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The National Center for Jewish Film
New Digital Restoration & New English Subtitles

THE DYBBUK

A YIDDISH FILM CLASSIC

The *Dybbuk* is a Yiddish film classic based on the celebrated play by S. Ansky, written during the turbulent years of 1912–1917. The idea for the play came to Ansky as he led a Jewish folklore expedition through the small towns of Eastern Europe. The expedition was cut short by the outbreak of the First World War and plans to produce the play in Russian by Stanislavsky's Moscow Art Theater were aborted by the Bolshevik Revolution.

Ansky, who died in 1920, never lived to see his play produced, in either Russian, Yiddish, or Hebrew. The play, however, with its rich ethnographic tapestry, mystical themes, star-crossed lovers, and haunting melodies, was destined to become one of the most widely produced in the history of Jewish theater.

The film version of *The Dybbuk* was created in Poland in 1937 with the finest talents of Polish Jewry — script writers, composers, choreographers, set designers, actors, and historical advisors. A fortunate few survived the ensuing horrors of the Holocaust; most died before their time, never witnessing the pleasure their artistry has brought, and will now bring, in this newly restored and subtitled version, to countless audiences. The National Center for Jewish Film presents *The Dybbuk* in tribute to them all.

The Setting

The Dybbuk is set close to the end of the nineteenth century in several small remote towns, or *shtetlekh*, of Eastern Europe, where Hasidism, a popular religious movement with a unique pattern of communal life, had become firmly established. The Hasidic way of life is centered on a charismatic leader,

the Tsaddik, who provides spiritual illumination for his followers attained through his mystical union with God.

A wonder-healer and miracle worker, in the eyes of his followers the Tsaddik, or Rebbe, is a combination of confessor, moral instructor, and practical advisor. Also a theoretical teacher and exegetical preacher, he expounds his teachings at his table surrounded by his disciples. For the individual Hasid, visiting the court of his Rebbe is both a pilgrimage and a revitalizing reunification with the brotherhood gathered at the court.

The shtetl pattern of Jewish settlement depicted in the film in rather stylized fashion took shape in the 16th century within the Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania as Jews were invited to settle in private towns owned by the

nobility. In many of these towns, the Jews became the predominant majority, thereby enabling them to consolidate a homogeneous way of life and pattern of values. Their primary economic function was to serve the noblemen as lessors of assets such as land, mills, inns, and breweries, and as tax collectors. Of course, other trades and businesses soon developed.

It would not be a gross exaggeration to say that the majority of shtetl population lived in a permanent state of poverty, an aspect of shtetl existence which Ansky dwells upon in his play and which is depicted in the film in the darkest of hues.

Ironically, by the end of the interwar period, when this film was produced, one out of every four Polish Jews lived in one of the five largest cities and 40 percent lived in settlements of over 10,000 Jews. The city, not the shtetl, was the center of Jewish political and

The Hasidic way of life is centered on a charismatic leader.

cultural life. Nevertheless, the shtetl maintained its hold on the imagination of Eastern European Jewry as it does to this very day. Modern Yiddish writers have variably depicted the traditional way of life in the shtetl, which they themselves had left behind, in nostalgic or severely critical tones, or oftentimes, in some combination of the two. But what is true for many is that the shtetl persisted as a symbol of Eastern European Jewish existence. This, on second thought, should not be altogether surprising, inasmuch as the life



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of Jewish communities in the large cities and urban centers of Eastern Europe, and eventually America, was to a great extent an outgrowth of shtetl life, institutions, and values.

The Story

Sender and Nisn, former yeshiva students and now devoted friends, have come from afar to celebrate the High Holy Days with their spiritual leader, Reb Azriel, the Hasidic Rebbe of Miropole. In their desire to strengthen the bonds of friendship, Sender and Nisn take a vow to marry off their soon expected firstborn children, should one have a son and the other a daughter. They make this pledge to one another, despite the foreboding words of the Rebbe that "Man does not make decisions" and the cryptic warning of a strange visitor, a Messenger, to the Rebbe's court, that "such things are not done without deliberation."

After saying their farewells at the crossroads, Sender returns home to find his wife has died giving birth to a girl, Leah. Nisn suffers a fatal accident on his way home at the same instant that a son, Khonnon, is born. Nisn's

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last desperate words are a plea to Sender to remember the vow.

Eighteen years later, Khonnon's fate brings him to Brinnits. Sender, now a wealthy miser blinded by avarice, rejects the impoverished young yeshiva student in favor of a wealthy son-in-law, failing to recognize Khonnon as Nisn's son before it is too late. Overwrought by his failure to win Leah's hand, despite his efforts to affect the outcome through ritualistic ablutions, fasting, and mystical practices and formulations, including appeals to Satanic forces, Khonnon finally succumbs. His death is announced by the Messenger during Leah's betrothal celebration.

