NADEZHDA PTUSHKINA: A STAR OF RUSSIAN DRAMA AND THEATRE IN THE NEW MILLENIUM

Elisabeth T. Rich

During a recent trip to Russia, I visited the Leningrad-born playwright Nadezhda Ptushkina,[1] whom I first became acquainted with in 1997, at her Moscow apartment. I sat drinking coffee at the kitchen table, while Ptushkina, bent over the stove and a blender, made soup (a concoction of white wine, chicken broth, and onions), as she talked at length about her career and new developments in post-Soviet Russian theatre and drama.

At a glance, it became clear that Ptushkina's apartment is nothing less than a shrine to her two greatest passions: animals (in addition to a crow, she has two dogs named Dika and Tuzik and three cats named Maksa, Tuchka, and Kosoj, all of whom have free rein over her apartment) and Jane Austen (a newly translated complete collection of her works was on the bookshelves). "Jane Austen," Ptushkina told me, pointing at the collection, "is my favorite writer. She is able to reveal the most varied emotions in the most ordinary characters." But Ptushkina discovered Austen late in life; in fact, Ptushkina read Austen for the first time only in 1991, at the age of forty-two, when a friend loaned her a copy of *Gordost' i predubezhdeniya* (*Pride and Prejudice*) to read. In pre-perestroika days, Austen's books, while not officially banned, were not accessible to the Russian public—a fact Ptushkina attributes to Austen's investigation into "petty, private life." "Before perestroika you couldn't find her books," Ptushkina explained. "This was probably because the Soviet regime viewed all displays of private life and private feelings in a negative way. Instead, our priorities had to be ideological—a type of patriotism, as it were."

Since the mid-1970s, when she trained under the late director Oleg Yefremov at the Moscow Art Theatre's School-Studio, the extremely prolific Ptushkina has written some seventy plays,[2] although more than half of them still have not been produced. "I don't have an agent," she said, shrugging, "and I cannot be involved in the dissemination of these plays . . . I do not have the time." Typically, she writes comedies, farces, and melodramas, which include, among others, the two-act farce *Pizanskaya bashna* (*The Tower of Pisa*), the two-act comedy *Pri chuzhikh svechakh* (*By the Light of Others' Candles*) and *Prikhodi i uhodi* (*Come and Go*), the three-part vaudeville *Poka ona umirala* (*While She Was Dying*), and the two-part melodrama *Monument zhertvam* (*A Monument to Victims*). But it was with Mossovet's production of *Ovechka* (*The Small Sheep*), a drama that mixes eroticism with the biblical story of Jacob and Rachel, that Ptushkina skyrocketed to fame.[3] This play was deemed so scandalous when it

Nadezhda Ptushkina with her cat, Kosoj

The Small Sheep at the St. Petersburg State Dramatic Theatre

The Small Sheep at the St. Petersburg State Dramatic Theatre

premiered during the 1996-1997 theatrical season that some Russian critics argued that Ptushkina should be excommunicated by the Russian Orthodox Church. Since then, *The Small Sheep* has been translated into several languages beyond Russia's borders, including in France and Egypt, where, the playwright told me, it exists in Arabic as a popular *samizdat*, or underground, publication.[4]

Ptushkina, though, prefers for her plays not to be pigeonholed in one specific genre; in fact, she says, her favorite genre is when "there is no one genre." "I have always gravitated towards using many genres in one play," she explained. "But whereas before I would write the first act in one genre and the second act in another genre, I now understand that it is necessary to mix genres all the time." Here Ptushkina alluded to her recently finished *Vse, chto ya znaju ob etikh muzhchinakh i zhenshchinakh* (*Everything That I Know About These Men and Women*), a play that, by offering a compelling melange of farce, satire, melodrama, tragedy, and drama, bears her distinct authorial signature. Ptushkina also regards this "collision of genres" (her words) as the genre of the twenty-first century.

