Dybbuk

Random and personal notes on “The Dybbuk”, culled from memory and deliberately with no assistance from Google. (Google has much material on this topic.)

* I don’t remember exactly when I first became awareof The Dybbuk, but I think it was sometime during my Junior or Senior years at Harvard. I recall seeing the movie at some moviehouse on Blue Hill Avenue , Roxbury that played movies of Jewish interest.
* At some point I wrote to L.F. and asked him whether there was a copy of the play in the Seminary Library. There was, and he sent me a xerox copy . (I don’t know what happened to the copy. Did I give it away?)
* The Dybbuk was written around 1904. It is in Yiddish, but has been translated into many languages including Hebrew. I found the Yiddish to be quite literary , studded with Hebraisms that I didn’t understand.
* The Dybbuk is S. Ansky’s major work. If it had any soliloquies ( I think it has one towards its very end.) it would be up there with Shakespeare.
* The idea of an evil spirit infesting a human body has Greek tragedy overtones, as well as Freudian overtones.
* The play opens with an old man --- a Traveller ?--- coming forward and saying somewhat mysteriously something like “Der Mensch darf wissen wohin er geht.” A person ought to be aware that his actions have consequences.
* The Traveller acts as a chorus, and as the Voice of Fate.
* I think the movie was made in Poland around 1937. There had been a thriving Jewish theatrical group there. It would be interesting to speculate how it would come out if a movie or a TV show were made today.
* The Dybbuk was made into an opera. Who wrote the music ?
* The end of the play – the exorcism scene – is terrific theatre- shofars blown to expel the Dybbuk.
* The word Dybbuk was not in my parent’s vocabulary. They knew about the movie – they may even have seen it . They called it an alte geschichte fun amoolige zeiten --nit fir ach gedacht ---an old story of years ago, no relevance today.
* Yet, the idea of an evil spirit was in my mother’s vocabulary; she would say – particularly of a wayward child : “Es sitzt in ihm a rikh” (ruach: spirit)
* I sense a certain ambiguity in the text. Is Ansky simply recording a piece of folk lore or is he criticising the mental – perhaps superstitious --- framework of a certain old Polish Jewish community ?
* The play carries the subtitle: Zwischen Zway Velt , Between Two Worlds. What were these two worlds: the superstitious and the rational ?
* Without a doubt The Dybbuk is a major piece of world literature, but requires much explication to to the average reader. --- P.J.Davis, September 2014