

Real-Life Backstory of ‘The Possession’ More Titillating Than Cinematic Dybbuk Dramatization

Submitted by [HollywoodChicago.com](http://www.hollywoodchicago.com) [1] on September 2, 2012 - 10:33pm

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – A film marketing itself as being “based on a true story” doesn’t hold the same teeth it once did. With truly original stories a financial high risk for Hollywood and many films leaning toward being based on a best-selling novel, the genre that is based on a true story or “inspired by true events” has increasingly taken creative liberties.

Beware, filmgoers. *Just a nugget of truth doesn’t amount to a true gold rush.* In the case of the new horror film “The Possession,” the only validity to this film’s claim of being based on a true story is that there was indeed a well-reported *dybbuk* box (also commonly spelled *dibbuk*). The story involved real people trying to offload it on eBay once it allegedly caused their lives a living hell.

Today, most horror films claiming real-life truth aren’t really based on a true story or much of one. They just say so for marketing purposes so you’re scared into being curious about the paranormal. Perhaps they’re preying on people who might already be on the fence about ghosts and UFOs.



Natasha Calis stars as Em in “The Possession”.

Image credit: Diyah Pera

Unfortunately for “The Possession,” that real-life backstory – whether or not you believe it to be true – is more redeeming than the film itself. By the way, we last saw a dybbuk as recently as 2009 in the massive David S. Goyer flop “The Unborn,” which featured a similar Jewish possession plot, was filmed in Chicago and starred Odette Annable and Gary Oldman.

So, what supposedly is a dybbuk and how does eBay fit in with one in the real world?

According to Jewish folklore, a *dybbuk* is a demon – or the soul of a dead person – that swoops into the body of a living human and nefariously controls the person’s actions. Casting away the demon is only possible through a religious ceremony, which society knows all too well as an *exorcism*. The soul has been unable to fulfill its function during its lifetime, so according to lore, it’s given another opportunity to do so in dybbuk form. Yes, demons get second chances. Obviously.



Tzadok (Matisyahu, left), Em (Natasha Calis, center), Clyde (Jeffrey Dean Morgan, back) and Stephanie (Kyra Sedgwick, right) in “The Possession”.

Image credit: Diyah Pera

Now “The Possession” is exploiting the launching pad of the original buyer, Kevin Mannis, who coincidentally says the box – which was actually a wine cabinet – was purchased at the estate sale of a 103-year-old Holocaust survivor. To add to its enigma, of course the box came with a few locks of hair, a couple pennies, a wine cup, a slab of granite that had been engraved and a dried flower. I’d personally pack nothing different in it.

Then a college kid in Missouri named Losif Nietzsche pawned the bad-luck Jewish wine cabinet on eBay. He claimed close contact to it made his hair fall out. Rather than getting hair help from Hans Weimann, naturally a supernatural demon had to be the culprit and eBay was the only solution.

Hype that perhaps it was an actual dybbuk box helped the undergraduate swindle 280 bucks from a museum curator named Jason Haxton at the Museum of Osteopathic Medicine at A.T. Still University in Kirksville, Mo. Despite the fact that the box might be able to kill him, he instead raced to set up a Web site to honor it and began fielding inquiries from filmmakers and authors.



Tzadok (Matisyahu) and Em (Natasha Calis) in “The Possession”.

Image credit: Diyah Pera

Another owner of the box reportedly had a stroke and lost the ability to speak forever – within minutes of receiving it. Later, the mute pointed to letters spelling out “hate gift”. Other owners said the box made them smell an odd amalgamation of jasmine and cat urine. I give props to the dybbuk for figuring out how to coalesce those two scents because that’d truly be a unique result.

And as the box kept getting offloaded to others, people reported that their doors wouldn’t stay closed or they’d open on themselves. Terrible nightmares. Body bruises. Dead fish. You get the drift. We’re dealing with a truly innovative dybbuk who knows how to get noticed.

