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The Habima Theatre's Paris Tour, Summer of 1926

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In the early 1920s an 'abrupt wave' of Jewish literature was witnessed in France in connection with the creation of the Jewish national homeland in Palestine and also due to a strong influx of émigrés from Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, numerous writers[1].

This 'wave' was favoured by a certain decompartmentalisation of Jewish literature, which stopped cultivating particularism, religious formalism, to model itself on the country's mores. 'Prophetism aims directly at universalism. [...] Such is the dilemma with which Judaism is struggling: either confining itself in its particularism or sense of identity and losing all universal raison d'être, or universalising itself by becoming less Jewish'[2]. Crémieux's opinion is shared by L. Blumenfeld, a specialist in Yiddish literature and author of numerous articles on the question beginning in the mid-1920s. He emphasises the emancipation of the religious spirit since the 1880s: 'Swept aside is the literature of the "enlightened" whose mission was to rescue the people from the clutches of the ghetto; erased forever, the didactic, pamphleteering, satirical forms.'[3] The new Yiddish literature henceforth sought to make Israel laugh about its old institutions. This vogue of Jewish literature led to the creation of a 'Judaism' collection overseen by Edmond Fleg at Éditions Rieder, which would publish the translation of *The Dybbuk* in 1927, after the Habima tour. Carried along by this wave of interest, Charles Dullin at L'Atelier would stage Sholom Ash's *The God of Vengeance* in 1925 and become interested in the works of Yitzchak Leybush Peretz.

Put back into this context, should the 1926 tour of a Jewish theatre from Moscow giving performances in Hebrew have surprised less? It seems that it was more its country of origin than the language of its performances that attracted the Parisian spectators. Both Soviet troupes that had made the journey before it (Moscow Art Theatre, Kamerny Theatre) had made a big theatrical splash.

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[1] Benjamin Crémieux, 'Judaïsme et littérature', in *Nouvelles littéraires* (?), 14 October 1921; preserved on microfilm, Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BnF), Performing Arts Department, fonds Re 2150, p.10.
[2] *Ibid.*
[3] L. Blumenfeld, 'La jeune littérature yidish' (*sic*), from *La Revue mondiale*, 1 August 1926, fonds Re 2150, *loc. cit*

The Habima, from Moscow to Paris

As of its founding in 1918 in Moscow, the Habima planned to get to Israel at the earliest opportunity, but although most of the troupe[4] hoped to rediscover the native land, it was bound by all its fibres to the Moscow Art Theatre, Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov, who supported and participated in its creation.

The Soviet authorities' lack of enthusiasm in aiding them financially (they did not obtain the statute of self-run State theatre until 1925, whereas the Moscow State Jewish Theatre [GOSET], founded a year later, received it) encouraged them to set off on a long tour that would go through New York and reach Palestine. They would move about for four years under the 'brand' of 'Habima Muscovite Theatre', arousing the admiration of Albert Einstein, Gordon Craig, Max Reinhardt, Thomas Mann, Alexander Moissi and Arthur Schnitzler.

Up until Vakhtangov's death, the question of the company's direction did not even come up. But as of 1926, distance increased tensions between the troupe and Naum Zemach whose cutting authoritarianism was initially tempered by collective direction. The struggle for sole, absolute power reached its paroxysm in Paris, where Zemach resigned whilst remaining a member of the board. The conflict grew more acrimonious to the point that his name would eventually disappear from the posters. He proposed a scission in New York in June 1927, taking the head of an American Habima, but this lasted only a few months. Plays acted in Hebrew did not have its place in the USA where approximately fifteen troupes performed in Yiddish.

High patronage

The tour was sponsored by three Russian personalities of great renown. Stanislavsky, having himself returned from a long European and international tour two years earlier, used his fame to recommend the Jewish troupe: 'Let them show and propagate beyond our country's borders what we, they, I and my student Vakhtangov have liked, sought and cried,'[5] he wrote in the programme. Faithful to his credo, Stanislavsky insisted less on the particularity of the theatre (an exclusively Jewish repertoire, actors acting in Hebrew) than on the messianism of art, which brings all men together: 'Art is this domain of the spirit in which

[4] At the outset, it was made up of two distinct groups: on the one hand, militant religious amateur actors and on the other, qualified actors, communist, alien to Jewish nationalism and not knowing Hebrew. See Vladislav Ivanov, *Russkie sezony Teatra 'Gabima'*, Moscow: A.R.T., 1999, p. 18.

