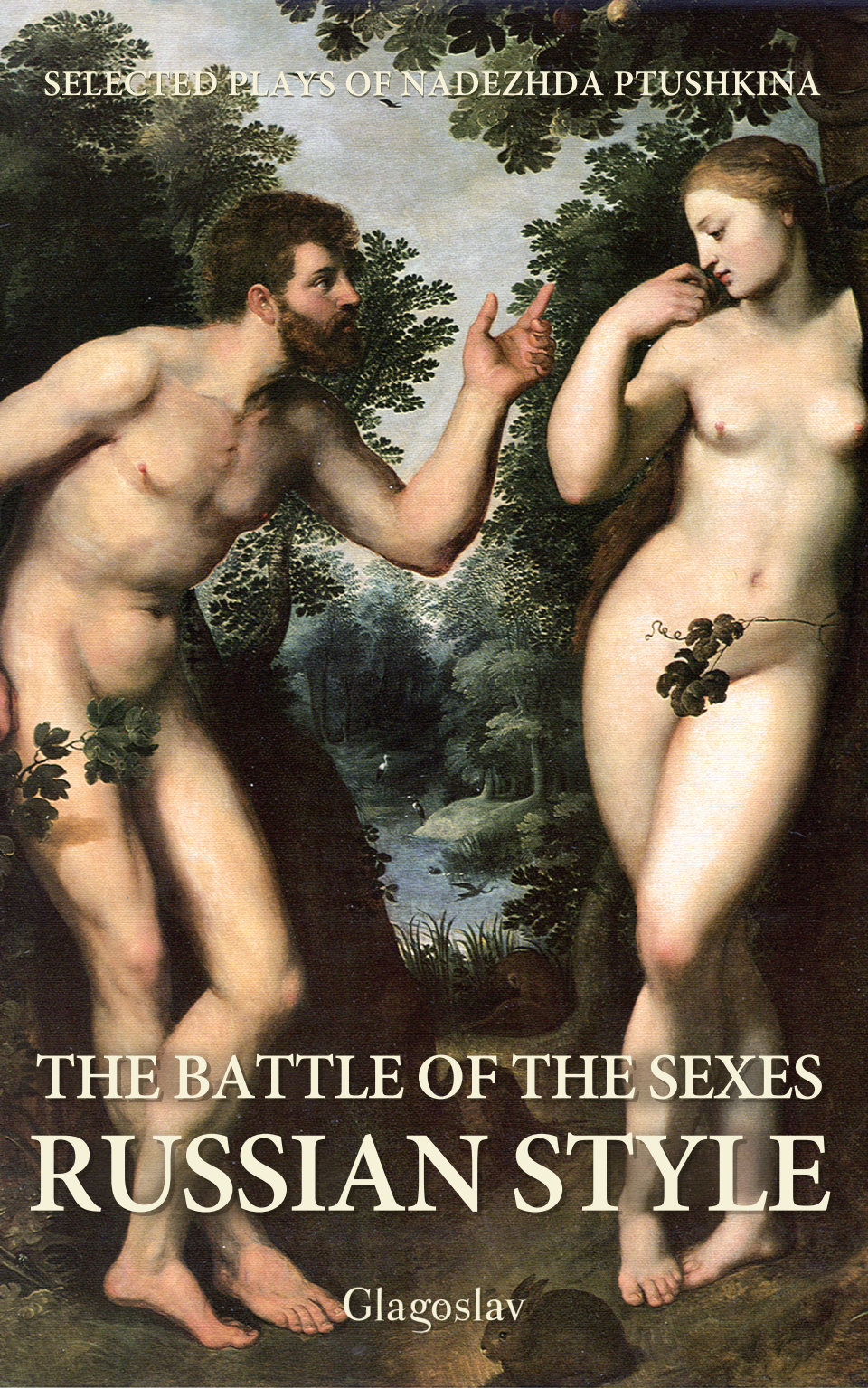


SELECTED PLAYS OF NADEZHDA PTUSHKINA



THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES  
RUSSIAN STYLE

Glagoslav



**The Battle of the Sexes**  
**Russian Style**

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**Glagoslav Publications**

# The Battle of the Sexes Russian Style

by Nadezhda Ptushkina

Translated by  
Slava I. Yastremski and Michael M. Naydan

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## Translators' Notes

In our translations we try to find English equivalents for the colloquial Russian of Nadezhda Ptushkina's texts. For translations of theatrical pieces, the lines must sound natural for the actors performing them as well as for the audience. To that end, we asked the amateur and professional actors mentioned in the acknowledgements to do a staged reading of most of the plays in this volume and have incorporated much of what we heard in our translations.

