

The Hebrew Art Theatre

"Habimah" Players in Palestine

By

Dr. Alexander Goldstein

IT was in 1917. A strange deputation waited upon K. S. Stanislawsky, the creator and director of the famous Moscow Art Theatre, with a fantastic proposal — to help them to create a Hebrew Theatre. Stanislawsky, the Great Master, the idol of the artistic and intellectual world of Russia, the law-giver and inspirer of the Russian theatre, must have been at first puzzled. The small group of young people before him were poor and unknown, they had no professional training, they never played on the stage of a real theatre. And the idea to make the ancient language of the Bible alive on a twentieth century stage sounded like a crazy dream of an unbalanced mind. But little by little the humble, shy young men before him, caught by the force of their enthusiasm, grew eloquent and poured out the vision of the great Hebrew Renaissance before the intuitive eyes of the Master. And he suddenly saw the greatness and beauty of their daring idea. And the unusual in it, the crazy grandeur of it appealed to the visionary that is living in the depths of the heart of every great artist. It was characteristic of Stanislawsky that, once he felt something new and original could be created, he did not stop at a mere platonic blessing. He took an active interest in the realisation of the idea of a Hebrew Theatre, and he gave the humble, unknown group his favourite pupil and best producer—Wachtangow—as their teacher and director. The "Habimah" came into life.

"The Dybuk."

THE heroic struggle of the handful of the "Habimah" players began. During the day they



Z. FRIEDLAND as "Chanan" in "The Dybuk."

worked for their poor living, under appalling conditions of hunger, cold, epidemics and civil war. And in the evenings, sometimes throughout the whole night, they studied and rehearsed. Wachtangow was not only a great artist and inspired teacher—he was an exacting teacher. He was determined to turn his eager pupils into real masters. And he succeeded. The fanatical obsession of his pupils was bound to help them to overcome all the difficulties and to climb from obscurity and inexperience to the heights of great artistic achievements and world fame.

After two hundred rehearsals, on the stage of a small theatre in Moscow, the "Dybuk" of An-sky was

played for the first time. A jury, composed of the leading representatives of Russian literature and art, assembled at the first night of the "Habimah" to pass its verdict over the unknown group of Hebrew-speaking young men and women performers. The effect was staggering. Gorki, Chaliapin, Stanislawsky, all the prominent writers, artists and actors, were carried away by the weird atmosphere created by the acting of the Habimah players, the decorations of Altman and the music of Engel. In one night the "Habimah" and the "Dybuk" leapt into fame.

"They do not play theatre—they *live* theatre," said Bernhard Dieboldt after the first "Habimah" performance in Germany. In the "Dybuk" more than in any other of their plays, lives the "heart of hearts" of the "Habimah."

THE audience may not understand Hebrew.

Among the hundreds of thousands of Jews and Gentiles who saw the "Habimah" in Europe and America, only few understood the language. Yet it did not matter. Somehow the ancient tongue, restored to life, sounded in a strange harmony with the unique fascination of the Habimah playing to which one could not help succumbing.

From the first sounds of the hauntingly ecstatic melody of the "Batlanim" at the rising of the curtain until the last icy-calm words of the mysterious "Messanger," the "Dybuk" grips the hearts and imagination of spell-bound audiences. They are all unforgettable — the strangely-obsessed, strangely-spiritual figures, so utterly un-European, so typically

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Jewish in their movements and gestures, in the very strangeness—of their talk that suddenly bursts out into the weird sing-song of the recitative of the "Niggun" of the Beth Hamedrash.

Unforgettable is the performance of Rovina, the great tragic actress of the "Habimah"—as Leah, the bride, the face as white as her wedding dress, the tormented eyes looking into the darkness of her obsessed soul, walking, dancing, talking like a somnambulist. Techmerinsky as the Zadik—more a spirit than a man, a marvelous study in grey and pale blue and white, the very soul of the legends and traditions woven into the figure of the "Rebbe" of the Chasidic world. Fridland—as Chanan, every movement, every incantation revealing the mystic depths of a soul seeking to tear asunder the curtain of the "Beyond."

The Mass Scenes.

THEY are all unforgettable—the mass-scenes of the "Dybuk"—those weird, thrillingly original mass-scenes, in which the pathos of the art of the players is blended with the genius of Wachtangow, the producer. The first act in the synagogue, all in shadows, with the wonderful group of the "Batlanim," with the soul-rending figure of the woman approaching the Ark—her voice heard from the distance—a scream and a prayer mingled into one haunting outcry of a soul in torment. Or the famous "Dance of the Beggars" before the wedding—a macabre, bizarre, ghostlike dance of cripples and downtrodden, starving and sneering, cringing and menacing.

"The Wandering Jew."

THE "Dybuk" is the sonata of the ghetto, all in twilight and glooms. "The Wandering Jew" is the tragic stage-version of the "Eicho" of Israel on the ruins of the burned Temple and fallen Judaea. The play by itself has many faults. But on the stage of the "Habimah" it is the playing and not the play that matters.