[5] Programme of the Paris tour, preserved in the Performing Arts Department, BnF, Re 2146. Text dated 26 January 1926.

men come together, with the purest and loftiest ideas, outside all politics, outside all mean, personal goals, for beauty and aesthetic joy'.

In a letter addressed to Parisians, Chaliapin, who had just emigrated to Paris in 1925, confided his own experience as a Moscow spectator a few years earlier, upon discovering shows performed in an unknown language in a small theatre in the Russian capital. The miracle of art was obviously going to work on the French as it had for him: 'I had the impression of a veritable celebration of the worship service, and my soul was moved in a pleasant, indescribable way…'

Finally, the programmes proposed a letter from Gorky, translated without explanation (it was written in 1921, when the writer was living in the USSR and fighting so that the troupe might subsist despite the 'competition' of the GOSET [Jewish State Theatre] and the government's indifference). 'Without understanding the language, struck only by its force and sonority, I felt all the great despair of a prophet the words of who do not get to the heart of the people he loves infinitely..'[6].

Since then, Gorky had left the USSR, and was living in Italy whence he continued to defend those who suffered, the persecuted who transcend misfortune by passion and artistic ecstasy. He would go see the Habima shows again in Berlin on 28 September 1926.

Three great artists, coryphaei of dramatic, lyric and literary art, brought their support to this little Jewish theatre, which had come from Soviet Russia.

The Parisian stop

The various works devoted to the Habima most often overlook the Paris tour[7]. Emanuel Levy mentions the stay in the French capital to underscore its minor importance for the troupe, on its way to Palestine and more interested in the reception of the German, Polish or New York audiences. He even asserts that the absence of a large Jewish community in Paris condemned the Habima to success as a simple curiosity: '[…] the non-Jewish public was not attracted by the Theatre, despite favourable reviews'.[8]

This is to lose sight of the fact that the Habima was presented as an offspring of the Art Theatre and its artistic work measured by the standard of the performances of other Moscow troupes. After having discovered, with the Moscow Art Theatre in 1922, the

[6] Programme of the Paris tour, *op. cit.* Gorky wrote this letter after having seen Pinsky's *The Wandering Jew* and attended a dress rehearsal of An-ski's *The Dybbuk*. The passage is also quoted by V. Ivanov, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
[7] Mendel Kohansky, *The Hebrew Theatre. Its first Fifty Years*, Tel Aviv: KTAV publishing House, 1969.
[8]Emanuel Levy, *The Habima – Israel's National Theater. 1917-1977. A Study of Cultural Nationalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1979, p.84.

extraordinary poetic musicality of *The Cherry Orchard*, the folklore authenticity of *Tsar Fyodor*, the picturesque realism of *The Lower Depths*, after the disconcerting confrontation with colourful constructivist sceneries, the inclined planes, the danced and sculptural acting of the stagings of Tairov (1923 KamernyTheatre tour), the Parisian spectators were going to come from well beyond the Jewish community. It was art that the French public was coming to see, expecting of the Habima surprising creative power and inventiveness. Its curiosity was on the alert: 'Never would I have suspected that one could meet so many Parisians who understood Hebrew! This crowd that filled the Theatre de la Madeleine certainly had to grasp all the refinements if we are to judge from the mystical fervour with which it listened […].[9]'

And the critics emphasised the ecumenical force of this theatre, capable of bringing people together beyond languages and religions: 'One would have really said that she communicated in Hebrew like the Christians in Latin in the distant centuries of great Christian fervour.'[10]

A Jewish and Soviet theatre?

The Parisian public and critics were a bit lost. This Jewish theatre, the only one in the world to have chosen not Yiddish but Hebrew, arrived from Moscow where it had been created thanks to the support of Stanislavsky and his disciples, they themselves of the Orthodox faith prior to the Revolution but having since become atheists, like all Soviet citizens.