Ptushkina's plays are closely connected with the *realia* of Russian culture during its transition from the Soviet regime to the new, quasi-capitalist environment of today's Russia. This period has seen a tremendous shift in cultural and spiritual values. Under the totalitarian Soviet regime when religion was banned, some Russian and foreign authors were prohibited from being published. Culture was the only means for preserving spiritual values. With most of the population being equally impoverished in the USSR, no one cared much about money. There was not much you could buy, even if you happened to have it. *Perestroika* and the first few years of the new Russia brought a complete reversal in people's attitude toward culture and money. This is prominently present in almost all of Ptushkina's plays. For example, in *I Pay Up Front*, the character Polina complains about the change that had taken place in Russian culture where spiritual and cultural values such as art, literature, reading books, despising money, etc. were replaced by the new corrupt capitalism such as businesswoman Olympiada's interest in nothing but money and the attitude that it can buy anything – from a painting by Picasso (not because she admires its aesthetic values, but because of its monetary value) to buying a married husband for herself. We find a similar clash of the protagonist Alla's idealistic views on love and life and the mercantile values of Alexandrina in *Somebody Else's Candlelight*. In *Momma's Dying Again*, the lead character Sophia from the older generation has a difficult time understanding how a bookkeeper can acquire money to buy a car along with a summer house in Spain.

In *Momma's Dying Again* we encounter a problem in the cultural translation of things connected with the New Year's celebration. During Soviet times when religion was all but banned in the

public sphere, the biggest and the most popular holiday was the secular New Year, which was celebrated exactly like Christmas (which according to the Russian Orthodox Julian calendar is on January 7) – with a decorated fir tree, Santa Claus (called Father Frost in Russian), the giving of presents, a big holiday dinner, etc. Even when religion made a return to favor after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the New Year’s holiday has remained the people’s favorite. Russian people now celebrate Orthodox Christmas on January 7 according to the Gregorian calendar, but the tree, the presents, the visit from Father Frost, all continue to occur on New Year’s Eve. In our translation we have opted to use terms more familiar to a Western readership and call the Russian New Year’s fir tree a Christmas tree and Father Frost St. Nick.

One other major issue in translation is that Russians have a penchant for using diminutive forms. Where possible we have retained them in the translation. For example Polina is also known as Polya, Polenka, Polyushka. They are all the same person, of course. Just as Olympiada is also Lipa, Lipusha, Lipochnka, and Lipuchka. In other instances we have opted for using an Anglicized version. For example, instead of Allka as the diminutive of Alla, we use Allie, and Tannie as the diminutive for Tatiana or Tanya.

Finally, in translating *Rachel’s Flute*, written in the lofty biblical style of the Old Testament, the book of Genesis and the Song of Songs in particular, we have opted to translate the Russian original directly without any precise quotations from the Bible.

*Slava Yastremski and Michael M.Naydan*

## Introduction: My Plays Are My Erotic Dreams

Since the mid-1990s Nadezhda Ptushkina has been the most popular and widely staged playwright in the Russian theater. When I first met her in 1996, she had eight plays produced in Moscow alone. To this day she has written more than seventy plays, forty of which were produced in many theaters in Russia and abroad, including the Baltic states, China, Japan, Germany, and Scotland. Ptushkina also has written screenplays for nine films, three of which she directed herself. As she said in a recent interview for the *Novye novosti* (The New News), she moved into the media of film in search of what Chekhov once called “new forms,” which the playwright hopes to find at the juncture of the most ancient and the most characteristic dramatic art form for the 20th century and beyond. In recent years Ptushkina also has turned to directing her own plays at several theaters.

Ptushkina has had an extraordinarily diverse and colorful biography before her success as a playwright. Earlier in her life, she experienced years of financial hardship and was forced to work to provide for her family. During Gorbachev's *perestroika*, when the entire cultural infrastructure of the USSR collapsed, Ptushkina became a businesswoman. she had to navigate through and stand her ground against the mafia, corrupt officials, and competitors (mostly men).

Her first play was staged in Tashkent in 1982 at the Tashkent Theater for Youth, and in 1989-1990 she was invited to the Central Asian city of Dushanbe to write several film scripts. Despite the fact that she wrote a number of scripts, as a result of the hardships experienced by Russian theater at that time, it was difficult for her to stage her plays. She had to postpone her theater career while she continued to support herself through other means. However, Ptushkina continued to write plays that fed on her experience with people from all walks of life.

