

## PLAYWRIGHT IN UKRAINE:

### “MY CHEKHOV LIGHT” JOURNEY TO KIROVOGRAD

#### PART 2

[IN FACT, I NEVER DID GET A CHANCE TO COMPLETE PART 2 OF “MY CHEKHOV LIGHT”/UKRAINIAN ODYSSEY; BUT RECENTLY PAVLÒ ASKED ME TO CONTRIBUTE SOME REMARKS ON MY UKRAINIAN EXPERIENCES FOR A NEW MAGAZINE, “HOBBY,” TO BE PUBLISHED IN UKRAINE. INNA DERKACH’S TRANSLATION OF “MY CHEKHOV LIGHT” WOULD BE PUBLISHED, ALONG WITH A QUESTIONNAIRE THAT I WOULD COMPLETE. THE MAGAZINE DEALS WITH THE SUBJECT OF “HOBBY” IN A BROADER CONTEXT THAN, SAY, WHITTling.

I SUBMIT THE FOLLOWING ANSWERS AS PART 2 OF MY UKRAINIAN ODYSSEY. FG]

*1) Frank, can we say that stage reading/performing is your hobby? Or teaching? Do you have any other hobbies? Or your profession- and calling, creative writing, is actually your hobby?*

My dictionary defines “Hobby” as —“an activity engaged in for pleasure and relaxation during spare time.”

Everything I do —(all my creative work, certainly)— I do for emotional and intellectual pleasure. Once I get through the natural angst of creating something, I find that what I do is relaxing; and, since I make my living primarily from teaching, my spare time from teaching is when I invest all my energies in creative work.

In this sense, then, my creative work does touch on all aspects of the definition of Hobby: My writing certainly does. I never write on demand or to formula. I write for the pleasure of organizing the chaos of my life into a structure that (I’m arrogant to believe) an audience will be interested in, and that actors will want to act in.

The work must give me pleasure, and when it does, I relax. Of course, I teach theatre (Playwriting and Text Analysis) for my primary living (my job), so I guess teaching is not a Hobby; still, I do find the results from teaching relaxing, and I get great pleasure from teaching—especially through the give and take of ideas with students.

So, even teaching has a Hobby aspect.

I thought, at one time, that my reading/performances, because they were done in my spare time, were, therefore, a pure hobby; but through reading/performances of my own plays, I have discovered all sorts of insights into text analysis and performance that have begun to inform my work in its totality and in my constantly-developing view of theatre art.

Reading/performance, therefore, is now part of my professional arsenal. So—yes—in the spare times of my life, I take pleasure in, and relaxation from, all the work I do in my profession of theatre making; therefore—it is all my life's Hobby.

***2) How did you find Ukraine and Kirovograd? What are your strongest recollections of our country? Of our people? of our art?***

I loved my stay in Ukraine. Kiev is a beautiful city and the Bulgakov house was an eye-opener for me and, as a result of visiting it, I began to read everything I could by that great writer, when I returned home. Most of my time was spent in Kirovograd, which I especially loved. The people I met there were extraordinary; kind, generous, intelligent and outgoing. The English-speaking students I lectured to were also intelligent and inquisitive.

My reading performance of my play, MY CHEKHOV LIGHT, was well attended and well received. In fact, I was overwhelmed by the reaction to my work, which included a glowing review from one of the leading and revered actors of the Kirovograd National Theatre, Mr. Ivan Kravtsov. My translator, Inna Derkach was a delight and a joy to work with; she was charming, a terrific actress. Her English was impeccable.

Every night I was invited to dinner at a different apartment, in which there

were food, drink, and laughter, singing; very much like the Italian-American family life I came from. I felt right at home in Kirovograd.

In terms of art: I had never really thought much about the art of Ukrainian iconography, but I saw much of it and I began to see the extraordinary and individual beauty of each piece. At one point in my visit, Tatiana Tkachenco, the curator of the Kirovograd Museum of Fine Arts, gave me a private tour of the Museum (which was where I also gave my reading/performance of my play, MY CHEKHOV LIGHT), and, with the help of a young, beautiful student of English, who translated (and whose name also was Tatiana) pointed out all the subtleties of each artist and the symbolism of many of the paintings.

