal to an impetus for artistic regeneration and reconfiguration. ■

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