

THEATRE: MIKHAIL BULGAKOV'S MOLIÈRE

From Barrie to Kiev with love

Talk Is Free Theatre is taking its version of a famous Ukraine play to the homeland

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September 27, 2008

KIEV -- Mikhail Bulgakov's statue sits rather glumly, arms crossed, halfway down the Andriyivsky Descent, a winding cobblestone street that leads from the city's upper town to Podil, the vibrant district often described as "Kiev's Montmartre."

Bulgakov, the Kiev-born playwright, author and doctor best known for his novel *The Master and the Margarita*, had plenty of reason to be disconsolate during his lifetime when his satires were banned in the Soviet Union.

But the great writer's statue should no longer look so downcast. He sits outside his old home at No. 13, which is now the charming Bulgakov Museum, and across the street from him, behind street vendors selling traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirts, matryoshka dolls and Soviet and Nazi memorabilia, is the celebrated Kiev Drama Theatre on Podil, home to the Bulgakov International Art Festival.

The seventh edition of the festival begins on Monday in Kiev - and, for the first time, a Canadian company is taking part.

Talk Is Free Theatre (TIFT) from Barrie, Ont., is the only North American participant in this year's Bulgakov love-in. The company will be presenting excerpts of their English-language production of Bulgakov's early 1930s play *Molière, or League of Hypocrites*, directed by Aleksandar Lukac. The seven-year-old company was invited by Kiev Drama Theatre on Podil's artistic director Vitaly Malakhov just a few months ago.

"I just got an e-mail out of the blue that I thought was a scam at first," says Arkady Spivak, TIFT's artistic producer. "They were wondering if our 2005 production was still running."

In continental Europe, theatre companies will often run the same shows in repertoire for years, or even decades, as opposed to weeks or months as in North

America. "I remembered from my childhood days that this is how they do things there," says Spivak, who was born in Moscow and immigrated to Canada with his mother in 1990. "And it's all done at the last minute."

This year's festival's theme is "Poet and Government," a topic that *Molière* tackles head on.

The play imagines the relationship between France's most famous playwright and Louis XIV and the battle they found over Molière's religious satire *Tartuffe*. But *Molière* (sometimes performed under the title *The Cabal of Hypocrites*) is usually interpreted as really being about Bulgakov's complex relationship with Stalin.

Bulgakov had early success under Stalin. In 1928, he had three plays running in Moscow at three different theatres; one of them, *The Day of the Turbins*, his adaptation of his first novel *The White Guard*, was hailed as "a new *Seagull*" - a flattering reference to play by Anton Chekhov, another doctor-turned-writer from Ukraine.

At the time, Stalin was one of Bulgakov's biggest fans. The dictator supposedly saw *Day of the Turbins* at least 15 times.

But soon, Bulgakov was tagged as a subversive and his plays were censored, banned or, in the case of *Molière*, relegated to a peculiar type of Stalinist "development hell." The Moscow Art Theatre, under the directorship of the famed Constantin Stanislavski, rehearsed *Molière* for four years, but it was then performed in public only a handful of times.

"At least *Tartuffe* ran 300 performances before it was banned - but Bulgakov's play about *Tartuffe* only ran seven times," says Spivak.

While Bulgakov managed to escape the more gruesome fates of other writers deemed to be anti-Soviet in the Gulag, he descended into fits of paranoia while writing in secret and died in 1940. "He didn't perish in concentration camps," says Spivak, "but he was mortally wounded psychologically."

Born in Kiev to Russian parents in 1891, Bulgakov may be the city's most internationally famous literary son, but he is not universally loved in the independent Ukraine. He immortalized the streets and squares of the Ukrainian capital during the Russian civil war in his novel *The White Guard*, but he wrote in Russian and did not hold particularly sympathetic views towards the Ukrainian language or the idea of a Ukrainian republic.

Think of him as to Ukraine what Mordecai Richler is to Quebec and you get some idea of his iconoclastic status.

Malakhov, one of Ukraine's most famous directors and actors, created the festival dedicated to the writer seven years ago, modelling it after a festival in Seville, Spain, dedicated to Cervantes.

"Bulgakov is one of the world's most famous writers and he is a Kiev writer," says Malakhov, drinking tea in a café near the city's main drag, Kreschatik Street, his long grey hair pulled into a ponytail under a baseball cap. "I was surprised that no one had started the festival before us."

But is Bulgakhov, who spent most of his career in Moscow, to be celebrated as a Ukrainian writer or a Russian writer? It's a question that has re-emerged since Ukraine's independence, and one furiously debated among Malakhov's theatrical colleagues.

Many famous writers typically thought of as Russian were born in what is now Ukraine, including Gogol and Chekhov, and many Ukrainian nationalists are trying to reclaim them, especially in light of renewed tensions between Russia and its neighbours.

"The problem is that before 1990 we were all thought of as Russian," says Malakhov, who speaks the colloquial mix of Ukrainian and Russian heard throughout Kiev known as *surzhik*. (It's like the Chiac spoken in New Brunswick, or Frenghish spoken in Montreal.) In a recent poll of Russians, Bulgakov was named the country's second best writer, while in similar poll of Ukrainians, he was named the third greatest Ukrainian writer. For Malakhov, however, Bulgakov's identity is simple: "He is a Kievide."

Igor Volkov, an actor being directed by Malakhov in the festival, prefers to emphasize Bulgakov's universality over such disputes.

"Bulgakov's work unites people from different parts of the world and people with different political views," Volkov says.

Indeed, in addition to Canadians, Scandinavians and Brits, the three-day Bulgakov festival is bringing in artists from Georgia and Russia, two countries that just fought a war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia. (In fact, there is even an actor from South Ossetia taking part in the festival.) The relationship between "the poet and the government" has changed a great deal since the Soviet days in

Ukraine and since 2004's Orange Revolution. But are things really better for artists? "In principle, yes," says Malakhov, using a popular equivocal Ukrainian expression.

While Ukraine is now a country free of censorship, the arts are not funded as much as they were in Soviet days. "Ukrainian theatre is much more democratic than that in Russia or Belarus," explains Malakhov.

"But in Russia, the government gives much more to the theatre, because of the propaganda it espouses."

Malakhov can't complain too much about funding: The Ukrainian government is sponsoring his Bulgakov festival. And a brand-new theatre is being built in Podil to house his theatre company and allow for the festival to expand. It's the first new theatre to be built in Kiev in 100 years.

But Malakhov fears playwrights, directors and actors aren't as motivated as they were in Soviet times.

Would Bulgakov have written *Molière* without his battles with Stalin? *The Master and the Margarita*, a Soviet satire about Satan visiting Moscow that inspired the Rolling Stones song *Sympathy for the Devil*, likely wouldn't have been penned in a democratic country.

"Oppression gives the artists energy because usually artists like to fight for their integrity," Malakhov says.

Bulgakov's plays resonate differently in Canada, where the population hasn't experienced the same kind of censorship or oppression - which may account for why his satirical plays aren't as often produced as those by earlier Russian-language writers like Chekhov, Gogol or Turgenev. "We didn't have to live through any of the stuff that informed *Molière* [the play]," Spivak says.

Nonetheless, Spivak is looking forward to bringing his company's English-language Canadian spin on one of Bulgakov's plays to the author's place of birth. "It's kind of a daring act to take their own playwright to them," he says. "It's almost like I'm bringing them their own present. You know how sometimes you get a gift, forget who gave it to you, and then you re-gift it to them?"