Alina Gabriela Mihalache
Ștefan Firică

Deterritorializing Theatre: Habima and the Making of the Modern Stage Language

Abstract: The history of the Habima theatre, the first Hebrew language company in the world, spans over at least three territories: Russia (soon to become the Soviet Union), United States, and Mandatory Palestine (on the place of the future state of Israel). Coming from Central-Eastern Europe to Russia, accepted as one of the four studios of Stanislavsky's MAT (Moscow Art Theatre), the migrant troupe will set on a famous world tour in 1926, before reaching Jaffa. Its director Yevgeny Vakhtangov connected the troupe, involved in the project of representing the old Jewish tradition, to the avant-garde and developed a new rhetoric, forging what will be later called the "theatrical theatre". The new poetics, apt to cross language barriers, will become a stylistic signature in the representation of Jewish Holocaust, migration trauma, and deterritorialization to a worldwide audience.
Keywords: Modern Hebrew Culture; Theatricalization; Non-Verbal Codes; Migrant Theatre; Deterritorialization; Trauma Representation.

Alina Gabriela Mihalache
Ștefan Firică
University of Bucharest, Romania
alina-gabriela.mihalache@litere.unibuc.ro
stefanfirica@litere.unibuc.ro

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The (hi)story of the Habima theatre

In 1917, a group of Jewish war refugees coming from various cities of Poland and Lithuania (Warsaw, Vilnius, and Białystok) gather to establish the first Jewish theatre of Hebrew language in Moscow: the Habima Studio. Relocated here after its brief existence in Białystok, the amateur troupe and its founding director, Nachum Zemach, are in search of a more favourable context for the affirmation of their cultural creed: promoting the old themes of Jewishness, in line with the Zionist ideology. With the upsurge of antisemitism in Central and Eastern Europe and with the February Revolution granting a wide range of civil rights to the Jewish citizens in Russia[1], the newly formed Communist state seems a logical choice.

Functioning under the auspices of the MAT (Moscow Art Theatre) and under the artistic direction of Yevgeny Vakhtangov, a disciple of Stanislavsky, the small company seeks recognition in the Russian theatrical system, before setting on a world tour, Palestine being its final destination. In a

confession that will later become a manifesto, Zemach states that the new theatre should express "the epic history of the Jewish nation, from its Talmudic origins to the recent tragedy of Pogrom", defining itself as a "theatre of the Talmud, myth and legend", a "theatre of elevating feelings"[2]. The option to perform their repertoire exclusively in Hebrew is part of a religious, moral, and artistic project. In order to stand up to the demands of their assumed "higher calling", the crew members are encouraged to identify with their mission and to act, onstage and in their private lives, as prophets of a national revival. Therefore, the three founders – Nachum Zemach, Menachem Gnessin, and Hanna Rovina – even take a self-styled vow of chastity, swearing not to start families before reaching the Promised Land with Habima[3], putting an end to their own "exodus".

In 1926, a few years after Vakhtangov's death, Habima starts a world tour, traveling through Poland, Austria, France, Germany, and the Netherlands to the United States. From a respected name on Soviet stages, the troupe becomes a praised international appearance, appealing to worldwide audiences while remaining an icon of Jewishness. Along the way, it receives accolades from leading contributors to the building of European modernities[4] of various generations, like the legendary physicist Albert Einstein, the writers Arthur Schnitzler, Richard Beer-Hoffman, and Felix Salten, the actors Alexander Moissi, Nadezhda Bromley, and Avrom Morevsky, the stage directors André Antoine, Max Reinhardt, and Edward Gordon Craig, the theatre critics Bernhard Diebold or Stanisław Miłaszewski, the musicians Sergei Volkonsky and Feodor Chaliapin, among other leading figures of the Russian émigrés[5]. Such stops as Krakow, Paris, or Berlin leave long-term marks on the local avant-garde scenes, resulting in postwar developments that will, in their turn, reshape theatrical modernism[6] (see, below, the subchapter "The posterity of Habima project"). In the United States, due to some of the crew members' intention to settle down, the troupe is on the verge of disbanding. However, despite Zeman and other actors deciding to stay in America, it crosses the Atlantic and reaches Jaffa in 1927, before going on another tour, between 1929 and 1931. In 1958, ten years after the creation of Israel, Habima becomes its National Theatre, located in the capital Tel Aviv.

