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Remembering Andrei Voznesensky. America. 1987.

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The death of Andrei Voznesensky on Tuesday couldn't help but send me back to my memories. Voznesensky, with Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Bella Akhmadulina, Bulat Okudzhava and a few others, personified Soviet poetry in the 1950s and 1960s. They were "rock stars" before anyone in the world knew what that term would come to mean.

Over the last 20 years I often saw Voznesensky in Moscow theaters &mdash he frequently attended the theater with his wife, Zoya Boguslavskaya.

Throughout the years, he cultivated working relationships with various playhouses. Yury Lyubimov's production of "Anti-Worlds,"based on the poet's works, enjoyed more than 700 performances at the Taganka Theater in the 1960s and 1970s. Mark Zakharov's production of the musical "Juno and Avos,"with lyrics by Voznesensky, is still in repertory at the Lenkom Theater after nearly 30 years.

But my most vivid memory of the poet dates back to a three-hour reading he gave at Tufts University near Boston on March 26, 1987. The following account of that evening incorporates notes I jotted down after returning home.

The first words Voznesensky spoke when he took the stage at Tufts were in English. His English was not perfect, although he spoke fluently.

"I didn't expect to read 'I Am Goya,', but they raped [sic] me to do it,"he said of one of his most famous poems. "So I do it for you."

A young woman stepped to the microphone and read a quiet, pleasant English translation. Voznesensky then boldly stepped to the microphone and chanted, cajoled and whispered his way through the Russian original.

It was nothing less than stunning.

Unlike the traditional Russian delivery &mdash an unrelenting chant, for which Joseph Brodsky was famous, for instance &mdash Voznesensky actually performed his poems. He snapped his fingers, waved his hands, flailed his arms, touched his face, leaned forward, leaned backward, shouted, whispered, talked, teased and growled.

It was a genuine theatrical performance.

As Voznesensky recited "I Am Goya,"I glanced at the young woman who had read the English translation. She smiled and shook her head. She must have been thankful that she had gone before Voznesensky and did not have to follow him.

After reading "I Am Goya," Voznesensky chatted for a while, as he did between the reciting of each of his poems. He talked at length in good English about the "shame" of Marc Chagall's lack of recognition in the Soviet Union and about his own efforts to open a museum in Vitebsk.

"Can you understand my jet-lag English?" he suddenly inserted as a non sequitur. "I came home at 6 this morning after drinking gin and vodka all night with Norman Mailer."

After that, he dropped many a name.

He introduced one poem by talking about meeting Pablo Picasso in Paris, and then of a later incident when he stayed with the painter's widow.

"I slept in the very bed in which the great man had slept," he declared proudly.

Introducing the poem "A Conversation in Rome," he revealed that he once was invited for a tete-a-tete with the Pope.

"There were just the two of us in the Vatican library. We talked about Berdyayev, Shestov and Rozanov," he said, referring to three Russian philosophers. "I wanted to know something special from him. So I asked, 'Do you believe in UFOs?' The Pope replied that he did not."

"Yesterday, I was in Yoko Ono's house," he informed us somewhat later.

Over the course of his three-hour performance, I could not help but feel that the "Norman

Mailers" and "Yoko Onos" were a bit much. I felt as though someone was leading me to the well of fame and forcing me to drink.

I must admit I began to feel resistant to his stories.

After talking about perestroika (of which he was skeptical), Joseph Stalin (whom he abhorred), and other sociopolitical topics, he came to a new poem based on the true story of mass graves that had been dug open and robbed. He spoke of the horror of the incident that prompted him to write the poem.

"Terrible, terrible," he exclaimed.

But in my perhaps exaggerated, youthful stridency, I found myself wondering, what has this to do with poetry?

One week earlier, I had heard the great Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz say something that struck a chord and has remained with me ever since.

"I have a feeling that poetry is popular in so far as it appeals to political passions," Milosz had stated. "This is not a good recommendation for poetry."

And yet it was impossible to resist Voznesensky's warmth and charm. The expansiveness, openness and forcefulness that had been associated with him since the 1950s were still evident in the late 1980s, particularly when he was reciting the best of his work.

Voznesensky had a marvelous ability to communicate. I can't imagine a listener remaining indifferent to his spoken poetry. He actively went out to win his listeners over, heart and mind. You can watch a clip of him reading here and listen to an audio recording here.

After the reading, I was among a small group that accompanied Voznesensky to a party. His manner, now that he was offstage, was harsher and blunter, yet quieter and calmer.

The charm that he worked so hard to cultivate during the performance, and which he displayed during a short interview with a reporter from the Boston Globe, was almost entirely gone. He was now more natural. Perhaps this was because he was speaking Russian again. His answers to questions were short and his talk was straight.

I left Voznesensky that night feeling that he was a man who was obliged to live up to an image of himself that had grown larger than he was himself. I suspected that at some point in his life, long ago, he bought into that image. He accepted it as an immutable part of himself, and he considered it his responsibility to fulfill the expectations put on him.

Through the ages such onerous missions have destroyed men and women of great and small stature. It is to Voznesensky's credit that his burden never crushed him. His integrity remained intact. Especially when he was performing his poetry.

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