

THE STANFORD DEPARTMENT OF DRAMA 2003-2004 PRESENTS:

MARIA

BY ISAAC BABEL

**TRANSLATION BY
PETER CONSTANTINE**

**ADAPTED FOR THE STANFORD STAGE BY
GREGORY FREIDIN**

**DIRECTED BY
CARL WEBER**

FEBRUARY 19-21 AND 26-28 AT 8PM

FEBRUARY 29 AT 5PM

PIGOTT THEATER

STANFORD UNIVERSITY

photo credits:

Davey Hubay • Alexey Smirnov



MARIA

BY ISAAC BABEL

TRANSLATION BY PETER CONSTANTINE

adapted for the Stanford Stage

by Gregory Freidin

Director

Carl Weber

Set Design

Mark Guirguis

Costume Design

Connie Strayer

Sound Design

Adrian Coburn

Lighting Design

Andrew M. Reid

Dramaturgy

Gregory Freidin

Kathryn Syssoyeva

Stage Manager

Lisa Vargas

STAFF

Assistant Director

Assistant Stage Managers

Light Board Operator

Sound Board Operator

Dresser

Makeup

Run Crew

Kathryn Syssoyeva

Eli Peterson

Lisa Rowland

Malika Williams

Stephanie Friedman

Ean DeVaughn

Jennifer Rose Carr

Pallen Chiu

Yana Kesala

Meghan Dunn

Turntable Controls By: Systems West

CAST

(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

- Isaac Markovich Dymshits** Zack
- Bishonkov** (*a cripple*) James Poskin
- Yevstigneich** (*a cripple*) Matthew Griffin
- Viskovsky** Kyle Gillette
(*a former captain of the guard*)
- Filip** (*a cripple*) James Lyons
- Lyudmila Nikolaevna Mukovnina** Audrey Dundee Hannah
(*daughter of General Mukovnin*)
- Katerina Vyacheslavovna Velzen (Katya)** Rachel Joseph
(*a live-in relative of the Mukovnins*)
- Nikolai Vasilievich Mukovnin** Thomas Freeland
(*a former general in the Czar's army*)
- Nefedovna** (*the Mukovnin's nanny*) Kathryn Syssoyeva
- Sergey Hiliaronovich Golitsyn** Michael Hunter
(*a former prince*)
- Kravchenko** Tim Youker
(*a former Czarist officer, now in the Red army*)
- Madame Dora** Ana Carbatti
- Inspector** Dan Gindikin
- Policeman** Eli Peterson
- Drunk in Police Station** Brad Rothbart
- Kalmykova** Holly Thorsen
- Red Army Soldier** Daniel Sack
- Agasha** (*a janitor*) Mandana Khoshnevisan
- Andrei** (*a floor polisher*) Edward Drapkin
- Kuzma** (*a floor polisher*) Justin Lisanckie
- Aristarkh Petrovich Sushkin** Barry Kendall
(*an antiques dealer*)
- Safonov** (*a worker*) Andrew Hendel
- Elena** (*his wife*) Emily Fletcher
- Nyushka** (*a young woman from the country*) Lisa Rowland

A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

It was in 1961, the year the Berlin Wall was erected, that I first encountered a text by Isaac Babel, a slim paperback titled *Budyonny's Reiterarmee* (*Red Cavalry* in English translation). Reading these short stories, I was immediately caught by the power and scope of Babel's vision, the way he captured the events described in their complex reality, in their ambiguities and abrupt turns from horrifying cruelty to the grotesque and, often, farcical behavior, as he had witnessed it all while serving with the Soviet cavalry during the Polish campaign of 1920.

When a few years later, in 1964, an at the time completely unknown play, *Maria*, received its first ever production in Italy and, soon after, in Germany, I got hold of the German translation and rediscovered what had fascinated me in Babel's cavalry stories. There was, in addition, the amazing dramatic structure he had created to unfold his narrative of an odd assembly of people who, caught in the turmoil of 1920 civil-war Petersburg, are swept way down, or up, from their previous station in Russian society. It was the combination of vibrant, colorful, often controversial characters and Babel's particular epic, one might say: film-like, dramaturgy that made me keen on staging the play. By then, I was living and working in America, and I tried to interest producers and regional theaters in Babel's daring text — a rather naive attempt, I must admit. Since there was no English translation yet available and I could only describe the play and explain what made it so fascinating to me.

