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Russia's First Political Madman Comes to Life Again

By John Freedman

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Of the lesser-known great figures of Russian letters Pyotr Chaadayev surely is one of the finest and most interesting.

Chaadayev was a veteran of the war against Napoleon, a society lion who hobnobbed with royalty, and a dandy, whom Pushkin suggested in "Eugene Onegin" was superior to Onegin. He was a clear thinker, a brilliant writer and a tragic figure.

A progressive with ties to the Decembrist revolutionary group, he has been labeled variously as a liberal and a conservative. He is known as a Westerner, a Slavophile and a Christian philosopher. However he is defined, his ideas were controversial when he recorded them in his famous "Philosophical Letters" and they remain so today.

Consider this brief excerpt from his first "Letter": Why "did the Russian people succumb to slavery only after becoming Christian, specifically I mean during the reign of Godunov

and Shuisky? Let the Orthodox Church explain that phenomenon. Let it say why it did not raise its maternal voice against this horrible violence that one part of a people holds over another."

I chose these phrases nearly at random. As I scrolled down the text published on the internet, it leaped out at me as if it were written about events taking place today. I can imagine supporters of the Pussy Riot group, currently jailed on charges of insulting the Orthodox Church, taking these words to heart.

What is not random is my bringing Chaadayev and Pussy Riot together. Both ran afoul of suspicious government leaders, both were detained and deprived of their freedom. The members of Pussy Riot were sent to prison; Chaadayev was committed to an insane asylum immediately following the publication in 1836 of his first "Letter," thus making history as the first Russian to be declared insane for political reasons.

In short, Chaadayev's battles with a government machine that interpreted his ideas and beliefs as hostile and dangerous, is very much a template for contemporaries who stand in disagreement with the current Russian state.

It is not surprising, then, that Chaadayev and his writings emerged as the focal point of the latest Drama of Memory project to be mounted by the Memorial Society and Georg Genoux's Joseph Beuys Theater, which, although declared closed some time ago, still continues to have a limited presence in Moscow.

Conceived, directed and acted by the young critic Nikolai Berman, "I, Chaadayev" is an intimate performance piece. It draws in a plethora of texts aside from Chaadayev's "Letters," including fragments of novels by Viktor Pelevin, snippets of Venedikt Yerofeyev's classic Soviet-era novella "Moscow-Petushki," and various radio and television reports.

Berman wanders among the spectators, who stand at random in an empty room, and appeals to them directly and personally. "What is your name?" he asked me before launching into a long description of the humiliations and frustrations "we Russians" eternally suffer. I, like others around me, shook my head in rather solemn agreement.

On occasion Berman rewards spectators for listening to him by handing them cookies. He transforms Chaadayev's words into introspective monologues, suggesting he is ready to commit suicide by stepping off a ceiling-high platform. Some speeches he delivers as exhortations through a fuzzy, overloaded amplification system, while at other times he takes on the role of a professor lecturing us on the influence of the murderous Ivan the Terrible on the Russian arts.

Each spectator will make what he or she will of this performance. What seemed most important to me about it is that it spotlights the genetic similarities of Russian outsiders from 1830 to the present. Vastly different worlds, astonishingly similar problems.

Of everything I saw I was most impressed with the finale of "I, Chaadayev," where Berman abandoned the spectators, leaving us feeling trapped inside the performance hall. Moments later, he appeared outside, sliding slowly along the glass of two large window panes. This was clearly an image of incarceration, yet, paradoxically, it was one of freedom as well. Just behind

the man playing the committed madman, individuals knowing nothing of what was transpiring passed by freely on the street.

"I, Chaadayev" plays next on June 17 at 7:30 p.m. at the State Center of Contemporary Art, located at 13 Zoologicheskaya Ulitsa.

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