

(lights up on a young girl of 17 or so, Tamara, standing somewhat shyly in centre of the stage. She is dressed in the manner of the late nineteenth century, simple clothing, carrying a weather-beaten suitcase)

TAMARA: (to audience after a moment) Here I am. I announced myself. I'm waiting for the master of the household. I'm always waiting. I had to wait a long time for the train that carried me here. Then I waited at the station. And again....as you see....I wait. Are you waiting too? Oh, I see. You're waiting for my story to begin. It is my story. I think it is. I hope you are not disappointed. I've lived a rather dull life until this time. I was orphaned at the age of three when my mother and father died rather beautifully in a double suicide. They left a note that said "Regrets..." Nothing about me. Unless, of course, I was one of their regrets. My aunt and uncle brought me up. My cousin, Peter, behaved like my brother. It wasn't such a bad childhood. People have had worse, especially in Russia. I could have gone to one of those orphanages. As it was, I am a poor but accomplished young lady about to embark on the adventure of teaching. That's why I am here. Count Sergei Kolav has employed me here on his estate to teach ....that point wasn't very clear in the letter. I believe the Count is somewhat progressive in his thinking. So, that is my story. Doesn't take a long time. I left out some details since we have not been formally introduced....such as my feelings for my cousin, my suitor at school, and my own aspirations.

(a young man dressed as a house servant comes on. Some of the smaller parts are played by one actor)

YOUNG MAN: The Count regrets he cannot come to you at present. I will show you to your room. Perhaps you would like to wash.

TAMARA: When might I see the Count?

YOUNG MAN: The Count will dine with you this evening.

TAMARA: I am disappointed, of course, but not dejected.

YOUNG MAN: You can follow me.

TAMARA: Yes. (she tries to hand her suitcase to the young man who turns on his heel without taking it. Tamara looks at the audience and shrugs) Maybe it is the servants who are progressive in their thinking. Come follow me. We will see what will happen. (she goes out after the Young Man)

(two young peasants, Natalya and Ivan, come on. They are dressed for work in the fields)

NATALYA: I saw the school teacher walking up to the door, I tell you. She is young.

IVAN: Too young to have learned much of the world. Don't worry, we'll help her with her real education.

NATALYA: Ivan, don't.....

IVAN: I'm sure she never met the devil before...or dined with him.

NATALYA: You must not say such things. You've been beaten before...

IVAN: A thousand lines across my back won't change the truth.

NATALYA: Or your parentage.

IVAN: Do you think I hate the Count because he lives in the big house while my mother and myself live in a hut?

NATALYA: Listen to you!

IVAN: Listen to yourself instead! You've spent too many afternoons in that damned church with those icons staring down at you.

NATALYA: I find love is an easier path.

IVAN: Then why won't you love me?

NATALYA: You haven't learned yet how to love.

IVAN: There are many women who would disagree.

NATALYA: The Count would not let us marry...

IVAN: Serfs have been freed. Or hadn't you heard?

NATALYA: Ivan, the Count has big plans for you.

IVAN: And for my mother? Look what came of his "big" plans for her.

NATALYA: You came of those big plans.

IVAN: I don't think it was planned at all.

NATALYA: He'll make something of you.

IVAN: He already has. He's made me a bastard.

NATALYA: Do you think that's such a unique position for a peasant?

IVAN: You are far too good, Natalya. You are my icon....

NATALYA: Now you're blaspheming. Come, let's gather the grain. The sun will be sleeping long before we're finished.

( they go off. The Young Man of the first scene comes in, snaps his fingers. Servants bring a table filled with food and two chairs. They set one at each end. The Count, a middle-aged yet sensual man, comes in and sits at one end. Tamara is timidly escorted

to her seat at the other end of the table)

COUNT: You may sit.

TAMARA: Thank-you, excellency.

(there is a long pause while the Count unfolds his napkin, pours wine, etc.)

TAMARA: Are we to begin?

COUNT: Unless you would like to say a little prayer.

TAMARA: (after a moment she folds her hands and says) Dear Lord, make this nourishment extend far beyond what we ingest at the table. Amen.

COUNT: As I said, a little prayer.

TAMARA: I am not used to praying , excellency.