How did the troupe fit into the ideological and artistic landscape of Bolshevik Russia?

Questioning M. Katchuk, the troupe's impresario, Georges de Wissant explains that the theatre operated like a cooperative. 'There are no stars, […] the leading roles in each play are held successively by different artists. This constant change is made easier by the fact that each artist knows not only his own role but also that of all the other artists, women and men alike. So there is no prompter, no understudies […].'[11]

The French journalist admired the equitable dividing-up of the takings, the discipline (the decisions of the artistic board, made up of five members, were respected absolutely). According to him, this work, in the manner of commedia dell'arte—not starting from a manuscript, a text established once and for all, but following a canvas on which the artists composed their acting by common agreement—typically comes from 'the communist

[9] Georges Le Cardonnel, *Le Journal*, 3 July 1926.
[10] Georges Le Cardonnel, *Loc.cit.*
[11] Georges de Wissant, 'L'organisation soviétique du théâtre Habima de Moscou', in *Soir*, 18 July 1926.

mentality'. For a critic attached to the privileges of text theatre, theatrical work based on free management of acting starting from preliminary improvisations could only be exemplary 'of the functioning in the Russia of the Soviets'...

A few years after the tour, Nina Gourfinkel would show that the cohabitation of the Jewish soul with the Russian soul was highly fruitful: on the one hand, the Russian skill at digging the depths of the being, and on the other, the fervent, prophetic Jewish exaltation ensured the universality and perpetuity of this theatre. 'The little Habima was the only one [...] to represent, in a period of the seeming triumph of materialism, its religious and idealistic side. So it was that its *Dybbuk*, which, for years, deeply moved Jews and non-Jews alike, first in Moscow, then round the world, conquered a precise place in history—not only of Jewish theatre but also of Russian theatre'.[12]

Antoine, Stanislavsky and the Habima

André Antoine, the 'pope' of Parisian critics at the time who had booed Tairov and Slavic barbarism in 1923, set the tone of a unanimously enthusiastic reception. His chauvinistic nationalism clearly shows through in a few condescending remarks about foreign troupes come to 'seek consecration in Paris'. *The Dybbuk* touches French audience because it is close to our ancient mysteries. But the attempt at reducing everything to French culture and Paris, of which Antoine was persuaded that it was then the cultural capital of Europe, stops there. Throughout his article, he stressed the *original, unique* character of these performances: '[…] 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'[13]

The founder of the Free Theatre (made up of amateur actors who were therefore not 'contaminated' by the clichés of professionals but concerned with recreating living environments exactly, in keeping with the theatrical naturalism defined by Émile Zola) appreciated that the 'ritual prayers and dances performed by young rabbis' were presented with 'pious fidelity'. The evening allowed the audience to 'gain information about the current state of Russian theatre and Jewish stage literature'.

The restoration of the ancestral language and the picturesque reproduction of the ghetto also struck André Levinson who linked An-ski's ethnographic experiments with

[12] Nina Gourfinkel, 'Théâtre juif: à propos de la tournée de Maurice Schwartz', in *Cahiers juifs*, May-June 1935, consultable on microfilm Re 2118, BnF, Performing Arts Department.
[13] A. Antoine, untitled, s.p. in *Information*, 12/07/1926. Microfilm Re 2146, BnF, Performing Arts Department.

Stanislavsky's naturalist truth. 'The subject was only a pretext. The dialogue served to frame the rituals and usages of Hassidic worship; religious folklore dominated the drama. It is not faith that guides the writer: it is a tender curiosity for the ancient customs of his people.'[14]

But all the difference between the aesthetics of the Art Theatre and the Habima was gone into thoroughly by the disciple of the first Studio, whom Stanislavsky delegated to the Habima. Vakhtangov, of Armenian origin, did not know a word of Hebrew but was haunted by a universal messianism, a devouring faith in art. 'It was he who, from an ethnographic study, drew a mystery.'[15]

Proselytism of art and faith

'Lovers of exoticism will find the wherewithal to satisfy their spirit avid for research,' affirmed the journalist of *Le Gaulois*, on 30 June 1926. They will be charmed by the actors' lilting, husky language, by the nostalgic songs, the picturesque dances, the touching ceremonies. The Beggars' dance in Act II of *The Dybbuk* makes up 'the most incredible fresco that Callot[16] ever composed'. The mystery that invades the stage ends up spreading into the audience. The emotional shock is guaranteed.

