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A Conversation with Karl Kramer

Ronald D. LeBlanc

University of New Hampshire - Main Campus, ronald.leblanc@unh.edu

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A Conversation with Karl Kramer

- Ron LeBlanc

Professor Emeritus Karl Kramer is a Seattle native who earned his B.A. (English, 1955), M.A. (Comparative Literature, 1957), and Ph.D. (Comparative Literature, 1964) all at the University of Washington. As a participant in one of the first – and, in those early days of the Cold War, extremely rare – academic exchanges in the former Soviet Union, Karl attended Moscow State University as a doctoral candidate in 1959-1960. He then went on to teach at Northwestern University (1961-1965) and the University of Michigan (1965-1970) before coming to the UW, where he taught jointly in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures and the Department of Comparative Literature (1970-1999) until his retirement. In addition, he chaired the Slavic Department between 1988 and 1998. A world-renowned Chekhov scholar, Karl taught a wide variety of courses during the nearly thirty years he spent at the UW. He also became actively involved – mainly as a translator and consultant – in a number of theatrical productions of Chekhov’s plays staged by local directors and actors in the Seattle area, especially those connected with Intiman Theatre. When I interviewed Karl recently, I asked him to reminisce about his experiences in both these areas.

Teaching at the UW

When I asked Karl about some of the more memorable teaching experiences he had at the UW, he related a number of humorous episodes. There was, for instance,

the time in a rather large undergraduate course on Tolstoy when he was – in his words – “ranting on” about some supposedly major issue in Tolstoy. He was about to say something that he obviously considered of enormous importance, when he looked out at the students: all he could see in front of him were pencils and pens poised to catch the Delphic oracle’s overwhelmingly significant comment, and he started giggling. The absurdity of the importance of his next pronouncement, Karl noted, had overwhelmed him. He could not remember now whether or not he managed to make the monumental statement they were expecting. He also recalled the time, very early in his teaching career (he was a T.A. in an English class), when he discovered just before class time that the fly on his trousers was malfunctioning. He called his wife, Doreen, to tell him what he should do. Oblivious to his sense of crisis, she started laughing raucously. Karl could not remember how the affair was resolved, but he believed he somehow made a respectable appearance in class. Another early time in his teaching career, Doreen appeared in class to observe him. Later she said, “You were fine, but your jacket collar was turned up the whole hour.” And in an introductory course on the Soviet Union, Karl prepared to enter the classroom one day, several weeks into the course, when he noticed that an elderly gentleman was standing at the podium reading his notes on poems by Tennyson. Karl looked at the students and, yes, they seemed to be those in his class. So he entered the room via a back door and approached the aged professor. By the time Karl reached him and whispered



Doreen and Karl Kramer

something about a possible mistake in room number, the latter said, “Oh my God – I’m in the wrong room!” The students applauded vociferously as he left.

On a more serious (or at least less humorous) note, Karl fondly remembered an undergraduate course on Tolstoy that had a dozen students in it (I was fortunate enough to be one of them) and was thus taught more in a discussion than a lecture format. During this ten-week course, the students were reading and discussing *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. Karl said that the course brought back very pleasant memories for him, especially the instance when he showed up late for class one day, only to find that all the students were already deep into an animated discussion of one of the novels. Karl sat down and listened and observed quietly for a while, but eventually he wanted to provide some input of his own, only to be told laughingly by one of the students: “No, you can’t join us: you were late, so you don’t get to say anything!” What struck Karl as important and meaningful about this anecdote is that the students had attained what should be the ultimate goal of every teacher: namely, to make his or her role superfluous. Karl’s recollection of this episode focuses on the high level of engagement on the part of the students, but for me – not so much as a student in that Tolstoy class many years ago, but now after years of teaching

Tolstoy myself – this story speaks volumes about just how good and wise a teacher Karl was. If I have come to learn anything about teaching, I have learned how challenging it is to get students engaged and inspired in discussing a work of Russian literature without succumbing to the temptation of doing most of the work for them (especially the critical analysis). In retrospect, I now appreciate and admire more fully the enormous skill it takes for a teacher to teach without making it look like he or she is actually teaching at all. Karl had that great skill as an educator.

