

From A Bright Swarm of Beetles

By Don Zolidis

Act One

In which Bulgakov rises from the dust and is returned to it

(Light up dimly on the attic of a building. MIKHAIL, mid- 20s, unwashed and slightly unhinged, leans against a crate, huddled for warmth. Upstage, looming abstract shapes form the broken backdrop of a city.

(Mikhail takes a syringe from his satchel and begins to tie a rubber cord around his arm. He looks about fearfully, then injects himself.

(Time slows. We hear Aida.

(From another part of the stage steps THE FOREIGNER, a smartly dressed man of indeterminate European origin. He speaks directly to the audience. Music continues.)

THE FOREIGNER

In the year of our lord 1918, the man who would become the greatest writer the Soviet Union would ever know was this unfortunate wretch. A doctor, sunk in his own sickness.

A brief history lesson to begin. This is Kiev. City of Nightmares. We are in the midst of the Russian Revolution. This once proud city is one of the major battlefields. It will change masters a dozen times – demons replaced by demons replaced by demons. Children starve in the streets. A man could grow fat on cruelty.

Oh our man our man our man. See him. You'll have to strain your eyes. There it is – the wit, the brilliance, the electricity – the man who would be immortal was yet a child – a man with an appetite for opium.

(TATIANA, dressed barely above the level of rags, enters.)

TATIANA

Misha?

MIKHAIL

...more.

TATIANA

You're needed, Mikhail. There are patients downstairs.

MIKHAIL

...more.

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(He proffers the syringe to her.)

Please.

TATIANA

There is no more, Misha.

MIKHAIL

I beg you.

TATIANA

There is no...

MIKHAIL

Please... I will go downstairs but I need some first—I cannot stand until...

TATIANA

All right. All right.

(TATIANA takes a vial from her dress and fills the syringe. She leans over him and injects him with the morphine.)

MIKHAIL

I love you.

TATIANA

I'll tell them you're coming.

(she exits quickly.)

THE FOREIGNER

I know what you're thinking. He's not all that impressive. But stay with me friends, for there are diamonds within all of us – well, most of us.

MIKHAIL *(seeing him)*

Who are you?

THE FOREIGNER

Don't mind me. I'm a hallucination brought on by your addiction.

MIKHAIL

Oh.

THE FOREIGNER

You'll meet me again some day.

(the lights change. THE FOREIGNER steps away.)

But let's leave Kiev, it's a miserable place at the moment. Death, disease, war, you can't spit without striking a man about to die. Truly the Devil's playground. Skip forward three years. To

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Moscow. Capital of the new empire. And a newly sober Mikhail and his bride were about to begin their grand story -

(MIKHAIL and TATIANA stumble their way into a tiny apartment, loaded down with luggage. They look around.)

I like it. MIKHAIL

You do? TATIANA

It has a... it has... charms. MIKHAIL

Which are what? TATIANA

A ceiling. MIKHAIL
(noises from above.)

My brother-in-law said it was small. TATIANA

Your brother-in-law is nothing if not accurate. MIKHAIL
(GRUBBY WOMAN enters. She looks at them.)

Hello?

What. GRUBBY WOMAN

I uh... MIKHAIL

Who are you? GRUBBY WOMAN

I am Mikhail Bulgakov and this is – MIKHAIL

Yes? GRUBBY WOMAN

I'm sorry. MIKHAIL

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GRUBBY WOMAN

What happened to Semyon? He's dead?

MIKHAIL

Semyon?

TATIANA

My brother-in-law is Andrey.

GRUBBY WOMAN

So?

TATIANA

He said the flat was ours to rent.

GRUBBY WOMAN

Where's Semyon?

TATIANA

I don't know who that is.

GRUBBY WOMAN

Hmph.

(she walks past them. Looks to open a counter.)

He owed me twenty rubles.

MIKHAIL

I'm sure I don't –

GRUBBY WOMAN

He owed me twenty rubles.

MIKHAIL

I suppose he did.

GRUBBY WOMAN

You're saying I'm a liar?

MIKHAIL

No I – what are you doing?

(she picks up a small table.)

GRUBBY WOMAN

This is mine.

(she starts leaving with the table.)

MIKHAIL

Actually I think that was left by –

GRUBBY WOMAN

Semyon owed me twenty rubles and I'm taking this. I'll be back later for the rest of my things.
(she exits.)

TATIANA

I think we should look into getting a lock.

MIKHAIL

Or a gun.

TATIANA

At least we won't need the china.

MIKHAIL

As soon as I get a job writing we'll move to a larger place.

TATIANA

I thought you were going to continue to practice medicine.

