

REVIEW OF “THE DYBBUK”, A PLAY WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY JULIA PASCAL, A PRODUCTION OF PASCAL THEATRE COMPANY, LONDON

Review written by Merle Molofsky

In August 2010, the Pascal Theatre Company brought its riveting production of Julia Pascal’s “The Dybbuk” to New York City, for a short run sponsored by “Dream Up Festival” at “Theater for the New City.” Pascal’s play and production is based on the seminal Yiddish theater play, “The Dybbuk, Or Between Two Worlds”, by S. Ansky, which was written in 1914, first produced in 1920, and made into a film in 1937. Whether Ansky first wrote his play in Yiddish or in Russian is unclear, as he offered a version in each language, but it has become a mainstay of Yiddish theater; indeed, more than a mainstay, it became the foundation for the rich tradition of Yiddish theater emerging in Europe and particularly in America, and has come to represent the cultural treasure of quotidian Jewish experience, which was decimated and nearly destroyed during the Holocaust. Pascal’s use of Ansky’s work is an act of homage, and a manifest act of resurrection and acknowledgment of the souls of the six million Jews butchered during the cataclysm of anti-Semitism resulting in the Shoah. Pascal’s play, first produced in 1992, insists that these souls are not lost, because they cry out for justice, and those who hear their cries lend their own bodies and souls to give them voice.

Ansky’s play utilizes an element of Jewish folklore, the “dybbuk,” which is the soul of a person who has died prematurely, unwillingly, with a sense of outrage that the arc of that person’s life was not fulfilled, and who therefore wants to remain on earth. The restless, rebellious soul of the dybbuk, cheated of life, seeks a human vehicle to inhabit, and takes possession of another person’s body, in order to fulfill an unfulfilled destiny. A dybbuk is an invading spirit taking possession of a living human being.

Ansky’s play tells a somber tale of ill-fated, star-crossed lovers, Hanan and Leah. Hanan is from an impoverished family, while Leah is the daughter of Sender, a wealthy man. Sender betroths her to the son of another wealthy man, and Hanan, on learning of this, is overwhelmed by despair, seeks refuge in religious ecstasy, collapses and dies. Leah wanders into the community graveyard, comes across a double grave of a murdered bride and bridegroom, and invites their spirits to her wedding. Then she finds Hanan’s grave, and Hanan’s spirit enters Leah’s body. Leah is possessed by the Hanan, the dybbuk.

Pascal sets her play in the Holocaust, and we as audience are in contact with a great moral demand in which we cannot but share, that those cheated of life must be given new life. Their new life is given in this piece of theater, embodied by actors, and implanted in the minds of the audience. In Pascal’s play, five Jews, two men and three women, are thrust together in a single room in the ghetto, and are destined for transportation to a death camp. They are desperate, hungry, argumentative, oscillating between states of denial, spiritual hunger, rage, loneliness, longing, and lust. The play is introduced by Judith, who is a secular British Jew visiting contemporary Germany, haunted by dream-faces, family members who died in the Holocaust and who need to be not only remembered, but known. The actor who plays Judith, Juliet Dante, also plays Esther, one

of the women trapped in the ghetto. As Judith provides the frame for the play, Esther provides the frame for an emerging play. She serves as moral compass, in some sense similar to the Stage Manager of "Our Town," but with a more vigorous, comprehensive intensity. Observing the bickering, terror, disappointments, competitiveness, and thwarted possibilities in the lives of the four others, aware that all five are doomed, she initiates a group project, to enact the Ansky play "The Dybbuk." She narrates the story of "The Dybbuk," and her fellow sufferers are drawn into the tale and its enactment. As they give voice to the lost souls within the play, they also embody the lost six million who clamor to be more than remembered, who clamor to be known. They haunt the play, and they haunt us.

