



Moscow Audiences Applaud ‘Jewish’ Play at Vakhtangov Theatre – But Why?

Reviewed by Susan Welsh

Smile Upon Us, Lord (Улыбнись нам, Господи), 2019 (film)

Directed by Rimas Tuminas, director of the Evgeny Vakhtangov Theatre, Moscow. Based on novels by Grigory Kanovich; adapted for the stage by Kanovich and Tuminas. Stage play filmed for international cinema by Stage Russia HD, director Eddie Aronoff. In Russian, with English subtitles. 167 minutes including a 15-minute intermission. See StageRussia.com for showing schedule in the United States and other countries. The film will be on the [Kanopy](#) streaming platform later this spring (free university and public library access) and soon thereafter as a pay per view on the [Digital Theatre](#) platform.

Three old Jews set off in a broken-down cart from their shtetl to the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius. It is the turn of the 20th century.

Efraim Dudak fears for his son, a revolutionary imprisoned in Vilnius for attempting to assassinate the Governor General of this province of the Russian Empire. Efraim’s friend Šmulé-Sender Lazarek has offered his cart and horse to take him there to see what he can do for his son. Avner Rosenthal is a bankrupt and lonely grocer mourning his shop, which has burned down.

It is a strange and moving play, but equally strange and interesting is the understated controversy that has surrounded it since it opened in Moscow in 2014. What is the film really about?

Smile Upon Us, Lord has been in repertory at Moscow’s Vakhtangov Theatre for five years, playing to packed halls and wildly enthusiastic audiences. It is based on two novels written in the 1980s by Grigory Kanovich. The author was born in Lithuania and has lived in Israel since 1993. Director Rimas Tuminas, also from Lithuania, staged the play in Vilnius in 1994, and 20 years later, as the Artistic Director of the Vakhtangov Theatre, he revived it in Moscow. The play has toured North America, Europe, and Israel, receiving rave reviews, and has now been added to StageRussia’s offerings.

Why are Moscow audiences so thrilled by a play about a couple of Jews who lived more than a century ago, making their way across the Pale of Settlement to what they call the “new Jerusalem” of Vilnius? Or is it, as some say, not really about Jews at all?

Author Kanovich certainly thinks it is. He told John Nathan of TheJC.com in February 2018, as the Vakhtangov troupe was performing it in London, “My major motive was my desire to create a monument to honour my long-suffering people and to strengthen

the national consciousness of Russian-speaking Jews in all of the Soviet Union.”

But not everybody looks at it through the author’s eyes.

Under the sensational headline “How Russian theatre is speaking truth to power,” the *Financial Times* in 2018 made much out of a joke told by one of the characters (Q: “How do you feel about our government?” A: “Same as about my wife. Kind of fear, kind of love, kind of want a different one.”) But the *FT* also quoted producer Oksana Nemchuk, who disagreed with that political interpretation, saying that Russian audiences understand the play’s themes more broadly: “For us, it’s a story about humanity and parenthood. The symbols are universal.”

Moskovskii Komsomolets (mk.ru) ran a headline in 2014, “The non-Jewish question for the Vakhtangovites,” highlighting the irony that the main characters are all played by ethnic Russians (not mentioning the marvelous Yulia Rutberg, who plays Efraim’s goat; see more below). And when the troupe went to Riga, Latvia, in 2016, the headline in *BaltNews.lv* was “Sergey Makovetskiy: ‘We aren’t playing Jews.’”

Historian Dmitriy Trubochkin points out that separation from one’s children is a theme that captures the interest of many. In his book on Rimas Tuminas’s Moscow plays (2015), he cites the water-carrier Šmulé-Sender’s plaintive cry: “Wherever we have traveled, wherever we have gone, we are always going toward our children, but they are going farther and farther in the opposite direction, and we can never reach them. What can you do, Efraim, if all you can do with your children is bid them farewell?” Šmulé-Sender (played by **Aleksei Guskov**¹/Evgeny

¹ Two actors alternate in some of the roles in this repertory production. The actor whose name is in boldface is the one who performs in the StageRussia.com film.