One of my classmates in that course was my good friend David Fenner, who went on to become Assistant Vice Provost for International Studies at the UW. When I asked David to share his thoughts about Karl as a teacher and about his experience in that memorable Tolstoy course, here is what he had to say:

Karl Kramer is easily one of the best teachers I've had. My abiding image of him is that of a guide in a dense forest, a *литературовед* who didn't so much lead, as indicate paths of inquiry, exploration, and analysis. As we babes in the woods stumbled through the thicket, in turns frowning at Levin, propelled by Anna, and (happily?) manipulated by Lev Nikolaevich, we truly appreciated Karl's deft and subtle guidance. Through the *берёзовые ветки* of this forest, I can just see Karl sitting on a boulder at a fork in the path, one leg tucked under, listening to the discussion with an eyebrow raised, a knowing glint in his

eyes. Then he'd drop in a word or two, and we were off in a new direction. Somehow unseen, he would bound ahead of us, and appear at the next turning point – wondering perhaps what took us so long, but never letting on. Karl encouraged us to consider, metabolize and challenge scholarly viewpoints but at the same time gently insisted that we discover the novels ourselves. As Steve Jobs has said, "Nothing is more interactive than curling up with a good book!" Facilitating this interactivity was clearly Karl's goal and, I suspect, the secret to his success. The results of Karl's pedagogical approach were phenomenal. The wondrous, tendrillous works of nineteenth-century Russia became a part of us and greatly expanded the depth of field with which we viewed the world. And for many of us, Karl Karlovich helped guide what kind of readers, teachers, writers, parents and human beings we became.

I am sure that David's fond memories of his formative experiences as a student are shared by many other UW undergraduates who had the good fortune to take a class in Russian or Comparative Literature with Karl Kramer.

Staging Chekhov

The other rewarding aspect of his academic career that Karl broached during our conversation was the collaborative and consultative work he performed with Intiman Theatre. This remarkable Seattle theatre was founded in 1972 by Margaret ("Megs") Booker, who first studied theater as a Fulbright Lecturer in Sweden and later returned there (at

the invitation of the Royal Dramatic Theatre) on a Ford Foundation Fellowship to study with Ingmar Bergman. Booker founded the Intiman Theatre (named after the small *Intima Teatern* created by August Strindberg in Stockholm) with the aim of producing international dramatic literature – including works by Chekhov – on an intimate scale. Karl started working with Megs Booker in 1977, when she was about to stage Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. In conjunction with this production, Booker held a special presentation of new plays and Karl acted as panel leader in post-play discussions with the audience. In 1980, when she decided to stage *The Cherry Orchard*, Booker approached Karl about the possibility of him providing her with a new translation of the play and he accepted the challenge, although it was the first time he had ever translated a Chekhov play.

The first thing she said was, "What if I don't like your translation?" Naturally, I said if that were the case, then she could reject it. Instead, she ended up going over the translation word by word, indicating what she was not satisfied with and I would proceed to re-write. In the end, I felt that she had given me so much help that I proposed that we say it was a joint translation. I believe she actually contributed only one line, but her advice had so altered (for the better) my original version that I thought she should get some credit for it.

In 1983, Booker staged her final Chekhov play at Intiman, *The Seagull*, and Karl once again assisted her, as he had in the two earlier Chekhov productions, as a technical advisor. Two years later, Booker left

Intiman and Seattle to become artistic director at the Hartman Theater in Stamford, Connecticut. Booker continued to stage Chekhov plays in her new position, and Karl flew back East in his accustomed capacity to help her out in those productions (including a staging of *Three Sisters* that featured an all-Asian cast).

