

A Migrant on the Stage: Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky and the Virtue of Time

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Abstract: *This paper analyses two “migration plays” written by the doctor-writer and dramatist Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky: Mediterranean Paradoxes (1998) and The Time Machine (1999), now available for the first time in English translation, in the volume From Russia for Good (2011). The Author reflects himself in the main characters, respectively the doctors Vesuvius Mediterranean and Musya Belochkin, presenting the steps of his conquest of freedom in the United States. On the stage, the audience discover the difficulty of his travel from Kharkov to Chicago, and the problems of his new life: the re-construction of another existence abroad, the use of a different language, the lack of the native land, the failure of the first marriage. Moreover, there is a balance of his personal experience as a migrant: “time” is the keyword to understand the past and the present, is the virtue necessary for the development of a better life.*

Key-words: *Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky; playwriting; exile.*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, emigration is one of the most discussed problem in the world and the figure of the migrant has conquered a relevant position also on the stage. The theatrical narration of the emigration is an intense experience of life for the audience, with a great cultural and social impact. The migrant is a very interesting character, with a deep psychological intensity and a special wisdom.

We can find a vivid portrait of this character in two “migration plays”, *Mediterranean Paradoxes* and *The Time Machine*, written by the doctor-writer and dramatist Mikhail Alexandrovich Berman-Tsikinovsky and available for the first time in English translation, in the volume *From Russia for Good* (2011). They are precious for the knowledge and the comprehension of emigration in a specific historical and social context, between 1970s and 1990s, in the passage from Soviet Union to the United States. In fact, the Author reflects himself in the main characters –respectively the doctors Vesuvius Mediterranean and Musya Belochkin – presenting the difficulty of his travel for freedom.

Born in Kharkov (present-day Ukraine) on 12th November 1937, Mikhail Berman-Tsikinovsky is a doctor-writer. He graduated from Kharkov Medical Institute as a Doctor of Medicine in 1961, and earned a Ph.D in Hematology in 1970. He came to the United States from the Soviet Union in 1978, during the so-called “first wave” of Jewish emigration. Since then, he has worked and lived in Chicago as a full-time practicing physician. His decision to

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leave Kharkov and to start a new life abroad, was prompted by having lived under Communist rule for forty years.

Berman-Tsikinovsky's literary career is extremely productive and his erudition is extraordinary. The publication of his poems started in Chicago, in the 1980s; he became a playwright in the 1990s, immediately garnering international attention and success. His dramas have been staged worldwide, and his works have been translated and published in Italy, France, Germany, Canada and the United States. His experience of exile from the USSR, and his life as a Soviet immigrant in Chicago, are the main autobiographical elements of his works.

He analyzed the exile in contemporary society with the so-called "migration plays", which were successfully staged in Paris, Chicago, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkov: *Chekhov on Devon* (1997), *Mediterranean's Paradoxes* (1998), *The Time Machine* (1999), and *The Return* (1999). Then, he considered the question on the historical perspective, in Roman and Byzantine society, with *The Pisonian Conspiracy* (2000), *The Land of Oblivion* (2007) about Ovid, and *Deus Conservat Omnia* (2009). A new recent phase, based on another form of recovery of the past, is with the plays *Rina* (2012) – premiering in Wuppertal in 2014 and successfully staged in St. Petersburg in 2015 – and *The Miracle* (2016).

Mediterranean Paradoxes and *The Time Machine* describe many aspects of his personal experience as a migrant in the United States. In these plays, both written in Chicago, the most important element of continuity, before and after the emigration, is the work as a physician: the two doctors (*alter ego* of the Author) have a special capability to understand the problems of the patients – especially if they are Russian migrants.

For Berman-Tsikinovsky emigration is not only a geographical passage from a country of the Old Continent to a country of the New Continent, but a radical change with many implications. The choice to emigrate was not simple or immediate for him: it was the result of a long interior meditation, which required courage and involved many risks. Moreover, it was not an individual choice, because also the first wife and two children had to experience it – with all the consequences on their family life. But the moral lesson is clear: the strength for a better life gains an advantage over all the difficulties.

On the stage, the audience discover the difficulty of the travel from Kharkov to Chicago, and the problems of the new life: the re-construction of another existence abroad, the use of a different language, the lack of the native land, the failure of the first marriage. Emigration is a sort of rebirth, a dynamic process with different phases and feelings, which implies a stable psychological equilibrium: there is no receipt for living it in the best way, the direction of the novelty and its effects on the human soul are never predictable.

In this perspective, Time is the basic element for the spiritual evolution of the character: in *Mediterranean's Paradoxes* the migrant lives a continuous struggle against the past, and is tormented by the responsibility of his choice – especially in front of two essential decisions, the divorce and the creation of a new family abroad. The total reconciliation with the past is expresses in *The Time Machine*: after many years in Chicago, a brief visit in Kharkov helps the doctor to realize that emigration is still the right choice for his life.

