

uncover the development and history behind each work, and as we uncover new facts as we complete commentaries, we will be getting closer to truth, a truth which might serve generations of future researchers and readers studying Tolstoy.

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The Realm of Darkness at La Mama, March 4–7, 2010: Interviews

Editor's note: Tolstoy's play The Realm of Darkness (Власть тьмы) was performed on March 4–7, 2010 at La Mama Ellen Stewart Theater, New York City, under the auspices of the Arts Program at Eugene Lang College. Zishan Ugurlu, artist-in-residence at LaMama, designed and directed the production; Inessa Medzhibovskaya was the literary adviser. These interviews were conducted by Candess Webster.

The production is reviewed by Caryl Emerson in the Review section of this issue of the Tolstoy Studies Journal.

Interview with Zishan Ugurlu

Candess Webster: What attracted you to this specific Tolstoy play?

Zishan Ugurlu: This is the centennial; the hundredth anniversary of Leo Tolstoy's death. Last year Inessa Medzhibovskaya and I decided to teach a Tolstoy class based on his wonderful novel *Resurrection*. Our plan was to create an adaptation. At the

end of the semester there was boundless creativity and so much potential, but with the time limitation the students couldn't reach the level of completion they would have like to. So at the end we decided to go in a different direction.

I started reading Tolstoy at 12. My father had Tolstoy around the house, and I mostly imitated and tried to read what he read. I probably didn't understand Tolstoy's thought provoking stories then, but I still became an avid reader. So after rereading all his plays and considering time constraints, I thought *The Realm of Darkness* would be the best choice to work on with the students for the Tolstoy Centennial; both challenging and invigorating. Also the journey to *Resurrection* with a Tolstoy Scholar Inessa Medzhibovskaya was an amazing, enlightening journey. The knowledge of my college is vast and endless source of discovery and exploration.

CW: In this moment, how are you feeling about the production?

ZU: We are very close to the opening. I always have a moment of anxiety mixed with an incredible hope inside me. The logic of bringing all the elements of theater and all these creative people into one room in such a short time is challenging. It creates incredible intensity. But meditating on a play in such a short time is also transformational. Tolstoy wrote the play in a month, so rehearsing for only a month brings rituality to the play. Working on Tolstoy's play is so magical.

CW: You are resetting the play in an American context, but with some of the Russian culture. What is your reasoning behind this ambiguity?

ZU: I would like to create poetry out of extreme conditions. I want to create an experience for an audience and the actors that is irreversible. The questions posed to us by Tolstoy's genius are still applicable today. I think for me, every production I direct gives me a chance to research something, and to learn something. This one was about the destructive, dehumanizing rigors of poverty and what people will do for money. All this is very relevant today with the recession. Andrew Baruch

which are included in the program. Wachtel also said that "Tolstoy had a soft spot in his heart for the Russian peasant". I have a soft spot in my heart for the people who cannot live the American dream. So if I can get people to think about the subject deeper than before I think that I am maximizing the potential of the medium. I also believe that a director should be more than a storyteller. Yes I am also a story teller but I choose to use the Metaphorical way rather than the Metonymy way.



The Realm of Darkness at La Mama: Nikita (Lucas McGowen) begs forgiveness of Pa Akim (Derek Spaldo). (Photographer: Andrew Smrz)

Wachtel said in the introduction to the play "In the Nineteenth century...The peasant question was perhaps the most important. At the time of the [Russian] emancipation proclamation of 1861, it was thought the problem had been solved...but one expert on the subject has written, 'serfdom was gone, but poverty remained: the mark of it was stamped upon the bodies of the people.'" Two centuries later that mark still remains. In America. I wanted to know the numbers about poverty —

Theatre is a mysterious activity. This is a room that people come to meet each other, explore each other through the medium. It is audiovisual age, computer age, video age. "Theatre has lot to do with putting the audience in contact with the Gods," said director Robert Lepage. Tolstoy was trying to do the same thing, and as a director my aim is to help the audience understand this.

CW: What was the casting process like?

ZU: It is interesting; there is a sense of spirituality in theatre and in this play. As a director, going into the audition is almost entering a zone in which you build a spine with awareness of every single vertebra. So when I go to the process I know what I want, I'm looking for certain qualities in the actor and I am willing to negotiate, but the most important thing I was looking for what was real and authentic rather than obvious and fake. I was looking for how much passion they can carry. I was looking for vulnerability, potential of vulnerability. I am always looking for actors that are passionate, willing to take risks, with no excuses, and would like to investigate. And they breathe. I want to infect everyone in the room with my pure love of theatre, so that when they leave a room they are unrecognizable to themselves.

CW: What emotion was the hardest to bring out in your actors when working on such a dark play?

