



YOUTH ACTION
THEATRE



“ЮС ЭКШН ТЕАТР”

молодежный театр из лондона
представляет английский мюзикл



“BLOOD BROTHERS”

“БРАТЬЯ ПО КРОВИ”

на английском языке

(Willy Russell - Вили Расл)

КИЕВСКИЙ ТЕАТР НА ПОДОЛЕ

вторник 29 августа – суббота 2 сентября

в 19.00 часов, также в 15.00 в субботу

с финансовой помощью от

RANK XEROX



Youth Action Theatre's

exchange with
Theatre Podol, Kiev, U.S.S.R

1989 - 1990

Sponsored by Thames Television Plc

The Story of Y.A.T.'s visit to the City of KIEV, August/September 1989.

It all started in February with a telephone call from Marjorie Havard, secretary in this country of the International Amateur Theatre Association who had received an enquiry from the Deputy Director, Yuri Kurasov, of the Theatre on the Podol, Kiev, asking for an exchange with an English company. "Would Y.A.T. be interested?" was the question. My reply, "We would like first refusal".

So negotiations began. Enquiries with key people around me. First with Peter Roberts - without Peter being keen, it would be difficult. But he was. A number of possible titles were discussed which did include "Blood Brothers" but was thought unlikely because of the professional run. But we both liked it, felt it was suitable and because of its simplicity, easy to transport. Application was made and we were thrilled to be given permission, although no performances would be allowed in this country.

Meanwhile the administration side was progressing and a visit by an advance party of three to settle the details was finalised for early in May. I was fortunate to find that Jean Goodwin and Richard Eliot supported the venture and willing to become part of the advance party at their own expense. We went to Kiev for five days and agreed a document titled "Statement of Intentions".

Although a preliminary meeting of those interested in being part of the exchange, was held during the Easter break, it was agreed that casting and rehearsals would not start until the first week in July after school and college exams had been completed. The date of our visit had now been fixed for August 25th. to September 3rd. which meant a short but heavy rehearsal period. Well over forty auditioned for the thirty places which had been agreed and these places must include the director, stage staff, musicians and the company. In the event, we had a company of twenty, all under twenty five, four musicians, three under

twenty five and six staff, two under twenty five and included me, Jean Goodwin (Lighting designer), Richard Eliot (on Sound) and David Lewsey (Stage manager). Many company members were required to take on additional responsibilities such as prompt, props, wardrobe and make up.

Now, the company being settled, the task of booking air passages, collecting passports, photos and application forms for visas, began. Those chosen had also undertaken to host a Soviet during the second half of the exchange next year.

With so much complex organisation to be carried out, it was surprising that arrangements all progressed according to plan and by sheer hard work, our rehearsals advanced at a cracking pace - there was so much enthusiasm. It was decided to hold two early dress rehearsals, necessary to settle so many production problems such as quick changes, whether difficult bits of staging worked and so on and that we had everything we needed. For these we were allowed to use the Edmund Kean Theatre in the Richmond Tertiary College. Because I felt that I needed an audience re-action to what we were doing, the cast were allowed to invite their parents and close friends. This was a most valuable exercise and if we had not done this, our problems which we faced in Kiev, would have been that much more difficult to overcome.

