

Tolstoy on Stage: *The Power of Darkness* at La Mama, March 4–7, 2010

Caryl Emerson

Princeton University

Editor's note: See the above section "The Whole World of Tolstoy" for related material.

During the 2010 centennial year, a good deal of Tolstoy appeared on stage and screen. There are adaptations of his prose, productions of his dramas, (melo)dramatizations of his life—and especially the highly stressed, painfully public end of it. Included in this rich harvest of performance art was a remarkable production of *The Realm* (or *Power*) of *Darkness* (Власть тьмы) at La Mama Ellen Stewart Theater, New York City, designed and directed by Zishan Ugurlu (literary advisor Inessa Medzhibovskaya), under the auspices of the Arts Program at Eugene Lang College. The colloquial Kantor–Tulchinsky translation, revised heavily for this quasi-modernized interpretation, held up well. In concept and set design, the event at La Mama was a riveting application of Tolstoyan aesthetics: first infection, then collaboration, finally liberation at life-changing cost.

Eugene Lang undergraduates made up the cast (with the exception of Anyutka, played by a ten-year-old girl). The entire action took place inside a single-roomed house constructed on stage space, which accommodated a couch, table, some hanging fabric dimly resembling laundered clothes, and “invisibly” also the audience, seated on bleachers that lined two of its walls. There was, in a sense, no theater: no footlights, pit, aisles, or comfort zone between “us” and “them.” The spectators walked into this house through a side door and found a place on a plank. Akulina flounced in through the

same door and sprawled on the couch. A few feet away, Anisya conducted kitchen rituals near a samovar (fixing tea; stuffing, flouring and pounding a chicken); where Nikita, in a wooing mood, pushed Anisya down on the floor within inches of the audience, Pyotr had been hovering miserably only minutes earlier. The crushing of Akulina’s illegitimate infant under floorboards in the cellar was video-projected in black-and-white on the walls above the bleachers.

Props and costumes were of mixed ethnicity and era: token Russianness in a nesting doll or a scarf or shawl for Anisya and Matryona, but little-girl plastics for Anyutka and trashy teenage pick-me-up clothes for Akulina (who was neither dimwitted nor dumb in this production but simply an adolescent brat, fully able to exploit her stepmother’s jealousy). In the final wedding scene, the “house”—in both the residential and theatrical meanings of that term—was dense with spectators at various levels. Those inside the story space watched the wedding (which becomes Nikita’s confession); those outside the drama watched them watch; and, if we followed Akim’s cues, some higher power from the Realm of Light was witness to God’s work. Sitting on those bleachers, we were always looking either down or up; never did we neutrally look across, except at other spectators like ourselves. Wedged in like that, we all felt implicated. Tolstoy’s five acts and multitude of tiny “scenes” (some only three syllables long) flowed by without interruption into and out of this concentrated, all-purpose space.

My comments on the La Mama production come to rest on its dazzling final scene. Their starting point is Tolstoy's insight into theater—and, more crookedly, into Shakespeare, who doubtless would have admired this debauched, sensationalist peasant drama from the pen of his most famous Russian nineteenth-century detractor. Tolstoy's polemic against the Bard is best known in its full-length form, the 1904 screed "On Shakespeare and on Drama" (*О Шекспире и о драме (критический очерк)*). But Tolstoy's dislike had begun decades before. By the 1890s, what most completely qualified Shakespearean drama as "counterfeit art," even more than its vengeance mentality, second-hand borrowed plots, and non-illusionist Renaissance stage conventions, was its unrelieved eloquence and constant striving for clever verbal effect. Especially offensive to Tolstoy was the culminating scene of *Othello*, a work that that he otherwise considered one of the Bard's "least bad plays" (PSS 35: 244). Tolstoy writes in his treatise:

Othello's monologue over the sleeping Desdemona, about his desiring her when murdered to look as she did when alive, about his intending to love her even when dead and wishing to smell her "balmy breath," etc., is utterly impossible. A man who is preparing for the murder of a beloved being does not utter such phrases. (PSS 35: 245)

It is crucial here that Tolstoy's irritation is formal, not ethical. He detects an inconsistency between the psyche and the utterance. Shakespeare's characters are on the edge of murdering or strangling others, in the grip of rage, revelation, ecstasy. They should be howling or struck dumb with horror—and yet they keep on talking in this detached poetic way, in a well-constructed string of wise, witty statements. Tolstoy, it would seem, despises Lear's Fool largely for this reason, even though the content of the Fool's words are (as George Orwell correctly notes) "a trickle of sanity running through the play" (40). Tolstoy holds the

Fool in contempt, not because he is stupid or wrong but because he is a hanger-on who lives by words, who speaks jokingly about the purpose of life, but who does so with such elegance and wit that he is taken for wise, and valued by others.

