



New Fiction

Me and the Golem

by Gary Lucas

For many years, I've had an intense, intimate relationship with the Golem.

What I mean is, over a dozen years now, I've been assiduously working with the 1920 Paul Wegener / Carl Boese silent film *Der Golem – How He Came Into the World*, having composed a score to accompany it live on electric and acoustic guitars, played in real time through many secret electronic effects (no samplers or sequencers here). The sound is symphonic, the science-fiction flavored music sumptuous and mystical.

I've played with this film in over 15 countries around the world since debuting the score in NYC at the BAM Next Wave Festival in 1989. Tel Aviv, London, Berlin, Budapest, New York, San Francisco – all have felt the power and majesty of the Golem again, as I

reanimate this film – a big hit worldwide upon release – with my own spectral music. I never grow tired of it. Night after night, it's like peering into a telescope at a microcosm of 16th century Prague, the Jews stooped and shuffling their way through Hans Poelzig's gnarled and misshapen ghetto mise-en-scene like some fantastically garbed Mummer's parade,

strolling the streets and moving into the synagogue for evening prayers.

I love witnessing the dramatic arc of the story unfold time and time again, the tale of the actual historic Rabbi Jehudah Loew and his Kabbalistic magical prowess, and how he created the Golem, a man molded from shapeless clay, to become a servant of the Jewish people, to protect them



from annihilation – the ultimate revenge for love of his daughter Miriam as the Prague ghetto is consumed by flames, caused by a Golem run amuck. I delight in the foppish antics of the lustful Junker Knight Florian, the sly machinations of the servile sorcerer's apprentice Famulus, and Wegener's all-too-human portrayal of the hulking juggernaut, the Big Fella himself – *Go, Go, Golem!*

Each night I play my heart out into this black and white phantasmagoria, changing the music round every time I

perform it, improvising new shrieks, whispers and sighs on my guitar, curdling new electronic frissons in my electronic cauldron, hurtling my Jewish heavy-metal soul across the yawning chasm of eighty-some-odd years to try and put some spring back into the Old Boy's feet of Clay. I have played my music to this film literally hundreds of times, and I never

get tired of it, I keep seeing new things within it, and it keeps haunting me, keeps drawing me back.

My absolute favorite city to perform the Golem in, bar none, is Prague, of course. My roots are literally Bohemian, and my family name was once Lichtenstein, stone of light – Lucas is close to that, deriving from the Latin root for luminous. . . true to my name, I like to throw light in dark corners. I've played it there many, many times, beginning with a performance in the Reduta Jazz Club (where Bill Clinton previously held forth with his saxophone) in 1993. And also, most memorably, in the cavernous crumbling old Yiddish theatre known as the Roxy, near the Mala Strana section of Prague's Old Town Square. *Let me tell you. . .*

It was an unusually hot (for Northern Europe), stifling summer of 1995. I had been summoned to Prague by a fellow musical eccentric named Richard Mader, who goes by the name of Faust, himself an underground rock legend in Czech progressive music circles, and the owner of his own label Faust Records. Faust had proposed to record a collaborative album with me and his band Urfaust on the theme of "The Ghosts of Prague," after seeing me play solo in Prague earlier that year. He had been full of praise for what he enthusiastically described in a letter to me as my "ghastly" guitar stylings. To that end, he had secured me several nights at the Roxy performing The Golem to pay for my trip to Prague, and had secured a good print of the film from the Goethe House archive for me to play to.

This gig was fraught from the beginning.

Faust, a 6-foot gentle giant of a fellow with a perpetually cheery outlook (a good counterbalance to my own mercurial weltanschauung), arrived at noon at my Dresden hotel the day of the first scheduled Golem show, having driven the normally 3 hour trip from Prague to East Germany in his battered Skoda to come and personally fetch me there. He excitedly showed me the Czech newspapers full of previews for my Golem engagement, and mimeoed flyers announcing the same, chattering on in his charmingly fractured English about the crazy album we were going to make together and the stellar gig I would perform solo that evening.

"It's gonna be a sold-out house, of that I am sure! Because we work on *promotion!* We work on *publicity!*" Faust exclaimed. "We" meaning Faust Records, his pride and joy— which consisted solely of him and his long-

suffering assistant and mistress Marta. They had come to me visit me in New York City that spring and had spun grandiose plans of Czech music-world domination.

