The Habimah “Dybbuk”: A Study of The Role of Exorcism
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You don't compete with a myth. It's a lost battle. That's why I want to sign a pact with memory, get it into the play, exorcise the spirit of that play. In a wider sense, it is not only Leah's private dybbuk, but rather the dybbuk of Habimah, and of Israeli theatre. And the dybbuk can be exorcised only if you connect with it and uproot it at the same time. The theatre's history with the myth of the dybbuk is an unfinished business. It is a myth, a term, a curse, a memory; it is a cloud, fog, chaos.¹

These were the words of Chanan Snir, in an interview given while working on his 1988 production of An-Ski’s The Dybbuk, celebrating the 80th anniversary of Habimah, Israeli’s national theatre.² Habimah’s Dybbuk, originally directed by Yevgeni Vakhtangov in Moscow in 1922, symbolized the birth of Hebrew theatre and constitutes a reference point in the history of modern Western theatre as well. The artistic achievement, its huge acclaim and The Dybbuk’s presence in Habimah’s repertoire for 43 consecutive years have been cited among the factors that turned this play into a theatrical myth.

All these aspects contributed to Chanan Snir’s basic assumptions when he set out to direct the play. He referred to the cumulative artistic-cultural charge of the historical play in the collective memory of Israeli theatre as a kind of ghosting,³ affecting the way in which the current production was to be perceived. The cumulative image of the Moscow production of The Dybbuk was conveyed in Snir’s production through the role of Leah-Rovina, the combination of the figure of Leah and the actress Hanna Rovina. The Leah-Rovina character is also a kind of ghosting, since it describes the performative presence of Hanna Rovina, the legendary actress who, from the moment she went on stage, was inseparable from the role, from The Dybbuk and from Habimah. Leah-Rovina is an icon of Hebrew-Israeli culture, an echo of the first generation of Hebrew performers, who offered an ideological acting style larger than life, in the service of reviving Hebrew culture.

In addition to the historical ghosting of the Moscow production, An-Ski’s play revolves around the actual figure of a ghost, and raises the question of the ontological status of the dybbuk: that is, what would be an appropriate interpretation of the material presence of the spirit that speaks through Leah. Snir decided to give the spirit a psychological interpretation as a mental state and not as a kind of spiritual entity deriving from the play’s reference to Jewish folklore. This could be seen as a rational literality of the irrational mystical esoteric dimension embodied in the historical phenomenon of the dybbuk, which may be interpreted from a psychological-anthropological perspective as the symptom of a mental illness.⁴
This article attempts to demonstrate the polyphonic quality in Snir’s interpretation, which resulted in a devaluation of the dramatic-theatrical and significative effectiveness of the dybbuk figure, in comparison with the Moscow production. While Vakhtangov’s production did not necessarily imply the “existence” of a dybbuk, I contend that the non-verbal means of expression, innovative at the time, made it possible to perceive it from the point of view of the present without robbing it of its irrational-mystical force. My basic assumption is that the non-verbal elements in the Moscow production made it possible to convey the powerful presence of the dybbuk figure, which is beyond the rational. In order to demonstrate this I present here a methodological comparative analysis of the factors that contributed to the dramatic embodiment of the dybbuk character in both productions based on the connection between theatre historiography and performance analysis. Further, the canonic status of Vakhtangov’s text invites and demands looking into an intertextual relationship. My reading of the text of the Moscow production is based on source material (photographs, reviews, biographies of actors) and descriptions by O. Aslan and others, while the performance analysis of Snir’s production is based on videotape of the production.

I focus, in particular, on those dramatic-theatrical components that formulated the ritualistic sphere of the embodiment of the dybbuk figure in the Moscow production, and on those elements that created the polyphonic quality in Snir’s production. I will show that even though the result in the latter may have appeared to be incoherent, it was precisely that incoherence which enabled the audience to perceive Snir’s conception. It let the spectator assume a distanced critical position, and decipher the staging and the creative process itself as Snir’s attempt to “exorcise” “Habimah”’s Dybbuk. First, however, let me clarify the ontological status of the dybbuk phenomenon and the particular form it took in An-Ski’s play.

The ontological status of the dybbuk phenomenon in An-Ski’s play

In the course of his ethnographic work, An-Ski came across a dybbuk story called “A Terrible Tale”, which served as his raw material for the play. There are dozens of reports of dybbuk exorcisms in Jewish literature, starting in the first half of the 16th century. Historically, the ideas and beliefs which gave rise to the dybbuk are a typical product of the Kabbalistic theory of reincarnation, originating in 12th century Jewish mysticism.