A Modernizing Project: Studio Habima

Ever since its settling in Moscow, in 1917, Habima fits into the local theatrical landscape and is unreservedly adopted by Konstantin Stanislavsky as part of his MAT, for a number of reasons. First, the mysticism of Habima's debut performances, specific to the Jewish folklore, is associated by the public with symbolism, a popular trend on the Russian stages, at that time. Stanislavsky himself produced *Hamlet*, in 1912, in collaboration with the English scenographer Gordon Craig, abandoning the rigors of realism that had consecrated him at the beginning of the century. Second, Moscow theatre and, in particular, the one derived from Stanislavsky's system is a favourable hub for artistic experiments, mushrooming in the first decades of the 20th century. Designed initially for the psychological theatre, in line with the 19th

century bourgeois ideology of individualism, Stanislavsky's method underwent significant changes in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution, readapted in the works of his disciples to meet the new political realities. Vsevolod Meyerhold's constructivism, Michael Chekhov's "gestural theatre", Alexander Tairov's "chamber theatre", and Yevgeny Vakhtangov's "fantastic realism"[7] are pathways converging into modernist aesthetics[8]. Therefore, the Habima Studio joins in naturally, taken over (at Stanislavsky's suggestion) by the young and non-conformist Vakhtangov, one of his most outstanding disciples, the only one having visibly departed from his master's school of psychological realism. Vakhtangov already conducts a studio since 1913, where he adjusts Stanislavsky's method to his own theatrical ends, so Habima will be his second, "adopted", troupe. He speaks neither Yiddish, nor Hebrew; however, as an artist of Russian-Armenian descent working in the internationalist era of the Soviets, he feels that defending the rights of ethnic minorities to self-expression is a challenge worth taking.

As noted by Gabriella Safran[9], Habima promotes a paradoxical form of theatrical modernism, treating traditional, primitive elements as "frozen" museum exhibits, i.e., subjecting them to a particular process of stylization (*stilizatsiia*) popular in the Russian context, at the beginning of the 20th century. It is an aesthetic option in line with what Richard Schechner calls "tradition seeking avant-garde"[10], i.e., a type of experiment anchored in pre-theatrical forms, mostly of religious origin, melting contemporary themes in an old-looking texture, recalling ancient rituals. The stylization-effect is conferred by at least two elements: (i) the minimalist set design, and (ii) the elaborate stage choreographies, intended to "tell" the narrative instead of the dialogues, relegated to a merely melodic role. The absence of classic scenography and the selection of texts with incantatory potential soon become signature marks of the troupe. Also, we should not overlook the fact that Habima was pushed to embrace such strategy by historical circumstances. As a low-budget company wishing to engage in a costly world tour, they were forced to use cheap, easy to transport props and develop an efficient non-verbal language in order to address non-Hebrew speaking audiences. Their artistic (and financial) success fully weighed on their choices.

The troupe's debut in Moscow takes place in the fall of 1918 with *The Genesis* (directed by Nachum Zemach), a manifesto-performance, juxtaposing a few one-act plays written by modern Jewish authors. In the same period, Vakhtangov intends to produce, with his first troupe, a set of scenes taken from the Old Testament and Byron's *Cain*[11]. His predilections for the founding myths of Jewishness, as well as for performances incorporating ritual elements, give him the aura of a visionary, in the eyes of the Habima members. His "prophetic" profile is also underlined by his poor medical condition: at the time of his encounter with the Habima, Vakhtangov is in the final phase of his incurable disease. He dies in 1922, shortly after the premiere of the play which will ensure his and the troupe's place in the history of modern theatre: *The Dybbuk or Between Two Worlds*, the show unanimously acclaimed in their 1926 transcontinental tour, to become their longest running production, with

representations spanning over more than four decades.

The Dybbuk or Between Two Worlds. The Text and its Avatars

The show consecrating Habima Studio, its actors and its stage director, in Moscow and around the world, is undoubtedly *The Dybbuk or Between Two Worlds* (1922), written by an ethnographer whose work was dedicated to the Jewish folklore, Semyon Akimovich An-sky. What convinced both Habima and Vakhtangov to adapt this story is that it revolves around a mythological character, both representative of the Jewish ethnic tradition and spectacular, in theatrical terms. In An-sky's play, the *dybbuk* is a loving but relentless undead spirit who disturbs the sleep of a young girl, once promised to him as a bride. Ambivalent in terms of (un)happy ending, the final act sees the two (ex-)lovers reunited in death.

A theatre representing ghosts who seek their justice through the voices of living humans had a history since Antiquity and developed its own rhetoric and tradition in Europe[12] (see *Hamlet*, for that matter). Thus, despite not speaking Hebrew and not being familiar with the Jewish folklore, the public in Moscow was presented with a situation recognizable in archetypal terms. The director was called to forge a new theatrical vocabulary, to reach his audience through the language barrier. Moreover, Vakhtangov's staging was supposed not to miss the play's over-arching message, topical for the troupe as well as for the Jewish communities living in Russia:

> The play was supposed to demonstrate to the Russian spectators the true, spiritual values of Jewish life. On the plane of cultural politics Ansky sought to inscribe, legitimate, and valorize East European Jewish folk culture and its spiritual creativity as a normative part of the empire.[13]