The production is brilliant. Julia Pascal, her set designer and choreographer Thomas Kampe, and her performers provided what for me has been the most profound, gripping, meaningful theatrical experience I ever have had. I am no newcomer to seeing and appreciating theater. I am 68 years old as of this writing, have seen many theatrical productions and performances, and majored in Speech and Theater as an undergraduate. Thus when I say this is the best theater I have ever encountered, it is no mere hyperbole nor the words of a newbie theater-goer.

The performance took place in a typical "black-box" off-Broadway theater, and the set design was disturbingly compelling in its poverty and adaptability. Three low walls hung with miscellaneous items of shabby clothing frame the ghetto room. At the onset, each character collects the meager possessions that will meet their needs: a wooden pallet to lay on the floor as a bed, a bucket, and a blanket. The stage setting is completed by five wooden ladders, which initially seem to have no useful purpose. They will not be used as escape vehicles. There is no escape, no where to go. The ladders lead nowhere.

A ladder in a Jewish-themed play cannot but evoke Jacob's ladder, and Jacob's ordeal of wrestling with an angel. Perhaps each desperate soul, given a ladder but no escape, can use the ladder to reach some sort of heightened awareness. Thus the wooden pallets and ladders provide mental/emotional escape, called into use by Esther, the guiding spirit of the room, as stage props for the inhabitants' performance of the Ansky tale. The pallets are laid out as a mini-stage, and the ladders are deployed in various ways as set design features for the ghetto inhabitants' mini-play. They are walls and gravestones.

One of the most vivid and terrifying aspects of the production is the occasional evocation of the Nazi presence in the ghetto, and the death trains leading to the death camps. The lights suddenly go out, and we hear highly amplified sounds, boots marching, orders being barked, trains roaring through. The sounds surround us; we are ourselves trapped in the ghetto, surrounded by Nazi soldiers. Never have I been so viscerally terrified during a theatrical performance. I actually trembled, then shook, and began to cry, whenever these sudden interruptions occurred. The impact of these experiences is similar to the impact of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. The Holocaust Museum, unlike other museums, does not have a broad option of galleries which a museum-goer can visit. Rather, it is a continuous unfolding single gallery. You enter, and there is no where to go but forward. In other words, there is no escape. Once in, you are in the

system, with no way out. There is only the forward march through a bleak reality to a final destiny.

A crucial element of the play is the moral development of the frightened, doomed people trapped together in the ghetto room, seemingly with very little internal resources. All are secular Jews, all save Esther without knowledge of the richness of Jewish teachings. Naomi insists she does not belong with the others because her mother was Aryan. Jan was brought up Protestant by parents who tried to abandon their Jewish identity. Throughout the play, the more they – and we, the audience – are regaled with wisdom gleaned from Jewish teachings, particularly the tales of the founder of the Chasidic movement, Yisrael ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov (Master of the Good Name, meaning the name of God forbidden to be pronounced – only a holy being like the Baal Shem Tov may invoke the forbidden name, for the good), the more the value of their heritage is understood.

One wisdom teaching of the Baal Shem Tov re-told in the play is the story of a tightrope walker stretching a rope across an abyss over a river near a small shtetl (village). The entire populace turns out to witness the acrobatic event. The Baal Shem Tov comments, “If only he worked on his spirit as he worked on his body.” What miracles of spiritual depth and integrity would be accomplished if people devoted themselves to spiritual concerns.

Another wisdom teaching re-told is the story of the mirror. A rich man in the village shows off his grand mirror. The Baal Shem Tov, seemingly naively, looks at the mirror, thinking it is a window looking out onto the street, and asks, “Where are all the people?” Told that the object before him is not a plain glass window looking out into the street, but glass lined with silver, creating a reflecting surface, the Baal Shem Tov teaches us that when we are concerned with material wealth at the expense of compassion for others, we see only ourselves reflected in the silver, the symbol of material accumulation. Greed creates narcissistic disregard of others. We need always to be aware of the humanity of others.