According to popular belief, a dybbuk is the physical incarnation of the spirit of a dead person who penetrates a living person and speaks through him or her. Dramatically-theatrically, therefore, a dybbuk may be seen as speech. Moreover, in the play, speech is associated with an actual erotic-physical act, since Chanan-the-Dybbuk who cannot possess his beloved Leah in physical life, possesses and penetrates her by speech. This is a motif taken from Jewish folklore.
The speech acts of the dybbuk figure create liminal situations in which polar categories are blurred, such as man/woman, life/death, hidden/revealed. These situations express an anxiety-producing element,\textsuperscript{10} bearing upon the fear of death and the wish to restore the dead to life. The dybbuk depends on and clings to the living person without whom it cannot exist. The dybbuk possessing Leah replaces and changes her personality. On the one hand, the dybbuk is Leah herself; on the other hand, although it can only be perceived through her, it is an independent entity and originates in a different realm of existence. Hence, Leah differs from the dybbuk to the same degree that the dybbuk differs from her. There is, therefore, a conflict between Leah’s presence and the spirit of the absent Chanan, who is present through her. An entity is thus created that belongs in the twilight zone between what is visible and what is invisible, and whose speech creates a presence of the invisible. The theatrical potential of such a dramatic embodiment exemplifies the performative force of the spoken word in theatre. That performative force also serves as a link between theatrical and religious ritual. In the theatre, spoken words are not merely mimetic, describing the extra-theatrical reality through imitation; rather, they create an existence. Speech creates new, dynamic, present situations, which the spectator accepts as fictional yet realistic within the framework of the fictional world presented on stage.

As dramatic potential, Leah’s speaking in a voice not her own creates an interaction between the “other world” and this one – the physical, material world. Thus the dybbuk penetrates Leah through speech, possesses her through speech, "gives birth" to himself and "struggles" for his existence inside her as speech. What happens to Leah/Dybbuk, therefore, clearly raises and reflects the issue of the stage embodiment of “elsewhere” and “otherness”, a phenomenon which is at the heart of the theatrical performance.

**Comparative Analysis**

**The Adaptation**

An-Ski’s intricate, detailed play, translated by Bialik, became under Vakhtangov’s interpretation a scenario with a reduced number of dramatic motifs. In addition to the many abridgements, the third and fourth acts were unified to create a more clearly symmetrical structure\textsuperscript{11}. The plot progresses through rituals in which crisis situations develop: Chanan dies at the height of a Kabbalistic-magical ritual meant to prevent the match; and the wedding is cancelled because Leah becomes possessed by the dybbuk. At the end of the play, following the successful exorcism, Leah is reunited with her lover on the threshold of the afterworld, to the sound of wedding music off-stage. This plot structure creates a ritualistic sphere that constructs the character of the dybbuk, absent yet present through Leah as the protagonist of the play. The adaptation focuses on the dialectic tension between the split in Leah’s character resulting from her possession, and the long-awaited reunion expressed by the revelation of the dybbuk in the fictional present. In other words, the spectators’ object of identification is neither Leah nor Chanan, but the combination of both in the
fictional present, namely, the dybbuk figure, and their being “on the threshold” of their reunion.

Snir’s adaptation is a deconstruction of An-Ski’s text and of the text of Vakhtangov’s play. Dramatically, the play revolves around the story of a girl whose father arranges her marriage against her will and who becomes insane on her wedding day. In other words, Leah is the main protagonist of the play. Snir conveyed the psychological perspective of the dybbuk phenomenon by breaking up the character of Leah into four Leahs. Leah (Nava Ziv), Leah’s Reflection (Victoria Hana), Leah-Rovina (Dina Blei) and Leah-Gitl (Yarona Harel). Such a division, as we shall see, created four embodiments of the dybbuk figure, each bearing a different meaning of existence. The drama of the voices of the multi-Leahs made it impossible to know which was the “true” dybbuk. Snir’s interpretation thus appeared to be an attempt to deal in different ways with the hovering shadow of “Habimah”’s original Dybbuk, and not only with the specific dybbuk of Leah’s character.

The psychological perspective was structurally translated through a flashback. The play opens at the moment of crisis, with the cry: “You are not my groom!” at the height of the wedding ceremony. Next, Leah is seen lying in a hospital bed. A doctor comes in and asks: “Do you remember me?”, “What happened, Leah?” But she doesn’t answer. From that moment on, the spectator is introduced to the characters and sees the chain of events in the fictional past leading to the trauma: Leah and Chanan’s meeting at the synagogue, Sender’s search for a match, Chanan’s death, the preparations for the wedding, the beggars’ dance. At the end of Act I there is a return to the moment of crisis, the wedding. Halfway through Act I, following Chanan’s death, a scene was added in which two rituals are performed simultaneously: the washing of the dead body, and the ritual of preparing the bride for her wedding. The simultaneity indicates that the reason for Leah’s insanity is unfulfilled mourning. Act II progresses linearly and revolves around the exorcism of the dybbuk in the fictional present. The socio-cultural climate that gave rise to the historical dybbuk phenomenon was enhanced in the ritual of exorcism through the addition of textual meanings and magical activities originating in dybbuk stories. Act II clearly does not provide an answer to the psychological interpretation of the dybbuk figure presented in Act I, but rather links it with and moves it to the socio-cultural climate in which it appeared. This approach allows the spectator to infer that Snir has consciously reduced the dybbuk figure by endowing it with psychological meaning. The psychological aspect as an interpretative starting point in reference to the historical dybbuk phenomenon does not allow “hearing the voices of insanity, nor deciphering the lunatic’s signs per se. Psychoanalysis can decipher some of the forms of insanity, yet the sovereign action of insanity remains alien to it. It cannot let go, neither convey, nor explain, the essence of such action”\textsuperscript{12}.