The story goes on and on, but it is the basis for what could have been a high-caliber horror film. The byproduct that is “The Possession” from producer Sam Raimi – the director of the “Spider-Man” trilogy and other horror films including “Drag Me to Hell” and “The Evil Dead” – results in half of that story’s initial allure in a film that squeaked by at “PG-13” after a re-rating on appeal.



Natasha Calis stars as Em in “The Possession”.

Image credit: Diyah Pera

Aside from the great potential of this film’s backstory, one of its glowing redemptions is that it’s not *nearly* as much a failure as “The Apparition” – another paranormal movie, which opened just a week before “The Possession”. HollywoodChicago.com content director and horror genre expert Brian Tallerico reviewed Ashley Greene’s “The Apparition” at [zero stars](#) [19].

“The Possession” follows a young girl named Em – played by Natasha Calis – who buys an antique box at a yard sale. All the while, her folks – played by Jeffrey Dean Morgan and Kyra Sedgwick – are going through a divorce. Of course, Em is clueless that she’s really bringing home a truly malignant and pissed-off ancient dybbuk spirit thingamabob. The dybbuk’s name is Walter – (*I just made that part up*) – and when Walter comes out to play, he likes to listen to a score that sounds much too close to “Jaws” and “The Shining”.

But seriously, Em’s dad teams up with his ex-wife, of course, to find a way to rid the curse that’s now controlling their child. And so they can have sex again because of the rekindled bond they’ve formed through trying to save their possessed tween. But I don’t blame them. I too wouldn’t want my kid to exhibit “The Exorcist”-like tendencies in a way that’s not nearly as convincing as the hand that writhed up the back of Linda Blair’s mouth.

To her credit and despite being wrapped within an overdone story on which it’s practically impossible to break new ground, Natasha Calis is surprisingly passable as a spirit-dominated freak show. Throughout, Kyra Sedgwick as Em’s mom unreasonably alternates with bipolar tendencies. She hates the dad. She doesn’t believe the kid and “you’re just not felling well”. Then she believes the kid. Then she loves the dad again.



Jeffrey Dean Morgan stars as Clyde in “The Possession”.

Image credit: Diyah Pera

Through the film’s worst decisions – i.e. mom’s dentist boyfriend suddenly loses his teeth and hysterically drives off into oblivion with no tie back into what happened to him and a teacher is ridiculously grading school papers at night just so the dybbuk can blow some wind and make her jump out the window to her death – its \$14 million production budget scored a sound casting choice in Jeffrey Dean Morgan, who is its one true saving grace.

The “Watchmen” and “P.S. I Love You” star is a relief to watch and you can actually buy into his genuine concern for his bedeviled kid. You even feel sorry for him because his former wife is a short-fused, fickle kook who can’t control the curls in her hair.

Is our eBay dybbuk real or a labyrinthine hoax to exacerbate the film’s intrigue? *It doesn’t matter.* What matters is what you believe and if you decide to spend your 10 bucks to see a half-good movie based on the anything-but-bulletproof rhetoric of people you don’t know. Or perhaps you could just decide the truth is irrelevant and you’d just like to be half scared at the movies.

“The Possession” stars Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Natasha Calis, Kyra Sedgwick, Jay Brazeau, Madison Davenport, Matisyahu, Grant Show, Rob LaBelle, Nana Gbewonyo, Anna Hagan, Brenda Crichlow, Iris Quinn, Graeme Duffy and David Hovan from director Ole Bornedal, writers Juliet Snowden and Stiles White and producer Sam Raimi. After editing and then a re-rating on appeal, the film is rated “PG-13” for mature thematic material involving violence and disturbing sequences. It was initially rated “R” for violence, terror and disturbing images. “The Possession,” which has a run time of 92 minutes, opened on Aug. 31, 2012.



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Source URL (retrieved on Mar 28 2024 - 7:14pm):

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