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Kitson, DaPonte: Broken promises, feverish dreams.

Tony Kushner's 'A Dybbuk,' by EgoPo

BY: Steve Cohen 06.11.2012

Tony Kushner's adaptation of *The Dybbuk* concerns unrequited love among Hasidic Jews in Eastern Europe. But mysticism is only part of this tale: The story works for skeptics as well as for believers, and for non-Jews as well.

A Dybbuk. By S. Ansky; translated by Joachim Neurgrochel; adapted by Tony Kushner; directed by Lane Savadove. EgoPo Classic Theater production through June 17, 2012 at Prince Music Theater, 1412 Chestnut St. www.egopo.org.

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Sympathy for our devils

STEVE COHEN

The Dybbuk is the outstanding accomplishment of Shloyme Rappoport, a researcher of Jewish folklore before he became a playwright using the name of S. Ansky. His main goal was to preserve the culture of the Belorussian Hasidic Jews among whom he grew up, at a time— just before World War I— when he saw their future threatened.

We tend to think of the religiously orthodox as rigid, yet Ansky's characters have their nuances, which Lane Savadove's direction enhances. The dybbuk is not the devil but a troubled soul whose earthly life was cut short; now he's trying to fulfill his mission so he can find eternal rest.

The play concerns a pledge made long ago by two Yeshiva students that if the wife of one of them should bear a boy and the other a girl, those two children should marry. The pledge is subsequently forgotten, but 18 years later their respective children— Chonen and Leah— find themselves inexplicably drawn to one another.

Leah's father, Sender, now has other plans for his daughter: He wants her to marry a rich man. He doesn't even know of Chonen's existence.

Yeshiva kids as teenagers

Sender is a well-meaning man who welcomes impoverished Yeshiva students into his home for Sabbath dinners: yet he never engages with

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students into the home for Sabbath dinners, yet he never engaged with those students personally. If he had, he would have discovered that Chonen was the son of his own friend from his school days, and then he might have remembered the promise they made to each other.

As portrayed by Savadove and his cast, these Yeshiva students are not heads-in-their-books automatons but teenagers with suppressed earthly desires as well as the ability to laugh at themselves. The young man whom Sender picks for his daughter is not a dunce but a sympathetic youngster filled with apprehension.

When Chonen dies, his soul takes possession of Leah's body, and therefore Leah refuses to go through with her arranged marriage, her family tries to get the dybbuk dislodged from her body. But the drama wields more power if we think of a dybbuk not as malevolent but as God's instrument for granting additional life to a person who had his or her mortality prematurely cut off.

A rabbi's doubts

Eastern European Jewish tradition holds that when a man dies before his time, his soul may return to earth and inhabit another's body. But this isn't the same type of devilish possession we see in fright flicks like *The Exorcist*.

Instead, a branch of Judaism that's usually branded as literal and superstitious here emerges as humane. The head of the rabbinic court, Rabbi Azriel, expresses doubts about his ability to judge fairly and questions his own faith in God.

Neither is Sender portrayed as a villain; he is thoughtless but not evil. In one scene her father slaps Leah, then instantly recoils and reaches out as if to take back the slap. In his confrontation with Rabbi Azriel, head of the rabbinical court, he displays contrition and confusion.

Catholic visions

The Dybbuk has been described as a fever dream, or as a Jewish *Romeo and Juliet*. As this EgoPo production unfolded, it was clear that Lane Savadove has done a superior job of recapturing the ecstasy and, yes, even sexuality, in the tale. The action seemed emotionally motivated, as opposed to relying solely on ideas, as was the case in the 1995 New York production.

Mysticism is part of this tale, but the story works for skeptics as well as for believers, and for non-Jews as well. (Just the other day I was enjoying a recording of *The Saint of Bleeker Street*, and was struck by similarities as Gian-Carlo Menotti depicted the comfort many Italian-Americans found, as late as the 1950s, in supernatural visions that other Catholics rejected.)

Robert DaPonte played Chonen with intensity, and Rachel Kitson was an endearing Leah. Brian McCann was a sympathetic Sender, Ed Swidey an imposing Messenger and David Blatt a thoughtful and benevolent Azriel. Leah Walton sang beautifully as Fradde, a mother figure for Leah. The rest of the small cast assumed dozens of supporting roles.

Matheus Fiuza's impressive set was draped with fabrics that resembled large prayer shawls. Matt Sharp designed the lights (with some eerie effects) and the sound, which included diverse and evocative music.

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