After stuffing the boot of his old car to capacity with my guitars and my dreaded, cumbersome Monster Case full of electronic effects (which he christened "The Flying Mary" – the scourge of many a European tour manager), we were off on hot, sweaty, endless journey to Prague. The trip took a maddeningly slow seven hours to complete, due to massive road repairs on an East German highway infrastructure which had been built before the War and hadn't been upgraded since. Additionally, Faust's propensity for circuitous shortcuts, unfailingly put us back on the highway, after much time spent stopping to consult outdated maps, in front of the shortcut exit we had just taken.

"Boo! Sheet!" he would invariably spout, commenting on his own handiwork. "Booo! Sheet!"

We arrived, finally, literally by the seat of our pants, at dusk in Prague. The Magic City glistened in the fading light like a fairytale. It is the most beautiful city in the world, with the spires of the St. Vitus Cathedral pricking the sky. Rising over the green Petrin hills, the lights of the Charles Bridge winked at us as we raced past the imposing stone edifice of the National Museum, past the faded elegance of the old Railway Station, roaring up onto the elevated highway above the bustling thoroughfare of Wenceslas Square, epicenter of the Velvet Revolution.

Faust frantically gunned our red bomber filled with my magician's wands and bag 'o tricks, past the late Saturday crowds of tourists and shoppers, into the heart of the old Jewish Quarter. We finally came to rest in front of the fabled, run-down, Roxy Theatre. We had less than an hour before showtime. In great haste, I set up my gear in front of the old screen, a remnant from the venue's Yiddish Theatre days. I checked the projection, tested the amps, all the while cursing Faust and his unerring tardiness, then stumbled solo out of the Stygian depths of the empty cinema into Prague's magic night.

Picking my way down the twisting twilight streets, I had to make a homage and pay my respects to someone very special to me. I made my way to the celebrated Jewish cemetery, nestled nearby the Roxy in the old Jewish Quarter at the foot of the Alte Neu Synagogue, which, legend has it,

is the final resting place of... the Golem.

They sell postcards of the Golem all over Prague. A definite Favorite Son, no doubt about it. My brother, the Orthodox Rabbinical student, swears that he resides there still, in that Old New synagogue. Stowed away in a locked attic room, it was rendered immobile until needed again. A special inscription on his brow writ by an Unseen Hand (“Emeth,” as in the Golem film I love and play to, the Hebrew word for Truth), or the rendering of certain obscure Kabbalistic rituals (reciting the Hebrew alphabet backwards, perhaps, as suggested in several scholarly tomes I’ve consulted), or through some recondite ritual unknown to current scholars — the Golem will rise, must rise, again.

It’s said that during the Nazi occupation of Prague, when German SS officers entered the holy tabernacle of that Synagogue one night to desecrate the ancient Torah scrolls and pilfer the wealth of the holy relics displayed there, the Golem was awakened from his 400 year old slumber. In the morning light that shone through the stained glass windows of the Alte Neu Synagogue the following day, the bodies of the Nazi soldiers were discovered,

literally ripped asunder by some malevolent Goliath with superhuman strength. My brother, the Harvard graduate, swears by this tale.

As the sky grew darker, and the midsummer night came on strong, I threaded over the winding stone pathway of the old Jewish Cemetery, through the thicket of ancient graves, pushing past some straggling Dutch tourists struggling with their guidebooks. Here at last, I had reached what I’d been searching for.

Jutting up from the earth, there they were. From the vaulted caverns below, sepulchers mouldering in this haunted burial ground, running twelve or so levels deep, caskets stacked up one atop the other because the original Jewish population were denied a decent plot of land to bury their dead.

Instead, they had to make do as always as best they could. Jutting skyward, all weathered black granite with nearly indecipherable inscriptions, looking like the broken, rotting teeth of some fallen giant, were the tombstones. I made for the biggest, blackest one.