ZU: Vulnerability. It is very important for the actor to reveal something profound and significant. The actor has to dig deep. "The shock of catching sight of his own evasions, tricks and clichés; the shock of sensing something of his own vast and untapped resources," as Grotowski said. The rehearsal process is about bringing the actor into this moment. American culture puts pressure on the importance of Success, which eliminates the idea of struggle. Everyone wants to be successful on their first try. Everyone is thinking I will come and be perfect, and they don't understand that there is no such thing, especially in a learning environment. Struggling is about paying attention to details. Struggling is making interesting choices.

The struggle is much more important than the victory. The frustration is the liberating feeling. Struggling is the core of creating poetry out of extreme conditions

CW: You always design your own set. Can you explain what you hope to provoke with this design?

ZU: The architecture of the creative room is a very important part of my plays. To imagine the space that Tolstoy creates is a crucial part of my interpre-

tation. Everything that I juxtapose in the space has a reason. This time I really wanted to create an environment for the audience that is intimate; that it is almost like being a part of the crime, organized crime. My master Andrey Tarkovsky, whom I like to believe I'm in the same artistic family—or would like to be in the same family—tree says, "When thought is expressed as an artistic image, it means that an exact form has been found for it, the forms that comes nearest to conveying the author's world, to making incarnate his longing for the idea. What I want to attempt here, to define the perimeters of a possible system of what are generally termed images, a system within which I can feel spontaneous and free. Anyone at all subtle will always distinguish in people's behavior."

Interview with Inessa Medzhibovskaya

Candess Webster: How do you feel about *The Realm of Darkness* being produced by Eugene Lang's Theatre Department?

Inessa Medzhibovskaya: I feel that my longstanding dream as a Tolstoy scholar and theater lover is finally fulfilled. Since Zishan and I became colleagues at Eugene Lang College in 2004, we kept speaking about the excitement and horror of putting Tolstoy on stage through Lang's Theatre. I admire Zishan's directorial and artistic talent and I went to see all of her previous productions at La-Mama, of which my absolute favorites are the Central European specimens, Witold Gombrowicz's *Operetta* and Vaclav Havel's *Temptation*.

But Tolstoy as a playwright presents a far greater gamble for a contemporary director. He is deceptively and superficially of a nineteenth century "high realist" tradition, but in fact—and this is what is becoming more and more apparent to avant-garde scholars and a worldwide sea of his devoted readership—he transcends the poetic idiom of his time. Despite some earlier attempts at writing up a few dramatic sketches and a really weak play (as a theatrical piece) in the 1850s, Tolstoy was led seriously and mightily to the cause of

doing theater relatively late in his writing career, in 1885–86. It is because of the tectonic transformations since the completion of *War and Peace* (1869) in his worldview regarding faith, human reason, social life, and the role of the poet and creative artist in modern life—those acquired a more or less finished form around 1879—that Tolstoy came to regard theater as the most important of all art forms. He appreciated its immediate and complete openness, vast potential for the public expression of social commentary and for receiving public feedback, he loved its emotional outreach and promise of ethical–aesthetic communion. Lastly, he loved theater because of its strict imposition on the authorial intention. Theater could not lie about its artificiality, and the only test of its efficiency and quality was the author’s talent, honesty, sincerity, and ability to commune with the recipient of his art or message. Another important test was the investment of the actor in the cause of conveying the author’s intention, a true participation in the task of making art together. It is not coincidental that Tolstoy wrote *The Realm of Darkness* in 1886, which was a seminal period of change when he decided he was ripe to create a new type of imaginative art.

Our first approach to Tolstoy was the possibility of adapting his last long novel *Resurrection* (1899) for the stage. In fall 2009, we co-taught a course through the Theatre Department in an attempt to adapt and stage *Resurrection* based on the plays that our students would write in the course. This was an unforgettable experience and the plays we received at the end of the semester offered an embarrassment of riches as per their promise. It is simply that the production cycle was too short for the amendments and technical adjustments that were necessary. And thus we decided to do one of Tolstoy’s own plays instead. As if this is an easier task! But Tolstoy’s drama is a complete artistic product ready for interpretation. He was a spectacular guide and advising partner to all directors who ever approached him, from Im-

perial Theaters to start-up troupes, one of which was the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko amateur company, the nucleus for the future Moscow Art Theater.

CW: Zishan is resetting the play in an American context; and you have helped with some of the translation issues along the way. Do you think that the translation that is being presented holds true to the original text?

IM: Yes, true...and I performed these services because I follow Tolstoy’s conviction that true and big art is universally transferrable. From this point of view, it does not matter a bit if the action takes place in nineteenth-century Russia or fifteenth-century Spain, or in twenty-first century small town America. If art is understood, if it acts upon you, you can enact it too, sharing your aesthetic experience with another. Putting this in Tolstoy-style expressions, I would say that evil is endemic in human nature, as is goodness. Crime and resurrection happen everywhere. Do we notice these events and when do we? Are we too careless as “birds of the air” to allow ourselves be caught? And so on. Most importantly, the Eugene Lang College rendition of the play is eclectic on purpose—to create a chaos of cultural identity (Russia? America?), age (twenty-year olds play sixteen to fifty-year olds) or time (horse collars being repaired in the age of Toyota recalls) which is not only characteristic of our life today, but is always characteristic of human nature. The action in the play takes place in a hypothetical human “somewhere,” let’s say Krapivna, Tula County, SmallState, USA.