His love unrelenting even in death, Khonnon's restless spirit enters Leah's body as she stands under the wedding canopy and cleaves to the soul of his beloved. The Messenger once again closes the act with the haunting words: "The bride has been possessed by a dybbuk!"

Sender brings Leah to Miropole to seek the help of Reb Azriel. His heart-rending confession of disregard for the vow made eighteen years earlier prompts the Rebbe to appeal to the deceased Nisn to forgive Sender, and declare the vow null and void, since, according to law, an agreement pertaining to a thing not yet born is not binding. In an elaborately orchestrated ritual, the Rebbe succeeds finally in exorcising the dybbuk. The Rebbe's earthly justice notwithstanding, the young lovers are ultimately reunited in death and, as the mysterious Messenger notes in the film's final words, true justice is done.

Between Two Worlds

As literary historians have shown, modern Yiddish writers at the turn of the twentieth century began to seek sources of renewal for Yiddish literature not in contemporary European culture, but rather in their own distant, and in some cases, not too distant past: in the bible and midrashic literature, Old Yiddish medieval romances, stories of the Hasidim, Haskalah literature, and folktales. Though far removed himself, in time as well as ideology, from the world of marvelous happenings, myth, and superstition about which he writes, Ansky's attraction to the folktale lay in what he saw as its primary theme: heroic spiritual struggle.

Originally entitled "Between Two Worlds," Ansky's play depicts a universe in which the natural and supernatural worlds are intertwined, where man not only senses the immediacy of the Divine Presence but also has the power to compel the upper world, and where the spirit of man ultimately triumphs over physical force.

The Messenger, who symbolizes the interplay of both worlds, stands at the crossroads of the story's conflicts and resolutions: conflicts which appear infinitely complex, yet whose resolutions appear patently simple, indeed perfect. As an everpresent brooding conscience, this mysterious figure reminds man of his responsibility to his fellow man and of the possibility of redemption from sin through moral action. And as the voice of fate, his presence serves as a reminder of the inevitability of justice in the universe.

Thus Sender, who saw only himself in the silver-covered glass, under the Rebbe's direction, seeks Nisn's forgiveness for the wrongs he committed against his son and finally redeems

himself by reciting the Kaddish for the tormented soul. And yet, the Messenger cautions the Rebbe that although the vow has been declared not binding and has been set aside, with Sender repentant and Leah's life saved, the heavens still demand justice: the fulfillment of the vow for the lovers' sake, for their hopes and spiritual struggle for happiness together. Ultimately, both worlds converge on the vow made between Nisn and Sender, for with the vow fulfilled, a human being's moral responsibility for one's fellow human being is reaffirmed.

Lore and Legend

Inspired by Ansky's folklore expedition through towns and villages of the Ukrainian countryside, *The Dybbuk* is a rich ethnographic tapestry of Jewish lore and legend.

The inner life of a Hasidic community is richly portrayed in image as well as sound: the court of the Hasidic Rebbe with his many disciples gathered round his table seeking to be inspired and enlightened by his teachings and his radiant presence; the centrality of the Hasidic song and dance rooted in the insistence of Hasidism on joy as the prime factor in a good Jewish life and the essential element of worship; the Rebbe as mentor and

FILM RESTORATION & NEW ENGLISH SUBTITLES



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RESTORATION CREDITS

Executive Director: Sharon Pucker Rivo

Co-Director: Lisa E. Rivo

Technical Director: Richard Pontius

Academic Consultant: Sylvia Fuks Fried

Translators: David Roskies & Sylvia Fried

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THE DYBBUK CAST

Tsaddik of Miropole
The Messenger
Sender
Leah, His Daughter
Frayde, His Sister
Nisn
Khonnon, His Son
Note
Zalmen
Nakhmen
Menashe, His Son
Reb Mendel, His Tutor
Mikhoel, The Gabbai
Meyer, The Shammes
Dancer of Death

Avrom Morewski
Isaac Samberg
Moyshe Lipman
Lili Liliana
Dina Halpern
Gershon Lemberger
Leon Liebgold
Max Bozyk
Shmuel Landau
Samuel Bronecki
M. Messinger
Zishe Katz
Abraham Kurtz
David Lederman
Judith Berg



wonder-healer, skilled in the magical art of exorcism.

The film draws its name from popular folk belief about spirits which enter a living person, cleave to his soul, and speak through his mouth. At first, dybbuks were considered to be devils or demons; later explanations, combined with the Kabbalistic doctrine of the transmigration of souls, had it that these were migrant souls which could not find rest. In the film version, Khonnon's wronged and restless soul "returns to the earth, so that it may complete the deeds it had left undone, and experience the joys and griefs it had not lived through." The power to exorcise a dybbuk, about which there is much in the body of Jewish mystical writings and folk literature, was given to accomplished Hasidim.

