New to You

Freshly translated lit from Russia, France, Greece, and the Czech Republic

SONECKHA
Ludmila Ulitskaya
Ludmila Ulitskaya was born in the Ural Mountains in 1943 and spent decades under the massive weight of the Soviet Union, but her galgal is that of humanity—the weight of the past, the lure of sex, the knowledge of death. Sonechka, consisting of a novella and six short stories, acknowledges the old regime as one acknowledges the weather, while life goes on regardless.

And what a sad, valiant life it can be. In the title story, Sonechka is a meek librarian who transfers into the beloved music of Robert Victorovich, a once famous artist whose career ended when he was sent to the work camps. Their life together is hard but loving, and when in his old age Robert takes young Jasia as a lover, Sonechka forbear, finding in fact that the family is strengthened. In these stories, forbears, finding in fact that the past, the lure of sex, the knowledge of death, the ever amusing hatred of creativity that is most eminently banal, while pretending to be. It’s a transcript of a pithy and scintillating epigrams, a bit of flash, and a whiff of ugly mystery.

Though not a flash, Petros Abatzoglou’s What Does Mrs. Freeman Want? is a classic of post-war Greek literature, works better for translator Linda Coverdale. The historian/narrator’s disembodiment, and translator Gerald Turner. An absurdist history with no chronological narrative, the book strings together the big ideas and facts of the century impressionistically, mining up periods and anticipating real events with painful little anecdotes that may or not be fictional: “And one young Jewish woman survived the war thanks to playing an aria from The Merry Widow on the violin on the railroad platform at Struthof concentration camp.” The historian/narrator’s disembodiment, voice rambles dispassionately between the theoretical (And among philosophers the opinion increasingly spread that the twentieth century has marked the end of the era of humanism and a new era had commenced, which they called post-humanist) and the childlike (“And airships and airplanes flew through the sky and the horses were terribly frightened”).

The patchwork highlights the similarities among promises made by different movements in art, religion, science, and politics. The young people who went to live on communes in the 1960s, for instance, are described in the same terms as those who went to live on the Monte Verita commune in 1906 and later joined the Nazis “because the Nazis preached natural harmony and the coalescence of the individual with the Earth.”

As in a history textbook, phrases are pulled out of the main text and put in the margins to highlight “key points.” These notes are willfully obtuse and show the inevitably reductionist, repetitive ways we make sense of history. They invoke certain recurring themes of the century (“SOL-DIERS LAY IN WAT”/“FASCISM UNIVERSAL!”), but also the century's obsession with determining what invisible parasite—whether scientific or metaphysical, the “millennium bug” or the contagion in the blood of “inferior races”—people were blaming for their problems at any given moment. Time and again we see that the cure are worse than the disease: the truth of one particularly horrid tale is that soap made from humans was used and named in the name of “hygiene” doesn’t make you cleaner. Yet we also see how society refuses to grow up, clinging to the different and not changing. Ourednik tells the story of a concentration-camp survivor and the ex-lover of a Nazi, both with shaved scalps: “They danced together with their heads against each other and other people found it improper and almost in bad taste.”

In a recent interview in the online journal Context, Ourednik explained that his goal was “to find a form that would enable the narrator—like History itself—to be terribly banal, while pretending to be original.” The book’s terrible banality—like the inappropriate appropriateness of a concentration-camp Barbie or an assassinasia manual written in Esperanto, two souvenirs from his century of violence—will make you laugh hollowly at the idea of progress.
Three decades on, nothing in Miguel Piñero’s award-winning prison drama seems shocking.

By Tony Adler

Miguel Piñero famously wrote his prison drama, Short Eyes, while doing time at Sing Sing in the early 70s. Joseph Papp saw it in its first incarnation at the Theatre of the Riverside Church and guided it to a production at Lincoln Center. Coarse, ugly, vio-

lewd, the play offered Broadway audiences a horrifying/tilting glimpse into convict society, the lumpen subcul-
ture that had lately drawn heavy popular attention thanks to jail-

house memoirs like Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Ice, Nixon’s declaration of war on drugs, and—most of all—the Attica uprising of 1971.

Short Eyes won two Obies, six Tony nominations, and the New York Drama Critics Circle award for best American play of 1973—74. Thirty years later, it’s just kind of nauseatingly quaint. What middle school kid doesn’t know that a weak or effeminate prison-
er faces the prospect of gang rape unless he becomes a stronger man’s bitch? Or that child molesters are despised and considered middle school kid doesn’t know, and—most of all—the Attica uprising of 1971.

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of molesting a little girl. His vocabulary, morality, and pecking order of the cell block have been absorbed into American life. The think that the rest would be

nothing but mob psychology. But even as his characters worry Davis like zoo lions fighting over a slab of beef, they’re engaged in a neat little Marxian dance of counterbalancing interests. And in the end, what’s truly left when the roles fall away is individual conscience.

Unfortunately, Short Eyes is more interesting than good. The last production I saw used pup-
petite headaddresses—big foam penis-head hats, among others—to distract us from its frailties. Here, director Ron OJ Parson tries a strictly naturalistic approach, which means that the only thing standing between the play’s weaknesses and our sus-
pension of disbelief is the ensemble. Which can’t hold the line. This is most disappointingly obvious in a scene where Davis (Greg Kinnear look-alike Andrew Kain Miller) opens up to fellow inmate Juan (Ian Vegar). Neither actor is bad, really, but neither can muster the force and skill necessary to make this absolutely crucial passage believable.

Still, there are some nice performances. Senuwell Smith would be vivid even without his epic—and, again, not entirely believable—mascara.

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