

## Interviews with Sergei Task and Mariia Ignatieva-Task

### Joseph Brandesky

Recent political and social changes in the former Soviet Union occurred and continue to occur with numbing rapidity. Before Russian theatre scholars had a chance to truly appreciate the changes wrought by Gorbachev's tentative, but deliberate steps toward democratization, the process was propelled into overdrive by an unsuccessful coup and its tumultuous aftermath. Sergei Task and Mariia Ignatieva-Task are Moscow natives whose careers began during the Soviet era. They have been working at the highest levels of professional and educational theaters during an extremely critical and confusing time. This interview examines some of the causes, as well as the effects of the recent changes on their careers and on Russian theater in general.

Sergei Task is a self-described creative writer whose poetry, short stories, screenplays, translations and plays have been published in Russia. *Pope Joan* (written in blank verse), was the only play included in a 1988 Russian anthology entitled *This Year's Poetry*. This edition was nicknamed "Gorby's Writers" because *glasnost* made the inclusion of previously forbidden works possible. Task received a masters degree in English language and literature from Moscow State University in 1974 and has since translated numerous works into Russian, ranging from fiction by Vonnegut, Salinger, and Orwell, to poetry by Keats, Shelley, and Longfellow. He has also translated plays by such diverse writers as Jean Anouilh, Neil Simon, Terence Rattigan, Christopher Hampton, Sam Shepard, Cyril Tourneur, John Ford, John Webster, and Thomas Middleton.

---

Joseph Brandesky is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at the Ohio State University, Lima Campus. He is currently arranging an exhibit of Boris Anisfeld's scene designs for display at the Chaliapin Museum in St. Petersburg.

Task's play, *More Than Life and More Than Death*, was staged in Moscow by the Jewish Chamber Musical Theater in 1985. Three of his translations were staged in Russia during 1991: *Victoriia!* (retitled from *A Bequest to the Nation*) by Terence Rattigan, Mayakovsky Theater, Moscow; *Les Liasons Dangereuses* by Christopher Hampton, Novyi Dramaticheskii Theater, Moscow; and, *True West* by Sam Shepard, Bolshoi Dramaticheskii Theater, St. Petersburg. Additionally, Task provided the libretto and lyrics for an adaptation of Orwell's *Animal Farm* called *Swineside Story* which was performed by the Sverdlovsk Musical Theater. Task is currently a Visiting Lecturer and Artist-in-Residence at The Ohio State University, Lima Campus. *Two Tyrants*, the first part of his trilogy entitled *Arabesques*, was performed in April 1992 at OSU-Lima.

Maria Ignatieva-Task received her Ph.D in Dramatic Theory and Criticism from the Moscow State Institute of Theater Art (GITIS) in 1988 and is currently on extended leave from her duties as an Assistant Professor at the Moscow Art Theater (MAT) School-Studio. For three years Ignatieva-Task worked in the Theater division of the Ministry of Culture. She has written extensively about theater and film in Russia and Eastern Europe and has completed the initial chapters for a book entitled *Russian Literature in Search of a Woman*. Ignatieva-Task gave a lecture on Russian drama at the Slavic Department of Harvard University in October 1989. Her commentaries on the plays *The Mandate* and *The Suicide* appeared in "Nikolai Erdman: Plays, Criticism, Poetry, and Letters," an anthology published in Moscow in 1990. Ignatieva-Task is also currently living in Lima.

#### *An Interview with Sergei Task*

*Brandesky:* Well Sergei, why don't we talk about your theatrical and educational background first. I understand that your parents came from a theatrical background.

*Task:* Well, there's not much to tell. My father is a theater director, my mother an actress. She was violently opposed to the idea of me following in their steps because she knew what happened backstage: the hustle, the conflicts. So I went to the Moscow State University, Philological faculty. I wrote poetry and started translating things and then, of course, I began writing for the theater.

*Brandesky:* Do you remember what you first wrote for the theater?

**Task:** One-act plays. And I translated plays and adapted some.

**Brandesky:** Concerning your translations, particularly Terence Rattigan's *A Bequest To the Nation* and Sam Shepard's *True West*, to what extent were they word-for-word translations, to what extent adaptations?