It was customary for yeshiva students to be invited to take some of their meals at the homes of members of the community. Khonnon, as fate would have it, visits the home of Reb Sender and meets his destined love. Khonnon's efforts to win the hand of his beloved rely heavily on his study of mystical teachings and practices, including fasting, ritual ablutions and numerical computations of the Hebrew letters of key words and names, which are purported to have mystical significance. In the harrowing scene leading to his death, Khonnon counts nine scrolls in the ark to equal, by one particular form of computation, the numerical value of the letters in the word "Emeth", Truth (Emeth equals 441, thus $4 + 4 + 1 = 9$). The number of handles on the scrolls equals the numerical value of the letters in the name Leah — lamed-30, alef-1, hey-5 — 36, which when multiplied by three equals the value of the name Khonnon. Moreover, the first two letters of Leah's name, lamed and alef, mean "no" or "not"; the last let-

ter, hey, is often used as an abbreviation for God's name. Hence, Khonnon concludes, it must be true that Leah can be attained not through God, but through Satan.

The depiction of traditional marriage practices is the most elaborate of any Yiddish film: The town's matchmaker and Sender visit the prospective groom, not only to examine his Talmudic acumen, but also to negotiate the terms of the marriage contract; Sender celebrates the betrothal of his daughter with the men of the community, neglecting even to tell his daugh-

... the most widely produced play in the history of Jewish theater.

ter the "good news"; prior to the wedding, in customary, though in his particular case, miserly, fashion, the wealthy father of the bride distributes alms and food to the poor in honor of the joyous occasion; the bride visits the grave of her deceased mother in order to "invite" her to the festivities; the wedding bard performs for the bride and guests, moving many of the women to tears; the bride and groom are led to the wedding canopy, without ever having met. Some of the scenes are markedly macabre and stylized, including the dance of the beggars and what has come to be known as "the dance of death."

The marriage ceremony itself is violently interrupted as Leah rushes to the tombstone of the martyred bride and groom in the town square to plead for protection. Tombstones marking the joint graves of brides and grooms were a common feature in the small towns of Podolia and Volynia. The

tradition is almost always the same (as Leah herself explains to Khonnon early in the film, foreshadowing the wedding scene): In the years 1648–49, when Chmielnicki and his Cossack bands swept through the town, they killed a bride and groom as they stood under the wedding canopy. The bride and groom were then laid to rest on that very spot. And it became the tradition for wedding parties to visit the grave and pay homage to the martyred couple.

About the Author

S. Ansky (pseudonym of Shloyme Zanvl Rapaport), born in Belorussia in 1863, brought to Yiddish literature a deep appreciation for Jewish folk values, much in the neoclassical style of I. L. Peretz. Attracted by the ideas of the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) and later the doctrines of the Narodniki, a Russian populist movement, he joined the Social-Revolutionary Party, subsequently composing "Di Shvue" (The Oath), hymn of the Bund, the Jewish Workers' Union.

He is perhaps best known as a folklorist, indeed the first to undertake large-scale fieldwork. Between 1911 and 1914 he headed an expedition through the villages and towns of the Ukrainian provinces of Volynia and Podolia, and the treasure trove of ethnographic materials that he unearthed (the expedition gathered some 1,800 tales and legends among other folklore artifacts) enriched not only his own writing, but inspired the works of countless other writers.

The expedition was cut short by the outbreak of World War I, which destroyed the very fabric of Jewish life in Russia's Pale of Settlement. During the turbulent war years, while organizing relief work for Jewish war victims, Ansky completed *The Dybbuk*, capturing in words and images a way of life that was disappearing before his very eyes.

The Play of Plays

According to some sources, Ansky presented an early Russian version of *The Dybbuk* to the renowned director Stanislavsky who, though declining to produce the play for his Moscow Art Theater, inspired the role of the Messenger in the Yiddish version. Indeed, Ansky was never to see the play produced. He died in November 1920, after entrusting the play to his close friend and literary executor, Yiddish

THE DYBBUK PRODUCTION

DIRECTOR **Michal Waszynski** | PRODUCTION COMPANY **Feniks** |
SCREENPLAY **Alter Kacyzne & Mark Arnshteyn** | BASED ON THE
ORIGINAL PLAY BY **S. Ansky** | SCRIPT **A. Stern** | ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
Mark Arnshteyn | HISTORICAL ADVISOR **Majer Balaban** |
CINEMATOGRAPHY **Albert Wywerka** | MUSIC **Henekh Kon** |
CANTORIAL MUSIC **Gershon Sirota** | CHOREOGRAPHY **Judith Berg** |
SET DESIGN **Rotmil & Norris** | PHOTOGRAPHY **A. Arnold** | CAMERA **L.
Zajaczkowski** | LABORATORY **Falanga**

writer Alter Kacyzne, who eventually wrote the screenplay for the film version. The Vilna Troupe premiered the play at the Elyseum Theater in Warsaw on December 9, 1920, at the end of the traditional mourning period for its author.

