

The PLEIADES THEATRE

IN COLLABORATION WITH THÉÂTRE FRANÇAIS DE TORONTO
PRESENTS

HEART OF A DOG

by ANNE NENAROKOFF

based on the novel by Mikhaïl Bulgakov

Directed by JEAN-STÉPHANE ROY

Scenography: RUDY BRAUN · Lighting: GLENN DAVIDSON

Original score: KEITH THOMAS



HEART of a DOG: The Story

Moscow, 1925.

It is the beginning of the Stalinist era, one of the worst and longest nightmares in modern history. While those few who are well entrenched in the establishment come to know a new sort of power, the rest of society struggles to merely survive.

In the midst of an economic and social crisis, a renowned surgeon, **Professor Philip Philipovich**, leads a privileged existence. Having made his fortune through a miraculous grafting procedure that reverses aging amongst his clientele of party officials and their wives, his latest experiment seems set to bring him even greater acclaim. He has accomplished a revolutionary operation: to graft into a dog the pituitary gland and genital organs of a human being.

The results are more than he bargains for. Once the procedure is complete, Professor Philipovich and his colleagues, **Doctor Bormenthal** and **Zina Petrovna**, find themselves face to face with a bizarre creation – a dog who mutates into a human, but seemingly imbued with the worse qualities of each. A cross between the mangy mutt he was born as, and the unscrupulous alcoholic human grafted to him, **Sharik** the dog wreaks havoc in the lives of his esteemed creators. With a growing taste for vodka and late-night carousing, he falls in with the self-serving **Schwonder**, himself a nasty character who has climbed the low-level ranks of the Party to become the Chairman of the local Housing Committee. This committee's sole purpose is to redistribute privileges of the wealthy, that is to say Professor Philipovich and his associates, to those below in the hierarchy. Together, Sharik and Schwonder set their sights on power and comfort, threatening the very lives of Philipovich, Bormenthal and Zina Petrovna at every turn. Just as Doctor Bormenthal predicts that "All this will come to no good," the situation degenerates to the point where Sharik has reversed his role of patient and taken the reigns of power into his own paws.

Under the guise of an absurd story and a fable, Boulgakov raises profound questions on the nature of revolution, individual freedoms, and the morality and justifications in scientific "advancement".

Heart of a Dog has become a posthumous victory for the great Russian writer, as the manuscript of the novel was seized by the Secret Police in 1925, even before it was published, and never released until 1987.

Now, more than seventy-five years after it was written, the story takes on a whole new resonance and speaks to us on many levels. It is about the abuse of power by political regimes, corruption, the stifling of free speech, the underhanded behaviour of the greedy, and especially, our modern obsessions with scientific advancement, the search for youth, plastic surgery and cloning. Today, no less than in 1925, *Heart of a Dog* speaks to our seeming need to manipulate all that is naturally human.

Mikhail Bulgakov

Mikhail Bulgakov (*pron.* Bul-**ga**-koff) was born in Kiev in 1891 to a well-heeled bourgeois family. His father was a Professor of Divinity at the University of Kiev. At the outbreak of the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the bloody civil war that ensued, Bulgakov had just barely completed his training as a doctor, yet he found himself practising medicine in remote villages in Siberia. He wrote of these early experiences in the exceptional manuscript *Journal of a Young Doctor*, in which he related his contact with the “tma”, or people of the darkness – the darkness of the Siberian night, the darkness of ignorance in these far off reaches of Russia. In fact, it was the success of this collection that convinced Bulgakov to become a writer.

Although he is still relatively unknown here in Canada, Bulgakov is considered to be one of the giants of Russian literature. After the resounding success of his first play, *The White Guard*, Bulgakov found himself surrounded by jealous plotting and paralysed by heavy censorship, so much so that he personally appealed to Josef Stalin, the cruellest and most dangerous of dictators, asking that he be sent into exile. By this point (late 1920’s) Stalin had seized complete control of the country. Despite his ruthlessness, Stalin was an admirer of Bulgakov so he offered him protection and granted him a position as manager of the famous Moscow Art Theatre where the great director Stanislavsky worked. This perceived kindness had ulterior motives however, for while Bulgakov was safe, entrenched in his administrative duties, it was a position that prevented him from writing. But even though he could neither be produced nor published, Bulgakov’s indomitable spirit kept him writing fervently and passionately. Indeed, it was in this period that he created his final masterpieces *The Life of Monsieur de Molière*, *Black Snow* and what is surely his greatest work, *The Master and Margarita*. All of these great works were suppressed by the authorities and while some were smuggled out of the USSR and published in the west in the late 1960’s, they were only released by the Soviets in the late 1980’s.

