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THE PREMIERE OF A.P. CHEKHOV'S *TATYANA REPINA* AT JUDSON POETS' THEATER

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The materials from the New York University archives as well as the author's interview with actress Essie Borden who took part in the play, served as the basic data for the presented article, which tells the story of A.P. Chekhov's *Tatyana Repina* premiere staged by The Judson Poets' Theater for the first time. Reverend Al Carmines who was the leading figure in Off-off Broadway movement in the 70-ies and 90ies of the XXth century was the producer of the staging. John Racin's translation as well as his long term research on *Tatyana Repina* by A.S. Suvorin and A.P. Chekhov made it possible to show *Tatyana Repina* to English-speaking public. The full overview of all the newspaper articles dedicated to the play allowed to draw the conclusion that the staging was well accepted by the contemporaries as an experimental show put together by a group of enthusiasts, but did not get any attention of big theater producers. Themes and problems of the drama were not of any interest for the majority of audience, the play could not be of any commercial value, so the premiere show remained the only one in the USA. The drama plays a very important role in understanding of the creative dialog between A.P. Chekhov and A.S. Suvorin and understanding of Chekhov's themes and innovative approaches to playmaking.

Key words: A.P. Chekhov, A.S. Suvorin, *Tatyana Repina*, Judson Poets' Theater, Judson Memorial Church, John Racin, Al Carmines

Judson Memorial Church and Judson Poets' Theater

The world premiere of A.P. Chekhov's one-act drama *Tatyana Repina* took place on March 31, 1978, in the historic Judson Memorial Church, at 55 Washington Square, in the Greenwich Village section of New York City. Unlike abandoned churches repurposed as venues for plays and concerts, Judson Memorial is an active place of prayer. Should the run of a show last for weeks, stage decorations are not removed. Making themselves comfortable among them, church members continue their worship.

The main church entrance is on the south side of Washington Square, a park associated with many well-known writers [19]. The chief architectural feature of the park, a 23-meter high triumphal stone arch, constructed in 1895, designed by architect Stanford White (1853—1906), erected for the centenary of the inauguration of George Washington.

The north side of Washington Square stands at the foot of Fifth Avenue. Walking south, through Washington Square Arch, we access the park and, according to an ancient tradition, much more. Passing through the arch transports us from the world of wealth, respectability and luxury to the north into the world of Greenwich Village to the south — the world of education, liberalism and bohemian artistry. It is thus entirely fitting that

the church chosen for the premiere of Chekhov's drama be located on the south side of Washington Square.

Judson Memorial Church has existed since 1890. It was founded through the efforts of Baptist pastor Edward Judson (1844–1914) as a memorial to his father Adoniram Judson (1788–1850). According to a plaque in the church, the elder Judson was the first American missionary to teach in Burma (today Myanmar). He translated the Bible into the Burmese language and authored the first Burmese-English dictionary. Another New York Baptist, the philanthropist John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937), paid for the construction of the building, completed in 1892. The temple, built by Stanford White in the Romanesque Revival style of yellow limestone and brick Romanesque, is a masterpiece of architecture. The church sanctuary, its bell tower and the attached Judson Hall were designated landmarks by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 1966, and were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974 [12].

The building is remarkable for the artistic stained-glass windows by John La Farge (1853–1910) and the marble reliefs of Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1848–1907). Under the roof of the temple, a very active social ministry takes place. The church has organized all manner of activities of interest or help to its parishioners — from a culinary club to employment services, and served as a base for new HIV drugs tests. Judson Memorial Church defends the rights of sexual minorities, helps illegal immigrants to draw up their paperwork, and provides shelter and food to the homeless. The principal strength of the ministry of the church lies in the arts, music, dance and theater. The history of Judson Arts ministry deserves special mention.

According to Judson Arts Wednesdays Humanifesto, Art can be prophetic, useless, sacred, irreverent, cheap. And art can be enough [8]. God speaks to people using the language of art. To censor that would be a sacrilege. Nothing should limit creative expression and imagination. This mindset sometimes led to scandals and even to prosecution by the authorities. Thus, an accusation of insulting the American flag was brought against Judson for the People's Flag Show, in 1970 [3].

