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A Russian Road Play Hits the Brooklyn Streets

By John Freedman

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A couple of weeks ago I received a request to write a small text. I often receive such letters and I'm not always able to respond positively. This one, however, was different.

This time the person making the request was Nicole Kontolefa, a New York actress. I have known Nicole, sort of, for many years. She studied acting at the Moscow Art Theater school in Moscow. She is a member of Studio 6, a New York theater comprising actors who have graduated from that school. Over the years we've been in contact from time to time.

The main reason for that is that Nicole fell in love with a play I translated, Alexandra Chichkanova's "I Am Me." She wanted to workshop it and she wanted to stage it. I was thrilled and I put her in touch with the author. I know they were in direct contact for some time.

And then life, as it does, intervened. Nicole had one thing to do and then another. And then death, as it does, intervened. Chichkanova, not yet 30, hung herself in December 2012. If

you're interested, I wrote about that horrible event in these pages.

So when Nicole asked me to write something for the opening of her new production of "I Am Me" I felt as though a mountain had moved. I was happy to oblige.

My pleasure continued to grow as Nicole shared scattered details of her work with me. What a beautiful production she seemed to be creating.

"I Am Me" is the monologue of a young woman walking and riding around her native city somewhere in the Russian provinces, trying to see what she has never seen, trying to understand what she has never understood. It is anything but a conventional play and, to my knowledge, it has never been produced. I can imagine why — how would you do justice to the poetry of this "road play" in the confines of a theater?

Nicole found a marvelous solution to that problem. Beginning yesterday, that is Sat., and continuing on weekends at least through Oct. but longer if weather permits, she is meeting groups of spectators in front of the Central Library in Brooklyn and is leading them on a 40-minute excursion of Chichkanova's play along city streets and Prospect Park.

By taking "I Am Me" to the streets, she is taking it right back to where it was created, only a complete culture and about 8,400 kilometers (5,200 miles) removed.

She is also establishing — and I don't fear overstating things here — Chichkanova's international status.

This writer, as sensitive and insightful as she was, was not spoiled by success. Productions of her 14 plays in Russia were rare. She was never produced outside of Russia in her lifetime.

Nicole Kontolefa's production of "I Am Me" changes that. The quiet young woman from Russia's Ural Mountains region now has an opportunity to speak to the world in a new setting and a new language.

Of all the plays I have translated, and I've done well over 50, "I Am Me" occupies a special place in my heart. It was an honor for me to write something for the website that Nicole built to support her production. After you reserve tickets for one of the performances on the home page, and if you are so inclined, you can read what I wrote by going to the "Alexandra" tab in the menu.

Whatever you do, don't fail to click on the "Sashenka" tab. Here you will find a text that Chichkanova's mentor and friend, the famous playwright and educator Nikolai Kolyada wrote specifically for Kontolefa. It contains the heartfelt, still deeply pained thoughts of a man who lost a piece of himself when Chichkanova took her life.

I have not seen, and probably will not see, Nicole's performance of "I Am Me." But I can already see this is one of those events that gives many lives new shades of meaning. The ripples that a person's life and work send out can die and then, almost miraculously, begin running strong again. That's something worth standing up and noting.

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