ACCORDING TO THE GOOD WISHES OF THE TLAXCALAN PEOPLE, CORTEZ SET OUT ON AN EXHIBITION

Catherine Sullivan

While the precipitating event for *Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land* was the 2002 Chechen hostage crisis in Moscow, the piece is in no way concerned with its representation or with the fast kill—notes of the spectacle as they relate to terrorism as a mediated form of political address. Also not on the agenda is a neo-Brechtian foregrounding of theater itself as a metaphor for the presentational excesses terrorism generates. Destruction aimed at the surpluses of the antagonists’ “way of life” and the symbolic regimes they hold valuable, are always the target of a mutual agitation. Particular to this event is the vast spectrum of trauma existent even prior to the hostage crisis; my interest is more in the slow kill—forms of erasure and arbitrariness—some of the extenuating circumstances of any assimilating regime.

My interest in the event began with the musical playing on the stage at the time of the attack—*Nord-Ost*. Billed as “Moscow’s first daily running musical,” the buzz surrounding *Nord-Ost* was that it would be a production of the same size and scope as American and British musicals such as *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Miss Saigon*. It would be a “Broadway spectacle with Russian soul.” Its significance was bolstered by items such as “facts about the musical” one could find on its website such as, “fact: the first two tickets for *Nord-Ost* were purchased by a couple in the US!” While the musical’s narrative itself supports some notion of a Russian national identity, the nature of the promotional language surrounding it affirms notions of quality in entertainment as Western.

*Nord-Ost* is based on a novel written by Veniamin Kaverin, *Two Captains*, book one of which was published in the USSR in 1940, book two in 1945. It is a love and adventure story based on the real-life search for a lost expedition in the Russian Arctic. Set against historical events such as the Bolshevik Revolution and World War II, the novel details the lives of pilot Sanya Grigoryev and his life-long love Katya Tatarinova, and the development of polar aviation in Russia. Ultimately it is a patriotic novel for teenage boys wherein the personal sensations of adventure and discovery are infused with details of Russian history. Sanya and Katya are obsessed with exploration, the details of which are the sublimation of their romance, and one can see why a popular musical with an expansionist pathology might be of symbolic importance to the Chechens. If one believes that the Chechen militants were aware of both the content of the musical as well as the aspirations of its producers, two targets appear between the cross-hair—the sensibilities of both Eastern and Western leisure classes. To what degree the Chechens took aim specifically at this is unclear. To me, the reverberations were particularly strong given the use not only of the Moscow theater, a place of public identification and assembly for the “Russian soul,” but the use of this particular musical, one which itself was already a product of a broader cultural regimentation and assimilation, the arbitrary quality associated with “Broadway spectacle.”
The project itself is hopelessly immersed in and confounded by the painful trajectories suggested by the event, what is elusive about them as opposed to what is directly consequential. The strategy (of course defined as such after the fact) was to animate these trajectories by regarding them as a series of continuums on which I could plot basic dramatic elements like character, action, setting, and reference, which would shift in relation to one another, and ultimately never remain under my total control. Early on, my view of the situation was somewhat romantic—what took place on the stage in Moscow was the confrontation between the idealisms of one contingency, which had formulated the oppressive realisms for the antagonizing other.
I soon realized that this was a kind of expression of Chinoiserie toward the milieu of the terrorist who is no less idealistic. I became interested in the more uncomfortable aspects of the project such as the impossibility of my own objectivity, and so consciously invented a kind of white on white Chinoiserie to color my view onto the icy landscape of the Russian novel, *Two Captains* (my working substrate), and the East as a timeless mise-en-scène, where past, present, and future remain hopelessly confused. In working with the novel, I fixated on both major and minor details hoping this would give my summation an effect analogous to the popular musical which relies on conventions that are often arbitrary and ridiculous. Conventions which perhaps have some underlying rationale, but have achieved substance mainly through the force of repetition. The *Nord-Ost* producers’ aspirations for the musical and my own projections onto the novel are read through one another in what is hopefully a continuum of otherness and exchange. This forms the basis of much of the painful arbitrariness that circulates throughout the piece.

