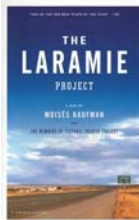


This is a short account of the Tolerance Theater travels around Russia and abroad. To begin with, just a few words about the actors and the project itself. The Tolerance Theater project is a civic initiative of a group of the Eurasian Undergraduate Program alumni, who decided to launch a theatrical project which would help to foster civic education, reduce intolerance in Russia, and raise public awareness of xenophobia, racism and extremism. As the means of influence we chose theater as one of the most expressive form of conveying messages to large audiences. The theatrical performance should always be followed by psychological training on related issues, since all of the “actors” are experience trainers/moderators. I’m calling ourselves actors, and we are actors, indeed, in the technical meaning of this word, but none of us has formal acting education or has ever gone to a theater school. Ultimately, we hoped to carry the emotional charge and not to claim being professionals. As it turned out, the job we did rewarded us with magnificent reviews even from theater critics and directors.



The first play we decided to stage was *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman. **The play chronicles the life of the town of Laramie in the year after the murder of 21-year-old University of Wyoming student**, using eight actors to embody more than sixty different people in their own words- from rural ranchers to university professors. The result is a complex portrayal that dispels the simplistic media stereotypes and explores the depths to which humanity can sink and the heights of compassion of which humanity is capable. We had to translate the text from English into Russian, since there was not (and still is not) an official Russian translation of that play. Then, in early October 2004 we started rehearsals. That was a long but hilarious process, because the experience was new to us and we got a bang out of the stuff we were doing, both the actual line-readings and all the acting exercises we were doing regularly. What really complicated the situation is that half of the actors were from outside of Moscow and were students, so they had to come nearly every weekend, and that was an 8-hour one-way travel!!! Finally, we finished the rehearsal and after numerous major recombinations of the scenes and text, we were ready to present the product to broad publics. Our first play took place in Moscow on the stage of the Iris-Congress Hotel during a National Conference for Undergraduate Students. The performance was a success, and that was a carte blanche for us to go on various trips, because we got funding for travel expenses as a reward for the efforts we’d made.



Our travels encompass a vast part of Russia from Moscow to Vladivostok. To give you an idea what that means, just a quick fact: a direct flight from Moscow to Vladivostok (the most eastern city of Russia) takes 9 hours, and the time difference is 7 hours ☺ We went to such cities as Irkutsk, Orel, Ryazan, St. Petersburg, played 5 times in Moscow, and even went abroad. I would like to tell you a little bit about some of those trips.

No doubt, the most remarkable one was in Vladivostok, maybe because we were exhilarated by the sheer idea that we are going to



the ultimate East of the country, where none of us had been before. That was a 5-day trip, and besides two performances, which we gave in a city theater and a summer camp, we had outstanding opportunities to enjoy the city, magnificent fresh seafood, participate in the Chinese tea ceremony and go to one of the city's most famous bays, called Shamora, and the most daring even enjoyed swimming in the cool water of the Pacific Ocean.



Because of its proximity to China and Japan, the city is generously sprinkled with Chinese and Japanese characters, and the number of Chinese workers is overwhelming.



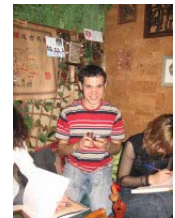
The Vladivostokans complain that those take away their job places and raise the unemployment level, but I have not met anyone who was willing to do the dirty work Chinese are happy to get for modest pay and not always with legal permission.

It takes only a night to get to China by train, and Russians do not need visas for short visits to China, so cheap (and not so cheap) products flood over the border into Russia not without help of entrepreneurs from both sides who make shopping trips there and back with enviable regularity, bringing all kinds of goods which overpopulate local markets, being in most part clothes and rare foods, such as teas or Chinese plum vodka. I walked into a tea shop in the center of Vladivostok and went away with a bunch of various sorts of tea. The most expensive one was *Luntsin* (1300 RUR per kilo, about \$45, that is not very expensive. But further west its price will grow at incredible rates, and in Moscow one will give \$70-100 for the same kind of tea): the first tea leaves which are picked in early March, when the tea trees only awake from their winter sleep. They are not rolled or fried – just dried as they are. The taste is mild and sweet; you would not



expect green tea to taste like that, and as most of genuine teas, it can be brewed up to 7-10 times, each time bringing a new note into its delicate flavor. I learnt about the intricacies of tea brewing during the tea ceremony we went to. The ceremony master performs complicated rituals with the pots and the cups, and then you should follow her

instructions on how to tumble one cup so that emitting a certain number of bubbles the beverage would flow gracefully into another, and then, having worked several passes in the air (each standing for some presumably old legend), you finally would get a chance to taste the desired liquid. That was quite an experience, and I am glad to note that at the end of the ceremony I reached the necessary condition, which is called “tea intoxication,” which is akin to alcoholic intoxication in the way you feel, but of course, it is only useful for your body because it provides relaxation and gives you strength to carry on.



