

Zhitinkin's speech before the play *Dead Man's Bluff* by Mikhail Volokhov

We have no programmes, so I'll say a few words about the play before we start. You see how cold it feels in here - that suits our purpose, I mean the circumstances of the play. This is an experimental project and you understand of course that it couldn't be staged in a state theatre.

Still, it's not 'epatage' and we take it very seriously.

Mikhail Volokhov is a well-known and odious figure in theatrical circles.

Even in Soviet times we knew his texts.

But we only had photocopies of his plays and only theatre professionals had access to them.

As you know, at that time staging Volokhov's plays was impossible.

Our show is actually the first attempt to do this, although I know some experimental theatres use these texts.

First of all I should say that Mikhail Volokhov writes in the Russian obscene language we call 'mat' in Russian.

As far as I can see there's no children here tonight? Excellent.

This too is important. The language of the play IS NOT the language of the actors but the language of the characters.

What you will see today is a model of sorts. We all remember Stanislavsky's words about truth in life – in my opinion Volokhov realises this idea to the utmost degree.

You see it's impossible not to drink in a morgue, firstly because you risk getting frozen stiff.

Then you can't help using this kind of language if you work in a morgue, otherwise you get beaten up by your 'colleagues'. It's a means of survival in this profession.

To those of you who feel it's going too far and you don't feel like listening further, my advice is to endure it for 8-10 minutes and then, perhaps, you'll be intrigued by the story.

As long as you understand this is just a game, 'playing at stiffs' in thieves' jargon.

By the way, Volokhov is a Russian emigré and as far as I know he's now thinking of returning to Russia.

His leaving the country had nothing to do with his political views, it was for family reasons: he just married a Frenchwoman.

And perhaps his writing is a sort of nostalgia, a farewell to that phenomenon of our RUSSIAN HISTORY that I call the Phenomenon of Soviet Idiocy.

We keep asking ourselves: should we continue performing this play? Considering recent events and the overall situation in the country, we think we should.

When we produced the play abroad, in Paris, the emigrés who came to see it sought an answer to the question: was leaving Russia the right thing to do? Some think that it was the correct decision, others are still in two minds.

But we all tend to forget the past we shared too soon. Whatever attitude we have to the time we are living in now, whether we are severely critical or feel we are living in some black hole, we must NOT forget HOW we used to live.

That's why for us this play is like a baguette on which we spread the layers of life.

This is our recent past and it's hard to perform it as a piece of theatre.

Theatre has its own laws of art and analysis. We have no intention of changing anything, we leave everything as it was:

the face value of the rouble, acronyms like the KGB and the USSR which no longer exist.

I usually give this example: at Sotheby's and Christie's works of social realism are in great demand. Is it because of their artistic value? Nothing of the kind, most of them don't have any. The reason is that this is already HISTORY, part of the Soviet era that is gone forever.

And we thought we could do the same in the theatre: let the stage remind us that such history must never be repeated.

The jargon the whole play is built on brick by brick is a theatrical experiment.

There was a very amusing scene when we produced the play in Paris, not with Bernard Sobel, but at the Sorbonne, INALCO. The senior students studying Russian were invited to check their knowledge of the language.

In short, for them the play came as a shock – they'd been learning Russian some 5 years and couldn't understand a word.

Another interesting story. To illustrate how I hate sanctimonious attitudes and hypocrisy when people ask me why I use this kind of language in the theatre.

Once they tried to show an excerpt on St Petersburg TV, but the bleep kept going like Morse code. Everybody asked each other what was happening.

Here's the last example of 'why I can't stand sanctimony'. It's about Misha's wife Chantal and what she once said about her husband's work. Now Chantal's left Moscow, she's in Germany, and Misha's been following her all over the world.

I should say that things have changed for Misha, too: his books have been published by the publishing houses Glagol and Magazin Iskusstva and his plays have been included ratings of the best European plays.

Dead Man's Bluff is his bestseller and has been produced in Paris, Switzerland and Germany. This play is well-known all over the world.

I believe that all his plays will be put on the stage one day.

But coming back to Chantal and the time she was still working at the Embassy in Moscow while her husband was living in Paris (a strange couple: the French wife in Russia and her Russian husband living in Paris).

Well, one day she called Misha and told him: 'I want to congratulate you - you're a classic writer already.'

When a wife says that to her husband it must be very pleasant, I can imagine how Misha felt at that moment.

And when like a true artist he naively asked her why, Chantal replied in all sincerity: 'Misha, every morning I go to the market and people quote you all the time.'

And that is really true. No other country but Russia has so many dictionaries of jargon, Slavists will confirm this and it's probably why we stay here.

The Russians have unequalled talent in this respect.

A new dictionary of Moscow argot recently appeared and I can tell you it's nothing less than poetry.

Last but not least I want to introduce the actors: without them it would all be impossible.

This is not a joke, I'm serious.

The actors are professionals, among the best representatives of the current generation of thirty-year-olds.

Arkady's part is played by an actor who made a brilliant debut in the film *Menya Zovut Arlekin* (My Name is Harlequin)

and acted in many films: *Fan*, *Dirty Thing*, *Serious Game*, *Labyrinth*.

Then he began making films himself (*Dear Hap*, *The Time of Your Life* based on Saroyan's novel).

Recently he was elected Secretary of the Union of Cinematographers. And now he ends up in the morgue.

Meet Oleg Fomin.

In the role of Felix you see an actor who is already quite well-known and many of you will recognise him.

This is an actor who's very dear to me, who participated in several of my projects.

Today he comes into your homes every evening in the Mysteries of St Petersburg serial.

His other films I can name are Deserter, The Psycho and the Trifler. At Lenkom he plays so many parts it's easier to say what he doesn't appear in.

In short, Sergei Chonishvili as Felix.

As usual, I wish the actors good luck...

I'll keep my fingers crossed for you. Let's begin.

Andre Zhitinkin