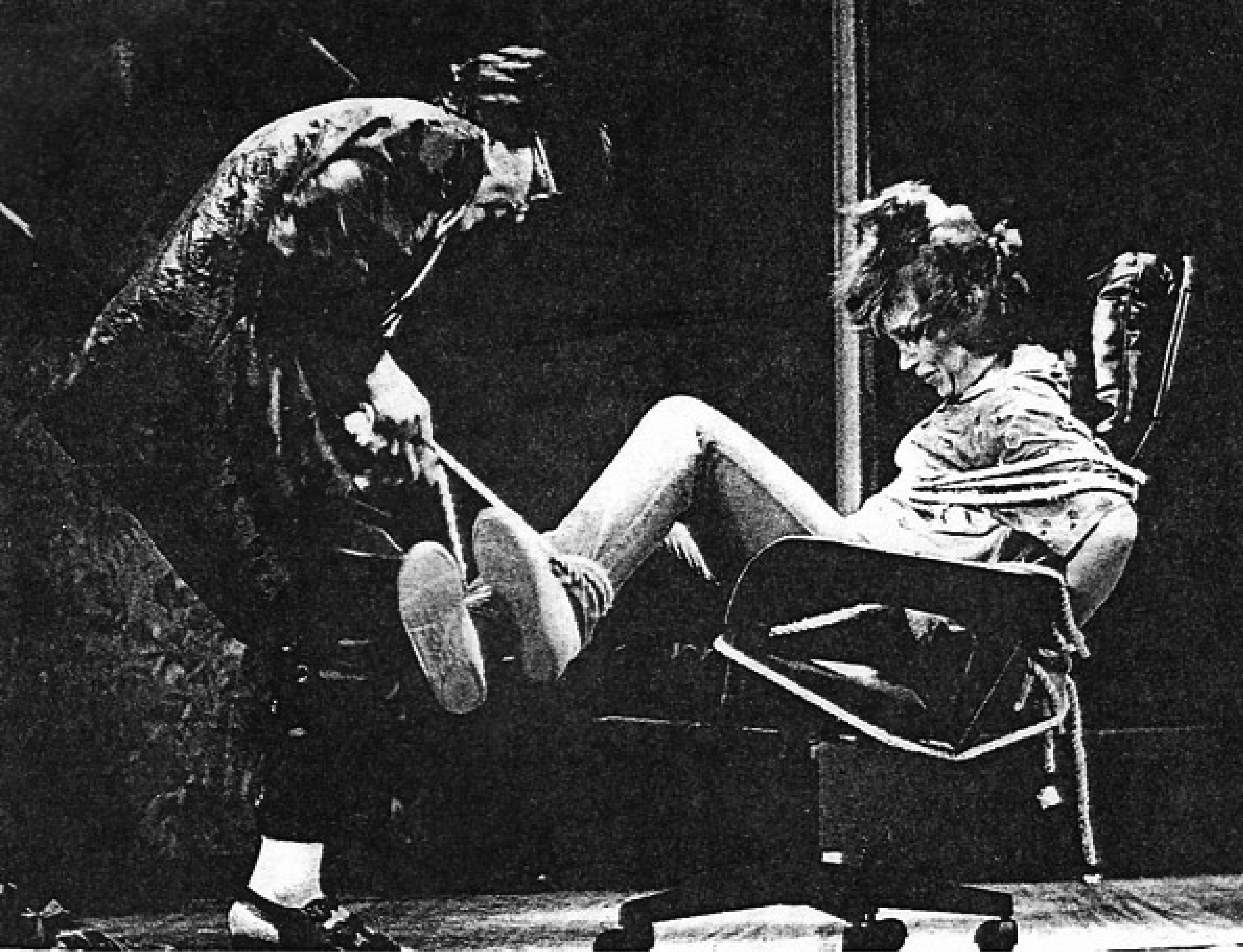
As for her thematic orientation, Ptushkina's primary concern is the human struggle to acquire personal dignity and to fight for oneself and one's own personal happiness, a theme that strikes a new chord for most Russians; it is also the credo by which Ptushkina lives both her professional and her private life. "In Russia," she explained, "you were supposed to fight for either an idea or an unfairly wronged social category of people, like the sick and the old. But to fight for yourself, this was always considered very unseemly. To have a feeling of personal dignity was always called "Ya," the last letter in the alphabet." Usually Ptushkina brings this theme to the forefront against the backdrop of love (or lack thereof), as happens in *Plachu vpered* (*I Pay in Advance*). In this two-act comedy, Olympiada (Lipa) Sidorova, a wealthy middle-aged woman, who seemingly lives by the philosophy that "money can buy anything," tries to buy the love of Mikhail Raspyatov, a theatre and film star with whom she has been in love for the better part of her adult life. Her proposition to Mikhail, which is degrading at best, goes roughly as follows: If he will divorce his present wife, the celebrated actress Polina Ametistova, and become her husband for a period of one year, she will pay him a million dollars "in advance." But in the play's final pages Lipa's dignity and self-respect are returned to her, as we learn how her love for Mikhail is in fact quite remarkable and uplifting—a love that was shining for her her entire life "like a guiding star."[5] Deciding early on that she had to become "a someone" to win his love, Lipa becomes, among other things, a "heroine" who spends three years in incarceration, an actress, the wife of a Russian millionaire and later the wife of a black African prince with seventeen wives, a "sister of charity" who