**Task:** With a good author, you want to be as accurate as possible. In the case of Shepard's *True West* I didn't change a word. Only when we speak of the art of translation, it is never word-for-word, especially when you are dealing with such a "playful" play as Neil Simon's *Fools*. Here, I am not talking about making cuts or of abridging the text, but of seeking linguistic equivalents. I had to find new puns, make some descriptions more clear for Moscow audiences. For almost five years the play was censored by the Ministry of Culture: they thought it was an impossible situation because what he seemed to be saying was that Russians are all fools. This was their ruling despite the fact that Simon set the play in the Ukraine before the Communist revolution. I particularly enjoyed this process because all of a sudden I found myself in a play with fools around me.

**Brandesky:** When was your translation of *Fools* staged?

**Task:** 1987, in Moscow, at the Theater of the Southwest. It was very inventive, the characters lived in cages . . . shop containers for vegetables, almost man-sized . . .

**Brandesky:** Like a crate?

**Task:** Yes, but you could see through them. The actors would get inside dressed in the most ridiculous fashion. It was hilariously absurd.

**Brandesky:** Your play *More Than Life and More Than Death* was performed in Moscow from 1985 to 87. What can you tell me about that production?

**Task:** Are you familiar with the term *datskii spektakl*? This is a joke. *Datskii spektakl* would be a play written for a specific date. It was a longstanding tradition, luckily no longer, that for some anniversary, like the October Revolution, dramatists would write *datskiye* plays and directors would stage *datskiye* spectacles, so that they would be allowed to do "something decent"—a Western play or Russian classics. It was a very careful arrangement, a classical play, a modern Soviet play, and maybe one foreign play. Referring to the

question, in 1985, it was the 40th anniversary of the war. We were hired, a colleague of mine and I, by the Jewish Chamber Musical Theater of Moscow to write a play. I researched some material about a Jewish ghetto in Belorussia during the war. It was about the hardships and feeble attempts to fight back made by this Jewish community. Speaking of the show, it was an interesting combination of dramatic action, dance, and songs.

*Brandesky:* A bit of a tragedy, perhaps a melodrama?

*Task:* We didn't moralize. It was melodramatic and rather touching.

*Brandesky:* I've read your poetry, short stories and a play and I've found quite a few religious allusions. If I dare pick up a theme from two points of discussion, I would say that a choice you make is to use religious allegory to illustrate political points.

*Task:* I can't really see how the two relate. But I am religiously conscientious and many plots of my plays, fiction and poetry are in some way based on the Bible and the New Testament and explore these myths . . .

*Brandesky:* Let me be more specific. In *Two Tyrants* you use the image of the Alpha and the Omega. Does this have anything to do with your views of the current political reality of your country or your personal life?

*Task:* Well, I think, or I prefer to think that I'm working on a plane other than immediate experience. In *Two Tyrants* the story has nothing to do with reality, but it does have certain ties with reality and it is just impossible not to have them. But I made it all up. I make a conscious effort to break away from what one reads in the newspaper.

*Brandesky:* We have been following the political changes in your country with great interest for a variety of reasons. What effect has this continuing upheaval had on you and your colleagues?

*Task:* Soviet literature today is at a standstill. It was and is believed that literature must reflect life and propagate ideas and this made our literature subservient . . . I think it still does.

*Brandesky:* In the past, party affiliation was necessary for writers to publish their work. With the recent demise of the party mechanism, have new groups appeared which now determine what works merit publication?

*Task:* I think it is a matter of cause and effect. When ideology is prevailing groups and cliques are bound to appear. As long as literature is perceived as a tool, as means to achieve certain goals which have nothing to do with artistic creation there will always be people who want to play it to the extremes. Also, there is a dangerous tendency: intelligent people have started overestimating "literary criticism" at the expense of creative writing. For example, poet A would appear in public and call poet B a rhymester and a political opportunist and then suggest that his (poet A's) poetry should be read. It's a familiar argument: "Lechmere prices are high—it's always better to shop at Fretter." So what we have in the former Soviet Union is a literary scene, but no literature (happy exceptions only confirming the rule). "Scribblers of the world, unite."

*Brandesky:* Sounds a bit like *Swineside Story*.

*Task:* I wanted to translate *Animal Farm* when I was a student, but the book was banned in our country. So when I finally did it, it was something of a feast. Then it occurred to me that it could be adapted for the theater and I discussed it with a friend, a well-known composer, Alexander Zhurbin. When we were working on the project it was not with the purpose to express our negative attitude towards Soviet reality—it would have been a simplification and unfair to the book. Newspapers can and are doing this. They have already trampled Stalinism and Leninism and their various successors. We regarded it as a universal situation of totalitarianism, regardless of where it happens or will happen. So we proceeded. I tried to stop myself every time I was tempted to pick up something that was marked "Soviet." I used some material though, like funny cliches which are typically Soviet, *colour local*, so to speak.