The first theater productions in the church are associated with the name of Rev. Alvin Allison "Al" Carmines, Jr (1936–2005), the Judson Church pastor who was a key figure in the off-off-Broadway movement in 1960s. His obituary said, that by 1972 the number of off-off-Broadway productions exceeded by five times the number of productions in Broadway theaters and theaters off-Broadway [13].

Al Carmines dared to put to music, and turn into shows, anything and everything — from the texts of Aristophanes, Apostle John, Abraham Lincoln and Gertrude Stein to quotations of Chinese Chairman Mao and Winnie the Pooh stories. Deeply convinced that spirituality is equally present in both the church and the theater, Carmines said: "If you want to know how to live, go to church. If you want to know how your life is in its deepest roots, go to the theater" [13].

Juan Carlos Castillo, in his 1979 dissertation states: "The impressive series of Judson musicals, over 40 in less than twenty years, has succeeded so well in attracting audiences, critical acclaim, and "awards", that they are likely to have a continuing position in American history." [2, p. vi].

Carmines' hard work on his musical performances in 1977 was cut short by an emergency hospitalization caused by a brain aneurysm. By 1978, the pastor felt better,

but still could not operate at full capacity. During this period, Carmines decided to invite John Racin, Professor of English Literature from the University of West Virginia, to put on a theatrical production. By that time, John Racin had completed the translation into English of Chekhov's one-act play *Tatyana Repina* and, upon the advice of the Rev. Dr. Robert Helm, sent it to Rev. Carmines [18. P. xii]. In the archives there is a letter of January 26, 1978 from Carmines to Racin inviting him to produce *Tatyana Repina* at Judson in a showcase production, which "would enable producers to see it — which is a valuable quality — particularly for this play, as it must be done and sung to reveal its power. A showcase means limited money for the performers: some honoraria for the actual play — although not enough for rehearsals — but the people at Judson are faithful and I think would do a very good job" [11].

The archives contain no letters from Racin. But, in two weeks the play was ready, so it is obvious that Racin, since he initiated the correspondence, gave his consent and took a very active part in the production. Arne Zaslove, artistic director of The Floating Theater, a Seattle based touring company, co-directed the play together with Carmines.

English translation of *Tatyana Repina*

A few words about the translation of the play by John Racin. The American scholar spoke about *Tatyana Repina* at different conferences and dedicated a number of articles to the drama [17]. Racin translated Chekhov's play into English. He was not the first to do it, but the 1925 S. S. Koteliansky translation of the text published by M. Chekhov in 1924 was incomplete [4]. A. Chekhov's brother published *Tatyana Repina* after he had cut out more than 80 lines of the original text (mostly liturgical). With the cuts the play seemed unintelligible.

Mikhail and Maria Chekhov were afraid of militant atheism and did not want the authorities to use the play against Anton Chekhov. So the easiest way to do it was to call it a parody, a private joke between Chekhov and Suvorin and discard it as something of no value or importance. This is exactly what Mikhail Chekhov did in his book: "The reader will read it and smile, the readership now has matured to the point that it is able to recognize a playful joke, a prank. It is to be hoped that this play will be taken and recognized as a private joke and a surprise between Anton Chekhov and Suvorin. The author never intended to have the play published" [4. P. 71].

There also exists a 1968 translation by Dr. Ronald Hingley of the full version of the play. Hingley's translation does not contain any comments required for people of non-Orthodox culture, thus his translation could not contribute to the appreciation of Chekhov's play by English speakers who were not Russian Orthodox.

Racin accomplished much. He translated both *Tatyanas* (there was a play with the same name by A.S. Suvorin and A.P. Chekhov dedicated his *Tatyana Repina* to Suvorin, his friend and publisher) into the English language, and provided the plays with extensive literary commentary. As a result, ten years after the premiere a 272-page book appeared. It included additional materials to facilitate the understanding of the cultural and historical context of the plays [18]. The book was reviewed by Russian scholars of Chekhov and evaluated as "interesting and unusual" [16].

Racin introduced additional remarks throughout the original text. Thus there was satisfied a need to explain in detail to the non-Orthodox audience what is happening in

the church, and the play received the additional remarks necessary for stage directions in a foreign cultural environment.