Snir’s adaptation, by contrasting the two interpretations, the psychological and the folkloristic ones, targets spectator reception to understood the production
as not being about Leah’s private dybbuk, nor its socio-cultural context, but rather as about interpretative alternatives for coping with the ghosting of the Moscow production; possibly in a deliberate attempt to eliminate the dybbuk’s ‘aura’ from Habimah’s off-stage.

The Performative Space: Stage and Off-Stage

An-Ski’s play abounds with mystical ideas adopted by popular culture. Vakhtangov’s rescuing of the plot from the backyard of popular culture and turning it into a theatrical experience, was apparently guided by the principle of not separating between the popular-ritualistic dimension and the theatrical ritual, which conveyed the irrational essence of the dybbuk figure by means of non-verbal expressions. This was corroborated by Natan Altman’s set design. The original set employed all the folkloristic elements (the pulpit, the Holy Ark, the curtain, Torah scrolls, the Zadik’s tisch), whose angular arrangement and the function of the stage composition endowed the religious objects with a unique new theatrical meaning. This was also contributed to by the costumes, which distorted the actors’ bodies, the accentuated make-up, which turned the face into a mask, and the spare lighting that created shadows. The set sketches show a tendency to create a stage-upon-a-stage in the design of the space. Such, for example, are the raised pulpit in Act I, and the large table in the Zaddik’s house, which stood on a raised platform, leaning diagonally towards the audience. The scenography profaned the holy objects, using them as theatrical elements reflecting a particular social significance. For example, the only short dialogue between Chanan and Leah in the fictional present takes place with Leah standing on the pulpit, a holy spot where no woman should stand. Chanan is looking up at her as if looking at the Shekhinah (the feminine aspect of the Divinity). The difference in heights may represent the difference in status. In another scene, the idlers are standing on the pulpit gazing in awe at Chanan’s dead body, like spectators at a performance. Their theatrical gaze, as well as Chanan’s corpse displayed as a kind of theatrical object, serves as a precursor to his return as the dybbuk in the theatrical fiction. In the exorcism scene, Leah is standing at the front end of the Zaddik’s table, facing the audience. The awed, curious stares of the Chassidim and the Zadik focus on her, turning her into a sexual object that is simultaneously attractive and discomforting. This stage iconography retained the religious images, while the liminal images enabled not only the reception of the social messages, but also an understanding of the irrational contents of the fictional world.

The mystical atmosphere of the fictional world in the Moscow production was also enhanced by the music. Before the curtain rose there was a quiet singing of the tune known as “Mipnei Ma”, whose lyrics describe the soul’s descent in order to ascend. The resonating violin created a mysterious, ethereal atmosphere. The tune was repeated at all major moments throughout the performance, either in its original form or combined with other musical ideas, such as prior to the wedding ceremony, and during the final dialogue between
Chanen and Leah when his voice is heard off-stage. At the end of the performance, after the curtain had fallen the opening music was played again, stimulating the spectator to imagine the off-stage, i.e. the metaphysical world of the dead souls surrounding the characters present on stage. The off-stage world was not only perceived as the double of the theatrical, physical world, but it also invaded it and sucked it into the void, into the invisible “other world”.

The set design (Alexander Lisiansky and Nitzan Refaeli) in Snir’s production, in contrast, reflected an attempt to turn away from elements associated with a specific time and place. At center stage, as a stage-upon-a-stage, stood a monumental building, with many windows. Its gray color and its texture gave it an old, deserted appearance, like a haunted house. Inside the building, on the right stood a dead tree. The building, with no indication of location, was mounted on a revolving stage, and the changes of position, lighting effects and stage situations created associations of a synagogue in ruins, a cemetery, etc. To the left of the building, outside, a bed was placed, symbolizing the psychiatric hospital. The dominant presence of the structure and the fact that the action was focused within and around it reduced the motif of insanity, making it but a scenographic illustration. The discrepancy between the two stage elements increased the spectator’s awareness of the incoherence in the interpretation. On the other hand, one could notice the attempt to form a connection between the process of remembering that Leah goes through as a way of coping with the fit of insanity, and the collective process of remembering, created by the performative space. This was possible since the stage seemed to be a kind of memorial service, aware of itself and of its ability to “revive” the dead. Thus, for example, the first scene depicted two parades, coldly lit, slowly emerging from either side of the building through a thick curtain of smoke. Upon reaching front stage the participants performed the wedding ceremony in a stiff, automatic manner. Very loud music, reminiscent of Jewish wedding music, could be heard in the background. Following Leah’s scream, “You are not my groom!”

Meshulach (the Messenger) entered and declared in icy tones: “A dybbuk has possessed the bride.” The whole situation appeared like a tableau vivant of “reviving” the dead. Chanen’s first appearance in the synagogue then reveals him lying “dead”, and after Meir, the custodian, asks: “Chanen, did you come back?” he is resurrected upon the stage, implying that all the characters in the fictional world belong in fact in the world of the dead. In the final scene, the monumental building is raised and disappears from view, accompanied by dramatic music and a red sky in the background. In the cold, alienated void left following the disappearance of the building, the two dead lovers slowly lie down and disappear together into an invisible grave.