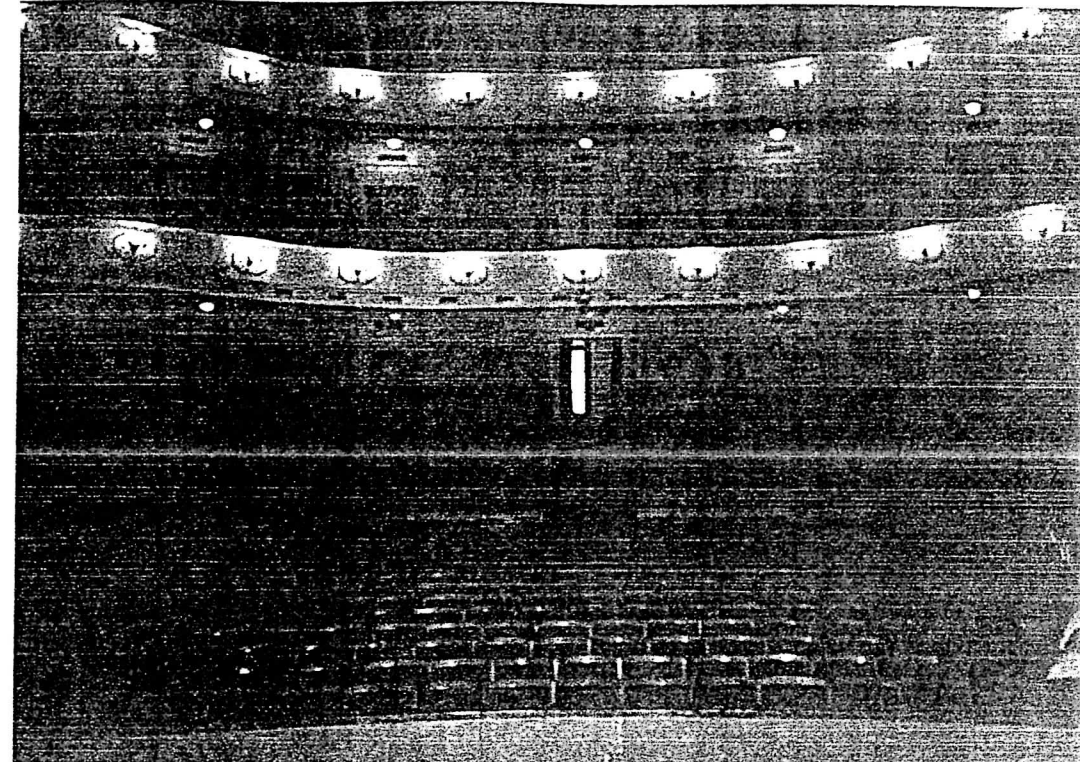
So we come to the tour itself. Everything we needed in the way of costume and props must be taken in our personal luggage. Where this was not possible, for instance we dared not take with us the guns and knives through Customs which the play demands. A list of these items, plus bigger items, furniture and a model of the simple setting had been sent out and we were assured that these would be found for us. But still as we left home, was the awful thought 'what essential item have we forgotten?'.

Seven o'clock on Friday morning, 25th. August, we all arrived at the school in Fairfax Road, Teddington, laden down with our luggage, with a few well-wishers, including two of our costume ladies, to speed us on our journey. A coach arrived to transport us to Heathrow. But not for long, Richard Eliot who had undertaken to get us there and back, decided he must call in at his home to make an urgent phone call to his office. It was not until we returned home that I learnt that the real reason was that he had misplaced our flight tickets. If I had, I would have surely hit the roof !

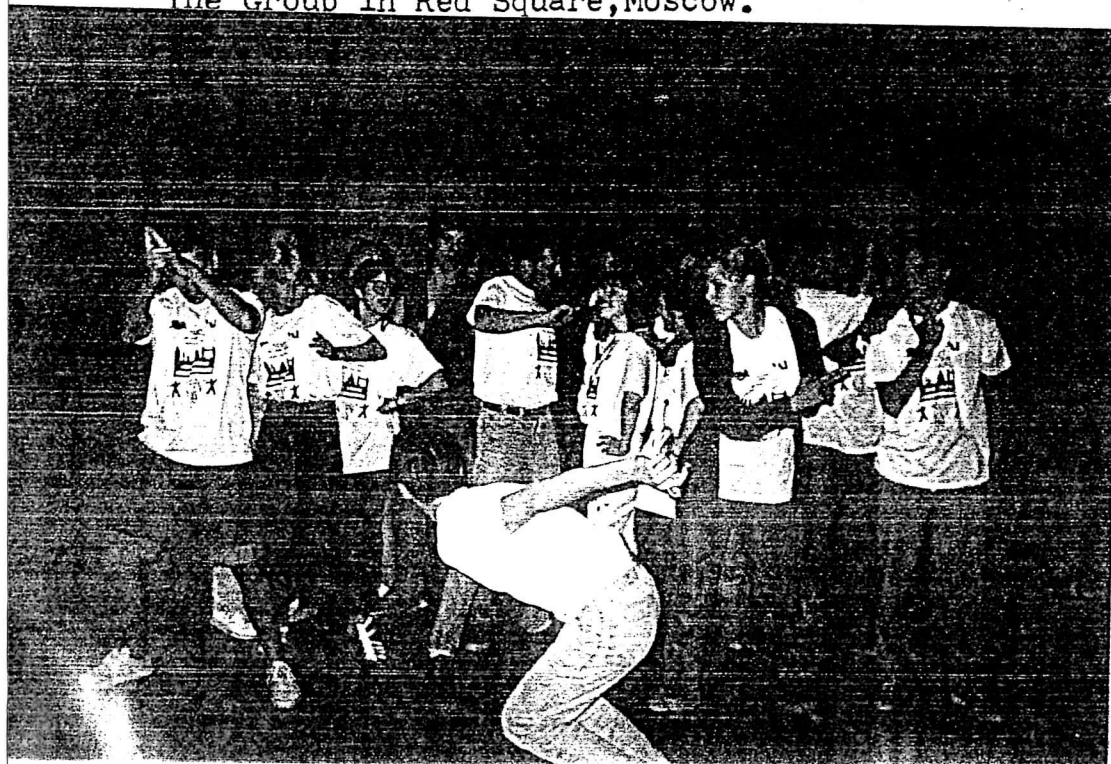
The British Airways flight to Moscow was comfortable and uneventful and we arrived just before five p.m. their time, which is three hours ahead of ours. There, waiting for us, was Yuri Kurasov, the director who I had made all the arrangements with. He had a coach ready to transport us across the city to the other airport where we were to catch another flight to Kiev.