Convention makes work go smoothly at the factory. Musical theater is a brutal regime. Forcing a relationship between a reduced and generalizing form of expression—pantomime—onto another—the novel—which aspires to psychological complexity, subtlety, and nuance was another blunt choice in constructing the piece. The ten parts of the novel were reduced to a series of roughly 50 pantomimed vignettes, both emblematic of its heroics (Pantomime Part 2/E “Sanya reads, learns, and dreams”) as well as idiosyncratic (Pantomime Part 6/G “Katya’s roommate’s mother drives her mad with her nonstop talking”). The resulting re-construction of the novel through the pantomimes was aberrant and arbitrary, and the 21 performers who signed on for *Ice Floes* were given the thankless task of mechanizing, learning, and executing them as if they were the oldest and most prestigious theater ensemble in Russia. Which one? Who knew. The Polish, Bulgarian, and American performers had different interpretations about what this meant, and the historical dimension of what would constitute the performance style of the work would ultimately be a matter of a lack of detail supplemented by projection, imagination, and regimentation.
Some of the pantomimes involve one character (Pantomime Part 7/A “Katya busies herself with her geological work”) others several characters (Pantomime Part 2/A “Sanya takes a blood oath with his friend Petya, they run away to Turkestan, they march with the other waifs and strays”). However, each actor learned all the roles within each pantomime, and the pantomimes themselves are presented as both en-masse choreographies and individual solos. The form of each pantomime was learned in exactly the same way: in large ensemble numbers, the individuals are assimilated mindlessly into the whole; and conversely in solo numbers asked to be the isolated representatives of it. Aberrations in execution are part of the struggle evident throughout.

In the end, the pantomimes do not serve the details of the novel; they are largely dissolved into the bodies of the actors. It is in the costumes, however, that the mise-en-scène of Two Captains emerges as a series of roughly 100 archetypes or costume clichés, and as the multiple manifestations of Sanya and Katya depicted throughout the course of the novel. For example, the character Katya is seen as a young girl; a sophisticated geologist, digging trenches in Leningrad; and as starving after the siege, but she is manifest through several actresses and
several costumes and at times all in the same scene. Different actors wear the same costume in different scenes, the archetypes are informed by the unique physical interpretation of different actors. Some costumes are refined, some are degraded and incomplete. Each actor wears a variety of costumes bearing no relationship to the pantomime he might be performing at any given time. An alternate set of archetypes unified loosely by modern dress and ad-hoc martial motifs are seen interrupting, coerced into participating, or passing within the action. These “insurgents” do not embody or represent an identifiable ideology, they are simply operating through another set of codes inconsistent with that of the dominant iconography of Two Captains.

All of the interior scenes for Ice Floes were shot at the Polish American Army Veterans Association (P.A.V.A.) in Chicago, Illinois, a kind of multi-purpose social hall with a series of adjacent rooms (downstairs bar, classroom, kitchen, dressing rooms, bookshop), used mainly by the Polish-American community for various social events and teaching of Poland’s military history. The interior is replete with a compelling combination of nationalistic regalia, military photographs and portraits, and original artworks by local Polish artists from Chicago. Of particular significance is a series of carvings by Alex Kowalzuk depicting a variety of social and political subjects such as terrorism, the Catholic church, and the Polish situation throughout the 20th century, primarily under Soviet and German domination. In the portrait room is a particularly impressive display of small Plexiglas vitrines, which house objects such as a resin cast of a broken hammer and sickle nestled within a mound of small clay skulls. Repetitive decorative motifs are found throughout the building, such as the stucco-covered fixtures arrayed in cascading geometries, and strange plaster vases and fountains. The film presents the location as it exists, the only addition was a representation from Two Captains of the shipwreck of Captain Tatarinov which is placed on the stage in the ballroom. The secondary locations are the parking lot of an abandoned nightclub, Moscow Nights, in a suburb of Chicago, and a cornfield further in the suburbs. Both outdoor locations are situated next to large generic industrial buildings.

It was my hope that multiple elements would animate one another to such a degree that many objects of consideration could be generated in each shot. The location depicts historical events in both a nationalistic and idealistic way, but it is a war memorial, and so the numerous representations of death somehow strangely subvert the heroic grandeur. The idealistic iconography of the Two Captains novel and the exotic image of the young terrorist are mirrored off the iconography of the Polish Army Veterans Association, but because the latter iconography also bears out the painful consequences of idealism, I hope that neither the overtly stylized theatrical action nor the details of the location are absorbed into a pure fiction. The interiors are treated with contrasting lighting aesthetics, one that is flat and uneventful and somewhat neo-realistic, the other high contrast, somewhat film noir. I associate these two cinematic movements with a kind of cold-war era paranoia. The shots in Ice Floes are often staged to transition from one lighting condition to another without cutting, creat-
ing an effect which loads and unloads light onto the subjects in unbroken sequences of time. In one shot light can lend and borrow theatrical magic from the pantomimes, but the actors must maintain their conviction regardless of their supporting circumstances.