At one point, the student, Tatiana, was describing to me the symbolism in a very-large painting that featured what seemed like a possessed Mystic walking (with bleeding feet?) barefoot in the snow. Somehow, that led to the student Tatiana talking about my reading/performance of my play, MY CHEKHOV LIGHT, and I asked her how it was that many in the audience seemed to become so involved in my character's agony without knowing the English language. True, translations were handed out to the large audience, but many did not follow the translated text; and not everyone in the audience understood English the way the student Tatiana did. She simply stated that, somehow, I had rendered the Soul of the character and, often, that intuitive insight into the Soul was more important for the audience than the understanding of the language itself. I found this astonishing. Until that point, I had pretty much convinced myself that I was merely demonstrating the playtext (though, once again, the packed art-gallery, in which I was giving the reading/performance, dematerialized and I was in the theatre space in which my anti-hero Peter Paradise was working through his crisis). But what also astonished me was the student Tatiana's use of the word "Soul." I have been teaching for over forty years and I have been in contact with hundreds and hundreds of students, but rarely have I had a student talk about the "Soul" of anything. Was this sort of spirituality so deeply ingrained in all Ukrainians? —Again I was moved.

The Curator Tatiana Tkachenco obviously took great pride in the Museum's collection and was determined to restore those pictures that had been damaged. One of the paintings, "Blood Sunday in St Petersburg" —a very large canvas—by the artist Wojciech Kossak, had large patches

covering the damaged areas. It broke my heart to see it. Band-Aids on a work of art. Ms Tkachenko said it would cost about \$10,000 to restore; a large sum of money for the Kirovohrad Regional Museum of Art; not that much money for such an undertaking in my country. I was convinced, because of Ms Tkachenko's enthusiasm and pride in her charge as Curator, that she would get the needed money and have the restoration done. Perhaps she has achieved that by now. I hope so.

Still in Kirovograd I visited the State Regional Research Library, where a gracious handsome woman, Olena Garashenko (who spoke excellent English and had done some studies at The Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.), allowed me to see some of their rare book collection, with some of the most incredibly designed book covers I have ever seen; some, as I recall, detailed with rare stones. The Library itself was featuring a contemporary art exhibit, and its permanent stained glass windows were colorfully designed in vibrant colors. In Kiev there were some shows of contemporary art, at which I saw that there were many fine contemporary Ukrainian artists working in the media of painting and sculpture.

The one contemporary play I saw at the Kirovograd National Theatre, "Desire of the Extreme," by Anatoly Krym, was very well performed. My friend Pavlò Bosyy needed to translate (in whispers) the more subtle parts to me as the play progressed, but it was very clear what the political nature of the piece was all about: Corruption.

***Some other Kirovograd snapshots:***

1) Svetlana Bosyy, Pavlò's beautiful mother (a retired medical doctor), being sure I had many of her marmalade filled pastries for breakfast; and making certain I take some jars of her homemade honey home to my wife Sandy.

2) Vasyl Bosyy, Pavlo's father (a Dance Master), holding me by the arm to make sure that I didn't slip on the treacherous ice that was still thick on the streets of Kirovograd that March.

3) The student Tatania accompanying me on the long bus ride from Kirovograd to Kiev airport and giving me, as a parting gift, a beautiful handkerchief, made by her grandmother.

4) Pavlò Bosyy, on the train ride from Kiev to Kirovograd, organizing a detailed itinerary for me and, with his usual energy, galvanizing everyone else to implement it.

5) In Kirovograd, at the entranceway of an apartment building, two old women, wearing black clothes, and with head scarves (babuskas?) covering their heads, talking on cell phones.

6) At the farewell lunch, given me by the staff of the Museum—in the same gallery where I gave my reading/performance of “My Chekhov Light” — and after the usual 3rd toast to the women in the room — I was asked many questions about the United States; the last one being: Are Americans as fat as they are said to be? I said, yes.

*3) What did you discover about Ukraine and Orange revolution before your visit and how did your opinion change during your visit?*

Before my visit, the glories of the Orange Revolution were featured in our media, and the revolution’s stories were top news for a long while. The generally peaceful nature of the revolution to bring about democratic change, and the ensuing result, was, indeed, inspiring.

