

Brusilovsky on Mikhail Volokhov's play 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami'

Mikhail Volokhov's play 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' is an extremely important philosophical study of the problems posed by our modern world.

Volokhov's drama has become a serious dramatic exploration of all the harrowing issues that confront mankind today, and in this play Volokhov touches on a serious and extremely important problem – our loss in the modern world of extremely important fundamental human qualities such as tenderness, love, personal relations, friendship and marriage. The modern world is losing values that were an integral part of our culture from time immemorial, losing them forever as the new century brings us increasingly uncompromising modes of existence that hold no place for these fundamental human characteristics.

When I stop to reflect and read the text carefully, in my opinion the two heroines of this play do not represent any particular age group, or even gender. In fact these are human beings that lament and howl at the sense that we are all godforsaken in a world where there is no room for love, in which love is subject to an extraordinary attack from universal evil, universal inflexibility, terrorism, war, moral degradation, drug addiction, etc. etc.

Unfortunately this is a very long list. Consequently the two heroines try throughout the play to embrace this problem of the abandonment of Life in a world that has become empty for them from all angles, as if feeling for an answer.

That is why I say their gender and even their age are immaterial. Actually the heroines could be anyone from adolescents to grown-up women, men or women of an indeterminate age, so to speak. As for their gender, the fact that they are lesbians is not important. Moreover, this is Volokhov's familiar, habitual game with concepts that seem shocking at first but only indicate the theme. Volokhov delineates a kind of lacuna, an empty place in which, you might say, the story unfolds. Of course the male sex also find themselves in this godforsaken state, except that they lack the deep-seated sensoria, the apparatus to tune into and measure the quality and degree of their downfall into the inhuman abyss of finer human feelings. In this instance women are better suited, although if it is possible to dig deep into their souls, men too may comprehend and feel the same things in the depths of their subconscious.

Throughout the drama the action is an attempt to organize an oasis of feelings, an oasis of resources that are slipping away and vanishing, sucked down a gigantic funnel like sand in an hourglass. We should use this play to help us seize and hold on to disappearing feelings that give life to the biological form of love and human attraction. Any staging of the play must also correspond to the gigantic theme posited by Volokhov. That is, it should be constructed like the greatest sublime tragedies and comparable with Ancient Greek tragedy or the elevated passion of the Japanese theatrical tradition Noh. For this purpose music must also be used. Clearly rhythmical tom-toms should sound offstage. No musical phrases should intersperse with the melancholy wailing of the Japanese

samisen or zither. This would create the pulsation of 'qi' energy, as the pulsation of nerve endings that prowl throughout the play, creating the aura of these sensoria.

It is also important that the heroines should not touch one another. Any trait that would reduce the play to everyday life will destroy the central idea of Volokhov's play, smash it to smithereens.

The dialogues must sound like an internal conversation enunciated inside a vacuous balloon. And the heroines should not even talk to one another – in principal they should not even speak these words. Perhaps this is contact between their souls. A kind of therapeutic session. A flow of pulsations between finer feelings almost imperceptible at a verbal level. Consequently there should be no touching. Not to speak of embraces or anything that can be viewed as a preliminary to sex in one way or another. And even stage make-up or any kind of costume will distract us from the theme of the play. There could be two large inflated sexual symbols on the stage – circles compressed at the top, maybe even illuminated (with light bulbs or filaments inside) and the women, who could rock to and fro on swings as they speak their monologues, would climb through these and so on – any number of flexible devices could convey this rich symbolism. Nothing else should be on the stage. Nothing in the way of chairs or table, bicycles or anything else. Clothing worn by the characters should also be minimal, certainly not a bikini of any kind. The costumes should be made of very fine flyaway material that flows around them without hiding anything, and nothing should be tight-fitting. They should simply give the impression of two clouds, nebulous, or rather astral constellations.