Another peculiar thing about Vladivostok and neighboring regions is that nearly all the vehicles have a right steering-wheel, as in Japan, because it is much cheaper to buy Japanese cars than European or even Russian. Some time ago the government tried to ban right-hand steering-wheels, but the drivers went on strike, realizing into what expenses they would run into if they had to buy cars other than Japanese or remodeling the cars.

So, walking along the streets in Vladivostok is like being abroad, because you are so accustomed to seeing drivers on the left side, that it seems completely out of the way, if nearly everyone IS ONE THE RIGHT!!!

The trip to St. Petersburg was so special just because it is St. Petersburg! I love that city so much that I am willing to go there on every occasion, thank God, it is not very far from Moscow, and you can get there only in an hour by plane.



We were lucky enough to find a fairly priced three-room apartment in the very center of the city, only two buildings away from *the Hermitage*, one of the most famous Russian museums, formerly *the Winter Palace*, the last residence of the Russian tsars.



Unfortunately, the stage was not available for rehearsal right away, so we had to rehearse a little at the apartment before we headed out to the theater. The St. Petersburg office of American Councils did a good job at advertising the play, and we had a large and grateful audience of American scholars, students, and everybody who wanted to see the performance.



We had to leave the next day, but as good luck would have it, the flight was in the evening, so we had the whole day to enjoy the city and its boroughs. I went to Pushkin, a small town near St. Petersburg, formerly called *Tsarskoye Selo*, which is famous for two



reasons: it was one of the residences of Catherine II and the lyceum where the famous Russian poet Alexander Pushkin studied was located there. Even



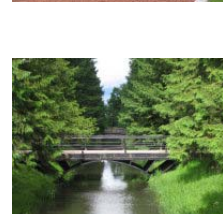
though the park and the palace were greatly damaged during the WW II, their splendor and beauty are stunningly magnificent and one is left speechless at



the sight of the architectural wonders which were left by the great masters of the past for the enjoyment of the following generations. I feel like I lack the necessary vocabulary to describe the gorgeousness of



the park, and the photos do not suffice, but that is all I have.



On the way to the airport, I managed to take a few pictures of St. Petersburg and buy some fresh bread and chocolates it is so famous for!



Our next challenges were the three performances in Moscow, which we had to give to the most demanding audiences of government officials and theater connoisseurs. Two of them took place in MHAT (the Smaller Art Academic Theater), one of the oldest and most famous theaters in Moscow, and the third at the Library of Foreign Literature. Our director was particularly nervous since most of the guests were his personal contacts, and the future of the project to a certain extent depended on their opinion about the play. You can be sure that we did our best and many people were leaving the hall with tears streaming down their cheeks: the highest appreciation an actor can get.



Soon after that we went on a trip to Lithuania to give two performances in a small and extremely hospitable town of Druskininkai, two hours away from Vilnius. I guess that welcoming Lithuanian land gave us extra strength and instilled a sense of security on the stage, because we did marvelously, even taking into consideration the fact that we had a new member in our team, since one of the actors left the troupe, having gone to a school



in the US. As a reward for great performances we got an excursion to Trakai (the ancient capital of Lithuania) and Vilnius. Unfortunately, we lost two hours because of a flat tyre, but still we had about an hour to walk around Trakai and the old city in Vilnius.



Right now, since nearly everybody has a job and cannot spend so much time on rehearsals and travel, we've agreed to perform only on weekend and holidays, but nobody really wanted to finish the project: so exciting and rewarding it was for all of us. In a recent talk with our director I learnt of prospective trips to Krasnoyarsk, Ryazan, and Poland, a tour around Europe in the summer of 2006, but plans are plans – Year One of the Tolerance Theater project is over!!!