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An Interview with Director Paul Schick

Paul Schick wrote and co-directed *Alyosha the Pot* (2006), a short film based on Tolstoy's tale of the same title.

Tolstoy Studies Journal: How did you first cross paths with Tolstoy?

Paul Schick: My first direct contact with Tolstoy took place in the summer of 1983, between high school in England and college in the U.S. As a child I'd seen a copy of *War and Peace* loitering at my (Freemason) father's bedside, and it may have been his recent death and the need to know him better that compelled me to pick up the Penguin tome and lock myself away until I'd read it through. I committed several passages to memory at the time that serve as touchstones still. Pierre's epiphany in particular hovered in view as I reflected during work on *Alyosha the Pot*: "To live with the sole object of avoiding doing evil so as not to have

to repent is not enough. I used to do that. I lived for myself and spoilt my life. And only now that I am living for others—or at least trying to—only now do I realize all the happiness life holds."

TSJ: So, which comes first for you: Tolstoy the Artist or Tolstoy the Thinker?

PS: How to separate the two, as if one could music from words in opera? We can agree, I imagine, that by Thinker you don't mean the purely intellectual, but the mental and spiritual project to which Tolstoy devoted himself post-*Anna Karenina*: Tolstoy the essayist, peace-activist, counter-cultural, proto-hippie, etc., whose legacy runs through Gandhi, King, and beyond. Was that not the same Tolstoy who conceived of the Russian peasant Kutuzov in *War and Peace* ("a simple, modest and therefore truly great figure who could not be cast in the lying mould invented by history"), or, for that matter Alyosha the Pot? The twin spirits of "simplicity and truth" inherent in these and other figures in his writing (e.g., Karatayev) seem to me features of *both* his art *and* his thought—to the extent that no segmentation of Tolstoy's biography into pre- and post-crisis, no reductive analysis of his works by form and content, and no account of the reception history of his oeuvre do justice to his meaning for me as a whole. Speaking as an artist and as a thinking person, Tolstoy the Artist and Tolstoy the Thinker are merely two sides of the same prodigious coin.

TSJ: Tell me a little about your previous experience with film making.

PS: During graduate school, when I should have been busy among the dust in the basement of the music library, I was off making a series of videos for CTV in New Haven. The first was a screen version of Claudio Monteverdi's *Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, a setting of a dramatic scene by Torquato Tasso. Next I produced a video of the Ben Jonson masque, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*, paired with the Monteverdi as part of a half-hour show that aired repeatedly over those years. My favorite of the period was *Blessings II Go*, a video made in a Chinese take-out restaurant with a looped and amalgamated soundtrack of the Shem the Penman episode from *Finnegans Wake* and chant by the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen. In addition to a couple of really short pieces (*Irony, Starfire*), I was able to collaborate with composer Jack Vees on a video entitled *Rocket Baby*, featuring a long single take of

about fourteen minutes and, among other visuals, an airborne shark off the coast of Cape Cod! It was also during this time that I spent countless hours watching my way through the history of film, guided by friends and a video rental place in Hamden I often thought of as the Library of Congress.

TSJ: We know your affinity for Tolstoy. But, given your previous work in cinema—an Elizabethan pageant, *Finnegans Wake*, and flying fish—what drew you to something like “Alyosha the Pot,” which must be among the most spare and simple stories Tolstoy wrote? **PS:** What drew me to “Alyosha the Pot” was in



Finnegan Schick as Alyosha (foreground) and Oliver Meeh as his father. (Photograph by Olaf Stelling)

part the very spareness and simplicity you identify as the story’s stylistic markings. I had thought about adapting some Kleist or Kafka, but soon realized how much harder it was to find cinematic equivalences for these, sentence by sentence, than for the Tolstoy, which moves in linguistic structures I could readily translate into a visual montage. The images and symbols of that

little symphony of a story are, moreover, rich in the extreme and tightly controlled, perfect for the scale of the short film I was considering. And then of course there’s the protagonist, a hero not in the ironic mode of, say, Gogol’s civil servants, but an underling capable of profoundly subverting so many of the stereotypic male leads we’re familiar with in American film. Finally, I’m very open to suggestion—a form of absent-mindedness, I suppose—and when I came across the story in my collection of Tolstoy’s short works, it just seemed instantly obvious that this was what I’d been looking for all along.

TSJ: So, when it comes to casting the film, you took what might be called a nonstandard approach. I’ll let you describe your casting, reasons for that choice, and your own analysis of the effect it produced.

PS: The reason for casting as we did, using kid actors, was entirely pragmatic to begin with: I have one. I’d initially wanted to shoot the film in the setting where I live, surrounded by an apple orchard, using my son Finnegan and his friends from school, who would be remunerated with PBJs during a couple of weekends of shooting. As it turned out, Bethany Tarbell, the film’s producer, arranged for us to see in excess of three hundred juveniles around the state of New Hampshire during the audition phase, from which we selected what we considered a fitting and balanced aggregation of actors. The Parsifal-like purity of the main character lent itself to the choice of pre-pubescent children as vehicles for Tolstoy’s story, as the children amplified the distance between the harsh world of which Alyosha is a part and the serenity of his presence within it. The effect is a kind of benevolent grotesque, a heightening of the essential quality that permeates the text’s ethical message. The use of children further facilitates entry into that moral universe, lacking as they do in the masks that complicate identity in adulthood. Put differently, they’re all mask.

