

The Dybbuk

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/dybbuk>.

Introduction

Ansky's *The Dybbuk* is arguably the most iconic play of the entire canon of Jewish dramatic literature. S. Ansky (pseudonym of Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport, 1863-1920) was a Russian-Jewish ethnographer and playwright whose signature work *The Dybbuk* played a seminal role in shaping modern Yiddish and Hebrew theater. This kit presents resources to help teachers teach about the play, its production history, and its significance, as a means of introducing students to a classic work of Jewish theater.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Folklore, Performance, Theater, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- Golda Werman's fine translation of Ansky's play, *The Dybbuk, or: Between Two Worlds: A Dramatic Legend in Four Acts*, may be found in *S. Ansky: The Dybbuk and Other Writings* (2002). This book is part of the **New Yiddish Library** series, a joint venture of the Fund for the Translation of Jewish Literature and the Yiddish Book Center.
- The YIVO Encyclopedia has a **brief biography of Ansky** with an overview of his work, as well as an article on *The Dybbuk*.
- The 1937 black-and-white film *Der dibuk (The Dybbuk)*, in Yiddish with English subtitles, is available for purchase from the National Center for Jewish Film. The NCJF has also prepared a **study guide on the film** and its history.
- Debra Caplan's "**The Sun Never Sets on the Vilna Troupe**," published in the Yiddish Book Center's magazine *Pakn Treger*, offers an introduction to the Vilna Troupe, the first company to produce *The Dybbuk*.

Resources

1: Play excerpt, S. Ansky's *The Dybbuk*, 1916, translation from Yiddish.

It has been arranged that Leah, a young woman of a wealthy family, marry Menashe, though she was destined to marry Khonen, a poor Yeshiva student who died in pursuit of her. In this excerpt from the close of Act II, Leah is led to her *badekn*, the ceremony at which a bride is veiled by her bridegroom. At that moment, it is revealed that she has become possessed by a dybbuk, the spirit of her beloved, thwarted Khonen. The grave to which she runs belongs to a bride and groom who were martyred centuries earlier in a pogrom.

Suggested activity: Have students read the play in its entirety, or, if pressed for time, selections from the play or simply this excerpt.

In small groups, have students work to stage this scene. Then, discuss: how does staging a scene change your perception of the characters and the story? What are the challenges of staging a play based on folkloric material? How can the actress playing Leah portray spiritual possession on stage? How might different performance styles alter the meaning? If there is time, encourage students to try acting their scene in more than one performance style (e.g. horror film, soap opera, thriller, etc.).

Sh. Ansky, *The Dybbuk*, trans. Golda Werman, in *The Dybbuk and Other Writings*, ed. David G. Roskies (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 29.

2: Questionnaire excerpt, S. Ansky's "Jewish Ethnographic Program," 1912, translation from



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Yiddish.

In 1912 Ansky set out on a two-year expedition to collect information about stories, folktales, songs, and superstitions from Jews in communities across Eastern Europe. This is an excerpt from the questionnaire that Ansky and his colleagues were planning to use to interview their subjects, before their expedition was cut short by the onset of World War I. It offers rare insight into the lore of Eastern European Jews prior to the war. Many of the questions concern the figure of the dybbuk, a departed, tormented spirit that, according to Eastern European Jewish legend, returns to earth to possess the body of a living person. The word "dybbuk" comes from the Hebrew *ledavek*, to cling.

Suggested activity: Ask students if they had ever heard the term "dybbuk" before and what they know about it. Discuss the concept of a dybbuk and its etymology.

Next, divide the students into small groups and ask each group to choose five questions that interest them the most. After each group briefly researches any unfamiliar terms in the questions, ask groups to imagine how respondents might have answered these questions in 1913. What do these questions tell us about Jewish life in Eastern Europe during this period? About Jewish communities? About Jewish superstition and belief? How might asking these questions have been useful to Ansk-i as a playwright seeking material for a drama?

S. Ansky, "From 'The Ethnographic Expedition': Questionnaire," in *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader*, ed. and trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 56.

3: Passage from story, "Warnings and Exorcisms for Driving Out a Dybbuk," ca. 1748, translation from Yiddish.

This purportedly true story from the Ukrainian shtetl Khmelnik was transcribed from an eighteenth-century manuscript as part of Ansky's ethnographic expedition. In the story, an epileptic teenager is possessed by a dybbuk that refuses to leave his body. The town's rabbi and most pious men, the do-gooder Shaya among them, have gathered to exorcise it by binding the boy in rope, lighting seven black candles, blowing seven *shoyfres* [rams' horns], cursing the dybbuk while holding seven Torah scrolls, and demanding it swear to leave the young man. In this scene, the spirit finally begins to relent.