The performative space functioned as a monochrome photograph, flat, unidimensional and cold, a memory of the world of the Jewish shtetl. This lack of dimensionality made the performative space both impermeable to the invasion of the off-stage world and immune to being sucked out. In the absence of any other world, the performative space thus became a space for playing with dead, rootless
memory. The sophisticated technology heightened spectator awareness of the process of creating and producing stage images. Scant spirit could be seen through plentiful matter. The superabundance of images created a meaningless collage, where it was impossible for voices from the past to become manifest. What could be seen were only artificial images, devoid of any current socio-cultural significance.

**Chanan, Leah and the Embodiment of the Dybbuk Figure**

Vakhtangov’s acting method was based on what he termed “fantastic realism”, which turned the actor’s body into sculpting material, without abandoning the inner “truth”. The characters’ allegorical position was conveyed through large gestures and stylized movement; speech that sounded more like a tune full of pathos; emblematic figures who seemed larger than life and represented abstract ideas. The choreographic syntax endowed the dramatic situation with a ritualistic dimension to create the spiritual essence of the dybbuk figure.

In contrast, Snir’s approach to acting is usually expressed in the fertile tension between psychodramatic techniques and a minimalist movement style. Through psychodramatic techniques he allows his actors to play the characters by combining the tension between emotional identification and expressive distance, resulting in a high level of restraint. A movement motif that repeatedly appears in his work is that of opposition between freezing and motion. Movement is usually "clean", devoid of any stylized or emotional element. In the case of The Dybbuk there was a clear attempt to formulate stylized movement associated with the Expressionistic movement style, while on the acting level he attempted to create a high degree of psychological credibility. As we shall see, that attempt produced different acting styles and opened up gaps that resulted in incoherence in the dramatic interpretation.

The dybbuk figure in Vakhtangov’s production gradually grew out of the sharp differences in the way the actors characterized their roles. Leah, played by Hanna Rovina, is the personification of innocence, a symbol of purity, motherhood and sanctification, the Madonna and Christ combined. Her dramatic moments were emphasized, among other things, by the tension between speech and silence, and by slow gestures that gave her presence a ritual dimension. Leah’s strong dramatic presence was enhanced by the special “color” of Rovina’s voice and her noble appearance. Chanan, played by Miriam Elias, did not look like a typical lover, but rather like a living-dead. He was in a constant state of stress. His entrances and exits were doubled compared with An-Ski’s stage directions, emphasizing his impulsive nature. The casting of a female in the role of a male character added an enigmatic quality, softening the harsh sexuality in the lovers’ encounter and enhancing Chanan’s allegorical dimension. Chanan’s movements were ritualistic and included hand gestures reminiscent of the hands blessing the holy ark. The spectator could associate him with the figure of the dybbuk through both verbal and non-verbal motifs: e.g. after Leah walked out of
employed to “exorcise” the memory of Leah-Rovina’s dybbuk. "real" other there this endowing a reflections in philosopher, sensual why man character thin sexual aspect, such as a particular way of touching the face or a type of caress.

Hanna dybbuk portrayed was in looked who was quiet, noble presence and the spirit’s strange, aggressive manner of speaking. It was emphasized by the stiff gestures expressing the ecstatic powers of the spirit who possessed her. The difference was accentuated by the acting style; her face looked like a wax mask, and only her voice-speech indicated what was going on in her soul. The spareness and preciseness of the performance increased the spectator’s awareness of the meta-theatrical nature of the dybbuk figure; i.e., it was discerned through the “double” acting of an actress who simultaneously portrayed two characters perceived as some sort of a ghost in regard to the actress’s presence. In hindsight, it could be said that the meta-theatricality of the dybbuk figure was further intensified by being associated with the presence of Hanna Rovina, considered to be the first lady of Hebrew theater, the great sorceress of theatrical death.

In Snir’s production, in order to emphasize the notion of the dybbuk as a mental state and not a state of spiritual being, Chanan’s figure was characterized realistically, rather than symbolically. Micha Selectar’s physical presence a tall, thin young man with handsome, pleasant features as well as his costume – a long gray coat worn over white trousers, a large kippah on his head – all gave his character the combined quality of a modern yeshiva student and a secular young man in search of himself within Jewish mysticism. It was not hard to comprehend why Leah was attracted to him. On the other hand, he did not convey any erotic, sensual dimension towards Leah. He appeared rather as a kind of young philosopher, rebelling against conventional ideas and eventually choosing death, in a way that the mise-en-scène interprets as the suicide of a young, frustrated lover.

