The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

‘The Master and Margarita’ Online Read-a-thon Kicks Off Today

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November 11, 2016



"The Master and Margarita. I was there" **masterimargarita.withgoogle.com**

Today at 1 p.m. an online read-a-thon of one of the greatest Russian classics, Mikhail Bulgakov’s ‘The Master and Margarita,’ begins. The project celebrates the author’s 125th birthday and 50 years since the book’s publication. According to organizers, the literary event aims to give a new ‘form of existence’ to the text, which is an integral part of Russian culture.

“The Master and Margarita. I was there,” is a live online reading of the novel that will take place over the next two days and will be broadcast on YouTube. This will be the third project in the series, with the previous two involving online readings of Anton Chekhov’s works and Leo Tolstoy’s “Anna Karenina.” This year’s event sees Google team up with Mosfilm, the country's oldest film studio and the main production platform for the project, to bring the novel to life.

An immersive experience

The key difference with this year's reading is the use of 360 video format and chromakey — a special effects technique for layering images — which allows the audience to see the reader and to be virtually transported into the book's world. The viewer will be able to experience the novel as if they themselves are taking a walk around Moscow's picturesque Patriarch ponds, the iconic apartment and other important locations in the narrative.

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"For me, this is the exact same thing that happens to us when we read the book," said Fyokla Tolstaya, a journalist, radio and television host, great-granddaughter of Leo Tolstoy, and the initiator of the project. "When we open a book we are being teleported into its world."

Andrei Boltenko, the project's creative producer, who also produced broadcasts for Moscow's Eurovision and the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, said that the use of this technology enables the readers to enter a "collective literary trance" — on the one hand they are reading Bulgakov's novel and on the other they are inside Bulgakov's literary world. "We want to create a sense that it is all happening in a single space, wherever viewer is watching from."

Over 500 people including actors, singers and government officials took part in casting with more than 350 taking part in the live stream from 8 Russian cities and Tel Aviv, Israel. The latter was chosen because Jerusalem features prominently in the novel.

The popular project is also expected to see Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov and Vladimir Medinsky, the Minster of Culture, taking a turn to read.

Organizers said that during the casting they were looking for people who loved the novel. Tolstaya describes it as a project which "thrives on peoples' enthusiasm."

A New Perspective on a Much-Loved Novel

One of the main challenges will be to not allow the visuals to distract the viewer. Many attempts to adapt the novel to big screen or to stage have failed, with some jokingly say that 'devilry' has something to do with it.

"There is a certain opinion that it's risky to work with Bulgakov's works, especially with the novel 'The Master and Margarita,'" said Karen Shakhnazarov, the director of Mosfilm, in a statement to the press.

Tolstaya explained that the project doesn't aim at introducing Bulgakov's work to the reader, it rather "aims to give a new form of existence" of the novel so dear to Russians.

Bulgakov worked on "The Master and Margarita" from the end of the 1920s until he died in 1940. However, due to Soviet censorship, it was only published as a serial in the "Moskva" magazine from 1966 to 1967. His tale of the devil arriving in a fervently atheistic Soviet Union

is now one of the Russian public's best-loved novels.

The read-a-thon runs from 1 p.m. today through 11:30 p.m. this evening and tomorrow from 12 p.m. through 6 p.m. Watch it here.

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