COUNT: Good. We will get along. My wife used to intone for hours. Look what good it did for her. She died at thirty-five, killed by a rotting part of the chapel wall when it fell on her. The Priest said it was a miracle.

TAMARA: That she was killed?!

COUNT: That the wall had not fallen sooner. A service had just been concluded. My wife remained behind...thinking just one more good word to the Lord would help procure a bountiful harvest.

(they are both eating. The Young Man serves them)

TAMARA: And was the harvest bountiful that year?

COUNT: Yes, surprisingly so.

TAMARA: And the years after?

COUNT: (annoyed) What are you trying to say, Mademoiselle?

TAMARA: Only that your poor wife proved a martyr for your grain. Or, perhaps, you have some other explanation?

COUNT: You are giving me indigestion. That is not a good sign!

TAMARA: I don't mean to. Possibly you would enjoy a change of subject?

COUNT: Possibly.

TAMARA: Who is it I am to instruct? You don't seem to want my educational

perspectives. I see no children.

COUNT: Ivan. He's not a child, but he needs your tutelage.

TAMARA: Why is he not dining with us?

COUNT: Because he is a peasant. He dines on black bread in a filthy hut with his angry mother and his witch of a grandmother.

TAMARA: You brought me here to teach one peasant?

COUNT: He is my son.

TAMARA:(after a pause) I see.

COUNT: It is not a secret here on the estate. I know you are young..and , perhaps, still innocent...but you must have heard...

TAMARA: I come from Moscow where one hears and sees many things.

COUNT: My wife may have provided a bountiful harvest, but her own womb did not prove fertile. We tried..and tried...it was no use. I could not put her away. I..I loved her.

TAMARA: You should not be ashamed to have loved your wife.

COUNT: I am ashamed she was not enough for me. That I had my son by another woman.

TAMARA: Did your wife know?

COUNT: Yes. She chose the woman. A simple woman for a simple task. The baby was born, and the woman was put out to pasture, literally. My use for her was over.

TAMARA: And that child is...

COUNT: His name is Ivan. He is now eighteen. Strong, healthy in both mind and body. He never came to live in the big house with me. I always hoped...but no matter, my wife is dead. Ivan is ready to learn about a larger world.

TAMARA: This is not what I expected.

COUNT: You thought a little school with shining-eyed children?

TAMARA: Actually your letter was vague. But I have no money....and no way back to Moscow. I am your servant as much as those who cook your food and wash your linen.

COUNT: And dessert?

TAMARA: I've lost my appetite.

COUNT: Then go to bed, Mademoiselle. Tomorrow we start the education of Ivan.

(she bows and goes off. As Young Man starts to clear the table, the Count lays his hand on the young man's arm)

COUNT: Do you have a proverb for all this, Boris?

YOUNG MAN: Yes, Master. Old Russian Proverb goes: He who wishes to make soup should not begin with rotted cabbage.

COUNT: Apt, but I don't much care for it. Another?

YOUNG MAN: The Moon is full once a month; the Peasant never.

COUNT: (looks at him for a long minute) Help yourself to what's left, Boris.

YOUNG MAN: (a small bow) Thank-you, sir.

(the Count rises, stretches, takes the bottle of wine and exits. The Young Man immediately sits in the Count's vacated chair and starts to eat, suddenly remembering to turn to audience)

YOUNG MAN: We have many proverbs to cover every possible situation. To flatter those in charge. To comfort those not in charge. For example, "the best saddle will not speed a tired horse." My stomach has been growling all day, waiting for the leavings of this meal. I will share, of course. The kitchen staff is waiting to know how much of the meat is left. The young lady teacher hardly touched hers. She has a distinctly virginal cast to her face. Probably many of her appetites are not yet awakened. No matter. Life will give her many proverbs to recite.

(he continues eating contentedly as the lights go out. When the stage is completely dark we hear the laugh of an old woman. Lights come up on Tamara sleeping in a bed with a peasant woman, dressed completely in black rags, standing over her. The stage is brightly lit, depicting morning)

TAMARA: (awaking with a start, she sits up) Who are you?

OLD WOMAN: I am a witch come to make magic happen.

