

When Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy Brought America to Russia

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This film of Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy in "The Gin Game" was made in New York just months after the author saw the play performed in Leningrad.

Now, I may be jumping the gun a little bit with today's blog. It is prompted by a show — "The Gin Game" at the Sovremennik Theater — that I won't review until Thursday's issue. But I'm not actually writing about that today; I'm just using it as a springboard to a few half-forgotten memories. So I don't think I'm spilling any important beans here.

The fact of the matter is that I first encountered "The Gin Game" in 1979. It had premiered at a small theater in Los Angeles in 1976 and by a stroke of great good fortune for author Donald L. Coburn, it was snapped up by famed director Mike Nichols and legendary actors Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy for a Broadway premiere in 1977. Tandy won the Tony award for best actress in 1978 and there I was, holding a ticket in hand to see the show in December 1979.

The twist is that I was living in Leningrad at the time, buffing up my skills in Russian as an exchange student at Leningrad State University.

I had been in Leningrad for nearly six months and I was luxuriating in my immersion in Russian culture, learning to speak the language, read its literature and meet its people. My own home culture was more than a long way away at that time — it was completely out of mind.

One of my extracurricular teachers in all things Russian was Vladimir Ferkelman, a young man a couple of years younger than I. Younger he may have been, but this guy knew his way around everything and everyone in Leningrad. Thanks to Volodya I was regularly getting into Leningrad theaters and concert halls, seeing the great Arkady Raikin slay audiences like no one I have ever seen, catching much talked-about productions by the young, almost-unknown Lev Dodin, and sitting around shooting the breeze with famous actors like Sergei Yursky, who had just moved from Leningrad to Moscow, and Valery Zolotukhin of the Taganka Theater.

Now, I had never been interested in theater before. I was an American kid from the Mojave Desert. I grew up, as I love to say, with tarantulas, lizards and ants. Theater didn't have much of a pull on me. Baseball did. Rock and roll did. Not theater.

Volodya changed all that. What I saw in Russian theater and Russian theater-makers began to change my life. Their intensity and their sense of mission sunk a hook into me.

That is probably why, when I saw that an American theater production was coming to town, I went down to one of those kiosks and bought myself some tickets. Without Volodya's tutelage, I can't imagine myself ever planning a trip to the theater.

Now I can go to the internet and [learn](#) that "The Gin Game" was performed 17 times in Moscow and Leningrad at the tail end of December 1979. I can even read that the great Russian actor Oleg Yefremov claimed that Tandy and Cronyn would have sent Konstantin Stanislavsky "into transports of delight." But I didn't know any of that then.

Yes, I was ignorant, but even my ignorance had been invaded by a blurred knowledge that Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn were American landmarks. So when I saw their names advertised in Cyrillic next to the title of a play I didn't know, I bought those tickets. I didn't have the slightest idea what was awaiting me at the theater — "The Gin Game" had played at the Maly Theater in Moscow and was now opening its run at the Bolshoi Drama Theater in Leningrad.

The house was packed and there was a new impediment to working your way down the narrow aisle to your seat. A makeshift system of headphones was attached to slim boards running down each aisle. When the show began everybody but my companion and I lifted up the headphones and rested them over their ears.

The weirdest thing began to happen, as my companion and I would laugh at the punchlines being tossed out by the actors and then the rest of the audience would follow with a burst of laughter as the translation followed seconds later.

I'll never forget the moment when the 1,100 people sitting around me first gasped in shock and horror. Hume Cronyn at that moment had just unleashed a juicy epithet. This was 1979, remember, not 2014. It's not that cuss words were not acceptable on the Russian stage in that era: they were flat out absent. That taboo was still fully and absolutely intact. However, Cronyn's character Weller Martin had a way of expressing himself directly when he was particularly angry, and the translator apparently had not shied from his task of being true to the original.

I became intrigued now and slipped one side of the headphones over one ear and listened in to see how things were being translated. As such I was in the perfect position to hear the translation just after Jessica Tandy's Fonsia Dulsey, driven to fury, dropped an F-bomb on her card-playing partner. It had been bad enough for a man to use that word, but when a woman matched him at his game, one would have thought the entire hall had been electrocuted. The sudden, single, collective gasp going up from the audience was almost deafening.

For those curious linguists out there, the translation consisted of the second half of a crude Russian three-word expression that concludes with the words "your mother." The verb, the crux of the obscenity, was left out, but the power of the shock was not dulled for that.

Mind you, this did not put anyone off. It only increased the spectators' sense that they were seeing something of extraordinary truth and power. The story of the two elderly people almost, but not quite, finding friendship and love, was received with great trust and emotion.

I, the desert rat with no interest in theater, was absolutely throttled by Cronyn and Tandy. I had put aside my America and was discovering my Russia, but these two extraordinary performers brought it all back home for me. I was overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia and respect for a culture I didn't know and couldn't claim, but was in that very moment being introduced to.

I hung on every word the actors uttered, and I followed every move they made. The mastery, the ease, the believability, the tragedy and the comedy that this husband-and-wife team poured into their work transported me to a place I had never known or expected could exist.

When the performance ended, like a bear to honey, I was drawn to a door leading backstage. I didn't even think what I was doing, I just followed my own footsteps. Having no idea where I was going, I opened the door and resolved to find those two actors who had just blown my mind open. But right there in the doorway there stood a formidable, unsmiling figure whose job it was to keep people like me at bay.

I was not to be stopped.

Calling on all the worst instincts a foreigner can have, I grabbed my companion's hand and said to her in plain, native English, "Come on, let's go see Hume and Jessica," and we prepared to blow our way past all obstacles. To the woman whose job it was to ward us off I said off-handedly in my worst, most wrangled American accent filled with lots of horrible-sounding r's and lazy a's: "We're Americans. We must go see the actors."

I still cringe to think I employed such a cheap tactic, but I am eternally grateful I did.

"Oh," the woman said politely, "then let me take you to them."

When we arrived in the dressing room shared by the husband and wife, there were several Russians already there offering gifts and flowers and thanks. It was Cronyn, I believe, who had already changed into his street clothes. Tandy, then, would still have been in her stage costume, because I distinctly remember that one of them was still in costume.

We waited until the other visitors left and I stepped forward, as awkward as I could possibly be, and I began a short speech, the only value of which was its brevity. I said something about being American students, about realizing we were homesick even though we had no idea that we were, and about being stunned by their performance. Both graciously listened to my little spiel as though they were genuinely interested.

"Do you really think we were all right tonight?" Jessica asked, not so sure of herself.

I unleashed another barrage of words assuring her that they were. Hume smiled at us the entire time with a genuine, almost familial warmth.

When I ran out of words I was aware enough to recognize that we were also out of time. I said, "But pardon our intrusion, I'm sure you'd like some time to yourselves" and Cronyn kindly said, "Yes, thank you. We do need to rest."

I don't remember walking out of the dressing room, leaving the theater or getting back to our dormitory. But the image of the two gracious actors, patiently smiling as I gushed, is forever burned in my memory.

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