Not only due to its literary value, An-sky's text is a landmark in the history of Jewish culture in Central and Eastern Europe, in the first half of the 20th century. Originally written in Russian, trimmed by interventions of the tsarist censorship, *Dybbuk* goes through several processes of adaptation, in Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew. The play is first performed in Yiddish, in the translation of the author, significantly different from the source text[14]. In 1920, this version is staged by the Vilna Troupe in Warsaw. Interpreted in a political key, the production arouses reactions of solidarity with the Jewish cause and with the left-wing ideology to which the producers and the audience rally, all the more since the playwright himself, An-sky, is known for his *narodnik* (i.e., left-populist) persuasion and revolutionary spirit. In time, a polemic tension will build between Vilna's production in Yiddish and Habima's production in Hebrew, based on the rivalry between the linguistic and cultural policies supported by the two companies, respectively. *Dybbuk*'s rich texture of Jewish heritage and its typically modern ambiguity make room for ideological controversies around the play's implied message. Therefore, the polarization between the two theatrical productions (and troupes) is embedded in the political dispute Yiddishism vs Zionism, a heated debate in the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe, in the first decades of the 20th

century[15]. The avatars of the play multiply further on, as *Dybbuk* travels on a variety of stages in Central and Eastern Europe, due to the immediate success of the Vilna troupe and to the diligence of Jewish communities spread in the towns and cities of the region. As an example, already in the 1920s, the play is translated in Romanian in two versions, by two known representatives of the local Jewish literary *milieu* (B. Fundoianu and I. Ludo), and is performed in Iassy and Bucharest, in Yiddish as well as in Romanian[16].

Meanwhile, the first Russian version of the play sees new changes, operated under Stanislavsky's supervision in order to be staged by the MAT. The interventions go as far as imagining new protagonists, like the Passer-By, an Aesopian character who brings to the fore the topic of travelling[17]. However, the play won't be performed, in Russian, in Moscow, until later. The post-revolutionary political context led Stanislavsky to believe the Hebrew version produced by Habima Studio was more appropriate.

Habima's version was based on a different avatar of the text, adapted by Hayim Nahman Bialik from two sources: the Russian original and the Yiddish translation worked by An-sky, in Warsaw, for the Vilna theatre. Bialik was already celebrated as the poet of the "national revival", so the fact that An-sky chose him as the translator of the Hebrew version was in itself a statement, matching Habima's cultural agenda.

Towards a New Theatricality

Despite its symbolizing the rebirth of the ancient Jewish civilization, for the director, for the Russian and the Yiddish-speaking Jewish audiences, the Hebrew remains inaccessible, thus forcing Vakhtangov into one of the most meaningful experiments of theatrical modernism in the 1920s. Preserved intact and accurately articulated, the text holds the ritual value of a sacred service, but its actual meaning cannot pass through unless conveyed in another language. Vakhtangov innovates a new type of stage expressiveness, understood as a hybrid of words (unintelligible, but laden with obscure meaning), gestures (profane or sacred), and group movements (involved in dances). The ritual practices present in the play – a prayer in the synagogue, a wedding ceremony, and an act of exorcism – are supposed to be delivered in this syncretic language. The choreographies, conceived to "translate" words in body-signs, build the tension between the two worlds: the space of the living (where the young bride invites to her wedding the spirit of the lover she lost by breaking the oath) and the space of the dead (claiming remembrance and observance of the old covenant). The tension between the living and the dead makes more sense for an audience familiarized with the contrasts within the early 20th century Jewish culture: it may suggest polarities like contemporary vs ancient, modernity vs tradition, or Yiddish vs Hebrew. The spectators, regardless of their ethnic-cultural background, witness the surreal encounter of a forgetful modernity with its long-lost tradition, persistent after all, despite historical transformations and adversities.

Vakhtangov now consolidates a new type of theatricality to deliver "archetypal images", in a manner that the director instantiates with his first troupe, in parallel, in a *commedia dell'arte* production, *Princess*

Turandot (adapted from Carlo Gozzi). Here, four characters improvise, changing various masks, while five others hold mostly static roles. In *Dybbuk*, the same type of contrasting ensemble is found in the alternation between still and moving bodies.

In Vakhtangov's version, the focus of the play shifts from the tragic story of the two youths bound by marriage vows made before their birth by their parents (a recurring theme in Jewish texts), to the scene of exorcism, in which the ritual performed on the haunted bride is accompanied by the beggars' dance. Thirteen actors dressed in rags, constantly in motion, in stark contrast with both the stillness of the other actors and the rigid costume elements specific to an old era, roam the stage throughout Acts II and III. Their movements interweave motifs from the wedding dance with elements of undefined rituals. Vakhtangov adds distorting effects: their faces are grotesque, their bodies deformed, their movements contorted and arrhythmic. They represent the only moving part of the scene, while all the other characters – the wedding participants – are quasi-immobile and have a spectral appearance. In this choreographic composition, both the dynamic and the static elements are replete with deeper meanings: on the one hand, the beggars represent a community always "on the road", in their symbolic journey between worlds; on the other, the "frozen" images strongly evoke Jewish culture (the *dybbuk* depicted in a static pose of horror; the hypnotized bride possessed by the *dybbuk;* the father frowning over family affairs, etc.).

Forging a radically different form of representing humanity, Vakhtangov distances himself from Stanislavsky's realist-psychological method, in terms of acting technique. While Stanislavsky recommended the performer-character identification to be derived from the perceivable circumstances of the play, Vakhtangov's concept of "inner justification" allows the actor's access to a private, secret realm, transcending the circumstances of both the play and the character. His de-psychologizing approach is meant to bridge the gap between the modern-naturalistic and the religious-symbolic codes[18].