Knyazev) has lost his son in the wave of emigration to America; the aging parents wait in vain for a word from him. Trubochkin writes that many Moscow viewers see this as the most important idea in the play. It is easy for this reviewer to see how this could be true for the many Russian parents whose children have emigrated to Europe or the United States since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

So what do the *Vakhtangovtsi* think?

The Director

Director Rimas Tuminas emphasizes the universal themes of tolerance, forgiveness, and family in times of crisis and approaching disaster. When the troupe toured American cities in 2015, the *Boston Globe* quoted him saying that the raging conflict over Ukraine “resembles the era in Kanovich’s novel.... That’s why I thought it was the right time to revive the play in Moscow.” He further underlines “the eternal story of parents bidding farewell to their children ... parents trying to get closer to their children, while the children are moving away from the parents and starting to live their own lives”—and this is certainly true. In London in 2018, he went on to say that “now the world is dangerously balanced between war and peace. In the play, characters undertake a journey at a very unstable time. Their world is not just unbalanced, it’s horrifying, and the characters feel both its rising madness and approaching calamity.... I believe forgiveness is the main theme of this story. An attempt to put oneself in someone’s shoes, to understand and therefore to forgive is a universal idea” (TheJC.com).

Tuminas does address the Jewish theme of the play when specifically asked, but he answers guardedly. In an interview with a Russian-language TV station in Toronto during the play’s 2015 Canadian tour (“Rimas Tuminas on antisemitism in the theater and the thirst to create”—*vestnik.ca*), the journalist asks, “Does antisemitism play a role, either for friends or adversaries of the play?” The director replies, “Yes, it plays a role. That bothers me, and all the actors; they understand that it is ... well ... a bit dangerous [“чуть-чуть опасно”]. They talk about it particularly in Moscow. But the actors are winners, they don’t play the characters of Jews, but they play *people*, the PERSON [“человека,” with an emphatic accent on the last syllable].... The director interprets, the actor interprets, they determine the

scene. To determine and to interpret the PERSON.”

In several interviews while on tour in Europe and America, he spoke of the Lithuania of his childhood (he was born in 1952), where he grew up in a tolerant community of various ethnicities. “We never felt any difference in the nationalities but, at the same time, the Jews had traits of character which the Lithuanian people don’t have, being creative, witty, very clever,” he told John Nathan of TheJC.com, speaking through an interpreter. “So they somehow colored our life with these talents.... I have never declared this before, but I have to say that I have always felt a kind of penitence in the company of Jewish people. I feel profoundly an aching loss that can never be replaced. I’m Lithuanian and I do not have any Jewish origins. But that doesn’t prevent me from feeling these things acutely.

“But these feelings are not on the surface of this production; rather they hide somewhere inside.”

In the 1994 Vilnius production, he says, the actors felt a strong connection to the Jewish element of the story for historical reasons, whereas the Moscow cast 20 years later found it more difficult to relate to the characters in the play. “One day I found a very simple explanation for them—I asked my Russian actors not to think that in this play the Lord smiles only upon Jewish people. It is not ‘us’ and ‘them.’ The actors understood and they showed compassion to their heroes. The Lord’s smile is for all of us, the characters, the actors, the audience ... for everyone.”

Sergey Makovetskiy, the actor who plays the part of Efraim (alternating with **Vladimir Simonov**), discussed with journalists in Riga in 2016 how Tuminas instructed the cast. “For me,” says Makhovetskiy, “there was never a question of national-

ality. There is no national color in our performance; we don’t speak with a shtetl accent. And Rimas Vladimirovich Tuminas was categorical: ‘Comrades, we are not playing Jews,’ he told us. We are not playing Jewishness, so what kind of local color can there be? As soon as local color begins, excuse me, it’s not Jewishness.” (BaltNews.lv)



Rutberg: “For me, the Jewish theme in this play is very powerful.” *currenttime.tv*

The Universal and the Particular

But excuse me! To suggest the play is not about Jews or Jewishness is a bit like saying *Fiddler on the Roof* is not about Jews, or Shakespeare's historical plays are not about England. Anything that aspires to the status of art (not melodrama) must of necessity be both universal and particular. And *Smile* is most certainly about Jews.

