

Youth Action Theatre's

exchange with
Theatre Podol, Kiev, U.S.S.R
1989 - 1990

Sponsored by Thames Television Plc
and YOUTH EXCHANGE CENTRE, THE BRITISH COUNCIL
Eric Yardley

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REPORT ON THE COMPLETION OF THE EXCHANGE BETWEEN YOUTH
ACTION THEATRE OF RICHMOND UPON THAMES AND THE THEATRE
ON THE PODOL FROM KIEV, U.S.S.R.

written by Eric Yardley

Arrangements for the exchange were began in February 1989 and visits by the Advance Party and Main company from England took place in May and August, 1989. The Ukrainian Advance party arrived in December and the visit for the Main company arranged for March 1990.

The final leg of the exchange was scheduled for arrival on Monday March 12th. and departure on Thursday, March 20th, a stay of eight days. The agreed maximum numbers on each side, were thirty persons.

The composition of the Theatre on the Podol party was as follows:

Acting Company	-	21	including Artistic Director, Interpreter / Administrator, Lights, Costumes, Sound.
Sponsors	-	5	including 2 wives. These paid the costs of Air Fares, etc.
Ukrainian TV Personnel	-	2	including Editor-in-Chief, Programmes for Youth
Deputy Director of Dept. of Culture, KIEV	-	1	
			TOTAL - 29

Considerable attention was attracted to this leg of the exchange because of the large British Commercial and Cultural Exhibition which is to take place in Kiev in June. We have been told that this is to be opened by HRH. the Princess Royal and that Mrs. Thatcher will be attending. The fact that Mr. Michael Chambergi, Deputy Director of the Kiev Department of Culture who it is understood, is connected with the organisation planning this exhibition, was travelling with the Company, caused the Kiev unit at the Foreign Office to contact us and visits by them to the Theatre and meetings in their offices, were arranged.

Also, Mr. Michael Hall, director of the British Soviet Chamber of Commerce, involved in the commercial side of this exhibition, requested a meeting with the sponsors travelling with the party and this took place in his office.

We also sent information to the three main performing companies to be included in the cultural side of the exhibition, English National Opera, English Shakespeare Company and London Contemporary Dance. All responded with considerable interest and came either to meet the Podol company or to see a performance at Hampton Court.

From the outset, we have received continuous support from the International Theatre Institute (Sec: Shawn Reid) and as one of the objectives of the Podol theatre company was to meet and possibly link up with a suitable professional company in this country, I.T.I.'s Chairman wrote letters to a number of suitable partners with some positive results.

Similarly, Jane Rayne, through contact which the writer made with Central Television, was most helpful. She is director, Theatre Projects, Soviet British Creative Association and visited the Podol company on several occasions during their stay with us. It was through her good offices that David Ambrose of T.N.T. St. Donats Arts Centre and Sally Campbell of Shared Experience Theatre company came to Hampton Court and these visits, with several others, could have positive results.

It was also through Jane Rayne that worthwhile interviews were set up for Viktor Pavljuk, Ukrainian Television Studio's, Programmes for Youth, Editor-in-Chief with both B.B.C. and Channel 4. Throughout the visit, this gentleman was engaged in making a video film of the visit including life with an English family, the family who was hosting him, to be broadcasted later on Soviet T.V.

It had been agreed that the Podol company would give six performances of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' in Hampton Court Theatre and this they did. At one time, the organisers were very worried about attracting sufficient audience for a play in Russian, despite the fact that the auditorium is quite small, seating around one hundred. But considerable work in the last few days before arrival, was put in and a good audience was attracted. In fact, once the first performance had taken place, it was of such an outstandingly high standard, that word soon sped around and the Box office was inundated with enquiries. A copy of the review written by John Thaxter, drama critic of The Richmond & Twickenham Times, is attached.