CW: This play was considered “dark”, would you explain a little bit of what Tolstoy was going through when he wrote this?

IM: We should distinguish the dark which is part of the poetics of *film noir* from the competition between darkness and light on a journey that Tolstoy is taking us. The word “darkness” (тьма) that stands in the title of Tolstoy’s play is only one possible way of rendering the notion of the dark, or of conveying menacing and moribund imagery.

The word involves much more than that. Tolstoy chooses this word precisely because the word bears religious connotations, being a complex reference to the formless chaos, to the struggle in this world of good and evil forces and to the promise of light as salvation, of showing the way (see Ge 1:2, Isa 9:2, Mt 4:16 and 6:23, and especially Jn 1:5). Tolstoy disputed Orthodoxy and many dogmas of Christianity, but he never made a single amendment to corresponding verses in the Old Testament or the Gospels as he was so often prone to do in his attempt to portray light breaking through the darkness of ignorance, sin, sloth or despair. This is no mere rationalist Enlightenment we are dealing with. Light conquering darkness is a triumphant image that often appears in religious literature or painting. Tolstoy offers his own interpretation of this notion and image.

And to add to all this: the word darkness (тьма) in the Russian title of the play may also connote ignorance on the one hand and multitude on the other. Tolstoy may be making an additional reference to the grave yet torpid energy hidden in the popular mass. He was not a supporter of a blind peasant revolt, especially not when that could be predicated on crime, the plot and theme that has been a creative curse of Russian art since Pushkin, who also disliked the idea of an erupting peasant-style chaos. The symbol of the “realm of darkness” (царство тьмы) was exploited by Tolstoy’s good friend, the playwright Aleksandr Ostrovsky, in his celebrated drama *The Storm* (Гроза). The dark realm devours its inhabitants and causes the suicide of the best. Their brave revolts, and especially the revolt of the chief female protagonist, who prefers death to adultery or home imprisonment, was glorified by progressive critic Nikolai Dobroliubov as “the ray of light in the realm of darkness.” This phrase became a proverb. Tolstoy certainly responds to both Ostrovsky and Dobroliubov in his treatment of the costs of salvation. Suicide is not a satisfactory solution. Public repentance is, as is love and forgiveness. As I have noted in a summary of

Tolstoy’s biography in this program, in the same year that Tolstoy finished *The Realm of Darkness*, he started writing a historical parable “Walk in the World While There is Light.” In this parable, the chief protagonist becomes a humble Christian who does not notice the demise of his flesh. He leaves the earthly realm and joins the realm of light. Please note that in Russian the world “realm” and the word “light” may be rendered by a single word, свет. The Russian title of Tolstoy’s parable is this, “Ходите в свете, пока есть свет.” He tries to impress on us, through artistic means, that there is no such a thing as the dark realm or the realm of darkness, that through our daily being in this world we can transform its symbolic darkness into light. In his unfinished play “And the Light Shined in Darkness” (1896–02), Tolstoy attempted to continue the dramatic rendering of this struggle for the light, as he did using different means in his analysis of Ernest Crosby’s poem, “Fiat Lux” (“Let There Be Light” (1905).

CW: What are the implications of “Realm” being used instead of “Power,” two different translations of the title?

IM: The word “power” is closer to Tolstoy’s intention than “realm.” I will explain. The original Russian word “власть” connotes political power and also the notion of any sort of control, including the notion of “reach” and “sphere,” both contained in the word “realm,” which brings us closer to “kingdom.” For Tolstoy, power of every shape and stripe is always at war with primordial force or forces. Neither is a predetermined good or bad. Both rather are different media for organizing our energies, horizontally and vertically. We achieve harmony when both power and forces are counterbalanced and remain in dialectical relationship.

In addition, by writing the play—like any artist—Tolstoy pursued more specific goals. One of which was a challenge to write something entirely out of the ordinary out of the most ordinary. He had studied peasant speech for decades. Finally, he gave this speech unforgettable artistic shapes and

sounds. Tolstoy's characters speak naturally, yet this is not how Russians normally speak. This is not so much a question of regional or social dialect, but of special coloring, that final special touch that great artists know to add to the chief ingredient. Every character has a linguistic individuality while remaining a peasant and a human being. So in terms of a competition between realm and power, Tolstoy did create a unique linguistic realm in the

play. And he was also convinced of the word's power (see his thoughts on the power of the word addressed to children on this program). And like all unique poetic expressions in whatever genre and style, Tolstoy's play is sadly untranslatable to a large degree. It remains with the interpreter to render its sounds and messages in the language he or she feels most proper for the task.



The Realm of Darkness at La Mama: Dress Rehearsal within the House. (Photographer: Andrew Smrz)