*Brandesky:* So you're saying that you prefer works with universal appeal?

*Task:* Yes. "Topical writing," especially "topical" political writing becomes *dated* before the date arrives.

*Brandesky:* Along those lines, I was going to ask you about Russian playwrights. Do you have any opinions about current trends in dramaturgy and which, if any, will have a lasting impact on Russian theater?

*Task:* Again, many Soviet playwrights knew well what was expected of them and what was allowed to be done, therefore their capacity was extremely narrowed. There were others like Alexander Galin. He chose the path of psychological theater with an emphasis on *byt*, on the experiences of everyday life. He tried to stay away from politics and this is one of the reasons his plays haven't died out quickly. Those who wrote "dated" plays exclusively are already forgotten. A good example here is Mikhail Shatrov. He has been making a fortune on royalties from a series of plays he wrote about Lenin, but he's suddenly found that no one is interested anymore. So here's a Soviet colossus on clay legs. Lastly, there is Edvard Radzinskii. In his best plays, *Conversations with Socrates* and *Theater in the Time of Nero and Seneca*, Radzinskii takes a parable and applies it as a translucent filter to "cover" immediate reality. Then, this reality suddenly becomes colorful, expressive, multi-dimensional. I think these three trends (psychological, political, and imaginative approaches) illustrate how Soviet theater worked and which direction it is headed.

*Brandesky:* Describe your views on life and art in fifty words or less.

*Task:* As we sit here and talk we stay within the boundaries of life. Nothing can make it a work of art—not even intelligent questions or answers. But let us imagine a situation: a successful reporter did an interview with Picasso who died that same day. Now the reporter is chattering with a famous writer and the latter has a fatal heart attack. The journalist, again, has come up with a sensational story, only later it is discovered that the writer has committed suicide by taking an overdose. Since this is a second accident, the reporter is charged with double murder. So we've made up a story and we've moved from "life" to "art." Art uses matter but its protagonist is spirit. And spirit always leaps borders and transcends time.

*An Interview with Mariia Ignatieva-Task*

*Brandesky:* Let's start with your education and training.

*Ignatieva-Task:* For American readers some things may seem very strange. Take for example, our educational system. I am a GITIS graduate, one of a class which began with fifteen students. We were all regularly checked for VD . . .

*Brandesky*: . . . student diseases . . .

*Ignatieva-Task*: Yes. And without a little paper [proof of the checkup] we could not begin a new semester. We were given an ultimatum: either we take a routine test or we are expelled. It was really an insult. On the other hand, no one bothered about your academic career. Even if you had bad marks they would allow you to continue your education. So after five years quite a few diplomas were given to illiterate theatre critics. Only three or four were up to it.

*Brandesky*: Out of the fifteen that began?

*Ignatieva-Task*: Yes. I don't know what the others are doing. One is working as an assistant on a documentary film. Some do shows, business, or nothing . . .

*Brandesky*: What about your mentors?

*Ignatieva-Task*: The most revered one was Pavel Markov, but he was very sick and he appeared in classes only three or four times. Still, his lectures are impossible to forget: he expressed himself clearly and had a real sense of perspective. He was very upset about the destruction of the theatrical system, which he had known so well. His death marked the end of an era. Another professor who we admired was Iulii Kagarlitsky. He is a distinguished specialist in 18th through 20th century French and English theater and literature. He was fired because his son became a notorious dissident. He had several heart attacks, too. When I went to see him at home to show him my course paper, I saw KGB agents in an entryway.

*Brandesky*: So he was under surveillance.

*Ignatieva-Task*: Yes. Generally speaking, there were two major schools of theater criticism—those of Pavel Markov and Boris Alpers. The two methodologies were at variance with each other. Of course, their followers went on criticizing the rival school. Alpers was a good theoretician. But, on the other hand, he generated major concepts and everything had to fit in. For example, he wrote about 19th century Russian actors while ignoring the techniques of acting. For him, intuition prevailed over skill.

*Brandesky:* This issue has come up in relation to Alpers work before. His book, *The Theater of Social Masks*, analyzes Meyerhold's productions by forcing them into pre-determined groups. It was an attempt to make a broad and diverse group of productions fit a rigid theoretical doctrine.

