A Dybbuk:

Between Two Worlds

by

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Abstract

In the early spring of 2007 I was approached by the then directorial MFA candidate David Savoy with a request to design the scenery for his thesis production *A Dybbuk* by S. Ansky in an adaptation by Tony Kushner, and I accepted his offer. The other members of the design team were Ariel Rivera for Costume Design (a BFA Design and Production graduate), Ian Giles for Lighting Design (a BFA Design and Production graduate) and Jason Ho for Sound Design (a BFA Design and Production student). The original songs and music were composed by Patrick Pennefather and performed by the Creaking Planks. The production was Stage Managed by the BFA Design and Production student Cassandra Tattrie. It ran from March 27 to April 5, 2008 at the Frederic Wood Theatre.

The challenges of designing the scenery for this production lay in accommodating a cast of eighteen actors that played over thirty different characters, as well as a live klezmer band that performed onstage throughout the play.

Our idea was to create stationary scenery that would present the necessary imagery for all the environments of the play without having to perform large scene changes. We were also determined not to have stage hands visible to the audience, which meant that all the scene changes and the traffic of properties was to be managed by the actors themselves.

The locations where the action of the play took place were the old synagogue in Brinnitz, a Brinnitz square outside of Sender’s home, a train station near the Jewish Ghetto in Miropol and Rabbi Azriel’s study in Miropol. My goal was to create an overall environment that would provide an emotional and cultural subtext for the play and create the basic structure sufficient to suggest all of these locations in such a way that they could be identified and interpreted both by the audience members familiar with the Eastern European Jewish culture and by those new to it.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my enduring gratitude to Mr. Robert Gardiner, Mr. Don Griffiths, Mr. Jim Fergusson, Ms. Lorraine West, Ms. Janet Bickford and Ms. Lynn Burton, Mr. Stephen Heatley, Ms. Alison Green, Ms. Irena Hoti and Ms. Elena Dubova, Ms. Cassandra Tattrie, Mr. Patrick Pennefather, the B.F.A Production paint and carpentry crews, and the other faculty, staff and students at the Department of Theatre, Film and Creative Writing at UBC, as well as Dr. P.G. Baker, Dr. Paul Stoesser and Dr. Francis Broun. In addition, I would like to thank the following individuals and organizations: Mr. Pawel Sawicki at Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, Ms. Shula Bahat and Ms. Zippi Rosenne at Beth Hatefutsoth - The Nahum Goldmann Museum of The Jewish Diaspora, Dr. Aiste Niunkaite Račiūniene and Mr. Paulius Račiūnas at The Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, and Ms. Caroline Waddell at The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
Chapter I. The Story

The story of *A Dybbuk* is a story of love and death, but also of survival and hope. It is a story of mystery and miracle that takes place in a time when one’s world was a close community in a small shtetl surrounded by a vast and mysterious unknown. This was the world of magic and learning, superstition and faith, when people stayed close to their kin and took care of each other as a community. The entire piece is pierced with nostalgia for this simple way of life that was disappearing from existence as it was being written.

The original play was created by S. Ansky in 1914 after he had spent years studying Eastern European Hassidic folklore and culture. First it was written in Russian and later translated into Yiddish. The play premiered in Warsaw in 1920 and was produced on Broadway a year later. The adaptation by Tony Kushner under the translation from Yiddish by Joachim Neugroschel, while keeping the general story line more or less intact, has altered the spirit and the mood of the play through making it much darker and filling it with premonitions of the Holocaust and the signs of imminent destruction of that small and familiar shtetl world that was never to return.
Chapter II. The Process

It was these dark images and premonitions that the director David Savoy was most interested in exploring. His vision for the play was a complex multilayered action rich with imagery. He established an elaborate timeline that involved the ghosts of people that perished in the Holocaust re-enacting the story of *A Dybbuk* that was itself taking place back in the late 19th century. Originally David wished to have another layer of time and meaning that would have made the character of the Scribe from the second act the only survivor of the Holocaust out of a pre-war company of actors. He was to return to their theatre in the beginning of the show, and it was through his memory that we would have seen the perished company re-enact *A Dybbuk*.