Ptushkina's fame as a playwright began in 1994 when St. Petersburg's "Experiment" state theater produced her play *A Monument to Victims*. The success led to the same theater releasing a production of another of Ptushkina's plays – *A Mad Woman* the same year. Eventually, Vitaly V. Lansky's production of her play *Somebody Else's Candlelight* at the “small stage” of the Stanislavsky Theater in Moscow in 1995 after which she became

the most staged playwright in the capital almost overnight. Later that same year true recognition as a playwright came to her after Boris Milgram's production of *Rachel's Flute* (*The Little Lamb*, as it was literally called in Russian) at the independent Art-Club XXI theater company. Although initially the play caused a scandal and was attacked by conservative critics, the production enjoyed great artistic success and has remained extremely popular to this day. Her later play *Momma's Dying Again* (literally "While She Was Dying" in the original Russian) now has a large fan club.

It should be pointed out that Ptushkina's plays are not limited just to erotic themes. She wants to know how people's psychology changes in today's turbulent world. she asks questions such as: What is love? Why do the spiritual and the base, the constructive and the destructive, coexist in every person? What is the relationship between the ideal and reality, truth and deception? Ptushkina's characters are real people who have a wide appeal not only for the Russian theater, but for a western audience as well.

*Rachel's Flute* is based on the Biblical story of Jacob and Rachel, and Rachel's older sister Leah, who tricks Jacob into marrying her instead of Rachel. The scandalous success of the Moscow staging was the result of the unbridled eroticism of the play. The dramatic and poetic, biblically-based play can be seen somewhat as a literary precursor to *Fifty Shades of Grey* in its unabashed depiction of sexuality.

*Somebody Else's Candlelight* is a fast-moving play for just two female characters. The play speaks to the need for human contact and understanding, which women may find briefly in each other, but which is very often destroyed by the men in their lives.

Ptushkina's plays are unmistakably written for the theater. The playwright observes that she strives to create parts for actors, which will allow them to respect themselves. Ptushkina's characters are not supermodels from *Cosmopolitan* or a body-builder's magazine, which, in the playwright's opinion, do nothing but traumatize people and serve as a means for developing inferiority complexes among people. Her play *Momma's Dying Again* provides an excellent example of this particular theme. Ptushkina describes the play as a vaudeville; however, it might be more appropriately called a New Year's holiday fantasy.

*I Pay Up Front* is a typical Ptushkina comedy, which mixes comical, almost farcical scenes with tragic implications of the

comic actions in the Russian tradition of “laughter through tears.” In any case, money is temptation and represents the battleground between God and the devil. Ptushkina says that for her God and the devil are Siamese twins: one cannot exist without the other.

This theme is continued in Ptushkina’s most recent play, included in this collection – *My Goldfish* (2012). It tells the story of SHE, who for thirty years has been in love with HER neighbor, a musician and composer, who lives one floor above HER. In this play Ptushkina continues to explore the theme of a great, ideal love set against the background of the Christian context of the fish as the symbol of Christ as well as of certain cultural traditions of Russian literature, such as Alexander Pushkin’s “Tale of the Goldfish”.

The universal themes of love, the need for human closeness, and multifaceted complex female characters make Nadezhda Ptushkina’s plays desirable material for any professional theater, and the translators hope that the availability of these translations will make their adaptation to the Anglophone stage easier.

*Slava Yastremski*

## PLAYS

## Somebody Else's Candlelight A Comedy in Two Acts

Cast:

Alla

Alexandrina Dmitrievna

### Act 1

*Part of Alexandrina Dmitrievna's large apartment. General disorder. On the floor, and on the armchairs and the chairs are empty picture frames, boxes in disarray, wrapping paper. Dishes can lie right on the floor, etc. Especially striking is a large overturned vase with a bouquet of roses.*

*The front door is wide open. A mop is tacked with two big nails right onto the door of the bathroom.*

*Alla is sitting in the bathroom at the edge of the bathtub, elegantly dressed, with either black and blue bruises or make-up running down her face.*

*Silence. Alla stands up (she moves like a robot), she's listening, leaning her ear to the door. Suddenly with a shout of despair: "Alex!" with all her strength she knocks open the door: she takes a running start as long as it is possible in the spacious bathroom and knocks the mop off.*

*The door flies open, Alla flies by inertia into the corridor and falls down. Momentarily she jumps up and runs out of the apartment shouting "Alex!" She returns, rushes about the apartment, looking into every corner, she finally stops, lowers herself onto the floor, pounds her head on the floor and... howls. She notices the telephone, crawls toward it, dials the number, makes a mistake, dials again... Finally she manages to dial it right.*