As noted, the dybbuk figure was conveyed through four different reflections of Leah’s character. As a rhetorical means, the multi-Leahs constituted a theatrical-dramatic potential to present a feminine “drama of voices”, hence endowing the dybbuk figure with a new, personal-mental significance. However, this deconstruction of Leah’s figure failed to create a coherent meaning, since there was no effective significant dialogue between the various voices. On the other hand, since the multi-Leahs diverted attention from the protagonist, the “real” Leah, the spectator was drawn to observe the means of expression employed to “exorcise” the memory of Leah-Rovina’s dybbuk.
The “Real” Leah

The acting style of the “real” Leah (Nava Ziv) revealed an attempt to give the figure those qualities of innocence, virginity and vulnerability that would give rise to the wild, violent, sexual fits of insanity. In the flashback scenes she appeared like an obedient, submissive daughter. However, there was also an overt erotic dimension to her acting. For example, in the synagogue she fervently kissed the ark’s curtain and externalized her desire for Chanan to such an extent that the spectator was left in no doubt regarding the intensity of the relationship. She was not exceptionally beautiful, fitting in with the childish appearance of her companions. Insanity was shaped through concrete physical details. Mental illness was emphasized by screams and seizures. The clothes enhanced the motif of insanity. At the beginning of the play she wear a white, long-sleeved nightgown resembling a straightjacket, which she also wore at the exorcism ritual. Nava Ziv’s performative presence contributed to the tension between vulnerability and strength in Leah’s character, but, as far as the concrete aspects of insanity were concerned, the actress’s dramatic choices and decisions were too obvious. An ineffective tension was thus created between an act perceived as irrational and the actress’s self-awareness of shaping insanity.

Leah’s Reflection

Leah’s Reflection (Victoria Hana) appeared and disappeared intermittently and, through an expressive use of voice and movement, hinted at the connection between mysticism and insanity. In contrast to Nava Ziv’s Leah, Victoria’s performative presence conveyed sensuality, desire and particularly a link to mystical aspects, all of which served to enhance the symbolism of her character. For example, when Chanan expressed his desire for Leah by recounting the parable of “The Maiden in the Palace” from the Zohar (the primary Kabbalistic text), Leah’s Reflection gently sang “The guards have found me”, from the Song of Songs, while slowly walking around the central building, shifting between appearance and disappearance. In Act II, between the ceremonies of Din Torah (the religious trial) and the exorcism, she chanted a prayer as she walked in a dreamlike fashion, slowly tiptoeing from one end of the stage to the other. Because Leah’s Reflection did not change but appeared throughout the play in a state of constant devotion, it failed to introduce any new insight or a connection higher level of consciousness. It thus constituted a part of the general mystical atmosphere without leading to the spiritual message it might have conveyed.

Leah, Leah’s Reflection and the Dybbuk

The figure of the dybbuk as a component of Leah’s soul grew out of a small number of scenes depicting Leah’s Reflection as Leah’s inner voice. Those
scenes functioned primarily as an illustration. In Chanan and Leah’s meeting at the synagogue her Reflection provided her with some sort of inner voice, standing behind her and devoutly whispering the text “Hello. Chanan, here you are again.” In the cemetery scene she led the dead Chanan and reminded him of that same sentence. Later on there was a verbal interaction between the three of them, while repeating the sentence in varying intonations and at an increasing pace, to the point when (the “real”) Leah screamed “Chanan!” as he disappeared from view together with Leah’s Reflection. At the height of the Beggars Dance she appeared in the center of the circle, spinning Leah round and round so fast that the latter collapsed. Then she spoke as an inner voice together with Leah, and was finally escorted out by a male nurse. This motif of reflection was repeated several times, recalling the atmosphere of the psychiatric hospital. At the end of Act I she appeared as Leah screamed “You are not my groom”, they held each other and spoke simultaneously in different voices, offering in fact, the only situation in which Leah’s “drama of voices” could be seen. Since there was only a limited number of (either verbal or non-verbal) interactions between Leah and Leah’s Reflection, the two figures never manage to integrate into one. Leah’s Reflection remained a symbolic dramatic expression that, although indicating the connection between mysticism and insanity, did not relate to the shaping of Leah’s insanity. She was therefore perceived as an independent character, which in a way overshadowed the character it was supposed to reflect.

**Leah-Gitl**

Leah-Gitl (Yarona Harel), another reflection of Leah’s figure, was a combination of Gitl, Leah’s young girlfriend, who accompanied her together with her nanny in the process of remembering, and an image of Leah as a bride (wearing a white bridal gown). Leah-Gitl appeared twice: first, during the simultaneous rituals of preparing the bride for her wedding and washing the dead body, and then again in the closing scene. In both cases she sang a lament, emotionally identifying with Leah: “Whatever was fresh becomes worn out / and whatever was soft becomes hard / and whatever was beautiful turns ugly / and whatever was jolly turns dark / and whatever was flowing withers / and whatever was young turns old / and whatever existed passes on / and turns into ashes and dust. / Man is like a vapor, his days are like a passing shadow.” The first time, she stood at center stage, sadly watching the ritual preparation of the bride, as Leah-Rovina focused her attention on the ritual washing of the dead body. The second time, she sang over the lovers’ grave. At these key moments, the sentimental song focused the spectators’ attention on the fate of the private Leah. Since the song pessimistically presents death as an unavoidable part of the life cycle, it dims the option of regarding the dybbuk, an anomalous phenomenon integrating death into life, as a spiritual answer to emotional distress.
Leah-Rovina