The journalist of *Paris-soir* describes a popular swarming of people who talk, play, sing and appear to get drunk on the rhythm to the point of frenzy and whose fierce beauty is of sometimes tragic grandeur. They are 'maniacs of art, the damned burning in the flames of a magnificent earthly hell…'[17]

Several spectators spoke of fanaticism: 'The most insignificant supernumerary of the troupe is far more than an excellent artist—he is a kind of believer, a mystic working towards the success of an ensemble agreeable to God.'[18] The aesthetic of paroxysm, desperate extravagance and the cult of the excessive create an atmosphere both dreamlike (as in a nightmare, the feverish actors have movements like sleepwalkers) and mystical (their hysterical agitation, their state of trance, their dances recalling the whirling dervishes reveal souls torn by mystical madness and superstitious terror).[19]

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[14] André Levinson, in *Comoedia*, 30 June 1926. An-ski came to consult Stanislavsky in the early 1910s, the latter planning to stage *The Dybbuk* at the first Studio with the participation of M. Chekhov and Grigory Khmara. See Odette Aslan, '*Le Dibbouk* d'An-ski et la réalisation de Vakhtangov', Les Voies de la création théâtrale, *Mises en scène des années 20 et 30*, vol.VII, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1979, pp.176-177.
[15] André Levinson, *loc. cit.*
[16] French engraver Jacques Callot (1592-1635), known for his highly original (i.e. sometimes grotesque or fantastic) vision.
[17] *Paris-soir*, 30 June 1926.
[18] *Ibidem.*
[19] André Levinson, *loc. cit.*

Behind the outbursts and disorder, the spectators make out a rhythm and a discipline. The actors move about between spontaneity and control, between prophetic fury and concern for order. These tortured beings are also actors who are alternatively tragedians, comedians, clowns, dancers and singers.

Control in chaos can sometimes appear too restrictive: 'the artists seem to be on manoeuvres as if they were no longer left the initiative for the slightest personal movement, once scene has been finalised.'[20] The strict discipline of the ensemble that pleased Antoine so much, for it was the mark of the director, bothered those spectators more sensitive to the performers' individual expressiveness: 'They are the instruments that this conductor directs to obtain the desired ensemble,' regrets the journalist of *L'Avenir*[21].

Dramatisation of legends

What is, for Antoine, characteristic of 'Russian' acting *à la* Stanislavsky, i.e., *the ensemble*, here contributes to creating an astonishing atmosphere, in particular, with a consummate art of makeup where the violent intensity of highlighting the eyes and mouth recalls Asian masks. These faces, painted without nuances, immediately capture the spectator's attention, but the actors' expressiveness is not limited to the face. Gestures, the way of walking and the body in general participate in a ballet of colours, movement and voices. Callot (for the Beggars' ballet[22]) and Brueghel are invited to translate the grotesque effects[23]. And it is to Rembrandt that the journalists refer in praising the skilful use of lighting and the effects of light and shade.

The Dybbuk, the cabbalistic representation of wandering souls opened the tour on 29 June. A masterpiece of Evgeny Vakhtangov, assisted by Nathan Altman for the sets and costumes, this production, prepared at length in Moscow (between 1918 and 1919, then 1920-21), was worked on starting from improvisations. An-ski's text, considerably abridged, was stripped of its supernatural dimension in favour of an Expressionistic dramatisation. The décors with their sharp angles, the work on chiaroscuro, the colour of the sets and costumes used in contrasting spots all contribute to the strangeness of the show, which leaves the strictly theatrical sphere to venture forth on the boundaries of opera and ballet: 'Just as the