ALLA. *(into the receiver)* This is the salon? Is this the salon? Tanya! Ask for Shelgunova! It's urgent!!! *(she sobs)* Tannie? It's you! It's Allie! *(she sobs choking)* Wait... wait... I'm gonna

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hang myself right now or stick my head in the oven. Right now!!! I'm calling to say good-bye. (*a new bout of sobbing*) Tannie, I'm calling from her apartment. He came! And he left, too. Tannie, it was all just like I imagined it would be. He brought me roses. You should see them! And then he took everything from the apartment. He took all of her things. Tannie, he took everything! He pulled paintings right out of the frames. Well, the paintings – okay. He took the TV, and the VCR, and a great big telephone – you won't be able to pay for this. He thought it was my apartment. Yeah, he thought it's all mine and my mother's... Tannie, what can't you understand? What? He shoved me in the bathroom, locked it and carried off everything from the apartment. He loaded it into his Mercedes and drove off. He thought it was my apartment. Ta-a-annie, what don't you understand? I'm telling you! Everything was the way I imagined it would be. He brought me roses. I bought some champagne, tomatoes, and all kinds of stuff from yesterday's pay... And we dined in candlelight. In her candlelight... We dined in somebody else's candlelight... Maybe it's a bad sign – to be in somebody else's candlelight? I love him, Tanya, I love him! Yes! Yes!!! I'm gonna hang myself, Tanya! What's left for me if I love him? Yes! Yes!!! Find him! Explain! No!!! Don't say the apartment's not mine! Please don't say it! I beg you – don't say it! Tannie, they're going to put me in prison, aren't then? I won't see him at all then! I'll be thrown into prison!!! My brother's in prison, and they'll put me there. The judges will say – your brother's in prison, let's put you in, too. And it doesn't matter that he's not my brother by blood. My mother took him from the orphanage when she worked there, to get an apartment quicker. That's it! That's it! My mother won't survive this with her liver problems and her sense of principle! She'll begin to pay for me and kick the bucket. She's paying for my brother, although the court didn't require it! And why does she have ten jobs, and we live in poverty? She's gone now to her brother in Kursk. She took two packets of buttermilk, a kilo of gingerbread and a lemon. A single lemon!!! Just imagine – a single lemon! Could you imagine that? I'll hang myself! What else can I tell you? I'm already telling you! Everything happened the way I imagined it

would. He brought me roses, we dined in candlelight, and in the morning he carried off the things. I love him so much. If you only knew how he looked at me so! Ta-annie, when I was with him it seemed like angels were raising us on somebody else's bed sheets to the heavens... I love him so much! I didn't tell him... no... I was afraid. He'd understand that I can't live without him and right away he'd dump me out of boredom. I can't breathe without him for very long. I, Tanya, it's hard for me to breathe right now – there's not enough air. I don't know what I'm going to do later, how to breathe without him. I'm having spasms, he carried off everything... But what could I do? I said something... And he hit me... shoved me into the bathroom and locked it. And who could hear anything? They moved nearly everyone from the whole building. Only a deaf old lady is feeding cats on the porch. It's right in the best part of the city. Kotelnicheskya Embankment, the Foreign Language Library, the house is standing here alone on a great big lot. Everything around has been demolished and everyone's moved. There's a church next door, but it's still not clear when it's going to be open for services, for the time being it's just standing there. Tannie, find him, tell him I love him. I'll give him my life. He didn't understand. He thought that I spend all my nights that way. Ta-annie, I dreamed of having a child with him. I love him so much, that just from that one night with him I began to believe in God. I'm going to be baptized. I'm going to go to church and learn how to pray. I know I can't keep a man like him, but the child would have been with me! And he'd have a little boy, just as handsome as he is. Find him!!! Will you find him? Thank you! I won't leave here. I'll be waiting. The landlady will come tomorrow. Ta-annie, I feel like I'm pregnant! (*she sobs*) I'll hang myself – pregnant... The child and I'll die! I don't want to go to prison!!! I'll be depressed without Alex in prison. Ta-annie!!! I'm waiting for you! I'll be waiting! Okay, I won't hang myself for the time being, I'll be waiting for your call. I'll be waiting, Tanya! (*she hangs up the receiver*)

*She walks up to a large mirror, looks herself over. Not her external appearance, but it's as though she were*

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*cautiously looking into her soul. She leans with her back against the mirror, recalls last night like music. For the first and last time we overhear his voice.*

ALLA. Lexi honey...

HE. Allochka... *alyi*-scarlet...<sup>1</sup>

ALLA. Do you feel good with me?