The translator studied the gestures and movements of the clergy and parishioners during the service. The additions in square brackets in great detail describe the motions adopted in the Orthodox ritual. Racin was of Russian descent, and in addition to his teaching, he was the choir director at St. Mary Russian Orthodox Church. For the translation of Chekhov's Church Slavonic wedding liturgy, Racin was guided by Rev. Dr. John Meyendorff's *The Sacrament of Holy Matrimony*, and for the necessary stage directions on the movements and gestures, he relied on the counsel of Dr. Michael Farrow [18. P. xii].

Farrow, for many years a choir director in Orthodox churches together with Racin, chose the appropriate musical settings. These settings, composed before 1889, were thus almost certainly known to Chekhov and Suvorin, both connoisseurs of Russian Orthodox music. Paying tribute to Chekhov's southern origin, for the acclamation, "Lord have mercy", a traditional Kievan Monastery of the Caves tune, was chosen. The rest of the sheet music bears the names of famous Russian composers — A.A. Arkhangel'skiy (1846—1924), P.I. Chaykovskiy (1840—1893), G.F. L'vovskiy (1830—1894), Arkhimandrit Feofan (Fodor Aleksandrov) (1785—1852), N.A. Rimskiy-Korsakov (1844—1908), S.V. Smolenskiy (1848—1909) [9].

Press release and other preparations

A press-release was put together and sent, with invitations to attend the performance, to all of the leading New York newspapers and magazines. The performances were scheduled, at 8 p.m., Fridays through Mondays, on successive weekends, March 31 — April 3, April 7 — April 10, April 14 — April 17, at a suggested contributions of \$3.50. Announcements of the premiere were published in *The Daily News* (Feb. 24, 1978) and *The New York Times* (March 31, 1978).

It is pretty difficult to judge the performance as presented in the only available amateur recording — the 50-minute video in the archives [10]. It is obvious that Chekhov's text was very carefully related, all the author's remarks and comments were taken into consideration. The Church is made to resemble a Russian Orthodox church as close as possible. The priests wear liturgical festive clothes — miters, vestments, etc. The candles and incense are burning, the two choirs are singing (taking turns), liturgically accurate in every detail the wedding is in full swing. The remarks of the characters are delivered in the pauses between the choral passages, producing a lethargic effect. During long remarks, the priests' gestures freeze, as if suspended in air, and then suddenly revive to continue with the wedding ceremony.

The one-act drama was produced as an independent piece (without any connection to Suvorin's *Tatyana Repina*) and everything was done to recreate on stage the polyphony conceived by Chekhov. Chekhov's staging remarks about the choir singing in the text of the drama are frequent — occurring 49 times. The choirs are given the maximum opportunity to sing — hymns and acclamations frame what the characters are saying and serve as background to their gestures and actions. The play uses counterpoint — the simultaneous combination of two or more independent melodic voices. Creating such

polyphony on a non-professional stage was a challenge, which Judson Poets' Theater undertook.

All the rehearsals and the number of consecutive performances were very hard on the actors. Essie Borden, who played the role of Vera Olenin, the bride, in a conversation with the author of the present article, recalled that: "It was very difficult for me to stand all the time. I had to stand at rehearsals in a static position and had sore knees. There is not much action for a bride in a Russian Orthodox wedding. For showcase productions there was no pay, though actors had to be provided with at least Metro fare to get them to and from rehearsals. The Union would permit it because the production might eventually provide paying jobs for actors. The idea behind showcase productions was for the actors to show their talents and hope that maybe major theatres would get interested. *Tatyana Repina* wasn't that kind of play, it did not have much commercial value, but we did it for the sake of Chekhov" [14].

The performance was a success. Art has once again triumphed not only over death, but also over ideological discord: the production took place in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and with the US/USSR Cold War in the background. Chekhov fans, who arrived at this non-traditional church from all over the U.S., gave life to a play which, at that time, would have been impossible to stage in its homeland.

Press reviews of the show

Everyone looked forward to the reviews. They soon appeared and, for a city with more than 400 theaters, were a lot — five articles in leading and popular editions. The first response belonged to Richard Eder, who stated categorically that the play shouldn't have been staged at all: "Chekhov's one-act *Tayana Repina* has slept on the shelves these many years. Perhaps it worked as a literary practical joke addressed to Suvorin, but its revival now, in a new translation by John Racin, <...>, is clearly a mistake" [5]. The reviewer said a few kind words about the performers, complained about the tedium of the play, and concluded that watching *Tatyana Repina* was an ordeal.