Festooned with yellowing paper messages, like the tattered prayers stuffed between the cracks in the Wailing Wall, Rabbi Jehudah Loews’ gravestone had become a repository for the hopes and dreams of all the wandering Jews who had made their way to his final resting place in Prague—“Please, Rabbi Loew, heal us as a nation,” “Please, Rabbi Loew, let

little Rachel walk as normal children do,” – and I too had a message for him.

Hastily I scribbled my prayer on the back of a printed flyer announcing my evening performance – “Please, Rabbi Loew, let the Golem rise again.” I placed it reverently at the foot of the weathered stone marker. The wind that sprang up then almost blew it away, but I caught it just in time, and tucked it firmly between a crevice in the headstone base and the rich, loamy earth of the old graveyard.

You never know.

My show that night was one of the wildest, most maniacal Golem performances I ever delivered – this was, after all, Prague – and I played as a man possessed, a madman, full of the scorn and fury of the ancient Hebrew patriarchs. I literally became as one with them, as in *Der Golem’s* famous film-within-a-film sequence, wherein Rabbi Loew summons up a vision of the Jews in exile trekking across the desert, their grizzled Moses-like leader striding angrily off the screen into Hapsburg Court to wreak vengeance on the terrified throng of skeptical, laughing spectators, my three guitars summoning a host of wraiths and malignant phantoms from the Kabbalah and Jewish lore to rise anew – Azrael, Astaroth, Lilith, Metatron, Habal Garmin a/k/a “Breath of Bones” – all filling the empty vessel of the old theatre with their shrieks and



imprecations, spirits of the earth and air, writhing once again, to dance triumphant in the flickering shadows.

And then it was over. The giant Star of David symbol came up superimposed on the film's final shot of the old Prague Ghetto's shuttered gate, as my last harmonic guitar flourish, a strange dischord which is my signature "Golem motif," rang out in the packed, airless theater. "Don't you wish you had a Golem?" I shouted into the mic – my stock line at the film's finish. I got no answer this night, not the usual tumultuous, rapturous applause. The lights were raised, dimly. The audience, what I could make out of them, looked numbed, shell-shocked. And that's how I felt, too.

In a trance, in the kind of hypnotic daze my own playing sometimes puts me in, I began to slowly pack up my guitars, operating on auto-pilot. Usually at this point I take questions about the film, the music and the Golem legend from the audience – but not this night. I vaguely became aware of a crowd of people gathering at the lip of the stage where I had just performed, and where I customarily sell CDs of my music after the show.

"Hey man, your music was louder than the movie," some wisecracking American student smirked. "Do you know what I mean?" he went on, covering his ears.

"Cool," I replied, "a little pain is good for you." (I am nothing if not . . . loud. I want to make you sweat with my music. I want to give you an orgasm with my guitar.)

Most of the crowd that had gathered (basically a motley assortment of Bohemian art intellectuals and various foreign tourists) were genuine fans, extremely enthusiastic in their response to both the film and my music, and I sold them many copies that night of my "Skeleton at the Feast" album, which contains my Golem score. There were a few cuties there as well, including one pouting zaftig blonde in a purple leather getup that seemed molded to her skin, with holes strategically placed over and under her hefty Czech breasts, but I was too drained to do much about it.

There was one face in that crowd though that really got my attention.

A skinny, prematurely wizened kid with sunken, haunted eyes, a severe, near-skinhead buzzcut, and a crimson slash of a mouth, kind of like Klaus Kinski's. He looked about eighteen going on eighty. He fixed me with his beady stare, and beckoned me over to him at stage left where he had positioned himself in the front of the crowd of onlookers.

"Meester Geddy Lookis" he spoke directly to me in that strange,

deliberate mittel-European Czech intonation that always reminds me of Peter Lorre. "I come from a family whose mutter and fadder were both kilt inda kemps. . . ."

Instantly my heart went out to this strange apparition. A landsman, I thought.

"End I just wanna say dat in your museek for dis film, I hear *murder!*! I hear *violence!*!" He went straight for the jugular, eyes popping at me accusingly. He self-righteously spat, "End we Jews, you know. . . we. . . we just don't *need* this!! Not no more! Not after de kemps! We haf to heal, you know? We haf to heal the world! *Not* by this!"