HE. All right. Why are you so strange? Not enough boyfriends?

ALLA. I have a husband. He's in the army now.

HE. That's bad. I thought you're free. I was in the service myself and don't like to mess over other guys, I don't like deceiving them.

ALLA. I'll write him and I'll be free.

HE. Don't rush into that. Does he love you?

ALLA. I don't know. I never thought about him that way – whether he loves me or not.

HE. He loves you. You're beautiful.

ALLA. Me?!

HE. You caught my eye right away. You're really beautiful. Even when you're washing up. Your breasts are so beautiful! And your legs, your tummy... and your neck like a swan's....

ALLA. I'm beautiful and happy.

HE. Of course, happy! You're living all right!

ALLA. Lexi, honey, right now I'm happy for the first time in my life!

HE. You're strange altogether! First you're cheerful, then sad. Enigmatic! I like you! Do you like me?

ALLA. Ye-sss...

*The telephone rings. Alla grabs the receiver.*

ALLA. Tannie! *(she stands still, remains silent for a long time, then in a whisper)* Lexi, honey! *(again she listens)* The things are already gone? Yes? Yes? Yes, they're not mine. And the apartment's not mine. Sorry. You're not angry? Mom and I are poor. Momma just gets paid for cleaning the apartment. And I lifted the keys from her. The landlady's coming back tomorrow. From Germany I think. *(she shouts)* Kill you? What little account? You're not hiding anything from me? You're not trying to console me? What happiness! What happiness! And you were with me and kept quiet? You're

the best. Sorry that I nearly thought badly of you. On my own I'm bad, but with you I'll become better. Can we meet? I'll wait. What? What? (*she begins to stutter*) It's hard to hear you here! What did you say? (*tempestuously*) Who's getting married? Us? You and I?! We're getting married?! (*instantly she turns into a astoundingly happy woman*) Alex, I love you! I loved you at first sight, there in the dance club. But it seems I've loved you without beginning and end. Me?! Angry? For what? Could anyone really get angry at his or her hands or legs? There's no me without you. I don't need myself without you! What, what of it if I'm crying? It's from happiness! I'll stop now. You know I've been unlucky in love before you. It's the second time in my life that I've been in love. When I was 14, I loved a tiny kitten. How I loved him. Alex, how I loved him! And how he loved me! He wouldn't eat or drink without me, he always waited for me at the door. And then our neighbor in the communal apartment and my mother got in a fight over some kind of idiotic stuff, as usual... And the neighbor woman began to object to the cat to spite my mother. We live by the Beltway. Mother took the cat beyond the Beltway. She's principled, my mother. She felt that since the neighbor objected, we didn't have a right to keep it. A hundred times a week my mother would fight and make up with our neighbor, curse her out, and wouldn't give in to her much... I looked for the kitten for the whole day. Along the melting snowdrifts, the patches of forest. I got a sore throat from calling for it. The police found me. I fell asleep at the police station, and nobody could wake me up. They woke me up in the hospital. I slept for seven days – how I didn't want to live! Alex, honey, may my kitty forgive me, but I love you more! I was afraid to say this to you earlier because of my feminine pride. I love you, Alex! (*she listens*) They won't kill you? I love you! You remember, you said that they cover up the fact that one of our cosmonauts, as a result of an oversight, of carelessness, flew into space alone without a rocket? How lonely he was! When I'm baptized, I'll be praying for him as well! Without you I'm like that cosmonaut. What? A revolver? Where? By the bed? Wait, I'll look (*she walks away and returns with the revolver*) I found it! Why are you throwing revolvers around everywhere?