Vakhtangov's search for new artistic ways is also evident in a backstage dispute, reportedly taking place during the long play's production. While Zemach invites Marc Chagall to create the play's set design, based on his recognized craftsmanship to depict the spirituality of the Jewish *shtetl*, the director is reluctant to the idea and finally opts for a lesser-known avant-garde artist, Natan Altman. Vakhtangov's rejection of Chagall's approach coming "from the Jewish wedding jester *(badkhonim)*, from the circus, from the harlequinade, even from *commedia dell'arte*"[19] is a step off the beaten track, a rebuttal of an already legitimized mode to represent Jewishness. Instead of the colourful *joie de vivre*, he gives credit to Altman's *noir* vision of a clash between the ancient and the new, in a minimalist set design meant to support the "archetypal gesture".

A Jewish and Universal Sign: "The Archetypal Gesture"

Perhaps the most iconic element of theatricalization introduced in the production is what one of Vakhtangov's exegetes will later call "the archetypal gesture", "the gesture of cataclysm" or "of protest"[20]. "The universal gesture of the bloody XXth

Fig. 1. *Dybbuk* by An-sky, directed by Y. Vakhtangov, Vakhtangov Studio, Moscow, January, 1922 – https://culture.pl/en/feature/possession-100-years-of-the-dybbuk

century"[21] has an autobiographical underlayer that Vakhtangov discloses briefly in a confession. In his years of youth, while striving to become an entrepreneur, a roommate tried to teach him a few Jewish words, which he kept forgetting:

> [W]hen I could not remember one of the words, my roommate made a very characteristic gesture, moving his palms apart with a slight smile, gently. Numerous variations of this gesture were played out in *Dybbuk*, physically – from gentle wonder resignation, astonishment, shock, indignation, etc. The gesture became the atmosphere, the through-line behind *The Dybbuk*.[22]

Onstage, the gesture looks either discreet, with palms slightly set apart, or conspicuous, with arms wide open, corresponding to varying degrees of emotion (See fig. 1). When explaining Habima's actors how to transpose An-sky's elaborate text in visual language, Vakhtangov describes the gesture resorting to a social-political commentary on Ilya Repin's famous portrait of Lev Tolstoy:

> Tolstoy stands in his long peasant shirt, his hands tucked behind his belt. This is how he lived his life. The form told us about it: his hands are tied by the traditions of his class. He dreamt of justice and truth. As he was approaching the end of his life's path, he tore this cursed belt with his hands. (Vakhtangov shows how Tolstoy freed his hands). He tore himself free – and died.[23]

This brief re-contextualization of the gesture, meant to cohere the group anatomy of the beggars' dance, intimates a second statement, due to the canonical place held by Tolstoy in the Russian culture: like its literary leading figure, Russia itself is located – historically, culturally, and symbolically – between worlds.

This non-textual sign, created on the corporeal-visual level, has the function to universalize the message, while preserving the Jewish theme unaltered. Throughout the play, the recurring image of the palms slightly moved apart from one another dominates the stage. The "archetypal gesture" stylizes, through this group choreography, the Jews' long and painful journey to their homeland, where the symbolic wedding between the living and the dead, i.e. modernity and tradition, can finally take place.

Not only for the Habima cast does *Dybbuk* echo deeply, on the personal level; for Vakhtangov, it has a testamentary character. At the time of staging the play, the director is in the last months of his life, which he decides to spend in the rehearsal room. As mentioned before, he works on this show in parallel with *Princess Turandot:* two contrasting productions, the heads and tails of his directorial career. To finalize them both, Vakhtangov schedules the

rehearsals with Habima especially at night, which apparently contributes to the "mystery" imbuing the play, while stimulating the troupe's identification with their quasi-mystical sense of destiny[24].

The expressive force of the symbolic gesture created for Habima follows Vakhtangov in his "daytime affair" as well, i.e. in the show *Princess Turandot* (1922). Here, the same gesture of emotion and bewilderment helps Vakhtangov surpass the challenge of representing the invisible:

> But what if, during prayer, they raised their hands to heaven! No, it's too realistic... We give up. But what if you formed, with your raised hands, palm to palm, a "little house"? This is better. And, apart from that, do not make any other move, with your hands raised to form the house, but live deep inside, in the rhythm of prayer... That would be extremely good![25]

The Play's Reception: Ideological and Aesthetic Responses

Before reaching recognition under the protection of Stanislavski and the MAT, Habima had to face competition with Alexis Granovsky's Yiddish theatre, a group ideologically aligned to the conservative left-centre, supported by the authorities and already quite popular with the Moscow public. On the other hand, as a troupe performing in the language of the Bible, Habima won the sympathy of a certain wing of Russian intelligentsia who disavowed the Bolshevik persecutions of religion. Some influential figures in the cultural elite of the regime also intervened in its favour, realizing the higher artistic stake of the project developed under the aegis of MAT. However, among the Jewish section of the Communist party, accusations arose of Habima's "bourgeois"-spiritualist approach, detached from the political reality of the present, under the guidance of Vakhtangov[26]. The troupe was disapproved for not supporting the cause of the Eastern European Jewish communities, active in the revolutionary political landscape of the early 20th century.