The Habimah Theater company soon followed with a Hebrew version translated by H. N. Bialik and directed by Yevgeny Vakhtangov, a Stanislavsky disciple. This Hebrew production in Moscow in 1922 established Habimah's reputation. Countless other productions in the Yiddish original and Hebrew, as well as German, Polish, English, Ukrainian, Swedish, Bulgarian, and French have made *The Dybbuk* the most widely produced play in the history of Jewish theater.

1937 Film Production

Much of Yiddish cinema in the inter-war period has its roots in popular Yiddish stage productions. Written during the First World War, and staged in innumerable productions during the ensuing years, *The Dybbuk* was finally made into a film just two short years before the Second World War, one in a series of Yiddish feature films produced during the second half of the decade.

The film was shot on location in Kazimierz and in a Warsaw studio, and drew on some of the finest talents of Polish Jewry.

Andrzej Marek (Mark Arnshteyn) who collaborated with Alter Kacyzne on the screenplay and served as artistic director, was active for over forty years as playwright, impresario, translator, publicist, and critic in both Polish and Yiddish theater. In 1925 his own production of *The Dybbuk* in translation on the Polish stage won critical acclaim.

Henoch Kon had served as musical director for numerous Yiddish stage and film productions, while Gershon Sirota, who contributed the cantorial pieces, was regarded as one of the most accomplished tenors of his generation.

Majer Balaban, premiere historian of Polish Jewry, served as historical advisor to the director Michal Waszynski, a fascinating film figure who had directed some twenty-five feature films before turning to *The Dybbuk*. Waszynski's treatment of this mystical tale harks back to his early association with the German Expressionist cinema.

Among the many acting talents, Abraham Morewski is featured in the role of the Rebbe of Miropole, while Lili Liliiana provides a poignant portrayal of Leah. Leon Liebgold, who was already well-known to film audiences for his performance with Molly Picon in the musical *Yidl mitn fidl* (Yidl and His Fiddle), went on from his memorable portrayal of Khonnon to play a featured role in the famous film *Tevye*.

NCJF Restoration

The Dybbuk was produced in Poland in 1937, during the last years of the most dynamic period in Polish-Jewish history. Soon after its release it was brought to the United States and opened at the Continental Theater in New York on January 27, 1938, where it became an instant favorite. It subsequently played at theaters in New York and other metropolitan areas in the United States and throughout Europe.

A considerable number of Yiddish and Jewish content films produced before World War II appear today to be lost forever: many were lost or suffered destruction through the ravages

of war and the annihilation of entire Jewish communities and their institutions; other prints, produced on nitrate film commonly used at the time, simply disintegrated, in part, or in whole, into dust.

By the early 1960s film historian Parker Tyler feared *The Dybbuk*, in its original form, was lost forever. "No negative print of *The Dybbuk*, I am told by its 16-mm distributors, is believed to exist anymore; no 35-mm positive, apparently, has currency in this hemisphere. Thus, "duped" positives provide whatever currency it has in the U.S. Its sound track, especially the dialogue, has suffered more than its imagery, so that it no longer exists as originally created . . ."

When the National Center for Jewish Film was created in 1976 with the acquisition of a private collection of Yiddish feature films, a nitrate dupe negative was among the initial materials. A work print was struck revealing that the materials were many generations removed from the original: the sound track was of variable density

The Dybbuk is a rich ethnographic tapestry.

and poor quality; large segments, including the famous exorcist scene, were missing entirely. A search for better materials was launched.

A visit to Poland in 1983 revealed that the original materials had been destroyed during the war and that only an incomplete, poor quality print with Polish subtitles existed. Other prints in France, Israel, and Holland were of equally poor quality and had either French, Hebrew, or German subtitles. After an exhaustive search, an excellent nitrate print with no subtitles was located at the British Film Institute in London; unfortunately it was missing two reels and had other technical problems. Additional prints were acquired from a private collector in Los Angeles and the Australian Film Archives in Canberra.

All these sources were examined and compared scene by scene to select the best materials and produce a complete print faithful to the original. In 1989 NCJF produced a completely new negative and reintroduced the film to audiences worldwide. Since that time the film has screened around the world. In 2018 NCJF produced a new digital restoration, including updated English subtitles. ■