On April 6, *The Soho Weekly News* published an article by Eileen Blumenthal. She recounted the story of Evlaliya Kadmina (1853—81), an actress who committed suicide at the age of twenty-eight. Kadmina, playing the role of tsarina to Ivan the Terrible, drank real poison on stage to revenge herself on a nobleman who had deserted her to marry a rich widow. In her commendable effort to try to convey some background information, Blumenthal unfortunately confused everything: the names of the characters with those of real people, as well as the date of the memorable death on stage. Blumenthal did have a very favorable impression of the play, and saw elements of Chekhov's innovations in the one-act drama [1].

Richard Nason's review appeared in *The Villager*, on April 6, 1978. He likened the play to the wayward child grown to the Prodigal Son — or Prodigal Daughter? — embellished by musical director Al Carmines with full choral trapping and by stage director Arne Zaslove with a heavy complement of 26 well-trained performers. This author also distorts a few historical facts. The play was not found, as the article states, in Anton Chekhov's papers after his death in 1904 with publisher's copy never found but the other way round. It was found among the publisher's papers after Suvorin's death in 1912. The

real-life actress who actually killed herself on stage was Evlaliya Kadmina, not Tatyana Repina, a fictional character in Suvorin's and Chekhov's plays. Nason's overall impression of the play is very favorable, he is sure that the Judson Poets' Theater has done justice to Chekhov's complex intention: "Zaslove and Carmines have a herculean task on their hands to give form to almost fifty actors and choristers in an arena about the size of a backyard swimming-pool" [15]. Nason gives no predictions as to the play's subsequent stage performance life.

Michael Feingold, in his article "Grateful for the Undead", is critical of the general attitude to classics staged in New York theaters. With no tradition, system or guidelines, spectators are at a loss: "Instead of taking the classics seriously New York leaves them to a few brave souls in off-off showcases, with short rehearsal periods, low budgets, casts rounded up catch-as-catch-can. It is the blind leading the blind, since without a sense of the continuum of dramatic literature — which New York has never had — neither actors nor audience know much about a play. <...> The two interesting aspects of the skit are, first, that it reveals more openly than most of his plays Chekhov's deep loathing for all human life (his idea of a good joke is to have the dying woman shout, "Everyone should take poison! Everyone!"), and second, the director Arne Zaslove, has been misled by Chekhov's undeserved reputation as a humanist into taking the play with entire seriousness as a piece of tragic moral satire" [6].

Ted Hoffman, who was both an actor and a theater critic, took up the challenge and responded to Feingold's claims: "An erudite flaneur relates our show to Chekhov's farces, as we did, only he wants it broader, with real yuks in the final scene where a woman, dying of self-poisoning, shouts at the archpriest from the altar *Everyone should take poison! Fine! Pure gold!* But what should the director and actress do with the following line *To betray a woman is to betray God! Yuk?* Maybe better the metaphysical chill of ironic reality?" [7]. Hoffman's article predicted that the American premiere of Chekhov's drama, marvelous as it was, probably would not be seen again.

Commercial failure — suggested explanations

Thus, a group of enthusiasts, who understood and appreciated *Tatyana Repina* and its potential, did a wonderful job of producing its world premiere at Judson Poets' Theater. But without box office success, no other productions followed. That was perfectly understandable, given the complexity of liturgical texts and the heterogeneity of Russian church space and its symbolism. But even if you skip the obvious difficulties affecting perception, the main issue is still there — the drama was inconsistent with the problems and struggles of most US intellectuals of the period. Women taking poison, and by their deaths proclaiming human dignity, their right to love, the attention and sympathy to the plight of an abandoned lover — none of this was relevant for America of the 1980's.

Women's issues which were so urgent in Russia, Europe and the U.S. in the 19th century were already resolved. Love between a man and a woman in the church, which took the side of sexual minorities, was not seen as the sole way of creating a happy partnership.

On the one hand, Tatyana Repina who took poison because she was abandoned by her lover and the suicide of the Woman in Black can be explained by hysteria and madness

being contagious (“Why are hysterical women allowed in here?” “Madness. Nothing else” “So many crazy women around now” [18. P. 152, 154]). On the other hand, one has to take into consideration the final lines of the drama: *Out of hatred... everyone should take poison... She is in her grave, and he... he... To betray a woman is to betray God... A woman has been destroyed!*

FATHER ALEXEI. *What blasphemy against religion! What blasphemy against life!* [18. P. 163].