In the post-revolutionary years, in Moscow, the official cultural institutions encouraged reworking and reinterpreting classical texts in the spirit of social-political emancipation. Against the background of this continuous re-semantization of dramatic texts, *Dybbuk*'s reception by the critics is diverted towards ideological ends, as can be seen from the comment of a reviewer who claimed to find "the mythos of the Soviet Revolution revealed in [an] ancient folk legend created by the genius of a people"[27]. As Vakhtangov shifted focus to the corporeal dimension, bringing to the fore the symbolic dance of the beggars and leaving Leah and Khanan's tragic love story in the background, the production could be seen as staging a revolt of the masses, in the immediate reality of 1920s Moscow. An apt interpretation of the play in this political key was reenacted by Emanuel Levy in 1979, based on an earlier analysis by Yosef Yzraely:

> Furthermore, in the second act of the play, Vakhtangov shifted the accent from Anski's folkloristic elements to a specific class struggle between the beggars and Sender, who was made to represent the materialistic establishment. In the dance of the beggars,

> he sought to express the spirit of the Revolution by transforming the beggars from a background element traditional at Jewish weddings to a central element of his interpretation: the suffering inflicted upon the beggars by the rich establishment.[28]

Interpreted in this way, as a play of the "class struggle" and a condemnation of religious obscurantism, Vakhtangov's staging does not convince through the excessive symbolization of its effects. Moreover, the profusion of theatrical details coheres into new layers of meaning which can hardly support ideological decoding: the much-discussed dance of the beggars displays an exaggerated expressiveness; the aesthetics of the grotesque is overarching the plot, etc. As a part of the eclectic landscape of the modernist stage at the beginning of the century, *Dybbuk* will later be claimed as the flagship of two theatrical orientations: on the one hand, it will be considered the first expressionist production in the history of the Russian modern stage[29], while, on the other, it will be revaluated as a precursor of the Theatre of Cruelty, theorized by Antonin Artaud in the 1930s[30]. The performances given by the troupe in Paris in 1926, at the beginning of the world tour which will end in Mandatory Palestine, will reinforce the latter interpretation: the French avant-garde finds the seeds of Artaudian aesthetics in the grotesque and antiquated looks of the characters, conceived similar to museum exhibits.

Beyond artistic affiliations, the show triggers strong emotional responses, such as the one described by the actress and director Nadezhda Bromley, herself involved in one of MAT's studios:

> *The Dybbuk*. An overtly esoteric production. Behind grotesquery and satire, there is a most acute longing for the spiritual world. The theme of the two worlds sounds here in the title itself. The text of the production, the alien, specific timbre of speech, the distorted contours of objects, the dance of the beggars, the death, the horror and that all-overcoming scream of love, the ecstasy, the life – have stayed in the memory forever.[31]

Though a British theatre critic of the 1920s thought that the play's deterritorialization, with the world tour, aestheticized its meaning and lessened its geo-historical impact[32], *Dybbuk* will become a cornerstone in the history of representing trauma and, in particular, migration trauma. Vakhtangov innovates here some of the most enduring theatrical tropes of exile, mass deportation, and refugee experience. The iconic facial image of petrified fear, emphasized by the "archetypal gesture", will become a haunting motif interwoven in many performances with a political message.

The Posterity of Habima Project

After the Second World War, migration becomes one of the major themes of Central and Eastern European theatres. The recurring image of group travellers involved in a macabre dance, with mythological roots (the Book of the Exodus, the legend of the Wandering Jew), gains new resonance with the recent dissolution of Jewish communities. Jerzy Grotowski dedicates productions like *Akropolis* (1962) or *Apocalypsis cum figuris* (1969) to the tragedies of concentration camps and

deportations. Having graduated from the directing school in Moscow, as an admirer of Stanislavsky's method and of its versions further refined by his disciples, Grotowski is familiar with Vakhtangov's directorial approach. At the same time, living in Opole, not far from the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps, he obsessively returns to the *topoi* of Jewishness. His conception of a "ritual" or "poor theatre" resonates with his endeavour to forge a more credible language to represent the Jewish tragedy. His definition of the stage resounds with the ambition to link the mundane with the transcendental: "a place for the *total act* to reveal the ecstatic current of our existence – in an explosion of oppositions, in the polysemy of myth and the *sacrum*"[33].

Akropolis, based on a text by Stanisław Wyspiański, is first staged in 1962, to a small audience (at the Theatre of 13 Rows, in Opole). The action takes place in a Nazi concentation camp, and the characters are ghosts "resurrected from crematoria smoke"[34]. The direct reference to Vakhtangov's production of the 1920s (which could be watched in more Polish cities, during Habima's European tour) is intensely highlighted throughout the show (See fig. 2).