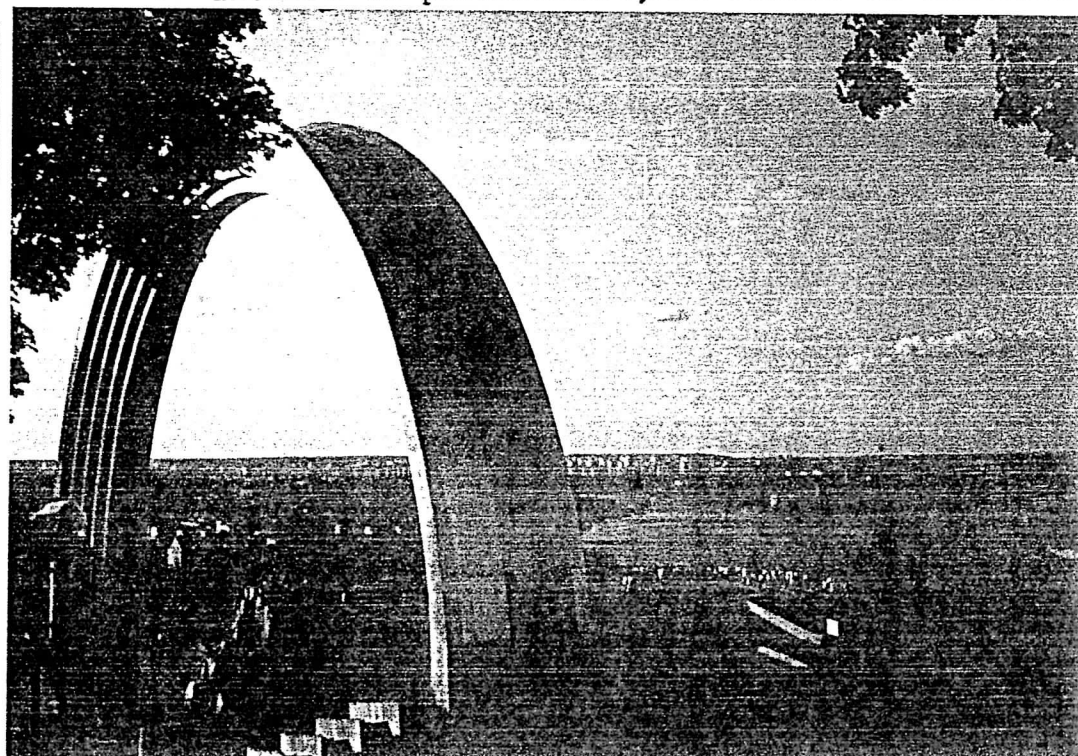
The Group in Red Square, Moscow.



Theatre of performance, The Palace of Culture.



On Stage Rehearsal



A View of the City of Kiev

There was just enough time for us to stop for thirty minutes to walk round Red Square, see Lenin's tomb backed by the buildings of the Kremlin. At least, our company could say that they had walked on these famous cobble stones.