It is ultimately the mutation, recombination, and ongoing interface between action (pantomime), setting, and character that is the narrative “progress” of Ice Floes. The attempt was to distribute as much of the action throughout as much of the location as possible using as much recombination of the elements as my resources would allow. Pantomimes are repeated throughout the interior, in arbitrary and automated recombination, forcing themselves into a variety of compositions upon a variety of costume archetypes and performers.
They are treated and forced toward ongoing mutation, and this is the experience of narrative time the piece proposes. The mechanized pantomimes played in large ensemble scenes repeat themselves in intimate spaces imposing the cruelty of the unquestioning collective onto the solitary individual. The pantomime “Sanya’s pregnant sister dies in childbirth,” when played as a large ensemble with 21 performers lying on the floor miming “pregnant” bellies and groaning in pain, signifies a kind of empathy. The same pantomime played in the noirishly lit classroom by a singular male actor invokes both the indoctrination and cruel humiliation inherent in the arbitrariness of the pantomime itself and the empathy it selfishly demands. An unmotivated camera passes through room after room of recombined elements, suggesting that the idealizing regime of Two Captains could mutate into

*Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land, 2003*
Multiple pantomimes parts 1 through 10
35 mm production still

Katya digs trenches in Leningrad (Pantomime 7/I)
Performer: John Kahara
35 mm production still
a mindless infinity. Within arbitrariness itself there lies a brutality whose only logic is a repetition that becomes increasingly more painful with every recombination.

In building the sequence of shots, parables formed as pantomimes were linked together, strange epiphanies and eerie reminiscences were generated through certain combinations and accumulations of action and setting. The pantomime “Sanya drinks red wine, white wine, then red wine at the officer’s club on his base,” depicts the ensemble drinking from their mimed wine glasses, becoming sad, then passing out in their chairs. When staged into the portrait room at the Polish Army Veteran’s Association, with its morbid decor, the pantomime generates connotations outside its originating content, but not unrelated to it. The frequency of the recombinations presents the actors with a regime they are constantly called upon to embody, no matter how ridiculous it becomes. If the piece itself has a kind of spatial circumference, the scenes at Moscow Nights and the cornfield are its outer edge. Here, the ensemble is introduced to a new theatrical backdrop, one that provides no support for the conviction with which they execute their action, and it is here that the regimes concocted by the work are articulated at their most arbitrary and thus most brutal.

When I began work on Ice Floes, I knew that the presentations that would work best for the piece would be those that allowed additional spatial articulation. The most successful to date has been the installation at Kunstverein Braunschweig in Germany. The interior architecture of the Kunstverein, a 19th-century neo-classical villa was yet another loaded setting. Unique to this installation was the consideration of two decorative regimes, one referencing the interior decor conceived for the Polish Army Veterans Association by Alex Kowalzuk, and the other, the interior of the Kunstverein Braunschweig as conceived by its former owner Peter Joseph Krahe. Motifs from the P. A.V.A. and its idiosyncratic and ad-hoc ceremoniousness have been abstracted from the setting and reconstructed as a series of discrete structures, and are then staged inside the Haus Salve Hospes. Although the “neo-classical” finds itself in both settings, it is in a very different way, and the result is that the interiors have both something in common and nothing in common.

In the sense that the films begin with the novel Two Captains and its projection into the decor of the P.A.V.A., so is the decor of the P. A.V.A., projected into the Kunstverein Braunschweig, and, like the actors who play the characters in the films, it is assimilated or not into its most recent setting. I hope this can be seen as a series of transpositions—from historical event (the 2002 Moscow crisis), to the musical Nord-Ost, to the novel Two Captains, to the interior of the P.A.V.A., to the interior of the Haus Salve Hospes. Each transposition loads the piece with additional references, inferences, suggestions, and ultimately consequences through which to read its themes. Each transposition moves the piece into the present tense through spaces that are very much conditioned by the past. This movement forward—the piece’s “progress”—forces issues of relationality and assimilation, and ultimately the experience of history as a baroque and theatrical construct.
ICE FLOES OF FRANZ JOSEPH LAND

CAST AND CREW

Cast:
DeMocco Atcher, Gary D’Amico,
Tim Beamish, Juliusz Dobiesz,
George Ducker, Michael Garvey,
John Kahara, Andrzei Krukowski,
Krishna Le Fan, Judy Lloyd,
Valentine Mielli, Beata Pilch,
Bartlomiej Sadkowski,
Carolyn Shoemaker, Kacper Skowron,
Circus Szalewski, Robert Teetsov,
Nickolai Todorov, Wesley Walker,
Nicole Wiesner, Bob Wilson,
Carl Wisniewski
Beata Pilch, Trapdoor Theatre

Casting:
Beata Pilch,

Director of Photography:
Raoul Germain Jr.