When Gregory Freidin approached the Drama Department and asked if we would stage one of Babel's two plays for the conference "The Enigma of Isaac Babel" that he planned for 2004, there came at last the occasion to explore in production the many aspects of *Maria* that had captivated as much as puzzled my imagination since I first read the text forty years ago. I hope that our audience will understand and share my fascination with Babel's play and the way he makes us watch women and men who are trapped in a world of rapid and cruel change, while they try to negotiate events beyond their control that might either destroy or lift up their lives.

—Carl Weber

ISAAC BABEL'S *MARIA*

Babel's second play, *Maria*, is set in Petrograd in the winter-spring of 1920. This was the third year of the Russian Civil War. The old regime began to collapse under the pressure of WWI early in 1917; the tsar abdicated in March; in November, the Bolsheviks seized power, provoking the Civil War when they dissolved the elected Constituent Assembly in January of 1918. For the Bolsheviks, Russia was "the weakest link in the capitalist chain," and they forced the Civil War in order to ignite the revolution in the more advanced Western countries, thereby speeding up the triumph of socialism all over the world. This goal remained elusive, and although the Soviet Union became an industrial superpower somewhere along the way, the means employed in pursuing it led to death, privation, and destruction on a historically unprecedented scale. What happens to the Mukovnin family in the play is an early part of this story.



Babel, in 1922

Babel did not have the benefit of historical hindsight. When he was writing the play in 1933, the socialist experiment in Russia still had some luster, especially if seen against the background of the economic crisis in the West, fascist dictatorship in Italy, and Hitler's ascension to power by constitutional means in the depression-ravaged Germany. Seen in this light, Soviet Russia could still be seen as a promising, if grossly imperfect, work in progress, and the world-famous Soviet author Isaac Babel—however intelligent, informed, and skeptical (and he was all of these)—had powerful reasons to hedge his bets, including the flow of royalties he received as a Soviet author. *Maria*, then, was very much a product of its uncertain time, and it is filled with the ambiguities and ambivalences, refracted through the prism of Russia's recent history.

Yet, Babel went to some lengths to make *Maria* chronologically precise: its action is dated by the references to the beginning of the Polish campaign in the spring of 1920, the subject of Babel's famous *Red Cavalry* (1926). In the former imperial capital, this third year of the civil war was remembered for its being the harshest, coldest, and most brutal. As the Civil War unfolded, the Bolsheviks abolished all forms of private commerce and much of money economy, substituting for them War Communism, a universal rationing system that gave them full control. Before



Schoolteachers selling their belongings in the street, 1919.

long, life became reduced to its barest minimum, and even that could hardly be supported by the meager, starvation rations. Black market burgeoned, crime proliferated. Petrograd—an abandoned capital since 1918, when the new government moved to Moscow—was sinking into a state of nature. In the winter, giant snow drifts covered the city, in the spring, young grass was breaking out through the cobblestones on Nevsky Avenue, and side streets were being transformed into fields of weeds. Class and status distinctions had vanished, and aristocrats, revolutionaries, poets, and black-market dealers were thrown together in this freezing pit of a Russian Apocalypse.

Although some saw redemption in man's return to a primeval state, many were crushed under the rubble of the old regime. Life was laid bare and lost all pretenses to civilization (in the winter, indoor plumbing froze, and the city was covered by excrement). All that mattered were the instincts, the will, and the wits of the men and women inhabiting the sub-arctic Hobbesean world.

As a writer, Babel was in his element, a witness to raw nature breaking through the cracks of one of civilization's most beautiful shells.

Night has no mercy. The wind slashes and cuts you down. The dead man's fingers are feeling through St. Petersburg's the icy innards. A crimson sign of the pharmacy shines frozen at the street corner. The pharmacist's head with parted hair is dropped to one side. The frost has seized the ink-stained heart of the pharmacy. And its heart has given out. Nevsky is empty. Ink bubbles are popping in the sky. The time is two o'clock. It's the end. The night has no mercy.¹

So ran one of his stories datelined "Petersburg, 1918." Written fifteen years later, *Maria* echoes these words with uncompromising starkness. It is in this world—the

nocturnal world of a dying metropolis—that the action of *Maria* is set to unfold.



