Degradation and Humiliation on the Kolyada Stage: Ekaterinburg Love Stories

On February 17, 2015, Dr. Valleri Robinson, Associate Professor of Theatre at the University of Illinois, presented her current project dedicated to the work of Nikolai Kolyada, a well-known Russian dramatist and stage director based in the city of Ekaterinburg. Prof. Robinson conducted her research, sponsored by a Fulbright Award, at the Kolyada Theatre from April through June 2014. She attended and closely studied rehearsals and 20 productions, and also interviewed Mr. Kolyada during this visit.

The talk opened with a vignette from Kolyada’s production of Gogol’s Marriage where, toward the end, the established hilarious tone abruptly disappears during the scene between the two servants, Dunyashka and Stepan. Suddenly, after their sappy and playful love union, the man repeatedly and with increasing aggression pushes away the woman, played by an actress in her 70s.

The exposed, aged female body adds to the shock. The intensity of the theatrical experience Kolyada delivers is such that the spectators may express their disgust and walk out of his performances, or stay and sit stunned till the end – sometimes turning into his devout fans.

A highly influential playwright and creator of the new drama of social conscience, Kolyada has always received either vocal praise or rejection from scholars and audiences. The dramatist explores such controversial topics as the life of social outcasts and prisoners, domestic violence, and homosexuality. Kolyada’s plays are full of obscenities and vulgarity. His characters consistently face humiliation and debasement as they endure verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. A recurring protagonist of Kolyada’s plays is a middle-aged woman who lives through the experiences of love and humiliation. Prof. Robinson looked at Kolyada’s representations of Liubov’ from The Cherry Orchard, Blanche from A Streetcar Named Desire, and SHE from Kolyada’s original play Nezhnost’ (Tenderness). In all three pieces, the director brings forward images of degraded women who are brutalized in modern cultures of disposability and waste.

Kolyada speaks about violence and dehumanization in human relations and institutional structures via a number of peculiar techniques. He incorporates water, mud, and various fluids into his characters’ interactions. His usual stage props are unsightly disposable objects: strips of paper, plastic cups, clothing, bedding, alcohol bottles, and children’s toys.

Prof. Robinson described Ekaterinburg as the symbolic locus from which Kolyada’s dramaturgy grows. As Russia’s fourth largest city, Ekaterinburg is a big mining, industrial, and scientific center with a vibrant artistic environment and its own distinct regional identity. The patchy cityscape, the aging historical quarters, the picturesque river, the littered boardwalk, the high-end stores, the numerous theatres and galleries, and the graffiti-covered residential buildings represent the different layers of Russian history. This local rootedness is apparently important to Kolyada because he never moved to Moscow or St. Petersburg, the historical hubs of Russian theatrical life. Prof. Robinson thinks that this local cultural fusion is in Kolyada’s plays, merging critique of an idealized Russian past with stories of a dark, domestic contemporary world.

In his production of The Cherry Orchard, for instance, the characters who wear crosses on their necks express the present-day authoritarian state. The post-Soviet, quietly bloodthirsty Lopakhin embodies the even worse future. The peasants build a cherry orchard out of wooden handrails, with the paper cups as cherry blossoms. Wearing
gaudy French couture and furs, Liubov’ Ranevskaya and Gaev drink and party excessively, ignoring the moderate Lopakhin, until Liubov’ finds her dead son Grisha’s small jacket and boots. In a poignant moment, she hides inside the wardrobe. Rather than a wasteful and childish woman, we see an injured mother traumatized by her son’s loss. In act III, Kolyada depicts her humiliation, brought on by the merciless Lopakhin, and her renewed trauma at the loss of the orchard and her identity.

Kolyada’s version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* takes the brutality and violence of the original to the extremes. Stanley Kowalski controls the environment physically, vocally, and sexually; he embodies oppressive masculine power. For example, he masturbates while talking to Blanche during their first meeting. In another scene, he slowly spits on her back. Trash covers the stage, and Blanche herself is turned into a piece of garbage that is disposed of and removed in the finale.

In Kolyada’s original play *Tenderness*, the climactic moment also features a representation of sexual violence against the female character SHE. HE forcefully removes her clothing and makes her stand against the wall. Then he begins soaking handfuls of toilet paper in a metal basin of water and flings them at her with increasing force. The visual, aural, and symbolic impact of these actions is possibly more powerful and unsettling than a mimetic rape scene could be. The whole story becomes a statement on the problem of domestic violence and crimes against women.

Kolyada’s performances of violence are at the core of his “traumatic” theatre. Their disturbing quality reveals the underside of the power dynamic between people. Kolyada blends artistic rendering of the darkest themes with harsh social commentary on the culture of dehumanization and forgetability which endorses absolute power.