

The Dybbuk shows way of life

Tender love story made tragic by possession

By MIRA FRIEDLANDER

Exorcism, the ancient rite of expelling demons, is once again being dealt with in Toronto, this time on the stage. The notable and encouraging point this time around is that *The Dybbuk*, now being presented at The St. Lawrence Centre, has nothing whatever in common with last year's tasteless commercial success of *The Exorcist*.

Long before Mr. William Peter Blatty set out to insult the art of cinema and its followers, there were playwrights and authors seriously contemplating and writing about the strange and terrifying phenomena of possession of the soul and exorcism.

Although *The Dybbuk* deals with the question of possession and exorcism, it is far different from the Catholic belief. A Dybbuk is not the devil or Satan, it is rather a tortured soul which takes possession of a living body. Nor does it take possession of any person at random; there is always a reason for its choice.

This soul cannot find peace or rest until the cause of its unhappiness is established and rightfully avenged by a rabbi. Here then we do not have a story of possession by a malicious devil, but a moving tragedy of an age-old wrong that must be set right so that two innocent people need not suffer for the sins of their parents.

The *Dybbuk* is based on an ancient Yiddish folk tale of Eastern European origin, and centres on a small cult among the Jews of that time

who believed in the "Kabbalah", the book of Jewish mystical thought. This story was familiar to the play's author, Sholem Ansky, who was born in Russia in 1863 into an orthodox Jewish family.

Ansky, writing in Yiddish, worked the story of *The Dybbuk* into a novel, and then sensing its theatrical potential, rewrote it into a play. When its success seemed dubious, he translated it into Russian and read it to Constantine Stanislavsky of the Moscow Art Theatre.

Stanislavsky engaged the play for the newly-formed Hebrew language studio — the Habimah, and it was translated again. The Habimah worked on the play for several years but hesitated to mount a production. Later, the famous Vilna Yiddish Theatrical Troupe mounted a production of the original version, but Ansky, who was forced to flee Russia because of his political leanings, died while the production was in rehearsal and never saw his famous work performed.

The most important point of this play is that it is an historic account of the beliefs and way of life of an ancient people. Ansky is not interested in making us jump in our seats and go home to creep frightened into bed; his play is a document of a legend and meant to be presented as such.

In this John Hirsch's new adaptation of the play succeeds brilliantly. As director, Mr. Hirsch has managed to keep the love story on which *The Dybbuk* centres closely confined within the context of the play, without undue sloppy sentimentality or over-emphasis on the lead characters of Leah and Channan.

The entire production is magnificently conceived and designed by Mark Negin and Maxine Graham, giving us a flexible working set that the actors are obviously



Marylin Lightstone and Paul Kligman in the possession scene from Saul Ansky's *The Dybbuk* currently playing at the St. Lawrence Centre. The production is radically different from other commercial exorcism ventures, says reviewer Friedlander.

comfortable on, and presenting a truly stunning and believable backdrop to the story.

Perhaps what pleases me most about the production technically is Mr. Hirsch's tight control of his cast. Staging an orthodox Jewish wedding, a frantic possession, and an exorcism on a stage, without losing focus of the story or the actors is not an easy task, particularly when working with a cast of 29 people.

He is to be congratulated in having been able to make this large company into an ensemble that flows easily and together throughout the entire production, giving a group

performance of the highest calibre. Because of this I will not as is usual mention specific names and outstanding performances. It would be impossible for any one actress or actor to shine as brightly without the backing of everyone else involved backstage and front, and as such I extend my praise instead to the company as a whole.

As the first production of this season, *The Dybbuk* gives me hope that maybe this year the St. Lawrence Centre has finally understood what "good" theatre means, and will continue to make a worthwhile contribution to the Canadian theatre scene.

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Mars Hotel shows changes

Dead continue to be vital force

By IAN BALFOUR

The Grateful Dead have been through a lot of changes since their inception over a decade ago.

Starting out as a rock/blues band, the Dead quickly became pioneers of the acid rock movement. After flirtations with country music the Dead arrived at their present stage of development: a highly distinctive sound which draws from all areas of their background.

The Grateful Dead from Mars

Hotel is the second offering from the Dead since they formed their own record company. The album is similar in style to the previous *In The Wake of The Flood*, though distinguished by one important development: the emergence of Phil Lesh as a songwriter.

Lesh's brilliant bass work has always been an essential component of the Dead sound, but until now Jerry Garcia and Bob Weir have dominated the group's songwriting.

The two cuts by Lesh, *Unbroken Chain* and *Pride of Cucamonga*, are among the finest of the Dead's recent work.

On *Unbroken Chain*, soft ballad-like segments marked by Lesh's tender vocals and beautiful bass lines frame an up-tempo intermezzo of driving rhythms and some spacy guitar by Garcia. *Pride of Cucamonga* is a pleasant country tune featuring some fine pedal steel guitar by Garcia and exhibiting the Dead's sense of musical humour, as they juxtapose incongruous styles to good effect.

Other highlights on the album include U.S. Blues with some delightfully cynical lyrics by Robert Hunter, and *China Doll*, a hauntingly beautiful Hunter-Garcia composition.

Many of the Dead's contemporaries, like the Jefferson Airplane and Quicksilver Messenger Service, have exhausted their creativity and produce music only in varying degrees of mediocrity. But the Dead continue to be a vital musical force, as evidenced by Mars Hotel.

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