The metaphorical basis of the play should be understood in the broadest possible sense, for it is extremely important that the audience focuses on the text from the very first instant, from the first word that is spoken. Here the text is of prime importance. Everything else is the plastic arrangement of this text. And the plastic arrangement should not illustrate the text, but symbolize man's forced separation from the image and likeness of God. If we were speaking of religion this would be man forsaken by God, the consequence of that separation and indeed the destruction of fundamental human relations. I believe that this play is quite simply a revolutionary disclosure, a breakthrough into the dimension of the soul that usually concerns Volokhov.

The text must be enunciated in a manner unlike any dramatic mode we are used to, outside of illustratively naturalistic forms, and certainly without 'feeling the part' or giving the heroines any specific characteristics. This is not required, and the names of the characters, their age and so on should not be of any interest to the audience.

You might think the result would be a rather vacuous production. On the contrary. We will observe with heightened interest the very things that elevate and inspire us.

Text should be spoken very fast in machine-gun bursts that alternate with pauses, seemingly endless pauses.

The heroines do not converse in the usual sense of the word. Everything they do and their contact with one another is the life of the Soul, the pain of the Soul and the wail of the Soul. Loneliness, separation and the inanity of life in this scorched desert of the Soul. All this together should make the play interesting and thrilling.

Familiarity with the drama of Beckett and Ionesco prompts me to say that Volokhov has crossed the threshold of abstract puppetry in the Theatre of the Absurd – Volokhov's drama belongs to the third millennium. Shutting it away in the archives of the mid-twentieth century is a big mistake – the world has been transformed since then, the human soul and the nature of human relations have undergone colossal cataclysms that destroyed much that was still present when Beckett, Ionesco and many others were writing.

In fact Beckett and Ionesco's plays are, strange to say, very comfortable pieces written in a robust bourgeois world for a robust and prosperous bourgeois world, where everything is well ordered, where the mechanism of social relations still works and precisely because of that they are quirky, amusing, interesting, etc. But for our unrepentant Russian world their drama is simply child's play. Through a gesture of penance in his powerful dramas Volokhov has progressed much deeper and further, and his drama should not under any circumstances be styled like the Western Theatre of the Absurd.

With regard to great theatre and great plays of bygone years from dramatists such as Shakespeare, Racine and Boileau, undoubtedly the great dramaturgic journey traversed by mankind in the work of Volokhov exists as a perception of this journey.

Volokhov's 'Tchikatilo's Calvary' contains echoes of all the masterpieces of world drama from the Greeks to modern times.

Anatoly BRUSILOVSKY

The play 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' continues the tradition of classical decadence. Not the genre to which decadence has been reduced by contemporary Russian writing, but traditional, classical, European decadence. Nobody writes like that now. All modern dramatists are influenced by Chekhov. The influence is subconscious, for they see decadence in his work as a branch of Romantic Symbolism. Because Chekhov himself is like Maeterlinck in translation.

Hard times demand romanticism. Right now the Romantic Symbolism of Maeterlinck's style is very modern and up-to-date. And Theatre demands such styles as part of its essential and universal traditions. But instead of directors turning to Chekhov once again, they should instead turn to plays such as 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami'. And approach them on a conscious level, selecting deep-reaching dramas like this with a virginal purity of genre. Because Chekhov no longer provides 'up-to-date romanticism', and accordingly no longer allows the Theatre to perform its sacred, cathartic and purifying function. Time passes and we have to write plays of classical quality taken from real life.

Because Chekhov wrote about his own era and however you look at it, Chekhov remains Chekhov. Why is Chekhov still staged? Because there is nothing else.

Now, for the first time, an alternative to Chekhov has appeared – in Volokhov's play 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami'. This is not an alternative because it somehow replaces Chekhov, but a first-class drama instead of second-rate goods.

As compared with his previous plays, here Volokhov rises to the heights, touching upon the mystical, sacral, crystalline-poetic essence of this world, while remaining true to himself as a shocking and Fateful writer.