When I got to Kiev and walked the Square where thousands of Ukrainians—so many of them young people—kept vigil, I found it a very moving experience. Then, while visiting Mohyla Academy in Kiev, the provost, Dr. Panchenko, showed me a gallery of many blown-up photos of the young people who took part in the demonstrations; and when I was told that even romances developed between young policemen and women students, that was a delightful bit of news that fed my romantic soul.

The students at Mohyla Academy were very like the students in the photos. They also resembled students I see on my campus at West Virginia University and at all Colleges I’ve worked at or have visited. I did meet some Ukrainians who were not sure the revolutionary spirit would be sustained. Have they been proven right? I hate to think so. But, as I write, and from this distance, it does seem that the Orange Revolution may have been betrayed. But that just means that the habit of corruption is very hard to break. But if anyone can break it, it is the Ukrainian

people.

Again, the ones I met were strong, competent, compassionate, hard working, talented, and wanted a better future for themselves and for their families. I am sure that that whiff of freedom and empowerment will win out over the stench of corruption—a stench, by the way, that now engulfs the country I live in.

**4) *How did you start writing? What are your earliest theatre experiences? Do you have any fun stories about playwriting and theatre?***

I started by writing original plays for radio. In those days (which seem like a million years ago), the United States radio broadcasting companies featured original drama, written specifically for that medium. In High School I began writing original stage plays for our drama club. Many of the plays were controversial; I think it was because I used “bad” language. I have no particular fun stories about playwriting. It’s all fun — and all pain.

**5) *How do people make a living on playwriting? Is that tough?***

It is very tough to make a living writing plays in the United States. Virtually impossible, in fact. Many writers turn to television to make a living; some (as I do) teach.

**6) *How does one teach creative writing? Can you teach someone to become Shakespeare or Chekhov?***

The best way to be a playwright is to write plays and get involved with their productions. *On the job training*. That's just about impossible today. Even readings and workshops are hard to come by. So classes are offered, in which all you can teach is technique; you can't teach genius, or talent. However, if there is a student with genuine playwriting talent, a teacher of playwriting (who has been around the production block, as it were) can often spot it, and nurture it, and encourage it, and let it blossom. Also, it's very important to establish a structure for the class that allows for the student to hear his/her play *read*: The name of the game is, *it's all in the dialogue*, so one's stage dialogue must be heard. It's amazing how quickly one recognizes what needs work as soon as the

words are *put out there*.

**7) *What's your dream theatre school?***

One that is built around playwriting. This question, however, requires a book-length answer.

**8) *How does your teaching style differ from what the other professors of playwriting do?***

I have no idea. I know what I do; but that would take another book-length essay to answer.

**9) *Frank, I remember how proud I was to discover your name on the board of produced works of contemporary playwrights at the legendary Cherry Lane theatre. How did you discover that company? Who directed your plays over there and performed them? Did you make any personal friends at Cherry Lane?***

Edward Albee formed a theatre group that presented “emerging playwrights” to New York theatre. This was in the 1960s. I was one of those chosen playwrights. Albee presented a series of plays by new playwrights at The Cherry Lane Theatre, a famous theatre of 150 seats, located in Greenwich Village. One of my early plays, CONERICO WAS HERE TO STAY, was produced in that series.

The following year, Edward Albee, at The Cherry Lane Theatre, produced another play of mine, NIGHT OF THE DUNCE. Two years ago, I gave a reading/performance of MY CHEKHOV LIGHT at The Cherry Lane Theatre (just before I gave a reading/performance of it in Kirovograd) and it was quite successful. The Cherry Lane Theatre is now run by Angelina Fiordellisi, a terrific actress and believer in encouraging new playwrights: Her Mentor Series is now one of the leading venues for developing new American plays.

The directors and actors I worked with would not be household names in Ukraine, but they are all well-known theatre practitioners in America. This

is true of designers, as well.

***10) How did the big classical artists of the 1960s, like Beckett or Strasberg influenced your art?***

Strasberg; not at all. My work has an operatic component to it and is informed by lyrical language and theatrical wonder with a streak of Absurdism; the Method, as practiced by Strasberg, was antithetical to my work.

