

AND THROUGH HIM RUSSIA HAS FOUND HERSELF

Without Imitating Him, Her Art and Literature Were Awakened At His Touch

Written for THE NEW YORK TIMES
By Isaac Don Levine

SHAKESPEARE in Russia is not identified with any certain period in Russia's spiritual development, but with the entire history of the Russian stage and literature. Of all the great Western European minds who have exerted their influence on Russian thought, Shakespeare occupies the most peculiar place. Voltaire, Racine, Rousseau, Goethe, Schiller, and Byron have all had their days in Russia. Like meteors they have crossed suddenly the Russian horizons, illuminating the path of Russia's intellectual progress. Not so with Shakespeare. In the dark seventeenth century he entered Russia, and, step by step, growing in brightness, expanding in all directions, he developed into the great luminary of today. Russia is now full of Shakespeare. Russia's soul is the Shakespearean soul. Russia's literature, art, music, philosophy, Russia's very political life, are permeated with the Shakespearean spirit.

In the dramas and lyrics of Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet, in the agonies of Dostoyevsky, in the philosophical and psychological quests of Turgenev and Tolstoy, in the restlessness and yearnings of Gorki and Andreyev, in the tunes of Tchaikovsky, the impassioned art of Motchulov and Kommissarzhevskaya, Russia's greatest actors, the dramatic genius of Shakespeare has found its truest incarnation. There is not a race in humanity that is a better typification of the Hamlet of "To be or not to be" than the Russian. There are few, if any, nationalities that surpass the Russian in the depth of emotion stirred up by the raging passions of Othello or the heartrending tragedy of Romeo and Juliet. And what nation more than the Russian can boast of a profound understanding of Shylock, of a deep comprehension of the sore problem of the Eternal Jew?

Shakespeare first appeared in Russia in the seventeenth century, when wandering troupes of English and German actors first touched Russia. Scenes from "King Lear" were included in their repertoires. In the first decade of the eighteenth century a troupe of German actors presented in Petrograd before Peter the Great "A Comedy, Julius Caesar," doubtless an adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy. In 1748, the German actor Conrad Ackerman played in Petrograd a French adaptation of "Hamlet." Russian interest in Shakespeare dates from the same year. The beginning of a literature and the theatre in Russia belongs to the same period. At that time Russia was completely under the influence of France; her educated classes spoke French and worshipped Racine and Voltaire. The pseudo-classicism then dominating France was thus transferred to Russia. And for generations to come Russian literature and art were merely blind imitations of the French.

In 1748, A. Sumarokov, "the father of the Russian drama," published his "Hamlet," a tragedy by A. Sumarokov, printed by the Academy of Sciences. It was presented in 1750, and was, in fact, a translation of a French pseudo-classic adaptation of "Hamlet." In 1759 Dmitrievski, one of the founders of the Russian theatre, translated from the French "The Life and Death of King Richard III." In 1769 he made a journey to London, where he first acquainted him with the works of Shakespeare. But the influence of the French was too powerful on him to make him deeply interested in Shakespeare. In 1769 the Russian periodical Adskaya Potchta printed the first review of Shakespeare in Russia. It was a consensus of Voltaire's notorious criticisms of the great dramatist. In 1772 N. I. Novikov, who shares with Dmitrievski the honor of being called "the parents of the Russian theatre," printed in his paper a translation of Romeo's monologue in the fifth act of "Romeo and Juliet." In 1783 a Russian version of Le Tournour's adaptation of "The Life and Death of King Richard III." was published.

An interesting page in the history of Shakespeare in Russia is marked by Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia. She was a woman of literary aspirations, and wrote a number of plays and articles. Though she was a great admirer of Voltaire, with whom she corresponded for years, she became interested in Shakespeare. In 1786 she published a comedy in five acts, an imitation of "The Merry Wives of Windsor," entitled "This 'Tis to Have Linnen and Duck-baskets," a free and loose adaptation from Shakespeare. This was the first play in Russia to bear the name of Shakespeare. Later the Empress published two plays based on Russian history, each of which bore the inscription: "An imitation of Shakespeare, a historical play, without conforming to the regular theatrical laws." This was an open revolt against the pseudo-classicism still dominating Russia, and only Catherine could dare do such a thing. It was an ominous warning to the pseudo-classicists, but it stimulated no desire in Russia to study Shakespeare and to seek new forms in art and literature. It was destined for Germany indirectly to open a new era in the Shakespearean development in Russia.