Forced to accept their destiny, the characters in the play begin to accept their Jewishness. During their enactment of the Ansky play one man winds tefillin around his arm. Tefillin are strips of material attached to a small container containing prayer scrolls, used as a prayer ritual performed by Orthodox Jewish men on arising in the morning. In another instance he cradles a battered briefcase representing a baby.

The root of the word “dybbuk” in Hebrew means attachment. Psychoanalysts of today are sensitive to the concepts of attachment theory. The word “dybbuk” therefore has many resonances with aspects of attachment. “The Dybbuk” leads us to consider the use of attachment to Jewish lore, to the depth of Jewish knowledge, in forming a safe attachment in a dangerously insecure world. A dybbuk is attached to what is unfulfilled in a truncated life, to the life force. By inhabiting another, the dybbuk hopes to perpetuate opportunity for life.

Is there something “dybbukian” in aspects of analytic work, when over-identification misleads us, when we think we are being “empathic” when we actually might be feeding on the feelings of another, over-identifying? Why do we seek to attune so deeply to another, to resonate so completely with another’s feelings and self-states?

Is a secular Jew like myself “over-identified” with those who suffered and perished during the Holocaust? Or does that identification lead to an awareness of other injustices, the various sadistic destructions in places like Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Darfur, Biafra, in gulags and stalags? My eldest child, Rebecca, who is 48 as of this writing, as a six-year-old child described to me a “memory” she had of being a Jewish child incarcerated during World War II. She “remembered” sitting in a concrete square, surrounded by women with shaved heads, and hearing a voice telling her that she would live to tell the truth of what had happened. Is her “memory” a “true memory”? What exactly could she be remembering? She had not been exposed to Holocaust imagery or literature. We did not have a television. At the age of six she had not seen images of Jews in concentration camps. I once had a vision of an endless chain of my ancestors, mostly women, traumatized women, stretching back for miles, for millennia.... Were we both overly impressionable, overly identified with victims of persecution? We each have a humanistic point of view, and we each have an essentially joyful approach to life. Are there overlaps of experience that transcend our usual concepts of space and time? Are there aspects of mind that can be cultivated and valued that lead to these sorts of “memories,” these sorts of depth connections with others? Is that the underlying feature of what people in the creative arts, and psychoanalysts, achieve in communicating what needs to be known about the human condition?

Pascal’s “The Dybbuk” raises questions about attachment and compassion, Thomas Kampe, who designed the sets, also provided choreography, and his use of dance and movement imbues the production with all the power of bodily experience. The actors don’t “act”; they move and become. The movement he creates for the actors embodies what authentic movement therapists use in their work, which is an extremely powerful modality when used in conjunction with psychoanalytic understanding.

Pascal’s use of music during the production made me aware of the intense emotional pull of traditional music, of music evoking memory. Kyla Greenberg contributed original music to the production, and utilized familiar music as well. Hearing the strains of a song popular in the 1940’s, which I heard sung by Steve Lawrence on the radio and by my father in my home, “Where Shall I Go,” in Yiddish “Vi Ahin Zol Ich Geyn,” caused me to burst into tears. Essentially it is a tale of a displaced person, a wandering Jew, a refugee, someone who sings, “Tell me where shall I go, there’s no place I can see, let me go, let me go, every door is closed to me....” [Note: YouTube has videos of Steve Lawrence and of the great Yiddish singer Leo Fuld singing this song.] The finale of the play, with the Nazis closing in, with the dybbuk commanded to leave the body of the girl he loves and whom he inhabits in an effort to maintain his last connection to earthly existence, and with the near extinction of European Jewry, the treasure of Jewish lives and Jewish culture, is accompanied by the tragic music of Mozart’s “Requiem.”

How do the dead rest in peace, if we cannot?

The actors who gave the dead life in this production are Juliet Dante, Adi Lerer, Anna Savva, Stefan Karsberg, and Simon Perlin. All were perfectly cast, and all created an eternal reality bounded only by the beginning and end of the script.