helps the fallen and downtrodden and about whom the Russian people even begin to create legends, the wife of an American millionaire with whom she lives for a while in the United States, and finally a patron of the arts. Buying Mikhail, she admits at the end, was only a final desperate act. "My love for you," she tells him, "gave me the entire world . . . It taught me to love life and to respect and value myself."[6] Still another example is Ptushkina's vaudeville *While She Was Dying*, where the heroine Tatyana, a sixty-year-old self-proclaimed "staraya deva" (old maid), preserves the feeling of personal dignity her entire life by refusing to marry without love, regarding loneliness as *dostoynie* ("more worthy"). "I didn't consent to marry without love at the age of twenty," she declares at one point, "and even more so at the age of sixty."[7]

Since the fifty-two-year-old Ptushkina made her debut on the Russian stage only in 1994, when her plays *Mazhor* (*Major Key*) and *Nenormal'naya* (*An Abnormal Woman*) were produced in St. Petersburg at the Eksperiment Theatre, she is generally considered a representative of the "young" post-Soviet generation of Russian dramatists. In fact, it was only in 1995—when her play *By the Light of Others' Candles* premiered in Moscow at the Stanislavsky Theatre—that Ptushkina turned full-time to what had previously been only a "hobby": playwriting.[8] Shortly after graduation from Moscow Art Theatre's School-Studio, Ptushkina was compelled to spend years at home caring for her two ailing parents. "In sum," she recalled, "I flew away from the theatrical world, and did not return there anymore." Years later, in the early 1990s, when business ventures in Russia were still in their infancy, she became the owner of a firm that set up cultural programs for private business enterprises, or *predpriyatiya*—work that entailed arranging excursions, trips abroad, and evenings at the theatre for their employees. Ptushkina, though, found it increasingly difficult to pursue this line of business, and at one point even resorted to selling cars. "I did not know the slightest thing about cars," she confessed. "I simply knew at what price to sell them."

But Ptushkina certainly does know a thing or two when it comes to drama. In fact, as a leading figure of post-Soviet Russian drama, who as recently as 2000 was awarded the prestigious literary prize Severnaya Pal'mira for her plays, she has indisputably helped to revitalize and broaden the parameters of contemporary Russian theatre and dramaturgy. Not only has Ptushkina introduced to the Russian public a new kind of comedy—a comedy that targets human foibles instead of a satire that ridicules the shortcomings of a regime—but she is also to be credited as one of the first playwrights in the post-Soviet era to write melodrama. "The Soviet regime did not tolerate melodrama," Ptushkina declared, "because melodrama dealt with private life;

By the Light of Others' Candles at the St. Peterburg Academic Theatre



By The Light of Others' Candles at the St. Peterburg Academic Theatre

at its foundation there was always a melodramatic story. Private life is always shown as the large plan, which means it acquires the character of priority. In totalitarian Russia, private life could never be a priority, and hence there was no melodrama as a genre."

Ptushkina also brings to the theatre a new mentality and mind-set. First, she openly call her plays "commercial," adhering to the tenet that "any kind of art is good except for boring art." "When a thousand people come [to a play] and then are bored," she insisted, "it's boorishness on the part of the dramatist . . . simply boorishness." By extension, she also views the stage not so much as a forum for fundamentally moral ideas, but as a *zrelishche* ("show") and place of entertainment—a viewpoint that directly contradicts and derails the former Soviet position that theatre in Russia was traditionally a "temple," or a place that provided only "spiritual nourishment."