[20] Georges Le Cardonnel, in *Le Journal*, 3 July 1926.
[21] *L'Avenir*, 8 July 1926.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] 'One thinks of the scenes painted by Brueghel the Younger, who was nicknamed 'Hell' Brueghel. But these animated paintings would be by a more Asiatic Brueghel who, in horror, would go even further than the other.' G. Le Cardonnel, *loc. cit.*

diction goes imperceptibly from spoken to sung, so does the corporal expression go imperceptibly from gesticulation to dance [...]'.[24]

The Dybbuk was followed, on 4 July, by David Pinsky's *The Wandering Jew* (directed by Vahtang Mchedlov, sets by Georgy Yakulov), where the work's 'non-dramatic' aspect is even more apparent. Here, we are at the limits of theatre. Indeed, Pinsky sets a legend to voice and body organised between two poles: the misfortune of Israel (destruction of Solomon's temple) and hope (birth of the messiah). Here, Providence, the God of the Jews, calls the tune, and it is to the fulfilment of a mystery that the audience is invited. The commentaries evoke oratorios, ritual ballets or sacred performances in which the officiant would have turned into an actor, the orison having become declamation. The framework of the ceremony imagined by Tairov's stage designer, Georgy Yakulov[25] (a large piece of working scenery up against a self-coloured canvas flanked by a spiral staircase), brings to mind a city perched on a mountainside. The mystery is penetrated by the beams of the spotlights, which draw figures from a Rembrandt-like penumbra, surrounding them with haloes. Zemach, as a prophet, is striking in his power, authority and the incisive clarity of his discourse but leaves the audience to whom he speaks cold. Here, the hermetism of the language blocks receptivity, but on the other hand, the stage lights up as soon as Hanna Rovina appears: 'This young woman with features so pure in the narrow oval of her face, the long martyr's neck and melodious arms is saturated with inner life. She radiates a mysterious power. Her staring, luminous gaze, as if turned inwards, seems to perceive nothing. One might say she's listening to her voices.'[26]

Unlike *The Dybbuk*, which transfigures a familiar reality, *The Golem*, a dramatic poem by H. Leyvik, proposes a realistic interpretation of imaginary facts. The action takes place in the Prague ghetto in the 16th century. According to a fantastic scenario in the style of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam or Théophile Gautier, the Creature defies the Creator and turns on him. As in Expressionist films, disproportions are obtained by ruses. The Giant, conceived for killing the enemies, is both fantastic and real. Makeup and silhouette contribute to this, but the illusion of gigantism is also obtained using low doors, tiers and platforms. The feeling of a latent, superhuman power is suggested by outbursts of thundering voices (directed by Boris Verchilov, sets by Ignati Nivinsky). This time, dialogue prevails over recitative. The visual symbolism and burlesque deformation give way to acting that is more direct and diction more

[24] Odette Aslan, *op. cit*., p. 223
[25] He does a pastiche of the construction he executed for Tairov in *Giroflé-Girofla*. *The Wandering Jew* was staged by Mchedlov.
[26] André Levinson, *op. cit.*

ordinary, except in the last act, which Marcel Say of *L'Humanité* compares with the paroxysms of a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy.[27]

Richard Beer-Hoffmann's *The Dream of Jacob*, the fourth production presented, disappointed. Whereas in *The Dybbuk* the audience had the impression of attending the fire of the Word, incarnate in fantastic creatures, in *The Dream*, it sees the cold application of an acting method. The Word has given way to the discourse. Sushkevich's conventionally modernistic direction (sets by Robert Falk) lacked inspiration. Goland, in the role of the archangel Gabriel, perched on a cylinder painted silver, dressed in padded purple and wearing a fluted cap, half wig, half tiara, recited his text at the top of his voice to the indifference of the audience.