The Woman in Black defies God, her words are strengthened by the remarks from Kuzma which are pronounced right before the staggering Woman in Black comes out from behind a pillar: “*Nothing... just so... It all means nothing. They sing, burn incense, read the liturgy, but God hears nothing. I’ve served here for forty years... Not once have I heard God’s voice. I don’t know where God is... all for nothing...*” [18. P. 162].

The challenge to God, the defiance of the Woman in Black turns her into a heroine in the classical sense of the term — she enters into a confrontation with the Creator in His temple, and as she is doing so she suffers and dies. Suffering — the destiny of heroes. But to acknowledge the challenge would simultaneously mean to start thinking about the complex process of what happened as a drama, a tragedy. The easiest way is to reduce everything to a farce and parody to hysterics of mad and crazy ladies.

It is impossible to pronounce Tatyana Repina and the Woman in Black heroines, who die for an idea. The concept of heroism as a positive, constructive quality in present day society is totally devalued.

The literary fate of Anton Chekhov’s “*Tatyana Repina*” is unusual. Presentation of this work has always proved untimely. When it was written, in 1889, it was impossible to get it through censorship, as it was strictly forbidden to show priests or church rituals on stage. After the October Revolution, Michael Chekhov had to publish the drama with cuts and omissions to safeguard his brother Anton from becoming a target for anti-religious propaganda. The play was passed off as merely a friendly joke, a travesty. Today lifestyle and mentality — where happiness and success are major priorities — see no value in sacrificial heroism or in explanations of the drama’s psychopathy, hysteria, madness and craziness.

Conclusions

The premiere of the one-act drama in New York became an outstanding event in the lives of enthusiasts of the Judson Poets’ Theater, but no continuation followed. Notwithstanding the determination and hard work of the actors, the play’s critical success was minimal and the receipts of the box office insufficient to repeat the production. Its subject matter, the elaborateness of the authentic ritual and the somewhat tedious staging don’t make it the easiest play to appreciate for most audiences. The play was misunderstood and unappreciated in a culture whose ideals and values are remote from the issues that agitated Russian society during the second half of the 19th century. Who is Tatyana Repina? A heroine or a hysteric? On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean the choice is made in favor of the hysteric. How could it be otherwise in an era, when all traditional values are either questioned or discarded, when everything is subjected to reevaluation?

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ПРЕМЬЕРА «ТАТЬЯНЫ РЕПИНОЙ» А.П. ЧЕХОВА В ТЕАТРЕ ПОЭТОВ ДЖАДСОНА

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В статье на основании архивных материалов, собранных в библиотеке университета Нью Йорка, интервью автора с участницей спектакля актрисой Эсси Борден, впервые изложена полная история постановки одноактной драмы А.П. Чехова «Татьяна Репина» в Театре поэтов мемориальной церкви Джадсона в Нью Йорке, США. Постановку осуществил преподобный Ал Кармайнз, стоявший в 70–90-е годы XX века во главе движения офф-офф Бродвей. Перевод Джона Рейсина, наряду с его многолетним научным исследованием истории создания и постановок «Татьяны Репиной» А.С. Суворина и А.П. Чехова, сделали возможным появление сценического варианта пьесы в англоязычной аудитории. Полный обзор рецензий на спектакль, появившихся в прессе, позволяет сделать вывод о том, что постановка получила высокую оценку современников как экспериментальный спектакль группы энтузиастов, но не вызвала интереса режиссеров больших театров. Тематика и проблематика пьесы оказались не созвучными для основной зрительской аудитории, коммерческого успеха спектаклю иметь не мог, премьерный показ так и остался по сей день единственным в США. Между тем пьеса имеет очень важное значение не только для понимания творческого диалога между А.П. Чеховым и А.С. Сувориным, но и для раскрытия основных моментов новаторского подхода Чехова к драматургии.

Ключевые слова: А.П. Чехов, А.С. Суворин, «Татьяна Репина», Театр поэтов Джадсона, мемориальная церковь Джадсона, Джон Рейсин, Ал. Кармайнз

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