Trumped by his survivor's status, fatigued from playing a wild, heartfelt show to a strangely lackluster crowd, stifled by the airless cinema, and momentarily at a loss for words, not at all my usual glib self, I mustered a subdued reply:

"My European relatives were killed too during the war, in a pogrom in Poland. . . I play what I feel. And I feel angry about it still. And this film," I gestured back towards the looming screen, "mirrors my feelings exactly."

"We don' need it here, unnerstand me?! Not your anger! *Not* your hatred!"

He shook his head, turned his back on me, and walked off slowly in disgust.

Profoundly depressed by this excoriation of my art, my life, my *raison d'être*, from someone whom I otherwise sensed an underlying deep kinship with, I packed up the rest of my gear as hurriedly as possible in the now nearly-empty cinema. I went looking, unsuccessfully, for Faust, in order to collect my fee for the night's performance. I told one of the theatre managers to keep an eye on my guitars and the Flying Mary for me, as I needed at that moment to escape the oppressive tomb of the Roxy as quickly as possible, to be alone with my shattered thoughts. I slunk, deflated and dejected and fighting successive waves of dizziness, out the rear stage door and into the oppressive Prague night.

I found myself in a darkened alleyway of slippery cobblestones, choking on the stench and the overflowing clotted refuse of open trashcans. I could barely see where I was going, there was very little illumination, no streetlamps shone back here, and I stumbled forward bumping into a slime-coated wall, rounding what seemed to be a corner in this warren of alleys, groping my way towards a glowing ember hovering in the distance – inching

towards what I thought was the end of the alley.

The ember was the tip of a lit cigarette. Its owner stood not at the entrance to the street, but in front of a blackened wall, a cul de sac.

A dead-end street.

“Excuse me,” I blurted, “I don’t speak Czech. Can you please show me how to get to the street?”

The smoker, a shapeless black hulk in the dark, took a drag on his butt.

“Do you know how to get to the main street?” I said again slowly, plaintively. Like I said, I was a little bit dizzy. “Street is dat way. . . come, I show you,” the phantom said in a harsh, low voice. He tossed his cigarette, deliberately, like a spark shooting out of a crackling fire – then suddenly a convulsive movement and my arm was gripped by a relentless, tightening claw.

The lout rasped at me as I recoiled from his fetid drunken breath, “You Jew musician from New York. . . I know you play here. . . tonight. . . I see newspaper. . . *Go back America!!*” I tried to tear away from his manacle-like grasp, to wrench my arm away, managed to take a swing at him, connecting only with – air – there was a short, brutish struggle – and then I was seized by his sharp pincer-like fingers and hurled down onto the slimy cobblestones, a sharp pain lancing through my right forearm as I put my hands out rigid in front of me to protect my head. I heard the click as of a knife blade opening, then felt the whistle of cold metal tearing through my loose jacket shoulder, seeking my flesh. The knife rent right through the fabric, narrowly missing

my shoulderblade, ripping through the flimsy summer jacket before striking the stone pavement.

“Goodbye, Jew...”

I closed my eyes. I prayed to Yaweh. I prayed to Rabbi Loew for my deliverance. I heard him laugh and whisper maniacally, “I am Breath of

Bones!!!” I heard him sing out exultantly, again, felt his shrouded form pounce on my back, pinning me down, hot breath on my neck, stabbing through the noisome air, clutching the knife. Up for the downstroke –

Suddenly a sound of heavy boots.

A feral, guttural growl.

And I felt my phantom assailant literally torn from my back.

And with a whooping, echoing scream dissolve into the night sky.

I opened my eyes to discover Faust standing over me with a flashlight.

“Gary, Gary my friend, I been lookin’ all over the theatre for you. . . my God what are you doin’ kissing the ground like dat? Did you slip or trip or somethin’? Bool Sheet! Bool Sheet! Come on, I got your money, let’s

outta here. . . .”

I whispered one last prayer, mentally, to Rabbi Loew, then let Faust help me up from the pavement where I lay. Gingerly cradling my right arm, I let the big Czech drag me, limping, down the street, his boots beating a mighty tattoo in time with my heart.

You never know. . . .



Gary Lucas will be performing *The Golem* live on Saturday evening at 7:00 pm in the Hyatt Centennial Ballroom.