TAMARA: Are you my maid?

OLD WOMAN: (angrily) I told you who I am.

TAMARA: You aren't a witch.

OLD WOMAN: Oh yes, I am. I flew in through your window.

TAMARA: (with a glance) The window was closed.

OLD WOMAN: (sitting on the bed) I opened it, flew in, and refastened the lock.

TAMARA: You look like a witch. I hope that wasn't rude of me to say.

OLD WOMAN: Everyone here calls me a witch. You will too. The children run when they see me. The Priest makes his hurried cross. I am not allowed within the church.

TAMARA: You say this all so proudly.

OLD WOMAN: It's an accomplishment in such a religious community to be a witch.

TAMARA: Well, you aren't frightening me.

OLD WOMAN: Perhaps I don't wish to frighten you. Perhaps I wish to be your friend.

TAMARA: Friends with a witch?

OLD WOMAN: My grandson is the one you are here to educate.

TAMARA: I see. Or I think I see.

OLD WOMAN: The Master here is evil. A Witch is a Saint compared to him.

TAMARA: He seems kind enough.

OLD WOMAN: You base this on one meal in his presence where he talked slightly of his dead wife and confessed to fathering a bastard.

TAMARA: How did you know what was said?

OLD WOMAN: I am a witch. (she does a frantic little dance step)

TAMARA: What do you want of me? The sun is up. You should have vanished with the crow of the rooster.

OLD WOMAN: You don't really know witches.

TAMARA: Just Baba Yaga from my childhood.

OLD WOMAN: A complete amateur compared to myself.

TAMARA: I'd ask you more, but I must get dressed.

OLD WOMAN: I came to look you over, and to let you know I am here if you need me.

TAMARA: Very kind, I'm sure. Why would I require a witch.

OLD WOMAN: (suddenly in a cackling voice) Old Russian Proverb: Look in the brook for the lost fish when all they serve is vegetables.

TAMARA: That's a terrible proverb.

OLD WOMAN: Do you want poetry or truth? (she does a small turn) I'm going now.

TAMARA: Are you going to fly out the window?

OLD WOMAN: It's tempting....but no, I'll use the door. (she waves, cackles, and leaves)

TAMARA: (to audience) The employment promises something interesting. I'm glad. I was sad to leave Moscow...to leave Peter. Peter. My adopted brother. My real cousin. The love of my life. He was older, although not wiser. Peter was...Peter is a man in search of a tragedy. Being Russian, perhaps he'll find one. He ...no, I won't tell. I'll show you...(Peter appears, thirty, tragic looking. The Romantic hero) Yes, now you see why I had to leave Moscow or commit myself to the cast of characters in Peter's sad story. (she walks up to Peter who does not notice her) Like most men of passions, he paid for his with his health...

PETER: (turning to her) Syphilis. I don't know why I should tell this to you, my innocent cousin.

TAMARA: I didn't understand...what is syphilis?

PETER: The bitter aftertaste of pleasure.

TAMARA: More explicitly?

PETER: Horrible things to my body. It shall rob me of my health, my sanity, and eventually my life.

TAMARA: Peter, no!!

PETER: I must go away for my cure. If it is not too late.

TAMARA: How does this horrid thing happen?

PETER: Through love.

TAMARA: (disappointed) Oh, you mean sex.

PETER: Perhaps you are not so innocent?

TAMARA: Don't be silly, Peter. I've been to school. We learn about sex .Biology class.

PETER: And do you hate me? do I repel you?

TAMARA: I am a modern young woman. I may not have sampled your world, but I am open to understanding it.

PETER: I'm sorry. I repel myself. Please don't forgive me....I don't deserve forgiveness.

TAMARA: Peter....

PETER: My mother is crying in the next room, and my father is counting out the roubles he needs to pay for my cure. They are more honest in their repulsion.

TAMARA: When I first came to this house, an orphan, you gave me a book of fairytales and told me I could wake you if I were afraid...

PETER: Yes.

TAMARA: Peter, you are afraid. Wake me.

PETER: I don't understand...

TAMARA: I have no book to give you, but I can listen in the night.

PETER: Why didn't I meet you at the ball?