There are also more positive, genre-specific reasons why Tolstoy disapproved of Shakespearean drama, however. Among the most important — although Tolstoy confessed that he did not always follow this advice in his own playwriting, since his reflexes were those of a dyed-in-the-wool novelist—was his belief that lengthy moral self-presentation through words, monologues of inner self-searching, were not appropriate for the stage. As Tolstoy told Teneromo (pen name for a journalist named Isaak Fainerman) in an interview in 1907, inward-gazing psychology was the task of novels, not drama. A theater audience would find such declamations "boring, tedious, and artificial" (Тенеромо).

Thus Tolstoy was not interested in those passages in Shakespeare that parallel his own moral searching and ethical stance on power, personal responsibility, fidelity, fear of death, war, all those magnificent monologues full of Tolstoyan wisdom that Tolstoy refuses to credit. (It is enough to recall the bastard Edmund in *King Lear* on the moral cowardice of allowing astrology to excuse our vices.) Tolstoy seems not to hear these passages—or rather, to skip over them while reading, for his acquaintance with the plays was largely through print. Tolstoy attended live theater performances of Shakespeare very rarely, and then only to persuade himself that the plays were as bad as he remembered them to be.

Without the psychological insights of its monologues, the Shakespearean stage might indeed seem a sensationalist shell for the "animal in man," the purely животное. But still, the ubiquitous lust and violence of Renaissance plots could not have been the primary irritant for Tolstoy. For on-stage enactment of cruelty, his own *Power of Darkness* rivals *King Lear* or even the mutilation-studded

Titus Andronicus. (Tolstoy felt this vulnerability in his peasant drama and provided a less graphic variant for his fourth act; but he retained the murder enacted in story space and time). Apparently it was not the theatrical presentation of violence in itself that was offensive to Tolstoy. Nor were words alone to blame. Tolstoy's non-acceptance of Shakespeare seems to be rooted primarily in the *relationship* of words to deeds on stage, which constitutes for him the morality of the performing arts. In certain situations, eloquence cannot go on. Words cannot be allowed to "pretty up" a deed and make it seductive, stunning, adorned with glittering turns of phrase, whether for animalistic (животное) reasons or for spiritually lofty (духовное) ones. Now to return to the house at La Mama and its *Realm of Darkness*.

Matryona is evil. She recommends poisoning without a backward look, panders for her son Nikita, ridicules her truth-bearing husband Akim, and (not the least of markers for Tolstoy) has a smooth, wise-sounding folk saying ready for every situation—just like a Shakespearean fool. It matters little whether such word-mongering fools speak falsehoods or truths (although Tolstoy is obsessed by his need to persuade us that these jesters are tedious, never funny, incomprehensible). What does matter is that these types of talker are always unperturbed by their own words, and always too clever. In Tolstoy's dramatic world, distress and revelation should confound and tongue-tie us. We cannot calculate their effect on us rhetorically or in advance. When, in act IV of *Power of Darkness*, a drunken Mitrich rambles incoherently for several minutes about his humiliating experiences in the army to the miserable and confused Nikita, we know that we are in the presence of words serving the deed in the right way. Nikita is in no state to listen. What he picks up on ("hears") from his friend Mitrich's outpouring is only what is relevant to *him*, not what the speaker cares to communicate. Mitrich is bragging about his contempt for officers who flogged him for drunkenness, and boasts in

passing about not fearing people—because as soon as you're scared of others, Mitrich says, the devil has his claw in you, you will not get away (the bird is lost). Nikita is far too wrapped up in himself and his awakening conscience to attend to this braggart soldier-tramp; he grasps only the bit about not needing to fear. After this unexpected and almost random verbal prompt from Mitrich, in a Tolstoyan moment that recalls Prince Nekhliudov's invisible inner turn toward resurrection, Nikita's frantic attempt to escape himself comes to a halt. If not Mitrich, some other cue would have served. Nikita's crimes begin to add up, his excuses fall away, and the sinner is reset irrevocably on the path of confession, in an unstoppable vortex toward the good.