A piece of mine was once performed in The Actor's Studio. It was a short absurdist piece that should have taken about 40 minutes to perform. It took 90 minutes in the Actor's Studio production. Agony.

I am in awe of Beckett's genius; but I do not think he influenced me. Brecht was more of an influence: The songs, the distancing, the poetic energy, and the often-grotesque humor. But I think the major influences on me were Georg Buchner, Federico Fellini and Giuseppe Verdi.

***11) Which theatre companies of that time were especially dear to your heart?***

The Berliner Ensemble. The Royal Shakespeare Company of England. The American Place Theatre in New York.

***12) What did you know those days about the Soviet Union and the Soviet Theatre? Other art forms?***

Just about nothing. In America, at that time, one got the impression that there was little in Soviet playwriting that was worth considering (I had never heard of Bulgakov). I don't know if that was true or not, but that was the thinking in my country during the "Cold War." Of course, Ballet Companies from the Soviet Union were always featured in our country then. I saw some of them and, compared to the work being done by Balanchine in the USA, the Soviet Ballets seems old fashioned. The dancers, of course, were superb.

***13) Tell us a little bit about translation of your works into foreign languages. How do you work with your translators?***



I've had three translators for my works: two different German translators, and one Ukrainian, Inna Derkach. All three were superb and I only had to explain certain idioms that they could then translate into idiomatic writing in their own language. I was always impressed with how each was concerned about the rhythms in my work and how to retain the feel of those rhythms in their own language.

**14) *How did you meet your wife? Did her art and personality influence your work?***

Sandy and I met at Queens College in the City of New York. We were both undergraduates. I then went to another University and then was drafted into the Army. When I returned from the Army, I did my graduate work at Columbia University in New York City. There, Sandy and I met again. We were married a year later. Sandy was an actress/singer, singing Opera and Lieder. I was brought up on Opera —Italian opera especially — but I was new to the world of Lieder. I was always impressed with her method of dealing with the words to get at the music. The integration of music into the fabric of my work is an outgrowth of Sandy's influence. She is still my partner.

**15) *Do you like directing yourself? Would you prefer direct your works yourself or someone else to do it?***

I do like directing, especially the early part of the process where discoveries are being made. After that, I lose interest.

**16) *What is your dream director/actor?***

Any director and actor who understands my work and can render in theatrical terms my lyrical language and special humor, mixed in with all of, what I call, my characters' "centers of pain."

**17) *What's your dream theatre? Do you prefer resident repertory theatres or the commercial model? Or Off-Broadway?***

Any theatre that will produce my plays, and produce them well, is my dream theatre. Often, of course, they (resident or commercial) turn out to be nightmare theatres. I guess I still like the small, intimate, Off-Off

Broadway space where actors and audience are receiving my play in close up.

**18) If you are directing yourself how do you treat a playwright-including yourself? Do you make changes or cuts?**

New casts of actors, in a new setting, with new designers, always require a new approach to any text.

Generally, if the play is not a brand new one, I'll limit my revisions to cutting, perhaps. It's dangerous to try to make major revisions in a piece that was written in another time and which bubbled out of a different emotional wellspring. If it is a new text it's best not to direct it yourself. A first-draft piece being made for the first time might require major writing surgery while in production, and, at that point, a playwright needs to function purely as a writer; directing the play as well, can fragment the focus. I will, however, direct a reading of a new play of mine.

In the USA all plays start by having readings and then are workshopped before, if they are lucky, getting a production. The reading consists simply of actors sitting on stools and reading the play for an invited audience. From that you can begin to see how the piece is developing. After a reading, one often has "talk backs" with the audience, to get a sense of how the piece is being received. Then, often, it's back to the drawing board with the piece. This often is a journey to disaster. Again, this is material for another book-length essay.

***19) Could you tell us the funniest story related to your teaching and playwriting experiences?***

Many many years ago, I entered my text analysis class early and some students were already there. The class was being held in a large Conference room with a large table. One of the boys was sitting on the table and his sox were off and he was painting his toenails with red nail polish. Without thinking I said: " And do you also paint happy faces on the head of your penis?" The student fell off the table, laughing. I can't recall what happened to the nail polish.