The flight from Moscow to Kiev was little more than one hour, but with the various waiting times, particularly in Kiev, where it took more than an hour for our baggage to surface, it was near midnight before we got aboard a coach for the final stage of our journey to the hotel.

We were booked into the prestigious Hotel Moscow in the centre of the city, where all the company had double rooms complete with shower ,toilet and T.V. except for the four older ones and we each had a single room. Each room was fitted with a telephone so we could rouse everybody in time for breakfast. We were all certainly ready for bed and breakfast had been booked for eleven thirty the following morning to allow us time to recover and settle in.

Breakfast was quite odd - some small slices of cheese with bread to start, a long sausage to follow, then bread and jam with a small cup of coffee and a glass of fruit juice. This was the same each morning except it would vary with a pancake or omelette roll to replace the sausage. We discovered too that we could ask for tea. Food was one of our main problems. It was all very basic and never quite enough, But this was not a problem confined only to us but to everybody. There appeared to be very restricted food to buy and not a great number of restaurants and in these, it was necessary to book. You can go into a restaurant as indeed Jean Goodwin and I did, only to find that they could take no more customers as they had run out of food. It is not an easy life for them, there are many things difficult to find, two we quickly found difficult were beer and cigarettes.

Until the evening it was free time, so Jean Goodwin,Dave Lewsey and I went and explored the main shopping street,Kreshchatik Street at a leisurely pace. Our hotel was just off this street, it was Saturday afternoon, so there were a great many people out doing their weekend shopping. They all looked very similar to a crowd out in one of our shopping centres, perhaps there was a little strangeness in the cut of their clothes and the type of fabric - but all were clean and tidy.

A coach in the evening, met us at the hotel to take us to meet our host company at their small theatre on the Podol. It was about this time that we were informed by our interpreter that we would not be giving six performances as agreed in our 'statement of intentions' but only two but they would be in the prestigious Palace of Culture Theatre adjacent to our hotel which seats two thousand at each performance.

This was most disturbing and I protested strongly that they were breaking our agreement. There were obviously problems with the original venue and they had tried to compensate by booking the most glamorous theatre possible to compensate but there was very obvious disappointment when I told the group. To pacify me, they did give me assurances that they would investigate the possibility of performances elsewhere. I accepted this, what efforts they did make, I do not know, but nothing came of these assurances.

The party that evening was one of the highlights of the tour and was a very happy occasion. In a yard adjoining their theatre, they had set up improvised tables which were laden with fruits, salads and meats. The trees were decorated with streamers and so forth and we were quickly being hugged and fraternising with the assembled company. Vitaly Malakhov, the Artistic Director, then made his speech of welcome - Vitaly loves making speeches, loves being in charge and being the centre of attention. With suitable martial music, he had paraded in by actors, banners representing Y.A.T. and his Company. Then followed another procession with the bust of William Shakespeare borne aloft. And finally, an enormous aquarium bowl full to the brim with red wine which was presented to me to drink from first. I staggered under its weight, took a swift gulp amidst tremendous cheers and gratefully passed it on to Vitaly and around the whole company to drink.

It was all very animated and a group on an improvised stage played 'live' music. At ten o'clock, in the theatre, a play with music "Intermezzo" was to be performed and we were invited to attend, if we wished. I thought it might be nice way to relax. It was, the voices poetic, the music beautiful and I began to nod off. I struggled awake, fearful I might snore and decided not to stay for the second half. But it was a very good night which we all enjoyed.

Sunday started with a long sight-seeing tour of the city by coach with another Yuri with a considerable paunch and an American accent, giving us a commentary. All the main well-known monuments, famous buildings, museums were briefly visited and it was certainly very interesting but it went on just a little too long. Several times we left our coach to take photographs and a closer look. One of the final moments was perhaps the most impressive. We went inside St. Sophia's Cathedral whilst a service was in progress. There was a packed milling crowd, many very devout people constantly making the sign of the cross, up in the gallery the choir singing ecclesiastical music unaccompanied, the smell of incense pervaded the atmosphere and in the distance the celebrant in his gold vestments, intoning the service. Altogether a remarkable experience.