Number 86, Nevsky Prospekt

a hotel at Nevsky 86, where much of the play's action takes place, as the haunt of the play's Jewish entrepreneur and Babel's namesake, *Isaac Dymshits*. His friend *Victor Shklovsky* recalled his this period in 1924:

Babel lived at Nevsky 86. He lived in a hotel and lived alone. Others came and went. The house maids cleaned after him, tidied the rooms, took away the *night buckets* with food leavings floating in them. Babel lived his life, observing unhurriedly the hungry lechery of the big city. His own room was clean. He'd tell me that nowadays women often gave in before six o'clock, because trams stopped running soon afterwards. No, he was not merely a cool observer of went on around him. But it did seem to me that Babel, before going to bed, would put a full stop and sign every lived day—as if it were a short story. The craft and its instrument left their imprint on the man.²

In those days, Babel combined successfully, if incongruously, a career of a translator for the Petrograd Cheka with that of a staff writer for the anti-Bolshevik but socialist paper *New Life*. The Cheka, as the Bolshevik called their political police³, hunted down the enemies of the new regime and black market operators, like the play's *Isaac Dymshits* and *Captain Viskovsky*, while the journal, edited by his loyal patron and literary godfather, *Maxim Gorky*, criticized the inhumanity and brutality of that same regime (until Lenin closed it down in July, 1918). Babel the writer who could juggle these opposites and draw from them what he needed for his art. The seeds planted during his residence at Nevsky 86 bore their fruit in *Maria*.

Like much of what Babel has written, the play has powerful autobiographical overtones. Some are on the surface. *Maria Mukovnin's* letter read in Scene Five echoes Babel's masterpiece, *Red Cavalry*, based on his service with *Budenny's Cossacks Army*. Less apparent, but clear to some of his friends, the play is rooted in Babel's sojourn in St. Petersburg-Petrograd in 1918–19. He lived then in

**ISAAC BABEL:
A CHRONOLOGY**

- 1894** Isaac Babel (Bobel) is born in Odessa, Russia's third largest city, to Feyga and Manus Bobel, a modest entrepreneur.
- 1899** Babel's sister, Mera, is born.
- 1905–11** Attends Odessa's Nicholas I Commercial School, studies violin with P.S. Stolyarsky, learns French, English & German, becomes an avid reader, tries his hand at writing, and frequents theater and opera.
- 1911–16** Studies economics and business at the Kiev Commercial Institute, meets future wife Evgeniia Gronfein.
- 1913** Publication of Babel's first known story, "Old Shloyme."
- 1914** Receives a temporary exemption from military service for reasons of health; drafts his story "At Grandma's."
- 1916** Completes studies at Kiev Commercial Institute, enrolls as a law student at the Petrograd Psycho-Neurological Institute. Meets Gorky, publishes two stories in Gorky's journal *Letopis*, writes for the Petrograd press.
- 1917** Charged with pornography by the old regime that soon collapses; volunteers for the Romanian front, travels to Odessa and Kiev.
- 1918** Works as a translator for the Petrograd Cheka, writes for Gorky's anti-Bolshevik *New Life*, organizes food procurement detachments in the Volga region, works for the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment.
- 1919** Returns to Odessa; works for the State Publishing House; marries Evgeniia Gronfein.
- 1920** With identity papers issued in the name of Kiril Vasilievich Lyutov, joins Semyon Budenny's First Cavalry Army as a correspondent for the army newspaper *Red Cavalryman* for the duration of the Polish campaign.
- 1921** Publication of "The King" (*Tales of Odessa*) in an Odessa newspaper.
- 1922** Travels in Georgia and the Caucasus, writes for a Georgian newspaper.
- 1923** Publication of *Red Cavalry* stories in an Odessa newspaper.