2. The Migrant and the Struggle against the Past

Mediterranean Paradoxes is a comedy in 17 scenes. The main character is Vesuvius Mediterranean, a fifty-year-old doctor with the heart big as the sea and burning as a volcano. On the stage, he reveals all his weaknesses of husband admitting a passionate love for the young doctor Yulia – another Russian migrant working at the hospital in Chicago (married with a musician and mother of a baby). But he fights against the doubts about the end of his marriage with Luiza (another doctor met at the university and married in Kharkov), with the same intensity with whom he had lived the human crisis in front of the decision to emigrate.

With a *flashback*, Vesuvius Mediterranean remembers his weak marriage, his infidelities in the married life and the complex situation which provoked his travel from Kharkov to Chicago. His wife Luiza understands and supports his decision to go away, but sometimes she can't hide her desperation for the long time of waiting to obtain the permission for the departure (scene 14):

LUIZA: I can't take it anymore. It's been a year since we applied for emigration. We've sold all our furniture, we're sleeping on the floor like pigs. Where is your permission? Where is this June, when it's so nice to swim in the Mediterranean, where is it? You have no work, and I have no work. Soon the money from the furniture and all the junk we sold will be gone. What are we going to do, Vesuvius? Could you call him?

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *From Russia for Good* 162)

After a very difficult interrogation in a KGB office and the exhausting passage in the "USSR Customs", Vesuvius Mediterranean conquers a second life abroad with his family. In Chicago, at the hospital where he starts to work again as a physician, he meets Yulia: it is another earthquake in his life, just after the emigration. At the first glance, this love can be seen as a weakness and the immediate consequence of a radical change of life. In a more intimate vision, the play reveals its real meaning: it is the sudden revelation of many years of unhappiness in the native country. The emigration has created the right circumstances for the complete admission of this situation and the urgency of a remedy. Vesuvius Mediterranean is a migrant, but also a sort of modern warrior who finally understand the way to victory: when he finds the courage to break a scheme of the past, he conquers happiness and freedom.

With another *flashback*, Yulia remembers her childhood between Sakhalin Island and Ukraine, her boyfriend at the university and her marriage, which is strong only in appearance. In this moment of the play, she is near to a Ibsenian woman who lives in a doll's house. But she knows her desire to improve her life, and is able to realize a possibility to change. In fact, Vesuvius Mediterranean has generated a real revolution in her life, and they don't want to hide their happy union.

With great coherence, Vesuvius Mediterranean and Yulia decide to break their marriages, and the sense of guilt is terrible. But they live this situation in different ways, according to their temperament. In the first days at home with Yulia, he is tortured by

remorse. Each night he is visited by Luiza's phantom, whose voice has the imploring tone of his abandoned wife, but also of his lost homeland (scene 17):

LUIZA: (*In a whisper*). Come back to me, come back, come back... Why have you done this? You're killing me. Have you brought me here to throw me away? Come back, come back.

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *From Russia for Good* 174)

The crisis of Vesuvius Mediterranean reveals a violent struggle between past (Luiza / old life in Kharkov / nostalgia) and future (Yulia / new life in Chicago / hope), provoking the final dialogue with his beloved woman (scene 17):

-MEDITERRANEAN: It's already the third night I haven't been able to sleep. Her whispering is haunting me. She stands behind me and whispers. I can't take it anymore.

-YULIA: You can't? Then go back to her! I'll survive. You're free.

-MEDITERRANEAN: But I love you. For me there's no one on earth closer than you. I know that I love you, but something's happening with me, independently of me, of my will and desire. Life has turned into utter hell. I'm suffering as if I killed someone. As if I killed...

-YULIA: Go back. You'll calm down. Everything will pass. You'll calm down, everyone will calm down.

-MEDITERRANEAN: And you? What about you??!

-YULIA: I'll go back to...

-MEDITERRANEAN: You'll go back?? Again, I'll have to imagine you in his...

-YULIA: That might be easier than suffering the way you are. I've survived a lot, and I'll get through this too. Go.

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *From Russia for Good* 175)

In this moment of the play, Yulia is near to a Ibsenian woman who lives the risk to lose the great love of her life. Her position reveals an absolute love for Vesuvius Mediterranean, because she is ready to renounce to him in the name of the absolute freedom.

At the end of the play, Vesuvius Mediterranean confirms his decision to live with Yulia. After the emigration, he is always a doctor, but also a "new" man: his hope for future is stronger than the memory of the past. This spiritual evolution has generated his renewed consciousness.

With *Mediterranean Paradoxes*, Berman-Tsikinovsky analyses the travel and the first period abroad of a migrant: this is the most difficult phases for the rooting in the new country,

with the pressures and the stresses of the unknown. Nobody can say if this choice is the right one. The only answer is Time, with its inscrutable power to balance and reconcile all.

3. The Migrant and the Reconciliation with the Past

The ideal continuation of *Mediterranean Paradoxes* is *The Time Machine*, a comedy in 6 scenes with this epigraph: «Dedicated to Kharkov and Kharkovites». With this “migration play”, Berman-Tsikinovsky shows the benefit of the new life abroad and gives a personal answer: for him, emigration is the right choice.