There was at this time a youth somewhere in Russia who was dreaming of great things. His name was Karamzine, the future famous historian of Russia. He was educated in Germany, and learned to regard contemptuously the French literature. He planned to translate Shakespeare into Russian from the original. In 1787 appeared his translation of "Julius Caesar," the first work of Shakespeare to be translated into Russian from the original. In his preface Karamzine said: "Shakespeare was one of those spirits whose fame lasts for ages. Time, the mighty destroyer of all, will never demolish the magnificent creations of Shakespeare." He defended Shakespeare from the "sophist" Voltaire. But Voltaire was the idol of Russia, while Karamzine was an unknown young man. He received little encouragement, and translated no more of Shakespeare. He, however, started the ball rolling. The press began to give translations of monologues from Shakespeare. The dramatist became frequently the subject of public discussion. In the world of Russian art and literature there appeared a small but strong group of admirers of Lessing, who took up the fight of liberating the drama from its pseudo-classicist shackles.

In 1792 the Zritel said: "The glorious Shakespeare put in his tragedies characters and actions that would degrade the lowest of farces; and though he compensated us at times with passages of sublime beauty, one can never approve of such methods. The beautiful in Shakespeare is like light-

nings, in the darkness of night." The following year The Mercury referred to the works of Shakespeare as "the monstrous farces called 'tragedies.'" In 1795 a translation of "Romeo and Juliet" from a French adaptation was published in Moscow.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century the Russian Intellegentzia struck into the Anzomania. This was the time when Alexander I. ascended the throne. The liberal Emperor was expected to grant a Constitution to Russia. The political and economical theories of Adam Smith were studied and widely discussed. The Magna Charta became the object of deep interest. The press devoted columns to items on all phases of English life. The novels of Goldsmith, Young, Richardson, Fielding, Radcliffe, translated from the French, became very popular. Pseudo-classicism was on the decline, and romanticism began to replace it. The Russian public wanted Shakespeare, but not the true Shakespeare. It was not yet ripe for him. It wanted the pathetic, the sentimental, the tempestuous in Shakespeare. Duclis gave the French public these elements of Shakespeare. An army of translators was soon at work, translating Duclis's Shakespeare into Russian. In 1806 "Othello" was for the first time presented on the Russian stage, but it was "Othello" à la Duclis. Such were also "King Lear," given at the Imperial Theatre in 1807, and "Hamlet," in 1817. Sept. 17 of the same year a Shakespearean opera was for the first time sung in Russia. It was "Romeo and Juliet," music by D. Steibert, the libretto being a translation from the French. In 1821 the ingenious Prince A. Shachovskoi presented in the Grand Theatre in Petrograd "The Tempest, or Shipwreck," a romantic fantasia in three acts, taken from the works of Shakespeare. It had an enormous success. Prince Shachovskoi made numerous changes in the play, but preserved all its original beauty.

In the periodical literature, however, a more conscientious effort to study Shakespeare was being made. In 1802 there appeared in a magazine an article "On Tragedy," in which the works of the great dramatic poet were analyzed. The writer gives the first place to "The Tempest," the second to "A Midsummer Night's Dream." In an article "On Drama," the same writer, urging the reading of Shakespeare, says: "Kingdoms fall, generations vanish, mountains crumble away, monuments fall into ruins, but Shakespeare, Homer, and Ossian will live forever." The dominating literary opinion was still anti-Shakespearean. In 1810 the editor of the Russki Vestnik reviewed "Romeo and Juliet" and "Othello," and expressed a rather unfavorable opinion of them.

In 1811 the Vestnik Evropy derided the Ghost in "Hamlet," and made fun of the whole play. On the other hand, the Dukh Zhurnalov printed in 1816 an article entitled "Comments of a Russian on Shakespeare, Schiller, and the best of the French dramatists." The writer challenged "the Messieurs French" to point out passages in their literature equal to the scenes between Hamlet and his mother or Brutus and Antony. He exclaims: "What a difference between these and French monotony! Even without following the names of the characters it is possible to recognize them. Each passion speaks in its own tongue, and not in the language of the sentimental French heroes."