This initial plan led us to start the scenery research in pursuit of a space that could act as a theatre destroyed during the war. David’s original inspiration came from an image of a theatre in ruins that he provided me with (*Figure 1*). During my research I came across images of an abandoned foundry in Tallinn, Estonia that were very interesting visually and featured a circular space that could serve as an inspiration for the set (*Figures 2, 3*). However, then it was decided that this additional timeline layer might be too difficult to convey to the audience as a part of a stage production and it was abandoned.

The next incarnation of the production concept was with the action taking place at a Nazi death camp, and the prisoners being unloaded from the arriving trains re-enacting the story, while waiting to be taken away. The train cars were to serve as some of the indoor environments of the play, as well as to provide entrances and exits for the characters. The car doors were to slide open and closed as needed for the action. We were also discussing the possibility of putting the cars on tracks to make them mobile. This was supposed to create a visual contrast to the beginning of the Act III of the play and specifically to the line full of bitter and sorrowful irony: “From such
an invention only good can ever come”¹ that applied to the train arriving in Miropol (Figures 6, 7).

The elevated square shape located centre stage was supposed to represent the bimah (a raised portion of the floor in a synagogue from which the Torah is read). It was also modified to invoke the shape of a crematorium entrance (Figure 8). Upstage we were going to have a brick wall with a concealed entrance centre stage for the Messenger, to give him an ability to appear and disappear among other characters on stage.

It was at this point in the process that it was decided that the majority of our props, including seats, aaron-hakodesh (the Holy Ark), the graves of the Holy Bride and Bridegroom and other objects would be created using the suitcases of the displaced. These suitcases were also to serve as storage for other smaller props and objects. One of the possibilities for the play’s finale that we discussed was to re-create an image similar to a scene in Roman Polanski’s film The Pianist, where the main character by chance escapes the fate of his family, friends and community that were taken away to the concentration camp. He returns to the square they had been held at only to find it deserted and covered in left-behind luggage (Figure 9). At the end of the play we considered having the actors clear the stage, leaving all of their suitcases behind to symbolise that none of them would have likely survived the Holocaust.

As a part of my research, I looked at the geography of the region to determine which concentration camp the population of Brinnitz would have been taken to. Most likely it would have been Treblinka in Poland. Different sources site different numbers of the victims of Treblinka, however they all agree that no less than 700,000 people were killed there between July 1942 and October 1943 before the camp was shut down. Around 600 people managed to escape the camp alive during the uprising that led to its 1943

¹ Tony Kushner, Joachim Neugroschel, A Dybbuk: And Other Tales of the Supernatural. Theatre Communications Group, December 1997, page 63
closure and of those only 40 are known to have survived until the end of the war.

Another reference David and I wanted to make was to the film version of *A Dybbuk*, Der Dibuk that was shot in Poland in 1937. It was directed by Michal Waszynski in Yiddish with an all Jewish cast. It is difficult to determine this with full certainty, however it seems that most of the actors that had worked on this film did not survive the Holocaust, as their careers cease to exist after 1941.
Chapter III. The Final Imagery

After exploring this route for a few weeks, we came to a conclusion that it would be too limiting an environment for the story David was hoping to tell. Our next and final environment became an old and partially burned 17th century Polish synagogue.

None of the real Polish wooden synagogues survived World War II. Their look and structure can only be researched based on reconstructions and pre-war photographs. They are very unique from an architectural point of view due to the large prayer hall they housed under their peaked roofs, as well as many other architectural features. Unlike synagogues built in other parts of the world, the baroque period synagogues of the Polish Empire were lavishly decorated with complex painted motifs of mystical flora and fauna that was to represent the glory of creation. These wooden synagogues were once indisputable centres of shtetl life, being places of social gathering, advice, study and knowledge, as well as physical centres for their communities.

To create a setting that would harmonize with the world of the play, as well as with the atmosphere of the dark premonitions of the Holocaust, I turned to the imagery in the text referring directly to the Brinnitz synagogue from Act I. “The dead come to pray here at the shul at night, scattering their sorrows on the floor like dead leaves”, “… the walls are wet”, “But it’s very very old”, “They say, it wasn’t built, just buried underground, the whole building”, “And even though the village has been burned to the ground again and again, so many times, the synagogue never burns” ² - these were the words of Fradde, a character that often spoke in a way of legends and superstitions.