***20) How did Ukraine and its perception in the world change***

*in the course of 1,5 years?*

It seems to me, from this distance, that the promise of the Orange Revolution is now on hold. But I would return to Ukraine in a shot — especially if one of my plays was being produced at the Kirovograd National Theatre. That would be an honor.

**21) *Did the USA change much in the same time period?***

Very. The quagmire that is the Iraq War has divided our country even more, and has isolated us from much of the rest of the world. In addition, I feel that our Constitution is now under attack and, in my long life, I wonder (for the first time) if that great document will survive.

**22) In your personal opinion, what's more correct, Ukraine or the Ukraine?**

Ukraine. "The" Ukraine sounds like it is still part of another country.

**23) *How do you personally perceive the recent political changes in Ukraine?***

It is at a crossroad. See above.

**24) *How does Ukraine as a nation, Ukrainian art, science and business influence the world?***

I really don't know. All I can say is that, since returning from Ukraine, I have discovered more and more people with Ukraine backgrounds, who are artists, workers, mothers, fathers and who are integrated into the fabric of our country and are part of its energy.

**25) *How does the Western world influence Ukraine? Could you notice any changes related to such an influence?***

I don't know. I only hope that the McDonald and Starbucks influence will not override the Ukrainian native institutions; or that the "Disneyfication" influence does not corrupt your theatre. I also hope that Ukraine does not "privatize" everything: That road leads, in my

opinion, to disaster; a road that often kills the soul of a country.

***26) What's your "Ukrainian dream"? (An idealistic picture of Ukraine in the future)***

That the integration of your rich culture absorbs whatever new outside influences try to overwhelm your collective soul; and that that integration gives to the world something new, and rich, and startling and astonishing.

***27) What do you expect in real life from Ukraine in the near future?***

The question is not mine—it is yours. What do you expect? The question of integrating “real life” with “inspired dreams of a new future,” poses a wrestling with intellectual and philosophical issues that is a monumental struggle. At this point of my life I don't know how that struggle will play out.

***28) Which changes are essential to make as soon as possible? What must we all do?***

First, squeeze out the puss from the boils of corruption; then cauterize the wounds with the salve of honesty and decency, and allow the pure and healthy energy of the Ukrainian creative Soul to emerge triumphant. A bit of purple prose there, perhaps; but I like the puss analogy.

***29) When do you think Ukraine will be able to join the EU if that will ever happen? Would they both benefit from that?***

I have no idea; but I'm sure both would benefit.

***30) How big is your family?***

Besides my wife Sandy, there is one son, Rico, who works as an Associate Producer and writer for National Public Radio.

***31) Are there any hobby magazines in the USA? Are they much different from our magazine? (Our magazine tries to***

*remain comprehensive and cover very many different hobbies).*

I have, on occasion, thumbed through various hobby magazines in my country, but my impression is that they are not comprehensive at all. They seem narrowly focused on a specific hobby (“Wood Working?” “Penile Enhancement”) without any deeper resonances explored.

*32) What do you think about Ukrainian language? Could you distinguish it from the other Slavic languages?*

I really can't. But I was delighted with the musicality of the language.

*33) What do you want to wish yourself?*

A venue where I can see produced a retrospective of all 15 of my plays.

*34) When do you plan to visit Ukraine again?*

As soon as I am invited back.

*35) What do you want to wish our readers?*

A productive future, in which the flowers of your creative Ukrainian Souls can blossom —free from the corruption of a corrupt politics and free from mediocre outside influences. Oops! More purple prose? Hell -- I mean it.

#### EPILOGUE

As a matter of fact (see #34 above), I may be returning to Kirovograd in December 07 — to oversee a production of my play, IN THE VOODOO PARLOUR OF MARIE LAVEAU (see selected scenes from LAVEAU in “the plays” link). Pavlò and I are talking about it.

In the opening paragraph of Part 1 of my Ukraine odyssey, I said that the experience had changed my life. I think what I meant by that was that my getting so immersed in the reading/performance of MY CHEKHOV LIGHT to a Ukrainian

(mainly non-English speaking) audience—and moving them—had finally validated the technique I had been working on for years: Holographing The Playtext—a method of working through a text to get to build a performance. I will be posting excerpts from “Holographing The Playtext” in the near future. Stay tuned.