Leah-Rovina was, as I mentioned earlier; the ghost of actress Hanna Rovina. The performance began by “meeting” her in the theater foyer. Among other exhibits, including a portrait of the historical Hanna Rovina, actress Dina Blei was seated in a glass case as a statue of Leah-Rovina. A few minutes into the show she stepped out of the glass case and slowly walked among the audience. When the performance began she went through the building on the stage, with a lit candelabra set upon her head, then disappeared into the darkness. Afterward, she appeared but was detached from the theatrical event as such; she was a silent figure, wandering and dancing in over-emphasized theatrical gestures outside the building, at the edge of the stage. She functioned as an idea from the distant past that is incapable of affecting what is currently happening on the stage. Her presence was strongly felt both because it was so static and due to her mostly slow, over-emphasized gestures. She watched the events taking place on the stage from different spots, but there was no eye-contact between her and the other characters, thus creating an image of an omniscient figure. For example: she stood outside the building, to the right, watching the meeting between Chanan, Leah and Leah’s Reflection at the synagogue; during the ritual of purification of the dead she stood on top of the table where Chanan’s body was lying, disappearing when the body was taken out; during the beggars’ dance she stood immobile in the distance (her freeze was accentuated, in contrast with the beggars’ wild dance with Leah); in the cemetery scene she stood on the building’s upper level while Leah and Leah’s Reflection stood face to face inside the building, and each performed an identical gesture of caressing her long braid (thus creating a poetic image connecting the present event with the theatrical past); in the exorcism scene, she ran along both sides of the building, looking from various angles at Leah, who was tied to the bed.

Dina Blei managed to convey in her acting that same aura that had surrounded Hanna Rovina’s performative presence. Her gaze embodied the point of view of the eternal nature of The Dybbuk with which the current production was wrestling. The interpretive alternative, which focused on the private narrative of Leah’s character, was made to look minor, and the folkloristic alternative seemed pathetic, in view of her observant gaze.

In conclusion, the four reflections of Leah’s character created a kaleidoscopic picture through which one could watch Leah’s private narrative through the point of view of Habimah’s Dybbuk. The multi-Leahs led to a devaluation in the emotional effectiveness of the dybbuk figure, thus increasing awareness of the theatrical event as a drama of voices. Within the difference between the Leah-Rovina icon as a theatrical pose and the “real” Leah, lay the overall interpretation: namely, the attempt to deal with Habimah’s Dybbuk in different ways. The incoherence resulting from the multi-Leahs invited a
wandering, wondering gaze, a multiplicity of points of view. In that sense, the theatrical event was not presented as a complete result but as a kind of ironic creative process, mocking itself for its attempt to exorcise Habimah’s *Dybbuk*.

**The Beggars**

The Beggars Dance was one of the most memorable icons of the Moscow production. Vakhtangov raised the number of beggars from seven to twelve, and they were characterized in precise detail revealing a strong physical presence. The dance was constructed as a play-within-a-play, and functioned as a powerful theatrical stimulus through which the moment of Leah’s possession was emphasized. The choreographic syntax was based on a sharp transition from rapid, precise movement to freezing. The distorted physical presence of the beggars, their angular, jittering, feverish movements, reflected Leah’s descent into insanity. It should be noted that the music, which created a feverish effect due to its repetitive structure and increasing pace, played an important role in its contribution to the horrific nature of the dance. At one point a beggar woman screamed: “I haven’t danced in forty years” and like a vampire pulled the horrified Leah into the circle, while the other beggars clung to her lustfully and violently. We could say that the beggars functioned as the dramatic representation of the dead man trying to be resurrected through her. Their social-historical context confronted the spectator with familiar figures (the shtetl’s poor inhabitants) though they were perceived more as an expressive projection of “the spirit of insanity”.

In Snir’s production, as opposed to Vakhtangov’s, the beggars’ were present not only in the wedding scene but throughout the performance. There were nine of them, two women and seven men. Each one suffered from a physical disability that limited his or her movements. In addition, the actors gave their characters those behavioral characteristics normatively associated with mental illness. They wore tattered black coats and ragged white shirts. Parts of their bodies were exposed. The men were bald. Make-up was emphasized and exaggerated, stressing distortions resulting from physical injuries, scars, bruises, dirt, etc. Although there was some attempt to use the beggars to accentuate the atmosphere of the psychiatric hospital, as witnesses-participants who create situations involving outbursts of wild sexuality, the idea actually remained on the illustrative level, since the hospital theme was not developed. Their grotesque quality was not stylized or permanent; they changed according to the situation. At the beginning of the performance they appeared as Leah’s nightmare as she lay on her hospital bed. They approached her, making violent gestures as if about to rape her. This mise-en-scene is eventually understood as an inter-textual quotation of the beggars’ dance, but it also creates an associative link between beggars and lunatics. Later on in the show they peeked into the building through the windows and functioned as substitutes for the figures of the idlers. In their dance with the bride they violently attacked Leah and blocked all escape routes. The movement motif was that of touching. The more provocative the touch, the more it excited
and was encouraged by the other beggars who were looking on. The dance became faster and faster, as Leah was tossed around. Since the beggars resembled mad people, they reduced the effect of Leah’s own fit of insanity, and their dance was not constructed or perceived as the extreme situation that induced Leah’s fit of insanity and served as its framework. In Act II they participated in the exorcism and carried out the Zaddik’s instructions from sheer sadistic enjoyment. Since these figures had no clear and defined extra-fictional referent in modern-day Israel, they did not create a significant statement on the level of the connection between theatrical reality and real life. Their grotesque essence gave them the quality of destructive figures and contributed to the expressionistic dimension of the dramatic syntax, but beyond destruction there was no image of “the beyond” but only of cruelty per se. Moreover, their constant presence as a kind of multi-vocal choir did not translate into a component expressing the polyphonality of the dybbuk figure.