Romanticism always takes the female gender. Now the Reality of the Human World has moved on to the Zeitgeist of femininity and the female perception of life. The world is tired of the coarse, violent, male dictatorship.

In this Volokhov play we are captivated by two women who express the very essence of life in a way reminiscent of Maeterlinck.

It is not important who acts in this play (men or women), since the characters – global beings – will nevertheless personify the women that ennoble us. This ennobling romantic Maeterlinckian female quality makes Volokhov's play 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' an extraordinary phenomenon.

Igor DUDINSKY

Slava Zaitsev on Mikhail Volokhov's plays (from a TV interview)

-What inspired you to contribute to the design of scandalous playwright Mikhail Volokhov's avant-garde play 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami'?

Slava ZAITSEV. First of all I find Mikhail Volokhov an interesting personality. I had the opportunity to meet and talk with him at the opening of my exhibition. I was intrigued by him and saw that he is a very tactful person, not at all like a scandalous writer. And as I learned later, Volokhov also acts and directs stage productions and films based on his own plays. I really liked his entirely one-man film 'Tchikatilo's Calvary', which was shown at a recent Moscow film festival and caused a sensation at the Nice Festival of Modern Art. After seeing productions in which Volokhov himself took an acting role I became even more interested in his original writing.

Thus my acquaintance with the author and his work motivated me to take part in Volokhov's new project, 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami'. I saw that he is a really extraordinary man who has a quite different way of thinking from most of us. And above all he takes the risk of being misunderstood, despised and humiliated, since he stubbornly insists on the right to his own view of life. Such a unique sense of individuality always attracts me to a person and inspires me with notions of an interesting joint project. When I read his play 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' I was a little surprised – why 'roaring like a tsunami'? But later when we began work I was engrossed by the theme, found it even more intriguing. To begin with the text sweeps you off your feet – his frankness and undisguised defenselessness. This is extremely exciting but also a great strain, and you have the desire to create something equally original and new on the

given theme. I have never worked on such a production before. Creating the costumes was very difficult because I didn't know director Mikhail Salov's initial concept, and he himself is a highly creative man with vacillating and changeable ideas, which is most important. When the director has precise and uncompromising ideas it is usually easy to work together. But this was a very impressionable person with a sensitive disposition and I was deeply interested in every new proposal he made.

It was a pleasure to talk to him, and as a result I could stand up for my own concept of the production. This process took a while, since Salov himself is an excellent actor with a fine understanding of the actor's craft. Of course I found his individuality remarkable – he is such an exceptional person, not-made-by-human-hands, as they say. He had already staged Mikhail Volokhov's play 'Paris Bound'. An absolutely unique performance from Mikhail Salov as both actor and director. In the end the tactful and delicate Misha Volokhov brought our discussions to a satisfactory conclusion, and I think the production was a success. Of course the costumes for 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' were unusual for me, especially with a deadline looming. But it was wonderful that I had to design and cut everything out myself. What an intoxicating maneuver on the part of Mikhail Volokhov – only introducing me to the director after I had begun making costumes for the play.

When I attended the premiere I roared with laughter. I was sitting next to Irina Khakamada and we were enraptured by the superb text and the acting. To begin with Maria Runa and Olesya Edelweis seemed too reserved, but during rehearsals with Mikhail Salov their inner tension melted away. They are actresses, after all, obliged to perform whatever the dramatist and director of the play have contrived. And undoubtedly the revelations they consequently allowed themselves onstage were staggering. Those two actresses were delightful. Their acting was brilliant. I can say that for sure because I watched the play several times. And then again on the video. I repeat – I was delighted by their acting.

'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' is a very realistic text yet the atmosphere of the play is very unreal – that bothered me when I was reading it. Such an astral and timeless concept. Although the text is quite frank, nothing is concealed. Many people think and act like the characters in this play but are scared of revealing it to others. Here the naked truth of human nature is exposed. Something of which we are unaware, something we never encountered. But we are implicated nevertheless, if we want to call ourselves human beings. And here Volokhov managed to create the marvelous aura of two very cruel women who are amazingly beautiful, but in that beauty there lurks a hidden demon. The dramatist and director show this with great skill.