TAMARA: I wasn't at the ball. I was here, waiting for you to return.

(there is a shift in light. Peter is gone)

TAMARA: (to the audience) Now you see why leaving Moscow was important. It would be so....Greek. I loved someone who was my brother. Like my brother. My adopted parents understood that I needed to move on, away from their love... from Peter's love.

COUNT:(entering) Have you slept well, Mademoiselle?

TAMARA: Now I am awake, excellency.

COUNT: And ready for the task at hand?

TAMARA: Some tea, some bread.....and then I am ready.

COUNT: I summoned Ivan from the fields.

TAMARA: Is this -- Ivan-- understanding of what you expect?

COUNT: He is a peasant and will do what is told to him to do. His mother will insist.

TAMARA: And his grandmother?

COUNT: The old witch!

TAMARA: Exactly.

COUNT: What do you know of her?

TAMARA: She was in my room this morning when I woke up...

COUNT: How in blazes....

TAMARA: You said she is a witch. Her account was that she flew in through my window.

COUNT: She is never allowed in the house. I have warned her.

TAMARA: She seems harmless enough.

COUNT: You come from Moscow, my dear young woman. Moscow is civilization. Out here we may serve the correct wines and even bathe once a month or more, but peasant beliefs rule these simple folk as you will see.

(Ivan knocks timidly and enters. In spite of his veneer of servility, he has an arrogant streak that jumps to the surface often)

COUNT: You are here too early.

TAMARA: That is fine. He can talk with me while I have my tea and bread.

COUNT: (to Ivan) You are not to be impolite to our new teacher.

IVAN: Yes, excellency.

COUNT: (to Tamara) I will tell that useless servant of mine to bring the tea and bread to the library. (he exits. Ivan gives the slightest bow)

TAMARA: (extending her hand) Good morning. I am told you are to be my special student.

IVAN: Do you expect me to take your hand?

TAMARA: Why I...

IVAN: I am a peasant. My hand has just shovelled cow manure out of the barn.

TAMARA: You are my student.

IVAN: I think you will find me very slow.

TAMARA: (drawing her breath) Nevertheless, we are expected to fulfill certain roles. I am to teach; you are to learn. His Excellency has high hopes for you.

IVAN: Does he plan to remove me from my hut? Give me some light at night by which to look at all the magnificent books in his library?

TAMARA: Speaking of which, go to the library. My breakfast is there.

IVAN: And mine?

TAMARA: Are you hungry?

IVAN: I am always hungry.

TAMARA: You cannot learn while your stomach growls.

IVAN: Is that an old Russian proverb?

TAMARA: It is just good sense.

IVAN: Old Russian Proverb: Roots and caviar both fill the stomach of the hungry man.

TAMARA: New Russian Proverb: A Pig knows better than to waste words when the trough is filling.

IVAN: Bravo! You might be somewhat interesting yet. The other teacher...

TAMARA: There was another teacher?

IVAN: You don't believe you are the first?

TAMARA: I thought I was.

(as they continue to talk the Actor who plays the servant removes bed and replaces it with a small table with a tray and two chairs)

IVAN: Then you know very little of life here.

TAMARA: I am new to all of this.

IVAN: I see.

TAMARA: What became of the other teacher?

IVAN: It was two years ago.

TAMARA: (sitting down at the table she gestures for Ivan to do the same. He stands) Did she quit? or was it a man?

IVAN: It was not a man. (slowly he sits) She was murdered.

TAMARA: Murdered? By whom?

IVAN: Who killed her is not important.

TAMARA: (horrified) Do you believe that?

IVAN: Yes. (they eat mechanically)

TAMARA: Why would you tell me this?

IVAN: So you understand...

TAMARA: I understand that I know less now than when I set foot on the train in Moscow.

IVAN: We do not take well to strangers.

TAMARA: So you kill them?

IVAN: (angrily) Why would you want to come and change our lives?

TAMARA: I need the money. I don't want to change your life....I want to make your life better. Is that so terrible? Is it so terrible to want to help people learn to read and write and think while earning my own bread?

IVAN: No...

TAMARA: In my own way, I am as wretched as any of you.

IVAN: We are not wretched.

TAMARA: Then why the anger?