In a theatrical way, Grotowski updates Vakhtangov's staging vision to the recent political realities of Central and Eastern Europe. He chooses a new text with folk-romanticist reminiscences, of a contemporary playwright known for his reenactment of the national theme, as a militant for "the new Poland". On this moderately modern platform, he builds a corporeal discourse in the grotesque register and creates an experimental representation of trauma open to multiple readings, from the social-political

Fig. 2. *Akropolis* by Stanisław Wyspiański, directed by Jerzy Grotowski, Theatre of 13 Rows, Opole, 1962 – https://www.bouffes-dunord.com/en/calendar/akropolis

to the abstract-nonreferential framework. The show stylizes the gruesome reality of concentration camps, while claiming connection to a mythical dimension of existence:

> In *Akropolis*, every gesture, intonation, situation and movement has the ambition to become a synthesis and a generalisation of a wider experience, a sign expressing archetypes, in order to gain the strength of a metaphor[35].

The theme of exodus, represented as a macabre dance, reinforced by the "archetypal gesture" of trauma, comes back in the work of the Jewish-French director Ariane Mnouchkine, in performances like *Les Atrides* (1990) or *Tambours sur la digue* (1999), an allegory of migration caused by natural disasters, set in medieval Asia. Raised in a family who experienced deportation, Mnouchkine creates in Paris a shelter-theatre for immigrants, organized roughly on the principles of a *kibbutz (Théâtre du Soleil)*. Her avant-garde theatre, with notable social-political impact, play out an array of aesthetic experiments to represent

Fig. 3. *Tambours sur la digue* by Hélène Cixous, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine, Théâtre du Soleil, Paris, 1999 – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5RXs-jTU34M&t=36s

ethnic diversity, including Habima's strategies of "translating" the text in non-verbal communication. *Dybbuk*'s influence on the French stage started in the summer of 1926, with the Jewish troupe's show received by an enthusiastic Parisian audience. The most revered local director of the previous decades, André Antoine, founder of the Théâtre Libre and of the French realist-naturalist orientation at the end of the 19th century, noted, after watching the show, "the original, unique character of the performance: acted in the pure Hebrew language, the drama takes on a ritual character of a grandeur the equivalent of which could hardly be found in any other literature."[36] The beggars' dance is associated to a fresco by Jacques Callot, and the enigmatic quality of choreography, to a "cabbalistic representation of wandering souls"[37]. Soon after Habima's tour, the play is restaged by two established avant-garde directors, Lugné-Poe and Gaston Baty, who insist on preserving Vakhtangov's expressionist bleak atmosphere and even some elements of Nathan Altman's set design.

Based on this precedence on the French stage, Mnouchkine represents uprooted identities, captive in foreign territories, with theatrical components visibly adapted from Habima. Some of her masked human faces from *Tambours sur la digue* express trauma in choreographies citing Vakhtangov's non-linguistic codes, mixing ethnic-archaic and avant-garde signs, including the "archetypal gesture". Here, she creates a collective group strongly reminding of the *Dybbuk*'s procession of the beggars: the drummers, looking like marionettes pulled on strings by unseen puppeteers, performing a synchronized slow-motion drum piece, prophesize the flood coming and the exodus beginning. Like the beggars, they are the tragic heralds caught in-between two worlds, the seen and the unseen (See fig. 3). By constructing image-based performances, staging de-psychologized characters, Mnouchkine updates a theatrical rhetoric apt to convey the message outside the classical categories of language and territory.

Concluding Remarks

Habima's impact on the theatricalization movement derives from its shift of focus from the linguistic to the superposed non-linguistic code (comprising set design, body expressiveness, and group dancing) in the construction of meaning. In the meantime, Vakhtangov's concept of "inner justification" was instrumental in departing from the Stanislavskyan method, prevalent in the first decades of the 20th century, in Russia and abroad. The interwar avant-garde scenes of Europe were the most attuned receptors of their innovations, in the interwar period. But Vakhtangov's Habima Studio, and their praised production *Dybbuk* in particular, had a long-term effect on the neo-avant-gardes as well,

influencing the representation of trauma in performances directed by Jerzy Grotowski or Ariane Mnoutchkine, from the early 1960s to the late 1990s. The "archetypal gesture" comprises symbolically the Studio's defining endeavour to transgress boundaries between Jewish and universal, traditional and modern, aesthetic and political, historical and mythical levels, by short-circuiting the *either/or* logic. As a result, their stage innovations in terms of lighting, corporeality, and choreography were successfully recast in the post-World War II decades to represent *both* the Holocaust *and* general themes like collective death, mourning, or trauma, applicable to other geo-historical localizations. Habima Studio, the worldwide acclaimed migrant theatre of the 1920s, beside fulfilling its goal to found a Hebrew national theatre in Israel, provided the first elements for a modern poetics of deterritorialization.

