Salome’s Dance and Herod’s Banquet in Russian Culture

On Tuesday, October 29, REEEC welcomed Dr. Rosina Neginsky, Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Illinois at Springfield, to campus as part of the Noontime Scholars Lecture series. Dr. Neginsky presented her new research on the myth of Salome in a lecture titled “Salome’s Dance and Herod’s Banquet in Russian Culture.” She began with an introduction to the biblical and historical origins of the Salome myth. She noted how few documentary sources actually mention Salome at all. While three New Testament Gospels discuss the death of John the Baptist (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), only the Gospels of Matthew and Mark describe Salome and her mother Herodias’ involvement in his death. The only historical source that refers to Salome is Josephus’ History of the Jews. The historical Salome lived an unremarkable life and married twice.

Dr. Neginsky then highlighted on the cultural context of the banquet. In ancient Roman times, the banquet had two parts. The first part was the meal, where women could participate. The second part, the entertainment, was forbidden to women, unless they were courtesans or prostitutes. The origin of the dancing girl Salome at Herod’s banquet was a combination of historical and dramatic events in the biblical account. There is no historical evidence of a dancing Salome. Rather, the dance served as a dramatic device, a typical feature of ancient storytelling. To effectively evangelize, the Gospel writers used all forms of narrative tradition, including dramatic devices.

Dr. Neginsky proceeded to discuss the religious imagery of Salome. Artwork portraying the girl began in the 4th century. It reflected how the Church Fathers used images of biblical women to minimize women’s role in social and political life. The Virgin Mary was the feminine ideal who represented purity, humility, and submissiveness. In contrast, Salome and Herodias did not fit the image of “good” women. They were from Eve’s lineage. A dancing Salome was threatening because she evoked pagan roots, and Byzantium’s mimes and circus. In a homily, St. Augustine described Salome as “completely mad or drunk in order to dance.” A demon has possessed her.

During the 6th century, the development of religious iconography intensified. Dr. Neginsky showed various images that drew on three major themes: Herod’s banquet, the beheading of John the Baptist, and Salome’s dance. She continued with showing how artists over the centuries portrayed Salome. For example, Titian’s Renaissance paintings depicted Salome as in love with John the Baptist. It included an image of cupid. During the 19th century, a time period when more women entered the workforce and perceived as a threat, there were 3000 literary and artistic works about Salome.

According to Dr. Neginsky, in Western European culture, the image of Salome was shaped and changed through the centuries. However, in Russia, the first use of Salome’s image did not occur until the Silver Age of the late 19th and early 20th century. Even that image was not original, but simply a dissemination of something from Western culture. In 1904, Oscar Wilde’s controversial play Salome was translated into Russian. Perceived as blasphemy, it was banned in England. The play was also forbidden in Russia, but to circumvent the ban, the title of Wilde’s play was changed to the Dance of the Seven Veils, the
setting was changed to Egypt, and the characters were renamed.

Another performance featuring Salome occurred in 1908. The title of the play was **Tsarevna**, the characters had different names, and there was no mention of John the Baptist. Yet, the play was still forbidden, the ruling coming two hours before its first performance. That same year, another scandalous performance of Salome involved the ballerina Ida Rubinstein dancing nude in the *Dance of the Seven Veils*. Additional performances occurred in 1917, when the Maly and Tairov Theater produced Salome.

Not only was Salome featured in Russian theater, but also in Russian literature. The poet Aleksandr Blok used Salome as a central figure in some of his poems. In “Venetsa” (“Venice”), he drew inspiration from a visit to Italy to depict Salome. Blok also asserts that the soul of a poet is like the head of John the Baptist, which the masses will behead. Another poet who wrote about Salome was Osip Mandelshtam. In “Salomenka” (1916), he blends the notion of a lovely Salome with a real-life woman he briefly loved. He plays on the idea of a “little straw” (what the title means in Russian) and describes the pain of unrequited love. Anna Akhmatova mentions the dancing femme fatale Salome in her poem “The Last Rose” (1962). Unfortunately, the image of Salome disappeared in Russia after the 1960s. Now, however, revived productions present her.

Dr. Neginsky’s lecture concluded with a reading of her own original poem about Salome and a question-and-answer session with the audience.

Stephanie Chung is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests are in Soviet literature and culture, Russian women’s writing, and Czech literature. She graduated with her B.A. in Plan II Honors, and Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies in 2007; and her M.A. in Slavic Languages and Literatures in 2009 from the University of Texas at Austin. She plans to write a dissertation on Soviet women’s memoirs, particularly focusing on the writer and translator Lilianna Lungina.