*Ignatieva-Task:* Markov, I think, was a deeper critic. Unlike Alpers, Markov's approach was very practical. He would sit at rehearsals and take notes. He elaborated on Pushkin's well-known statement that the public educates dramatic talent. Markov went on to explain how it happens.

*Brandesky:* Can you think of an example he used to illustrate this principle?

*Ignatieva-Task:* The Alexandrinsky Theater was located in St. Petersburg, where the emperor's family resided and high society was the dominant force. This affected the technique of all the actors, specifically of the leading actor, [Vasily A.] Karatygin. And of course the style of the performances, the themes of the plays were affected by the court. Karatygin tried to copy the emperor . . .

*Brandesky:* . . . his decorum . . .

*Ignatieva-Task:* Yes. Meanwhile, Moscow was the city of government officials, students, and was more democratic. This, again, affected the theatre to a great extent. For example, [Pavel S.] Mochalov, who was the leading actor at the Maly Theater, would bring tears to the public's eyes, because he would do what the public expected from him . . . yet he failed on the stage of the Alexandrinsky Theatre. Markov is also credited for his explications of Gogol's ideas about theatre reform; specifically his view of the theatre as a harmonious entity: a place where the director is like the conductor of a symphony who orchestrates a work. Markov traced the impact of Gogol's ideas on Russian theatre to the first decade of this century. He also wrote the most enlightening articles about Meyerhold, Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov and mind you, he wasn't a devotee of any one of these directors. He wrote about different trends and personalities. This empowered him to be objective. It was important for him to regard an actor's techniques in perspective. For instance, [Vera F.] Komissarzhevskaya first appeared in vaudeville and comedies, and then she became a lyrical actress. Markov viewed the theater as being in constant flux. Thus, after 1910 the Moscow Art Theater felt a need for smaller stages, to move closer to the audiences. This situation repeated itself in the sixties when the *Sovremennik* Theater emerged as a legitimate child of



the Moscow Art Theater. It was a reaction against pomposity and conventionality. The new aesthetics practiced by this group were collectively referred to as the "poor theatre." Years after, Oleg Efremov, who had founded the *Sovremennik*, returned to his alma mater, together with his best actors, to revive the MAT. Some called it a betrayal, others regarded it more as a feat . . . a blood transfusion. Efremov adapted his aesthetics to a big stage . . .

*Brandesky*: Successfully?

*Ignatieva-Task*: More or less. He directed all the Chekhov plays, and he developed a pleiad of new talented actors . . . who eventually left him to work in a studio [*Chelovek*] of their own. It was June, 1986 in Leningrad. Efremov was crying: "My students are leaving me." It was tough for him. But after Studio *Chelovek* collapsed, his students went back to the MAT. It was the return of the prodigal children.

*Brandesky*: Yes, I sensed that. My final question has to do with your dissertation, "Grotesque and Eccentrics in the Russian Theater" (of the 20th century). The word grotesque poses difficulties because of the numerous imprecise connotations which are commonly associated with it. Do you have a clear definition for this term?

*Ignatieva-Task*: It is a style which combines opposites: comedy and drama, tragedy and farce . . . which makes grotesque an oxymoron of sorts. Another important aspect of this term is the old question whether grotesque exists in life or whether it is a fabrication of art. Hugo and Stanislavsky held it that grotesque is part of life. I personally believe that it is artists who conscientiously take the extremes and make them blend.

*Brandesky*: That's interesting. You don't find that grotesque occurs in life?

*Ignatieva-Task*: It is a matter of "vision." It is a peculiar talent to see life in conflict . . .

*Brandesky*: [Laughter] Then I must be a very talented person . . .

*Ignatieva-Task*: [Laughter] . . . It is a rare talent.

*Brandesky*: There's a term applied to Federico Garcia Lorca's work called *duende*. It's an almost untranslatable word. *Duende* describes a mystical connection with nature which allows a poet to perceive and give expression to the seemingly contradictory experiences of daily life. What you call grotesque, Lorca called *duende*.

*Ignatieva-Task*: We have a very interesting theatre critic, Vidas Seliunas, who researched the grotesque in Tirso de Molina and Calderon, Lorca and Dali. In his book there are brilliant pages about the grotesque. Well, he was an opponent when I defended my dissertation, and he said that he had worked on the grotesque for ten years, but he still wasn't sure what it was. So you're right, there is something mysterious about it.

*Putney, Vermont*

November 1991

# Introductions