The third decade of the last century marks the beginning of the modern, typically Russian literature. Pushkin, Lermontov, the Russian Byron; Griboyedov, and Zhukovski began to assert themselves. It was a short time after the death of Byron, and Byronism was still dominating all that was young in Europe. Not the least service of Byron to Russia was the stimulus he gave to the study of English. Pushkin took it up, and became soon an ardent admirer of Shakespeare. In a letter to a friend he wrote that he "preferred Shakespeare to the Bible." In his preface to "Boris Godunoff" he openly acknowledged that it was Shakespeare who gave him the idea of writing his famous drama. Some years later Pushkin began translating "Measure for Measure," but he never went beyond the first scene.

In 1825 a farce in two acts called "The Ghosts of Shakespeare," and dedicated to Griboyedov, was published. The author, in his preface, said that it was originally written for private use, but he published it in order to acquaint Russia with "the romantic mythology of Shakespeare." The



C. Kovalenskaya as Olivia, in Twelfth Night



G. Darsky as Shylock. He gained fame in this role late in the nineteenth century



The late Vera F. Kommissarzhevskaya as Desdemona

She was the founder of the Moscow Art Theatre and was considered the greatest Russian Actress



Fedor Ignatevitch Stravinski's drawing of himself in the role of Falstaff.

same year Prince Shachovskoi presented in Petrograd "Falstaff," a comedy based on "Henry IV.," a historical chronicle by Shakespeare. Like all the Prince's adaptations, it became very popular. When Zagoskin once referred to the author of "The Merry Wives of Windsor" as stupid, Prince Shachovskoi replied that "one cannot discuss Shakespeare with children and the feeble-minded," that the whole Russian literature in comparison with the English was not worth a penny, and that such a poor and backward people as the Russians would have long to live and much to learn before it understood and appreciated Shakespeare. In 1828 a translation of "Hamlet" in verse appeared. It was too exact for the theatre. And Polyeyov, in his Moscow Telegraph, demanded a translation of "Hamlet" in which Motchulov, the Moscow actor, could show his powers. When Griboyedov read before the Petrograd favorite, Karatygin, a French translation of the fifth act in "Romeo and Juliet," the great tragedian fell to his knees, "as if gone insane, and begged the dramatist to translate the tragedy into Russian." But Griboyedov refused "to mutilate Shakespeare."

Criticisms, comments on Shakespeare, translations of separate scenes, and monologues from Shakespeare's works became very frequent in the press. Pletnev, in his "Thoughts on Macbeth," became so enthused with Shakespeare that he dreamed of giving up all other reading for the rest of his life and devoting it to his favorite. "Why read other writers, when he contains them all?" he asked. Another writer, in a series of brochures which appeared in 1830-31, analyzed "The Merchant of Venice," "A Midsummer Night's Dream," "The Winter's Tale," and "Macbeth," devoting to the latter a great deal of space. A prominent magazine published a long biography of Shakespeare, full of praise and exaltations. But there was still considerable opposition to Shakespeare in Russia. Its most eminent representative was Bulgarin, who recommended Shakespeare to a "museum of historical relics."

In the '30's romanticism in Russia reached its apogee. Walter Scott was very popular, paving a way for a broader and deeper study of Shakespeare. The young generation of authors turned to Hegel and Chelling and Shakespeare. The historical "Stankevitch circle" came into existence

about that time, gathering into its ranks the brilliant group of young men who were destined to become the creators of most of the wealth of the Russian literature. Turgenev, Belinski, Aksakoff, Ostrovski, Herzen—all came under the influence of Stankevitch. Shakespeare was their idol. They worshipped him, studied him, discussed him incessantly. And when later all of them delivered their individual messages to the Russian people it was the sublime message of Shakespeare that they delivered.

Meanwhile the introduction of Shakespeare into Russia continued. In 1833 the first translations of "King Lear" and "The Merchant of Venice" from the original appeared. The Moscow Telegraph did not find them satisfactory, but said that "bad translations would never kill the great poet." The Russian stage, however, was still in want of a good translation of Shakespeare, worthy of Karatygin, the "Russian Talma," or Motchulov, the Moscow genius. Polyeyov of the Moscow Telegraph then undertook the translation of "Hamlet" for the stage. After long persuasion Motchulov agreed to play it. On Jan. 22, 1837, the first performance was given, with Motchulov in the rôle of Hamlet. With this date a new epoch in the history of Shakespeare in Russia commences.