That evening, we put on our collars and ties and were taken to a Ballet performance. It was a mixture of classical pieces, starting with Swan Lake and interspersed with one or two more modern pieces including one backed by the music of Pink Floyd and another which impressed, had an Indian flavour. Nothing outstanding but a pleasant relaxing evening.

First thing Monday morning I was invited to go and see the Palace of Culture in October Revolution Square, just across the road from our hotel. This is where we were to perform. Standing on the empty stage looking out front for the first time, it was an amazing sight, gilded with huge chandeliers, I looked up to the distant balcony, then the dress circle, back stalls, down the front stalls to the huge orchestra pit at my feet. All most impressive and a very awesome sight, remembering our coming performances. It seated two thousand, we were told. But, on the other hand, the opportunity and experience of working in such a house would be something we might never experience again. So I sent for the whole company to come over and see it. They had been disappointed at the reduction of number of performances, perhaps the sight of this, might go some way to mitigate this disappointment. It did and we arranged to use the stage the following morning.

Most of our lunches were served in a small restaurant near to the Podol theatre and it has connections with the theatre. In fact, next door, we were shown their new theatre which is in the course of being built. The meals served here were some of the best we had and were quite tasty.

After Monday's lunch in this building, two or three Podol actors invited our members to go to a sporting afternoon at the Dynamo Kiev's training centre a little way outside the city and this could be followed by a sauna. Jean Goodwin and I decided that we would use this time to see some of the sights which interested us, more closely. Unfortunately, the visit to the training centre fell through but the actors looked after the group, took them to a nearby park where there was a rickety big-dipper and so forth. They bought food from a nearby market and had an enjoyable barbecue evening.

We, on the other hand, having walked a great deal, decided to find somewhere we could have a relaxing meal. We were unlucky, not having booked, we failed to find a restaurant which could take us, even the small cafe in the hotel was closed and we finished the evening in my room with a bottle of brandy and a packet of digestive biscuits, I had brought with me.

On Tuesday morning, we had our first opportunity to use this huge stage for two hours and we attempted to run the play and get used to using this large area. Although there was not time to complete the

run, this session was to prove invaluable when we came later in the week to realise how little time we were to be allowed on stage.

Lunch at the Podol theatre restaurant was followed by an appointment with the Kiev television company. First, we sat informally on a wall alongside the theatre and with the camera on us, the presenter asked questions of various members of the company about their re-actions to the trip, to Kiev and the Soviet people, and so on. The company then went to the area where the party had been held, to prepare a few excerpts from our show, to be recorded. I was left with the presenter and his camera crew who gave me a long and searching interview about every aspect of the group and this exchange, and how it was proceeding. Perhaps I was a little less than enthusiastic, bearing in mind that I was still disappointed over the number of performances. Rejoining the others, I was pleased how well Peter Roberts had organised three numbers from our show, to be accompanied only by guitar as there was no piano at hand. And after a quick rehearsal, these numbers were recorded.

That evening, a boat had been chartered to take us on a trip along the great Dnieper river - the crossing and re-crossing of this huge obstacle during the Second World War, was the scene of very bitter fighting. With the recent tragedy of the "Marchioness" on the river Thames just before our departure, still fresh in our memory, we embarked with a little trepidation. However, the friendly atmosphere quickly engendered by the mixing of our two companies who were, by now, getting to know each other very well, soon dispelled any fears and ensured a very happy evening on the water, with the T.V. camera still present.

We thought we would be allowed another two hour rehearsal session on the stage on Wednesday morning but when we arrived, the stage was full of scenery, prepared for an incoming company presenting an operetta that evening. After more fierce negotiations, we were given permission to use the stage, around the scenery for one hour when the incoming company were due to arrive for rehearsal. In addition, an interview had been set up for me with a reporter from some youth magazine. This was constantly happening - all in all, at various times during the week, I must have been interviewed for T.V., radio, press and various journals, at least a dozen times - at one stage between performances, they were queuing up. But this hour on stage was used to good advantage. Our previous session on this large stage in this vast auditorium, had shown our inadequacies in projection, so Dave Lewsey used this time to improve diction and projection and his success in doing this was apparent later in the week.

During this afternoon, a number of our members attended a seminar on stage fighting which an expert was giving to the actors of the Podol company for their next production.