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Is it a real one? What, it can even shoot? I'll be careful... What should I do? Throw it out? Such an expensive thing? But it's completely new! Better I'll hide it, and give it back to you later! Throw it out? Into the Moscow River? All right, all right, don't be angry! I'll throw it out, I'll throw it out... But why do you need a revolver? What did you do with it? Can I shoot it once? OK, I won't. OK, OK, I'll throw it out today. From here it's a stone throw to the Yauza River, I'll throw it out right now. I've never seen a revolver up close like that. It's so interesting! Don't be nervous. I'll throw it out right now. A kiss to you too... A kiss to you, kiss you, kiss you... Say something, I'll kiss your voice. (*she listens, closing her eyes*) Your kisses haven't grown cold on me... What will I do? Oh!!! My God!!! I've forgotten about everything! The landlady's coming back tomorrow. She'll file a complaint right away. And the second set of keys is at my mother's. She's coming back from Kursk this evening. And tomorrow she's supposed to do the cleaning here. My mother will file a complaint right away. No, you can't make a deal with my mother! She won't bat an eyelash if they put me in jail. Why do you say she doesn't love me? She loves me. It's just that she puts justice, the law, a sense of duty, honesty, and truth higher... It'd be good, if I could take the hundredth place in her system of values! And there's nothing standing behind me there. I don't want to go to prison, Alex! Without you I'll be in despair there. My heart will be torn apart without you. Will you visit me? (*she laughs happily, as though at a sweet nothing*) My love, who'll let you come to see me every day? But won't they kill you? For sure? Are you trying to console me? I forgive you. You did it accidentally. I'll think up something... I'll go to my husband; he'll confirm I've been there since yesterday. The main thing – return the keys, so the neighbor woman doesn't catch me when I show up at home. And my husband will corroborate it! Are you jealous? (*she laughs*) Better than you, worse – what's the difference? I love you the way you are. But how will we find each other? And when will we see each other? No, it isn't soon, Lexi, honey. I miss you. A day, an hour – what's the difference? I miss you... Maybe I shouldn't leave? No, my mother will figure it out right away and file

a complaint on the spot. All right. I'll return in about two days. And we'll meet! I love you, I love you... *(she hangs up the phone and swirls around, brimming with happiness)*

*She suddenly remembers something, looks for her jeans, her top, her slippers, the package. She takes off her beautiful skirt, her blouse; she walks up to the mirror and looks herself over with growing pride and ecstasy. She gets the revolver, aims at her reflection, takes various poses.*

*Alexandrina Dmitrievna appears in the doorway.*

*She's an unattractive woman between 50 and 60 years old wearing glasses. She's dressed with the pretensions of chic style and youth: a loose, lacy, delicate black blouse, through which nothing particularly attractive shows, tightly-fitted chamois pants, shoes on very high, "sexy" heels. There is a poisonously red large spider hairpin in her hair, she elicits associations with someone between Carmen and Cleopatra.*

*Alexandrina is paralyzed from astonishment. From her own doorway she first examines the ravaged apartment, then Alla.*

*Alla notices Alexandrina in the mirror. She tenses up, grows still then slowly turns to the owner of the apartment. She forgets about the revolver in her hand, and it turns out to be pointed at Alexandrina.*

ALLA. *(super politely)* How do you do!

*Alexandrina puts down her suitcase and slowly raises her hand.*

ALLA. *(she suddenly remembers the revolver and quickly hides it behind her back)* What's with you? Don't pay attention to it! What's with you? You've gotten scared by this? It's a toy. For playing a joke. Well, to play a joke, first me on you, then you on me –for a laugh. To cheer you up. *(she points to the distance)* Take a look yourself, if, of course, you know

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anything about guns.

*Alexandrina lowers her hand and steps unsteadily toward Alla.*

*Alla, overstressed, presses the trigger. There's a shot. Alla screams and drops the revolver. Alexandrina throws herself onto the floor. Silence. No one stirs.*

ALLA. Are you alive? Woman, are you alive? (*she stands there frightened*) Well, woman, I'm afraid to touch you. Please, answer, are you alive? Oh, Lord, are you alive or not?

ALEXANDRINA. (*displaying the exceptional experience of an orator*) Have they hired you to kill me? (*she rises up on her knees, not without pathos*) Who's behind you? Who sent you? Whose will are you following in blind ignorance?

ALLA. You're not wounded?

ALEXANDRINA. Did Derzhavin the writer set you on me?

ALLA. Something familiar there... Derzhavin? The actor!

ALEXANDRINA. Please, don't! The writer! Robert Derzhavin.

ALLA. "And gave me his blessings, going to his grave...." I thought he had died.

ALEXANDRINA. The great 18th century poet Derzhavin has died! But mediocrity is everlasting! And it sows the seeds of the foolish, the bad, and the transitory. It's he who sent you! He publicly threatened me! Through anonymous phone calls. He's a Mafioso. By your hand he wants to eliminate me thus eliminating my criticism of him. Derzhavin sent you!

ALLA. Yes.... of course! Now I understand the kind of guy he is! And I liked you right away! Right away I'm going to go to him and tell him everything!

ALEXANDRINA. Are you a groupie of his?

ALLA. No, just a hairdresser. (*she puts away the revolver into a plastic bag, quickly pulls on her jeans and tee-shirt*) And I liked you right away and everything about you! I see you have a suitcase?

ALEXANDRINA. (*hurriedly*) There's nothing there!