Belinski thus describes the historic performance: "The proportions of the crowds who clamored for admission are beyond description. Those who were able to procure tickets felt the happiest persons in the world. It is a long time since Moscow has seen such a mighty and universal outburst of enthusiasm provoked by the love of art." The crowds did not diminish with the second and third performances of the drama. "Since Motchulov," said Belinski in another place, "the Russians understood that there is but one dramatic poet in the world, and that is Shakespeare." Motchulov's love of Shakespeare passed all bounds. On the monument erected to him on his grave the following words were inscribed: "To the Mad Friend of Shakespeare."

At the same time Karatygin played "Hamlet" in Petrograd with tremendous success. Russia went wild with "Hamlet." Shakespeare, who was before understood and appreciated only by few, suddenly became the idol of the public. Shakespeare's struggle for recognition in Russia was at an end. All opposition disappeared. His triumph on the stage directly influenced the development of the Russian drama and theatre. Gogol wrote that Shakespeare planted the seeds of the modern Russian theatre, as created by Ostrovski and Alexei Tolstoy. The Shakespearean tide turned Russian thought and art to the psychology of human nature, to the drama in the life of the individual, to the study of the subtleties of man and the vicissitudes and catastrophes of his life. Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Tchekov, Andreyev, and Gorky, under the influence of Shakespeare, dug deep into the mysterious abysses of the Russian soul, penetrating all its nooks and corners.

Beginning with the '40's of the last

century Shakespeare's works, like an irresistible flood, inundated Russia. Legions of translators took up the work of presenting the genuine Shakespeare to Russia. Numberless articles began to appear in the press devoted to all phases of Shakespearean history. In 1840 Slavin published his "Life of William Shakespeare." In the '40s and '50s Belinski, Botkin, Pissarev and Druzhinin were the apostles of Shakespeare in Russia. In 1890 Turgenev read his famous lecture on "Hamlet and Don Quixote." In 1884 Tichonravov's articles on Shakespeare made a profound impression on the Russian public. In 1865-68 the poets Nekrasov and Gerbel edited a new edition of Shakespeare. In the '70s the first and greatest Shakespearean scholar appeared in Russia. It was Nikolai Storozenko who established a course in "Shakespeareology" in the Moscow University. In 1872 he published his "Predecessors of Shakespeare," and in 1876 his "Robert Greene," considered the best work on Greene. The two books were translated into English and German. Storozenko proved in them that Shakespeare was influenced by Greene, Marlowe, and other English dramatists of the fifteenth century. Till his death (1906) Storozenko continued to contribute articles and books to the Shakespeareana of the world.

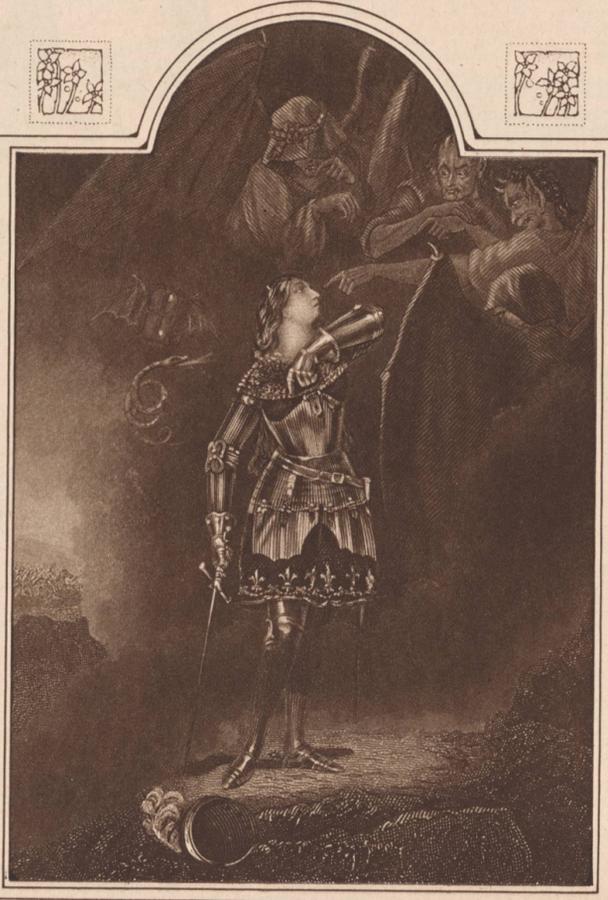
In 1879 N. Ketcher published his monumental translation of Shakespeare's dramas. He worked on it twenty-eight years. Between 1873 and 1882 there existed in Moscow the historic "Shakespeare circle." Turgenev once witnessed a performance of "Henry IV.," given by the "Circle," and he said that he never saw in Western Europe Falstaff better played than on that occasion. In the '80s Professor Sichevski toured Russia, lecturing on Shakespeare. In 1887 Timofeyev published his "Influence of Shakespeare on the Russian Drama." In 1889 Tchukoi's popular but rather superficial "Study of Shakespeare" appeared. In 1893 Konshin's translation of Shakespeare appeared. In 1896 I. Ivanov published his work "On Shakespeare." In 1898 Sokolovskii's single-handed complete translation of Shakespeare appeared. It was a translation in verse, and he labored over it for thirty years. It is recommended by the Academy of Sciences. In 1900 Grand Duke Constantin published his "Hamlet." Soon afterward Shestov's "Shakespeare, and Brondes" was published, a splendid contribution to the Shakespearean literature in Russia. In 1906 Tolstoy's famous article on Shakespeare appeared.