It is almost impossible to believe that those Palestinian Hebrews of the "Wandering Jew" are impersonated by the same actors who created the ghost-like ghetto-figures of the "Dybuk." It is another world. The glowing world

of the Orient, with a strong sun, with strong men and women, with strong emotions and impulses.

I saw the "Wandering Jew" for the first time in Jerusalem. There was something pathetic in this spellbound Jewish audience of Jerusalem of to-day watching the destruction of Jerusalem of nearly 2,000 years ago. By the magic of their art and decorations and music the "Habimah" achieved the miracle of a reincarnation of by-gone days. The rather primitive stage of the Jerusalem theatre had become the stage of the tragedy of a people. The cast on the stage were not actors—they were the soul of Israel on the morrow of the fall of the nation. The men and

Vera Kommissarjevskaja in "Nora," Elizabeth Bergner in "A Strange Interlude," and now—Hana Rovina in "The Wandering Jew."

When she appears and faces the crowd frantic with grief, and stares—it is not a woman, it is the whole of Judaea, whose despair oozes from those tragic eyes. And then she begins her famous monologue—not talking, not screaming, but pouring out her despair in a voice that is at first hollow and stony, and then suddenly breaks into a gruesome melody of a sing-song of a frenzied soul, moaning, sobbing, singing, wailing her tale of a tragic Fate. Rovina's achievement in the "Wandering Jew" is more than art and technique. It is the *Gottesdienst der Kunst*.

At the Crossing of the Roads.

IN 1925 the "Habimah" began its tour through Europe and America. The tour became a triumph. The enthusiastic reception of the public of Paris and Berlin, London and New York, Rome and Amsterdam was echoed by the eulogies of the press and the critics. The Jews of Europe and America saw for the first time the past and present of their own people in images of supreme artistic beauty. They heard for the first time Hebrew fluent on the lips of artists on the stage. The Gentiles, too, saw for the first time the inspired expression of the innermost soul of Jewry—in the language of their own—in an art of their own.

They have visited 115 cities in 19 countries. And then they arrived in Palestine, the only country in the world where every member of the audience *understood* the language of the Hebrew plays of the "Habimah." It was more than a success. It was more than a triumph. It was a reunion. Palestine has found her theatre. The "Habimah" has found her home. After a few months had passed, however, grave doubts as to the future began to rise. What was to become of the "Habimah?" Personally every one of the players wanted to see the theatre linked permanently with Palestine. But if they were to remain, what was to become of the future of the "Habimah?" They could not go on for ever, with the five plays they brought with them. In Berlin or Paris they could have the most brilliant producers and



HANA ROVINA as "Leah" in "the Dybuk."

the women, the old and the young, the merchants and the beggars, the prophet and the dancing girl—all were voices not of individuals, but of a people standing over the open grave of their national freedom.

The Art of Rovina.

AND above all—Rovina as the young mother. One may see during a lifetime hundreds of plays in different languages, in different countries. But retrospectively, out of the fleeting visa of numberless stage-images, only one or two—real and unforgettable—remain engraved on one's mind. Such were in my life the memories of

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painters to stage their plays. But in Palestine? They would have to be their own producers, they would have to face the tremendous difficulties of showing their future plays with local decorations, under the rather poor technical arrangements of the small stages of the "Beth-Am" of Tel-Aviv or cinema "Zion" of Jerusalem. And they would have to face all the material difficulties of an Art Theatre of a small population of about 200,000 souls.

They were at the crossing of the roads. They were to face a vital decision: to remain the Wandering Theatre of the Wandering people and benefit by all the artistic possibilities of Europe or take root in Palestine and face all the difficulties and hardships of pioneers.

In the "Emek."

SUBCONSCIOUSLY they probably felt all the time what the answer was going to be. But it was their tour through the Emek to which they owed their ultimate decision.

It was in Dagania. Never has an Art Theatre played under such conditions. The stage consisted of a few planks and boards hastily nailed together. The first rows of the audience sat on bundles of hay. The next rows stood on wagons or were on horse-



E. BERTOFF as "Urien" in "The Wandering Jew."

back. From all over the Emek they came, men and women, leaving their work, walking or riding for hours. Some of them started on foot in the morning to be in time for the performance that evening. And when the first words of the "Wandering Jew" rang through the air of the starlit night, the artists felt a thrill they had never experienced before in the luxurious theatres of Europe. The spellbound silence of an audience of Halutzim and Halutzoth was a greater reward than all the eulogies of the great critics of the capitals of the world. When the play was over, the audience and the artists broke out into the singing of the songs of the Emek, and danced the "Hora" under the canopy of the sky of Palestine, perspiring under the hot breath of the "Hamsin," covered with dust and almost drunken with the ecstasy of the moment, singing and dancing until the first rays of the sun announced the end of the night.

And during that night at Dagania the players knew that their problem had been solved for them in their hearts—that here was the soul of the "Habimah."

The dream unfolded 15 years ago by a few unknown enthusiasts before Stainslawsky in Moscow finally became true. The "Habimah" has become the Hebrew Art Theatre of Palestine.

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