In *The Time Machine*, there is the young doctor Yulia again, but her husband is the doctor Musya Belochkin. After his departure, he has spent about twenty years in Chicago without returning in Kharkov. Meanwhile, he has started to work also as a playwright with very good results. His brief visit in the native town is connected with the début of one of his plays (some details of the dramaturgy reveal that it is *Mediterranean Paradoxes*) at the Russian Drama Theatre. His arrival is tenderly waited by his elder brother Sasha, the schoolfellow Viktor and the past girlfriend Alina.

In this occasion, Sasha meets for the first time Yulia, the new wife of his brother. They have a lucid opinion on the importance of their new and old family ties: the past is the key to understand the choices of the present. Time is the virtue to cultivate for the right comprehension of all the events.

The contradictions of Belochkin’s condition of Russian migrant and American citizen are evident, especially considering the use of the adjective “our” to indicate some objects made in USA. His different style of life is underlined by the expensive gifts for the brother (scene 1):

-MUSYA: OK. I brought you a jeans jacket too, as you requested. (*Takes it out of his bag*). Here, try it on. (*Sasha puts it on*).

-SASHA: Perfect. (*Glances into the bag*). What else do you have there? What’s that shining there? (*Takes out a pair of tan shoes*). Oh, great shoes! What brand are they?

-MUSYA: “Salamander”.

-SASHA: Wow! That’s a really expensive brand. Only the very richest people here wear those. (*Turns them over in his hands*). The sole is almost worn through. But we’ll put patches and new backs on them. I’ll look really cool in them, so leave them.

-MUSYA: I’ve been wearing them for about seven years. They’re very comfortable – my favourite shoes.

-SASHA: You can buy another pair. You exchanged your beloved wife for someone else in those seven years. So you can change shoes too. (*Reaches for Musya’s watch*). And what kind of watch is this? Come on, take it off. (*Musya*

takes off his watch. Sasha looks at it through a magnifying glass). What are these squares on the watch face?

-MUSYA: It's the latest technology, with solar-powered batteries. They charge themselves from the sun, or any kind of light.

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *From Russia for Good* 179-80)

In the play, this situation is also underlined by a poem composed by Berman-Tsikinovsky, entitled: *Song by the Brothers about their Things*. This music performance focuses the different style of life of the two brothers, creating a moment of deep intensity.

During the dinner, Belochkin discovers again the food and the smell of his childhood. In this way, he takes a first leap into the past, starting to meditate on the positive and negative aspects of his emigration (scene 1):

-YULIA: Come in, the food is ready. (*Musya and Sasha go to the kitchen*).

-MUSYA: Smells great! What's this? (*Points at a bottle*). Is it really sunflower oil? (*Smells it*). Yes, it is!

-YULIA: And here are some cherries, real cherries – I tried them!

-MUSYA: How could I live for twenty years without sunflower oil and cherries! (*Eats some salad*). And what great tomatoes, cucumbers! (*Smells them*). That's it. I'm staying here.

-MUSYA: (*To Yulia*). You can do what you want, but I'm staying.

-MUSYA: (*To Sasha*). Where do you get all this?

-SASHA: At the market.

-MUSYA: We don't even have any markets. What we really need to do is start a new emigration: from Chicago back to Kharkov!

-YULIA: And you can be the first! Let's drink! To the premiere of your play!

-MUSYA: Let's drink to sunflower oil instead!

-SASHA: That can be the next toast. And after that, to cherries. (*They clink glasses and drink*).

-MUSYA: Now I understand why Chekhov chose a cherry orchard. (*Tries a potato*). Your potatoes are also better than in Chicago.

-YULIA: Everything's better here. *The Cherry Orchard* has already been written, but you can write a play and call it *Potato Field*.

-MUSYA: Seriously, though. What does life consist of? What's the point of all these American luxuries if they don't have sunflower oil, cherries, decent potatoes, cucumbers, and tomatoes with a real smell. (*Holds a tomato out to Yulia*). Here, smell it.

(Berman-Tsikinovsky, *From Russia for Good* 181-82)

At this point, an invisible time machine helps Belochkin to take several leaps into the past. The lost days in the native country were happy only because his parents were alive... Opening his eyes, the migrant doctor is disappointed by the several architectural changes of Kharkov, his schoolfellow Viktor is widowed and paralyzed, his first girlfriend Alina has become a fat and hysteric woman.

After the début at the Russian Drama Theatre, Belochkin and Yulia are ready to go to the airport: they are happy for their visit in Kharkov, but also for their return in Chicago. In this final, there is a balance of Berman-Tsikinovsky's experience as a migrant: Time is the keyword to understand the gradual development of the human soul, all the choices, the wrongs of the past and the conquests in the present. The meaning of his emigration is a gradual, but complete rebirth: it is an inner travel from darkness to light, from fear to safety.

4. Conclusions

In these two "migration plays", there is a mix of humor, simplicity and clearness: for Berman-Tsikinovsky, they are also a way to observe his personal travel from Kharkov to Chicago, through the filters of Time. His portraits of the doctor migrant transmit a deep message for the contemporary theatre, between East and West: Time has a value, Time is a virtue, Time is the only element which can give the real opportunity to enjoy the taste of freedom.

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