

## ***The Grain Store*, by Natal'ya Vorozhbit** **Translated by Sasha Dugdale**

### **THEMES:**

INDIVIDUALISM VS COLLECTIVISM

IDEOLOGY & CONTROL

PROPERTY & POSSESSION

**GENRE:** Drama, a fictional account based on actual events

**AGE RESTRICTION:** 12+ (death, starvation)

**NUMBER OF CHARACTERS:** 30+ (7+ W, 10+ M)

### **CHARACTER LIST:**

**MOKRINA STARITSKAYA**, 13 year-old daughter of Feodosii, a skilled landowning farmer (kulak). She is a fine singer and retains a strong spirit through the famine and suffering she endures.

**ARSEI PECHORITSA**, a young peasant who is recruited to Stalin's regime and becomes a communist enthusiast. He is torn between his love for Mokrina and his loyalty for the state.

**MORTKO**, the regional government representative, strict and unyielding with the villagers. He rules with an iron fist and has no understanding of the delicate web of relationships in the village

**FEODOSII**, a financially comfortably landowning farmer who gradually loses his possessions to the Soviet regime through the process of collectivisation

**OLIANA**, Mokrina's mother

**ODARKA**, Arsei's mother

**SAMSON** and **GOROBETS**, two middle-aged friends who provide comic relief in parts of the play

**KILINA**, a beautiful young peasant girl whose love for Arsei is unrequited

**RUDEENKO**, the local educator

**ARTYUKH**, the grave-digger

**SAMOILENKO**, the flesheater

**OLD WOMAN**, holds an empty bucket throughout the play, symbolizing her frugal existence, but even that eventually gets taken from her

#### **NURSE**

**LYONECHKA**, a 14 year old boy with an amputated leg, we encounter him briefly at the beginning and the end of the play. He looks up to Mortko

**OLD MAN** and **WOMAN**

#### **TRAMP**

Mokrina's relatives and fellow villagers:

**KHRASINA, SEKLETA, YAKIM, BRONIA, FYODORA, MINA, YAVDOKHA, TODOS, YUGINA, GORPINA, YAVDOKHA, TEKLIA, SAFON, ONIS'KO, PROKOP, STASYA, KHRANKA, TOFILLA, YANIK, FANAS, GAFIIKA**

Agitators:

**IVAN IVANYCH, YURKO, MASHA, VASILII**

Political activists:

**GAVRILO, YUKHIM**

Plus various other **VILLAGERS, HOSPITAL PATIENTS**

#### **SYNOPSIS:**

Based on the terror-famine that caused seven million deaths in Ukraine and neighbouring lands in the 1930s, Vorozhbit's play illustrates the consequences of Stalin's first five-year-plan on a small Ukrainian village.

A close knit rural community stands unwittingly in the path of Stalin's drive to create a thriving socialist Soviet Union. The outcome is catastrophic. What begins for the people of the village as an amusingly alien concept, foretold by a group of agitprop performers, rapidly becomes a realy and unstoppable force for change. Robbed first of their land, then their religion and independence, the whole country soon becomes engulfed by a tragedy that will scar a nation for generations.

The play centres primarily on the story of young lovers Arsei and Mokrina, who yearn to be married but cannot, at least to begin with, because he is a peasant and she is the daughter of a landowning 'skilled' farmer (kulak). In a twist of fate, the tables turn and Arsei becomes a communist enthusiast and climbs up the ranks of the Soviet regime, while Mokrina's family is stripped of their possessions in the name of collectivism. The two are finally married, but at what cost?

The Grain Store was written in Russian and translated into English by Sasha Dugdale. It was commissioned by the RSC for its Revolutions season in 2009.

### **KEY MOMENTS:**

#### **ACT I, Sc. Easter 1931: pp. 19-23, (5F, 7M)**

Arsei brings the church bell down, announcing that it will be turned into a grain store and signifying the start of the revolution. He publicly announces his love for Mokrina and his desire to marry her.

#### **ACT II, Sc. 16 April 1933: pp. 54-56, (1F, 1M)**

Mokrina and Arsei are having a secret picnic in the graveyard as Artyukh buries the dead. Mokrina is starving and relies on these secret picnics to be kept fed. Once her belly is full, she turns on Arsei, resentful of her dependence on him.