Although the members of Youth Action Theatre during their visit to Kiev last August, were boarded in the prestigious Hotel Moscow in the centre of the city, it had been agreed that our guests would be hosted by individual families in this locality, many of them with the parents of those young people who went to the Soviet Union. To simplify our organisation and arrangements, Jean Goodwin took responsibility for the theatre production, David Lewsey for the feeding arrangements and Richard Eliot for transport. Whilst I was in overall charge of the programme. Because of the very limited financial resources of each guest, a full programme of activities was arranged.

The visit itself. A coach was arranged to meet the party at Heathrow on Monday evening, March 12th, whilst the hosts were asked to congregate in the Foyer at Hampton Court Theatre. There we all were at eight o'clock, a group, not many of us knowing each other and wondering what the next week had in store for us. Suddenly the phone rang. It was Richard, their plane had landed; they were on board and would soon be negotiating Customs. Just before ten pm. they arrived at Hampton Court excited but very tired; they had travelled by train from Kiev to Moscow, (600 miles) and by plane to Heathrow. I sat down with the Interpreter who I knew from previous contacts and I gave him one name from my list and he gave me a name from his list and so the guests were allocated, whilst they had a drink served to them from our Foyer bar.

The first full day, Tuesday had been allocated entirely to "getting in" to the theatre and rehearsing and giving the first performance. Could it all be done in time? We assembled at ten am. and all the morning the stage staff and lighting technicians worked. Lunch was served in the theatre and then began a long rehearsal. I thought it would never end. Everywhere - chaos. How could an audience be allowed in at seven pm. But suddenly the rehearsal was over, everybody lent a hand to tidy up and the early arrivers appeared and saw a comparatively tidy and calm Foyer.

There was an incredible air of expectancy, excitement and anticipation in the Theatre that evening. It was wonderful to be part of it. None of us knew quite what to expect. And then we sat in a near full house and the play began. There was tremendous atmosphere from the first moment. It was a most striking production - everybody was impressed - the visual impact overcame the lack of understanding the words - and at the end, rapturous applause, so much so, that I rushed backstage to bring on Vitaly Malakov, the director, for a well-earned reception. There were to be further equally successful performances each evening until Saturday with a matinee to make the six, agreed.

Wednesday, a coach at nine am. took us up to London to the Houses of Parliament. Our appointment was for 10.30, we drove over Westminster Bridge at 10.25. All through this week, we were to be a very privileged party. On this occasion, we were met outside the House by two peers of the realm, their Lordships, Graham and Gallagher. We split the party in to two and their Lordships each conducted us on a tour, explaining the intricacies of this historic building. A most remarkable experience. At the end, they posed with us for photographs before taking their leave.

The main party then walked back across Westminster bridge to the South bank except for the sponsors who were taken off to a special meeting with the director of the British Soviet Chamber of Commerce.

At the National Theatre, a special guided tour had been arranged by the Touring and Education Depts. and Nicola was to be our guide backstage and around the Lyttleton, Olivier and Cottlesloe theatres. Nicola later, came to a performance at Hampton Court Theatre. The members of the company were very impressed with all they saw and asked many questions. After the tour, we were served lunch in the Staff canteen and the Podol director and administrator were able to meet and discuss possible links with various officials of the National. The coach then sped us back to Hampton Court for the evening performance.

Thursday's programme was to be an easier one. Through the good offices of a Teddington Theatre Club member, Mrs Pat Beaumont, Assistant Administrator of Hampton Court Palace had arranged for the Administrator, Mr. Yarnell to meet the Company outside the Palace gates and to allow a special tour around the buildings and though the gardens which, on this sunny Spring morning with the daffodils in full bloom, were a picture. The glories of the Palace were explained by Mrs. Sara Edwards, another friend and recent Chairman of Richmond Arts. And finally, as a special concession, lunch was served in the Palace.

In the afternoon, the Company's Artistic director had called a rehearsal for some of the company and the remainder were taken in to the near by town of Kingston upon Thames, to see around the shops, before the evening performance.

For Friday morning, a red double decker London bus had been chartered to take us on a tour round central London and all the well-known sights of Piccadilly Circus, the Tower, Downing Street, etc. And these were all explained by a Russian speaking guide.