In the early evening, a meeting at the Podol theatre had been arranged for us to meet the Party Secretary of the Kiev Communist Party. He gave us a short address of welcome and then invited any questions. Although one could view this session rather cynically, at least our young members were able and did ask the most frank questions on a full range of subjects and they did receive answers, even though some of these own skirted round the fringe of the questions. But in its way, it did show that 'glasnost' was working.

After this, my frustrations reached their peak. All through the week, we had been told different stories - we would be given additional performances - we would have all day in the theatre to prepare - then that we would not be able to get in until lunchtime as the preceding company would be getting out in the morning. Now Jean Goodwin came up to report that she had just been told that there was a schools 'opening of term' ceremony in the theatre in the afternoon and the earliest we could expect to get in was seven o'clock in the evening. Yuri Kurasov then came up to ask me to his office to discuss our meeting the following evening with the theatre's sponsor and handed me some documents. I must confess that I threw these papers across the desk at him and told him I did not want to discuss them, only at what time could we get into the theatre. They realised how upset we were and made urgent telephone calls to the director of the Palace of Culture, offering him any amount of money but nothing could be done about the afternoon event but did agree to let us in at five p.m. So we did gain two more valuable hours, and we accepted the situation.

Some of the party that evening went to see the operetta we saw in preparation earlier in the day but I went with a select few to watch the famous football team Dynamo Kiev play their rivals, the Moscow Torpedoes, in their wonderful stadium. It was an excellent game, resulting in a two all draw.

There was still one more engagement for me after the football. Vitaly Malakhov, the Artistic Director of the Podol theatre had asked for a meeting to discuss our future together. Yuri Kurasov, his deputy and Olga his wife also attended. I had invited them to my hotel room for a drink and we got out our whiskey and vodka bottles. They are very anxious that our association should continue and have plans already under way, to link a number of drama companies together world wide. The main things decided were that the three Soviets present plus Vladimir Moroz, the director of the sponsor company who, we understand, was bearing the cost of putting us up in the Hotel Moscow, would be invited by me to come to England as advance party for the main group,

and this would take place from Friday December 15th. to Wednesday, 20th. December. The visit of the main party would be from Sunday March 11th to Monday, March 19th. 1990 subject to availability of air flights. Vitaly suggested that they may like to present three plays each for two nights, Shakespeare's "Dream", Sophocle's "Oedipus Rex" and a Ukrainian musical - but this to be confirmed later. It was, despite all our problems, a very friendly and relaxed meeting.

Another outcome of this meeting was the offer as a gift of a small 'smoke' machine which would be very useful to us. Jean Goodwin went to inspect this the following morning. With Dave Lewsey, I was to go and choose the furniture for the play, immediately after lunch. So the two of us made our way by Metro from the hotel to the theatre restaurant, quite an adventure for two impossible navigators. I waited outside the restaurant whilst Dave went on to the theatre to fetch the others. When he returned, he was accompanied by a strange man. This was an amazing moment for me personally for it turned out to be Sergei Azerpoby, a Russian with whom I had been corresponding for more than 20 years but had never met. Knowing by my last letter that I was to visit Kiev, he had determined to surprise me by paying a visit. When you consider that his home is in a town nearly one thousand miles north east of Moscow and that we were about six hundred miles south west, it was quite a feat. He had been on a train for about twenty six hours. The Soviet Union is such a surprising country, It was a wonderful experience meeting him but, unfortunately I had a full programme to carry out and could not give him the time he deserved.

We chose the furniture and hurried back to the theatre, where the actors of the Podol company had been assembled. I had been asked to talk to them about our methods of directing plays. With the aid of an interpreter, I talked for about forty five minutes on how I feel about directing and then invited questions. I was very pleased how attentive they seemed and that they wanted to ask questions and they were questions very relevant to the way we work in theatre. I found this to be a most rewarding experience.

The evening was taken up by another party in my hotel room when we entertained Vladimir Moroz, the main sponsor of the Podol company. I was pleased that my friend Sergei, was able to join us for the latter part of this.

Having waited so long it seemed incredible that we had at long last arrived at Friday, the day we were to move into the big theatre to start our preparation. The reason for the whole visit. We knew our time in the theatre was short and every minute had to be used sensibly, so we planned to meet at four p.m. ready to move in the moment they gave the signal. To fill the morning we were offered a visit to the Lavra Monastery complex, a very ancient site in which was

in which was included a labyrinth of caves in which ancient chroniclers and other monks lie buried. It was interesting but our regular interpreter had other things to do and left my friend Sergei to conduct the tour. It was a place he had always wanted to visit but it was as strange to him as it was to us. Later that evening he had to leave for home so I had little more time with him.