#### **ACT II, Sc. 23 April 1933: pp.66-70, (3F, 5M + Crowd)**

The peasants are forced to sing and dance for a film through their starvation. In a tragi-comic set-up, they must act past their destitution to portray the quintessential image of village success brought about by the revolution.

### **STEP ONE: EXPLORE**

Refer to the monologue by Garvilo (ACT II, pp. 77). In this scene, Garvilo recalls a moment from his childhood when he is caught relieving himself in a wood, whereupon the landowner whips him, leaving the child fearful of leaving his home again. He recounts this childhood memory when he recalls the bloodbath that followed the starving peasants attacking the food that was promised to them, and then withheld for the next day.

What philosophical questions does this monologue raise in the students' minds? In groups, ask them to come up with questions based on the scene, and which have no easy answers. Think about the themes raised and perhaps try to combine more than one concept in a single question to broaden out the potential for the discussion. For example:

- Who decides what is our property and what isn't? How should land, property, food and goods be divided? Do some people deserve more than others?

Vote to select one of the questions and discuss it, keeping the fruits of your conversations (themes, further questions, provocations, points of discomfort...etc) alive as you go through the exercises below.

### **STEP TWO: EXPLORE**

#### **Exercise 1: Boal's Columbian Hypnosis**

The play deals with heavy and complex themes around possession and control – of people, of nature and of objects. In this exercise, students will explore the relationship between the controller and the controlled. In pairs, ask students to decide who is 'A' and who is 'B'. A holds their palm up in front of B's nose, as if a string is tied between A's palm and B's nose. B must

follow A's palm wherever they go, maintaining the same distance in between. A can get creative about how they move B around the space in terms of pace/speed, altitude, direction...etc.

To rebalance the space, switch the roles so that B is in control.

### **Exercise 2:**

The play is based on the mass starvation that occurred across the Soviet Union as a result of ideology-centered politics that disregarded the impact on human lives. The withholding of food is a means of control, along with withholding other rights such as freedom (e.g. of speech, movement), money, education, shelter...etc.

Select two students to read Act II (pp. 54-56) while continuing the Columbian Hypnosis above, perhaps even literally having a morsel of food in the palm of the controller. Arsei maintains control over Mokrina in this scene, by taking on the role of gatekeeper to food, a basic need withheld from Mokrina and her fellow villagers under this regime. Notice the points where Mokrina resists Arsei's control and watch what these moments of tension do to the power dynamic of the physical relationship.

Once you have had a few attempts at running the scene through the physicality of the Columbian Hypnosis exercise, see how the newly-found embodied alertness of the actors translates into interpreting the scene as it is written, with Mokrina and Arsei seated in a picnic scene.

### **Exercise 3: Objects & Masks**

In Act II (pp. 66-70) we see the villagers dancing and singing in preparation for a film documenting the success of the Soviet experiment. The villagers are starving and haggard in un-presentable clothing, but they are made to 'borrow' decent clothing which they must return to the state. They have also been promised food once the performance is over. They are ordered around for the sake of a projected image of success. They are objects to be placed and moved in service of a propaganda film.

Read the scene through, asking students to mark the following moments (and invite them to find their own!):

- The peasants return home from a day at work in the collective farm
- The starving villagers move slowly towards the table laden with food
- One of the men is asked to put his arm around a random woman

In groups, count students down into freeze frames of the above images. In one series of images, students wear a mask of pristine happiness. In another series of the same images, the masks of happiness are betrayed, with the actors revealing their true state through subtle hints and signs – perhaps in the way they are carrying themselves or how they look at each other. Ask each student to consider what small change they can find that might betray their mask of happiness. Transition between the two states of real and masked happiness, following this with a discussion on power and control.

Ultimately, humans are not objects, and where there is an attempt to control and direct them, the true state of affairs is likely to fizzle through the cracks. While the play is about the failure of a state system and deals with a real historical tragedy of a monumental scale, it is peppered with plays-within-a-play to show how life sometimes imitates art. Theatre is also a micro-system in itself. There is a lesson for budding directors in this, not least in terms of the impact excessive control can have on actors and, ultimately, on the authenticity of the art created.

### **STEP THREE: FEEDBACK**

Discuss what came up for the students. What are they still wondering about? What was the most interesting thing they learned? What was their least favourite part and why?