In his novels and plays, Bulgakov paints a vivid portrait of the Soviet Union of the 1920s and ‘30s, a period which, for us today in the Western World, is shrouded in mystery. His gift was to bring to life this period not only in detail, but also in its most human dimensions, through his extraordinary imagination and courageous denunciations of the cruelty

and suffering he both witnessed and endured in his lifetime. Bulgakov is often compared to the genius of Molière, with whom he shared a verve and a distinct absence of bitterness even in the face of great opposition. With *Heart of a Dog*, we get a glimpse of what can happen to people under a revolutionary regime, where ideology falls victim to greed and a thirst for power. In that kind of universe, the monsters are sometimes the ones we would least expect to be so.

Unlike a great many of his fellow artists in Russia, Bulgakov died a natural death in 1940, although he was prematurely worn down by his lifelong fight against injustice.

A Word from the Playwright

Heart of a Dog is a rich and complex fable. This fantastical story -- and perfect example of a dark comedy—draws our attention to the troubling realities that lie at the heart of almost all violent revolutions. Violence breeds violence, becoming entrenched in the nature of the society that is forged from the struggle; also, people fight to attain power, becoming fearful, jealous and ruthless, and in order to succeed, all too often they make their own pact with the Devil. Sharik, the Dog, could himself be seen as a metaphor for the revolution, or even more specifically, as a projection of Stalin himself – an individual removed from the masses for whom the revolution gives permission to assimilate and apply the worst of human survival techniques. In this light, it is not surprising that *Heart of a Dog* was banned.

In *Heart of a Dog*, we can take nothing at face value. Exactly what kind of operation is Professor Philipovich involved in? Does he practice medicine out of a true desire to improve human life, or is it simply to protect his privileged position in society? Does he truly believe that he can meddle in human evolution with impunity? And his assistants, Dr. Bormenthal and Zina, always on the lookout for “interesting” human cadavers, do they not also have personal ambitions that have nothing to do with the progress of mankind? Once Sharik has completed his transformation, he loses no time in understanding the rules of the game: “eat or be eaten.” Therefore, is he the victim or the perpetrator? His evolution and ascendance to power are affected by the dubious motivations of Schwonder, himself a fine example of the power hungry and petty revolutionary.

Nothing can be taken for granted here as Bulgakov refuses to take sides in telling his story. He offers us an uncompromising portrait of each of his characters, without ever passing judgement on any of them, thereby forcing us to make up our own minds about them. He leaves us with enormous questions concerning the nature of justice, both in his own time and ours.

Bulgakov’s sly, yet ferocious humour animates his characters wonderfully, making their transformation from novel to play, from the page to the stage, an exciting, challenging and delightful process. He himself had the intention of adapting *Heart of a Dog* for the stage and

surely would have done so if the manuscript had not been seized by the secret police. It also seems clear that Bulgakov would have forged ahead with this work despite the almost certain knowledge that his play would be censored before anyone would ever even get to see the curtain raised. I can only hope that today we do his work justice and that we honour his memory with dignity.

Anne Nenarokoff

A Word from the Director

HISTORY of the PROJECT

In 1997, Guy Mignault, Artistic Director of Théâtre français de Toronto (TfT), asked me to direct four short plays by Chekhov, using existing French translations and grouped together in one show called "Soirée Tchekhov". Following the success of this production, he decided to create a cycle of Russian plays at TfT. The next step, in 2000, was Dostoïevski's "Les Nuits Blanches" ("White Nights") in a new Canadian adaptation by Anne Nénarokoff from the original Russian novel. For "Coeur de Chien/Heart of a Dog" we began with the same premise, namely to do a new, Canadian adaptation from the Russian novel by Bulgakov. The difference here is that we are taking the project one step further by translating and producing it in English as well, using the same cast and production. *Heart of a Dog* marks my second collaboration with Anne Nénarokoff.

Both of these projects were born from a wish to create something unique, something that would not be treading familiar ground. Here in Canada, when we think of Russian theatre we think of Chekhov and that is about the limit of what we know. We take too few risks with the Russian repertoire. Those short plays that we did in 1998 and now the two novels done in 2001 and 2003 constitute a real discovery for both the audience and the artists. For me, these are the kind of projects that allow me to grow and to extend my reach beyond the limits of what I have already done.

PHILOSOPHY of the PROJECT

Our view of Russian theatre is very limited. I have had the good fortune of seeing many productions of Chekhov directed by Russians, Czechs, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Roumanians... in other words by many creative artists from Eastern Europe. These productions amazed me with their audaciousness and their honesty. They allowed me to realize that we are still in the dark ages when it comes to understanding this type of theatre. They demonstrated an approach that was much more instinctive than our own, we who remain much too "clever" and "intelligent." The character construction in these productions seemed much more organic than psychological and their direction seemed much more inventive and imaginative than they tend to be in ours, which persist in flirting with "realism." Working on these Russian texts not only allows me to go

beyond the codes that I already know, it also gives me the chance to develop a level of performance that doesn't rely on the habitual psychology but instead demands an instinct and a corporal presence that often seems to frighten us here in Canada.