"My plays are generally funny," she told me, "although I do pose serious questions in them. I think that serious questions are better suited for a philosophical treatise; theatre, it seems to me, should give its audience enjoyment . . . not vulgar entertainment like drinking beer, but entertainment of the kind like a Beethoven symphony." She then went on to say that it is not the theatre's task to educate its spectators, as it was once expected to do in Soviet Russia. "Let people be educated in school, with books and by life's experiences," she maintained. "I believe that it is necessary to give everyone who pays money whatever they want." This stance explains to a large extent why her plays have elicited controversial, if not downright hostile, reviews from snobbish Moscow critics who often dismiss comedy as a lowbrow genre. "One critic wrote that if you see the title of a play by Ptushkina on a billboard," she told me, "you would be wise not to go and see it. Another wrote that my success is not as harmless as it may seem to everyone, because in the shadow of my mediocrity all the best Russian dramaturgy has perished." Still, Ptushkina's plays are staged—all over Russia, in fact—which is certainly more than she could have hoped for in pre-perestroika days.[9] "Before perestroika," she reflected, "it simply didn't occur to me to show my plays to a director . . . My plays were not of use to the Communist regime, because they dwell on the private lives of individuals and there is no ideology in them anywhere. Therefore, I knew that they would never get past the censors."

In terms of her own creative development, Ptushkina admits to having been influenced largely by foreign writers and playwrights, usually American or English. At the top of the list is Neil Simon, to whom she claims to be indebted for the precision of his cues and for what she refers to as his "moral influence." "Simon," she told me, "taught me to understand that it is indecent to write a boring play, even if it is for only one second, and to write

dishonestly. Neither Americans nor Russians value him as they should . . . But I love him madly, especially his *Poslednij pylko vljublennyj* (*Last of the Red-Hot Lovers*), which I consider to be nothing less than a masterpiece. He is of course a great, gifted, dazzling playwright." Ptushkina is also indebted to Oscar Wilde for "the precision of an idea's expression" and "brilliant style," although she acknowledged that he is a "cold dramatist" who does not affect her on an emotional level; to Jane Austen for her "humanism," "rules about love," and "subtlety of psychology"; and finally to Agatha Christie for her methods in constructing a detective story. "Agatha Christie," she began, "has taught me how to write a detective story—to build a plot so that there are twists and turns in it, so that it is not boring." According to Ptushkina, there are no other present-day Russian dramatists who incorporate elements of detective story writing into their plays. "At the foundation of all of my plays," she told me, "is a line of intrigue; it's compulsory for me. This kind of writing takes no particular effort on my part; it is my nature and I simply cannot construct a play in a different way. I deceive people, I mislead them, and this is what makes my plays interesting for them."

As for the Russian classics like Anton Chekhov, Ptushkina has only the highest regard. "As a reader," she stated emphatically, "I adore Chekhov." In fact, when she was eighteen years old, she even wrote a play about him that was originally called *Belletrist*—a term that applies to fiction writers who earn a livelihood with their literary works; it was also the term that Chekhov applied to himself. "Although Chekhov's dramatic techniques are light-years from me," she told me, "his *Weltanschauung* is close to mine. I, too, believe that the writing profession is ordinary work and that the writer should not be singled out in society." Later she changed the title *Belletrist* to *I drognet konets tsepi* (*And the End of the Chain Is Shaking*), a quotation from Chekhov's famous short story "The Student" (1894) that, to quote Simon Karlinsky, argues for "the importance of religious traditions and religious experience for the continuation of civilization."[10] But Ptushkina admits that the new title has little to do with her play. "I simply took this title from faintheartedness. The word 'belletrist' seemed too boring and ineffective."

According to Ptushkina, *And the End of the Chain Is Shaking* is a "very bold play . . . the kind you can write only when you are eighteen." Isaak Levitan, the celebrated painter and one of Chekhov's closest personal friends during his university years, is a character in it, as are Lydia (Lika) Mizinova, a colleague of his sister's and casual friend, and Yevdokia (Dunya) Efros, the Jewish woman he had wanted to marry at twenty-six. "It took a certain boldness to portray real people," Ptushkina admitted, "but there were also drawbacks . . . These are real people—people who have their own biography

and a certain historic 'image'—and I felt certain constraints from this." The play, styled after a Chekhov play, also has a minimum of dramatic action.