Steadicam Operator:
Geoff Schotz

1st Assistant Camera:
Jose Rios

2nd Assistant Camera:
Lindsey Gilmore

Assistant to the Director:
Sarah Leahy

1st Assistant Director:
Adam Kolegás

Costume Design:
Stacy Ellen Rich

Assistant Costume Design:
Sage Reed

Hair:
Sherri Liberatori

Wardrobe Mistress:
Pamela Meiners

Wardrobe Assistant:
Katie Giroux

Make-up:
Jason Wagner, Melanie Rizzo,
Gina Ussel, Kim Clark

Set Dresser:
Merje Veski

Specialty Props:
Inga Lutkowska

Prop Master:
Marquee Reno / Guy Trayling

Gaffer:
Jason Glazer

Best Boy:
Kevin Pittman / Steven Ware

Key Grip:
Jeremy Long

Grips:
Zeb Maderas, Brandon Dennahy,
Oliver Alling

Sound:
Bartek Swiatek

Boom Operator:
JT Mueller

Transportation:
Jeff Weiner

Craft Services:
Renata Olejniczak

Production Assistants:
Gigi, Quentin Kruger

Production Assistants:
Taryn Shick, Grant Weiss,
Eboni Johnson, Josh Tollo,
Stephanie Graham, Wyatt Seavers,
Timmy Osoba, Ronnie Reese,
Ewelina Dobiesz

Special thanks to:
Beata Pilch and Trapdoor Theatre,
Alex Kowalzuk, Henry Zygmunt,
Juliusz Dobiesz, Ewelina Dobiesz,
Patricia Dunham, and Carrie Holt.
Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land, 2003

“Nenets: I am a prisoner of the Arctic seal.
Group: You are the pervert of the Arctic seal.
Nenets: It hurts me.
Group: Oh! It hurts you?
Performers: Michael Garvey, Kacper Skowron, Beata Pilch, John Kahara, Bart Sadkowski, Juliusz Dobiesz
Digital production still
Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land, 2003

Sanya and Petya become petty thieves (Pantomime 2/8)

Performers: Andrzej Krukowski, Krishna Le Fan

Digital production still
Poor Little Sanya Economic Parable, 2004
7 black and white photographs, 8 x 10 inches (each)
Performers: Juliusz Dobiesz, Democco Atcher, George Ducker
Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land, 2003
Sanya and Katya sit alone in the map room of the Tatarinov home (Pantomime 3/4 E)
Performers: Tim Beamish, Carl Wisniewski
Digital production still
Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land, 2003

Metropolese Lady and Military Nurse walk with cabbages. Vagabond waits for Metropolese Male.

Performers: Beata Pilch, Carolyn Shoemaker, Valentine Mielli, Tim Beamish

35 mm production still
Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land, 2003
Katya confronts Sanya’s lifelong enemy [Pantomime 6/C]
Performers: Juliusz Dobiesz, Andrzej Krukowski, Judy Lloyd, Bart Sadkowski, Beata Pilch, Valentine Mielli
35 mm production still
Digging Trenches Katya and Metropolisse
Assimilation Scene, 2004
9 black and white photographs (8 depicted here), 14 × 11 inches (each)
Performers: Bart Sadkowski, Juliusz Dobiesz, Beata Pilch, Tim Beamish
Poor Little Sanya Economic Parable, 2004
7 black and white photographs, 8 x 10 inches (each)
Performers: Wesley Walker, Juliusz Dobiesz
Poor Little Sanya Economic Parable, 2004
7 black and white photographs, 8 × 10 inches (each) Performers: Demasco Atcher, Carolyn Shoemaker, Nicole Wiesner, Valentine Mielli
Poor Little Sanya Economic Parable, 2004; 7 black and white photographs, 8 × 10 inches (each); Performers: Democco Archer, Nicole Wiesner, Valentine Mielli, Wesley Walker, Carolyn...
9 Woodcuts by Aleksander Kowalczyk


Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details), 2004
Projected, decorative, and scenic elements from the exhibition at Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2004
with: Aleks/Peter Infusion, 2004
Multiple decorative and scenic elements in plaster, wood, faux greenery, and paint; dimensions variable

Ice Floes of Franz Joseph Land (House of Peter, House of Aleks, and Some of Those Crappy Details), 2004
Projected, decorative, and scenic elements from the exhibition at Kunstverein Braunschweig, 2004
with: Aleks Speech #1, 2004
Plaster, wood; 254 x 110 x 110 cm