The PERTINENCE of the PROJECT

The subject of *Heart of a Dog* is so timely that one might easily think Bulgakov wrote this novel for our new 21st century. Is the Professor some kind of genius who is searching for a way to improve human nature or is he a madman lusting after a Nobel Prize? Are these characters merely driven by the diabolical desire to save their own skins or do they really wish to transform human kind for the better? As we watch while science extends the limits of what it can know and do, with such things as the arrival of human cloning, we can rightfully ask where we are headed. Do we have the right to defy nature as we try to satisfy our desire to remain eternal? We now know that within the human body the reproductive cells are the last ones to be extinguished and that a woman actually begins to age as soon as she has given birth. Contrary to preconceived ideas from the past, we now know that the longer a woman delays childbirth, the greater her chances of a longer life. All this puts us before an essential question: are we on this earth *for the purpose* of reproduction? Does the chicken create an egg to make another chicken or does the egg create a chicken to make another egg? Knowing that the reproductive cells are the most important in the human organism, does that make it immoral to try to outsmart life by using scientific experiments to attempt to attain immortality?

I certainly will not try to answer these questions with *Heart of a Dog* but they constitute my point of departure for my own research, which will be carried out through the process of rehearsing the play. Together with the designers and actors, we will look for the best way to make these questions evident to the audience. With this production, I hope to surpass the "cultural product" and to make a gesture toward something that is "culturally essential."

Jean-Stéphane Roy

EXTRACTS FROM THE PLAY AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Read over these selections and comment on them.

These are the first words uttered by Sharik, the dog, following his operation. Doctor Bormenthal says “His entire vocabulary, straight from the gutter.”

SHARIK

Stupid mutt!!! All aboard. Evening special. Piss off. Gimme one for the road All aboard, evening special, stupid mutt, it’s the cops! Stupid mutt! *Barks.* Stupid mutt! *Barks.*

Each oath corresponds to a specific situation from his life as a dog. Can you imagine these scenes?

In this exchange between Zina and Doctor Bormenthal, we are given an idea of the context of Bulgakov’s life when he wrote *Heart of a Dog*

ZINA

Do you think the Professor is in real danger? It doesn’t look as if Schwonder will let go.

BORMENTHAL *He shrugs*

Who knows. So far, he’s got the upper hand. But the wind could shift.

ZINA

Yes, but God only knows in what direction. The other day, several merchants were arrested for spreading rumours that the world is coming to an end and it’s because of the Bolsheviks.

BORMENTHAL

Let’s be patient. They’re so busy denouncing one another and having one another arrested, we’ll soon have peace.

ZINA

But in the meantime, what a mess. What’s happening now in Moscow makes me fear we can expect the worst. If I could find a way, I would leave. (*Lost in her thoughts.*)

BORMENTHAL

Leave? Where would you go? Supposing, of course, you could even get out.

ZINA

To America.

BORMENTHAL

America? You're not serious, what would you do in America?

Discuss : Bolshevik

Why was it difficult for people to leave the country?

This passage illustrates the relationship between Sharik and Professor Philip Philippovich

SHARIK *in a plaintive voice*

Gee Pops, you sure know how to hurt a guy.

PROFESSOR *jumping up*

Pops? What is this familiarity? Call me by my name and patronym, if you don't mind.

SHARIK

Yes, yes. Do I still have a right to breathe? Don't spit. Don't smoke. Don't this... Don't, don't, don't. What else? As for Pops, it's not fair. *Almost yapping.* Did I ask for the operation? You catch an innocent creature, you slice up his head and then... wham! Suppose I didn't give you permission. Suppose (*thinking, as if looking for the proper wording*) my next of kin didn't give you permission. I... I could sue.

PROFESSOR *seething, to himself.*

What a creature!

So, if I understand you correctly, you are not happy to have been made human. I suppose you are pining for garbage cans? You long for the good old days when you ate slop in back alleys? Well, if I had known...

SHARIK

Garbage cans, garbage cans. I was making an honest living. What if I had croaked under your knife? You wouldn't be singing the same tune, hey, comrade?

PROFESSOR *almost choking*

«Philip Philippovitch». I repeat, I am not your comrade. This is unbearable!

Aside. What a nightmare, God, what a nightmare!

SHARIK

Yeah, right. I understand. We are not your comrades. We haven't been to university and we've never lived in seven room apartments, with a bathroom. Except, nowadays... that's all over. Times have changed. Everybody's got rights.

Discuss : « Comrade »

What can we say about Sharik's attitude towards authority?

What have we already learned about the Soviet System?

Here is a brief scene that situates Philippovitch and his assistant Doctor Bormenthal.