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Notes

1. "In the wake of the February 1917 revolution, Jews got equal rights and were no longer a downtrodden minority." (Helen Tolstoy, "An-sky's *The Dybbuk* through the Eyes of Habima's Rival Studio", in *Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, Volume 10, Number 1, January 2012, p. 57.
2. Andrei Malaev-Babel, *Yevgeny Vakhtangov. A Critical Portrait*, London & New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 195.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 196.
4. We use the concepts *modernity – modernism – modernist*, roughly, in the spirit of Matei Călinescu's book *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1987). In his book, Călinescu talks about the umbilical, though dialectic, relationship between the civilizational and the aesthetic modernities (see chapter "The Two Modernities", p. 41-42). Nevertheless, in our more fluid understanding of the terms, we prefer Jessica Berman's attempted definitions from *Modernist Commitments. Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2011). For Berman, *modernity* "is a social, historical, and economic situation of late capitalism, characterized in part by advancing industrialization, expanding division of labor, and the increasing globalization of capital, as well as a range of attitudes associated with that situation as it emerges in different shapes and guises worldwide" (*Ibidem*, p. 289), while *modernism* is "a constellation of rhetorical actions, attitudes, or aesthetic occasions, motivated by the particular and varied situations of economic, social, and cultural modernity worldwide and shaped by the ethical and political demands of those situations" (*Ibidem*, p. 7).
5. See Emanuel Levy, *The Habima – Israel's National Theatre. 1917-1977. A Study of Cultural Nationalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1979, p. 79-94, and Dassia N. Posner, "Across Worlds: Documents on the Creation and Reception of Habima's *The Dybbuk*", in Debra Caplan, Rachel Merrill Moss (eds.), *The Dybbuk Century. The Jewish Play That Possessed the World*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2023, p. 77-108.
6. While "theatrical modernism" is conventionally ascribed to a historical period spanning from the late 19th century to the 1930-1940s, newer approaches tend towards a "weakening" of the concept, taking in consideration the Eurocentric assumptions undergirding former periodizations and definitional projects. Therefore, we use the phrase "theatrical modernism" with the morphed meaning used by Claire Warden, Nicholas Johnson, Adrian Curtin and Naomi Paxton, i.e., a "constellation" of artworks and practices related genetically to "the revolutions and fissures opened by modernity in philosophy, science, economics, politics and society", consisting in "artistic experimentation in areas such as dramaturgy, characterization, language, *diegesis*, *mimesis*, scenography, acting, performance style, embodiment, directing, and audience engagement" ("Introduction: Sensing Modernism in Theatre", in Adrian Curtin, Nicholas Johnson, Naomi Paxton, and Claire Warden, eds., *The Edinburgh Companion to Modernism in Contemporary Theatre*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, p. 4-5). The "constellation" metaphor is taken by the authors from Jessica Berman (see, above, endnote 5), to extract the concept from rigid space-, time-, and discipline-framings and expand it on a transnational scale.
7. The theatrical concept "fantastic realism" was forged to suggest Vakhtangov's interplay between reality and the illusion of the stage (based, in its turn, on the illusion of the text). It was meant as a way out of Stanislavsky's method, a mainstream institution in the Russian theatre at the time of Vakhtangov's directorial debut. For this, see Oleg Mirochnikov, *The Vakhtangov Technique*, Project Report. University of the Arts London, London. [Creative Arts and Design Drama Education]

Academic Studies in Higher Education, http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/510/. Initially, in the opening remarks of a dress rehearsal, in recognition of his master's influence, Vakhtangov called his new manner "theatrical realism". Later, in the 1920s, commentators opted for more appropriate phrases, like "fantasy in reality, reality in the fantastical", to describe his work (see Samuel Margolin, "*The Dybbuk.* A Theater of Ecstasy," in *The Screen*, February 7–13, 1922, *apud* Dassia N. Possner, "Across Worlds: Documents on the Creation and Reception of Habima's *The Dybbuk*", included in Debra Caplan, Rachel Merrill Moss (eds.), *The Dybbuk Century. The Jewish Play That Possessed the World*, p. 83, 91).