**The Exorcism: The Zaddik and the Chassidim**

In the exorcism ritual, Vakhtangov systematically employed all the popular elements and exploited their evocative-theatrical power. The Chassidim lit black candles, held them in their hands and looked like shadows. They removed the Torah scrolls and held them in their arms, covered the ark with a black curtain, blew the shofars and, like a talking chorus, repeated the Zaddik’s words in bizarre cries. The Zaddik resembled a wizard. Leah looked like a distorted androgynous creature, a distinct deep male voice emanating from her throat, expressing the ecstatic powers dominating her. The scene was mostly static. The Zaddik was seated at the head of the table with Leah standing at the front of the stage and the Chassidim standing/sitting around the table. The tension between the static situation and the stylized gestures, and the male voice coming out of her mouth, emphasized the theatrical embodiment of the dybbuk figure. All of these served to create the effect of a powerful ritual, captivating the audience with its theatrical magic, simultaneously covering and revealing that which cannot be embodied on the stage – the Absence, the Invisible.

The meager spirit of the dybbuk exorcism in Snir’s production was the result of the utilisation of esoteric-folkloristic elements without creating a suggestive ritualistic sphere for the encounter between the Zaddik and Leah. The visual and behavioral characteristics of the Zaddik and the Chassidim made them appear pathetic. The Zaddik (Shalom Shmuelov) wore a white robe, and wrapped himself up in a piece of white cloth instead of the tallit (prayer shawl). There was some sort of white kippah on his head. These garments were meant to create an associative link to the world of modern medicine. But his other characteristics, such as his long hair and beard, as well as the behavioral characteristics of a grand young-old rabbi, which the actor gave his character, made him appear like an eccentric rabbinical authority. In the opening scene, the Chassidim/beggars were lying at the feet of the Zaddik like innocent cubs. Later on their utter cruelty was exposed, as they violently carried out the Zaddik’s orders. In the course of
the ritual, the Zaddik and Chassidim tried to create a level of performative credibility in their attitude towards the dybbuk. They “seriously” acted out an exorcism, but the choreography and vocal style did not create a suggestive ritualistic sphere but, rather, a pathetic ceremony. While Leah appeared to be possessed by something stronger than herself, she did not speak in two different voices, but screamed with an emotional intensity. The spectator was expected to believe these rapid and unexpected switches of extreme mental states. Traditional objects of exorcism were not used. Instead, Snir added magical activities originating in dybbuk stories, which gave the occasion a concrete physical dimension and increased its folkloristic esoteric aspect. For example, one of the magical acts that express the sexual dimension of exorcism in folklore is that the mother, the sister or the daughter of the possessed person has to put her finger in her own pubes and then put it in the mouth of the possessed. This was to be performed by Frieda, Leah’s nanny. One of the Chassidim approached her and whispered in her ear, then she hid behind a curtain, and when she emerged, horrified, she was led by the Chassid and forced to complete the act. Leah responded by vomiting.

There was also a text added towards the end of the ritual of exorcism, enumerating various body parts in detail, in order to determine the exact place for the spirit to exit the body. At that point in the ritual Leah was tied to the bed, with the Zaddik sitting on the edge of the bed and obsessively touching every part of her body, in a way reminiscent of a rape. In the course of that physical contact, he recited the text with a great deal of pathos. Leah shrank, went into a seizure and screamed. The “rape” stressed the physical details and linked the physical symptoms with mental illness. Leah however seemed to be less possessed than did the Zaddik, who appeared to be madly affected by the situation he found himself in. It was not clear at this point whether the dybbuk was in Leah’s soul or whether it had penetrated the Zaddik. In the absence of the ritualistic sphere, the focus was on the body undergoing an aggressive process, which brought about its reduction physically, mentally, and spiritually.

In conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that Vakhtangov’s interpretation did not necessarily imply that there “is” a dybbuk, but that the ritualistic sphere that resulted from the expressionistic aesthetics created liminal situations in which the void became existence in the spectator’s mind. In his attempts to confront Habimah’s Dybbuk, Snir’s production presented a psychological position regarding the existence of the dybbuk, while the exorcism presented the folkloristic option, and the cumulative image of the historical production was made present by the character of Leah-Rovina. The latter’s observant gaze made the private narrative of the Leah character seem minor, and the folkloristic alternative seem pathetic. The multi-Leahs caused a reduction in the emotional effectiveness of the dybbuk figure, thus increasing awareness of the theatrical event as a drama of voices. The incoherence that was the result of the multi-
Leahs invited a wandering, wondering gaze, a multiplicity of points of view. In that sense, the event was not presented as a result but as a process, self-ironic as to its own attempt to exorcise Habimah’s Dybbuk. The polyphony represented a psycho-mythical process: that is, Leah’s process of remembering was a rhetorical means, representing the process of exorcising Habimah’s Dybbuk. The incoherence enabled the spectator to take a distanced, critical position when reviewing the way in which the event openly and consciously coped with the psycho-mythical process it had taken upon itself, as Snir put it: “To connect with the myth in order to exorcise it.”