Back to Hampton Court for a quick lunch before being taken to York House, Twickenham, the civic centre of the Borough of Richmond upon Thames where the Mayor, Councillor Geoff. Pope with his Mayoress, were to give a reception, Unfortunately, the Mayor was unwell and was only able to make a brief appearance, but following the Mayoress's welcome, Councillor Woodriff, a fluent Russian speaker was able to talk and explain the building.

As there were to be two performances on Saturday, the guests remained with their hosts till lunchtime. And so we arrived at the final performance. All of them had been enthusiastically received, audiences were impressed and showed it with their applause. Those of us who watched all the shows, were surprised to find that each was different in small details.

It fascinated us, how this could happen - it did mean that the individual players had complete trust and understanding with each other so that they were able to respond to these small individual differences and so keep the performances fresh and alive. A very happy supper party followed this performance and, of course, by this time, our guests, members of Youth Action and all our hosts, were all comfortable in each others company.

Sunday, a day to be spent with the individual hosts until the evening. It was beautiful warm Spring sunny day. Each host had made their own plan. Several of us, had pooled our guests and were to have a joint large, typically-English roast dinner. Mrs. Wilson, mother of one of the YAT Kiev party, had offered her house and garden and to do the cooking. We had a magnificent lunch eaten in the garden, our guests included Lysander, Hermia and Peter Quince. A most enjoyable and relaxing time.

The evening was given over to a reception by the Teddington Theatre Club in their theatre, an informal evening of food and drink with the opportunity to meet and chat to our Soviet visitors. Many local public figures, many representatives from local organisations and interested local people came along. There were Councillors and Borough officials from Richmond, Chairmen of the Arts Councils of Richmond and Kingston, dignitaries from the Kingston Polytechnic, Society for Cultural Relations with USSR and so on. It was a stimulating evening and Vitaly Malakov, Podol's artistic director responded to the warmth of the reception.

For the final day, a trip to Stratford upon Avon had been planned. Unfortunately, the sunny Spring weather was over but even so the English countryside looked beautiful from the coach. First port of call was Mary Arden's cottage just outside the town where we were shown around Shakespeare's mother's home with a full description. Afterwards, we sat outside to eat our picnic lunch. Then into Stratford town centre to the Birthplace where, Roger Pringle, the director had arranged an illustrated talk given by Rebecca Flynn. The Soviets then wished to do some shopping and dispersed until five pm. We all met again in the Foyer of the Stratford theatre where Graham Sawyer, manager of the theatre and one time member of Teddington Theatre Club, met us. Although the theatre was dark and full of workmen, he was able to show us inside and also into the beautiful Swan Theatre, where he explained the workings of these theatres. Then on to the home of Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, just outside the town where another past TTC member has a restaurant. Here we had dinner before setting off for home.

Tuesday, the flight home was scheduled to leave at 08.55, this meant meeting at Hampton Court at six am. All arrived, brought by their hosts who bade them a fond farewell and the coach set off for Heathrow. The organisers and other members of Youth Action went with them and had final emotional farewells as they disappeared through the departure gates. There is no doubt that, with the whole week going through completely according to plan, with six tremendous performances, with so many friendships firmly established and with all the official links that had been forged by officials here and with the Podol officials, it was a tremendously successful visit and one which we can be very proud of having set up. A new protocol of Intentions was agreed by both our parties, covering our future associations and signed by both sides. A copy of this document is attached.

To conclude this final report, Youth Action Theatre expresses its appreciation to its main sponsors, THAMES TELEVISION p.l.c. whose support came from the very start, and to the YOUTH EXCHANGE CENTRE, The British Council. Also to the Management Committee and members of Teddington Theatre Club at Hampton Court Theatre, many other organisations who gave financial and material support and to literally hundreds of individuals who have contributed in so many different ways to enable Y.A.T. to complete this very successful and memorable exchange. THANK YOU ALL.