If, as would stress Robert de Flers of the Académie Française, 'it is suitable to inscribe the adventure of the Jewish troupe of the Habima Theatre in the annals of the theatre'[28]; if this 'theatre of believers and highly-strung actors' communicates its spiritual fever to the spectator and, by its bizarreness and madness, its mystical solemnity, 'offers an aspect of theatre of which we were heretofore unaware', the fact still remains that the artists seem more to confess faith than play a role. After the fourth and final show, less inventive and heavier than *The Dybbuk* created by the late Vakhtangov (whose epigones of the first Studio—Mchedlov, Verchilov and Sushkevich—have neither the calibre nor the inventiveness), the Parisian critics raised the question of the Habima's future. Who was going to direct the troupe, put together the repertoire and renew it? Who was going to train young recruits? The Habima could not last by settling for exploiting its assets.

The Dybbuk after the Habima

The shock produced by the tour and, in particular, the extraordinary staging of *The Dybbuk*, was going to have an immediate consequence in Paris. At the same time as the Habima tour, the French premiere of this play was announced for the following year by Lugné-Poe in a translation made from Yiddish. A legal problem with the translation forced Lugné-Poe to abandon the project. Finally, it was Gaston Baty who staged the play in

[27] *L'Humanité*, 8 July 1926.
[28] *Le Figaro*, 13 July 1926.

February 1928 at the Studio des Champs-Elysées, in April 1928 at the Théâtre de l'Avenue and at the Théâtre Montparnasse during the 1930-31 season.[29]

Baty himself designed the black and white sets framing the Holy Ark decorated with a red curtain. The Ark was the point of convergence by which the space was organised. The lighting alternately brought out such and such a playing area and created images *à la* Rembrandt. The final scene was a symphony in white and music (a lullaby sung by Leah, the Song of Songs). Antonin Artaud claimed to be subjugated by the acting of Marguerite Jamois in the role of Leah, who experienced the character's trance intensely. 'In this work, she embodied a person turned in on herself but who speaks from the deepest part of her being; and the voice with which this being claimed her property is one of the most fearsome things I've heard.'[30]

But his enthusiasm was not shared by all the spectators. Some spoke of nightmare, of wild ceremonies. Baty insisted on the dark sides, the stifling of a closed world. He wanted to take up the psalmody, the spoken-to-sung transition found by Vakhtangov but without the grotesque, demystifying intonations[31]. Antoine would judge that the strange music, inspired by Hassidic tunes, did not compensate for the lack of songs and dances, 'which was of such great character with the Habima'.[32] Coming from him, this primacy given to the foreign troupe over the French performance was a very rare and very fine compliment indeed.

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[29] *The Dybbuk* circulated in Russian in manuscript form. Stanislavsky appreciated it greatly and encouraged An-ski to translate it into Yiddish, so that it might be performed 'authentically' by a Jewish troupe. The text was published in Yiddish in 1919 and first performed in that language in 1920 in Warsaw, directed by David Hermann. An-ski died on 8 November 1920 and was unable to see the play performed professionally. In homage to An-ski, a production of the play was prepared by a troupe of actors from Vilna in Russian during the 30-day mourning period that followed his death and with the première being given at the Elyseum Theatre in Warsaw on 9 December 1920. This was the Vilna troupe's greatest success. A year after the Warsaw première, the play was produced again by Maurice Schwartz, at New York City's Yiddish Art Theatre and, a few months later, translated into Hebrew by Chaim Nahman Bialik in Moscow and staged by the Habima troupe in 1922, directed by Evgeny Vakhtangov. In Paris, before the Habima, it seems that the play was presented by the Vilna troupe in **1922** in Russian.
Marie-Thérèse Koerner's translation from the Yiddish into French was published in Paris, by Éditions Rieder in 1927. It was revised during the revival by Gaston Baty in 1930. There exists another translation, by Nina Gourfinkel and Ariè Mambush, published by L'Arche in 1957. For the Daniel Mesguich production in 2004, an adaptation of the text was made by Xavier Maurel and published in 2004.

[30] Antonin Artaud, *Œuvres*, vol. 8, Paris: Gallimard, collection NRF, 1971, p. 219.

[31] I take up the analysis made by Odette Aslan, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-238. Armed with this admirable pioneering study on *The Dybbuk*, Odette Aslan was kind enough to guide my research on the Habima's first Paris tour and I am grateful to her for it.

[32] André Antoine, *Information*, 6 February 1928.