In our interview, Karl noted that the experience of working with Megs Booker re-energized his interest in Chekhov: he had already written a book on Chekhov's prose fiction and taught his works (fictional as well as dramatic) for years in his literature courses, but he had never before been involved in the production of any of his plays. Attending rehearsals and working with theatre people at Intiman who were staging Chekhov plays, Karl observed, gave him an opportunity to consider anew what things in the plays truly meant. Reading a Chekhov play (for a class he might be teaching) is a rather passive activity, he noted, but watching and rehearsing a play involve a much more active engagement with the text. "My experience in the theatre taught me one pretty obvious truth," Karl said,

but one that can easily be forgotten, too: a play is not meant to be read; it is meant to be enacted on a stage by people who momentarily try to be the characters in that play. It is somewhat analogous to solving a Sudoku. The author gives us a certain amount of information and from that the actors are expected to interpolate the rest. The

main difference is that a Sudoku has only one correct answer, while a play in performance can have a number of plausible answers. The fact is that, though I often taught Chekhov plays in the past, I really did it very poorly. It was only after my brief work in the theatre that I gained some insight into what kinds of questions should be asked when considering the text of a play.

Karl claimed that he learned enormous amounts from Megs Booker about what goes into putting a play on the stage, and she, for her part, had the advantage of being able to pick his brain for information about Chekhov. Karl believes that both he and Megs Booker thought that theirs was a very fruitful relationship, but what he did not realize at the time, he admits, is just how rare this kind of harmonious, mutually beneficial working relationship between a theatre director and an academic specialist generally is. "I later had brief contacts with other directors," he said, "and discovered that the very last person they ever wanted to have in the rehearsal space was an academic type. I can see why they feel that way . . . but I believe it is a very great shame that this kind of cooperation is so rare. The director and the academic really have a great deal that each can give the other."

Indeed, Karl came to learn this lesson – that, as a rule, theatre directors do not want to have an academic specialist involved in rehearsals of their stage productions – the hard, experiential way, when he had occasion to interact with one of Megs Booker's successors at Intiman Theatre in two subsequent productions of Chekhov plays (specifically, *Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya*). The director decided to

eliminate one word from a crucial scene in the latter play: after Vanya fires his pistol at his rival, Serebryakov, and misses, he says, "Bang!" The director felt this word would undercut the scene. Karl pointed out that the exclamation "Bang!" does indeed undercut the drama, but this was, of course, precisely Chekhov's intention and was thus totally necessary. The director, however, apparently thought that he knew better than Karl – and Chekhov – what was best here. Curiously enough, the actors in that production of *Uncle Vanya* came to side with Karl (and Chekhov), and the director was eventually convinced to reinsert the "Bang!" And, yes, Karl assured me that he did indeed get a bang out of that turn of events himself!

In addition to his productive decade-long partnership with Megs Booker, another collaborative experience with members of the theatre world that Karl looked back upon fondly was his participation in "Chekhov Seen and Reseen." This was an outreach program, funded by the Washington State Commission for the Humanities in the 1990s, whereby a director, two actors, and a Chekhov specialist, who served as discussion leader, would travel to various sites across the state to present an evening program on Chekhov. The idea was to take a scene from a Chekhov play and to stage it in several different ways to show the audience how, by emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain aspects of the scene, one might come out with several different but equally plausible versions of that one scene. Karl recalled that the audiences were generally quite responsive to the performances and actively engaged in the discussions that followed, many of which became, in his words, quite "red-fisted." Usually the

presentations were made at community colleges, but a unique and memorable one took place at the Monroe State Reformatory. “The inmates at Monroe really got into the scenes,” Karl noted, “especially the one involving Konstantin Treplyov and his mother in *The Seagull*.” Karl offered a few humorous reminiscences about that presentation of “Chekhov Seen and Reseen” at the prison in Monroe. One involved the prison officials becoming quite alarmed when they accidentally discovered that the actors who were playing Liubov Andreevna and Trofimov, in a scene from *The Cherry Orchard* where the two characters are drinking shots of vodka, were actually drinking some vodka themselves – and this is in a penal facility where the presence of alcohol, let alone its consumption, the actors were promptly reminded, is strictly prohibited! My favorite anecdote, however, concerns what happened immediately following the presentation: as the inmates were filing out of the room and returning to their jail cells, one of them thanked Karl for coming, to which Karl responded, “Thank you for being here.” I am sure that Chekhov, with his wry sense of humor,

would have been pleased . . . and greatly amused.