Let us return briefly to the plot.

After receiving a blessing from the local rabbi and hitting the road, one of the first people our travelers encounter is Khloyne-Genekh, a clownish figure of no apparent occupation who is pretending to be blind, feeling his way along with a stick. He probes each of the travelers with his switch, first the shoulders, then the face, and then the crotch. Satisfied with his investigation, he turns to the audience and loudly exclaims, "Good morning, Jews!"

The audience at the Vakhtangov Theatre cracks up.

Later the travelers are attacked by "wolves" (men in dark padded jackets), not all that subtle an image of a pogrom. Arriving at the gates of Vilnius, Efraim and Šmulé-Sender are assaulted by a team of people wearing gas masks, who spray them with what must be disinfectant or insecticide. The ominous scene becomes more intense in the finale, as our heroes are stripped to their underclothes and a large metal frame appears, hanging above the darkened stage. They raise their arms and start to rotate it. It is covered with ornaments, stars of David, and candles. There is a sepia-toned portrait of a large family, all seated, with a bearded *pater familias* in the center. On the back of that panel are hung various household implements, women's slippers, men's boots, children's shoes. The two images evoke the familiar ones of piles of confiscated shoes and the family portraits of those who perished in the Holocaust.



Guskov: "It's a Russian play! That's all there is to it!"
currenttime.tv

Dispute Among the Actors

Despite such obvious markers, the "is it really about the Jews" theme keeps bubbling to the surface.

Actor Viktor Sukhorukov plays the part of Avner Rosenthal, who is more than a little crazy, fixated on the fire that destroyed his shop, his livelihood, and his sense of worth. He longs to become a tree. The other travelers and the audience seem to find him endearing in his vulnerability. Sukhorukov spoke about the play with Russian TV's Channel One after the 2015 New York performance. The interviewer commented on "the centuries-long Jewish wisdom and sad humor, imprinted in folklore. It could be very funny, this play, if it were not so sad." Sukhorukov retorted with evident impatience or even anger, "I don't play that kind of stereotyped image of a Jew. No! When I speak it's as if I'm talking about myself. I talk as if about my own pain, my own dreams. I invest myself in this play as if it were not Avner Rosenthal's building that burned down, but my own."

The "anything but Jewish" (whether "Russian" or "universal") view, while common, is not without dissenters. Several members of the cast participated with Tuminas in a panel discussion during the New York visit, where an impassioned dispute erupted between Yulia Rutberg and Aleksei Guskov. It's worth watching this 3-minute televised excerpt (in Russian) (<https://www.currenttime.tv/a/27055762.html>).

Rutberg, the only woman and the only Jew, is seated on the audience's left; five men are lined up on the right. Tuminas has stated his view of the importance of the universal fathers-and-sons theme: that our children are always moving away from us. Then Rutberg seizes the microphone: "I absolutely agree with what the guys and Rimas Vladimirovich are saying. But for me, the Jewish theme in this play is *very* powerful." Guskov shoots back, with exaggerated pathos: "It's about what to do with our children, when all we can do is say goodbye. I think about this, I know it for myself. These are *my* ruminations. How can we say this is Jewish? It's Russian! It's a Russian play! That's all there is to it! Nothing more to discuss!"

And where is it written that it can't be both?

Discovering the feisty Yulia Rutberg was my greatest pleasure in working on this review. Those who understand Russian and love poetry will enjoy her televised performance on "the importance of poetry in the life of the ordinary person" (50 minutes):

<https://tinyurl.com/y63vpn3m>

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