

A spiritual centenary

A new exhibition at the Hebrew University marks the 100th anniversary of Habima Theater's inaugural rendition of 'The Dybbuk'

• BARRY DAVIS

In Jewish Ashkenazi folklore, there are few stories more stirring or iconic than the harrowing tale of the Dybbuk.

The play – the long version of the title reads *The Dybbuk – Between Two Worlds* – depicts an exorcism rite and the various associated social and religious shenanigans in a shtetl in late 19th-century Poland. It has been performed umpteen times, around the globe and in several languages, and has been adapted in all sorts of creative and improvisational ways since its author S. Ansky completed it in Russian in 1920.

Tragically, Ansky did not live to see the fruits of his labor make it to the stage. The world premiere of the play, in Ansky's own Yiddish translation, was performed by the Vilna Theatre Troupe at the Warsaw Elizeum Theater – just one day after the 30-day mourning period marking his passing.

A Hebrew version by Haim Nahman Bialik was staged in Moscow in 1922 at the Habima Theater, the forerunner of the Israeli national theater company.

Now the Israel Goor Theatre Archives and Museum on the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University is marking that auspicious event with *The Dybbuk – Through Times and Generations* art exhibition, curated by comics artist, producer and lecturer Rachel Achunov; and historian and editor Leah Gilula, director of the host venue.

Gilula's principal field of research is the history of Hebrew-speaking theater in pre-state Palestine and Israel, and oral documentation of theater artists. So that certainly fits the bill. Both curators clearly have the professional experience and expertise to do the evocative subject matter justice.

All told, the Dybbuk exhibition at Mount Scopus comprises more than 60 works across a variety of disciplines, offering all sorts of perspectives on the subject matter and conveying a variety of aesthetics and sentiments.

The exhibits also cover a broad temporal arc, with the concomitant zeitgeist range, from Russian-Soviet

avant-garde artist, Cubist painter, stage designer and book illustrator Nathan Altman's quizzical figure of a hunchback, created in 1922; and American caricaturist Al Hirschfeld's compelling demonic dance scene from 1948; through to Uri Lifshitz's ghoulish depiction of the exorcism from 2000. The show comes right up to the here-and-now with an alluring collage by 43-year-old Israeli illustrator Shlomi Charka, and a work by Achunov that tends toward the decidedly feral side of the artistic tracks.

Gilula says the eclectic nature of the exhibition is partly a product of the period in which they were created which, naturally, connects to the time line of the play itself. "The difference between the work from 100 years ago, by the Vilna Troupe or the Habima production, and those that were subsequently staged results from the point of reference. The original works were created, as it were, out of nothing. They became the touchstone. The works that followed reference and relate to them."

That is principally driven by the source visual aesthetics, including the captivating presence of the star of the original Hebrew-language production, Hanna Rovina. Her part in the play as Leah, the young bride who is possessed by a demon, became her signature role and is most readily identified with Rovina, who became known here as The First Lady of Hebrew Theater.

Gilula says that has informed the work of artists across the ages, from all disciplinary spheres. "Both theater and the plastic arts address the Habima production from 1922, and particularly Hanna Rovina as Leah. It is a recurrent theme. They [artists] acknowledge the importance of the iconic work, give it pride of place, and do not bury it and even create new works."

The historian also sees a thematic thread running through the representational evolution. "It is curious to note the similarities between the topics that interest the artists. They repeatedly cite the image of Leah – principally as portrayed by Rovina – the beggars' dance and the exorcism."

The base media also come into the interpretive equation. "Another clear difference is the materials and the techniques they use," Gilula adds. "Today there are quite a few works that feature digital techniques and assemblage." The latter comes across in the exhibition, including in the contributions by Charka and Achunov.

Anyone who has seen the play on stage or a silver-screen version should be able to follow the curatorial trail. "The exhibition is arranged based on the order of the scenes in the play," Achunov explains. Still, oxymoronic contextualization was also factored into the



RACHEL ACHUNOV'S compelling installation.
(Rachel Achunov)

presentational reckoning.

"The positioning [of the exhibits] incorporates different techniques and colors, works that were created for productions alongside those that were inspired by them. You will also find a 100-year-old work next to a contemporary one. The visual aesthetics of placement of the works was also important for us." All of which makes for an enticing viewing experience.

HAVING SUCH dramatic visual and narrative material to work with is a boon to any curator. Then again, dealing with a story that has been through the portrayal grinder so many times over the years presents its own challenges.

How, for example, do you come up with a fresh angle on the tried and tested tale, and spark interest in it from new consumer domains? And how can one draw in youngsters who were born into the Internet age of instantaneous gratification and the resultant



RUSSIAN PAINTER Miron Sima's 1937 take on 'The Dybbuk' evokes the Ansky tale's dark humor.
(Miron Sima Bequest, Mishkan Museum of Art, Ein Harod)

SHLOMI CHARKA'S 2022 'I Am Her Destined Bridegroom' collage imparts a sense of high drama.
(Shlomi Charka)

RUSSIAN-SOVIET avant-garde artist Nathan Altman's quizzical figure of a hunchback, created 1922.
(Nachum Zemach bequest, Israel Goor Theatre Archives & Museum, Jerusalem; Gregory Khatin)



compressed attention spans? After all, *The Dybbuk* has been around since before their great-grandparents were born and, for them it is surely an arcane product that, at best, might get them to raise an eyebrow if not induce a dismissive shrug.