An eloquence of words would distract from this trajectory and ruin it. Tolstoy's most reliable and righteous people tend to be inarticulate: stutterers, bunglers, shy, ill-spoken, like Alyosha the Pot. That the upright old man Akim in *The Power of Darkness* is a stutterer is crucial to Tolstoy. As he wrote in March of 1887 to Pavel Svobodin, the actor in Petersburg's Alexandrinsky Theater who would be playing Akim:

He speaks with a hesitation, and then suddenly phrases burst out, and then again a hesitation, and 'y'know' (тае)... As I see it, it's not necessary to mumble. He walks with conviction...His motions—his movements—are vigorous (истовые); only nimble smooth speech God did not grant him. (64: 24)

"Smooth speech" of the sort that "God did not give Akim" is the least reliable of all vehicles for virtue. For Tolstoy as dramatist—and perhaps for Tolstoy in general—the truth of a situation was to be found in minds and bodies, not in words. Perhaps if Shakespeare's jesters and fools were not so "smooth of speech," if they stuttered while walking firmly, they could be for Tolstoy the vehicle for truth that they are for the rest of the world.

The final scene of the La Mama *Realm of Darkness* was a spectacular application of this hypothesis. We actually saw and felt the radiating vortex of a Tolstoyan confession. By the fifth act, as Nikita is being driven wild by his own dissoluteness and acts of murder, the audience hovering over the action has also begun to feel uncomfortably trapped. To the horror of his smooth-talking mother Matryona and the rest of the wedding party, Nikita confesses: first to Marinka, then to Akulina, finally to his father. When the police arrive to take Nikita away, father Akim, stuttering ecstatically, begs them to hold off for a while: “God’s work is being done, this is no time for your ‘dictments... Speak, my child, don’t be ‘fraid o’ people, God, God! He is here!” Nikita willingly submits to being tied up: “It was my idea, my doin’. Take me you know where” (Tolstoy 88–90).

At that point and with that final line, Tolstoy’s play is over. But the La Mama production did not end. As soon as those final words were spoken, the dialogue (and the arrangement of the characters) ricocheted back to the beginning of Nikita’s confession to Marinka. Then the final six minutes of act five were replayed, a bit faster, but without any change. Again we reached the end; again the action spun back to the critical moment and again speeded up, this time even more, as if we were caught in a funnel. The final confession rushed through us again, with an even greater degree of urgency and intensity. Suddenly, the roof of the house opened up and light poured in. The audience on the bleachers, now under a spotlight too, had no idea when it would end, or how many repetitions it would take before the words were stamped indelibly into the bodies that received them. When finally the actors stopped on the final word, the moment of Nikita’s full confession and Akim’s ecstasy, still they did not release the play. The actors froze in place, and appeared ready to wait forever. We the spectators didn’t know how to get out, or when to get out. It seemed like five minutes before someone looked at her watch and crept

down off the bleachers for one of the side doors. Eventually the rest of the spectators picked their way down and out through the statues.

This was a fabulous rendition of Tolstoy’s drama, fully in the spirit of its author. It was also squarely in the tradition of Russian drama, where frozen, shocked, or silenced endings are a trademark of moral urgency: the tableau at the end of Gogol’s *Government Inspector*, the abandoned holy fool and unresolved chord at the end of Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, the announcement of Treplev’s suicide at the end of Chekhov’s *Seagull*. In this production of Tolstoy’s greatest play, Shakespeare’s accessible stage and direct appeal to the audience were in full force—for call it what you will, *The Power of Darkness* rises to Shakespearean heights. But there was no fanfare, no verbal adornments. And, of course, no formula to release the audience from the show, or to separate out their world from the pleasant fantasy of a stage. We had (literally) heard all the words before, but it was no longer so easy to cast them off. Realms of darkness, we were given to believe in this production, will go on forever until the vortex is punctuated with light. And then each member of the audience crawls out alone. That night, Tolstoy was everywhere.

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