Suggested activity: Read the excerpt or the entire story. Ask students: what seem to be some of the hallmarks of a dybbuk's psyche and behavior? Which of these elements are also found in the dybbuk of Ansky's play, and what differs here? How might this folk legend, gathered by Ansky on his expedition, have influenced the writing of *The Dybbuk*?

Anonymous, "Warnings and Exorcisms for Driving Out a Dybbuk," in *The Dybbuk and the Yiddish Imagination: A Haunted Reader*, ed. and trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 111.

4: Film excerpt, "Dance of Death" from director Michał Waszyński's *The Dybbuk*, 1937, Yiddish with subtitles.

This dance, one of the most famous scenes in the play and the film, was not part of Ansky's original script and came into the play via its first director, Dovid Herman. In this scene, Leah dances with a mysterious figure dressed as "Death" at her wedding, just prior to becoming possessed by the soul of her dead lover Khonen. After this dance was added to the first production in 1920, it has appeared in virtually every production and film since.

In the film, the famous Yiddish theater choreographer Judith Berg appears as the dancer playing "Death." Berg choreographed this dance for the film, as well as for several stage productions.

Suggested activity: Watch the excerpt and discuss: what does this scene add to the play? What does it foreshadow? How do the movements of the woman and the skeleton figure differ from each other? Do they change throughout the scene? What is the function of the dancers around the main couple and what might they represent? If a director were to bring this scene to life on a stage, how might it differ from this filmed interpretation?

Der dibuk, directed by Michał Waszyński (1939; National Center for Jewish Film, restoration in 1989), DVD.

5: Ballet music, excerpt of Leonard Bernstein's *Dybbuk Suite No. 2* - "Leah (Maiden's Dance)," 1974.

The celebrated composer Leonard Bernstein wrote the music for a *Dybbuk*-inspired ballet in 1974. Jerome Robbins was the choreographer. Bernstein used Kabbalistic numerical equivalencies to develop many of the musical motifs for the ballet. In Kabbalah, each letter corresponds to a number. According to this system, the name "Leah" has the numerical value of 36. Bernstein thus used rhythms corresponding to multiples of 9, 18, and 36 throughout the ballet.

Suggested activity: Have students listen to an excerpt of "Leah" from Leonard Bernstein's *Dybbuk* ballet. Invite them to imagine a dance to this music. Perhaps they could draw a picture of what the music evokes for them, or use their bodies and dance to the music. Then, discuss: how does Bernstein's music relate thematically to the play? To the character of Leah?

Leonard Bernstein, "Leah (Maiden's Dance)" from *Dybbuk Suite No. 2*, performed by the New York Philharmonic and conducted by Leonard Bernstein (Hamburg: Polydor International, 1981).

6: Oral history video excerpt, Aron Gonshor on "Performing 'The Dybbuk' in Vienna," 2011.

In a conversation recorded by the Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project, Montreal-based surgeon and actor Aron Gonshor talks about performing *The Dybbuk* in Vienna with the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theater.

Suggested activity: Have students discuss in small groups: what did you learn from Gonshor's description of performing *The Dybbuk* in Vienna? What does this play mean to a Yiddish actor like Gonshor? Why might the audience have responded so emotionally?

Aron Gonshor, interview by Sara Israel at the Montreal Jewish Public Library (Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project, December 15, 2011), www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/excerpts/woh-ex-0001293/performing-dybbuk-vienna. For the complete interview with Gonshor: www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/woh-fi-0000213/aron-gonshor-2011.

7: Play preview video, Gesher Theater's production of *The Dybbuk*, 2014.

This dramatic production, as well as the one seen in resource number eight, are contemporary Israeli adaptations of *The Dybbuk*. Gesher Theater was founded in 1991 by Russian immigrants to Israel, and sees itself as a bridge (in Hebrew, *gesher*) between the Russian and Israeli cultures.

Suggested activity: Watch this video, and the video in resource number eight. Ask students to compare and contrast the previews from these two productions. How are contemporary theater artists in Israel interpreting this century-old play anew? Which production do you think you would be most interested in seeing and why?

Roe Chen, *Hadibuk (The Dybbuk)*, directed by Evgeny Arye (Tel Aviv: Gesher Theater, 2014), www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8_uKEk38H0.

8: Play preview video, Habima's production of *The Dybbuk*, 2008, Hebrew with subtitles.

Habima is the national theater of Israel, founded in Russia in 1912. *The Dybbuk*, the key work of the company's repertoire, was first performed by Habima in its Hebrew-language premiere in 1922 (with the translation completed by Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Israel's national poet). Here it is seen in a much more recent puppet adaptation.

S. Ansky, *Hadibuk (The Dybbuk)*, trans. Hayyim Nahman Bialik, directed by Shmuel Shohat (Jerusalem: Habimah, 2014), www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeMh7SU166g&list=PL645FC34E2F36AC42.