BORMENTHAL

Philip Philippovitch, I shall never forget how you took me under wing when I was but a starving student. You are much more than a teacher for me, much more than a mentor... my respect for you is boundless. Allow me to embrace you, mon cher Philip Philippovitch.

PROFESSOR

Mon cher ami. *(He stands in response to Bormenthal's gesture. They embrace).*

Your words go straight to my heart, to my heart. I thank you. And forgive me if I occasionally bawl you out during our operations. Forgive the excesses of an old man. You see, mon cher, the fact is, I am terribly alone.

BORMENTHAL

Professor, how can you say such a thing? You offend me. You know very well, you are not alone...

PROFESSOR

Thank you. (*He hums «...to the sacred banks of the Nile...»*)

I have always looked upon you as a most competent practitioner.

BORMENTHAL *jumping up*

Philip Philippovitch, it's the only way out!

He goes and closes the door. In a whisper.

It's the only way out. Of course, I wouldn't dream of giving you advice, but look at yourself, Philip Philippovitch, you are exhausted. You can't go on like this.

PROFESSOR

You're quite right.

BORMENTHAL

Then you agree that this cannot continue? I may be your pupil but I am not a child. I can see what a grim joke this could turn into and I'm convinced there's no other way.

PROFESSOR

Don't tempt me. I won't listen. Imagine for a moment what would happen to us if we were found out. We would never get out alive, even for a first offence. Especially given our origins. I suppose yours are no better than mine.

BORMENTHAL

Good God, my father was a judge!

He empties his glass.

PROFESSOR

There you are. Not very helpful. Mind you, for me it's even worse. My father was an archbishop. Thank you very much.

Discuss their respective social backgrounds.

How would their families be seen by the Soviet regime?

This passage illuminates for us Professor Philippovitch's position on science, and thus no doubt also that held by Bulgakov.

PROFESSOR

Philip Preobrazensky has never done anything so difficult in his life. I imagine it is possible to graft the pituitary gland of a Spinoza, or any other poor bugger into a dog and to make him into a superior being. But why? That is the question. Can you tell me why one would want to manufacture a Spinoza when a mother is going to give birth to him when the time is ripe? My dear doctor, mankind takes care of itself and, with evolution, it continues to produce, among many varmints, dozens of geniuses who will light up the planet. So now, doctor, you see why I disagree with your conclusions about this operation. My discovery, which you persist in extolling, isn't worth a kopek. (*Bormenthal is about to speak, he stops him.*) No, no. I see things very clearly. And I never speak lightly, you know that. In theory, this is interesting. So what? The medical profession is thrilled, Moscow is abuzz. But from the practical point of view? What are we dealing with?

What does the Professor mean?

**The vice tightens around the Professor.
Is Schwonder winning?**

BORMENTHAL

Do you really think that Schwonder...

PROFESSOR

I'm afraid that now he is in complete control... Nothing will stop him, especially since it's a matter of personal vendetta.

BORMENTHAL

Then, we have to act fast.

PROFESSOR (*picking up the telephone.*)

I'm calling Kamenetzky. (*He dials the number. Pause.*) What do you mean it's not the right number? Isn't this General Kamenetzky's office? (*Pause.*) But that's ridiculous. I spoke to him yesterday. (*Pause.*) Okay, maybe it was a few days ago but still... The reason for my call? Strictly

confidential. A personal matter. (*Pause. He yells into the phone.*) I said it was personal. (*Pause.*) By the way, if I may be so bold, with whom do I have the honour? General Papravnik? (*Long pause.*) Kamenetzky... has been transferred? I see. And where can he be reached? (*Pause.*) I see, I see. Then I beg your pardon for having troubled you.

He hangs up the telephone. He is white as a sheet.

BORMENTHAL

What, he too, “reassigned”?

PROFESSOR

We are in a real fix, now.

Sigh. Pause.

PROFESSOR

All right, Schwonder, it’s you or me!

**What can we tell from the Professor’s telephone conversation?
How does it illustrate the dangers of the regime?**

Activities

Possible Research

Research famous revolutionaries from around the world and present your findings to the class.

Heart of a Dog was written in 1925.

What was happening at that time in Canada?

What was the political climate? What was the social climate?

What was the impact of Communism on Canada?

Investigate Stalin.

What were his origins?

What were the trademarks of his reign?

What were the consequences of his regime?

Write your own dialogue for the following scene.

You are an animal with the appearance of a human. You arrive at a restaurant.

How do you set your self up at the table? What do you order?

Choose one. You are: a horse; a cat; a pig. .

How do you place your order with the waitress?

You ask questions about the menu, you order something not offered at this restaurant, etc...

n.b.: your physical behaviour matches that of the animal you are interpreting.

Imagine a situation where you have worked very hard to create something that has turned out to be quite nasty, even dangerous. How would you deal with this: would you try to improve it or would you destroy it?