Autobiographical elements do not end there, and *Maria* should be seen in light of Babel's works and days in the decade that preceded its composition. In the 1920s and early 1930s, he was becoming increasingly controversial even as his fame in Russia and abroad was growing unabated. Much has been written about the pressures Babel had to contend with to conform to the party line in the arts or the brutal threats of Semyon Budenny. But he was subject to stresses of another sort as well. His complicated personal life—the logistics of supporting his mother in Brussels, his lover and mother of his first child, Tamara Kashirina, in Moscow, his wife and mother of his daughter Nathalie in Paris—required a lot of energy and imagination. What's more, they involved unrealistic and unrealized commitments to publishers and film studios, and the impossible financial schemes he had to resort to in order even to begin to discharge what he thought were his obligations. By 1932, there was also a budding romance with Antonina Pirozhkova... *Isaac Babel* was torn between the life of duty, which required calculation and maximizing his earning power (he saw this as his *Jewish* self, the play's *Isaac* Dymshits), and the life of art and romance (which he treated as his *Russian* soul, one embodied in the play's character of *Maria*).

The entire play is electrified by the currents flowing from these two thematic extremes. One pole is the pure capitalist rationality of *Isaac* Dymshits, the resident at



Maria Denisova, c. 1914

Babel's old Petrograd address; the other is the pure romance of the revolution embodied in the play's *Maria* Mukovnin who, like the young Babel, served in Red Cavalry in the Polish campaign. The two are linked through the person of *Maria*'s sister, *Lyudmila* (literally, "pleasing to people"), a clumsily calculating victim of her own schemes. These two polar opposites and the figure that mediates them may be seen as a melancholy autobiographical meditation of a man—a writer and a public figure—in crisis. Almost forty and still unable to make a choice in his personal or public life, torn by conflicting demands of both, Babel was haunted by the thought of never again being able to repeat his spectacular feat of the mid-1920s, when the publication of *Red Cavalry* and *Odessa Stories* (1923-1926) brought him to the apex of fortune and fame.

There are indications that Babel may have conceived the play late in 1929 or early in 1930, around the tenth anniversary of the First Cavalry Army, when political pressure on him to redeem himself in the eyes of Budenny increased considerably. Around that time he obtained commissions, and advances, for this play from two theaters, but for one reason or another *Maria* remained on the drawing boards. Everything changed when he arrived at Gorky's villa in Sorrento in April 1933. There, away from his family and enjoying Gorky's famous hospitality and

- 1924** Babel's stories appear in the Moscow journals *LEF* and *Red Virgin Soil*, beginning Babel's fame. Moves permanently to Moscow. Attacked by Semyon Budenny for "defaming" the First Cavalry Army.
- 1925** Works in film, collaborates with Sergey Eisenstein on the script for a film *Benya Krik*, based on his *Tales of Odessa*. Romance with Tamara Kashirina. Babel's sister emigrates to Belgium; his wife, Evgeniia, leaves for France. Publication of "Story of My Dovecote" and another story of the childhood cycle.
- 1926** Publication of *Red Cavalry* (soon translated in German and French) Kashirina and Babel have a son, Mikhail. Babel writes *Sunset*, his first known play. Babel's mother emigrates to Belgium.
- 1927** Films *Benya Krik* and *Wandering Stars*, released. Breaks with Kashirina, leaving her his Moscow flat, rejoins his wife in Paris in July, finishes scripting the film *Chinese Mill* (1928).
- 1928** While Babel is in France, *Sunset* is produced successfully in Baku and Odessa and unsuccessfully, in Moscow. Babel returns to Russia in October and travels in the South of Russia.
- 1929** American edition of *Red Cavalry*. Gorky compares Babel to Nikolay Gogol and comes to Babel's defense when Budenny goes on the offensive. Babel's daughter Nathalie is born in Paris to Evgeniia Babel.
- 1930** Babel settles in a village outside Moscow. Critics begin to speak of Babel's "silence" as a writer. Babel is accused—falsely—of making anti-Soviet statements while abroad and succeeds in proving his innocence. 4th edition of *Red Cavalry*.
- 1931** Publication of two more "childhood" stories, one new tale of Odessa, and one story about collectivization of agriculture. Resumes his friendship with Gorky.
- 1932** Babel's new apartment in Moscow. Publication of four new stories including "The Journey" and "Guy de Maupassant." Romance with