² Tony Kushner, Joachim Neugroschel, A Dybbuk: And Other Tales of the Supernatural. Theatre Communications Group, December 1997, page 28
David and I defined the general atmosphere of the play as that of dust, ashes, incense smoke, old books and candle light. The architecture of the set was largely inspired by the Gwozdziec Synagogue, which was built in the former Polish Lithuanian Empire (Lvov region of Ukraine in the present time) around 1640 and remodelled in 1731. The texture and the treatment of the flats was inspired by the Gwozdziec Synagogue (Figure 10) and the Synagogue of Chodorow (Polish Lithuanian Empire, contemporary Podolian region, Ukraine), which was founded around 1642 and completed between 1700 and 1714 (Figure 11). Both of these synagogues were destroyed in the 20th century, like all the others of this kind and are only known through secondary sources.

As it can be seen from the photographs, the imagery of the Eastern European baroque synagogue murals is extremely complex. In order to create a surface reminiscent of these originals, we needed to find a way to simplify the process to make it suitable for the limitations of a live theatre production process. Through consultation with the Head Scenic Artist Ms. Lorraine West, I developed a three-layer stencilling process that was loosely based on the motifs used in the original murals. This process allowed the team of scenic painters to create the wall treatment in a quick and efficient manner. The first two layers of the treatment were applied through a hand-cut plastic stencil, and the final highlights were painted on free-hand as an additional layer (Figures 22 – 25). The animal imagery was inserted last in the junctions created by the areas of stencil treatment. These were copied free-hand from the source images I extracted directly from the photographs of the Chodorow Synagogue ceiling mural reconstruction. The areas of the flats that featured burned wood creating the uneven edges of the set were treated with an actual welding torch that was applied to the pre-shaped and pre-painted wood after the flat units were assembled. The lions carved on the upstage doors of the set were based on the originals used on an 18th century
As soon as it had been decided that our set was going to be a synagogue, I determined that we had to have a two-storey structure. Not only it would have been typical for a synagogue interior of that period, but there were a few practical considerations to support this decision. The character of Messenger had an ability to appear and disappear that was written into the play, and having levels built into the set, along with creative blocking, provided him with that ability. The klezmer band needed a permanent location that was contained within the set, but wasn’t taking focus away from the action. This location became the upper level of the stage right unit. According to David’s interpretation of the script, the characters of Chonen and Leah ascend to Heaven at the end of the play. In the finale they appeared on the upper level of the centre stage unit, which was concealed from the view of the audience until that moment, washed in a bright white light, thus symbolizing their ascent.
Chapter IV. Conclusion

Working on this project has been a fascinating research process, as well as a deep personal journey into my heritage. The initial research for the first design concept had been very difficult as I had to bring myself face to face with my personal fears in order to be able to research the visual imagery we required. Being brought up knowing about the Holocaust and having family that perished in it, I knew that a lot of the images I would be looking through would be difficult to cope with. The hardest part of the research for me was that of the train cars that were used to transport the concentration camp prisoners. Some of the images were incredibly horrific, especially those of the Iasi Death Train in 1941 Romania. I was relieved when David changed the concept of the production, which allowed me to switch the focus of research to the Jewish Eastern European architecture.

I truly hope that our production did reach both the audience new to Jewish mysticism, culture and symbolism and those familiar with it. In retrospect, it would have been beneficial to have an opportunity for more collaboration with the other designers, as well as more support from the design faculty comparable to that received by the directorial Master candidates, for whom there is a strong faculty presence throughout the process. It would also be desirable to have in place a framework that would ensure that design candidates had an opportunity to explore their own concepts and pursue their ideas and visions within their thesis projects, considering how important a role these projects play in the graduate level design education.

Working on A Dybbuk was my first time designing scenery for a proscenium stage of this scale and for a cast of this size, as well as having live musicians on the set. All of these factors, in addition to an opportunity to work with a full scene shop, props shop and a scene painting team provided an invaluable learning experience. The knowledge I gained throughout this process created a solid base for my consequent projects, and each new design I work on expands and builds upon it.
Figures

**Figure 1**: Theatre in Ruins
image provided by David Savoy

Figure 1 has been removed in compliance with copyright restrictions. It depicted a monochromatic photograph of an interior of a European horse-shoe theatre in ruins. Unknown source.