As for its thematic content, *And the End of the Chain Is Shaking* is essentially about a writer's quest for truth and "the price he pays for his fame and recognition . . . The quest for ultimate truth carries a heavy price tag," she told me. "It is paid for with life, it is paid for with health—and it is here that we find the sacrifice of the Russian writer. Like Christ, a great artist must be a Messiah, and he cannot refuse the chalice." Ptushkina sets her play on April 21, 1890, the day of Chekhov's long and arduous journey to Sakhalin, one of Russia's most terrible penal settlements—a pilgrimage that, as Donald Rayfield so aptly puts it in his book *Understanding Chekhov*, he set out on in order "to get at the roots of the evil and misery which beset him [the artist] on earth."[11] In the play, as in real life, Chekhov was 33-years old at the time. His resolve to undertake this journey came at great personal sacrifice, though; Chekhov was already showing symptoms of tuberculosis, from which he would die fourteen years later at the age of forty-four, and this expedition undoubtedly exacerbated his condition. "When I talk about Chekhov," Ptushkina told me sadly, "I start to shiver. I feel a tremendous amount of pity for him. I can well imagine how he traveled in an unsprung covered wagon and then across perilous seas to reach Sakhalin, and what an ordeal it was for him." To date, *And the End of the Chain Is Shaking* still has not been produced, although theatres, including the Vakhtangov Theatre, have approached her about the possibility of staging it.

Although Ptushkina's proclivity for dramatic denouements, "turning points," and "direct action" are sharply at odds with Chekhov's indirect or concealed action, Ptushkina concedes that she has nonetheless been influenced by him in a significant way. "I can't say that I took one thing or another from Chekhov, but I think that he has influenced me with what I call 'pure sound.' There is no falseness in Chekhov . . . only pure rhythmical melody." With this in mind, Ptushkina looks for rhythm and melody when she has finished a play and is reading the final product. "There may be a superfluous letter somewhere in the play, such as the preposition *v* [which translates as "in" or "at"] being inserted in the wrong place. I can really agonize over the smallest preposition, and I can't rest until I've found the problem. This makes me angry with myself because I realize that no one will notice it; the actors will say it as it should be said. But this is the way I am. Sometimes I even let a play lie around for a year because I'm dissatisfied with the rhythm. It's like the princess on the pea: somewhere there is a pea in the pages of a play, which makes the entire play awkward."

A Monument to Victims at the St. Petersburg Academic Theatre

"When you remove a trifle that is disturbing a play," she continued, "it is analogous to painting a picture. Some great artist goes up to a picture and, with two strokes of his brush, the picture is completely transformed. It's the same thing with a play—when you take away a trifle, the entire play comes to life. I think that my awareness of rhythm and melody, and my efforts to exclude all false notes from my work, comes directly from Chekhov—and I really value this."

Ptushkina's creative talents, though, are by no means confined to playwriting. Since the age of eighteen, she has been writing *rasskazy*, or short stories, a few of which (i.e., "N.I.") have appeared in the Russian edition of *Cosmopolitan*, after being solicited by its editor. Her other long-term ambitions include writing a "novel about this epoch," now that the twentieth century has come to an end, and finishing a book that deals with the upbringing of children. "I started this book a long time ago," she told me, "when my children [a son and two daughters] were still growing up . . . I don't want to write a culinary book, although I really love to cook. I don't especially like raising children, but I still want to write a book about it." In 2001 Ptushkina also made her debut in Moscow as a professional director, staging her own play *Korova* (*A Cow*) at the Pushkin Theatre. Reflecting the author's profound devotion to animals, this play is a tragicomic love story in which the heroine, Katya, destroys herself and her sense of identity by taking back her unfaithful ex-husband Vadim and then allowing him to promptly dispatch her beloved cow to a sanatorium—a cow that had (as unbelievable as it might sound!) lived in the same apartment with her; in sum, she betrays the cow for a man who has betrayed her. Still other plays she has written and would like to direct for the stage include *I Pay in Advance* ("I want to stage it simply because I want to") and *By the Light of Others' Candles*, whose multiple productions have in her opinion failed. "I want to direct it not because it lies close to my soul," Ptushkina explained, "but because it is offensive to me that it is not properly illuminated onstage. There is more to it than how it is currently being produced." On the other hand, there are plays that she would never direct, such as *The Small Sheep*, which she believes has been fully "realized" in its numerous and varied stage productions, and *The Tower of Pisa*, which, under the direction of Boris Milgram, premiered in 1999 at the Stanislavsky Theatre. "I don't think anyone on earth could have done a better job staging [*The Tower of Pisa*] than Milgram, " she declared. "I don't want to direct it because I would do it worse."[12]

Ultimately, though, Ptushkina would prefer to make her mark as a director by producing plays other than her own. "Now the entire country summons me to direct my own plays," she told me. "Theatres offer me a

great deal of money to come and do this; that's interesting for them. But for me to go somewhere like Krasnoyarsk to sit and direct one of my own plays—I don't want to."