The stage kept pace with the literary expansion of Shakespeare. A brilliant array of actors, from the days of Motchulov and Karatygin to our own have immortalized the Shakespearean characters. Sichevkin, Stravinski, Kovalenskaya, Danilov, and, finally, the great Kommissarzhevskaya, founder of the Moscow Art Theatre, and Yoozhin (Prince A. Sumbatov) have written indelible pages in the history of Shakespeare in Russia. In 1890 Tchaikovsky composed the music for "Hamlet" sung by Gtirl in Petrograd.

A landmark in the international history of the theatre was the staging of "Hamlet" in 1912 in the Moscow Art Theatre, under the direction of Edward Gordon Craig, the English artist. Craig's theory that the stage must be made real, not pictorially but architecturally, was first put to test there. To a large degree it has been rendered real, thanks to several years' preparations, during which time more than a hundred rehearsals of the play took place. V. T. Katchalov in the rôle of Hamlet was a great success.

What was the message of Shakespeare to the Russian literature and stage? One cannot say that the Russian drama is an imitation of Shakespeare, as it was in the case of Voltaire and Racine in the eighteenth century. Shakespeare's mission to Russia was this: Till the forties of the last century Russian art and literature could not find themselves. They blundered. They embraced pseudo-classicism, followed the Encyclopedists, imitated Schiller and Byron, became infatuated with Walter Scott. But all these idols became Russia with ill-grace, because Russia had in her those dramatic elements that had put her art and literature in such a brief period into the foremost ranks of the world's spiritual treasures. And there was no one to awaken Russia to the realization of her vast intellectual wealth. No one but Shakespeare. When the true, unadulterated, unutilized Shakespeare was shown to Russia, as if touched by a magic wand, awakened.

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Joan of Arc summoning her fiends to the Aid of France. I Henry VI, Act V, Scene III. Collection of William P. Harvey

The Last Scene of "Romeo"

From Edward Dowden's "Shakespeare"

SHAKESPEARE did not intend that the feeling evoked by the last scene of this tragedy of "Romeo and Juliet" should be one of hopeless sorrow or despair in presence of failure, ruin, and miserable collapse. Juliet and Romeo, to whom Verona has been a harsh stepmother, have accomplished their lives. They loved perfectly. Romeo had attained to manhood. Juliet had suddenly blossomed into heroic womanhood. Through her, and through anguish and joy, her lover had emerged from the life of dream into the waking life of truth. Juliet had saved his soul; she had rescued him from abandonment to spurious feeling, from abandonment to

morbid self-consciousness, and the enervating luxury of emotion for emotion's sake. What more was needed? And as secondary to all this, the emnity of the houses is appeased. Montague will raise in pure gold the statue of true and faithful Juliet; Capulet will place Romeo by her side. Their lives are accomplished; they go to take up their place in the large history of the world, which contains many such things. Shakespeare in this last scene carries forward our imagination from the horror of the tomb to the better life of man, when such love as that of Juliet and Romeo will be publicly honored and remembered by a memorial all gold.