ALLA. Then I won't distract you. It was nice to meet you. Sorry for troubling you. Good-bye!

*But before Alla could get close to the door, Alexandrina locks it with the key.*

Nadezhda Ptushkina

ALEXANDRINA. Have you been here long?

ALLA. Literally just a minute! And I'm already leaving. I don't want to distract you.

ALEXANDRINA. Was the door open?

ALLA. Wide open! I thought that all the apartments had been abandoned. I thought I'd go in, take a look.... Sometimes people leave such great things! I took a look and saw, no, they haven't left anything. I noticed that someone was still living here! I'm out of here. It was really-really nice to meet you!

ALEXANDRINA. *(with a moan)* My God! My paintings!!! Did you see anyone here?

ALLA. No one!

ALEXANDRINA. Whom did you find when you entered?

ALLA. Not a soul! Excuse me, but I don't want to hold you up even for another minute.

ALEXANDRINA. Stop! I'm calling the police! Stay here! You'll be a witness!

ALLA. Sorry, but I'm in a hurry! I'd be happy to oblige, but there's no way I can!

ALEXANDRINA. *(she no longer is listening to her and walks around the apartment)* My God! For what reason? They robbed me!!! They even took the phone! With the fax! And the gold! And diamonds! My diamonds! My dollars!!!

*Alla quietly tries to open the door with her keys. Alexandrina notices. She takes a chair, sneaks up and strikes Alla with the chair on the head. Alla falls. Alexandrina picks up Alla's keys. She pulls the revolver out of the bag. She finds ropes in the house.*

ALEXANDRINA. *(she ties Alla's arms and legs)* Thief! Stool pigeon! Bandit! Just you wait, Derzhavin! You'll study my life in the Solovki prison camp! *(she drags the tied-up and moaning Alla to the bathroom)* You've created a paradise on earth for yourself! Built a living museum for yourself. Your own hired killers! *(she speaks as though she's reading a public lecture)* A bad writer is always amoral! You can have an incompetent worker, a worthless dressmaker, a miserable actress... But despite that they can be remarkable people needed by society. But society doesn't need a bad writer

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ever! His complexes, his thirst for self-affirmation destroy everything sacred in him! The desire to hold spiritual power over people possesses them, the desire for glory at any cost... and all this is combined with a vulgar attraction to the despicable riches of everyday life... *(she splashes water into Alla's face)*

ALLA. *(without raising her head)* Why'd you do this? Gone mad? Why'd you nail me on the head? Did I touch you? Why'd you tie me up? Are you nuts?

ALEXANDRINA. How is it you have my keys?

ALLA. They were lying by the door!

ALEXANDRINA. They weren't! My door's been opened with just these keys! You opened it! That's why you were taking to your heels!

ALLA. I protest! Untie me right now! You don't have a right to tie me up and interrogate me!

ALEXANDRINA. It was self-defense! You tell me where you got the keys from, and I'll immediately untie you.

*Alla remains silent.*

ALEXANDRINA. There are three sets of keys. One's mine. The second's at Benjamin's... *(thinks.)*

ALLA. Untie me!

ALEXANDRINA. Answer me honestly just once, but honestly, and I'll let you go right away. I've already understood everything. The whole picture is practically right in front of me. I just want you to confirm it one more time. If you confirm it, I'll let you go.

ALLA. What do I have to confirm?

ALEXANDRINA. Do you know Benjamin... Sergeevich?

ALLA. *(immediately)* Yes.

ALEXANDRINA. *(abruptly)* Where does he live?

*Alla is evidently struggling with the answer.*

ALEXANDRINA. *(she steps away and disgustedly looks her over)* He brought you here. Apparently he got the urge for a young chick! Well, of course, he wouldn't introduce you to his mother! Have you two been doing this for a long time? Answer – and I'll let you go. I've already figured out everything. For a long time?

Nadezhda Ptushkina

ALLA. (*indistinctly*) Not very...

ALEXANDRINA. (*she gets more and more interested in the investigation*) How did my keys end up in your hands?

*Alla struggles with the answer.*

ALEXANDRINA. (*proud of her own perspicacity*) He took off earlier and left you here?

ALLA. Yes.

ALEXANDRINA. Naked?

ALLA. No. First he left, and I undressed afterward.

ALEXANDRINA. That's original! A respectable guy, and what did he lust after?

ALLA. Well, he didn't lust after anything that much....

ALEXANDRINA. So all of it was your initiative?

ALLA. Yeah. Mine.

ALEXANDRINA. What did he say about me?

ALLA. About you personally? Nothing!

ALEXANDRINA. That means there's something sacred still left?