After the academic year that my wife, Lynda, and I spent at Moscow State University on an IREX/Fulbright fellowship (1981-1982), we came to know Karl and Doreen on a personal basis. Doreen, an expert on native American art from the Pacific Northwest, was working as a professional framer at the time, and she agreed to frame a dozen or so original works of Russian art that a Moscow friend of ours had given us at the end of our stay in the Soviet Union. From that time forward, we started regularly to attend theater and have dinners together with Karl and Doreen. A few years later, Lynda and I even drove back a few times from Pullman (my first academic job was at WSU in the mid-1980s) to housesit and cat-sit for them during periods in the summer when they were away, traveling abroad. In the mid-1990s, by which time Lynda and I were now living in distant New Hampshire, the four of us arranged a rendezvous at an international Chekhov conference being held in Ottawa, where we hung out together the whole time. By day, Doreen and Lynda would visit the terrific collection of native American art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, while Karl and I, as

dutiful conferees, would listen to riveting papers being delivered on such arcane topics as the function of ellipsis in Chekhov’s writing and the role of Epikhodov in *The Cherry Orchard*. In the evening, the four of us would regroup and head out together for dinner together and a night of lengthy conversation. For the past ten years or so, Lynda and I have been able to visit Karl and Doreen much more frequently because we have been spending at least a month or so each summer in Seattle, where our son, his wife, and our darling little granddaughter now live. It was a very enriching experience for me to have had Karl as a teacher back when I was a student at the UW (1976-1983), but it has been even more enriching to have come to know him even since that time as both a friend and a fellow scholar of Russian literature. Indeed, it has been a real treat for Lynda and me these past several years to see him enjoying retirement with Doreen at their beautiful Lake Forest Park home, as he listens to his beloved jazz albums, reads his own personal book-of-the-month selection from world literature, and further develops his gourmet cooking skills . . . Chekhov, I think, would have approved.

Ron LeBlanc (Ph.D. 1984) is a Professor of Russian and Humanities at the University of New Hampshire.

CLASS OF 2011

On Friday, June 10, the department honored this year’s graduates at its annual Convocation ceremony in Parrington Hall. As this year’s keynote speaker, REECAS alumna and Executive Director of the Henry M. Jackson Foundation Lara Iglitzin spoke about “Slavic Studies, 20 years after the fall of the USSR.”

Graduates were then introduced individually by faculty members who had worked closely with them during their time at the UW. Awards were later presented to five outstanding students: junior Connor Lynch was honored as an ACTR Russian Language Laureate Scholar; graduating senior Cyrus Rodgers was the recipient of the Outstanding Undergraduate Award for his academic excellence; Kendra Ellis was awarded the Asante Outstanding Paper Prize for her research paper entitled “The Chekhovian Character Sketch;” MA student Tyson Sadleir was recognized for his excellence in teaching first-year Russian; and Johanna Gawronski was presented with the Best Polish Student of the Year Award by Wanda Cieslar-Pawluskiewicz, on behalf of the Polish Home.

The class of 2011 includes BA recipients Jacob Barr, David Feldman, Connor Hobby, Yuliya Mailyan, Steven Mataya, Jasmina Meskovic, Kathryn Moffat, Elena Ogden, Jan Pawluskiewicz, Jamilia Popov, Cyrus Rodgers, Anthony Schlumpf, Ekaterina Shilkina, Anna Shishlova, Jordan Swarthout, Nora Vralsted, Katie Wigginton, Carly Willis and Jennie Wojtusik, MA recipients Tyson Sadleir and Zhen Zhang, and PhD recipient Anna Glazkova. Congratulations to all of them for their hard work and achievements!