Achunov says that she and Gilula were very much aware of that, and engaging young people in one of the gems of 20th-century Jewish folklore was uppermost in their minds from the get-go. “The starting point of the conception of the exhibition was how to interest the younger generation. After all, everything has already been said about *The Dybbuk*.”

Then again, regardless of the chronological and socio-cultural setting, there are aspects of the Ansky text that defy sequential bounds. “The storyline of the play and, in particular, of the love story, touches young people,” posits Achunov. She feels that the raw material leaves plenty of room for expressive maneuver and thus facilitates a broad user hinterland approach.

“The works in the exhibition are varied in terms of the content, the techniques and their polychromy. There are two-dimensional works, caricatures and paintings, sculptures, reliefs, installations, costumes, a theatrical design item, and even a [political] cartoon.”

Achunov believes there are plenty of contemporary and marketable elements to work with in *The Dybbuk* and its portrayal. “The historical materials and the photographs of different productions performed over the years were the base point for the influence and inspiration of the works of art,” she says, noting that she hopes and expects the exhibition to provide us with food for thought as well. “The different renditions by the artists across the generations, the differences and also the similarities evoke interest and raise questions.”

Drama is, of course, a handy tool to work with, especially if it is drama of the highest caliber as per a take of exorcism set in a late 19th-century shtetl with the images prompted by such a context. But that can also be a double-edged sword, and a certain degree of familiarity minefield side-stepping can be required.

Surely, when it comes to *The Dybbuk*, many may feel they have been there and done that. Achunov says she and Gilula dug as deeply as they could into the thematic substrata in an effort to mine rarely explored seams and, thereby, come up with something new for our sensory and cerebral consumption.

“So much has been written and said about the play and the production,” she notes. “What else is left to say about it? Is there anything new to be said?”

NO CULTURAL stone was left unturned. “Gilula’s idea was to look into how *The Dybbuk* – the play and production directed by [early 20th-century Armenian-Russian actor and director Yevgeny] Vakhtangov – influenced art across the generations; how they became an inseparable part of Western culture, and how much Western culture is core to *The Dybbuk*,” Achunov explains.

She and Gilula duly pored over art repositories in archives and museums, in Israel and around the world, collated works inspired by the iconic Habima production, and endeavored to uncover rare visual material, things we may have not seen before. The exploratory mindset also led them to a multi-stratified creator cast. They talked to artists of different age groups active in Israel today and asked them how *The Dybbuk* resonates with them.

The idea was not only to draw on the artists’ gifts but also to help fuel their ideas about the thematic anchor. Achunov sent them a wide range of background information and references to *The Dybbuk*, including the script of the play, theatrical images and photographs, cinematic readings, operatic adaptations, and musical and dance works. That spawned 14 original works created specifically for the Mount Scopus showing. “It is interesting to see how they reference historical visual images,” Achunov says.

Exorcism doesn’t sound like too much fun, and the curators did not want things to get overly morbid. Luckily Ansky’s story offers a referential ingredient for introducing some lighter shades to the exhibition spread.

“The famous scene that breaks the seriousness, even though it incorporates critique and pain, is the beggars’ dance,” Achunov says. “Art through the generations, as well as contemporary artists, return to this scene time and time again.”

It is not just a mood lifter. “It is also a visually intriguing scene. It offers interesting compositional opportunities, and the exhibition features a clutch of paintings of the

scene from different years, from 1931 through to 2022.”

Ansky was inspired to the write story – which took several years to craft – by the scenes he saw and experiences he had as the leader of an ethnographic commission that traveled across Podolia and Volhynia in the Pale of Settlement. Between 1791 and the Russian Revolution of 1917, Jews were confined to that western region of the Russian Empire and, as such, offered an eclectic view of contemporary Jewish life.

Ansky took all of that on board and eventually worked it into *The Dybbuk*. “The importance of the play lies in the documenting of the Jewish communities and their customs,” Achunov notes, “documenting the Jewish villages, a world which vanished after World War II.”

That, she says, comes through in the original Vakhtangov portrayal and percolates through the new exhibition. “The importance of the Habima production of *The Dybbuk*, directed by Yevgeny Vakhtangov in 1922, stems from the fact that it breathed new life into the play and made it timeless.”

After the Hebrew University of Jerusalem exhibition closes, the curators are planning to make the most of the topic’s universal relevance and appeal by taking it on the road.

“We would be delighted to show the exhibition in galleries and other display spaces in Israel and abroad,” Achunov says.

Time will tell how that pans out. But for now, visitors to the Israel Goor Theatre Archives and Museum have plenty to see, ponder and marvel at. ■

The Dybbuk – Through Times and Generations closes in January 2023.

For more information: goorarchives.org.il



Clockwise from top L:

AMERICAN CARICATURIST Al Hirschfeld’s compelling beggars’ dance scene, 1948. (©The Al Hirschfeld Foundation. www.AlHirschfeldFoundation.org)

URI LIFSHITZ offers a ghoulish depiction of the exorcism. (Courtesy Dorit & Nadav Lifshitz)

RUSSIAN-BORN artist Moshe Bernstein took a left-field approach to the play’s principal protagonists. (Rami Zarnegar)

MULTIDISCIPLINARY URUGUAYAN-BORN artist Lucy Elkivity conveys a sense of the core ambiance. (Lucy Elkivity)