ALLA. That's left. (*a pause*) Well now, everything is apparently quite clear. Time to untie me.

ALEXANDRINA. (*she sits on the edge of the bathtub*) Who to believe? A ten-year long affair.

ALLA. So, that's what it's all about! Don't you worry! You know, I remembered. I just brazenly thrust myself on him. I didn't know anything about you! And he resisted. And there was nothing between us. Nothing happened. He told me right to my face that he's loved another woman for ten years. Now I remember – he was hinting at you.

ALEXANDRINA. (*she laughs loudly*) Ten years of what?

ALLA. He's in love!

ALEXANDRINA. With whom?

ALLA. A woman! You!

ALEXANDRINA. Did he use those words exactly? He's in love?

ALLA. Yes, now I remember exactly. Those words.

ALEXANDRINA. Exactly? Quote it!

ALLA. What?

ALEXANDRINA. Quo-ote it! But repeat his words about love exactly!

ALLA. Well, he said that he misses, really misses... really misses... Really misses you!

## The Battle of the Sexes Russian Style

ALEXANDRINA. I got that. Go on!

ALLA. And, when you're together, it seems to him that the angels are raising you up to the heavens on a sheet!

ALEXANDRINA. It'd be better for the angels to raise a little something for him personally once in a while. Well thought out, kiddo! Very touching! That's very touching that you've taken to comfort me in your situation! But that means my affairs are in really bad shape! And that's very noticeable! He's impotent. You never noticed that?

ALLA. No.

ALEXANDRINA. Have you ever run across impotents in your life?

ALLA. No.

ALEXANDRINA. I only run across impotents! In all respects! (*she walks away to the mirror and looks over herself*) You have to accept reality. I'm younger than Sophia Loren, but look a lot worse.

ALLA. Do you love him?

ALEXANDRINA. I was at a conference in that bastard city of Munich. The French, the Germans, and Poles paid me compliments, laughed and drank with me! I had the kind of blouse on me that looked as if I wasn't wearing one at all! But not the slightest hint of desire flashed on a single vile mug of theirs to fuck me! But I was in ecstasy! It seemed to me I was having great success! All around me love affairs were going on, everyone was sleeping with somebody... But not with me! No, not with me!

ALLA. Do you love him?

ALEXANDRINA. What do you know about love? I always tried, but the sex somehow never worked out. At first I felt too pretty to condescend to having sex with someone. And then all the men I knew somehow became terribly virtuous. Don't ask idiotic questions! You and I can't understand each other! To each their own. Like in hell!

ALLA. True, I'm not as educated as you are. I don't understand anything about love. But I love! Untie me, please! I've already been pushed into this bathroom today! I hate it! I'm sick to my stomach here!

ALEXANDRINA. Was Benjamin violent? I'm beginning to respect him. Well, Benjamin, who brought you here to poetically wax about angels! Tell me everything! And don't think I'm a fool! I won't untie you until you tell me the truth!



## Nadezhda Ptushkina

Nadezhda Ptushkina is the author of more than seventy plays and nine screenplays. Prior to her success as a playwright, she had an extraordinarily diverse and colourful life which saw her experience years of financial hardship, when she struggled to provide for her family. When the entire cultural infrastructure of the USSR was collapsing during Gorbachev's *perestroika* she became a businesswoman, but then found fame as a writer in 1994 when *Experiment*, the St Petersburg state theatre, produced her play *A Monument to Victims*. Since 1997 she has been both the most prolific and the most popular of all contemporary Russian playwrights; her many plays are

staged throughout Russia and in the Soviet successor states, as well as in Europe and Japan. In recent years Ptushkina has also turned to directing her own plays at several theatres, and has written screenplays for nine films, three of which she directed herself.



Nadezhda Ptushkina's plays reflect her keen interest in constructing multidimensional characters that reflect the myriad ways people are affected by today's turbulent world. Often writing strong female roles, she does not shy away from exploring the sometimes tragic implications that lie behind her comical, almost farcical scenes.

Ptushkina questions the nature of love, and explores the boundaries between the spiritual and the base, the constructive and the destructive, that lie within every human being. Conflict between the sexes constitutes the core of Ptushkina's plays, in which she warns the audience against confusing sex and love. Ptushkina rejects any notion that men and women are the same, seeing gender differences rather than personality differences as the main source of tension between men and women. Her plays thus dwell on this 'battle of the sexes' and the resulting lack of respect for women that she sees in today's Russia.

In this new translation, western readers have a chance to discover why Ptushkina's work holds such wide appeal in the Russian theatre.

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