MIKHAIL

It's the literary life or nothing now.

TATIANA

Yes, but until you find work –

MIKHAIL

I have to throw myself into to the water to see if I can swim.

TATIANA

Or drown.

MIKHAIL

This is a new life for us. A city of possibilities. We're going to turn our backs on the past now – all of it – and strike forward. I must at least try. You have to allow me that chance. Do you trust me?

TATIANA

Mostly.

MIKHAIL

That's mostly wonderful. You'll see, Tasha. We will conquer the world.
(there's a knock at the door. A MAN enters.)

MAN

What is this about Semyon being dead?

MIKHAIL

Well – I don't –

MAN

He owed me thirty rubles.
(lights change.)

THE FOREIGNER

Ah. Moscow.

(Noise and boisterous activity as CITIZENS rush back and forth, nearly pushing MIKHAIL over as he makes his way to the side of the stage. The CITIZENS part and bring on the desk of the publisher, YAKOV. He holds a sheaf of short stories.)

YAKOV

These were published?

MIKHAIL

Yes. In the newspaper. In Vladikaviakov.

YAKOV

Where?

MIKHAIL

It's a minor town.

YAKOV

This is Moscow.

MIKHAIL

I saw the signs on the way in.

YAKOV

You're a doctor?

MIKHAIL

I was a doctor. Now I'm a writer.

YAKOV

Like Chekhov.

MIKHAIL

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Actually yes. Except not as successful.

YAKOV

I have no use for these.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps I can show you something else?

YAKOV

No.

(The desk is removed by the CITIZENS. MIKHAIL stumbles toward the other side of the stage, buffeted by the CITIZENS again. Another desk is placed in front of them, with the publisher, ANNA, behind it.)

ANNA

These are good.

MIKHAIL

I'm glad you –

ANNA

Extraordinarily good.

MIKHAIL

I thought so too.

ANNA

Very well.

MIKHAIL

Very well what?

ANNA

Goodbye.

MIKHAIL

I was actually wondering if you needed someone on staff to write for you.

(ANNA eyes him.)

ANNA

No.

(ANNA pockets the newspaper.)

MIKHAIL

Can I have that back actually?

(ANNA stares at him.)

ANNA

No.

(The CITIZENS remove the desk again and spin MIKHAIL. He stumbles again and finds himself placed before a third publisher, LEZHNEV.)

LEZHNEV

You are imitating Gogol.

MIKHAIL

Perhaps Gogol is unconsciously imitating me?

LEZHNEV

You imagine yourself a funny person?

MIKHAIL

I've been told that on occasion.

LEZHNEV

Make me laugh. Now.

MIKHAIL

Um...

LEZHNEV

This is disappointing.

MIKHAIL

No I uh... okay – um here... I wrote this for the paper –
(MIKHAIL assumes the character of Vladimir the peasant.)
Dear Editor – my name is Vladimir and –

LEZHNEV

What are you doing?

MIKHAIL

I'm reading what I wrote.

LEZHNEV

Why are you doing it like that?

MIKHAIL

I'm becoming the character.

LEZHNEV

And this is supposed to make me laugh?

MIKHAIL

Well I think it would if you give it a chance.

LEZHNEV

All right.

MIKHAIL

Okay...

(he assumes the character again)

My name is Vladimir and I am considered by many to be the wisest man in my village of M.

LEZHNEV

What village?

MIKHAIL

The village of M.

LEZHNEV

What kind of village is named M?

MIKHAIL

It's an abbreviation for the actual name of the village.

LEZHNEV

Why?

MIKHAIL *(assuming the character again)*

However, there is something which confuses even me. I have three cows –

LEZNHEV

Cows are funny.

MIKHAIL

One cow gives milk only during the day, one cow gives milk only during the night, and the third cow... the third cow only gives milk when I sing it a song. So I say to my wife one night –

LEZHNEV

Okay, enough. You read well. You should be an actor.

(LEZHNEV considers him.)

We need a man who can write humorous sketches. Can you do that? Letters from fools... illiterate peasants—

MIKHAIL

You want me to write a letter from an illiterate peasant?

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LEZHNEV

Perhaps he dictated to his brother, I don't know. We have a small humor section. I can't pay you much.

(the CITIZENS remove the desk as MIKHAIL hurries home to the apartment, shivering with cold.)

THE FOREIGNER

How to describe that winter of 1921? The nights of frost, the ice creeping in through the windows. Mikhail, bundling his small literary sketches in a pack, tramping across half the city, beset on all sides by the indigent, the beggars, the sad fools who froze to death during the night? The hint of starvation in the mirror?

To read more of this play, please contact me at donzolidis@yahoo.com