8. In ascribing Vakhtangov to the *modernist* (and not *avant-garde)* aesthetics, we have in mind Matei Călinescu's divide between *avant-garde*, i.e., "the most extreme form of artistic negativism – art itself being the first victim", and *modernism*, which "never conveys that sense of universal and hysterical negation so characteristic of the avant-garde". Moreover, the author adds, "[t]he antitraditionalism of modernism is often subtly traditional" (*Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 140). Therefore, in Călinescu's frame of thought, an artist like Vakhtangov, interweaving the traditional with the shockingly experimental, falls in the category of *modernism*. However, there are critics who don't draw such a hard line between *avant-garde* and *modernist* practices. See below, for the case of theatrical studies, Richard Schechner (endnote 10).
9. Gabriella Safran, "Jews as Siberian Natives. Primitivism in An-sky – *Dybbuk*", in *Modernism/modernity,* vol. XIII, no. IV, 2006, Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 635-655.
10. Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual. Writings on Culture and Performance*, London & New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 11 ("Introduction").
11. Andrei Malaev-Babel (ed.), *Vakhtangov. Sourcebook*, London & New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 241.
12. See Monique Borie, *Le Fantôme ou le théâtre qui doute*, Arles, Actes Sud, Académie expérimentale des théâtres, 1997, p. 5-10, (ch. "Le Fantôme ou les enjeux de la représentation") *et passim.*
13. Helen Tolstoy, "An-sky's *The Dybbuk* through the Eyes of Habima's Rival Studio" in *Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, Vol. 10, No. 1, January 2012, p. 55.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 49-75.
15. The ideological conflict is also present in the Jewish literature of the epoch. See, for instance, Mihail Sebastian's novel *De două mii de ani* ("For Two Thousand Years", 1934), narrating the disputes between Yiddishists and Zionists among the Jewish intelligentsia living in the cities and small towns of Romania, in the 1920s. From the heated dialogues spread in the book, one can summarize the main positions held by each of the two sides: use of Yiddish vs Hebrew Language in everyday life and in culture; positive vs negative image of the Jewish *shtetl* or ghetto; making roots in vs. uprooting from the country of adoption; the trope of diaspora vs the trope of exile (Mihail Sebastian, *For Two Thousand Years*, translated by Philip Ó Ceallaigh, London, Penguin Random House, 2016).
16. See An-sky's play, translated in a serial by B. Fundoianu in the Zionist review *Hasmonaea*, between June 1922 and July-August 1923. See also An-sky (S.), *Dybuck. Legendă dramatică în patru acte*, translated from Yiddish by I. Ludo, Bucharest, Editura I. Brănișteanu, 1927. More theatrical productions, by the Vilna troupe (who came, on tour, in Iassy, in 1922) or by local companies, are announced and sometimes reviewed in newspapers like *Opinia* (Iassy) or *Rampa* (Bucharest).
17. The history of all these versions is summarized by Helen Tolstoy: "Thus, the text of *The Dybbuk* was changed a number of times. The Russian version, with changes imposed by tsarist censorship, has survived; a later version, reworked by Stanislavsky and Sulerzhitsky was lost. The Yiddish version that An-sky wrote waiting for a delayed Russian production was also lost. These two versions together became the source for Bialik's Hebrew translation [...], considered the final authorized version; the latter became a basis for some further translations including a new one into Yiddish that An-sky made in Warsaw" (Helen Tolstoy, *op. cit.*, p. 58).
18. Vakhtangov's commentators called this type of character's construction, "a-psychological", projecting it in the sphere of collective imagination. His method, called "the selected truth" generated a

type of show called "the theatrical theatre". See Oleg Mirochnikov, *op. cit.*, http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/510/.

19. Andrei Malaev-Babel, *Yevgeny Vakhtangov. A Critical Portrait*, p. 207.
20. *Ibidem*, p. 202-203.
21. *Ibidem.*
22. *Ibidem*, p. 211.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 212.
24. A theatre historian pointed at the close crew relationships, similar to family bonds, demanding both ethically and professionally, under Vakhtangov's directorate: "The specific framework in which Vakhtangov produces his great shows of the '20s implies the severe ethic reuniting an artistic family and the intimate interconnection of actors' formation and human education" (Béatrice Picon-Vallin, "Repetițiile în Rusia-URSS", in *Repetițiile și teatrul reînnoit. Secolul regiei*, edited by George Banu, translated by Mirella Nedelcu-Patureau, Bucharest, Nemira, 2009, p. 74).
25. Nikolai Mihailovici Gorceakov, "Lecțiile de regie ale lui Vakhtangov", translated by Raluca Rădulescu, Bucharest, Editura Nemira, 2017, ch. "Prințesa Turandot", p. 280.
26. Alexis Granovsky's theatrical enterprise and ideological profile is described by Huntly Carter, in *The New Spirit in Russian Theatre, 1917-1928*, New York, London, Paris, Brentano`s LTD, 1929, p. 87 *et passim*. For the reception of Habima Studio in the Soviet Union of the 1920s, see Helen Carter, *Op. cit.*, p. 47, 58.
27. Emanuel Levy, *The Habima – Israel's National Theatre. 1917-1977. A Study of Cultural Nationalism*, p. 35.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 33.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 36 *et passim*.
30. Andrei Malaev-Babel, *Yevgeny Vakhtangov. A Critical Portrait*, p. 206.
31. Nadezhda Bromley, *Vakhtangov E. Zapiski. Pis'ma. Stat'I*, Moscow-Leningrad, VTO, 1939, *apud* Helen Tolstoy, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
32. "The production in Moscow was a synthesis of a new and inspired dynamic form. Out of Russia it was simply the usual, conventional exhibition of actors speaking dialogue, and wearing long beards to appear venerable" (Huntly Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 72).
33. Ludwick Flaszen, *Grotowski and Company*, Holstebro-Malta-Wrocław, Icarus Publishing Enterprise, 2010, p. 185.
34. *Ibidem*, p. 177.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 76-77.
36. A. Antoine, untitled, s.p. in Information, 12/07/1926. Microfilm Re 2146, BnF, Performing Arts Department, *apud* Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu, "The Habima Theatre's Paris Tour, summer of 1926", HAL Id: hal-00553801 https://hal.science/hal-00553801, p. 7.
37. *Ibidem*, p. 10.