And how does Ptushkina see her place in the new millennium? Does she have, as her first name might suggest, "hope" for the coming years? "I have hope for myself," she spoke warmly, without the slightest hesitation. "In contrast to earlier times, when everything lay in the hands of censorship and the government, the situation today rests entirely on the bidding of each creative personality."

NOTES

[1] In post-Soviet Russia, as women are being offered more opportunities for professional advancement, female dramatists have come increasingly to the forefront. The more successful Russian women playwrights today include Elena Gremina, Ksenia Dragunskaya, Olga Mikhailova, Maria Arbatova, and Olga Mukhina, whose *Tanya-Tanya* has been running for more than five years.

[2] Although Ptushkina writes the first draft of a play quickly, she is extremely meticulous when it comes to editing and making revisions, sometimes doing as many as a dozen more drafts. "It is impossible for me," she told me in 1997, "to hand over a play [to a director or a theatre] in its first draft." Unfortunately, she added, this does not seem to be the case with other contemporary playwrights. "I see the gift of other dramatists at a glance, but I also see that their plays have not been brought to completion . . . This laziness is everywhere in dramaturgy and at the factory; this is the Soviet legacy."

[3] Ptushkina's *Ovechka* is based on the biblical account of Jacob at Paddanaram, where his uncle Laban lives and where he seeks refuge after tricking his father Isaac into giving him the blessing intended for Esau, his older twin brother. In addition to introducing into her play biblical subject matter, an area that had been off-limits to the Russian public during the Soviet era, Ptushkina makes ample use of another former Soviet taboo: eroticism. In the more intimate scenes between Jacob and Rachel, for example, the text is permeated with erotic language and sensual detail. It is hardly surprising, then, that *Ovechka* sparked such controversy and heated discussion when it first premiered in Moscow in 1996.

[4] *Ovechka* and other plays by Ptushkina have been translated into English by Michael M. Naydan, a professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Penn State University, and Slava Yastremski. These translations are included in a collection entitled *Rachel's Flute and In Somebody Else's Candlelight*, which has not yet appeared in print. *Rachel's Flute* (their translation of *Ovechka*) is also forthcoming in the journal *Glas*.

[5] Nadezhda Ptushkina, *Plachu vpered!*, in *Dramaturg* 8 (1997), 217.

[6] Ibid., 217.

[7] Nadezhda Ptushkina, *Ovechka i drugie p'esy* (Izdatel'stvo A i B, 1999), 222.

[8] Until 1993, Ptushkina disseminated her plays only to her immediate circle of acquaintances, relatives, and children.

[9] In Moscow, during the 1999-2000 theatrical season, *Rozhdestvenskie grezy* (*Christmas Dreams* [a retitling of Ptushkina's play *Poka ona umirala*]) was staged at the Moscow Chekhov Art Theater, *Pizanskaya bashnya* (*The Tower of Pisa*) at the Stanislavsky Theater, *Ovechka* (*The Small Sheep*) at the Art Club XXI, while the following year her *Korova* (*A Cow*) premiered at the Pushkin Theater. Ptushkina's plays have also been staged in the more remote regions of Russia, including, among others, Novosibirsk, Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, Novgorod, Rostov on the Don, Penza, Smolensk, and Omsk.

[10] Simon Karlinsky, *Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 13.

[11] Donald Rayfield, *Understanding Chekhov: A Critical Study of Chekhov's Prose and Drama* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 93.

[12] What makes these comments especially noteworthy is the fact that Milgram eliminated her finale, choosing instead to replace the text of her play with visual effects. "He still succeeded in creating a finale that adequately expressed what I intended," she told me. "I understood that for this director the text of this play's finale was not needed . . . that Milgram created visual effects that are much dearer to the theatre."