1Dori Parnes, (ed), Eighty and One Nights, “Habimah” The National Theatre and Yediot Aharonot Press 1998; 196-197; (Hebrew)
2 Snir’s production is Habimah’s third production of the play, since the Moscow production. In 1979 it was directed by Joseph Cheikin, one of the founders of “The Open Theatre”. In 1988 it was directed by Andjei Vaida, a Polish theatre and cinema director. In 1985, Yossi Yizraeli directed the play at the Jerusalem Chan Theatre. Snir is thus the first Israeli director to direct the play for Habimah.
3Marvin Carlson, ‘Invisible Presences – Performance Intertextuality’ Theatre Research International, Vol.19, 1994; 111-134. The term “ghosting”, coined by Marvin Carlson, describes, among other things, the artistic baggage that actors accumulate with every role they play. That baggage accompanies the actor when he or she plays a character, as some sort of a ghost, and it affects the way s/he acts and the way the character is perceived by the spectator.
4Yoram Bilu, ‘Dybbus – Then and Now’ Makom le Mahshava, no.4, July 1999; 2-8. (Hebrew) In this article he analyzes the historical dybbuk phenomenon from the perspective of psychological anthropology. He maintains that despite its dramatic appearance, the dybbuk represents a relatively mild disorder, reminiscent of classical hysteria or the dissociative identity disorder in current psychiatric classification.
7Since I closely accompanied the production in all its phases, I am well familiar with it.
8 Gedalyah Nigal,(ed) Dybbuk Tales In Jewish Literature, Rubin Mass Ltd. Jerusalem, 1983; 146 (Hebrew)
9 Nigal, ibid. and Bilu, ibid. It is worth mentioning that the sexual element is very strong in dybbuk stories but in none of them is there a loving relationship between the victim and the attacker. This is one of the main changes introduced by An-Ski in the play.
10Eli Rozik, Basics of Play Analysis, Or Am Publishers, Tel-Aviv 1992; esp. 38-44. The term “anxiety-producing element” equals the term “mythic element” as it appears in Rozik’s model for play analysis.
11 The play’s script was published by the Israeli Drama Center of the Histadrut Center for Education and Culture. The year of publication is not mentioned. A detailed follow-up of the textual changes may be found in Yossi Yizraeli’s dissertation, as well as in Uri Haklai’s Ph.D. diss., Nahum Zemach’s Work in the context of the Revival of Jewish Culture in Russia, 1974.
12 Michel Foucault, Histoire de la folie a l’age classique, 1972, translated by Aharon Amir, Keter, Jerusalem, 205 (Hebrew).
Chajes’ Ph.D. dissertation that deals with the exorcism phenomenon from a historical perspective.

It is worth mentioning that the sketches for the set design feature eight beds, but in the performance text there was only one bed.

The image of the Madonna and Christ can be seen in photographs from the production. For example, in Act I Chanan is looking up at Leah, who is dressed in black, as if he were looking at the Holy Mother. In a picture from Act II she can be seen leaning against a black board, one of her hands stretched out to one side, suggestive of Jesus on the cross. The beggar woman tries to pull her away and the rest of the beggars are standing behind her. The picture is an allusion to the Danse Macabre. In Act III she is leaning on the table, both arms open to the sides of her body, her hands on the table. Her head is held up and there is a sorrowful, suffering expression on her face. The position can be associated with the crucified Christ.

It is worth noting that Miriam Elias was Vakhtangov’s initial cast for the role, and later on the role was played by actor Refael Zvi.

Critic A. Kugel wrote: ...”To play with such subtlety and accuracy as she does – this can be done only by a very talented, very perceptive actress. To merge two voices into one in such a way as she does – this is a wonder of technical overcoming…” The review is in Shimon Finkel’s Hana Rovina, a Monography based on Memoires, Eked, Tel-Aviv 1978; 49 (Hebrew).

The song was taken from the play Yentel, based on a story by I. Bashevis Singer. The adaptation was written by Yaakov Shabtai and Chanan Snir, who also directed the play.


Dvora Bertonov, A Journey to the World of the Dance, Reshafim, Tel-Aviv, 1982. In her book, dancer Dvora Bertonov describes the Beggars Dance in detail. As the daughter of actor Yehoshua Bertonov who played the Meshulach character in the play, she was able to watch the dance dozens of times. In the 1980s she “revived” the dance in her solo evening.

It is worth noting that the doctor appearing in the first scene and the Zaddik were portrayed by the same actor, whose performative presence was supposed to create an association between the two characters. But this association was not effective, as none of the ritual acts connect with the psychological dimension.

Shorshei ha-Shemot (a Kabbalistic text), p.132. Snir arrived at these texts thanks to Yossi Chajes’ Ph.D. dissertation that deals with the exorcism phenomenon from a historical perspective.