A play of penance. These girls, the heroines of the play, open up in one another's presence with such celestial radiance yet say such ghastly things that the audience is appalled when they begin to imagine the extent of these crimes. Simply horrifying. But the characters recount everything with such ease, probably fearing the burden of truth that weighs down their conscience. They open up in

front of the public, before the auditorium. Verily these sinners are repenting on behalf of all of us. For their irony, sarcasm and pathos we feel a terrible pain.

Of course 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' is a very interesting play. And this production is on the one hand remarkably in tune with the times, but nevertheless demands completely different conditions, demands to be played with a different and more worthy stage set.

I would like to create an image of two cosmic women in bright clothing and incredibly bright bedclothes. When the truth about life is revealed by these splendid women surrounded by fitting stage décor it becomes even more terrifying.

-You said that in the context of world drama this is an innovative play. In what way?

Slava ZAITSEV. Above all the dramaturgy of 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' makes it an innovatory play. The text is very powerful. There are few authors worldwide who allow themselves to write such honest plays with such concentrated energy and outspoken candor. There are different degrees of truth, it can be veiled or mysterious. In this play the truth is shouted from the rooftops. But I think audiences are not ready to hear most of this. Not mature enough, yet. Many would like to see the action that takes place onstage, but for many it comes as a shock. Those who know Misha Volokhov already have an idea what they will see. They watch the play and listen to the dialogue with pleasure. Young people who came here with their girlfriends were obliged to leave when the girls were put off by words the heroines use. The young men wanted to watch, but the girls were very embarrassed. The audience has to be well prepared and very civilized as regards erudition and perception. It is extremely important that the play is timeless. A cosmic drama.

There is no calumny against Russia in Volokhov's dramas. On the contrary – they emphasize Russia's merits as a country capable of global cultural penance for the whole world, performed by her talented sons.

I have read all Mikhail Volokhov's plays. They really are extraordinarily interesting dramas, proving that highly talented people still live in Russia. Initially you may find the text of Volokhov's plays and the revelations they contain alarming. We are not used to seeing such words on paper. We use them among friends, when we are irritated or somebody is being especially annoying. I can say any word from the Russian lexicon of non-standard vocabulary. This is typical Russian language, but unfortunately most people are too hypocritical to admit that they use it for everyday conversation. However, careful perusal of Volokhov's plays reveals that this language is simply a form of expression, while the content is different and more profound. The profane form they take is only used to more fully and precisely depict modern man, who dresses up in fine clothes but is rotten at the core deep inside. You often see well-dressed men or women who suddenly release such a stream of expletives that the air turns blue. Such unexpected and inappropriate behavior is infuriating. But in Volokhov's plays

there is very exact analysis that gets to the root of a question or situation, and brilliantly modeled characters. There's poetry, too, everything you care to name.

After seeing one of Volokhov's plays you emerge from the theater not just feeling good, but in excellent spirits! You just watched a superb drama yet feel unnerved because it requires a re-evaluation of your own ideas. The play makes you stop and think, which is very important. You didn't just watch a show, have a bit of a laugh and walk out the door. No, the play forces you to think about a situation that surrounds us right here and now. All the more because you don't know the people around you, what is happening to them and to this world in which we must live by the rule of love, according to Volokhov. Well done, Volokhov. I fully support Volokhov.

In the play 'Lesbians Roaring Like A Tsunami' Volokhov has achieved a phenomenal dramatic reworking of the plastic arts (of roles, confrontations, conflict, the actors' movements, etc.) in a lyrical and extreme situation that occupies the narrow space of two female characters. He has written a 'philosophical pillar of fantastical drama' on a par with his best tragicomedies.

Valery IVANOV-TAGANSKY