**Figure 2**: Abandoned Foundry in Tallinn, Estonia
image by Kimmo Nummela

Figure 2 has been removed in compliance with copyright restrictions. It depicted a photograph of a multi-level interior of an abandoned industrial foundry located in Tallinn, Estonia. Image source: Kimmo Nummela.

**Figure 3**: Abandoned Foundry in Tallinn, Estonia
image by Kimmo Nummela

Figure 3 has been removed in compliance with copyright restrictions. It depicted a photograph of a multi-level interior of an abandoned industrial foundry located in Tallinn, Estonia. Image source: Kimmo Nummela.
Figure 4: Holocaust Rail Car, The Holocaust Documentation and Education Center, Hollywood, Florida, USA

Figure 4 has been removed in compliance with copyright restrictions. It depicted a photograph of an exterior of a rail car used in World War II presented as a part of an exhibit. Image source: The Holocaust Documentation and Education Center, Hollywood, Florida, USA

Figure 5: Interior View of the Railcar on Display in the Permanent Exhibition of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, USA, courtesy of Polskie Koleje Panstwowe S.A. image by Arnold Kramer
Figure 6: Preliminary White Model I, Front View

Figure 7: Preliminary White Model I, Top View
Figure 8: Ruins of Crematory and Gas Chamber III, View from the Entrance to the Changeroom, Auschwitz II - Birkenau, www.auschwitz.org.pl photograph by Paweł Sawicki

Figure 9: Film Still, The Pianist (Roman Polanski, 2002), Studio Canal

Figure 9 has been removed in compliance with copyright restrictions. It depicted a film still showing the main character of the film Władysław Szpilman (played by Adrien Brody) walking toward the viewer down the centre of an empty street in the Warsaw Ghetto with abandoned luggage and broken furniture covering the ground behind him. Image: video still, The Pianist (Roman Polanski, 2002).
Figure 10: Gwozdziec Synagogue Interior, Terry Y. Allen, Pakn Treger, Revisiting History: The Lost Wooden Synagogues of Poland, image c. 1910

Figure 10 has been removed in compliance with copyright restrictions. It depicted a photograph of an interior of the Gwozdziec Synagogue with an elaborate mural covering the wall. Terry Y. Allen, Pakn Treger, Revisiting History: The Lost Wooden Synagogues of Poland, image c. 1910

Figure 11: Ceiling of the Chodorow Synagogue Reconstruction (detail) image: Beth Hatefutsoth, The Nahum Goldmann Museum of The Jewish Diaspora, Photo Archive, Tel Aviv, Israel

Figure 12: 18th Century Cast Brass Chanukah Menorah, from the Collections of the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, Vilnius, Lithuania photograph by Paulius Račiūnas, 2010
Figure 13: Preliminary White Model II, VectorWorks, Front View

Figure 14: Preliminary White Model II, VectorWorks, House Left View
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**Figure 19:** Front Elevation, Stage Left Unit

**Figure 20:** Front Elevation, Upstage Unit

**Figure 21:** Side Elevations

**Figure 22:** Mouldings and Railings
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Figure 24: Scenic Painting Pattern II

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Figure 28: Production Photograph
Figure 29: Production Photograph

Figure 30: Production Photograph
Figure 31: Production Photograph

Figure 32: Set Close-Up
Figure 33: Set Close-Up

Figure 34: Set Close-Up
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### Appendices

#### Appendix A

#### List of Properties

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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>suitcase containing wedding dress etc.</td>
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**ACT TWO**

**Scene 2**

Grave of the Holy Couple - made from suitcases - gravestone addition?

- crutches, canes
- Suitcase to sit
- Purses/packages
- chuppa - canopy
- wedding veil
- wine glass - ceremonial candles

**ACT THREE**

**Scene 1**

- suitcases, bundles, luggage

**Scene 2**

- braided candle
- wine glass
- spice box
- note book
- pen
- writing table - lap - ink well
- suitcase to sit

**ACT FOUR**

**Scene 1**

- curtain - hanging on the set
- tallis
- long cane
- 7 torahs
- 7 shofars
- 7 black candles
# Appendix B
## Production Budget

### Materials

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### Prod. Miscellaneous

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