TSJ: Working intimately with a text, molding it into some different medium, one often discovers aspects hitherto occluded or obscured or latent. What did you learn about Alyosha the Pot, that paragon of surface and simplicity?

PS: I read fairly closely to begin with, so it’s hard for me to say that I noticed things in the process of turning the story into a film that I wouldn’t have observed had I only been reading for aesthetic pleasure. I can say,

The Museum of Russian Art

I'm not kidding—it's coming to our unlikely neighborhood—
at the corner of 35W and Diamond Lake Road—they are
building—*The Museum of Russian Art*—in the old Mayflower

Church—which later became—*The Enga Funeral Home*—so—
there are spirits enough—imbedded in the plaster—enough—
spirits—and voices—to hover around the deep—jeweled—mystery—

of *The Black Madonna*—or—*Christ Pantocrator*—with all the gold—
surrounding the faces—to focus—the devotion of anyone looking—
or—they might have—Kandinsky's funny horsemen—stepping up—

that *Blue Mountain*—or why not—a Fabergé egg—right here—
in South Minneapolis—opening under our eyes—*unclasped?*
I have this dream—I'm a fidgety old man—wanting to move—

so I walk down Diamond Lake Road—*along the Diamond Path*
of the Czars—to the roaring freeway—and none of the noise will
bother me—it will be just like the locomotive—screaching—

to a stop—*The Astapovo Station*—where the old man had to get off—
now freed of his bed sheets—now on that final quest—to get away—
that itching—of life—to get to—where?—where faces are lit in gold.

-Timothy J. Nolan



however, that time-space relationships, or what Bakhtin describes in terms of the chronotope, took on a practical significance they probably wouldn't have otherwise held. As a form of romance/fairy tale, the time of the story is basically empty: Events, such as the routines of Alyosha's life at the merchant's, are not etiologically determined. Indeed, unlike the rest of us, Alyosha seems blithely immune to consequences, standing as he somehow does outside of causality; he never really changes. Thus the story could be temporally transplanted to the Depression era without loss of narrative impact. Spatially, the story is pretty abstract: It could occur anywhere, giving us license to film it in New Hampshire at Canterbury Shaker Village (or in

L.A., for that matter, had we opted to do so). That couldn't be said, for instance, of *Eugene Onegin*, *A Hero of Our Time*, or *Oblomov*, precise sociological studies that are both historically and geographically quite specific. The philosophical connection between Tolstoy and the Shakers, or the landscape similarities between Russia and New England, were simply fortuitous coincidences.

TSJ: Tolstoy was clearly not your only Russian influence. Can you say a bit about some of the models you had for making this film?

PS: I'm especially devoted to the films of Andrei Tarkovsky (*The Mirror* being my favorite), and the outdoor and indoor scenes owe much to the emotional moods

he achieved in his work, though his are more expansive, being feature length (witness *Stalker!*). The sound collage I created out of Alyosha's activities (the "Tenney Variations") was an attempt to project Sergei Eisenstein's experiments with montage into the auditory domain, such that the accompanying visuals function secondarily as a suggestive backdrop for the sonics. In storyboarding the piece, I closely followed the advice of V.I. Pudovkin, who insisted that each new shot should make a new point. François Truffaut also looms large behind Alyosha, notably through his deep concern for the child (*The 400 Blows*, *The Wild Child*, *Small Change*), and the artistic heights scaled by the French New Wave in general. The hand-held camera work by cinematographer Nat Heard intends to capture some aspects of Shaker trance and the edgy feel that pervades a film like Wong Kar-Wai's *Chungking Express*. Other influences are (mainly) unconscious.

TSJ: Given the usual desperate straits of indie filmmaking, how did you fund and publicize this gem?

PS: The film was shot for \$16,000, funded in part by a grant, in part through private contributions. We also

relied heavily on volunteer efforts, one of New Hampshire's hallmark commodities. Press releases garnered media attention from papers, radio, and television, and we're hoping that interest will keep accruing as the film gets noticed.

TSJ: What are your future plans for the film? I cannot imagine that we'll see your Alyosha in the local Cineplex anytime soon. How will it be distributed? How can someone get a copy?

PS: The film is being shown at festivals (NHFX, S.N.O.B.), and Merrimake, our production company, is currently in the process of sending it to others. The DVD will be available this winter at <http://www.alyoshathepot.com>

(You can listen to an interview in which Paul Schick and *Tolstoy Studies Journal* editor Michael Denner discuss both the story and the movie "Alyosha the Pot" on the *Tolstoy Studies Journal* website, <http://www.tolstoystudies.org>. The interview originally aired on New Hampshire Public Radio's program "Front Porch.")