We did get into the theatre as arranged soon after five p.m. and our work began and so did our troubles. First the Sound box was locked and we were told would not be opened until one o'clock the following day as the technician had gone home for the weekend. Major arguments followed and I next learnt that not only were we having this theatre's sound equipment but they were also transporting all the Podol theatre's sound equipment down as well. What strings had been pulled I do not know but Richard Eliot was able to get on with fixing up his sound and amplification which we needed.

Meanwhile Jean Goodwin on the lighting side was receiving more resistance from the formidable lady in charge of the Lighting box who could not understand what Jean required nor would she let her operate the controls - that was her job. So although Jean had begun to understand the board, she was very frustrated with the progress she was able to make that evening.

At nine p.m., I agreed that we must attempt a full dress rehearsal and Jean would give us what light she could. We eventually started at 9.30 and completed the run soon after midnight but not before the theatre staff had closed down and left us to finish in house lights. We did our best to console Jean who was a very worried lady.

Saturday morning and our lighting problem was solved by a young English girl who was staying in our hotel on some sort of course. She was a fluent Russian speaker and agreed to give up her morning and spend it in the lighting box, interpreting for Jean. At the same time, the formidable lady in charge, also became more amenable. So we were able to do some sort of technical rehearsal in the morning and broke early for lunch and a rest before our first performance at 4.p.m.

This moment was memorable. I was standing alone in this huge glittering auditorium, nobody else to be seen. Standing alone and feeling very alone. The stage was dark and empty, the cast all below changing. Way back, at the back of the auditorium, I could see a small lit window to the right and through^{it} see Jean, head bent over her lighting plot. On the other side a similar lit window and Richard Eliot standing argueing with his Soviet technician. There was an eery silence, suddenly broken by a piercing bell and stop. Then as I looked up, doors burst open, high in the balcony, in the dress circle at the back and sides of the stalls and the audience poured in from all directions. Poured in and filled this vast speace.

So we performed in the afternoon - and so again in the evening to an even larger audience. There were probably more than three thousand people at these two performances. They appeared to understand the play, they read the synopsis in the programme avidly as I walked amongst them during the interval and they gave loud and generous support at the end - with flowers being presented by enthusiastic supporters to the leading players. And just as suddenly, it was all over but not without the cast feeling very emotional. And so did I.

The Podol company were all present and when the audience had left, there were speeches and presentations and an affectionate farewell. And then we adjourned to hotel rooms, to parties and final drinks together.

Sunday we had to have breakfast at 8 a.m. and be packed and ready to leave at nine by coach for the airport. Yuri and Sasha were there, ready to see us off and by 9.30 we were, at last, loaded on the coach with all our goods and chattels, ready to leave Hotel Moscow for the last time.

We had not been able to get return flights from Moscow, so our Aeroflot flight due to leave at 11.45 a.m. was taking us to Leningrad. We did leave on time after saying our final farewells to Yuri. At Leningrad, we were on our own. We had thought that we would be leaving from the same airport - perhaps we did, but the terminal was 4 or 5 miles away from where we landed. Richard, however, was successful in securing the services of a small coach and van to transport us. I don't quite know how he did this or how he paid for it as we had handed all our surplus roubles, in. The problem of going through Soviet customs was comparatively easy, I saw no-one having any apparent difficulties despite some of the weird things some had bartered or bought. And once on board the British Airways plane, I felt that we could all now relax, we were homeward bound.

It was not until twenty four hours later that I learnt of an awful occurrence. We had been given as part of the agreement, 550 roubles for our performances and with the surplus roubles collected, we had more than six hundred, none of which we were allowed to take with us. We had arranged for this to be held by the Podol company for us against future ventures. Unpacking his bags, Richard confessed he found these roubles in another bag, not the bag he thought which he had handed to Yuri for safe keeping.

I don't think I have ever seen such a tired looking bunch as we arrived back at Heathrow. But everybody agreed it was a once-in-a-life-time experience - not one of us would have missed it for anything - a truly amazing and enjoyable week !